



FirstSigns Self-Injury Factsheet for Teachers and Lecturers

What is Self-Injury?

Self-injury is any deliberate, non-suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical injury to a person's own body. Self-injury is essentially a coping mechanism that enables a person to deal with intense emotional distress, creating a calming sensation. It may also be used to 'awaken' a person who is feeling numb or dissociated.

The injuries can validate a person's feelings, creating a 'real' pain that is easier to cope with than the hidden emotional pain.

Self-injury has an immediate effect, creating instant relief, but it is only temporary; the underlying emotional issues still remain. In time, self-injury can become a person's automatic response to the ordinary strains of everyday life, and both frequency and severity of self-injury may increase.

At FirstSigns we recognise that self-injury is a coping mechanism, and we never judge a person or tell them stop. Instead, we encourage them to make positive changes in their lives and in their behaviour, and enable them to find healthier coping mechanisms in order that they may choose to move away from self-injury.

Types of Self-Injury

The most common forms of self-injury are scratching, cutting, burning and non-suicidal overdosing (chronic self-medication). Many people find unique ways to hurt themselves.

Who Self-Injures

Self-injury affects people from all walks of life, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or personal strength. Self-injury is not particularly related to music, emo or gothic cultures, or such stereotypes.

Warning Signs

Self-injury is very often a secretive behaviour and there may be no warning signs, but some of the things below might indicate that a pupil is suffering internally which may lead to self-injury:

- negativity and lack of self-esteem;
- appearing unhappy or depressed
- out of character behaviour;
- a history of bullying or problems at home;
- a sudden change in friends or withdrawal from a group.

Indications of Self-Injury

- Obvious cuts, scratches or burns that do not appear of an accidental nature;
- frequent 'accidents' that cause physical injury;
- regularly bandaged arms and / or wrists;
- reluctance to take part in physical exercise or other activities that require a change of clothes;
- wearing long sleeves and trousers even during hot weather.

How to manage

Your initial reaction is important, and will have a great impact on your pupil. It is important that you don't react negatively.

Hopefully your school will already have a self-injury policy in place, but if not then guidance on how to create one can be downloaded from FirstSigns at www.FirstSigns.org.uk/publications/

If you do not have a self-injury policy then the following points should be noted:

- make it known to pupils that you are available to listen;
- remain calm and non-judgemental at all times;
- avoid dismissing a pupil's reasons for distress as invalid;
- encourage pupils to be open with you and assure them they can get the help they need if they are willing to talk;
- endeavour to enable pupils to feel in control by asking what they would like to happen and what help they feel they need etc;



- do not make promises you can't keep regarding such things as confidentiality;
- encourage all pupils to seek health and happiness in their lives every day;
- discuss and promote healthy coping mechanisms and suggest ways in which pupils can be empowered to make positive changes in their lives;
- provide access to information and resources regarding self-injury and emotional wellbeing;
- provide and encourage access to external help and support;
- monitor the reactions of other pupils who know about the self-injury.
- avoid asking a pupil to show you their scars or describe their self-injury;
- avoid asking a pupil to stop self-injuring - you may be removing the only coping mechanism they have;
- review all duty of care documents and be aware of communication processes;
- while self-injury in some pupils may appear to be attention-seeking, it is more likely attention-needing and the pupil may just need to be heard.
- take care of your own emotional wellbeing and obtain any extra support you need in dealing with a self-injuring pupil.

Self-Injury and Suicide

Although self-injury is non-suicidal behaviour and relied on as an attempt to cope and manage, it must be recognised that the emotional distress that leads to self-injury can also lead to suicidal thoughts and actions.

It is therefore of utmost importance that all incidents of self-injury are taken seriously and that the underlying issues and emotional distress are thoroughly investigated and necessary emotional support given, in order to minimise any greater risk. Any mention of suicidal intent should always be taken seriously and acted upon as a matter of urgency.