



I need to help a self harmer

At least 1 in 10 young people will self harm before the age of 16. That makes it a huge issue and yet one that is often misunderstood by parents, teachers and those working with young people. This guide outlines some of the key reasons why young people self harm, how to support a young person who is harming and where to go to find more information and advice.

▶ Starting points

You've been mentoring Katy for a while now, and as you sit in that cold one to one room she starts to tell you what's really been going on. Slowly she opens up about how she sits alone at night feeling so low she carves at herself with a razor blade until she can no longer hold the blade or the tears back. Katy tells you she feels unattractive and unwanted, that at every argument at home she feels in the way, and that at school she lives in fear of attention being drawn to her and is relieved when the day is over. She worries so much about everything that she doesn't enjoy anything anymore and wishes, just wishes she could be like other people, but knows she never could be. And you want to cry as you hear all this young person's fear and pain come tumbling out, and wish you could tell her that what she felt wasn't true, but this girl is hurting so much she couldn't hear you even if you tried.

Then there's Justin, he's in year eleven now, you've known him for a few years, when he makes it to school he gets in trouble all the time and many are amazed he hasn't been permanently excluded yet. You see him in a weekly anger management group, along with six other lads. Justin's an entertainer, always quick with the jokes, and seems to be the centre of any group banter. As they are larking about you notice long lines running up his arms, his shirt mostly covers them, but when he reaches out your heart sinks. You realise they could only have been deliberate, and you think how can he be the life and soul of this group yet be in so much pain when he's alone. You wonder how to begin talking about it.

Maybe you've been there when a young person tells you they are self-harming and you find yourself feeling helpless, not knowing how to respond for fear of doing the wrong thing. Maybe this is a completely new area, but one in which you want to be prepared for. The good news is that understanding just a little more about self-harm stops it being a scary subject and enables you to act with confidence as you support the young people you work with.

▣ What is self harm?

Self-harm is when someone deliberately harms or injures themselves. About two thirds of those who self-harm use cutting as their primary method although there are lots of other ways people harm: including scratching or burning. Research in Luton in 2005 found that by the age of fourteen, 25% of girls and 12%

of boys had self-harmed, other research suggests that over half of those who harm once will go on to harm again. This is consistent with a recent government commissioned report which found that currently in the UK 10% of teenagers were self-harming. These statistics show the issue to be far more 'normal' in the lives of young people than previously thought.

❖ **Why do young people self harm?**

People self-harm when they feel overwhelmed by the emotions they are experiencing, be that deep sadness, frustration or even joy. The first time someone self-harms, they will usually feel completely at the end of their tether, desperate for something to relieve their anguish. When someone self-harms the body releases a rush of chemicals, similar to opiates like heroin, which gives the body a sense of unnatural calm, this gives some respite from the feelings and in that sense works. After the harming episode there is usually an extreme low that is coloured by guilt and shame. This leads to a dichotomous experience for the young person of finding momentary relief followed by deep regret, which turns into a cycle that brings huge anxiety to the young person.

▶ **Helping a self harmer**

Self-harm is often termed as addictive, both because of the chemical aspects of harming, but also because it can become highly habitual with routines and rituals, and can also become a reflex reaction to emotions that cause anxiety. The upshot of this is that a young person who self harms is likely to feel trapped by the behaviour at the same time as being scared of how they would cope without harming.

When supporting someone who self-harms it is essential to understand the emotional dependency that people place on harming. If the focus is solely placed on helping them to stop harming, or changing their habit, the reality is that they will be no better equipped to handle the emotions that led them to harming in the first place.

One of the first places to start is by exploring the feelings they have immediately before harming and then exploring with them different ways of expressing those emotions. For example if people feel things are out of control at work, they may tidy their desk, if they feel angry, they may go to the gym and pound it out on the treadmill, or, if they feel low they may ring one of their closest friends. They can be very simple, but highly effective and invite young people to think about hope, where before there was only destructive behaviour.

Central to anybody overcoming self-harm, the young person needs to feel they have autonomy and control. What helps along the way is lots of affirmation of their positive choices and encouragement of them as a person.

It is common for people who self-harm to rotate their harming mechanisms to other negative behaviours masking the harming itself. For example stopping cutting, but starting drinking pints of vodka instead, then moving onto having lots of unprotected sex. Although these do not all have the physical effect of harming, the patterns and habitual needs in their lives are similar and something for those supporting harmers to be aware of.

▶ **Common questions about self harm**

❖ **What do I do when a teenager confides in me?**

Listen, listen and listen some more, it is likely that this is one of the first times a young person has spoken about the subject. Be aware of how you are responding; gasping and expressing disgust is not going to help. Those who self-harm will have a heightened awareness to the reactions of others so will be very aware of your reaction to them. Be sure to affirm them and express your acceptance of them as a person.

❖ **What questions should I ask someone who tells me they self harm?**

At the first point of disclosure it is good to ask questions which build a picture of the seriousness of the situation

- When did you first self-harm?
- How often do you self-harm?
- How are you harming?
- Who else knows?
- What was going on when you first self-harmed?
- What emotions do you feel before you self-harm?
- How do you feel afterwards?

Be prepared for answers you may not be expecting, some may say they feel better after harming. The key is to respond in a way that accepts the young person at the point where they are at.

As time goes on don't keep going back to practical questions of how much and how often, but focus on things that will increase their understanding and progress them forward, like when they have been feeling low and what have they done that has helped in those times. The key to supporting them is to enable them to think about their coping mechanisms. Any ongoing conversation should have a focus on this and not the harming itself.

❖ **How do I stop someone harming?**

If a person feels the need to self-harm, the drive is such that they will find a way to harm even if they have nothing available to help them. In one instance, a young person was relieved of their pen knife, their lighter, an elastic band, and a pen only for them to start biting the back of their hand. The reality is it may well be better to let a young person harm and then talk to them afterwards, and not enter into trying to talk them out of an urge, which at that point may be all-consuming.

❖ **Should I take their blades away?**

In a short answer: no. In self-harm there is often a routine and a security within that routine. In removing their blades you are taking away their 'safe' process for harming and run the risk of them harming in ways that are less measured and more risky. Parents sometimes remove every sharp implement in the house, only for the young person to go into the back garden and find a rusty nail to harm with.

Taking the blades from a young person also symbolises you telling them how wrong you think their behaviour is. However negative the coping mechanism of harming is, you do not want to run the risk of a young person hearing that you think that they are wrong or bad in some way.

If a young person offers you their blades and asks you to hold onto these things for them that is a different matter. It represents that person feeling it would be more helpful for someone else to have them, and a commitment to a level of accountability within that. It is recommended that you make it clear that if young person wants them back you will not stand in their way, thus being an extra point in the process but not someone to rile against in a crisis. This continues to give the young person control and choice, which are essential in any supportive relationship.

❖ **Should I see them more often now they have told me they self-harm?**

Generally the answer is no: they have identified wanting to speak to you about their harming within the context of the contact and relationship you already have. It is important not to cave on the boundaries you already have, so if you do not give your mobile number to young people don't change that. What you don't want to do is create situations where the young person can become dependent on you, and where the goal posts for them keep moving. Making a big fuss may make them escalate the issue in their mind. What they really need from you is stability.

➤ **What do I do if I think someone is self-harming?**

It is always much better if a young person initiates disclosing self-harm, so make yourself available to the young person to do so, giving them opportunities to talk to you if they wish. It may be they don't want to talk about it. However, if they are obviously showing you cuts and scars it may be that they want you to ask them, that they don't know how to start the conversation. Don't avoid self-harm if it is obviously presented before you as this will feed into many of the myths about self-harm being shameful and them not having a right to being understood and supported. If disclosure is handled well it can be a very liberating experience for the young person.

➤ **How do I make them stop?**

Telling a young person to stop self-harming is never helpful for the young person; they are left feeling misunderstood, isolated and afraid of letting you down. Research suggests that putting expectations and demands on young people like this does very little to help reduce the harming behaviour of the individual, but does have a dramatically negative affect on the ongoing level of sharing in the relationship of the young person and the person who made the demand, usually resulting in future harming episodes being hidden.

A better question to ask is how can you encourage that without taking what is currently a coping mechanism they are relying on away from them.

➤ **Do people recover from self-harm?**

The vast majority of young people will in time learn different ways of coping or find they no longer feel the need to harm. A very small group will continue on into adulthood, and it is likely that for them there are some deeper underlying mental health issues which need to be addressed.

In terms of child development, adolescence is when a young person develops the coping skills to deal with situations they face and the emotions they generate. Engaging with this process is key to overcoming self harm, and if a young person relies on harming throughout their adolescence they will not have the opportunity to develop these skills; skills which are virtually impossible to learn outside of this developmental window.

➤ **Do I need to tell the school?**

What is expected will vary from school to school. Different schools have different policies, some will expect a full disclosure and treat it as a child protection case, others will inform parents and others will not expect to be told unless the child is thought to be at risk of taking their own life. When working in schools it is key to know how each school likes to work and how they expect you to engage with their policy.

➤ **Should the parents be informed?**

This is a difficult one and the answer partly depends on the age of the young person.

Young people are often adamant that they do not want their parents to know for fear of how they will react. However, professionally it is a lot safer for parents to know something of the troubles their child is facing. Some services for self-harm cannot be accessed by young people without parental consent.

It is important to remember that parents often react badly to the news of a child self-harming, they feel panic and shock, fear that people will think it is their fault and anxiety that their child has not come to them earlier. Many people know very little about self-harm and fearful of what they don't understand. It is important to prepare the young person for this, so they understand where any reactions may be coming from.

➤ **What help is available for young people who self-harm?**

This really varies from area to area. Any young person who self-harms and is struggling emotionally will be eligible for a Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH's) referral; The referral process is tightly controlled

and can normally only be made either by a school SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) of the school or by a GP. The waiting list for this can be long and may not be appropriate for each young person. If you have concerns about the wider mental health of a young person it is good to encourage them to see their GP who can make a more informed assessment of the situation. There are an increasing amount of services that are specifically for those who self-harm, for example in Luton, LCET runs psycho-educational and psycho-therapeutic groups specifically for those who self-harm.

➤ **What is harm minimisation?**

Harm Minimisation is a term most commonly associated with drug users, where it is acknowledged that alongside the taking of any drugs there are other risks that can be avoided, like those of using dirty needles. The NHS has schemes of needle exchange meaning those who would be using anyway can use in the safest way possible.

In terms of self-harm, the focus on harm minimisation is on reducing the physical risks of the harming. These include using new sharp blades, which reduce the risk of infection and give a clean cut which will heal more quickly; using good first aid practice; and harming in ways that require less surgical intervention – e.g. cutting vertically up the arm rather than horizontally across the arm.

➤ **“I have two self-harmers that I work with, can I work with them together?”**

Yes, absolutely, it's commonly assumed that putting self-harmers together will turn into a tip sharing competition that sees little benefit for those involved. However the reality is it can give a safe environment to discuss the issues and responses of others who can empathise, taking the sting out of the feeling that many harmers have that they are the only ones to feel like this. In fact peer group work, especially in schools, has been long thought of as the most effective intervention for young people who self-harm.

▶ **Resources**

➤ **On the web**

www.selfharmuk.org

Information about 'Truth Hurts', the report of the National Inquiry into Self-harm, 2007

www.selfharm-uk.org

Basic information about harming, including how to support self-harmers and advice for parents.

www.siari.co.uk

Helpful information from one of the UK's established experts on self-harm.

In the coming months a new Christian based resource, **selfharm.co.uk**, will be launched to meet the needs of young people who self-harm. It will be a key source for resources, information and ideas for dealing with self-harm and related issues.

➤ **In print**

“Self Harm: The Pathway to Recovery” by Dr Kate Middleton and Sara Garvie

A very practical guide to supporting someone who is self-harming, useful for youth workers, parents and harmers alike.

➤ **Training**

Quality Training (www.qualitytraininguk.com) offer regular two day courses about young people who self-injure.

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