



**University of  
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**University Counselling Service**

# **Understanding Self-Harm**

## **What is self-harm?**

Self-harm describes the deliberate harm or damage someone may do to their own body, with the intention of causing pain or injury. Those who self-harm may cut or burn themselves, punch their fists or head against a wall, pull their hair out (although this might also be a compulsive behaviour rather than part of an intention to self-harm) or overdose on drugs or alcohol.

Self-harm is a response to painful emotions that feel intolerable or that cannot be expressed any other way. 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 distress or crises.

The person, who is self-harming, may feel bewildered and frightened and this behaviour can evoke powerful emotional responses in other people, who may feel upset, 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 behaviour. People who self-harm do not necessarily intend to kill themselves, but their actions may result in their accidental death or significant injury.

Self-harming behaviour usually begins in adolescence, but it can happen in younger children.

## **Why do people harm themselves?**

For the person doing it, it is a way of coping with emotional pain that they feel they cannot express any other way. 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; they temporarily relieve the pain and distress.
- Preparing 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 to “feel” something.
- 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.

Some people who harm themselves may be feeling depressed, others may have a history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Often the issues behind the emotional turmoil and distress that lead to self-harm 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 something to be ashamed of. You might feel overwhelmed by feelings and emotions, but you can still make choices about how to respond. 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 that you are struggling, or that you want to self-harm. 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 within the University to whom you can turn for support. These may include your personal tutor, or the Support and Wellbeing Officer in your department or school, the Disability Liaison Officer in your department or school, A Residential Assistant your hall of residence or any other member of support staff. 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, learning how to tolerate intense feelings and how to express strong emotions will take time. You might need to continue self-harming until you have established new ways of coping. Try not to give yourself a hard time if you do resort to self-harm.
- Some people can ward off the need to self-harm with less damaging ways of expressing their feelings and getting some relief. Try using a red marker pen on your skin, holding ice cubes against your skin, eating a hot chilli, have a cold shower or snapping a rubber band against your wrist. This does not work for everyone however and it is important to try not to feel guilty if this does not work for you.
- You may try delaying harming yourself for a few minutes to start with and practise extending the length of time. You could try waiting until the end of a song or piece of music, or TV programme. You might write down how you are feeling of what is happening for you, no one else needs to see it. After waiting, you may find that some of the intensity of feeling has passed.
- If you do harm yourself, try to reduce the damage. Use sterile equipment to reduce the risk of infection. Have a first-aid kit handy. Cover cuts with a clean, dry dressing. Run cold water over burns for at least 10 minutes and cover loosely with cling film.

- If you have taken an overdose, go straight to the Emergency Department at Queens Medical Centre.
- If you have hurt or injured yourself in any other way, you will need to assess whether first aid is sufficient or whether to seek medical help from the Emergency Department at Queens Medical Centre or from your GP.
- It may be that your distress, or the behaviour 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. Let someone in your department or school know, for example your personal tutor, or the support and wellbeing officer in your school.
- Self-help organisations provide advice, information, and support. A directory of services can be found at the end of this leaflet.

## **How can you help someone else?**

- If a friend or housemate confides in you that they have self-harmed or feels the urge to do so, simply listening may provide them with some relief. You do not have to come up with answers or solve the problems.
- Hearing that the person you know wants to self-harm might seem very urgent and frightening to you, and it is important to know that you can seek support too or suggest that they do. Unless there is a medical emergency, it is more helpful to allow the other person to make their own choice about what to do.
- You might find it irritating or difficult to understand why someone might self-harm, particularly if their injuries do not appear to be serious. All overdoses should be taken seriously however – encourage the person to seek immediate help.
- 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 significant injury.
- Hearing someone talk about harming themselves or seeing their scars or injuries may be upsetting for you. If you wish to talk to someone about your own feelings, you can contact a telephone support line or talk to family and friends or a support and wellbeing officer for support and advice.
- Immediately after a person has self-harmed, they may be frightened or upset. If it is a superficial injury, you might be able to help with first aid measures and reassurance.

**If you think the person needs medical attention, seek advice from the GP/by phoning 111 or encourage them to attend the Emergency Department of the Queens Medical Centre.**

- If the person is unconscious, or if it is a significant injury or an overdose, they will require a medical assessment immediately. If they are not willing or able to attend hospital, you will have to act or tell someone who can take responsibility. If, for example, the incident happens in a hall of residence, this will be the Residential Assistant or security team. If the incident happens in your house, you should phone the emergency services (dial 999 from any phone).

## **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 feel like 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 and in Nottingham where you will find information, advice, treatment, and support. Initially, if you prefer to approach someone you know, your personal tutor, the support and wellbeing officer in your department or school or a member of support staff can put you in touch with specialist help. There are also the chaplains, the Students' Union Welfare Officer, and the residential support staff in hall, who will support you in seeking appropriate help.

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

- Counselling can help you to understand why you self-harm and to learn other ways of coping with your thoughts and feelings
- Medication can sometimes be helpful in reducing the symptoms of depression or anxiety and therefore some of the reasons you self-harm.

The resources listed in this leaflet will help you consider what approach might best suit you and refer you to the appropriate service, if necessary.