

Information for Frontline Staff

What is self-harm?

Self-harm describes a wide range of things that people do to themselves in a deliberate and usually hidden way. In the vast majority of cases self-harm remains a secretive behaviour that can go on for a long time without being discovered. Self-harm can involve:

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

Why do young people self-harm?

Young people who self-harm mainly do so because they have no other way of coping with problems and emotional distress in their lives. This can be to do with factors ranging from bullying to family breakdown. But self-harm is not a good way of dealing with such problems. It provides only temporary relief and does not deal with the underlying issues.

What to do?

It was clear to the Inquiry that young people who self-harm can find it very hard to talk about it and are often afraid of how people will react. The reaction a young person receives when they disclose their self-harm can have a critical influence on whether they go on to access supportive services. It can be also hard for family, friends, and professionals to handle a young person's disclosure of self-harm.

If you find a young person is self-harming, first and foremost, try to remain calm (even if you don't feel calm). Any indication of a negative emotion or being judgemental is likely to aggravate the situation. If his or her wounds are fairly minor, provide basic appropriate first aid, and a dose of 'tender love and care'. If the wounds are deeper, or won't stop bleeding, they should be seen by a health care professional. It's also important to recognise that even though the young person's wounds are self-inflicted, he or she may well be in a state of shock. You may need to take the young person to casualty or, if necessary, call an ambulance.

Strive to be accepting and open-minded. Provide an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on, a hand to hold, and focus on the person not the self-harm behaviour.

Assure them that it's okay to talk about their need to self-harm, and reassure them that they have your support even if you don't understand why they are doing it or what they are going through.

Offer to assist them in seeking professional help; e.g., GP, counsellor, therapist, or community psychiatric nurse, but avoid taking control—many young people who self-harm struggle with control issues. Endeavour not to take it as a personal affront if the young person cannot talk to you because you are too close.

Avoid giving ultimatums; e.g., 'stop or else . . . ' as they rarely work, and may well drive the behaviour underground, or the young person may turn to more dangerous methods to hurt themselves. It is important that the decision to stop comes from the person themselves.

Dealing with your own feelings

Be honest with yourself about how the young person's self-harm is affecting you. It's not unusual to feel shocked, angry, sad, frightened, guilty, responsible, hopeless, or powerless.

How can I find out more?

There are a growing number of useful books on the topic of self-harm as well as some informative websites. Educating yourself on the subject can go a long way towards helping you become a more understanding and productive support person for your child.

Helpful telephone numbers:

- Samaritans - 08457 90 90 90
- ChildLine - 0800 1111
- Parentline Plus - 0808 800 2222
- NSPCC - 0808 800 5000

Helpful websites:

- www.nshn.co.uk
- www.lifesigns.org.uk
- www.childline.org.uk
- www.samaritans.org.uk
- www.selfharm.org.uk

More information is available from our website: www.selfharmuk.org

Extracts taken from www.siari.co.uk