

Self-harm and self-injury

There are many reasons why people deliberately injure themselves but generally it is about coping; coping with intense emotions that are hard to express or handle alone.

By looking after your emotional health and learning to cope in less hurtful ways you can create new habits that look after your mind and your body.

WHAT IS SELF-HARM OR SELF-INJURY?

Self-harm or self-injury refers to people deliberately hurting their bodies and is often done in secret without anyone else knowing. Some young people do it once, others do it to cope with particularly stressful events, while others use it as a way of coping over time. When they feel pressured or distressed they self-harm; for them it becomes their habit for coping.

The most common type of self-harm among young people is cutting but

Urgent Assistance

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there are many other types of self-harm including burning or punching the body or picking skin or sores. People who deliberately injure themselves are not trying to kill themselves, they are trying to find a way to cope with difficulties and distress.

Self-harm can be something that someone tries once, or it can become a habit as they search for relief from distress. The problem is that this relief is only temporary, and the circumstances usually remain.

WHY DO PEOPLE HARM THEMSELVES?

Many young people describe self-harm as a way of coping with feeling numb or intense pain, distress or unbearable negative feelings, thoughts or memories. They are trying to change how they feel by replacing their emotional pain or pressure with physical pain. Some people harm themselves because they feel alone, and hurting themselves is the only way they feel real or connected. While others self-harm to punish themselves due to feelings of guilt or shame or to 'feel again'. Some young people who self-harm are experiencing depression and/or anxiety.

For most young people self-harm is a coping mechanism, not a suicide attempt.¹ There is however a risk that a person may accidentally hurt themselves more than they planned. So the risk of accidental suicide is much higher in people who self-harm.

People who repeatedly self-harm may also begin to feel as though they cannot stop, and this may lead to feeling trapped, hopeless and suicidal. People who self-harm are also more likely than the general population to feel suicidal and to attempt suicide.²

IF YOU ARE SELF-HARMING

Self-harm is not a long term solution. Self-harming might be working for you at the moment but it does not help to sort out why you are feeling the way you do. Sometimes you need to learn and practise some new ways of coping before you can

THERE ARE SOME MORE COMMON EXPERIENCES THAT CAN TRIGGER SELF-HARM, THESE MAY INCLUDE:

- difficulties or disputes with parents
- school or work problems
- difficulties with boyfriends or girlfriends
- physical health problems
- anxiety
- depression
- bullying
- low self esteem
- sexual problems
- alcohol and drug abuse
- distress and intense emotions.

give it up. It is also important to look after yourself, to minimise harm and to stay safe.

There are other ways for people to express how they feel that do not cause harm, and by doing this they can improve their sense of control and wellbeing, too.

Your first step is to decide that you want things to be different, that you want a longer term solution to how you feel. Then it is about setting realistic goals that you can work towards.

It might take a little while, and there might be some hurdles along the way, but it is important to keep trying and get the support that you need.

To get support from others it means you have to tell them about what is happening, and sometimes that's what can stop you from getting help. It can be hard to talk

with the people who care about you if you are worried about how they will react to your self-harm.

When you first talk to people about it they might be shocked and have difficulty understanding it but that does not mean they will not support you. It just means they might need some time to learn more and talk with you about how they can help. Others might be relieved to talk with you about it; they might have seen your scars but not known what to say.

You can take your time to explain your situation, or you might tell them everything at once. And you might choose to only tell the people that you think won't judge you and will support you.

REPLACE YOUR SELF-HARM WITH SOMETHING LESS HARMFUL

Try a few of these to see if they work for you.

- Try holding ice cubes on your hand – cold causes pain but is not dangerous to your health.
- Wear a rubber band on your wrist and snap it when you feel the need.
- Use a red pen to draw on the areas you might normally cut.
- Work it off with exercise.
- Scribble with red pen on a piece of paper.
- Eat a chilli.
- Try deep breathing and relaxation exercises.

- Try and focus on something around you, something simple, watch it for a while and see if that can distract you from the negative thoughts.
- Talk with someone.
- If you find it hard to remember your options, write them down or put them in your phone to refer to when you need it.

GET SUPPORT

A mix of supportive friends, family and a health professional can help you to achieve your goals.

- It's good to work on some things that you can do for yourself but you do not to have to face this challenge alone.
- Choose some supportive friends that you can talk to when you feel you need to.
- Do not expect friends to keep 'secrets' about your self-harm if they are worried for your safety. They will want to help keep you safe and sometimes that means calling on other adults, health professionals or support services.
- Find a health professional in person, online or over the phone. A counsellor, psychologist or doctor can help you to work out what is triggering your self-harm, and begin to work with you on managing your difficult thoughts and feelings.
- Let others know how you feel when things don't go to plan. Don't build up worries, anger or disappointments – talk about them.

LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR HABITS

- Write down when you self-harm, what happened before and how you felt. This can help you to work out your triggers and the feelings that you need to begin to handle better.
- Set some realistic goals for how you might begin to cope better and how you are going to know if it is working.

MAKE SOME HEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES

- Look after your physical health – eat well, exercise daily, try to have a regular sleeping pattern.
- Spend time doing things that you enjoy, with people you enjoy being with.
- Avoid or try limiting the amount of alcohol and drugs you use. Drugs and alcohol use can intensify the feelings that you are having.
- Look after your injuries – bandage and clean your injuries to avoid infection.

CALL FOR HELP

- If you hurt yourself more than you intended to, get medical advice from your local doctor or hospital or healthdirect.org.au
- If your thoughts change from wanting to harm yourself, to being hopeless and thinking about suicide, talk to someone about it — *beyondblue* are always available to talk you through times that are overwhelming or feeling hopeless.

HELPING A FRIEND

It is not always obvious whether someone is self-harming but if you are concerned about them it is important to talk with them about it. Let them know what you have noticed, that you are worried and that you would like to help.

It can be a hard conversation at first – what you hear might be a bit scary but if you remain calm, then you might have the opportunity to talk more about it and help them through their difficult time. You may want to tell them to stop because it makes you uncomfortable but there are some more helpful ways to approach your friend.

LOOK

- Look out for your friend. If you are worried about them let them know and talk about it with them.

LISTEN

- By listening you can begin to understand what is happening and why.
- Be open to hearing what is happening without judgment and with respect.
- Don't assume you know all about it.

TALK

- Let them know you are there for them. You might find it hard to understand but you can support them.
- Be realistic; self-harming can take a while to stop. Encourage them when you notice that they have coped with difficult things without self-harming and help them to achieve the goals they set for themselves.

SEEK HELP

- Encourage them to seek help from family, counsellors or health professionals.
- Support services are available online, in person or over the phone. Help them make the first call if they don't know what to do.
- Access information about self-harm so you can learn more about what is happening and how you can help.
- Ask for advice from family or health professionals on how you can help your friend. Call a helpline anonymously to ask these questions if you are not sure who you can confide in.

SPEAK UP

- If you are worried about the safety of someone who is self-harming it is important to let someone else know. You cannot support them on your own. Try to speak to them about this first and talk with them about who else they would be happy to talk (for example family, doctor, *beyondblue*). It is important that they don't feel that things are being taken out of their control and that everyone will suddenly know about their self-harm.
- Let them know if you feel uncomfortable about their self-harm; what you can and can't cope with. Decide how you can support them in a way that works for both of you. For example your friend might call you when they are distressed but you might ask them not to tell you the detail of how they have hurt themselves.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

- Supporting someone who is self-harming can be emotionally exhausting.
- Try to find the balance between supporting them and looking after yourself.
- Look after your physical health; eating well, exercising daily and sleeping regularly.
- Look after your emotional health; talk with someone about what is happening. You can respect your friend's privacy but still have a conversation with someone about how it is affecting you and what you should do to help your friend.
- Online and phone support services can also help you in these situations.

Giving up self-harm and developing new habits for coping with intense emotions can take time. You have to find what works for you. In the meantime it is important to look after yourself. Get support, talk to your friends, and build things into your life that you enjoy and find rewarding. If you know someone who is self-harming offer your support, be patient, and support them to get the help they need.

References

- ¹ Klonsky, E. D. (2007). The functions of deliberate self-injury: a review of the evidence. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27 (2), pp. 226-239
- ² Martin, G., Swannell, S. V., Hazell, P. L., Harrison, J. E. & Taylor, A. W. (2010). Self-injury in Australia: a community survey. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 193 (9), pp. 506-510.

Where to find support

For help with how you're feeling

beyondblue

www.youthbeyondblue.com

Learn more about anxiety and depression and how to talk about it with your friends, or talk it through with our Support Service.

 1300 22 4636

 Email or  chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Kids Help Line

www.kidshelp.com.au

1800 55 1800

headspace

www.headspace.org.au

www.eheadspace.org.au

1800 650 890

ReachOut

Reachout.com

Urgent Assistance

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Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

13 11 14

Suicide Call Back Service

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

1300 659 467

For more info on self-harm

headspace

www.headspace.org.au/is-it-just-me/find-information/self-harm



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