

## Self harm

Most of us can think of times in our lives when we have not respected our body by doing something that is in some way harmful to it, such as smoking, drinking, or pushing it to the limit in some other excessive way. This leaflet is directed at people who may feel the need to deliberately inflict injury upon themselves, such as cutting, burning, stabbing, scratching, banging or hitting parts of the body especially the head, pulling out hair or even just taking unnecessary risks. Self harm is not usually connected to suicidal thoughts, but they may be at increased risk, and it is a definite sign that there are issues that need to be addressed.

There is no such thing as a typical self-harmer. No one sex, race, or background is more likely to do it than another, although it is most prevalent in young people aged 15-25. It is not easy to identify someone who is self-harming as they may present themselves to the outside world differently to how they are feeling on the inside. The starting point of someone who feels the compulsion to cause themselves pain is usually a very deep sense of powerlessness, of feeling out of control or trapped. These feelings may have originated from experiences that can be traced back to childhood or from a traumatic incident where the person felt unable to control the situation.

### Why do I self-harm?

Self-harm can be a way of dealing with difficult feelings that are overwhelming such as rage, pain, self-hatred, loneliness, guilt, grief. To make physical these complicated emotions by carrying out an action that embodies the feeling can feel like a release, or at least a distraction from the unbearable. It may also be a way to communicate your pain to others in a way in which you are unable to do so with words, although sometimes, you may feel ashamed of doing so and will conceal it so as not to draw attention to yourself. If you are self-harming, it is possible that you may have experienced difficulties at some point in your life. These include:-

- Abuse, including sexual, emotional and physical
- Separation from or loss of a loved one.
- Extreme pressure to comply with another's expectations
- Bullying
- Isolation

Perhaps when you were younger, you felt unable to find support to explore your difficulties and you may have unconsciously blamed yourself, turning your anger inwards. As you develop into an adult, self harming may have become a way of expressing the pain, punishing yourself, or avoiding the central issue.

It is possible, if you have been subjected to severe abuse or trauma, that you may not feel any pain during the act of self-harming as you may be able to completely detach yourself from the feelings both mentally and physically. Alternatively, it can be a way to re-establish feelings of control, or to convince yourself that you are not vulnerable. On the other hand, you may feel the need to experience pain in order to know that you can actually feel and that you are alive.

### How can I stop?

Realising that you have a choice may be the first step to learning how to avoid hurting yourself.

- The hurting can often come about whilst experiencing feelings of powerlessness, so being aware of when these feelings emerge, and recognising patterns, perhaps even writing a diary to see if certain things are triggering the desire. Knowledge is power!
- Talking to someone supportive can reduce the feeling of isolation and loneliness. Friends or relatives may feel shocked, guilty or even angered by your revelation, so it is important that you think about what you want to get out of telling them, so that you are able to explain to them exactly what you need. If you feel the need to talk to someone not connected with the rest of your life, there are counsellors at all Middlesex campuses available to help support you.
- Try to remember that you are not to blame for the way that you are feeling. These emotions are inappropriate and misdirected.
- Give yourself the best chance of avoiding feeling low by getting enough sleep, eating healthily, and adding an

exercise regime into your lifestyle. Also, try not to let undue pressure build up. If it feels as though things are getting too much, seek help rather than burying your feelings and hoping they'll go away.

Stopping harming yourself is possible, but it may involve a sense of loss. Perhaps it is how you have learned to cope over many years, and you may fear what will happen if you let it go. Will you lose the sense of control it has given you, or the way it allows you to express yourself? Talking to a counsellor may well allow you an alternative outlet for your feelings to help get you through the dread of letting it go.

### **My friend is self-harming**

It is natural to feel a mixture of emotions when you discover that someone you care about is causing themselves harm. These may include fear, guilt and helplessness. Perhaps it may seem less scary to think about the fact that your friend/relative is using it as a way to cope with difficult feelings. Obviously you want them to stop, but you can not force them to do so. However, the way that you respond to them can make a great difference.

- Acknowledging their injuries is a way of allowing them to feel that they and their body matters, and that you care about what happens to it and to them.
- Accepting their need to self-harm – this is very hard, but equally important.
- Recognise that they are finding life hard to deal with, showing them that you are trying to understand.
- Encourage them to talk about what makes them want to self-harm. This might be hard for you to hear, so you may wish to urge them to seek out a counsellor.
- Try hard not to judge or be critical of their feelings or of the self-harming itself. This will help them to feel accepted and cared for.
- Change may well be very slow, and it is important that you let go of your own expectations about wanting them to stop. People who self-harm are doing it as a way of avoiding extremely difficult feelings that they fear will completely overwhelm them if they are not kept in check by the action of

self-harm. It is a defensive coping mechanism that may well have allowed your friend/relative to function in most other areas of their life. Giving up what has helped someone to cope must be done with great care, and at the pace of the person in pain. You can be a supportive influence, but you cannot solve their problems for them.

Please see website for up-to-date service details and contact numbers: <http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling Service or you can contact us at: [cmh@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:cmh@mdx.ac.uk)

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