



ARC Counselling and Information Service

Factsheet

Self-harm

Self-harm is often seen by others as simple mutilation, attention seeking or as a cry for help. In many ways it happens because the person **is** in need of attention, but not in the way that others judge and not for their self-harming.

People who self-harm usually do so to release feelings they have inside that they feel unable to express or bear. Self-harming is therefore their way of coping and is very important to them. Most people who self-harm have no intention of killing themselves, despite what others might assume – rather self-harming is their way of keeping themselves alive.

What kinds of self-harm are there?

The first thing most people think of when you say 'self-harm' is cutting. Cutting can occur on any part of the body, including arms, legs and body. Some people scratch or burn themselves. However, other kinds of self-harm can include alcohol and substance misuse, overwork, over-exercising, over-eating and under-eating.

Why do people self-harm?

There are many reasons why people self-harm, the immediate reasons usually being as a result of not feeling heard or understood, or not being able to cope with certain feelings or thoughts.

People who self-harm often (but not always) have a history of (among other things) abuse, neglect, experiencing domestic abuse, witnessing domestic abuse, bullying, loss, excessive expectations of achievement, family or own illness, parental alcoholism or drug abuse, or feelings of shame about their sexuality.

How does self-harming 'work'?

Usually, the self-harming works to protect a person from feelings or thoughts that feel dangerous or unbearable in some way, for example, anger, guilt, panic, fear or anxiety. The action of self-harming can release 'endorphins' in the brain, which provide a sense of calm or relief. Therefore, people self-harm to provide themselves with relief from certain feelings or thoughts or to create a sense of greater control over their own lives.

What helps someone who self-harms?

Telling someone to 'just stop' is not helpful, because it leaves them in a place where their only method of coping is removed. This can be very dangerous.

It is important for the person to be able to speak about how they're feeling and to share their concerns or anxieties. This could be a parent or friend, but will often be someone outside of their own personal circle, someone they know won't judge them and who will be on their side, such as a counsellor.

Counsellors must be accepting of the self-harming and not judgemental, but may often make sure that the person who is self-harming is treating their wounds appropriately, for example with antiseptic

creams or bandages, or even visiting a doctor or A&E department for stitches if necessary. Caring for the wounds can also sometimes provide a sense of being nurtured or cared for that is missing from the person's life.

Counsellors might also suggest other forms of 'self-harming' that are less dangerous, such as:

- Chewing on a raw chilli pepper
- Immersing the face or hands in icy water for as long as possible (though this **must** include water, as ice alone can burn)
- Sometimes drawing red lines or butterflies (or some other personal symbol) where the person wants to cut, can help

However, these alternatives should not be pushed onto the person who is self-harming. Rather, it should be their choice.

What can you do if you are worried about your own or someone else's self-harming?

If you are worried about your own self-harming, please call us to arrange to speak with a counsellor for free, on 0118 977 6710.

If you are worried about someone else, although you can't make them change or do anything differently, you may find you can learn new ways of communicating with them or supporting them that eases their suffering. If you want to find out how you might be able to support yourself in coping with someone else's self-harm or even if there is anything you can do to help them, a counsellor can support you through this. Call us on 0118 977 6710 to arrange a session.

Where can I find more information?

The following links can provide you with more information:

- Mind: http://www.mind.org.uk/mental_health_a-z/8006_self-harm
- The NHS: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Self-injury/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
- ChildLine: <http://www.childline.org.uk/explore/damagingyourself/pages/selfharm.aspx>