

Self harm

Self-harm is the deliberate injuring of oneself in an attempt to cope with strong feelings such as anger, despair or self-hatred. Someone who self-harms may inflict physical injuries in a variety of ways such as cutting, piercing, burning or biting themselves.

Generally speaking, someone who self-harms isn't trying to commit suicide. A person who is suicidal is desperate to never feel anything again, whereas the person who self-harms is only trying to make themselves feel better. In some cases, a person may self-harm in an attempt to drive away suicidal feelings. To distinguish self-harm from suicidal behaviour, the term non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is used.

The most comprehensive Australian study of self-harm published in 2010, estimates that around eight per cent of the Australian population, aged between 10 and 100 years have self-harmed.

Reasons for self-harming behaviour

Some of the many reasons why a person might self-harm could include:

- To manage emotions
- The belief that punishment is deserved
- Low self-esteem
- Poor body image
- Self-hatred
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Strong feelings of anxiety or depression
- Emotional numbness (feeling physical pain is 'better' than feeling nothing)
- A response to physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

Other forms of self-harm

Indirect self-harm involves inflicting physical injury in a more roundabout way, such as neglecting to manage an illness or failing to seek help for a disorder or alcoholism.

Self-harm is generally different from socially acceptable forms of 'self-harm', such as tattooing and body piercing, because the reason for doing it is different. Tattoos and body piercing may be done for spiritual, aesthetic or cultural reasons, whereas self-harm is a coping mechanism for dealing with psychological problems, such as severe anxiety.

The response from the medical profession

Anecdotal evidence from people who self-harm suggests that many workers in the medical and health professions don't understand and often react in negative ways. This may include:

- Showing horror or revulsion
- 'Talking down' to the person, ridiculing them or trying to shame them
- Resentment that the person is 'wasting' hospital time and resources that could be given to people who are in 'genuine' need
- The mistaken belief that the person has a form of Munchausen syndrome (the desire to inflict injuries or induce symptoms to get medical attention)
- Deliberately delaying treatment or giving them inadequate treatment, such as little or no pain medication
- Instructing the person on where to cut their wrist (for example) so that their next 'suicide attempt' will be successful.

Treatment for self-harm

Treatment could include:

- Psychological intervention and/or counselling
- Psychiatric treatment
- Learning other forms of effective coping techniques
- Understanding and support from family members, friends and doctors
- Medical treatment for the physical injuries
- Until the self-harming behaviour is under control, advice on harm minimisation techniques; for example, how to keep piercing and cutting implements sterile
- Until the self-harming behaviour is under control, first aid training and adequate supplies of first aid equipment in the home (such as bandages and antiseptic solution).

Other forms of coping

Self-harming behaviour may be destructive, but it seems to help the person to manage their strong feelings. This is why it is so important to introduce other, more positive coping strategies before attempting to stop. Otherwise, the self-harming will continue, despite the person's best intentions or their promises to loved ones. Different coping strategies that could be helpful include:

- Regular exercise
- Stress management
- Counselling
- Forms of personal expression, such as writing or painting
- Relaxation therapy
- Yoga and meditation.

How to help during an incident

If you witness a loved one self-harming, try hard to control your emotional response. Yelling, crying or becoming hysterical will only make your loved one more stressed, which can reinforce their self-harming behaviour. Suggestions include:

- Try to act in a neutral way.
- If necessary, take them to a more private place.
- Help them to administer first aid to their injuries.
- If their injuries are severe, take them to the nearest hospital emergency department for treatment.
- If this is the first time you discovered their self-harming behaviour, ask your doctor for referral to appropriate mental health services.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- SuicideLine Tel. 1300 651 251
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 551 800
- Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria) Tel. (03) 9427 0407

Things to remember

- Self-harm is the deliberate injuring of oneself in an attempt to cope with strong feelings such as anger, despair or self-hatred.
- Many workers in the medical and health professions don't understand self-harm and often react in negative ways.
- Self-harm is not a type of suicidal behaviour – in some cases, a person may self-harm in an attempt to drive away suicidal feelings.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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