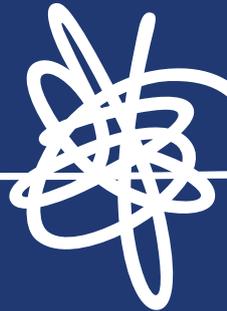


# UNDERSTANDING SELF HARM



## Fact sheet for Teachers, Tutors and Lecturers



### What is self-harm?

The terms self-harm, deliberate self-harm and self-injury are often used and sometimes can add to our confusion when discussing and understanding self-harm. Within a broader context, self-harm can include smoking, alcohol, that glass of wine to take the edge off of the day because it helps with the stress, repetitive cleaning, working late or taking work home frequently, driving too fast... all can be deemed to be self-harming behaviours. This fact sheet uses the term self-harm to include self-poisoning and self-injury but does not include alcohol and drug use nor eating disorders.

Self-harm/self-injury is essentially a coping mechanism that enables a person to deal with very difficult feelings, painful memories or as a way to deal with overwhelming experiences, and the associated intense emotional distress.

Self-injury as defined by Sutton and Martinson (2003) is seen as

“an expression of acute psychological distress. It is an act done to oneself, by oneself with the intention of helping oneself rather than killing oneself. Paradoxically, damage is done to the body in an attempt to preserve the integrity of the mind.”

Self-harm can provide a calming sensation, provide ‘instant relief’ it may also be used to ‘ground’ a person who is feeling numb or dissociated. Self-injury can also be used as a method of self-punishment or self-control. Whilst self-injury can provide instant relief the ‘relief’ can be temporary. As the underlying emotional issues are not being addressed the need to self-injure may increase. This increase could be either in frequency or severity or both. Self-harm can be compulsive or impulsive and at times and for some it can be both. Self-harm is coping mechanism.

### Who self-harms?

So who self-harms? Males, females, young, old, employed, unemployed. Gay, lesbian, straight. Rich, poor. Strong, intelligent. Self-harming behaviours as a means of coping do not discriminate.

### Forms of self-harm

People who self-harm utilise a number of methods and this can include:

- Cutting
- Burning
- Poisoning
- Self-punching, hitting, slapping or bruising
- Scratching and hair pulling

However some may use more than one method and this can depend on the intention and the emotions that are associated with the behaviour.

### Washington Mind

Washington Mind provide services for those aged 11 years and upwards. We work with young people, young adults and adults who self-harm now and those who have self-harmed in the past. We view self-harming behaviours as a coping mechanism. We provide support that allows the individual to explore and understand their self-harm with the aim of identifying alternative and healthier options and choices to assist them with dealing with their emotional distress. If your child/a child you care for would like to access to support at this time, Washington Mind can be contacted on 0191 417 8043. The child/young person can contact us directly or we can take information from a parent, carer, guardian or professional on behalf of the child/young person with their permission.

# Signs to look out for

Although self-harm is often a secretive and private behaviour with very little or no indications of it taking place, there are certain things that may bring a pupil to your attention and that could lead to self-harming behaviours. A pupil may present as unhappy, they may act out of character and have low self-esteem. They may be experiencing being bullied and appear very negative. They may have issues at home that they do not know how to talk about or how to cope with.

You may see cuts or burns that do appear to be the result of an accident, or the pupil may have frequent accidents that cause a physical injury. You may notice surgical dressings on the arms or wrists. The pupil may wear clothing that is not appropriate for the weather (long sleeves during hot weather) or they may inform you of reasons why they cannot partake in physical activities and these reasons may be continuous and often. This could be because they do not wish to change clothes in the

company of others who might see the cuts or scratches.

Although self-harming is a method for coping and dealing with emotional distress should the underlying emotional issues continue without accessing support then self-harming behaviours can increase. Whilst some say that self-harming keeps them alive, this indicates that there are also thoughts of death and dying. Any mention of suicidal thoughts or intent should be taken seriously and should always be acted upon. Emotional support should be provided with the aim of reducing any greater risk.

# Responding

Increasing your knowledge can help you to increase your understanding of self-harm. Your initial reaction to either the behaviour or the disclosure of this behaviour will impact on the child or young person. How your school or place of learning supports staff through its policies and procedures for self-harm should provide with the guidance you need. Some schools/places of learning do not have policies and procedures in place. This may be due to the difficulties associated with 'dealing' with self-harm if this is the case then the following information can be of help.

Allowing the pupil to know you are there for them is important, as is the pupil not feeling that they are not being judged. If you wish to understand and support your pupils to access the appropriate support for them, listening to them and allowing them the

freedom to talk about their self-harm will enable them to trust you. However you must not make a promise that you cannot keep, such as not telling anyone or that the matter can remain confidential. You can reassure your pupil that there is support available and that talking about the emotional issues can help. You can encourage the young person to access help and support.

Self-harm is essentially a coping strategy, and although it can be scary and difficult to understand, your pupil needs to be in control of the decisions surrounding the support they need. You can ask them what help they feel they need and what they would like to happen now. Do not ask them to simply stop harming themselves, it is not that easy and do not remove the 'tools' they use. As this may lead to them becoming more secretive or using other 'tools' that may increase any risk of infection. With the right support your pupil can find healthier alternative coping

strategies. These new methods for coping must be found before moving away from the self-harming behaviours. There are helpful resources that provide information for young people (and teachers also) to enable them to understand self-harm and to help them understand emotional wellbeing and resilience.

The young person is experiencing emotional distress and the way the disclosure of their self-harm is dealt with is important. It is best if you can talk about the emotional issues rather than the self-harming behaviour. Asking to see the injuries can increase the emotional distress. In the main self-harming injuries are dealt with by the person as they 'self-comfort' and take personal care of their injuries. If there is any concern surrounding the injury or if an overdose has been taken medical attention should be sought. If there is any doubt contact 111 (NHS local support).

# Recovery

Recovery from emotional distress and self-harm is possible. This journey of recovery can be a long one so be prepared and remember to look after yourself. Self-harm is difficult to both understand and cope with, you may wish to access support for yourself. Within your role you may need to support other pupils who are aware of the self-harming behaviour and you may need to promote healthy coping strategies and behaviours that increase their own (and your) mental wellbeing. Talking through your feelings with someone who can offer you support surrounding this is equally important.

# A Multi-Faceted Approach

You should make yourself aware of the protocols and procedures and of the communication processes associated with the duty of care for your school, college or place of learning. You may already have a Self-harm policy in place or you may wish to develop one. Self-harm policies can prove to be anxiety provoking documents and a multi-disciplinary/ team approach to the development of this policy can ensure that an individual providing initial support has the backing and support of the team as a whole. This form of group decision making regarding the content of the policy and procedure can ensure that no individual

is scapegoated and the school, college or place of learning is united in its approach to self-harm. Any policy/procedure will have the 'child's' needs as paramount therefore an individual approach will need to be taken to each child who you support.

By increasing your understanding of self-harm you can help yourself, your colleagues and your pupils. This fact sheet and other information is available at [www.washingtonmind.org.uk](http://www.washingtonmind.org.uk) or visit [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) and download the information booklet understanding self-harm.

With thanks to Washington Mind's Young Peoples Steering Group for sharing your encouraging personal stories and for your time and support in developing this information fact sheet.

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