

## Self-harm

### Introduction

Self-harm is when somebody intentionally damages or injures their body. It is a way of coping with or expressing overwhelming emotional distress.

Sometimes when people self-harm they intend to die but often the intention is more to punish themselves, express their distress or relieve unbearable tension. Self-harm can also be a cry for help.

If you are self-harming, you should see your DOCTOR for help. Your DOCTOR will usually offer to refer you to healthcare professionals at a local community mental health service for further assessment. This assessment will result in your care team working out a treatment plan with you.

Treatment for people who self-harm will usually involve seeing a therapist to discuss your feelings and thoughts and how these affect your behaviour and wellbeing. If you are badly depressed it could also involve taking antidepressant medication.

### Why people self-harm

Self-harm is more common than many people realise, especially among younger people. A survey of people aged 15-16 years carried out in the UK in 2002 estimated that more than 10% of girls and more than 3% of boys had self-harmed in the previous year.

In most cases, people who self-harm do it to help them cope with unbearable and overwhelming emotional issues, caused by problems such as:

social factors – such as being bullied, having difficulties at work or school, or having difficult relationships with friends or family

trauma – such as physical or sexual abuse, or the death of a close family member or friend

mental health conditions – such as depression or borderline personality disorder

These issues can lead to a build-up of intense feelings of anger, hopelessness and self-hatred.

Although some people who self-harm are at a high risk of ending their lives, many people who self-harm do not want to end their lives. In fact, the self-harm may help them cope with emotional distress so they don't feel the need to kill themselves.

## Types and signs of self-harm

There are many different ways people can intentionally harm themselves, such as:

cutting or burning their skin

punching themselves

poisoning themselves with tablets

misusing alcohol or drugs

deliberately starving themselves (anorexia nervosa) or binge eating (bulimia nervosa)

People often try to keep self-harm a secret because of shame or fear of discovery. For example, they may cover up their skin and avoid discussing the problem.

Therefore, it is often up to close family and friends to notice when somebody is self-harming, and to approach the subject with care and understanding. The signs may include unexplained injuries and signs of depression or low self-esteem.

Someone who is self-harming can seriously hurt themselves, so it is important that they speak to a DOCTOR about the underlying issue and request treatment or therapy that is likely to help them.

## Signs of self-harm

There are many different forms of self-harm and they are not always easy to notice.

People who self-harm usually try to keep it a secret from their friends and family and often injure themselves in places that can be hidden easily by clothing.

If you suspect that a friend or relative is self-harming, look out for any of the following signs:

unexplained cuts, bruises or cigarette burns, usually on their wrists, arms, thighs and chest

keeping themselves fully covered at all times, even in hot weather

signs of depression, such as low mood, tearfulness or a lack of motivation or interest in anything

becoming very withdrawn and not speaking to others

changes in eating habits or being secretive about eating, and any unusual weight loss or weight gain

signs of low self-esteem, such as blaming themselves for any problems or thinking they are not good enough for something

signs they have been pulling out their hair

signs of misuse of alcohol or drugs

### Helping someone who self-harms

If you are worried about someone who is self-harming, there are a some things you can do to help them:

make time to gently and sympathetically discuss the problem with them and listen to what they say without judging them or being critical

try to appreciate how difficult they are finding life and show them you understand

discuss the possibility of seeking professional help

get medical help if any injuries are serious

It's important not to react in a strongly negative or critical way (such as getting angry), as this kind of reaction is likely to make the problem worse.

If they don't want to discuss their self-harm with you, you could suggest they speak to an anonymous helpline or see their DOCTOR.

## Causes of self-harm

There are many reasons why people self-harm and these can change over time, but the causes usually stem from unhappy emotions.

Self-harming has been described as a "physical expression of emotional distress". Some people find that the physical act of hurting themselves helps them deal with overwhelming emotional and psychological issues.

## Social factors and trauma

Research has shown that social factors commonly cause emotional distress in people who self-harm. These include:

difficult relationships with friends or partners

difficulties at school, such as not doing well academically

difficulties at work

being bullied, either at home, school or work

worries about money

alcohol or drug misuse

coming to terms with your sexuality if you think you might be gay or bisexual

coping with cultural expectations, for example, an arranged marriage

Self-harm could also sometimes be a way of coping with a traumatic experience.

For example:

sexual, physical or emotional abuse, including domestic abuse and rape

the death of a close family member or friend

having a miscarriage

## Emotional distress

The distress from a traumatic experience or an unhappy situation can lead to feelings of low self-esteem or self-hatred. You could also have feelings of:

anger

guilt

anxiety

loneliness or isolation

grief

hopelessness

numbness or emptiness

feeling unconnected to the world

being unclean, unworthy, trapped or silenced if you have been abused

The emotions can gradually build up inside you, and you may not know who to turn to for help. Self-harm may be a way of releasing these pent-up feelings. It can be a way of coping with overwhelming emotional problems.

Self-harm is linked to anxiety and depression. These mental health conditions can affect people of any age. Self-harm can also occur alongside antisocial behaviour, such as misbehaving at school or getting into trouble with the police.

Psychological causes

In some cases, there may be a psychological reason for the self-harming. For example:

you may hear voices telling you to self-harm

you may have repeated thoughts about self-harming and feel like you have to do it

you may disassociate (lose touch with yourself and your surroundings) and self-harm without realising you are doing it

it can be a symptom of borderline personality disorder (a condition that causes instability in how a person thinks, feels and behaves)

Getting help

It is important for anyone who self-harms to see their DOCTOR. They can treat any physical injury and recommend further assessment if necessary.

Your DOCTOR is likely to ask you about your feelings in some detail. They will want to establish why you self-harm, what triggers it and how you feel afterwards.

Your DOCTOR may ask you some questions to see if you have an underlying condition such as depression, anxiety or borderline personality disorder. If the way you self-harm follows a particular pattern of behaviour, such as an eating disorder, you may be asked additional questions about this.

Your height, weight and blood pressure may also be checked, and you may be asked about any drinking or drug-taking habits.

It is important that you are honest with your DOCTOR about your symptoms and your feelings. If you don't know why you self-harm, tell your DOCTOR this.

## Assessment

After an initial assessment, your DOCTOR should offer to refer you for a further assessment with healthcare professionals at a local community mental health service.

This assessment, which may take place over several meetings, is used to find out more about you and your self-harming behaviour. The results of the assessment will be used to help determine the treatment and support you need.

During an assessment, you will usually be asked about:

your physical health

your relationships with others and your living arrangements

the methods you have used to self-harm

how often you self-harm

any specific events or feelings that occur before you self-harm

any things you have tried to help reduce your self-harming

whether you think you will self-harm again

why you think you are self-harming

whether you have thoughts of ending your life

Any further treatment will normally be decided jointly between you and your team of healthcare professionals. It will be a specific programme for you according to your needs and what is likely to be effective. You will be asked for your consent before any treatment begins.

Your care plan

In most cases, psychological treatment (also known as talking treatment) is recommended for people who self-harm.

Psychological treatments, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), involve sessions where you meet with a therapist to talk about your feelings and thoughts and how these affect your behaviour and wellbeing. Evidence suggests these kinds of treatments can be effective in the long term for people who self-harm.

If you have a mental health problem such as depression, borderline personality disorder or schizophrenia, your treatment plan may involve medication as well as psychological treatment.

If psychological treatment is recommended, you will usually have a number of sessions with a therapist.

Once treatment finishes, you and your care team should discuss steps you can take to deal with any further crises and you should be told how to contact your care team if necessary.

Specialists involved in your care

During your assessment and treatment, there are a number of different healthcare professionals you may see, such as:

a counsellor – somebody who is trained in talking therapies

a psychiatrist – a qualified medical doctor with further training in treating mental health conditions

a psychologist – a health professional who specialises in the assessment and treatment of mental health conditions by talking (usually CBT)

You may also see some other specialists, depending on the underlying reasons why you self-harm.

For example, if you have lost a close relative, you may be referred to a specialist bereavement counsellor for help coping with bereavement. If you are self-harming after an incident of rape, or physical or mental abuse, you may be referred to someone who is trained in dealing with victims of sexual assault or domestic abuse.

If you have another condition that is linked to your self-harming, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, you may be referred to a specialist in eating disorders and a dietitian or nutritionist.

It might also be recommended that you attend a self-help group, for example, Alcoholics Anonymous if you are misusing alcohol, or Narcotics Anonymous if you are misusing drugs. These groups can offer support as you try to stop your self-harming behaviour.

Seeking immediate help for an injury or overdose

Some physical injuries may need treating in an accident and emergency (A&E) department, minor injuries unit or walk-in centre.

somebody is unconscious

you or somebody else are in a lot of pain

you or somebody else are having difficulty breathing

you or somebody else are losing a lot of blood from a cut or wound

you or somebody else are in shock after a serious cut or burn

If your injury is not serious, you could be treated at a minor injuries unit (MIU). These healthcare services are run by doctors or nurses to assess and treat minor injuries, such as minor burns and scalds, infected wounds and broken bones.