



Understanding and managing self-harm

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Many young people self-harm, and many other people find this behaviour incredibly hard to comprehend or know what to do to help.

This information booklet has been devised with the hope of assisting families and care givers to have more of an understanding about self-harm in adolescents. It offers an insight into reasons why some people self-harm and what you can do to support your child, and look yourself, during what can be a difficult and trying time.

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What is self harm?

Definition of **self**

*noun (plural **selves** /selvz/)*

- a person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action:

Definition of **harm**

noun

[mass noun]

- physical injury, especially that which is deliberately inflicted:

These definitions have been taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, by placing these two words together we get the term self-harm, effectively meaning to cause deliberate physical injury to one's self.

Self-harm is a very broad "umbrella" term that covers a variety of different methods including:

- Scratching
- cutting
- burning
- hitting against objects
- hitting themselves
- taking a drug overdose
- swallowing or putting other things inside themselves
- manipulating their medication for other conditions such as diabetes

It can however take less obvious forms, including unnecessary risks (unsafe sex, drug taking), developing an eating issue (such as anorexia or bulimia), or someone not looking after their own emotional or physical needs.

Who self-harms?

Due to the nature of our service, the information in this booklet will focus on young people who self harm however, many adult men and women self-harm too.

Young people

Research focusing on young people suggests that 10% of all 15 to 16 year olds have engaged in self-harming behaviours, usually by cutting themselves, and that young girls are far more likely to self-harm than boys. The research suggests self-harmers are much more likely to have low self-esteem, to be depressed and to be suffering with anxiety.

They may seem to be facing more problems in life, but actually it may be that they are less good at coping with normal adolescent issues and difficulties. Young people tend not to talk to their parents or other adults about these issues, or to ask for the help they need.

Research suggests that 1 in 15 young people in Britain have harmed themselves deliberately. This shows that it's actually a very common problem. Most young people who harm themselves are aged between 11 and 25. (NSPCCC 2009).

Some very young children self-harm, and some adults too.

Why do people self-harm?

“It relieves all the stress and tension I’ve been feeling”

“I deserve to be punished because I’m a bad person, he told me so”

“I just get so frustrated and angry I don’t know what else to do, if I don’t hurt myself I’m scared I’ll end up hurting someone else”

As one young person said, many people self-harm to ‘get out the hurt, anger and pain’ caused by stressors or experiences that have happened or are currently occurring in their lives.

They harm themselves because they don’t know what else to do and because they don’t have, or don’t feel they have any other options. They often feel that they are unable to talk about the issues causing them distress or they might not know how to approach people to talk about them.

For some people, self-harm gives temporary relief and a sense of control over their lives, it may seem that it’s the only way to escape from the pain they are experiencing on the inside.

A number of reoccurring themes have been acknowledged as triggers to self harming, these include

- Being bullied at school
 - Not getting on with parents
 - Stress and worry about school work and exams
 - Feeling isolated
 - Parents getting divorced
 - Bereavement
 - Experience of abuse earlier in childhood
 - Current abuse – physical, sexual or verbal
 - The self-harm or suicide of someone close to them
 - Problems to do with sexuality
 - Low self-esteem
 - Feelings of rejection socially or within their family
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Is self-harm a suicide attempt?

No! Not everyone who self-harms is suicidal. As mentioned previously, self-harm is a deliberate act to harm one's self, whereas suicide is the deliberate act to take one's life.

Self-harm is not always an attempt at suicide despite it often being termed "parasuicide". In fact often people who harm themselves on purpose are not aware of the dangers of what they are doing and do not intend to kill themselves. Their actions can be attempts at communication, psychological or physical relief or punishment, but should be considered distinct from attempts to end life entirely.

Self-harming is a way to survive and cope with distress rather than to end their lives.

In some cases, self-harm has led to accidental death or death by misadventure, when this has not been the victim's intention.

Isn't self-harm just attention seeking behaviour?

People often mistake self-harming for attention and manipulative behaviours because they don't understand it. Well, it is a kind of attention seeking behaviour, but people don't just self-harm because they are craving attention. They do it because they are trying to demonstrate that they are struggling with issues and cannot verbalise or express how they feel in a more appropriate way.

Advice for preventing and managing self-harm at home

The team will endeavour to form a risk management plan with the young person and carers regarding on how to manage self-harm at home, and the risks involved. You might also find the following tips useful.

1. Before the young person comes home from hospital, have a look around your home, including their bedroom and school bag, and remove items which are not necessary for every day functioning and could be used for self-harm.

For example:

- Ensure any medications which are not required are disposed of and any remaining medications are in a locked cabinet.
- Remove any razor blades, pencil sharpeners, shoe laces, small make up mirrors, (which could be smashed), maybe dressing gown cords and belts, and similar items from the young person's room. This may feel intrusive but if the young person is self harming they will feel safer that you have done this, although they may not always show appreciation.
- Do not leave razor blades easily accessible at home.

Tell the young person before they leave for home that you have been advised to do this and it has been done.

2. Talk to the young person prior to them coming home about how you can help if they are having self harm thoughts. Consider if there is a signal that they may be willing to give you before self harm happens such as squeezing your hand or asking to do a specific form of distraction with you, or giving you a red card. Young people sometimes find this easier than vocalising how they are feeling. Ask them how they would want you to react if they give you this signal prior to this occurring so that there is a good plan in place ready to be put into action when required.
3. Try to think if there are any patterns to when the young person self harms, (such as following an argument) and if there are; consider how these could be safely managed.

For example:

- If the self-harm usually happens when they are alone in their bedroom it might be worth asking the young person to leave their door open when they are in their room.

- It may be necessary to consider if a family member can sleep in the same room as the young person, if they are appearing distressed
 - After a family dispute you may wish to ask the young person to remain in social areas of the house until they are feeling calmer
4. After a self harm incident give minimal attention to the actual self harming behaviour but ensure the wound/danger is addressed to prevent further harm. Offer the young person time to talk when calmer and discuss how the situation could have been managed differently to allow them to access help before they self-harm next time. Ensure the young person is aware that you love them and are willing to support them through this difficult time but you would like to give support to prevent self harm occurring rather than after it has happened.
 5. Consider if there were any early warning signs that indicated that the young person was distressed, which the family could spot next time, and then try to distract or talk to the young person at that point in the future to prevent the situation escalating.
 6. Feel free to ring your keyworker for advice during our opening hours (9-5 Monday to Friday) if you are finding it difficult to manage a situation or would like some advice. The paediatric liaison nurse /keyworker can be contacted at the Gem Centre Child & Family service on 01902 444021.
 7. If you are concerned about any self harm incidents and do not feel able to deal with the incident or wound you should always seek medical attention.

My Self-harm Management Plan

Triggers to self-harm

- I self-harm when I feel.....This usually happens when.....
- My preferred method of self-harm isbut I also

Early warning signs

- People at home would be able to tell that I'm not feeling quite right or I might be at risk to myself because I might appear..... and I will usually
- Just before I self-harm I

Supporting me through a difficult time

- To prevent me from harming myself in the future I could.....when I start to feel.....
- I can let people know I need support before I reach the point where I feel like self-harming by.....
- It will help me if people at homewhen they can see that I appear.....

Supporting me after a self harming incident

- If I do self-harm, despite trying not to by following the plan above, I would like it if people at home.....
- It will help me to understand why I was unable to refrain from harming myself if we.....
- If I have to go to the hospital for any reason I'd prefer it if.....because this will make me feel

Signed.....(Young person)

Date:.....

Signed.....(Parent/guardian)

Date:.....

Signed.....(CAMHS)

Date:.....