



Self-Harm: Practicing the Language

Sam is 16 and has struggled to return to school since the Covid-19 restrictions. Prior to the lockdown he was doing well at school, studied hard and was expected to pass all of his National 5 exams. He found home learning really difficult and was unable to manage more than a few hours of school work per week. He is due to sit exams in a few weeks and has fallen behind with his studying. Sam's parents are frustrated with this change in his attitude to his school work particularly as they are keen he pursues a career in medicine. Sam has started to cut his arms on a regular basis particularly at night when his parents think he is studying. Sam's friend Mark is worried about him and has come to you for advice. Sam has agreed to meet with you.

Emma is 14 and is care experienced. She has lived with her aunt for 5 years. She sees her dad every few weeks but they don't have a good relationship. Emma recently fell out with her friends and she has stopped going to gymnastics and swimming. She is spending all her time in her room. Her aunt has found lighters in her room and suspects she is using them to burn herself but Emma keeps her arms and legs covered at all times and won't talk to her aunt about it. Emma approaches you and shows you a burn on her arm and discloses that she did it to herself.

How might you start the conversation?

Can you help him find any drawbacks?

What language will you use to show you understand why Sam is self-harming?

Explore exceptions with him: are there times Sam doesn't use self-harming behaviours?

Try exploring the benefits of the self-harm for Sam and feed these back.

How might you respond to this disclosure?

Can you help her find any drawbacks?

What language will you use to show you understand why Emma is self-harming?

Explore exceptions with her: are there times Emma doesn't use self-harming behaviours?

Try exploring the benefits of the self-harm for Emma and feed these back.

Sarah is 10 and has just started Primary 7. Over the summer holidays her parents separated and her mum is now living with a new partner. Sarah blames her mum for the separation and is not currently having any contact with her. It is uncertain where Sarah will go to high school now as her parents work out where she and her little brother will live. Sarah has always done well at school but there is a marked deterioration in her work and mood in school. You notice Sarah is wearing long sleeves and leggings instead of her usual skirt and blouse and she regularly has an excuse for missing PE.

How might you start a conversation with Sarah about how she is coping?

Can you help her find any drawbacks?

Assuming Sarah tells you that she has been self-harming, what language will you use to show you understand why Sarah is self-harming?

Explore exceptions with her: are there times Sarah doesn't use self-harming behaviours?

Try exploring the benefits of the self-harm for Sarah and feed these back.

How might you respond to this disclosure?

Thank them for coming to you

Acknowledge how difficult it must be for them to open up to you

Invite them to tell you more about how they are feeling

Be clear about confidentiality and boundaries

What language could you use to show you understand why the YP is self-harming?

Acknowledge the thoughts and feelings

Repeat and reflect key thoughts and feelings

Use the same words as they do about the self-harming behaviours

State that you understand why the person would self-harm – **reflect back the triggers and consequence**

Explore the benefits of the self-harm

“It sounds as if self-harming is helpful for you in some ways. Can you tell me how it feels afterwards for you?”

“It sounds as if cutting makes you feel better? Can you tell me more about that – in what ways do you think it helps you?”

“so you mentioned there that when you’ve fought with you dad and you’re alone in your room thinking it over you feel guilty, hopeless and overwhelmed and when you cut those feelings goes away. It’s really understandable that you would try to cope in that way.”

Explore exceptions, are there times the YP doesn’t use self-harming behaviours?

“Are there times when you manage to cope without hair pulling?”

“Tell me about a time when you felt low or overwhelmed but you didn’t burn your arm”

“I wonder how you’ve coped with other strong feelings when you’ve managed not to pull your skin”.

“I wonder if there are any drawbacks to you cutting”

“So it sounds like you feel cutting only makes you feel better for a short while. I wonder if we could think about things that might make you feel better for longer.”

“I’m hearing that you don’t really think there are any drawbacks. I wonder if your mum or your friends would see any drawbacks for you. What do you think they might say?”

Reassure the young person that you want to help them find other ways of managing difficult times but you understand it might be very difficult to stop self-harming altogether. The first step might only be to reduce it a little bit.