

# Understanding Self-Harm

## Factsheet for Teachers, Tutors and Lecturers



### 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.

## Signs to look out for

Although self-harm is often a secretive and private behaviour, there are certain things that may bring a pupil to your attention. Things to look out for include; young people present as consistently unhappy, acting out of character and displaying very low self-esteem. They may be experiencing bullying or may have issues at home, with peers or another difficult life situation that they do not know how to talk about or how to cope with.

You may see cuts or burns that do not appear to be the result of an accident, or the pupil may have frequent accidents that cause a physical injury. You may notice surgical dressings on the arms or wrists. The pupil may wear clothing that is not appropriate for the weather (long sleeves during hot weather) or they may inform you of reasons why they cannot partake in physical activities and these reasons may be continuous and often.

Although self-harming is a method for coping and dealing with emotional distress, should the underlying emotional issues continue without support, self-harming behaviours may increase. Be aware when young people say that self-harming keeps them alive, as this indicates that there may be thoughts of death and dying. Any mention of suicidal thoughts or intent should be taken seriously and should always be acted upon. Emotional support should be provided with the aim of reducing any greater risk.

## Looking after yourself

Self-harm can be difficult to understand and cope with, you may wish to access support for yourself. It is likely that you will need to support other pupils who are aware of the self-harming behaviour and you may need to also encourage them to invest in healthy coping strategies. Looking after your own wellbeing, talking through your feelings with colleagues and intending to your own needs is important.

## Responding

Increasing your knowledge can help you to expand your understanding of self-harm. Your initial reaction to either the behaviour or the disclosure of this behaviour will impact on the child or young person. Be aware of your schools policies and procedures around self-harm as these should provide you with the guidance you need. As a school it is important that you regularly review these policies and procedures, keeping up with any trends or patterns of behaviour among young people. Remember that the 'child's' needs are paramount in all decisions that are made, therefore an individual approach with each young person you support is essential.

Allowing the pupil to know you are there for them is important, as is the pupil not feeling that they are not being judged. If you wish to understand and support the young person to access the appropriate support for them, listening to them and allowing them the freedom to talk about their self-harm will enable them to trust you. Be clear with the young person what your responsibilities are, what information needs sharing and who this will be shared with, be as transparent as possible. Make it clear that you have a duty of care towards that young person and reassure them that there is support available and that talking about things can help. Allow the young person as much control as possible in the decision making surrounding the support they need. Manage your own anxiety and do not put pressure on the young people to stop self-harming, as this may escalate risks; it may lead to them becoming more secretive or using other 'tools' that might also increase any risk of infection.

With the right support young people can find healthier alternative coping strategies, but this can take time. These new methods for coping must be found before moving away from the self-harming behaviours. The way a disclosure of self-harm is dealt with is important and needs to be managed in a respectful way throughout.

## Other help

Utilising local services and online resources can help you to support the young person, signposting and referring them to local services and provide them with useful self-help resources. Routinely consult with your local young people's mental health services (e.g. CAMHS) in order to understand referral processes and maintain contact after pupil support has started

- The NHS website recommends a number of websites and apps which you can share with the young person, visit: [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk) and search 'self-harm' for more information.
- Childline can provide free support for young people and are available 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 young people, visit: [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk) to access resources. They also provide a free text support service which young people 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. In the case of any serious or life-threatening injuries, take the young person to your local Accident and Emergency Department.