



Shoreham Academy

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2011|2012

UNDERSTANDING SELF-HARM



**A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING - WITH PRACTICAL
ADVICE ON HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD**

ABOUT SELF HARM

Self-harm, or self-injury, describes a wide range of things people deliberately do to themselves that appear to be harmful but usually do not kill them. Self-harm is not usually a failed attempt at suicide, but it can still be very hard for parents or carers.

Cutting the arms or the back of the legs with a razor or knife is the most common form of self-harm, but self-harm can take many forms, including burning, biting, hitting or taking overdoses.

A young person may self-harm to help them cope with negative feelings, to feel more in control or to punish themselves. It can be a way of relieving overwhelming feelings that build up inside, when they feel isolated, angry, guilty or desperate.

In a survey carried out by National Self Harm Network of 758 respondents the survey showed that only 4% of these individuals stated that it was suicidal feelings that led to any of their individual incidents of self-harm (Figures correct to August 2009). The feelings given most often were self-hatred, anger, frustration, worthlessness and feeling overwhelmed.

"When I self-harm I don't feel any pain at all, just a release. It is not until after that I feel the pain and that is when I start to regret what I've done."

ATTENTION SEEKING OR ATTENTION NEEDING?

Self-harm is often seen as a cry for help, a ploy to gain attention or as manipulation. However more often than not self-harm is a very private and hidden behaviour that does not involve anyone else.

Some people will take great care in hiding their injuries and scars through shame, embarrassment or fear. They may conceal injuries under clothing, jewellery or make up excuses and explanations. A large number of people who self-harm treat their wounds themselves at home rather than seeking medical help.

Self-harm, hidden or exposed, is about distress. This may be the only way that the young person feels able to communicate their unhappiness.



"I don't want to die. I just want the pain to stop. The only way I can get some relief from this emotional pain is by hurting myself"

GETTING HELP

Though self-harm is rarely a failed suicide attempt, it is a sign that the person doing it is coping with very difficult feelings, and probably needs some help. Self-injury can also lead to infection, permanent damage and even accidental death. It is therefore important to seek professional advice if your child is self-harming.



Self-harm is not about liking pain. It is a way to cope with thoughts and feelings that are depressing or distressing

and to regain some control over how you feel. A lot of the time, individuals who self-harm do not actually feel any pain due to adrenaline: instead they feel a release.

Self harm can also be a mechanism that allows individuals to 'feel' something, as the feeling of being emotionally numb and empty are common symptoms of depression. Such feelings of pain can also be used to 'ground' oneself in reality when feeling disassociated such as during flashbacks common with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or manic episodes such as those experienced by individuals with Bi-polar Disorder.

In some cases individuals self harm to punish themselves. This may be due to feelings of guilt or shame. This is common in cases of sexual abuse and sexual assault. Individuals who self harm for these reasons are seeking pain, but not for gratification.

Start by going to see your GP. You can see the GP yourself if your child does not want to go. You should also ask your GP what to do if your child's cuts get infected. Your GP may refer you and your child to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). You can also look for counselling for your child. You do not need to see the GP first for many youth counselling services.

If you are worried your child is putting their life at risk by self-harming, call 999 or take them to A&E if possible. Finding that a person you care for is harming themselves can bring about a large range of thoughts and feelings: fear, distress, confusion, worry, anger, anxiety and self-blame. Your first reactions may be to remove the things that they are using to harm themselves, be forceful in seeking help (i.e. urgently seeing a GP), apply pressure on them to talk, or be confrontational. Self-harm is primarily a coping strategy. Until the reasons behind the self-harm have been explored, taking away their ability to cope can be highly detrimental.



"It's a way of expressing negative feelings about myself that build up inside me. As someone who finds it difficult to put things into words, it can at times be the only way of expressing how I am feeling."

DISTRACTIONS THAT CAN HELP

PHYSICAL

1. Exercise - Sit ups etc.
2. Going to the Gym
3. Punching a punch bag
4. Having a pillow fight with the wall
5. Shouting and screaming
6. Ripping up paper into small pieces
7. Popping bubble wrap
8. Popping balloons
9. Playing with a stress ball
10. Plucking your eyebrows
11. Taking anger out on a soft toy
12. Throwing socks against the wall
13. Dancing
14. Stamping your feet (with boots on)
15. Playing catch with a ball
16. Swimming
17. Going for a bike ride/walk/run

CREATIVE

1. Writing poetry, journals, letters, stories etc.
2. Doodling or scribbling on paper
3. Playing a musical instrument
4. Singing
5. Knitting
6. Sewing
7. Crocheting
8. Drawing or painting
9. Origami
10. Memorising poetry or song lyrics
11. Make a compilation of your favourite music

DISPLACEMENT

1. Drawing on yourself with red marker
2. Snapping an elastic band on your wrist
3. Putting on fake or henna tattoos and then peeling them off
4. Putting plasters or bandages on where you want to self-harm
5. Mix warm water with red food colouring and put it on your skin
6. Squeezing ice cubes
7. Chewing leather
8. Use stage make up to create fake injuries
9. Draw yourself or around your arm on a piece of paper, draw the harm you are imagining then destroy the picture
10. Draw over your old scars, which will provide a repetitive action and hopefully will relieve urges
11. Bite into a chilli

REINFORCING

1. Thinking about not wanting scars in the summer
2. Thinking about not wanting to go to hospital
3. Set yourself a target e.g. 10 minutes and promise not to harm in this time, once you get to the 10 minute point, set a new target of 15 minutes and continue
4. Use a glowstick, when you feel like the urge to harm, snap the glowstick to start it glowing and tell yourself that you can't harm until it stops glowing. The glow will last for a few hours by which time your urges will hopefully have passed

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

CAMHS are specialist NHS children and young people's mental health services.

If you think your child might need more help than friends, family, school and GPs can give, you can read more about CAMHS here. Or perhaps you and your child are on the CAMHS waiting list, or have an appointment soon. For more information visit <http://www.camhscares.nhs.uk/>

Useful Links and references:

<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/> or email;
parents@youngminds.org.uk

This is a confidential service

<http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/>

The Parent's Guide to Self-Harm, by Jane Smith (Lion Books)

Young Minds Parent Information Service: 0808 802 5544
This is a confidential line

For more helpful advice, check out the National Self-Harm Network website: www.nshn.co.uk

Shoreham Academy has a self-harm policy available for parents/carers.

Please enquire at reception if you wish to obtain a copy.