

SELF-HARM MYTHS AND FACTS



[HAND OUT]

MYTHS ABOUT SELF-HARM

Only 'emos' self-harm, it's part of modern-day youth culture

There's no such thing as a typical person who self-harms. It can affect anyone of any age, background or race, and regardless of whether they are an extrovert or an introvert. *"Around friends and in public you may seem OK, but it's not like you want to go around looking depressed and feeling sorry for yourself,"* says JD, 17. *"You feel differently inside to how you show yourself on the outside, and you do put on a bit of a front, so you can't just look at someone and say 'they self-harm'."*

It's just a phase – they'll soon get over it and stop doing it

Some young people self-harm on a regular basis, while others do it just once or occasionally. For some people it's part of coping with a specific problem and they stop once the problem is resolved. Other people self-harm for years, or whenever certain kinds of pressures and problems arise. Self-harm can become habitual behaviour for some people. Telling somebody to 'just stop it' will not work and could possibly alienate them further. They may find another more dangerous method of coping or they may also feel they are letting people down if they are unable to stop, which adds to the pressure on them, and the sense of failure. They need help and understanding to recover, and to learn other strategies for coping with emotional pain and stressful situations.

They're just doing it to get attention

Stripping naked and running down the high street would be attention-seeking, but self-harming is very private and personal. People who self-harm often go to great lengths to cover up their injuries. The attention that self-harming does bring is often negative. For some, self-harm is a release that doesn't – or needn't – attract the attention of others. It can be performed in private, dealt with in private and then covered up with clothing. Self-harm is not manipulative behaviour – many people who self-harm are often unaware of the effect that their self-harming has on others. People who self-harm often find that this means they are further isolated from everyone because of the shame they feel and the difficulty they experience in being able to talk about what is going on.

People who self-harm want to take their own lives

Some people who self-harm see it as a way of staying alive and coping with the difficulties they are facing. For many, self-harm is not about the inflicting of physical pain but coping with emotional pain. ChildLine and other support lines for children believe that unvented emotions such as anger and frustration may often be behind self-harm, which provides an unhealthy but seemingly cathartic outlet for the build-up of these feelings. Other factors that can lead to self-harm may include stress arising from a difficult home environment or a general sense of having no control over life. Self-harm can be a way of seeking relief. Where many people cope by, say, crying on another person's shoulder, some people find that self-harm is a way of coping with difficult feelings when they do not know how else to cope with them.



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Children who self-harm have been sexually abused

While some people who have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused may self-harm, that is not the case for most people who self-harm. There are many different triggers and often young people find it difficult to pinpoint the exact thing that caused them to self-harm in the first place. For many self-harming is a way to cope – to release tension, stress or pressure. Professional help can allow some self-harmers to get to the root of the problem.

Some people harm themselves because they don't know how else to cope with pressures from family, school and peer groups. Extreme feelings such as fear, anger, guilt, shame, helplessness, self-hatred, unhappiness and depression can build up over time. When these feelings become unbearable, self-harm can be a way of dealing with them.

Reasons young people have given for their self-harm could include:

- When the level of emotional pressure becomes too high it acts as a safety valve – a way of relieving the tension
- Cutting makes the blood take away the bad feelings
- Pain can make you feel more alive when feeling numb or dead inside
- Punishing yourself in response to feelings of shame or guilt
- When it's too difficult to talk to anyone, it's a form of communication about unhappiness and a way of acknowledging the need for help
- Self-harm gives a sense of control that's missing elsewhere in life.

What can help?

- ➔ Let the person self-harming know that self-harm is very common and that individuals who do it are by no means alone.
- ➔ Make sure that they know who they can go to in your local area for expert help.
- ➔ Some practitioners suggest asking children who self-harm to think about what changes they would like in their lives and environment in order to stop harming themselves.
- ➔ If somebody has the courage to tell you that they self-harm it is incredibly important to show them that you take them seriously, regardless of how severe, or not, the injury is. Your reaction may have a tremendous impact on them, so tread carefully.
- ➔ Being available, whenever possible, to talk to a child who self-harms can make all the difference, as feelings of isolation are often part of the problem.

Self-harm is often a way of coping with painful and difficult feelings. Someone may harm themselves because they feel overwhelmed and don't know how else to deal with things. It's usually a very private issue and motivations and methods will differ from one person to another. Some forms of self-harm carry a serious risk, but this doesn't mean someone who self-harms is always intending to cause themselves serious injury.

More information: www.thesite.org/healthandwellbeing/mentalhealth/selfharm/whatisselfharm

