

### **What is self harm?**

Self harm is a deliberate act to harm yourself in some way. It's often a way of expressing very deep distress and can be a means of communicating what cannot be put into words or even thoughts, and is often described as an 'inner scream'. Sometimes you may not know why you are self harming but it's a sign there are problems that need addressing.

There are many ways of self harming such as:

- Cutting
- Burning and scalding
- Stabbing
- Scratching
- Banging or bruising your body
- Breaking bones
- Hair pulling
- Self strangulation
- Ingesting toxic substances or objects
- Eating disorders
- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Risk taking behaviour

These responses may help you to cope with feelings that are overwhelming such as sadness, rage, grief, self hatred, loneliness and guilt. It may be a way of getting the pain out of yourself, being distracted from it, overcoming numbness or finding relief. It can also be a means of self punishment, an attempt to gain control over your life and to cleanse yourself.

### **Is self harming a suicide attempt?**

Self harming is rarely an attempt at suicide or an expression of madness. It can often be about trying to stay alive – a coping mechanism and escape from emotional pain. You may not be suicidal but some suicides can result from self harm accidentally.

### **Is self harming a way of seeking attention?**

Self harming behaviour can be misunderstood by many people and can be seen as attention seeking and manipulative. Whether you have deep wounds or slight injuries, they should always be taken seriously. The size of your wound is not a measure of the conflict and pain inside.

### **Triggers to self harm**

You may harm yourself once or twice at difficult times in your life and then never do it again. But self harming can become an ongoing way of coping with problems on a regular daily, weekly or monthly basis. Triggers could be a reminder of the past (e.g. an anniversary), abuse, bereavement, isolation, poor relationships, helplessness, academic or work pressures.

### **Coping with self harming**

Remember you have choices and there are things you can do to reduce, control or overcome the urge to self harm such as:

- Knowledge is power – gather as much information as possible about your behaviour and keep a record of what is going on for you so that over a period of time you can recognise your triggers and ways of coping
- Talk to someone - partner, friend, GP, relative, counsellor, religious/spiritual leader, positive online discussion groups, the Samaritans, tutor

- Delay self harming – start with 15 minutes and then gradually increase the time delay
- Find other ways of expressing feelings – writing, drawing, sports, hit a pillow, a bath, a warm drink, write a letter/email, cook, look at positive web sites, cut your nails or hair instead of your skin
- If seeing blood is important, create redness by scribbling in red crayon/pen or draw in red felt tip over the areas you want to cut
- Do anything but self harm – things that cause intense sensations such as biting into ginger, squeezing ice, flicking an elastic band on your wrist can help with the urge to self harm
- Build your self esteem – you are not to blame for how you feel so make a list of your feelings and then write positive statements about yourself. If you cannot think of positive things about yourself, ask friends and family what they like about you
- Make life less stressful – have occasional treats, eat healthily, get good sleep and exercise

### **Staying safe during strong self harming urges**

If self harming urges are strong, stay safe by:

- Avoiding major arteries, veins and organs
- Not sharing cutting tools with others
- Keep cuts shallow
- Have a first aid kit handy
- Keep emergency contact numbers
- Avoid alcohol and non-prescriptive drugs
- Before self harming, set limits on how many cuts, burns etc to do

### **Helping someone who self harms**

It's natural to feel upset, helpless and angry when a friend or relative is self harming. Rather than being frightened, think of it as a way of them coping with their difficulties. You can help by:

- Understanding that self harm makes your friend's life bearable
- Accept this is their way of coping
- Encourage them to talk and listen sympathetically
- Maintain a balance in the friendship by sharing your own joys and worries as it's important it does not become one way

Remember to not offer more than you can cope with– it's better to offer a little support which you can sustain than offering a lot and withdrawing. You can also seek support and advice for yourself.

### **Useful Contacts:**

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|------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| • Samaritans                 | 08457 90 90 90   | 24 hour helpline                    |
| • National Self Harm Network | 0800 622 6000  | Survivor led support                |
| • Harmless                   | <a href="http://www.harmless.org.uk">www.harmless.org.uk</a> | Support, information and advice     |
| • Secret Shame               | <a href="http://www.selfharm.net">www.selfharm.net</a>       | Advice and information on self harm |