Self-harm

What is Self-harm?

Self-harm is a way of expressing deep distress and overwhelming feelings, an inner scream that cannot be verbalised.

It may take many different forms from scratching, cutting and burning to head banging, overdosing, issues with food or use of drugs and alcohol. Self-harm is used as a way of coping with painful emotions such as rage, sadness, shame, guilt and fear enabling someone to let out the pain or as a distraction from or to numb themselves to emotional distress.

Someone who self-harms has usually experienced painful and distressing situations during childhood or as a young adult and has begun to use self-harm to manage their feelings.

Although suicide does sometimes result from self-harming behaviour, this is not usually the aim as self-harming is more likely to be a means of coping with life and staying alive.

What may trigger Self-harm?

The origin of self-harming behaviour can often be difficult to pinpoint, with the person not understanding when or why the behaviours began.

The incidence of self-harm has increased in recent years and it is now common for a young person to know someone who self-harms as a way of coping with their feelings. Some people will only self-harm once or twice when navigating a particularly difficult time in their life, however many more adopt destructive behaviours as an ongoing way of coping, harming themselves on a monthly, weekly or even daily basis.

The trigger can be a memory or reminder of the past, but it can equally be stressors in everyday life which prompt someone to begin self-harm.

How can I help myself?

If you feel you have an issue with self-harm it may be advisable to initially speak to your GP to check your health and to discuss your concerns.

It is also important to draw support from those around you: friends, family, your tutor, the University Counselling Service, as self-harming behaviours can isolate you from others as you try to keep it a secret. It is vital that you begin to look at the underlying feelings, the difficult emotions you may be trying to avoid, as ignored emotions won’t just go away.
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Try thinking about when the issue began.

- What was happening in your life?
- What were you feeling?
- What might you be trying to avoid or express?

The most important thing to remember is that you have a choice and that the self-harming behaviours can stop today.

Coping with Self-harm

There are ways that the urge to self-harm, or the harm caused, can be reduced, whilst working toward overcoming the behaviours.

- Admit it is happening to someone close to you as this can be a positive step toward choosing to stop.
- Try to distract yourself and develop strategies to confound the urges.
- However, if this does not feel possible, keep yourself safe whilst the urges to self-harm are still very strong:
  - Avoid major arteries and veins if you are going to harm yourself. o Keep a first aid kit and emergency numbers at hand.
  - Avoid alcohol and recreational drugs as these will impair your judgement.

Useful strategies to stop Self-harming:

- Gather as much information as possible about your self-harming behaviour, so that you understand what and why you are doing it and the purpose it has in your life at present.
- Keep a diary of events and feelings which precede the behaviour, so that you can begin to understand yourself more readily.
- Talk to someone supportive, this will help to boost your strength and give you the courage to stop and work through the feelings you are coping with.
- As you stop the destructive behaviours, you will begin to experience the feelings you have used self-harm to avoid or express. Accept the support offered by your GP, friends, family and the University Counselling Service.
- Look at ways to build your self-esteem, you are not to blame for how you feel, your self-harm is an expression of deep distress and a cry for help.
- Share your feelings and concerns with those close to you. Explain to them what is helpful and what is not. Develop a network of people you can contact when the urge to self-harm is at its greatest or you are experiencing a crisis.
- Try to make your life less stressful. When you experience difficult and distressing emotions, think about more healthy ways to express them rather than punishing yourself. Why are you feeling this way?
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

- If you feel the need to self-harm, focus on staying within safe limits. Your GP can advise on minimising injuries whilst you work towards stopping.

Further help and support

- Speak to your GP, a trusted friend, a family member, tutor or supervisor.
- Contact the University Counselling Service on 0118 378 4216 or email counselling@reading.ac.uk Royal Berkshire Hospital – Accident and Emergency Department, telephone: 0118 322 7020

Helpful contacts:

- National Self-Harm Network
  Survivor led organisation who develop guidelines for understanding and treating those who self-harm- 0800 622 6000 - www.nshn.co.uk
- Samaritans 24-hour emergency helpline 116 123

Useful publications:

- Self-harm: The Path to Recovery – Kate Middleton & Sara Garvie
- Healing the Hurt Within: Understand Self-injury and Self-harm, and Heal the Emotional Wounds – Jan Sutton
- Cover Up-Understanding Self-harm – Joan Freeman

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