

Self-harm

What is self-harm?

Self-harming occurs when someone deliberately hurts or mutilates their body. This may take the form of cutting, burning, poisoning, hair-pulling or overdosing. The onset of this behaviour generally occurs during puberty. As a rule, the behaviour takes place in secret and is not intended to be fatal. It is a way of expressing emotions that cannot seem to be expressed in words. It is rooted in stress and then becomes the cause of stress. It must be taken seriously.

Who is likely to self-harm?

Research suggests that self-harm is becoming increasingly common among young people. According to the Samaritans, 43% of us know someone who has self-harmed. A survey of deliberate self-harm in adolescents in 2002 showed that 6.9% of 6,020 young people aged 15 to 16 had committed an act of self-harm in the previous year. This means that an average of one or two students in every class is likely to be self-harming. Self-harm is more common in girls than boys with young women three to four times more likely to self-harm than males (*source: Mind factsheet available from www.mind.org.uk*).

What are the causes of self-harm?

Young people who self-harm have low self-esteem and self-worth so will require emotional support. There may be other associated risk factors such as depression, paranoia or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Sometimes friends of self-harmers copy the behaviour. A family history of depression has also been recognised as a risk factor. But everyone who self-harms has a unique reason for doing so.

Student voices

- *I just want to hurt myself before anyone else does.*
- *I don't want to talk to you – it's no use talking to someone who's never done it themselves.*

- *Don't call me a self-harmer – I'm Jo.*
- *It's not something you can just stop once you've started doing it.*
- *I like looking at the scars. I don't know why.*
- *If I was doing it for attention, I wouldn't do it privately, would I?*
- *No one takes what I'm doing seriously. Even the hospital just dressed my arm when it was my head that needed help.*
- *Hurting myself helps me cope with life.*

How can teachers help?

Self-harm is not an attention-seeking activity. In most cases it is an attempt to control distressing feelings. Those who have self-harmed should be treated with care, respect and understanding. They should not just be encouraged to seek help, but told where they may locate help within the school or college and at home. They need to know that someone cares.

Many people who self-harm end up requiring hospitalisation or hospital treatment. Self-harm can be life threatening.

Young people should have every opportunity to develop positive self-esteem within the classroom. They should be encouraged to look at the importance of their mental, physical and emotional health as well as their educational achievement. They must be encouraged to value and respect both their minds and their bodies.

Further information and support: starting points

- Young People and Self-Harm: www.selfharm.org.uk
- The National Self-Harm Network: www.nshn.co.uk
- Mind: www.mind.org.uk
- The Samaritans: www.samaritans.org.uk
- The Mental Health Foundation: www.mentalhealth.org.uk
- Young Minds: www.youngminds.org.uk