

# UNDERSTANDING SELF-INJURY

**HEALTH WARNING!** With all statistics, you have to remember that they are only an indication of what has happened in the past. They are certainly not a forecast of what may happen to you.

## What is self-injury?

- ✦ Self-injury (SI) is also sometimes called 'self harm' or 'deliberate self-harm' (DSH) or sometimes 'parasuicide'.
- ✦ Self-injury is a person hurting themselves deliberately, usually on a regular basis, through a range of methods, but most commonly burning, cutting or poisoning.
- ✦ Self-injury is usually a way of coping with difficult or painful emotions.

"When I cut myself its like a way of expressing emotional pain as physical pain."

## How many people self injure?

- ✦ One in 10 people aged 15 and 16 in the UK has self injured at some point in their life.
- ✦ Rates of self-injury in the UK are among the highest in Europe at 400 per 100,000 per year. Self-injury rose dramatically from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, then decreased in the early 1980s but rose again by the end of the decade.
- ✦ Self-injury is uncommon in children under 11 although there is evidence of children as young as five trying to harm themselves.
- ✦ Self-injury is three times more common amongst girls and young women than amongst boys and young men.
- ✦ Rates of self-injury reported by parents are much lower than the rates of self-injury reported by children. This suggests that many parents are unaware that their children are self injuring.
- ✦ Of people who go to hospital because of self-injury, 15% will come back again for the same reason within a year.

## Why do people injure themselves?

- ✦ Those who do self-injure have usually lived through very difficult and painful experiences and describe their behaviour as a way of coping with overwhelming feelings and gaining a sense of control.
- ✦ Research carried out by Samaritans and the Centre for Suicide Research amongst 15 and 16 year olds found that the most common reason for self-injuring is to get relief from a terrible state of mind. Others said they wanted to punish themselves, or because they wanted to die.
- ✦ People who self-injured were more likely to have difficult things happening in their lives, for example, problems with schoolwork, fights at home and with friends, someone close to them who isn't well or dying, or boyfriend or girlfriend problems.
- ✦ Experts say there is a close link to depression and low self-esteem. These can be triggered by things like physical or emotional abuse, bereavement, bullying, neglect, money worries, relationship difficulties and problems at school or work.
- ✦ Often people who self-injure don't want anyone to know about it and are very secretive which can make it hard for friends or family to know what's going on and to help.

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## Influence of the media

- ✦ Portrayal of self-poisoning in a popular TV drama in the UK was associated with a short-lived increase of self-poisoning cases seen in general hospitals. Choice of substance was also influenced by the broadcast.
- ✦ The death of a major public figure can influence rates of self-injury, although there is not enough research to understand exactly what factors are involved.

## Myths

- ✦ It is true that people who self injure are somewhat more likely to take their own life than the general population. However, self injuring is not usually about taking your own life. The majority of people who self injure say that they do so in order to cope with living rather than because they want to die.
- ✦ A common stereotype is that self-injury is about 'attention seeking'. Most self-injury is actually done in secret, for a long time and it can be very hard for people to find enough courage to ask for help.

## Ways of coping and recovery

- ✦ Stopping or reducing their self-injury does not happen over night. It can take time to reach the point where a person can start to give up.
- ✦ The first step along the journey can be learning how to cause the least possible damage. This is called 'harm reduction.'
- ✦ Another step is substituting self-injury with a different way of dealing with difficult feelings (coping strategies). For example when there is the urge to self-injure people have suggested:
  - ✦ Hitting or screaming into a pillow.
  - ✦ Physical exercise – to relieve tension and improve mood.
  - ✦ Making lots of noise, e.g. musical instrument or just banging on pots and pans.
  - ✦ Calling and talking to a friend (not necessarily about self-injury).
  - ✦ Doing something creative, writing negative feelings on a piece of paper and then ripping it up or keeping a journal.
  - ✦ Going online and looking at self-help websites.
- ✦ For most people, recovery means tackling the underlying problems that were causing their self-injury. Counsellors can help people do this by talking through thoughts and feelings and developing coping strategies.
- ✦ It may be very difficult if someone you care about is self injuring. Trying to force them to stop doesn't work. Instead, being a good friend, talking to them about it, encouraging them to get help when they're ready and supporting them to find other ways of coping.

"It's vital for friends and family to take self-injury seriously, to listen to the person and not to be judgemental. It's important to strike a balance between supporting the self injurer and protecting them from serious injury."

"Look at the individual, not the harm. Look at the person beyond the scars. Scars are not important. The person that did them is important."



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## For further information and support...

### **Samaritans**

Our volunteers are there 24 hours a day to give confidential emotional support.

**Tel:** 08457 90 90 90 (United Kingdom) or

**Tel:** 1850 60 90 90 (Republic of Ireland)

**Email:** [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

**Web:** [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**Write to:** Chris, PO Box 90 90, Stirling, FK8 2SA, Scotland

### **Mind**

MindinfoLine can help you find services in your local area.

**Tel:** 0845 766 0163

Booklets and information on the website.

**Web:** [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

### **BBC One life**

Factsheet and links to support groups.

**Web:** [www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onelife/health/healthy\\_mind/selfharm.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onelife/health/healthy_mind/selfharm.shtml)

### **self-injury UK**

An online support group for people of any age who self-injure.

**Web:** [health.groups.yahoo.com/group/siuk/](http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/siuk/)

### **Young People & Self-harm**

Information about self-harm and resources to those who are affected by the issue of deliberate self-harm amongst young people.

**Web:** [www.selfharm.org.uk](http://www.selfharm.org.uk)

**A full list of references for the facts above can be found on Samaritans website [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)**