

# Deliberate self-harm in young people

## Factsheet for parents and teachers

### About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at the reasons behind why some young people may harm themselves, and offers practical advice about how to cope with this problem.

### Introduction

#### What is deliberate self harm?

Deliberate self-harm is a term used when someone injures or harms themselves on purpose. Common examples include 'overdosing' (self-poisoning), hitting, cutting or burning oneself, pulling hair or picking skin, or self-strangulation. It can also include taking illegal drugs and excessive amounts of alcohol. Self-harm is always a sign of something being seriously wrong.

#### Why do young people harm themselves?

Self-injury is a way of dealing with very difficult feelings that build up inside. People say different things about why they do it:

- Some say that they have been feeling desperate about a problem and don't know where to turn for help. They feel trapped and helpless. Self-injury helps them to feel more in control.
- Some people talk of feelings of anger or tension that get bottled up inside, until they feel like exploding. Self-injury helps to relieve the tension that they feel.
- Feelings of guilt or shame may also become unbearable. Self-harm is way of punishing oneself.
- Some people try to cope with very upsetting experiences, such as trauma or abuse, by convincing themselves that the upsetting event(s) never happened. These people sometimes suffer from feelings of 'numbness' or 'deadness'. They say that they feel detached from the world and their bodies, and that self-injury is a way of feeling more connected and alive.

#### Who is at risk?

Self-harm is most commonly triggered by an argument with a parent or close friend. When family life involves a lot of abuse, neglect or

rejection, people are more likely to harm themselves. Young people who are depressed, or have an eating disorder, are at greater risk. So are people who take illegal drugs or excessive amounts of alcohol.

#### Where can I get help?

Anyone who is harming themselves is struggling to cope and needs help. Self-injury is often kept secret – even from friends or family. The person feels so ashamed, guilty or bad that they can't face talking about it. There may be clues, such as refusing to wear short sleeves or to take off clothing for sports.

If you are a parent or teacher, you can help by:

- recognising signs of distress, and finding some way of talking with the young person about how they are feeling
- listening to their worries and problems, and taking them seriously
- offering sympathy and understanding
- helping with solving problems
- staying calm and in control of your feelings.
- being clear about the risks of self-harm – making sure they know that, with help, it will be possible to stop once the underlying problems have been sorted out
- making sure that they get the right kind of help as soon as possible.

It's important to make sure that the young person feels that they have someone they can talk to and get support from when they need it. Otherwise, there is a risk they will harm themselves instead. It's important to ask whether parents and family will be able to give the support that's needed. This may be difficult if there are a lot of problems or arguments at home. As a parent, you may be too upset or angry to be able to give the help that is needed. If so, you should seek advice from your general practitioner.

## Sources of further information

- National Self-Harm Network: PO Box 7264, Nottingham NG1 6WJ; e-mail: [info@nshn.co.uk](mailto:info@nshn.co.uk); [www.nshn.co.uk](http://www.nshn.co.uk).
- The Young People and Self Harm information resource website: [www.selfharm.org.uk](http://www.selfharm.org.uk).
- Childline provides a free and confidential telephone service for children. Helpline: 0800 1111; [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk).
- The Samaritans provide a 24-hour service offering confidential emotional support to anyone who is in crisis. Helpline 08457 909090 (UK), 1850 609090 (ROI); e-mail: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org); [www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk).
- YoungMinds provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA. Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk).
- A CD-ROM designed for 13–17 year-olds on mental health which looks at depression and self-harm: *Changing Minds: A Multimedia CD-ROM about Mental Health*. Further details from the Royal College of Psychiatrists: tel. 020 7235 2351, ext.146; [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/auvideo/cmindsdcd/index.htm](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/auvideo/cmindsdcd/index.htm).

### Or you may like to look at these websites:

[www.lifesigns.ukf.net](http://www.lifesigns.ukf.net)  
[www.nshn.co.uk](http://www.nshn.co.uk)  
[www.selfharmalliance.org](http://www.selfharmalliance.org)  
[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: [booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk](mailto:booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk), or you can download them from [www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk).

If you are a teacher, it is important to encourage students to let you know if one of their group is in trouble, upset or shows signs of harming themselves. Friends often worry about betraying a confidence and you may need to explain that self-harm can endanger their lives. For this reason, it should never be kept secret.

## Specialist help

If you feel that more professional help is needed, the general practitioner should be able to tell you what help is available locally, and make a referral to your local child and adolescent mental health service.

The aim is to discover the causes of the problems. It is usual for parents or carers to be involved in treatment. This makes it easier to understand the background to what has happened, and to work out what sort of help is needed.

There are different talking approaches, depending on what is causing the problem. Treatment often involves both individual and family work. Individuals will need help with how to cope with the very difficult feelings that cause self-harm. Families often need help in working out how to make sure that the dangerous behaviour doesn't happen again, and how to give the support that is needed. If depression or anxiety is part of the problem, these will need treating (see Factsheet 34 on depression in children and young people). Occasionally, intensive help may be needed. Sometimes, recovery from very damaging or traumatic experiences happens slowly. Then specialist help is needed over a longer period of time.

## References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (eds) (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.

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