

# **Self Harm**

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# Why schools?

- Schools have universal access to young people at a pivotal time in their developmental process
- Adults working in school are likely to encounter young people who self-harm
- Negative emotions block learning & thinking
- Schools can play an important part in promoting emotional health and wellbeing

# What is self-harm?

- Cutting
- Taking an overdose of tablets
- Swallowing hazardous materials or substances
- Burning
- Over/under medicating
- Punching/hitting/
- Bruising
- Hair pulling/skin picking/head banging
- Episodes of alcohol/drug abuse or over/under eating can at times be acts of self-harm

# Definition

- Self-harm is any act with a non-fatal outcome such as self-cutting, swallowing objects, taking an overdose, running in front of a car etc where the intent is to deliberately cause self-harm
- ‘Self-harming is usually an attempt to escape from unbearable feeling or from an intolerable situation’ (Babiker & Arnold 1997)

# What then are the intents in self harm if it is not to die?

- To survive
- To communicate
- To cope
- To feel better
- To get help
- Transfer emotional pain to physical
- To show I am different
- To heal
- To see blood
- To check I'm alive
- To feel something
- I deserve it/punish self
- To punish others
- To dissociate
- To control something
- Its complex!!

# Prevalence

1 in 15 young people has self harmed.

On average in every secondary school classroom there will be 2 young people who have hurt themselves.

**Truth Hurts** — report of the National Inquiry into Self-harm among young people – Mental Health Foundation executive summary (2006)

# What does self-harm mean?

- Self-harm is a symptom not the core problem
- It can mask underlying psychological and emotional trauma
- It can be adolescent experimental behaviour that isn't serious

# Why do some young people self harm?

- Some young people are more at risk than others
- Young people are affected by risk and protective factors in all areas of their lives
- There are often multiple triggers in relation to daily stresses
- What makes young people vulnerable?
- Belonging - culture and groups

# Signs of Self Harming

May include:-

- Wounds, scabs or scars on the body frequently on the arms and legs.
- Verbal hints- *‘I’m scared about what I might do’, ‘ I don’t feel safe’*
- Signs of hopelessness and depression
- May talk of suicide more often

# Signs of Self Harm

- May be more angry or impulsive or conversely display apathy and withdrawal.
- Also associated with increased substance misuse, including alcohol or prescription medication
- More likely in response to life events such as the end of relationships, physical illness or significant anniversaries.

# Signs of Self Harm

- Reluctance to get changed for PE in front of others.
- Inappropriate clothing : eg long sleeves in summer .

# Triggers

- Bullying
- Self-harm behaviour in other students
- Self-harm portrayed in the media/websites
- Trouble in school or with the police
- Feeling under pressure from family, school or peers to conform or achieve
- Exam pressure
- Times of change, e.g, parental separation or divorce, school transitions

# What function does self-harm have?

- I don't know how to release my feelings in any other way.
- It acts as a safety valve
- It's a distraction from problems
- It's an outlet for anger and rage
- It's a form of non verbal communication
- It's a conversion of emotional to physical pain
- It's a way of punishing self or others
- It's a form of taking control
- It elicits care from others

# Emotions

- Self-harm can evoke powerful intense emotions in everyone that can be difficult to manage

- How is Self Harm Managed in School?
- How is risk assessed?

# **Suggested components of whole school health awareness (Hawton, 2006)**

- Problem solving skills
- Self esteem
- Coping with stress
- Awareness of own problems
- Seeking help and helping others

# A Place to Start/Helpful Considerations

- Be based in whole school approach
- Be integrated into normal secondary school activity
- Be empowering, giving flexibility – not coercing or manipulating
- Be relevant to lives of young people
- Use key elements of skills development e.g identification/practice/ feedback, modelling, coaching

# Who can help?

- Friends
- Families of young people
- Colleagues
- School counsellor
- School Health Advisor
- GPs
- TaMHS
- Social Care
- ESWS
- EIS
- EPS
- CAMHS
- Helplines
- Websites

# What Should I do?

Most people are relieved to talk openly about their experience and receive an understanding and compassionate response. Your response is important as enabling the person to talk about their self harm gives them a sense they are not mad or alone.

# What Should I Do?

- Ask tactfully – *‘Have you hurt yourself or are you worried you might hurt yourself’*
- Consider is the young person safe?
- Do they present a risk to others?
- Is first aid or an ambulance required?
- Listen non judgementally – go at their pace, try not to second guess or force your own interpretations.

# What Should I Do?

- Make it clear that self harm is not a ‘secret’ that cannot be told.
- If there is a risk you have a duty of care to inform other professionals and carers.
- Any child protection concerns follow WSCB blue book.
- Contact your TaMHS worker for advice.

# What Not To Do

- Tell them to stop self harming
- Panic
- Get someone else
- Be wary of taking the self harming item away even if not self harming
- Demand they show you where they have self harmed
- Tell them off

# Still Concerned

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