

# Self-Harm

## Identification:

Self-harm has become an increasing concern on university campuses and is defined as the deliberate harm of one's own body, without the intent of committing suicide. It may also be called self-abuse, self-inflicted violence, self-injury, self-mutilation, or self-injurious behavior. It can take a wide variety of forms including such things as hitting, cutting or burning oneself, hair-pulling, skin picking, or branding oneself to mention a few, and results in some form of injury or pain to one's body. Self-harm tends to be a secretive behavior, due to shame and concerns over being judged or criticized. This behavior typically begins in adolescence and peaks in the early to mid-twenties, with most people stopping by their thirties. Research indicates that both men and women self-harm at roughly equal rates, and approximately 1% of the population has used some form of self-injury in their lifetime.

People typically self-harm as a strategy to deal with overwhelming and intolerable emotions and in the short term, this behavior can serve this function (i.e. to relieve unbearable pain). Research indicates that people who self-harm have difficulties generally controlling or regulating their emotions. Coming from a family where feelings were denied, ignored or disputed can contribute to this pattern.

Although harming oneself can effectively serve to cope with emotional pain in the short term, it creates additional problems after the fact including physical trauma to the body, pain, guilt, shame, low self-esteem, feelings of being out of control, depression, and accidental death in some cases. Self-harm is considered an unhealthy coping strategy, similar to alcoholism, drug abuse, overeating, excessive gambling or smoking. Each causes potentially negative consequences on one's life in the long term. As well, self-harm usually becomes less effective over time as a coping strategy.

## Coping Strategies:

### 1. Make Sure You're Ready to Stop

Changing any type of unhealthy behavior depends a lot on your readiness for change. Self-harm is no exception to this rule. If you do not feel ready to stop hurting yourself, then wait until you are, or perhaps you are only ready to reduce the frequency of the behavior. Trying to stop prematurely will only lead to frustration and a sense of failure, which can tie negatively into the cycle of self-injury. Only you know when you are ready to quit. Your readiness may be higher because you are tired of the guilt and embarrassment, no longer want to consume the energy it takes to keep it a secret, or because it is no longer effective in helping you cope with your emotional pain. Don't let others push you into controlling your self-harm, since the true motivation you need to be successful will not be there. However, the first step is to acknowledge that self-injury is a problem for you and your life.

### 2. Understand What Purpose Your Self-Harm Serves

You would not intentionally harm yourself unless it served some purpose and it is important to identify the purpose it serves to better put an end to this behavior. Self-harm may serve a number of potential purposes including: to relieve emotional stress or pain, to produce a sense of euphoria (due to the release of endorphins), to communicate to others on a physical level your

emotional pain and suffering, to punish yourself because you may feel you deserve it, to attain a sense of control if you felt powerless during previous abuse from others, to allow yourself to feel something when you are feeling very numb, to give yourself a physical reason to care for yourself, or to stop or prevent yourself from dissociating (zoning out). Once you discover the purpose or purposes of your self-harm, you can then experiment with more healthy ways to achieve these same ends.

### 3. Identify Your Typical Pattern of Self-Harm

Research indicates that for people who harm themselves there is often a predictable cycle of behaviors, thoughts and emotions that make up a ritual, and by identifying and changing part of the cycle, one can reduce the likelihood of future self-harm. Before you try and make any changes to reduce or stop your self-injurious behaviors, spend some time trying to identify your typical pattern. Start by analyzing and writing down a description of each part of the ritual, including what you do before, during or after you hurt yourself. Include the location or locations the self-harm occurs, the time or times of the day it occurs, and any object or instruments used to hurt yourself (i.e., such as knives, razor blades or cigarettes). Also include a list of triggers that commonly precede your self-abuse.

### 4. Change Some Aspect of Your Self-Harm Ritual

Research suggests that if you change any part of the ritual, you will reduce the likelihood of the ritual continuing. This could include, changing the order of the ritual, or adding or taking away a step in the ritual to increase your level of awareness. It could also mean avoiding the location you usually harm yourself in, or making sure you are around people when you typically harm yourself. It is also often very effective to remove any objects or instruments you harm yourself with. Throw them away, or give them to a friend or family member. This simple change can often significantly reduce your chances of hurting yourself.

### 5. Develop Your Support System

Since the likelihood of self-harm is significantly greater when people are feeling isolated, alienated or alone, reducing these feelings is an important strategy to reduce self-harm. This means that participating in any activities that involve people in a healthy way, and which strengthen your support system, will be helpful. Deliberately being around people at times you are most prone to hurt yourself will also significantly reduce the odds of self-harm. Making a list of people you can contact when you are feeling vulnerable to hurt yourself and having it with you, at all times, can make it easier. Contact people you really trust and have informed regarding your self-harm or people who could distract you, but may not be privy to the issue.

### 6. Increase The Number of Positive Emotional Experiences You Have

When we are emotionally upset or distressed, we tend to stop engaging in a lot of positive emotional experiences. Unfortunately, this only heightens our level of distress and gets us trapped in a negative cycle, because without positive experiences we can become more depressed, angry, fearful or anxious. These feelings, in turn, increase one's risk of self-harm.

Instead, make a list of all of the activities you could engage in to make yourself feel happier and more content. This could include: going to a movie, taking in a concert, playing a sport, buying something you've really wanted, going to a club, having an unusual beverage, going camping,

playing a game, having lunch with a friend, or going to church. The list is endless, depending on what you enjoy. Now do it.

However, as you do the activity, it is essential that you also experience it mindfully, like you are experiencing it for the first time. Engage yourself fully in the activity and do not compare your feelings to how you think you should be feeling or how you have felt in the past. Pay attention only to your experience in the present moment.

## 7. Identify Your Thoughts Related to Self-Harm

The thoughts you have before, during, and after you hurt yourself are very influential in the cycle of self-harm. Some typical thoughts you might have before you hurt yourself include:

1. I hate who I am.
2. No one ever cares about me.
3. I'll never have any friends.
4. What's the point in even trying in life?
5. My body is so ugly.

Thoughts that you might have immediately before you hurt yourself and during the self-harm include:

1. I'll only feel better if I cut myself.
2. Just one more burn and I'll forget about the problems.
3. I need to do this to survive.
4. Anything to stop feeling crazy.
5. I have no other choice.

Thoughts following the abuse may include:

1. How could I do this again?
2. What's wrong with me? Everyone else seems to cope with life.
3. I feel so stupid for hurting myself again.
4. I can't let anyone know what I've just done.
5. I'll never get out of this habit.

Spend some time writing down your thoughts at each stage of the cycle.

## 8. Changing Your Thoughts Related to Self-Harm

Since your negative thoughts may be contributing significantly to your risk of harming yourself, changing these thoughts can significantly reduce your risk. The best way to change your thoughts is to look at the validity of the thoughts. Many of your thoughts likely have little or no evidence supporting them, even though in the moment you might feel they are true. After each negative thought, make a list of evidence for and against them (making a table can help). Through this process, you can challenge your thinking and then develop new more accurate thinking, which will lower your risk. Write out your new more accurate self-talk and review it, whenever you begin to spiral into a negative emotional state.

In this way, your negative thoughts can be transformed to be more accurate and often more positive. For example:

## Negative Thoughts

1. I hate who I am.
2. No one ever cares about me.
3. What's the point in even trying in life?
4. I'll only feel better if I cut myself.
5. I need to do this to survive.
6. I have no other choice.
7. What's wrong with me? Everyone else seems to cope with life.
8. I can't let anyone know what I've just done.

## Realistic/Positive Thoughts

1. I need to find those parts of myself I can love since no one's all bad.
2. Some people care and I just need to let them in.
3. If I make better choices, my life can turn around finally.
4. I always feel worse in the long term for cutting myself.
5. There are many strategies I can try to cope in a more healthy way.
6. There are hundreds of other choices. I just need to try them this time.
7. I've done the best I know to cope, but I can make better choices in the future.
8. It's okay to share my pain with someone I trust. I need the support.

## 9. Exercise Your Body

Since your mind and body are integrally connected, a great way to reduce your likelihood of self-harm is to exercise your body. Exercise causes the release of endorphins, our bodies' natural pain killer, and can reduce both physical and emotional pain. Exercise is much less destructive than self-harm and when used strategically, can be a great substitute. It is important that you find some activity that you enjoy, or have enjoyed in the past before you were depressed, or emotionally feeling out of control. Exercise doesn't just mean going to the gym, but includes a wide variety of activities including: dancing, cycling, walking, golfing, swimming, badminton, bowling, to mention a few.

## 10. Utilize Relaxation Techniques

Another way of managing overwhelming feelings is to learn relaxation techniques that can actively relax both your body and your mind. Applying relaxation techniques can make us feel in control again when we have overwhelming feelings. The most basic of these techniques is learning to do deep (diaphragmatic) breathing. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose, letting your abdomen expand first and then your chest. You can check for the movement of your abdomen or chest by placing one hand on each area and counting to 5 while inhaling. Then breathe out through your mouth, again counting to 5 can help. As your breathing becomes slower and deeper, you will feel a sense of deep relaxation as you practice the skill. You can also use a number of other relaxation techniques to produce the same effect. Work with a psychologist to learn progressive muscle relaxation, passive muscle relaxation, imagery training, autogenics, mindfulness and meditation techniques.

### 11. Be Mindful of Your Feelings

People typically harm themselves because their feelings become overwhelming, and they believe that self-harm is the only way to cope with them. However, there is an alternative which is to allow the feeling to be experienced, without judgment, and to observe it rather than avoid it, knowing that all feelings change and usually disappear over time. Learn to identify your feelings and accept them, rather than deny them. Denying your feelings increases the likelihood you will harm yourself. In general, treat feelings like your other senses (sight, taste, smell, touch, sound), as useful information or feedback regarding your experience. At the same time, realize that feelings don't have to be acted out, nor do they define your identity. You are not what you feel, and when you are highly emotional, your feelings may not be the most useful guide for your actions.

### 12. Learn to Express Your Feelings

One of the easiest ways to change your feelings is to express them in healthy ways. This could involve expressing your feelings verbally, in a way that still respects the rights of other people you may be interacting with. Assertive communication is a powerful way to express your feelings and in doing so, feel in more control in your relationships and your life. Writing out your feelings in a journal or in a letter are also healthy ways to express and better understand your own feelings. Expressing your feelings through some physical activity (i.e., walking, running, lifting weights, painting, drawing, singing, yoga, cleaning) may also serve to release the emotion. Just simply allowing yourself to cry is often a great way to express your feelings. It's your body's built in tool to release overwhelming emotion.

### 13. Express Your Anger in a Way That Doesn't Hurt Yourself or Others

When you absolutely need a physical expression of your anger or frustration, there are a number of healthier options than harming yourself or others. These include: punching a pillow, bed or punching bag; using a screwdriver to scratch or put holes in a piece of wood or plastic bottle; breaking the object you use to self-injure; massaging the area of your body you would usually hurt; scribbling on paper; using the implement you use to self-injure to inflict damage on an old shirt, towel or piece of paper; drawing a picture of whoever or whatever is making you angry and tear it up; going somewhere alone where you can scream or yell; tearing up an old newspaper or phone book; throwing ice against a brick wall or on a driveway; flattening aluminum cans; or making Play-Doh models and cutting or breaking them.

### 14. Change the Sensations in Your Body

Changing the sensations in your body can take a variety of forms including: putting your face or arm in a basin full of ice water/warm water, placing an ice cube on those areas of your body you would typically harm, taking either a hot or cold shower/bath, changing the room temperature significantly, biting into something which has a strong taste (i.e., lemon, lime, grapefruit, hot peppers, ginger root), sexual activity, listening to some loud music, exercising or playing a sport that you enjoy, rubbing liniment under your nose, putting a rubber band on your wrist and snapping it (but not too hard), or just noticing the feelings in your body as you breathe.

Each of these strategies can help because the urge to self-harm usually goes in waves and each of the above tools can get you through the intense peak where you are at high risk of self-harm. Each time you make this more healthy choice, you will feel in more control.

### 15. Write Out a Few Helpful Lists

Writing out and reviewing some of the following lists may prove helpful. These might include:

- a) All the reasons you no longer want to harm yourself.
- b) All the aspects of yourself you like, or have heard other people say they like about you.
- c) A record of all your life accomplishments.
- d) Affirmations – self-statements that are healthy and that you want to live by or believe.
- e) All the aspects of a healthy lifestyle that you want to live.
- f) The top 10 strategies that have been useful to reduce your self-harm.

### 16. Simulate Self-Harm

Rather than actually harming yourself, you can simulate your self-abuse by using a marker, red lip liner pen or food coloring to create the same marks on your body that you would see if you cut, burned or bruised yourself.

Remember, you are not helpless and have the power to make a new choice, rather than harm yourself. However, you have to really push yourself to make the healthier choice; it won't be easy.

### 17. Consider Professional Help

If after trying the above strategies, you have not experienced any change or a significant enough change in your self-harm behavior, consider professional assistance. This might consist of seeing a psychologist to get support and guidance in working through these strategies, or through some of the issues that may be feeding into the self-abuse (i.e., past sexual or physical abuse). Or it could mean talking to a physician, particularly if you are significantly depressed or anxious, to look at medications that may help treat these issues which will in turn reduce your risk of self-harm. Self-inflicted violence is a significant health issue, and therefore, it is not unusual to require some additional assistance to overcoming it.

### References

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