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Self-harm or self injury

Self-harm or self-injury describes a wide range of things that people do to themselves in a deliberate and sometimes hidden way.

Self-harm can involve:

- cutting
- burning
- scalding
- banging or scratching one's own body
- breaking bones
- hair pulling
- ingesting toxic substances or objects

Self-harming is often a means of communicating what can't be put into words, pictures or thoughts and has been described as an 'inner scream'.

Self-harm does not usually mean that someone wants to commit suicide, but if a self-harmer is not helped, there is a risk the wish to hurt themselves could escalate into a desire to end their life.

This is a very difficult area to cover as we certainly do not want to be introducing an idea or coping technique that a young person has not previously heard of or considered.

If young people do disclose their self-harm, the feedback, both verbal and non-verbal, they receive can have a critical influence on whether they go on to access supportive services.

Should you become aware that a young person may be self-harming, the advice is to remain calm in spite of what you may be feeling. Any indication of a negative emotion or being judgemental is likely to aggravate the situation.

You should assure the young person that it's ok to talk about their need to self-harm, and that you will support them even if you don't understand why they self-harm or how they must be feeling. Explain to them that in order to provide appropriate help and support you will need to refer for advice.

As soon as possible after a young person tells you they are self-harming, you should make a written record. This should document exactly what has happened using the words of the young person where appropriate. It should be dated and signed.

You should pass this information on following the Association's procedures for reporting concerns about a young person's welfare. These are set out in the Young People First code of good practice – the 'Yellow Card'.

Why do young people self-harm?

The reasons for self-harm can be extremely personal, but it is often a sign of emotion that needs to be expressed.

Young people who self-harm talk about their anger and frustration at things that are going on in their lives such as bullying, family tensions, exam stress, abuse, or the death of someone close.

'I can't stop cutting myself. I don't feel alive any more. People pick on me and nobody talks to me – I feel like I'm invisible.'
Linzi, 15

As with other problems, for example, eating disorders, depression, and substance abuse, young people who self-harm talk mainly about a loss of control over their lives. By bringing about injuries to themselves and causing pain, these young people seem to regain a sense of control and personal ownership.

However, self-harm provides only a temporary relief from problems and does not deal with the underlying issues.

Who is most likely to self-harm?

A National Inquiry into Self-Harm among Young People found that in the UK, 1 in 15 teenagers had deliberately self-harmed. On average, this means that in every secondary school classroom there will be two young people who have hurt themselves as a means of coping with distress.

The study also showed that girls are four times more likely to have engaged in deliberate self-harm than boys.

The majority of those who said they self-harmed said it was an impulsive act rather than something they had thought about for a long time.

'I cut myself when I feel sad, upset and alone.' Charlie, 14

About half of those who cut themselves, and over a third of those who took overdoses, said that they had thought about harming themselves for less than an hour beforehand.

This means that there is often little time for intervention once thoughts of self-harm have been fully formulated.

Myth: Self-harm is just a way of attention seeking.

Fact: Self-harm is a coping strategy. People self-harm because they are finding something difficult and painful. They could also be trying to show that something is wrong. They need to be taken seriously.

Myth: Self-harm is rare in young people.

Fact: Lots of people self-harm. There is lots of secrecy around self-harm and because many people do not talk about it, it is hard to know exactly how many are self-harming. The Royal College of Psychiatrists (1999) found that as many as 1 in 10 teenagers have deliberately self-harmed.

Myth: Young people self harm over trivial reasons.

Fact: All self-harm should be treated seriously. People self-harm to different extremes as it is a coping strategy and everybody is unique. The extent of self-harm is not necessarily a reflection of the seriousness of the persons difficulties.

Myth: Once you have self-harmed you cannot stop.

Fact: People can self-harm just once or twice. Some use self-harm over a long period of time. The frequency of the self-harm varies. Many people do stop self-harming, but only when they are ready. This could be when they sort their problems out or when they find other ways to deal with their feelings.

Young people often state that all they want is to be able to talk to someone who will listen and respect them, not specifically about self-harm but about problems and issues in their daily lives. Many said that had this been available to them they may never have started to self-harm.

There are a number of organisations that offer young people the chance to talk in confidence about what is happening in their lives. Details of helpful contacts are listed at the end of this fact sheet. These agencies help young people work out how they can stop their self-harming and suggest where they can go for further support and advice.

'I told my teacher, but I still couldn't stop doing it' Macie, 14

Helpful Contacts

Life Signs produces factsheets that can be downloaded for people who are self-harming and friends or family. On the homepage they have a 'Read this first before you harm' link, which is really excellent and gives well written support to the young person.

National Self Harm Network produce many very good documents, particularly the distraction and report cards.

Young people's help lines such as ChildLine or the NSPCC Helpline are free and available at any time for information and confidential advice about all problems.

ChildLine – 0800 1111

NSPCC Helpline – 0808 800 5000

YoungMinds is a national charity committed to improving the mental health of all children and young people. Call 0800 018 2138 or visit www.youngminds.org.uk/selfharm

Self-Harm Alliance is a national voluntary organisation that provides support to those who self harm and those close to them. Call 01242 578 820 or visit www.selfharmalliance.org

National Children's Bureau provides information on a wide range of activities and initiatives that relate to young people and self-harm.