

UNDERSTANDING SELF HARM

What is Self Harm?

Self harm can include a lot of different ways that a person can inflict pain on him or herself. Cutting is perhaps the most common way – cutting arms, legs, back, front, anywhere on the body, with knives, razors, glass or any other sharp object.

Other ways of self harming can include inflicting blows, burning or scalding, pulling hair out, biting, pinching, swallowing harmful substances or objects, inserting objects into the body, scrubbing or scouring the body.

Self harm is a way that some people cope with difficult feelings. No two individuals will have the same reasons or the same ways of hurting themselves.

Self harm can be a daily, weekly, monthly or periodic activity – it can often be quite ritualistic. Some people will use particular tools or play certain music, use the same room at the same time of day etc. Or it may be more random.

Both men and women self harm. There used to be a belief that women were more prone to it because of the female tendency to internalise feelings which get expressed in bodily symptoms or conditions such as eating disorders. Men, on the other hand, are renowned for expressing their feelings, through acts of aggression for example. Recent research, however, suggests that the rate of self harm in men and women is becoming more equal.

Self harming is not a strictly modern phenomenon and there is historical and literary evidence of it.

It is, therefore, important to be aware that self harm can be a survival strategy and a way of coping for anyone.

Why Do People Hurt Themselves?

There are lots of reasons why some people choose self injury as a way of coping with difficult or painful feelings. The feelings may be recent but often have been buried for a long time.

Some reasons go back to childhood and may include:

- Sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Lack of communication, or the 'silent' treatment
- Loss through death of a parent, relative, or pet
- Being abandoned by a parent or carer
- Separation/divorce of parents or re-marriage of parents
- Parental illness/alcoholism/addiction
- Witnessing family violence or rows

- Too high expectations
- Perfectionism
- Bullying
- Racism
- Fear/shame about lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual feelings
- Fear/shame about puberty
- Fear of separation from the family/growing up

Adult reasons may include (as well as any of the above):

- Rape/sexual abuse
- Abusive, violent or controlling relationships – physical or emotional
- Loss of a baby through miscarriage, termination, adoption or inability to have a child
- Prison or long stay in hospital
- Relationship breakdown
- Lack of support/communication/isolation, generally or resulting from any of the above issues
- Feeling that there are no other outlets for difficult feelings or stress

It is important to realise that there may be no single reason for self harm and it may take some time to realise why one is doing this. There is still a big taboo in society about self harm; it can be difficult to talk about and sometimes it may be kept hidden, for example by wearing long sleeves. Self harm is nearly always a private activity and not about trying to shock or offend other people.

Some Feelings That May Trigger Self Harm

- Emotional pain – sadness, grief, depression, hopelessness, desperation, worthlessness
- Self hatred – shame, guilt, 'dirtiness,' hating physical appearance
- Anger – frustration, powerlessness, rage, bottled up feelings
- Anxiety – fear, tension, panic, stress
- Isolation – lack of support, being or feeling unheard
- Unreality – numbness, feeling nothing. If you are feeling numb or dead inside, sometimes the pain and seeing blood can confirm that you are alive and feeling something

Often the physical pain can be an effective distraction from emotional distress.

Some of the purposes and functions served if you are self-harming may include:

- Relief of feelings – expressing, realising, distracting, numbing, calming
- Self punishment – washing, cutting out 'badness' or 'dirtiness,' alleviation of self hatred
- Control – over your own life, your own body, preventing your anger being expressed outward to others or to make yourself unattractive to an abuser. It's a way of protecting yourself
- Communication – to yourself or perhaps to others of feelings or problems. Often it is about trying to get people to see the pain and desperation. But

self harm is not about 'attention seeking' – if someone simply wanted attention, there are less traumatic ways of achieving this

- Comfort/nurture – for yourself or by others. It may become a comforting ritual that becomes like a friend, or part of your self identity
- Habitual behaviour – like any habit, self harming may be difficult to stop as it has become a regular coping strategy
- To feel real or alive and bring yourself back from numbness and dissociation
- Distraction from painful feelings
- To stop flashbacks, nightmares or disturbances in perception

How to Stop Self Harm

- It is important to talk to someone supportive that you can trust; either a counsellor or a friend or partner. This takes courage, but talking can help bring out the feelings that lie behind the self injury
- If you are not ready for this, there are things you can do on your own. Start to notice your emotions before, during and after the self harming episode. It may help to write them down
- Notice what triggers your urge to hurt yourself. It may help to keep a diary so you notice patterns. Is it worse, for example, when you drink alcohol, talk to a certain family member, feel bored, or have a 'bad day?'
- Make sure the implements you use to hurt yourself are clean and that you have plasters and bandages to hand. Seek medical attention if you need to and have someone to contact in an emergency
- Think about alternatives. Might it help to scream? Do sport? Punch cushions? Or paint yourself? Maybe you could try squeezing or gnawing your skin instead of cutting it? Or holding on to ice cubes or tying something tight on your arm. Try to find your own way to help relieve your feelings
- Imagine what your life would be like without this habit – what are the advantages and disadvantages of giving it up. Make a list and discuss with a trusted person
- Remember – only you can stop; no-one can force you to change; you are in control of it
- Take each day at a time. Giving up is hard and you probably won't stop overnight. Recognise your achievements in giving up – if you injure yourself three times in a week, acknowledge the four injury-free days
- Don't see stopping self injury as the only goal – self injury is a way of coping with feelings and may carry on for some time. It may also get worse temporarily as you explore your feelings and memories and this may be frightening and disheartening
- If you feel yourself moving from self harm into severe depression and suicidal feelings, speak to someone
- **Remember that many people have been able to give up self harming through counselling**

How to Help Someone Who is Self Harming

- Try not to panic, get angry or upset

- Try to show that you care about the person and recognise their emotional pain, behind the physical pain
- Acceptance, listening, caring and understanding are the most helpful responses
- Show concern for the actual injury and offer help, but only if this is wanted and the person can stand being touched
- Encourage seeking medical attention if the wounds warrant this
- Make it explicitly clear that talking about feelings and situations is OK
- Acknowledge how difficult it can be to stop self harming and how scary it may be to cope without it
- Encourage seeking support, from the NTU Student Counselling Service or elsewhere within the Dept of Student Support Services
- Remember that self harm is not a suicide attempt, though it may be helpful to check whether suicidal feelings are present
- Get confidential help for yourself from the Counselling Service or other support if you feel powerless, angry, frightened, confused or have any other feelings that distract you and prevent you from getting on with your own life

What is Not Helpful

- Do not condemn, blame, ignore, dismiss or shout at someone for self injury. You may make matters worse and the person will no longer see you as helpful
- Never treat the self harmer as disturbed, mad or irresponsible. You will only reinforce the belief that they are helpless and that positive changes are impossible
- Do not try to control the person or see them as manipulative
- Raise your awareness about self harm – fear, ignorance and misunderstanding can easily lead to false assumptions and hurtful responses

Useful Books to Read

- The Self Harm Help Book - Arnold & Magill
- Cutting: Understanding & Overcoming Self Mutilation – Steven Levenkron
- A Bright Red Scream – Marilee Strong
- Women Who Hurt Themselves – Dusty Miller
- Skin Game - Caroline Kettlewell
- Bodily Harm – Conterio, Lader & Bloom
- Healing the Hurt Within – Jan Sutton – Pathways
- Self Harm – Fiona Gardner – Brunner Routledge
- Cry of Pain: Understanding Suicide & Self Harm – Mark Williams

Website

National Self Harm Network - www.nshn.co.uk/
 Harmless - www.harmless.org.uk