



One minute guide

Self-harm and self-injury

No.85, July 2015

What are self-harm and self-injury?

Self-harm and self-injury are ways that some young people respond to difficult and distressing feelings. They can take a variety of forms including young people putting themselves in risky situations; injuring themselves (e.g. cutting, burning or taking an overdose of tablets); or excessive use of drugs or alcohol.

Young people may experiment in risk taking behaviours such as using drugs and alcohol and they may not see this as self-harm or self-injury. Such behaviour is not always a sign of difficult and distressing feelings. So it is important to recognise when behaviour is motivated by the negative thoughts and feelings of the young person.

Self-harm is not usually about ending their life, however sometimes young people feel unsure whether they want to die or not. Some young people do have suicidal thoughts and feelings and sometimes they harm themselves in ways that are very dangerous, and it is possible that they could accidentally kill themselves.

Self-harm may be on-going and some young people feel they manage this well with behaviour which is less physically dangerous. One example of this is superficial cutting. This may not require an immediate response but it is still likely to be a sign of emotional distress and the young person still needs support. As a practitioner you may wish to get advice and support to help you work with the young person to access suitable services.

Why do young people self-harm?

There are many different reasons why young people self-harm. Some young people describe self-harm as a way of:

- Having a break from difficult things in life;
- Controlling one aspect of their lives;
- Getting rid of big emotions that feel overwhelming;
- Punishing themselves – they may feel so bad about themselves and their current life; and
- Communicating to other people how much emotional pain they feel – perhaps because they cannot find the words to describe all their thoughts and feelings.

What should practitioners do?

Often young people find talking about self-harming can feel harder than talking about other risk taking behaviours such as unsafe sex or alcohol use. Practitioners need to:

- Listen and explain the limits to confidentiality;
- Reassure the young person it is ok to talk about it; and
- Stay calm and don't judge the young person for their actions.

Ask them: What is happening for you? Is this affecting you? What help do you need? What would you like to happen next?

Responding to self-injury

If someone has seriously injured themselves or taken an overdose it is important that they get immediate medical treatment from the Emergency Department (or A&E). In Leeds this is at Leeds General Infirmary if the young person is under 16 and either LGI or St James if they are 16 or over. In an emergency call an ambulance by ringing 999.

The young person's GP can offer confidential and regular support for a wide range of health problems including psychological distress and the physical consequences of self-harm. Quick access to advice and, if necessary, an appointment should usually be available for urgent matters.

Overdosing is always dangerous and someone might have taken the same tablets before and thought they were unharmed. There can be unseen damage inside the body, so it is always important to treat this seriously - even if the young person feels ok. The staff at A&E will be able to talk to the young person about what they have taken and provide any treatment needed to avoid long term damage.

Cutting can be very dangerous, especially if the young person cuts deeply or cuts certain parts of the body such as the forearm or thighs. If the bleeding cannot be stopped or it is deep enough to need stitches then practitioners must support the young person to go to A&E. For changing dressings or an infection it may be more suitable to see the young person's GP.

Want to know more?

More information on self-harm and a range of emotional issues is available on www.MindMate.org.uk . Other useful contacts are included below:

One to one support and counselling at The Market Place, tel: 0113 246 1659 or admin@themarketplaceleeds.org.uk

The Market Place also provides an additional service for care leavers ([guide](#))

Cluster ([guide](#)) Based Mental Health Support (also known as TaMHS) can help by providing consultation for practitioners and face to face support for the young person. This can be accessed through the young person's school

School Nurses can help support practitioners to work with the young person. They can be accessed through the young person's school

If the young person is using alcohol or drugs you can contact Platform Young People's Drug & Alcohol Service on tel: 0113 263 7035

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service ([CAMHS](#)) provide assessment and therapy to children and young people up to the age of 18 who have emotional or behavioural problems or other mental health difficulties. Discuss with the young person's GP

The Education psychology team ([guide](#)) can support practitioners to work out how to respond to self-harm. They can be contacted on tel: 0113 395 1039

For looked after children ([guide](#)) and care leavers ([guide](#)) the Therapeutic Social Work Team can be contacted about therapeutic support on tel: 0113 3781800

Leeds Survivor Led Crisis Service provides emotional support to people in crisis aged 16+. The team can be contacted on tel: 0113 260 9328