

Talking to students about Self-Harm: Toolkit for Staff

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What is self-harm?

Self-harm is any intentional act of self injury or self poisoning irrespective of motivation or intent i.e. it's a behaviour to harm oneself on purpose

This can include:

- Cutting
- Burning
- Scratching / hairpulling
- Poisoning
- Punching walls or hitting self

How many young people self-harm?

In a classroom of 30 secondary students on average 3 will self-harm, this reduces into adulthood.



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Why do people self-harm?

Self-harm is a behavioural response to psychological distress or discomfort. There are therefore lots of triggers that can cause a young person to hurt themselves.

It can be a way to express feelings, release emotional pain/stress, to demonstrate how awful they feel, to stop feeling numb (by feeling pain), a form of control, a habit.

Each person who self-harms will have their own reasons which might be different from day-to-day.

Self-harm is usually not an attempt to kill themselves, it is often a coping behaviour intended to help them stay alive. However, self-harm is an indication that the person is suffering and is a risk factor for suicide.

MYTH: Self-harmers just want attention.

A lot of young people who self-harm feel a lot of shame about it and do it in secret. If a young person is asking for your attention there will be a reason so give them that care and attention.

Why do people self-harm?



This is the issue that needs to be addressed, the root cause of the behaviour.

Do not remove the coping mechanism if there is no healthy alternative. Support the student to gradually move over to less harmful coping methods.

What can staff provide?

- First aid – Young people may first come to a staff member when they need medical attention. Attend to this first.
- Vigilance – You may notice new wounds, sores, bandages or plasters, long sleeves in hot weather. Asking if they are ok.
- Reassurance – This is a coping mechanism and can be replaced with healthier ways to manage life events and feelings. The student will not feel like this forever, things do move on.
- Guidance – Talking through ways to manage the urges to self-harm and what could replace the behaviour.
- Signposting - to websites and additional support.



Talking about self-harm

- Respond calmly and non-judgementally. The way that you respond now will influence how the student engages with support later on.
- Try not to ask too many 'why' questions. They may not be able to articulate why they do it and may feel shame.
- Be clear that this is a common coping behaviour but there are ways to change it.
- Don't tell them to 'just stop doing it'. This is unhelpful, unrealistic and will likely stop the student from getting further help.
- You may gently ask if there has been anything going on that makes them feel emotional or overwhelmed. Focusing on the root triggers and encouraging addressing them.
- Research* suggests most young people want:
 - TIME AND ATTENTION (Listening)
 - CARE AND RESPECT
 - PRIVACY
 - SUPPORT ACCESSING SERVICES

Managing self-harm

REMOVING TEMPTATION: Encourage removing anything that could be used to hurt themselves from school bags and bedrooms e.g. razors, sharpeners, medications. Having to find implements delays the self-harm and the urge may subside.

DELAY: Suggest seeing how long can wait when an urge first appears. Delaying the behaviour gives time for the urge to fade as emotions change.

DISTRACTION: Offer techniques that fit well for the student, e.g, texting friends, talking to family, drawing, knitting, exercise. Activities that take up mental space and focus are usually best.

MANAGING FEELINGS: Suggest healthy ways to process feelings: Talking to people, writing poetry or fiction, journaling, drawing, singing, texting a support service etc.

Self-harm and Covid19

Being confined to bedrooms may increase the urge to self-harm and remove a lot of coping mechanisms that might previously been used.

Consider checking in with students that you know self-harm. Ask how they are coping and talk about how they could adapt their coping mechanisms during the restrictions.

Young people may fear talking on the phone to a therapist if their parents are home so remind them of services that offer text and messenger support that is more private.

Resources

Support services:

Battle Scars (Leeds service)

Provide face-to-face, online support and resources.

www.battle-scars-self-harm.org.uk

Harmless (National Org)

Support and advice

<http://www.harmless.org.uk/whoWeSupport/youngPeople>

Self-harm UK

<https://www.selfharm.co.uk/>

Apps:

Stay Alive
(Suicidal thoughts)



Calm Harm
(Self-harm urges)

