

UNDERSTANDING SELF HARM

One in ten young people self harm in the UK today. There still remains a stigma around self harm and it can be isolating, not only for the young person but also for the parent or carer of a young person who self harms. The reaction a young person receives when they disclose self harm has a major impact on whether they can go on to get help and recover.¹

What is self harm?

Typical self harming behaviours include: cutting, burning, pulling hair out, head banging, controlling eating patterns, swallowing damaging articles such as razor blades and abusing alcohol and drugs. Signs to look out for if you suspect a child or young person is self harming:

- unexplained cuts and bruises
- wearing long sleeved clothes, especially in warm weather
- knives or razor blades going missing
- unexplained blood stains on clothes or towels
- feelings of worthlessness
- change in moods – frequently angry or depressed

Reasons for self-harming include:

- bullying
- death of a parent or close friend
- parental separation or divorce
- serious illness which can affect how they feel about themselves
- being under intolerable pressure; for example, exams
- abuse: emotional, sexual, physical and neglect.

Some people self harm on a regular basis as a means of coping while for others it will only be once in a while.

Why do young people self harm?

However negative and self destructive it may seem to hurt or injure their body, for some children and young people it is a way of coping, and may seem like the only way of dealing with unbearable feelings.

It is a way of expressing inner conflict as, by self harming, these painful feelings can be released. This may be the one area in their life that they feel able to control.

Children and young people who self harm may have low self esteem and poor body image. They self harm when feelings become unbearable. Some of the feelings described by young people who self harm include fear, guilt, anger, shame, helplessness and self hatred. Children and young people who self harm may have had difficult experiences and relationships.

“I dragged a razor along my skin and when I saw the blood I felt relieved. Cutting stops the dark thoughts for a while.”

1. Truth Hurts: Report on the National Enquiry into Self Harm. Camelot Foundation and Mental Health Foundation. 2006



How to respond to and support children and young people who self harm

Finding out that a child or young person is self harming can cause the parent/carer to experience a wide range of emotions: shock, helplessness, anger, disgust, panic, disbelief, guilt and isolation.

- It is important not to overreact or show anger and revulsion.
- Stay calm and non judgemental.
- Ask sensitively if they are self harming.
- Some injuries caused by self harm may need medical attention.
- Encourage them to talk, give them space and listen.
- If they are uncomfortable talking to you encourage them to talk to someone they feel comfortable with.
- Acknowledge any distress they may have and show concern.
- Don't ask them to stop. They won't until they are ready to, and this may be one of the few things in their life that they feel able to control.
- Don't issue ultimatums or make assumptions.
- All you might be able to do is to keep the lines of communication open with the young person and talk to

them. They may reveal their reasons for self-harming over a period of time.

Contact

To talk through some of the feelings you may have and for ongoing support for you and your child, please contact the confidential helplines and email service:

ParentLine Scotland

t: **08000 28 22 33**

e: parentlinescotland@children1st.org.uk

Opening hours

Monday to Friday 9am-10pm

Saturday and Sunday 12noon- 8pm

Penumbra

t: **0131 475 2380**

ChildLine in Scotland

t: **0800 1111**

We can help you take action to achieve change where it is needed.

For further information about CHILDREN 1ST please contact:

CHILDREN 1ST, 83 Whitehouse Loan, Edinburgh EH9 1AT

t: 0131 446 2300

f: 0131 446 2339

e: info@children1st.org.uk

For more information on family group conferences or to find out how you can help and to order any of our publications, visit our website www.children1st.org.uk

