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What is self harm?

Self-harm is the term used to describe the deliberate harm or damage someone may do to their own body, with the intention of causing pain or injury. Typically those who self-harm may cut themselves on the arms, legs or face; burn themselves with cigarettes; hit fists or head against a wall; pull hair out or overdose on drugs or alcohol.

Self-harm is a response to unbearable or painful emotions. Some people may self-injure as a one-off episode in response to extreme distress. For others, it may become a habitual way of coping with stress or crises.

The person who is self-harming may feel bewildered and frightened by what is happening and it evokes powerful emotional responses in other people, who may feel distressed, angry or afraid.

The actual injury may be serious or superficial, but any self-harm indicates emotional distress and should be taken seriously. Self-harm is sometimes confused with suicidal behavior. A person who self-harms does not intend to commit suicide, but their actions may result in accidental death or serious injury.

It is most often associated with young women, but young men and older people also self-harm. Self-harming behavior usually begins in adolescence, but it is also encountered in younger children.

Why do people harm themselves?

For the person doing it, self harm is not the problem but a way of coping with emotional pain. It may be difficult for others to understand, but there are several reasons why inflicting physical pain may bring some emotional relief:

- Our bodies release natural, opiate -like endorphins in response to physical pain that temporarily relieve pain and distress.
- Making the preparations to inflict self-injury provides some distraction from distressing thoughts and feelings.
- Self-harm offers a way of expressing emotional pain and distress to oneself or to others. Some people may wish to attract help, others will hide their injuries.
- Some people feel emotionally numb or dead inside and may inflict pain in order to “ feel”.
- Self-harm is often associated with low self-worth and can sometimes be an expression of anger and self-loathing .

Any sense of relief is temporary and is often followed by fear or anxiety about the injuries inflicted and shame or guilt about the act or its consequences. It is similar to “ drinking to forget ” and waking up with a hangover.

Some people who harm themselves are suffering from depression, others may have a history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, but the issues behind such emotional turmoil and distress are individual and varied.

How can you help yourself ?

It is more helpful to understand self-harm as a way of trying to cope with emotions, rather than as something deviant, mad or bad. You may feel overwhelmed by feelings and emotions, but you can still make choices about what to do. Here are some suggestions that people have found useful:

- It may be helpful to talk to your friends or family . It can be a relief just to tell someone else what you are going through. Some people may find it hard to understand, but others will try to understand your feelings or may have had similar experiences.
- There are many people in the University to whom you can turn for support. They will be able to put you in touch with someone who can offer more specialist help, if necessary .
- Developing less damaging ways of expressing yourself , releasing pent up feelings and dealing with strong emotions, will take time. You are likely to continue self-harming until you have established new ways of coping. Do not give yourself a hard time about slips.
- You may try delaying harming yourself for a few minutes to start with and practice extending the length of time. You could try waiting until the end of a CD, or TV programme. You may find that some of the intensity of feeling has passed.

- If you have taken a small overdose, contact your GP for advice as soon as possible. If you have taken a large overdose, or if you feel at all unwell, go to the emergency Department at any hospital or to your GP.
- If you have hurt or injured yourself in any other way, you need to decide whether first aid is sufficient or whether to seek medical help from the emergency Department at any hospital or from your GP.
- It may be that your distress, or the behavior you are using to cope, is interfering with your academic work. If you are finding it difficult to study or falling behind with your work, arrangements can be made to help you through a difficult patch. Let someone in your Department or school know.
- Academic support may also be able to help you to negotiate arrangements for course work or exams and to offer you practical support, if you are finding it difficult to study.
- Self-help organizations provide advice, information and support. There is useful information on the Internet and in self-help books.

How can you help someone else ?

- If a friend or hostel mate confides in you that he or she has self-harmed or feels the urge to do so, simply listening may provide him or her with some relief . You do not have to come up with the answer or solve the problems.
- Such a situation may seem very urgent and frightening to you, but the person may have been living with this for a long time. You are not responsible for him or her . Unless there is a medical emergency, it is more helpful to allow the other person to make their own choice about what to do. Try not to get too overwhelmed. You also have your own life.
- You may find it irritating or difficult to understand why someone might self-harm, particularly if the actual injuries are superficial. Any incident of self-harm indicates emotional distress and the severity of the injuries may not reflect the intensity of distress the person feels. It may have taken the person considerable self-restraint not to inflict a more serious injury .

- Hearing someone talk about harming them self , or seeing their scars or injuries may be upsetting for you. If you wish to talk to someone about your own feelings, you can talk to a counselor for support and advice on a confidential basis.
- Immediately after a person has self-harmed, he or she may be frightened or upset. If it is a superficial injury , you might help with first aid measures and reassurance. If you think the person needs medical attention, use your judgment or seek advice whether to encourage him or her to attend the emergency Department of any hospital or the GP.
- If the person is unconscious, or if it is a more serious injury or an overdose, they will require a medical assessment immediately. If they are not willing or able to attend hospital or their GP, you will have to take action, or tell someone who can take responsibility. If the incident happens in a hostel, this will be the warden. If the incident happens in your house, you should phone the emergency services.

When is specialist help appropriate?

Sometimes, self-harm can be an impulsive response to a particularly difficult situation. It may be that help and support from friends and family will get you through the bad patch. If , however, you have been harming yourself for a long time, this may not be enough. Even though you tell yourself that the self-harm is helping you to cope, there may be times when you feel frightened that it is getting out of control.

If so, there are resources at the University where you will find information, advice, treatment and support. You can also seek help from appropriate specialists or counselors.

Depending on the nature of your difficulty , different approaches may be suggested:

- Counseling may help you to understand the reasons you self-harm and to learn different ways of coping with your thoughts and feelings
- Medication can sometimes be helpful in reducing symptoms of depression or anxiety and allowing you to regain control.