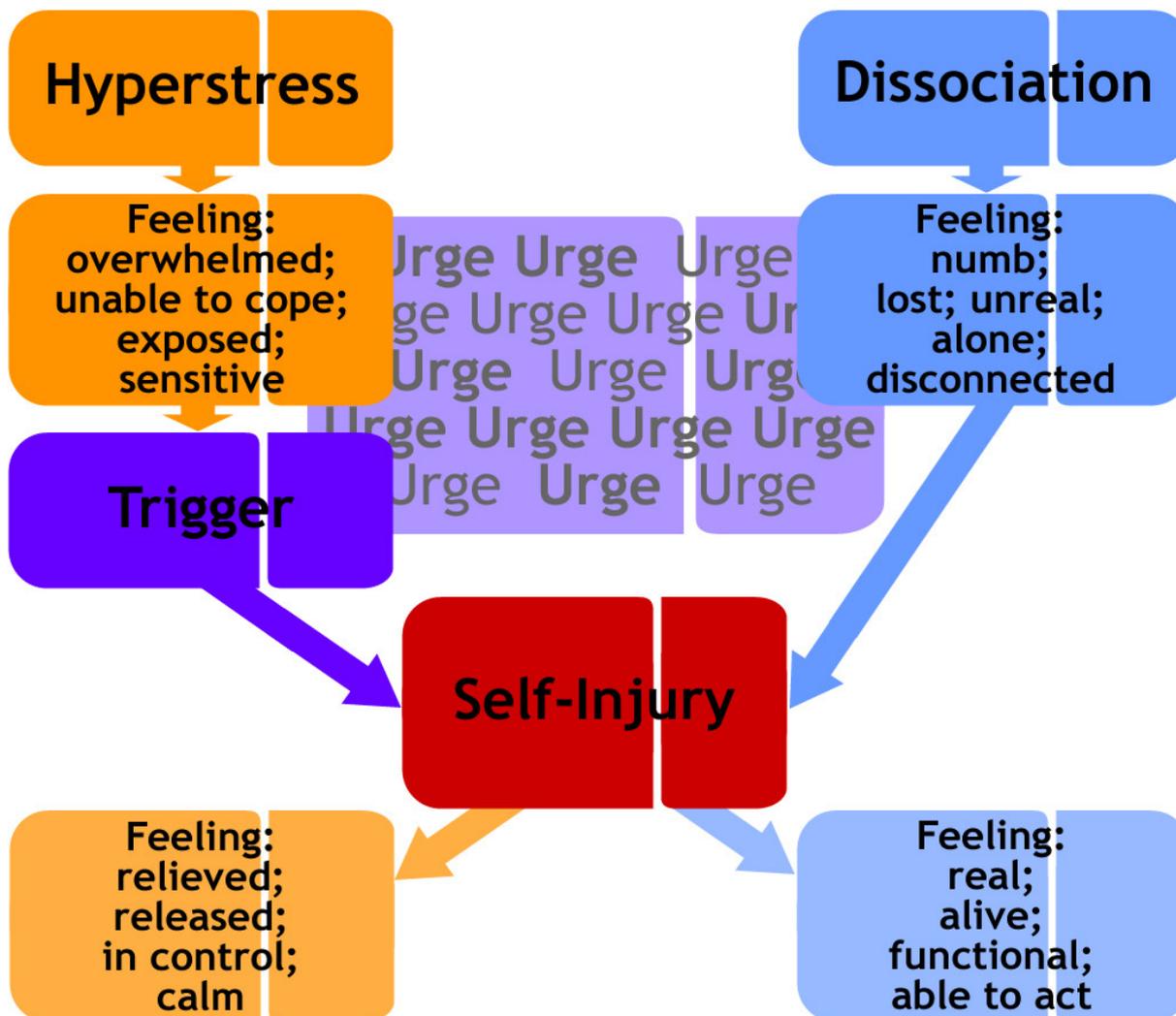


Precursors to Self Injury

This working theory attempts to describe the feelings and processes a person may go through before resorting to self-injury / self-harm.



Explanation and Discussion

FirstSigns considers self-injury to be a learned behaviour in response to overwhelming feelings and distress; FirstSigns does not consider self-injury to be a physical addiction. Hyperstress is thought to affect more people than dissociation in regard to self-injury.

Hyperstress: (Left side of the flowchart)

A person may be hyper-sensitive and overwhelmed; a great many thoughts may be revolving within their mind, becoming confused and entangled. They may be upset and tearful, or angry and destructive; they may well experience physical symptoms such as nausea or a racing heart, akin to panic†. They may either become **triggered** or could make a **decision** to stop the overwhelming feelings by resorting to self-injuring.

A trigger is an event that upsets and disturbs a person; it could be an internal event within the mind, or an external event that affects the person. Triggers can make a person feel a great deal worse and there is a feeling of panic and a need to directly, and immediately, end the distress.

Self-injury can have an immediate calming effect‡, slowing the mind down, calming the breathing and heart rate and enabling the person to cope, regain control and get on with things.

Dissociation: (Right side of the flowchart)

A person may be detached from life, detached from their emotions, from their body; numb and unfeeling. They may feel separate from 'reality', and may behave without conscious awareness.

People suffering trauma or abuse may learn to dissociate themselves from what is happening. They may find that dissociation becomes an automatic response to stressful situations.

It's possible that turning to self-injury when in a dissociated frame of mind does not require a trigger. They may recognise the need to regain control, or have a desire to feel real again, and they act so as to create sensation and 'wake up'.

Self-injury is a coping mechanism. An individual harms their physical self to deal with emotional pain, or to break feelings of numbness by arousing sensation.

FirstSigns short definition of self-injury - www.FirstSigns.org.uk

† Psychobiologists may wish to consider Adrenaline, Dopamine and Serotonin.

‡ Psychobiologists may wish to consider Noradrenaline, Dopamine, Serotonin and Endorphins.

About FirstSigns

FirstSigns (Self-Injury Guidance & Network Support) is an online, user-led voluntary organisation, which raises awareness about self-injury and provides information and support to people of all ages.

We recognise self-injury is a way of coping with distressing experiences and difficult emotions, and we encourage people to reflect on the issues behind their self-injury, and to develop alternative coping mechanisms.

FirstSigns is managed and led by people with personal experience of self-injury, and we are non-judgemental, non-directional, and respectful of our members' and visitors' life experiences and perceptions. The FirstSigns website is the centre of our vibrant community, and provides access to all of our services, including our newsletter, message board and training - www.FirstSigns.org.uk

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