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University Counselling Service

Understanding Self-Harm

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 behaviour. A person who self-harms does not intend to commit suicide, but their actions may result in their accidental death or serious injury.

It is mostly associated with young women, but young men and older people also self-harm. Self-harming behaviour usually begins in adolescence, but it is 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, the temporarily relieve the 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 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 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 within the University to whom you can turn for support. These may include your personal tutor, senior tutor or the Disability Liaison Officer in your department or school, the hall tutor or warden in the halls of residence; or any other member of staff. They will be able to put you in touch with someone who can offer more specialist help if necessary. There are also other members of the University such as chaplains, the Students' Union Welfare officer and the welfare reps in the halls, whom you may wish to approach.
- 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.
- Experiment with less damaging ways of expressing your feelings and getting some relief. Try using a red marker pen on your skin, rubbing ice cubes against your skin or snapping a rubber band against your wrist.
- 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 CD, or TV programme. 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 and cover loosely with cling film.
- 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 Queens Medical Centre 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 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 through a difficult patch.

Let someone in your department or school know, for example your personal tutor or the senior tutor.

- 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 organisations provide advice, information and support. There is useful information on the internet and in self-help books. Some resources are listed at the end of this leaflet.

How Can You Help Someone Else?

- If a friend or housemate 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 don't 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 it 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 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 talk to a counsellor 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 judgement or seek advice whether to encourage him or her to attend the Emergency Department of the Queens Medical Centre 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 hall of residence, this will be the hall tutor or warden. 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 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 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 senior tutor in your department or school or a member of staff can put you in touch with specialist help. There are also the chaplains, the Students' Union Welfare Officer and the welfare reps in hall, who will support you in seeking appropriate help.

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

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

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.

At The University of Nottingham

- **The University Counselling Service** offers free, confidential counselling, group therapy and workshops to undergraduates, postgraduate students and University staff. The service also offers support to those concerned about the welfare of a friend, housemate, relative or colleague. Counselling is available at University Park, Sutton Bonington, Jubilee campus and the Derby Medical School.

To arrange an initial appointment

1. Visit the web site at www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling and complete the registration form.
 2. Then telephone the Counselling appointment line on 0115 748 6344 or call into The Orchards, Building 6 on University Park.
- **Your GP** can offer you support, advice, referral to specialist help or medical treatment. If you are registered at Cripps Health Centre telephone 0115 846 8888. Out of hours calls will be referred to Nottingham Emergency Medical Services.
 - **Academic Support** offer advice, practical help and support to individual students experiencing study issues, in addition to assisting students with dyslexia or a disability. They also offer a range of workshops and groups throughout the academic year. www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicsupport or **contact your local Student Services Centre** www.nottingham.ac.uk/student-services
 - Each school appoints a **Disability Liaison Officer (DLO)** to provide advice and guidance for students and members of staff, about disability issues and to offer support. For further information, visit the web site at: <https://bit.ly/3aF6oWS>
 - **The Chaplains** offer spiritual and emotional support and guidance, to students and staff of all faiths or none. Contact the chaplains on University Park, Jubilee or Sutton Bonington <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/chaplaincy> 0115 951 3931
 - **The Students Union Advice** can help students with information, advice and representation around all aspects of student welfare and education such as financial housing and course issues
www.SUAdvice@nottingham.ac.uk 0115 846 8730 Portland Building C Floor.

- **Nightline**, is a student-run service providing confidential listening and information. Is it a non-advisory service. 7pm – 8am every night during term time. 0115 951 4985 www.nightlineanon@nottingham.ac.uk

Local and National Resources

- **The Emergency Department** at Queens Medical Centre is available 24 hours for medical assessment and treatment.
- **NHS Urgent Care Centre** 0115 883 8500 – Seaton House, City Link, Nottingham, NG2 4LA 7am – 9pm – www.nottinghamcitycare.nhs.uk – offers assessment and treatment for urgent but not life threatening.
- **Nottingham Counselling Centre** – Unit 5, Victoria Court, Kent Street, Nottm, NG1 3LZ – 0115 950 1743 – 9-8 Mon – Thurs 9 -4 Fri BACP registered counsellors.
- **Base 51** – NGY myplace Centre 29 – 31 Castle gate, NG1 7AR 0115 704 3114 - Provides confidential support and services, including: free counselling, learning support service, health service, contraception, sexual health service and 'C-Card', registration and pick up (free condoms) scheme for 13-24 year olds.
- **The Samaritans** – 24 hours a day 365 days a year call 116 123
- **MIND** – Helpline 0300 123 3393 – info@mind.org.uk – Mental health charity
- **The National Self-harm Network** – PO Box 7264, Nottm, NG1 6WJ – www.nshn.co.uk support@nshn.co.uk online support forum, volunteers. Non crisis service – replies usually within 72 hours.