

nshn

The National Self Harm Network



What is self harm?

Contact us at:

NSHN, Po Box 7264, Nottingham NG1 6WJ

Email: info@nshn.co.uk

Website & Support Forum: www.nshn.co.uk

A registered charity number: 1106336
A company limited by guarantee: 04305979



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Definitions

“Intentional self poisoning or injury, irrespective of the apparent purpose of the act” NICE 2004

Self harm (also known as self injury or self mutilation) is the act of deliberately causing harm to oneself either by causing a physical injury, by putting oneself in dangerous situations and/or self neglect.

Forms of self harm:

- Cutting, burning, biting
- Head banging and hitting
- Picking and scratching
- Pulling out hair
- Over dosing and self-poisoning
- Substance abuse
- Taking personal risks
- Neglecting oneself
- Eating disorders

Who self harms?

There is no 'typical' person who self harms. It can be anyone. An individual who self harms can not and should not be stereotyped; they can be of all ages, any sex, sexuality or ethnicity and of different employment status etc.

“The UK has one of the highest rates of self harm in Europe at 400 per 100'000 population”

Horrocks, J. Self Poisoning and Self Injury in Adults, in Clinical Medicine, 2 (6), 509-512 (2002) Cited in Samaritans information sheet, Self Harm and Suicide March 2005.

Why?

Each individuals relationship with self harm is different. There can be many reasons behind self harm such as childhood abuse, sexual assault, bullying, stress, low self esteem, family breakdown, dysfunctional relationships, mental ill health and financial worries.

Self harm is primarily a coping strategy and can provide a release from emotional distress and enable an individual to regain feelings of control. Self harm can be a form of self punishment for feelings of guilt. It can also be a way to physically express feelings and emotions when individuals struggle to communicate with others.

In the majority of cases self harm is a very private act and individuals can go to great lengths to hide scars and bruises and will often try to address physical injuries themselves rather than seek medical treatment.

Whilst some individuals who self harm may have suicidal feelings, those feelings are likely to originate from the experiences and traumas behind their self harm rather than being influenced by self harm itself. Self harm is rarely an attempt of suicide but where an individual may have suicidal thoughts self harm can provide an alternative way to cope with those thoughts and lessen their intensity.

A release of tension, frustration and distress:

“I think it's somewhat of a release when you do it, you know you've not really dealt with your feelings properly but you have dealt with them in a way that's possibly the only way you can see at the time”

To feel and regain control:

“When things were happening to me that I had no control over I started hurting myself, this was something that I could control, I could do as much or as little damage as I wanted, it only involved myself and I could care for the wound after”

To punish:

“I would say there is a definite punishment element involved in my self harm, a feeling that I have to take things out on myself, to drive the bad feelings away, punish myself for what I let happen to me, and to get the badness out”

To feel, to ground oneself:

“When I feel numb or go to the place where I disconnect from reality I need to feel pain to bring me back to the here and now, nothing else will ground me. The pain makes me realise that I am really here”

A way to express:

“It's a way of expressing negative feelings about myself that build up inside me. As someone who finds it difficult to put things into words, it can at times be the only way of expressing how I am feeling”

People who self harm can stop easily if they want to

Self harm is very often a coping mechanism, therefore it is very difficult for someone to stop without learning new ways of coping. Triggers for self harm such as abuse, bullying etc. are unlikely to be resolved over night. Recovery can be a slow process. It is possible that self harm can also turn into an addiction. Therefore it can be a great struggle to stop even if you want to, the same way as it would be for somebody trying to give up smoking or drinking to excess. Individuals may need a great deal of support to move away from using self harm as a method of coping.

Self harm is the problem, if we stop this then the person will be fine

Self harm is rarely the problem, but a solution until other issues are resolved.

It is the reasons that lay behind individuals self harm that need to be addressed in order to aid a recovery from self harm

“I try hard with distractions to stop myself from self-harming, however I’ve come to accept that until the issues behind my self-harm have been dealt with and I start to like myself a bit more then the urges to self-harm are unlikely to go away. I don’t want to self-harm but it’s the only way I feel I can cope with my past at the moment.” Anon

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Common Misconceptions

Common Misconceptions

There are a number of common misconceptions surrounding self harm.

Self harm is attempted suicide

All people who self harm are suicidal

People often associate self harm with attempted suicide however this is rarely the case. People suffering emotional distress may feel suicidal but as self harm is a coping mechanism its function is predominantly to prevent suicide rather than being a suicide attempt.

Some individuals that self harm may go on to complete a suicide attempt. It is unlikely however that self harm is the cause of such suicidal feelings. It is far more likely to be due to the reasons triggering the self harm, such as abuse, bullying, financial worries etc. rather than an extension of the self harm itself.

A survey of 758 respondents carried out by NSHN showed that only 4% of these individuals stated that it was suicidal feelings that led to any of their individual incidents of self harm (Figures correct to August 2009). The feelings most often reported were self hatred, anger, frustration and worthlessness.

“I don’t want to die. I just want this pain to stop. The only way I can get some relief from this emotional pain is by hurting myself.” Anon

Attention seeking

Self harm is often seen as a cry for help, a ploy to gain attention or as manipulation. However more often than not self harm is a very private and hidden behaviour that does not involve anyone else. Some people will take great care in hiding their injuries and scars through shame, embarrassment or fear. They may conceal injuries under clothing, jewellery or make up excuses and explanations. A large number of people who self harm treat their wounds themselves at home rather than seeking medical help.

Other individuals who do let people know about their self harm may do this as they have no other way to communicate how they are feeling. Self harm for these individuals may be a cry for help. If someone goes to these extremes it is clear that they are in distress.

“It’s not about attention-seeking. I go to great lengths to keep my scars hidden at all times.” Matt 27

“It is absolutely not attention seeking, for most people it’s very secretive” Gerard 24

“In the small percentage of cases where it may be considered as attention seeking, there must be some issues that cause them to go to such extremes, so they need help to deal with the issues leading to them self harming just as much as anyone else.” Anon

The more serious the injury, the more serious the problem

It is important to take all injuries seriously as the nature of the wound does not represent the extent of the anguish being experienced.

“I feel it is inappropriate to ‘measure’ self harm in such a way. Yes, it may be useful to have some idea of the frequency and intensity and perhaps gain some understanding from that but I do not believe a) the amount of blood, b) number of scars/cuts is going to give you anywhere near the full story of what is going on.” Anon

“If you meet someone who self-harms it is fundamental to treat them as an individual with respect and care, do not bother trying to gauge what is going on in their head by the number of stitches they need.” Gerard 24

They must like the pain

Self harm is not about liking pain. It is a way to cope with thoughts and feelings that are depressing or distressing and to regain some control over how you feel. A lot of the time, individuals who self harm do not actually feel any pain due to adrenaline, instead they feel a release.

Self harm can also be a mechanism that allows individuals to ‘feel’ something as the feeling of being emotionally numb and empty are common symptoms of depression. Such feelings of pain can also be used to ‘ground’ oneself in reality when feeling dissociated such as during flashbacks common with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or manic episodes such as those experienced by individuals with Bipolar Disorder.

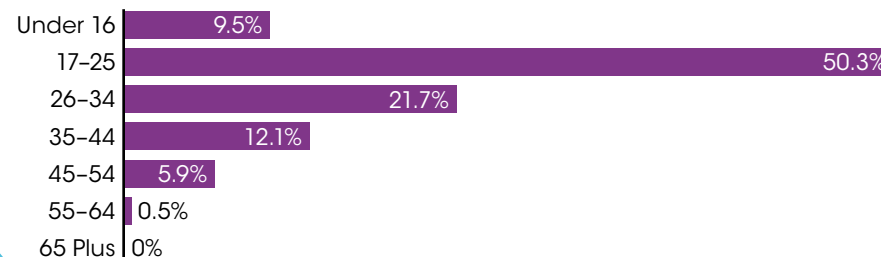
In some cases individuals self harm to punish themselves. This may be due to feelings of guilt or shame. This is common in cases of sexual abuse and sexual assault. Individuals who self harm for these reasons are seeking pain but not for gratification.

“When I self harm I don’t feel any pain at all, I just feel a sense of relief. It’s not until after that I feel the pain and that’s when I start to regret what I’ve done.” Anon

Self harm is a young person’s issue

It is not only the young that self harm, triggers for self harm are experienced by people of all ages.

Results from an NSHN survey (390 respondents)



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Finding that a person you care for is harming themselves can bring about a large range of thoughts and feelings: fear, distress, confusion, worry, anger, anxiety and self blame.

Your first reactions may be to remove the things that they may be using to harm themselves, be forceful in seeking help (i.e. urgently seeing a GP), apply pressure on them to talk, or be confrontational. Self harm is primarily a coping strategy. Until the reasons behind the self harm have been explored taking away their ability to cope can be very detrimental. The table contained within this leaflet gives you more detailed do's and don'ts.

A common fear is that a loved one is feeling suicidal. Whilst some individuals that self harm may have suicidal feelings, these are likely to originate from the issues behind the self harm rather than the self harm itself. Self harm, as a coping mechanism, is very often a way of avoiding suicide by releasing thoughts, feelings and emotions.

The reasons behind self harm will need to be addressed when the individual is ready and with the right care and support. Appropriate professional help may be needed. Whilst these reasons are being worked through the greatest support you can offer is a listening ear.

Distractions can be a powerful way of diverting feelings of self harm or finding other ways to express thoughts and feelings such as poetry, art, sport etc. Alternatives to self harm such as ice cubes on the skin, flicking elastic bands or drawing on the skin with red pens can also help.

Contact NSHN for a full distraction list.

Things to do...

Ask them what, if anything they would like you to do to help

If they are willing to talk about it – recommend and encourage them to seek professional help, coping strategies, support groups, support forums etc.

Let them remain in control as much as possible (Many people who self harm feel they have a lack of control over their lives and feelings etc.)

Learn as much as you can about self harm

Try and be understanding

Show them that you care and can see the person beyond the self harm

Be positive. Try and focus on their strengths

If they tell you they have just self harmed, stay calm and ask if they want to talk about it or need any medical help (Despite how you may feel, try not to show it)

Get help for dealing with and understanding your own feelings and emotions

Only help as much as you feel able to. You need to look after your own health too. You need to maintain some self preservation, supporting someone else can be emotionally draining

Offer ideas for distractions – talk about things not related to self harm, watch a film together, go for a walk together etc but respect requests for time on their own

Things not to do...

Don't assume what they need and want or take any action without discussing it and being sure that they are comfortable with it

Don't force them into going to get help and take control away from them. (They may not be ready. Forcing this may cause them to withdraw from you.)

Don't try to make them stop self harming (e.g. by removing self harm tools) or give them ultimatums or do things that they aren't comfortable with. Never ask them to 'promise' they won't harm themselves. This will only add more pressure and lead to guilt for any further self harm

Never jump to conclusions

Don't tell them what they are doing is wrong or be judgemental

Don't change your perspective of them as a person (They are an individual, not a 'self-harmer'!)

Don't be negative, their self harm does not change everything about them

Don't get angry with them, shout at them, or show shock after individual episodes of self harm (You may feel this way but expressing it may cause more harm and make the individual feel guilty)

Don't blame yourself or take it personally

Don't blame them for making you worry or talk about how much this is impacting on you, this may make them feel even more guilty and lead to further self harm

Don't assume that they always need to talk about the self harm if they are low or not allow them any time and space alone

Things to do...

Open up methods of communication

Give them the option to come to talk to you IF they want to

Ask them if they want to talk about what, if anything led to the individual episode of self harm

Things not to do...

Don't force them to talk about it

Don't make them feel that this is something that should be kept secret and is wrong to talk about or that they 'have' to talk about it

Don't assume every episode of self harm is for the same reason