



## Working with young people who self-injure

Fiona Macaulay  
Self Injury Support

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## Discussion

Everybody self harms at some point in their lives

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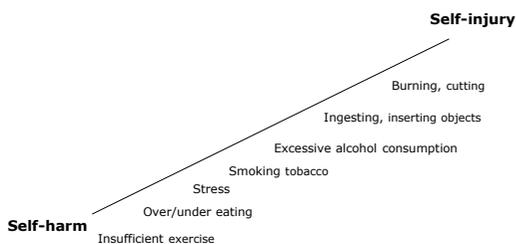
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## The Self-harm spectrum



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## Some definitions of self-injury

*'...an expression of personal distress usually made in private, by an individual who hurts him or herself. The nature and meaning of self-harm, however, vary greatly from person to person. In addition, the reason a person harms him or herself may be different on each occasion and should not be presumed to be the same.'*

Source: **Self-harm**: the short-term physical and psychological management and secondary prevention of **self-harm** in primary and secondary care . NICE clinical guideline 16 (2004)

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- *Self-harm is any act of self-poisoning or self-injury carried out by a person, irrespective of their motivation.*

*This commonly involves self-poisoning with medication or self-injury by cutting. Self-harm is not used to refer to harm arising from overeating, body piercing, body tattooing, excessive consumption of alcohol or recreational drugs, starvation arising from anorexia nervosa or accidental harm to oneself.*

Source: NICE Quality Standard June 2013

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- *A wide range of mental health problems are associated with self-harm, including borderline personality disorder, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and drug and alcohol-use disorders.*
- *People who self-harm have a 50- to 100-fold higher likelihood of dying by suicide in the 12-month period after an episode than people who do not self-harm.*

Source: NICE Quality Standard June 2013

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## Case study

A 15 year old girl comes to see you. You know from her records that her sister died in a car accident two years ago and her mother is in remission from cancer. She also has exams looming.

She tells you she has been self-harming and it has really helped her when things have been difficult but now she would like some help to stop. It is obvious that she is finding talking about this difficult.

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## Discussion

In groups of three discuss your similarities/differences in:

- Responses
- How you show understanding/ empathy
- Next steps/action taken
- Signposting

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## Reasons for self-injury – childhood experiences

Sexual abuse	Problems with race, culture or religion
Neglect	Sexuality
Emotional abuse	Being bullied
Extreme lack of communication/support	Stress and worry about school work and exams
Physical abuse	Unwanted pregnancy
Loss/separation (bereavement/divorce)	Low self-esteem
Parental illness/ alcoholism	Feelings of rejection socially or with families
Witnessing Family Violence	High expectations

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### Reasons for self-injury – feelings precipitating

Emotional pain (sadness, grief, hopelessness, desperation)
Self-hatred (shame, guilt, 'dirtiness' )
Anger (frustration, powerlessness)
Anxiety (fear, tension, panic)
Neediness (unsupported, unheard)
Unreality (numbness, deadness)

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### Reasons for self-injury – functions served

Relief of feelings (anger, distress, anxiety, tension, to avoid feelings)
Self-punishment
Control: (own body, thoughts, feelings, situation, others, method, intensity, length of time, what happens afterwards)
Communication: (when no words, in-act emotions/thoughts, to self, to others)
Comfort/nurture: (healing, attending to own needs)
Feel real or alive: (dissociative type experiences, emotional numbing)
Externalising the pain: (makes more sense)

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### Users experience of services

*'Attitudes are the single most important factor in determining whether services are seen as helpful/unhelpful'*

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### User views: helpful responses to self-injury

- Show that you see the person behind the self-injury
- Show concern for the injuries themselves
- Show your understanding about self-injury, and how people often use it to deal with some painful and difficult emotions
- Be mindful of language you use, don't call people who self-harm, 'self-harmers'
- It is unlikely that someone will stop self-harming unless they want to

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### User views: helpful responses to self-injury - long term

- Help the person make sense of their self-injury
- Encourage the person to use the urge to self-injure as a signal to themselves
- Support the person in taking steps to keep themselves safe and to reduce self-injury, but...
- **Don't see stopping self-injury as the only goal, other outcomes such as reduction in frequency, severity, understanding are big steps towards positive change**
- Let patients know that moving away from self-injury is often a zig zag recovery and even if not self-injuring urges to do so may continue for some time.

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### Strategies to manage emotions and reduce self-injury

List devised by people who use self injury

- Talking
- Writing
- Exercise
- Physical means of expression
- Relaxation
- Physical reassurance
- Self-nurture
- Be creative

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### Personal strategies for wellbeing

- Support from others
- Ways of thinking or self-talk
- Looking after our physical well-being
- Creative self-expression
- Self-nurturing activities
- Influencing our mood
- Relaxation strategies
- Spiritual practices
- Taking control of own life
- Building our self esteem

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### Contact Details

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