



Factsheet 1

Advice for young people

What is self harm?

You might have heard the terms self harm, self injury, self mutilation, cutting and deliberate self harm used by youth workers, friends, teachers or on the telly and wondered what they mean...

They mean doing anything on purpose that causes harm to yourself. This could be by:

- cutting
- burning
- pulling your hair out
- hitting yourself or something against yourself
- scratching
- overdosing or swallowing something dangerous

or anything that causes harm to your body on purpose.

These are all terms that mean similar things and can be used to describe self harm.

Suicide

If you hurt yourself this does not mean you want to die. Attempted suicide is when your aim is to die. Self harm is something that people do to help themselves manage their emotions. This means that self harm is what we call a 'coping strategy'.

Self harm

- is not suicide
- is not attention seeking
- is not a cry for help
- is not a fashionable or cool thing to do
- is not something that can't be cured
- is not 'mad' or 'weird'
- is quite common, 1 in 10 teenagers self harm
- is not done because people enjoy the pain

Why do people self harm?

Young people self harm for a number of reasons but the most common is to help them cope with their feelings or state of mind. This is a learnt 'coping strategy' and helps people feel: calmer, in control, relief, release and better.

Sometimes people also hurt themselves because they want to punish themselves, out of anger, fear or lack of confidence.

Mostly there is something that has happened that makes people hurt themselves in the first place, this can be something that is big or small but it's likely to be something that has effected how you feel, such as:

- bullying
- abuse (physical, emotional or sexual)
- neglect
- family difficulties
- boy/girlfriend troubles
- housing
- loneliness
- someone you know dying
- pressures from school/college
- drug or alcohol problems
- eating disorders
- family money problems
- plus many more

Sometimes when people self harm they feel the pain but mostly they feel 'spaced out' or like they're not really there. This is because they are so overwhelmed by the other difficult things they are feeling.

People often think that their feelings don't matter and that they are invisible; by hurting themselves physically it is a way of outwardly expressing the feelings on the inside.

Ways to help yourself

Speaking to someone you know may help, perhaps a teacher or parent. It is good to speak to a friend but remember they might find it hard to understand or struggle with it on their own. If possible allow your friend to talk to an adult - so they have someone to talk to too. It can be very upsetting for people who care about you.

Many schools and colleges now have counsellors available for you to talk to - this is a good place to start, if this is not an option for you then perhaps speak to your school nurse or family GP. If you are under 16 your GP can talk to your parent/guardian against your wishes but discuss any worries you have about this with your GP first.

- see also the **Coping Strategies** page on our web site.

Treatment options

You might be given the option to see a counsellor, psychologist, therapist, psychiatrist or mental health team - all of these people will be trained to deal with self harm and any issues that might have caused your self harm. They might want to speak to your parent/guardian - if they know about your self harm and if not they may help you find a way to discuss it with them, if that is appropriate.

Seeing somebody about your difficulties does not mean that you are crazy, mad or mentally ill. It just means you need a bit of help to get by at the moment and figure out how to cope differently with your feelings and experiences.

Talking about things might help you understand what made you start self harming in the first place - if you don't already know. It will also help you manage your self harm and help you come up with some ways to distract yourself. If you can get help for the cause of your self harm then you will have less reason to self harm and find it easier to learn other coping strategies.

Support

We provide email or postal support, this is a completely confidential service provided by people who understand self harm from a personal point of view. We can also provide support and information to your families, friends, teachers and anyone else who might need it.

We won't tell anybody what you put in your emails or letters or that you have contacted us. The only time we would have to break your confidentiality is if we thought you were in danger either from yourself or someone else. We do not mean if you tell us your are hurting yourself - but if you tell us your intentions are to kill yourself then we would by law, have to tell someone. If you tell us that someone else is hurting you and we have enough information then we will also have to tell someone about that.

There are a number of other organisations that provide support, see the **Links Page** on our web site - which is being updated all the time - or contact us for more details.