



For better
mental health

Understanding self-harm

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'I am a survivor of both sexual abuse and self-injury. I no longer self-injure, but it has been a long struggle to try to acknowledge and work through emotions that once felt overwhelming in their power.'

'Self-harm is not a phenomenon known only to a few like me, who have inflicted injury on our bodies. Self-harm involves all of us on some level. We may all punish, distract or numb ourselves, as a way of dealing with difficult feelings or situations.'

'I am twenty years old, presently attending a day hospital and rebuilding my life, which I once believed had been destroyed.'

'I belong to a women's self-harm support group. The group was the start of changing my life. The encouragement and support from both has given me the strength and courage to continue my life, and I now value myself. I am a survivor of incest. I still self-harm, but nowhere near as much as I used to. By talking about it, I am learning to deal with my feelings.'

These are all quotes from people who self-harm. This booklet is for anyone who self-harms, their friends and family. It should give readers a greater understanding and knowledge of the condition and of what can be done to help.



What does it mean to self-harm?

Self-injury, such as cutting or burning yourself, is a way of expressing very deep distress. Often people don't know why they self-harm. It's a means of communicating what you can't put into words or even into thoughts, and has been described as expressing an inner scream. Afterwards, you may feel able to cope with life again, for a while.

Self-harm is a broad term for many acts that cause personal harm. It ranges from not looking after your own needs properly, either emotionally or physically, to direct injury such as scratching, cutting, burning and hitting yourself, or swallowing or putting things inside you. It can involve staying in an abusive relationship, taking risks too easily, and recognised problems such as eating distress (anorexia and bulimia) and addiction (for example, to alcohol or drugs).

We all have times when we behave self-destructively. We may not recognise it, because we are doing perfectly ordinary activities, such as smoking or overeating. People often overwork, for example, to try and lose themselves and avoid being alone with their thoughts and feelings.

Why do some people self-harm?



Self-harming behaviour is a way of dealing with unbearable feelings. These feelings are released through the body, where they can be seen and dealt with. You may be overwhelmed by painful emotions, such as rage, sadness, emptiness, grief, self-hatred, fear, or guilt. Injuring yourself may help you cope in a number of different ways. It may be a way of getting the pain out, distracting yourself from it, communicating how you are feeling, or of finding comfort from someone else. It may be a way of punishing yourself, or of attempting to get some control over your life.

Sexual, physical and emotional abuse

People who self-harm have usually lived through very difficult and painful experiences. Many of them will have been abused as children or young adults (although not all people who have been abused self-harm). This may be sexual abuse, physical violence, or emotional abuse (an utter lack of love or attention). They may have been neglected or separated from someone they loved very dearly, been bullied or put into care, into hospital or into prison.

They probably never had the chance to tell anyone else what happened to them, or to get the support they needed to deal with it at the time. They may be left with a very low sense of self-esteem, unable to talk at all about their emotions. Without an outlet, the emotions have to be buried and blocked from awareness. A child who has been betrayed by a trusted adult, with no witnesses, may feel they are themselves to blame. Their feelings of rage get directed inwards. As an adult, self-injury can be a way of both expressing their pain and punishing themselves, while repressing the actual memory of abuse.

Self-harming behaviour is common, but not well understood. Although statistics are misleading, because people are often unwilling to admit to injuring themselves, the numbers seem to be rising. It's a problem that affects more women than men (except in the prison population) and tends to involve more young people. A significant number of people who self-harm come from minority groups, who are discriminated against within society.

Women and self-harm

Feeling helpless or powerless is an important factor. Women often find themselves caring for others, putting themselves last. Their sense of worth, their opinions and strengths are often grossly undermined. They may feel themselves to be unimportant, and silent witnesses to abuses that they have to endure. As a result, they may lose a sense of their own identity, their power and their rights as individuals. One way of surviving this is to cut themselves off from their real needs, and to try and gain some control over their neediness or to deny it. They may, for instance, try to control the size and shape of their bodies by refusing to eat. They can then feel they have some influence over what happens to them. (See *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

There is often an absence of pain during the act of self-injury, rather like the absence of sensation that often occurs during abuse. Within the body's own defence system, natural opiates numb the trauma and also have the effect of numbing the emotions, so that little is felt or realised consciously.

Women may be so badly traumatised by their experiences that they feel detached from their feelings and their bodies, and quite separate from them. They may injure themselves to maintain that sense of being separate, and to convince themselves that they aren't vulnerable. They may also need to injure themselves in order to feel real and alive.

Men and self-harm

Men may conform to a macho stereotype that leaves them unable to feel their emotions and detached from that aspect of themselves. Men may be more likely than women to express their rage openly, but if locked up in institutions, for instance, may well express these pent-up feelings through self-injury, especially if they have been abused.

Young people

Young people often feel under great pressure from their family, school and peer group to conform or to excel. If there's no chance of living up to these expectations, even high achievers may express their anger through aggression and destructiveness. Others may express feelings of powerlessness and lack of self-worth in the same way.

Voice-hearers

Some people who self-harm also hear voices, and harming themselves can be a way of coping with them. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, for details of the Hearing Voices Network and *Further reading*, on p.14, for information about Mind's booklet, *How to recognise the early signs of mental distress*.)

Is self-harm an attempt to commit suicide?

Self-harm is about trying to stay alive, despite the pain people are in. Many more people self-harm than commit suicide, and most people don't hurt themselves so badly as to risk their lives. Of those who do, killing themselves may not have been their intention; it's the feelings they want to wipe out.



We may think that whether someone wants to live or die is always a straightforward choice. But some people are suspended in a grey state of survival, where choices and decisions are kept on hold. This is where self-harm happens. Surviving is subject to rigid controls, under which feelings are suppressed for fear of what may lie behind them. If living means having to cope with acutely painful feelings and memories, and there is not enough support available, the choice not to be alive is understandable. It is certainly less painful.

Human beings have an enormous capacity to survive great pain. When someone you love or care for professionally talks about death, it's natural to fear they will go through with it. But these may be the very feelings that need to be explored. (See *What help can I get?*, opposite.) People who self-harm are trying to resist feeling the full weight of their emotions. This defence mechanism, once vital, can't now be dismantled easily. It takes time for people to learn that their feelings won't destroy them.



Is self-harming behaviour attention-seeking?

Self-harm is often treated with mistrust or fear and described as attention-seeking and manipulative behaviour, because it can be hard to understand. If someone you care about, or look after professionally, self-harms, you may feel helpless when faced with their wounds, and your own feelings may cause you to blame them instead of supporting them (see also, *How can friends and family help?*, on p. 10.)

It's important to remember that a person who is self-harming may be using the only way they can to communicate their plight to other people, and to try and get the attention, care and comfort they need. However upsetting it may be for you, it doesn't necessarily mean the person's intention is to upset you.

The size of the wound isn't a measure of the size of the conflict going on inside the person. Some people have deep wounds, others have slight injuries. They should always be taken very seriously.



What makes people start to self-harm?

You may harm yourself once or twice, when dealing with a particularly difficult time or difficult feelings, and never do so again. But self-harming can sometimes become a regular way of coping with life on a monthly, weekly, or even a daily basis, in some circumstances. This is because it becomes a way of dealing with problems in the present, not just in the past.

It may be triggered by something that reminds you of feelings from the past, such as an anniversary or a particular event, which sets off a hidden memory. Sometimes, it can start because something out of the ordinary happens to shake you up. It could also be that the circumstances of your ordinary life are so difficult that self-harm is the only way you can cope.

What help can I get?



If your experiences have been so painful that you needed to deal with your emotions by hurting yourself, you may now seriously doubt whether you can deal with them in any other way. But people do move forward, to grieve over a lost childhood and work through the fear and confusion surrounding it. With the aid of plenty of support they learn that they can cope with the pain, anger and rage, which have to surface.

The important thing is to find ways to start talking to someone you trust. It could be to a friend, a family member, a professional counsellor, a psychologist or a psychotherapist.

A professional should have the training to listen to you and help you reach your feelings and manage them in a different way. The traumatic incidents that are behind you are probably not confined to childhood. It may not be possible to pinpoint one traumatic experience or series of experiences that holds the key to self-injury. Problems in the present, and from the past all need to be addressed.

There aren't many professionals who specialise in treating people who self-harm, but there are a reasonable number who are experienced in working with people who have eating problems or who have been abused. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, and *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

You may be able to get counselling through your GP surgery, or your GP can refer you to a clinical psychologist, who may offer cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). This is a very practical treatment, which could involve looking at what happens just before you self-harm, encouraging you to keep a diary of self-harming episodes and finding other channels for your feelings. (See *Further reading*, on p. 14.) CBT may not always look, in depth, at the causes behind self-harming behaviour.

Psychiatric services

If your self-harming is severe, you may be referred to a psychiatrist or admitted to hospital. People's experience of these services is very variable and, unfortunately, they are sometimes met with staff who don't really know how best to help and who aren't properly supported themselves. When time and resources are limited, it may be easier for them to make judgements, use labels and offer you medication, than spend time looking for possible causes of your distress. If you find that this is the case, you may need an advocate, who can speak for you and ensure you are properly treated. This could be a friend, relative or a professional. (See *Further reading*, on p. 14.) At their best, however, hospitals can offer access to invaluable therapeutic help and support from professionals experienced in the field.



What can I do to help myself?

Learn about yourself

Knowledge is power. Gather as much information as possible about your own behaviour. Keep notes of what is going on when you feel the need to harm yourself, so that you can identify, over a period of time, specific thoughts which come up. It's also useful to keep a daily diary recording events and feelings. Powerful emotions of happiness, anger or pain can be difficult to deal with. It's helpful to record how you cope with and channel these.

Think about your anger and what you do with it. If you weren't busy being angry with yourself, who would you really be angry with? Write a list of people who have caused you to feel like this. You deserve good things in life, not punishment for what others have done to you.

Collecting advice, information and support

A supportive GP will give you good advice on caring for your injuries and help you to find further help. If your GP is dismissive or unhelpful, you can contact your local community health council for advice on sympathetic GPs. You have a right to change your GP, if necessary.

Even though you feel alone, there are others who can understand your pain and help to boost your strength and courage. Try to talk about your feelings with someone supportive. Many people find that joining a support group of people with similar problems is an important step towards making themselves feel better, and changing their lives. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, for more information.) If there are no appropriate support groups in your area, why not consider starting one? Local Mind associations may be able to support your initiative.

Keep the telephone numbers of friends, or local and national helplines, where you can find them easily if you need to talk to somebody because you're in a crisis. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

Treat yourself well

Stay within safe limits. If you are cutting yourself, use something clean, and preferably sterile, which hasn't been used by other people.

Try to find ways to make your life less stressful. If something is worrying you, tackle it quickly, if you can, and ask other people for help and advice, if you need to. Use services, such as Citizens Advice Bureaux, to deal with practical problems. (See *The Mind guide to managing stress*, details on p. 14.)

Remember you are not to blame for how you feel; your self-injury is an expression of powerful negative feelings. It's not your fault. Work on building up your self-esteem. Make lists of your feelings, and then write positive statements about yourself, or the world around you. If you can't think of any, ask friends to write things they like about you. Keep these in a place so that they are visible.

Make a tape of your own voice saying something affirming. Sometimes people have favourite stories or poems, which they record for themselves. Hearing your own voice can be soothing, or you can ask someone you trust to record their voice reading to you.

Line up a set of cushions to represent people who caused you pain. Tell them how they hurt you and that you are no longer deserving of punishment. Kicking or hitting cushions is good. Try to do this with someone else, if possible, so that the experience is shared and you do not hurt yourself.

If you feel like it, try drawing or painting how you feel. Some people draw on themselves, using bright body colours. Creativity is the most powerful tool in gaining strength over despair. This doesn't have to be about making something. Whatever lifts you out of your pain and makes you feel good is creative.

Remember you have choices: stopping self-injury can begin now.



How can friends and family help?

If someone you love and care about is self-harming, it can be very difficult to cope with the range and depth of feelings it provokes in you. You may, naturally, be very afraid of how far they might go. Shock, grief, guilt, anger and a sense of helplessness are just a few of the emotions you may go through. You, yourself, may need help and support from family, friends or professionals. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.) It's important to remember that although you may feel helpless, what you do, or don't do, counts for a lot.

Offer the person support, by gently encouraging them to examine their feelings and to talk to someone about why they self-harm. The fact that you want to understand will mean a great deal. It's important that you understand how difficult they find their own reactions and that there are battles going on inside them. You may find what they have to say difficult to hear. If it feels too much for you, help them to find someone else to talk to.

Try not to deal with your own uncomfortable feelings by panicking, blaming the other person or treating them as if they are mad. Being uncritical of the person who is self-harming can make a huge difference. It can help them to feel accepted and cared for, instead of even more self-hating. It's also possible to be honest with them about your own feelings without making them feel guilty.

Pay proper attention to the injuries themselves, and show the person that their body is something to care about. But don't focus only on the injuries. Try to look at the feelings behind them. Emphasising the non-harming areas of the person's life is also very important. This can help to develop and support their sense of self-worth.

Don't expect change to happen quickly; and don't hold on to any expectation that your friend or relative can stop self-harming just because you want them to. It's important for friends and family to resist the temptation to step in constantly to try to solve the problem. In the end, healing can only be effectively gained through the individual drawing on their own strengths and finding their own healing inner resources.



Useful organisations

The Basement Project

PO Box 5, Abergavenny, Wales NP7 5XW
tel. 01873 856 524

Publications, groups and workshops for people who self-harm

Bristol Crisis Service for Women

PO Box 654, Bristol BS99 1XH

helpline: 0117 925 1119

Helpline for women, with a focus on self-harm

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG

tel. 0870 443 5252, minicom: 0870 443 5162

email: bacp@bacp.co.uk web: www.bacp.co.uk

See web or send A5 SAE for details of practitioners in your area

British Red Cross

9 Grosvenor Crescent, London SW1X 7EJ

tel. 020 7235 5454, web: www.redcross.org.uk

Free training in camouflaging scars

DABS (Directory and Book Services)

4 New Hill, Conisbrough, Doncaster DN12 3HA

tel./fax: 01709 860 023, email: info@dabsbooks.co.uk

web: www.dabsbooks.co.uk

Information service concerning sexual abuse

Hearing Voices Network

91 Oldham Street, Manchester M4 1LW

tel. 0161 834 5768, email: hearingvoices@care4free.net

web: www.hearing-voices.org.uk

Runs local self-help-groups

Mind*info*line

tel. 0845 766 0163

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services. Mind*info*Line is Mind's helpline and information service. Contact them for details of Local Mind Associations

NAPAC

42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH

helpline: 0800 085 3330, web: www.napac.org.uk

National information service for people abused in childhood.

National Self-harm Network (NHSN)

PO Box 7264, Nottingham NG1 6WJ

email: info@nshn.co.uk web: www.nshn.co.uk

Supports survivors and people who self-harm

Self Harm Alliance

PO Box 61, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL51 8YB

helpline: 01242 578 820, web: www.selfharmalliance.org

A national survivor-led voluntary group

Survivors UK

16 Swan Court, 9 Tanner Street, London SE1 3LE

helpline: 0845 122 1201, web: www.survivorsuk.org.uk

For men who have experienced any form of sexual violence

Threshold Women and Mental Health Helpline

14 St George's Place, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 4GB

helpline: 0845 3000 911, email: thrwomen@gloablnet.co.uk

Information line for women with mental health problems

YoungMinds

102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA

parents information service: 0800 018 2138

web: www.youngminds.org.uk

For anyone concerned about a child's mental health

Websites

www.selfinjury.freeserve.co.uk

www.selfharm.org.uk

www.siari.co.uk

www.self-injury-abuse-trauma-directory.info

Further reading

- The assertiveness workbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- A bright red scream: self-mutilation and the language of pain* M. Strong (Virago 2000) £9.99
- Cutting – the risk: self-harm, self-care and risk reduction* (National Self-harm Network 2000) £10
- Cutting: understanding and overcoming self-mutilation* S. Levenkron (W. W. Norton 1998) £9.95
- The day the voices stopped* K. Steele, C. Berman (Basic Books 2002) £11.50
- A head full of blue: a memoir* M. Johnstone (Bloomsbury 2002) £9.99
- Heal the hurt: how to forgive and move on* A. Macaskill (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- How to accept yourself* Dr. W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to help someone who is suicidal* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to recognise the early signs of mental distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Hurting and healing: how to overcome the trauma of sexual abuse and rape* G. Wade (Vega 2001) £7.99
- Managing anger: dealing positively with hurt and frustration* G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000) £7.99
- The Mind guide to advocacy* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- National Self-harm Network information pack* (National Self-harm Network 1998) £3.50
- Overcoming childhood trauma: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* H. Kennerley (Robinson 2000) £7.99
- Overcoming low self-esteem: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Understanding borderline personality disorder* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1
- Women and self-harm* G. Smith *et al* (The Women's Press 1998) £7.99
- The world is full of laughter* D. Sen (Chipmunka Publishing 2003) £10

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Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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Mind (National Association for Mental Health)

15-19 Broadway

London E15 4BQ

tel: 020 8519 2122

fax: 020 8522 1725

web: www.mind.org.uk



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