

Self-harm: what is it?

Self-harm involves deliberately physically harming oneself. Often this is done in secret without others knowing and can include cutting, biting, burning, hitting, scratching or picking skin or other parts of the body.

WHY DO PEOPLE SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is often used to try and control difficult and overwhelming feelings or to gain some kind of relief from emotional pain. It may also be used to express anger, to feel 'something' (if you're feeling numb) or to communicate a need for help.

People who self-harm may have been experiencing a range of problems:

- Difficulty getting along with family members or friends
- Feeling isolated or bullied by someone
- Relationship breakup
- Current or past physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect
- Loss of someone close such as a parent, sibling or friend
- Serious or ongoing illness or physical pain

DOES SELF-HARM HELP?

Self-harm only provides short-term relief from feeling angry, distressed, numb or overwhelmed. Although the intention may not be to really hurt yourself, it can lead to permanent scarring or damage to your body.

GETTING HELP

It may seem difficult but it is important to talk to someone about your self-harm. It can help to identify what causes you to physically hurt yourself and find other, more positive, ways to manage the pain you feel inside. It can take time to sort things out. If you do self-harm and the injury won't heal or looks serious, go to the emergency department of the hospital or see your doctor. You may feel guilty or embarrassed but, if not treated, the injury may cause permanent damage or problems.

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WHO CAN I TALK TO?

Choose someone you feel comfortable with and someone you can trust. This may be a family member, friend, a teacher or nurse, a psychologist or your local doctor. You may also need to see a mental health clinician such as a psychologist to talk through the reasons for your self-harm and find alternative ways of managing these difficult feelings. If talking to someone seems too overwhelming, write down what you want to say first and then approach someone. If you get a negative response, don't give up. Keep trying until you find someone who will listen.

OTHER WAYS OF DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL PAIN

If you feel like you want to harm yourself here are a few things you can try instead:

- Exercise – go for a brisk walk or fast run to use up energy
- Distract yourself – sing loudly, dance, play music or video games, cook something you like or eat something spicy
- Relax – practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing
- Try an alternative – squeeze an ice cube, have a very cold shower, or punch or scream into a pillow
- Talk to someone about how you are feeling – finding words for feelings (rather than actions) can be difficult but may help you feel less overwhelmed
- Write a journal to keep track of your thoughts (have a look at au.reachout.com)

Although the above tips are not solutions to the problem, they may help in the short-term. Again, it is important to identify the reasons for your self-harm and find alternative ways to cope and live the life you want to live. This can take time. Don't give up!

The Project Air Strategy acknowledges the major support of NSW Health. The Project works with mental health clinicians, consumers and carers to deliver effective treatments, implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries, and offers high quality training and education. Contact us at info-projectair@uow.edu.au or visit www.projectairstrategy.org