

What is Self Harm?

Many people cope with difficulties or distress in their lives in ways which are harmful to themselves. Some people drink too much, others make themselves ill through overwork or worry. Many people smoke, drive too fast, gamble or do other socially acceptable things which are risky or harmful to themselves.

Self harm can take many forms. The most common is cutting, often the arms, as well as other areas. Cuts are usually quite superficial but some people can cut themselves quite deeply. Some people pick or scrape at the skin, or burn themselves, while others punch themselves or hit parts of their bodies against something to cause pain and bruising. Less visible injuries might be caused by inserting or swallowing objects. Some people also hurt themselves by pulling out their hair or eyelashes or repeatedly biting and tearing the skin on hands or fingers.

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) defines self harm as the intentional self injury or self poisoning irrespective of the purpose of the act.

Self Injury means causing injury or pain to yourself. Some people might cut, scratch, burn or attempt strangulation or hanging.

Self poisoning refers to taking overdoses of medications or dangerous liquids or substances.

In most cases the individuals we support self harm is not about attempting suicide but a way of dealing with stresses in life.

Why might someone self harm?

There are many circumstances which might lead to self harm below are just a few:

- Bereavement
- Loss of employment / Financial Worries
- Relationship breakdown
- Coming into / out of Prison
- Mentally unwell

Research has shown that people who self harm often fall into 1 of 3 categories:

- Self harm to obtain a psychological relief, help to relieve symptoms of anger, depression and anxiety.
- Those who self harm to escape life events i.e. bereavements.
- Those who self harm in order to control their environment, so called manipulation.

What can we do to help or support?

- Our attitudes: Acceptance listening, caring understanding attitudes are the single most important factor in supporting someone who has self harmed.
- Support during crisis situations, someone to call on at bad times.
- Alternatives to self injury, explore alternatives to help the individual develop healthier coping mechanisms through the short and long term. Be aware of other support services or mechanisms available during their time in prison and on return to the community if possible. Consider things they are able to do even when they are back in cell .i.e. writing down feelings, art or meditation.

While some people harm themselves in ways which are obvious to others or seek help for injuries others are successful in hiding what they do. Shame fear and humiliation may force them to keep it secret. This means the true nature and extent of the problem are unknown.

Everyone who self harms is an individual with their own story to tell

Useful Facts

- Around 1% of the world population self harm, in the UK alone 170,000 cases of self harm required hospital attention.
- Some members of the community are of a higher risk than others, young people, women and those dependent on alcohol or illicit substances are more likely to self harm.

Self harm in prisons (ONS information for 2009)

- Total 24,114 incidents of self-harm in prisons reported in 2009
 - 57% male, 43% female.
- Hospital treatment required for 1126 male and 176 female prisoners
- Number of ACCT documents opened in 2009 = 28,530
- Most common method of self-harm was cutting = 14,215 instances.
- Self harm most common in sentenced prisoners.