

# Understanding Self-Harm

## Factsheet for parents/carers



### Washington Mind

Washington Mind provide services for those aged 11 years and upwards. We work with young people and adults who self-harm now and those who have self-harmed in the past. We view self-harming behaviours as a coping mechanism.

We encourage individuals to explore and understand their self-harm with the aim of identifying alternative and healthier options moving forward. For young people, who would like to access support, Washington Mind can be contacted on 0191 417 8043 or: [ypp@washingtonmind.org.uk](mailto:ypp@washingtonmind.org.uk).

Young people can refer directly or can be referred by a family member or professional.

### What is self-harm?

Self-harm and self-injury can include smoking, alcohol, repetitive cleaning, overworking, driving too fast, or other risky behaviours.

This fact sheet uses the term self-harm to include self-poisoning and self-injury but does not include excessive alcohol and drug use nor eating disorders. Self-harm is a coping mechanism that enables a person to deal with very difficult feelings, painful memories and overwhelming experiences. It is a way of dealing with the associated intense emotional distress. We also recognise that talking and thinking about self-harm can cause anxiety and even fear, and that for these reasons many people avoid talking about it.

Self-harm can provide a calming sensation, provide 'instant relief' it may also be used to 'ground' a person who is feeling numb or dissociated. Self-harm can also be used as a method of self-punishment or self-control. Whilst self-harm can provide instant relief the 'relief' can be temporary. As the underlying emotional issues are not being addressed the need to self-harm may increase. This increase could be either in frequency or severity or both. Self-harm can be compulsive or impulsive and at times and for some it can be both.

Self-harm is coping mechanism.

### Who self-harms?

People of all genders, young, old, employed, unemployed, people of all sexualities, rich, poor, strong, intelligent.

Self-harming behaviours as a means of coping do not discriminate.

### Forms of self-harm

People who self-harm utilise a number of methods and this can include:

- Cutting
- Burning
- Poisoning
- Self-punching, hitting, slapping or bruising
- Scratching
- Hair pulling

However some may use more than one method and this can depend on the intention and the emotions that are associated with the behaviour.

## Someone close to you self-harms?

Discovering that your child is harming themselves can bring up complicated and distressing emotions, often these include fear, anger, shock, guilt, blame and worry, all of which are normal and understandable responses. It is important to remember that in most cases, self-harm is not an attempt to end a person's life. Self-harm is a behaviour that helps your child cope with complex and difficult life situations.

Reasons why some young people self-harm include; exam stress, bullying, uncertainties around gender and/or sexuality, relationship issues, fitting in, or not fitting in, bereavement and loss or many of the other potential challenges that young people today face.

## Looking after yourself

It is difficult to both understand and cope with knowing that your child self-harms and you may wish to access support for yourself. You may begin to blame yourself, feel angry or other strong emotions. It may help to remember that your child is looking at the world through their eyes. It is their own personal view of how things are, for them. Looking after your own wellbeing, talking through your feelings with friends or family members and attending to your own needs is important.

## Responding

Increasing your knowledge can help with your understanding of self-harm and enable you to manage your own anxieties. Your initial reaction will impact on your child and remaining calm will encourage them to confide in you further. Letting your child know that you are there for them no matter what is important. Even though this is incredibly difficult for you as a parent, please try to refrain from judgements. Listening to your child and allowing them the freedom to talk about their self-harm will build trust and provide an outlet for their difficult emotions. It is likely that your child will feel overwhelmed by their disclosure, it is important that you try to be guided by them and negotiate the best places and times to talk. Remember that self-harm is about coping, and although it can be scary and difficult to understand, it is unlikely that your child will simply stop harming themselves no matter how much you want this. Try to manage your own anxiety wherever possible and do not put pressure on your child to immediately stop self-harming, as this may escalate risks. Try to negotiate how you move forward as a family in order to avoid them becoming more secretive or using other 'tools' that might also increase any risk of infection. Allow your child as much control as possible in the decision making surrounding the support they need. Over time and with support your child can find new ways of coping. If they are happy, offer to go with your child to see their GP or a counsellor but it is also possible that your child wishes to attend these appointments on their own.

## Other help

Utilising local services, e.g. CAMHS or your GP, and online resources can help you to support your child.

- The NHS website recommends a number of websites and apps which you can share with your child, visit: [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk) and search 'self-harm' for more information and to find out about useful resources.
- The NSPCC website provides a lot of useful resources for parents, visit: [nspcc.org.uk](http://nspcc.org.uk)
- Childline, a service from NSPCC, can provide free support to your child 24/7 over the phone by calling: 08001111 and counsellor chat via their website at: [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)
- YoungMinds provide a range of resources on their website for both you, including their Parents Helpline and webchat which you can find out about at: [youngminds.org.uk/parent](http://youngminds.org.uk/parent), and your child, visit: [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk) to access resources. They also provide a free text support service which your child can access by texting: 'YM' to: 85258
- The Mind website provides a range of information and resources, visit: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk).

If you need in the moment advice, contact NHS 111. If in the case of any serious or life-threatening injuries, take your child to your local Accident and Emergency Department.