

Self-Harm

What is it?

“Self-harm is when you hurt yourself as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences” (MIND, 2019).

Some common reasons why children and young people self-harm include: to turn emotional pain into physical pain; to reduce overwhelming feelings or thoughts; to gain a sense of control; to punish themselves; to stop feeling numb or disconnected; to create a reason to physically care for themselves; and to communicate suicidal feelings without taking their own life.

Self-harm includes self-injury (such as cutting, scratching or biting their body, inserting objects into their body, burning their body, interfering with wounds or pulling out their hair) and self-poisoning (taking an overdose of medication or drugs, swallowing bleach or other chemicals, or inhaling glue or petrol).

Signs and Symptoms

- Marks on their body that appear too ordered to be accidental, or inconsistent with the story of how they were sustained
- Blood stains on clothing, or finding tissues with blood on them
- Frequently engaging in activities that cause physical injury
- Regularly bandaged areas of the body
- Reluctance to take part in activities that require them to change clothes e.g. P.E.
- Wearing long sleeves and trousers, especially during hot weather
- Wincing from pain if someone or something touches an area of their body
- Use of strategies such as snapping an elastic band on their wrist
- Scars from previous self-harm

Suggestions for Schools

Information provided by the Anna Freud Centre:

- **Don't panic!** The worst thing you can do is to do nothing and ignore the self-harm – talking about the problem will not encourage more self-harm.
- **Speak with the young person** – invite them to tell you about the self-harm and any problems or worries they might want to share - this should be an invitation and not a demand to share everything, it may take a few invitations to talk before the young person feels able to risk sharing with you - the most important thing you can do is offer to listen.
- **Don't tell them to “just stop doing it”** the self-harm will always be of great importance to the young person and may be their only coping mechanism - so just stopping might leave them more at risk.

- **Make a plan** – this might be as simple as making another time to listen or the plan might be to make a referral on - what is important is that you and the young person discuss and (ideally) agree on the plan.
- **Share with someone** – always speak to colleagues in school and ideally speak to your local CAMHS team for advice - your local safeguarding protocol will also mean you have to share with a parent or carer - be clear with the young person why you are doing this and give them choices about how you might tell parents.
- **Act** – do what you have agreed – even the best plans don't always go to plan - but do what you can as soon as you can.
- **Let them know what you have done** and what you haven't managed to do yet, and why.
- **Stay in the loop** - if the local CAMHS or Social Care start work with the young person – school still has a great deal to offer – it is important for the young person that schools and specialist services continue to communicate and work together in the interest of the young person.
- **If someone is actively suicidal:** If they are clear they want to die, they have a plan and intend to act on that plan immediately, make sure someone stays with them – you still have time to seek advice as long as they are kept safe with someone. If the young person has already taken an overdose - or if you suspect they might have - get them to A&E for medical assessment and treatment for the poisoning.

One strategy is to find ways to replace the behaviour with other, safer ways of coping. Consider the function that self-harm plays for that individual and what non-injurious behaviours could achieve this. For instance, if the self-harm functions to turn emotional pain into physical pain they could hold ice cubes on their skin; if it functions to release negative feelings about themselves they could draw themselves and write the harm they are imagining onto the drawing; or if it functions to generate self-care they could put plasters or bandages on where they want to self-harm.

Another strategy is to create a self-harm timeline (a version is available from the National Self Harm Network website, linked below) to document changes in their self-harming behaviours, such as the amount, the type and the method. This can help them to understand triggers, associations and protective factors.

Ways they could minimise harm can also be explored, such as through encouraging them to clean the blades, use non-rusted blades or to clean themselves and use bandages afterwards.

Useful websites / Resources



AMBER Project – Cardiff-based group, specifically for young people who self-harm
Tel: 029 2034 4776; Text/Phone: 07905 905437; Email:
amber.project@churcharmy.org
<https://www.amberproject.org.uk/>

SHOUT - A text-based crisis service
Text shout to: 85258
<https://www.giveusashout.org>

Head Above the Waves – Online resources on coping strategies and alternatives to self-harm, as well as school-based workshops
<https://hatw.co.uk/>

MEIC – National helpline for young people who self-harm
Call: 080880 23456; Text: 84001, or chat online
<https://www.meiccymru.org>

National Self Harm Network - A support forum for individuals who self-harm
www.nshn.co.uk

Anna Freud – National Centre for Children and Families
<https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind>

This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg



Llywodraeth Cymru
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