

## Self-harm

What is going on when people self-harm?



# Self-harm

### Your University at your side

#### Mental Health and Wellbeing at the University of Wolverhampton:

- provide free and confidential individual counselling
- offer non-judgemental support and understanding
- are professionally trained
- are experienced in dealing with a wide range of problems

#### Counselling can:

- help you to develop your strengths
- offer you the chance to focus on and understand your difficulties
- enable you to make positive decisions and changes
- help you to develop the skills and resources to cope
- help prevent small problems from becoming bigger

#### Get in touch

You can make an appointment to see a counsellor by filling out the Contact Us form at [www.wlv.ac.uk/SSW](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/SSW), alternatively, you can come along to one of our drop-in services. For more information go to the web address above and click on the Mental Health and Wellbeing option. From here you will find a wealth of useful information and self-help tools as well as our Drop-ins and Group activities.

## What is self-harm?

Self-harm, also known as self-injury can take a variety of forms including cutting, bruising, burning, pulling out hair, biting and scratching. There are also other forms of self-harm such as alcohol, nicotine or drug mis-use, living dangerously, getting into fights etc..

It is not in itself a symptom of mental illness, nor is it an attempt at suicide. It is sometimes regarded as 'attention-seeking' but this is mistaken; self-harming behaviour often occurs in private and is kept hidden. Those who self-harm have genuine problems and require support rather than blame, including when ready a look at what is behind those external symptoms.

Although current information suggests that the majority of those who self-harm are women, there are significant numbers of men who self-harm. This issue is not confined to one gender or a particular social or cultural group.

## Why do people self-harm?

Self-harm is both a sign of distress and a means of coping with it. Those who self-harm often find that it serves one or more of a number of purposes:

- to distract attention from other issues which feel overwhelming
- to help release strong feelings such as anger, frustration, despair, powerlessness or feeling out of control
- to make psychological suffering more visible and therefore more 'real'
- to gain a sense of control over feelings or at least part of a difficult situation.

## If you self-harm

You may have conflicting feelings about your self-harming behaviour. You may feel it helps you to cope but at times you may experience guilt, shame or embarrassment about it. Perhaps you are afraid that others will judge you because of it.

You may wonder why you self-harm. Sometimes the reasons are not obvious at all. The feelings that self-harm expresses may be connected with current events in your life, unresolved issues from your past, or a mixture of both.

It can be difficult to work out what is leading to the self-harm because you may fear facing such issues; if they feel overwhelming it may seem easier to try to avoid

them. Perhaps you have tried to handle them or to reach out to others for help and it has not worked out as you had hoped.

Maybe you think you would like to stop yourself from self-harming but are not sure how to do this. Talking things through with a counsellor or someone else you trust, can help you understand why you self-harm. Once you realise the need it is fulfilling in your life, it is possible to consider finding other more satisfactory ways of having this need met.

Professional counselling can help you identify your needs, find ways of meeting them, and support you whilst you make changes at your own pace.

## Other ways to express feelings

If you do not feel ready to confide, or if you want to reduce your self-harm on your own, you may want to try some alternative ways of expressing your feelings. These may include;

- keeping a journal (note when you feel tempted to self-harm and what is currently going on in your life; you may notice a pattern emerging)
- painting or something similar
- using marker pens rather than cutting, etc.
- punching cushions
- delaying self-harming for a while
- consider practising some mindfulness exercises.

## Taking care

If you self-harm, it may be wise to have your own first aid kit and to learn the basics of first aid so that you can take care of any injuries. If you cut, implements need to be kept sterile. If you bleed heavily or think you may have an infected wound, seek help immediately

## If you know someone who self-harms

You may feel a whole range of emotions: panic, fear, bewilderment, anger, a wish to help. Try to be patient and remember that self-harm is not a means of attention seeking but a sign that someone has some difficulties.

If you are able to support someone who self-harms, you need to realise that it may take them some time to change. Even if you find their behaviour hard to understand, it is important to remember that simply caring about the other person can be very helpful.

Also, it is important to remember your own needs too, and to say something if the demands made upon you are too great.

If you are distressed by the self-harming behaviour of someone close to you, you may want to talk things through with a counsellor. This can help you to manage your feelings, get some support for yourself, and be realistic about the support you can offer.

## You might like to look at:

Recover your life website – visit: [www.recoveryourlife.com](http://www.recoveryourlife.com)

## People you might want to contact:

- Your doctor
- NHS 111 - tel: 111
- Samaritans – tel: 01902 426422 or tel: 08457 909090 or visit: [www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)
- Campaign Against Living Miserably helpline for men – tel: 0800 585858 or visit: [www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net)

## Other useful websites:

The Royal College of Psychiatrists  
[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/atozindex.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/atozindex.aspx)

Advice from Mind:

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/mental-health-a-z/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/mental-health-a-z/)

Useful leaflets:

[www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp/](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp/)

Health A-Z at:

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

Free meditation exercises:

<http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

