

Introduction

The term 'self-harm' is used to describe a range of things that people do to themselves in a deliberate manner with the intent of gaining an emotional release.

Self-harm encompasses a variety of different behaviours including cutting, burning, hair pulling, head banging, swallowing poisonous substances or foreign objects, alcohol abuse, starvation, binge-eating, vomiting, picking wounds, biting one's skin and breaking one's own bones.

Recent research shows that approximately 1 in 15 young people in the UK have deliberately harmed themselves. In terms of schools, there could potentially be 2 young people who self-harm in each secondary school class. (Mental Health Foundation 2006) So, although it is not that often heard or spoken about, it is quite a common problem.

There is no such thing as an archetypal young person who self-harms but there are some groups who seem to be more at risk of self-harm than others, these include: looked after young people, young people in sheltered housing, prison, hostels or boarding schools, young Asian women, Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual and Transgender young people and young people with learning disabilities. The reasons why a young person self-harms are unique to each individual. Self-harm is an immediate response to a person's feelings of stress, anger, frustration, shame, hate and so on. But self-harm is also a response to an **underlying problem**, which has resulted in some form of emotional distress including shame, hate and frustration; consequently, it is a very complicated behaviour.

Causes of Self-Harm

Self-harm can be linked with, but not restricted to, issues such as:

- Bullying
- Stress
- Isolation
- Family conflict
- Family separation
- Physical, sexual or verbal abuse
- Issues with their sexuality
- Low self-esteem
- Bereavement
- Unwanted pregnancy

Recognising Self-Harm

The short answer is that you may never know that someone is self-harming. It is a very secretive act but if you suspect that someone might be self-harming it could be useful to look out for some of the following behaviours:

- Spending more time in the bathroom or their bedroom
- Unexplained cuts or bruises
- Wearing long sleeves or trousers all of the time, even in hot weather, particularly if this is not a normal behaviour for the person
- The person frequently smells like Dettol, TCP or surgical spirits
- Plasters and bandages disappearing from the first aid box
- Spending a lot of time by themselves
- Low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness
- Changes in eating or sleeping behaviour
- Negative life event
- Low mood, angry, irritable

How to Help Yourself:

- Try to identify why you are self-harming
- Try to recognise your triggers by keeping a diary
- Seek support from someone you trust
- Find out how to self-harm safely (harm minimisation), and how to clean/care for injuries
- Try to reduce how often you harm, and how severe the injuries are
- Find other ways of expressing your feelings (e.g. art, music, poetry, writing, sport)
- Find out about distraction techniques e.g.
 - ✓ Use fake blood
 - ✓ Hold an ice cube in your hand
 - ✓ Put a rubber band on wrist and flick
 - ✓ Origami
 - ✓ Punch a Pillow

How to Help Someone who is Self-Harming:

- Ask the person what they feel the problem is and how best to support them
- Take them seriously
- Support them to explore difficult issues
- Help them to gain insight into the thought processes behind self-harm
- Be sensitive and compassionate about wounds
- Be positive, understanding and non-judgemental
- Be trustworthy and reliable
- Emphasise that you are not trying to take their self-harm away from them
- Understand what they are getting from self-harm and explore other coping strategies/alternatives
- Find resources to educate yourself and to help people see that they're not the only one
- Seek out local support groups or appropriate agencies
- Listen!!
- Make sure you have support for yourself.

Useful Contacts:

Breathing Space

Confidential phone line for people who need someone to talk to.

www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

Phone: **0800 83 85 87**

Childline

Confidential helpline for children and young people.

Phone: **0800 1111**

Website: www.childline.org.uk

Samaritans

24hr confidential phone line for people who need someone to talk to.

www.samaritans.org

Phone: **08457 90 90 90**

Other Websites

<http://www.thesite.org/healthandwellbeing/mentalhealth/selfharm>

<http://www.seemescotland.org.uk/findoutmore/aboutmentalhealthproblemsandstigma/selfharm>

www.rethink.org



Penumbra is a leading Scottish voluntary organisation working in the field of mental health. We provide an extensive range of person-centred support services for adults and young people.

We also campaign to raise awareness of mental health issues and reduce the social stigma attached to them.

If you would like more information or have any further questions about any other Penumbra services please contact:

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