

Self Harm

Social Issues & Resources Committee



Introduction

In recent years more and more attention has been given to the issue of 'self harm'. Although it is discussed openly amongst youth workers, youth fellowships, parents and wider circles, not much is actually known about self harm. At the time of writing (2008) there has been limited published academic work widely available on the subject. However, there are avenues of help available to people who live with self harm and related difficulties. This leaflet aims to define what self harm is and suggest what can be done to help a person struggling with self harm.

Defining self harm

An article in the Daily Telegraph (24th May 2002) said: "Self harm is typically conducted in private - the tools, like scars, kept hidden from view. For this reason the scale of the problem is hard to assess. According to an American study however, one American student in eight inflicts deliberate harm on themselves."

In the United Kingdom, Department of Health surveys indicate that around 5–6% of people have self harmed at some time in their lives. There are no available survey findings for Northern Ireland. However there are hospital statistics that relate to self harm admissions. These statistics indicate that there are over 7,000 admissions per year. This is likely an underestimate of the real picture. The Department of Health says that such admissions have risen 9% since 2000. There are significantly higher rates of self harm in Northern Ireland compared to the Republic.¹ Self Harm admissions to Northern hospitals accounted for 1.5% of all admissions in the last five years.

The action of self harm

Not only is self harm hard to define in terms of frequency it is subject to speculation and myth. What do we mean then by self harm? In 2004 The Royal College of Psychiatrists observed: "Deliberate self harm is a term used when someone injures or harms themselves on purpose. Common examples include 'overdosing' (self poisoning), hitting, cutting, or burning oneself, pulling hair, or picking skin, or self strangulation. It can also include taking illegal drugs and excessive amounts of alcohol. Self Harm is always a sign of something being seriously wrong."²

1 Protect Life – A Shared Vision, NI Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan, www.dhsspsni.gov.uk executive summary

2 Royal College of Psychiatrists Self Harm factsheet 26, 2004.

Self harm and suicide

Self harm is not always about suicide. It is true that those who self harm are more at risk from attempting suicide, it is not true however that the majority of self harmers will go on to take their own lives.³ Somewhere between 27–30% of young people who have attempted suicide had also self harmed. One in six people who attend A&E with self harm repeat the act, one in 100 die by suicide during the following year.⁴

Self harm as coping

For some people self harm is about ‘coping’ through a rough period and they may only practise infliction of harm for a short period. Self harm is not just ‘attention seeking’. People self harm because they feel pain about something, or because they want to show something is wrong. It could be related to bullying, losing someone close, exam stress, loneliness or isolation. Some teenagers who feel home, school, relationships, body shape are out of control will indulge in self harm, seeing it as one action they can ‘control’ themselves. This is self harm as a form of empowerment. Some of the emotions involved in self harming are displayed in the following poem by an anonymous self-harmer:

“I feel guilty and full of shame
Yes, I have cut again.
As the blood flows my soul is clean,
And I can pretend it was a dream.
The pain I feel makes me good,
Makes me feel the way I should.
I feel clean and pure within,
I’ve washed away all my sin.
I know this sin will build again,
But for now, it takes away my shame.”

Who self harms?

It is not true to say self harm is exclusively practised by teenage girls - older women are known to self harm too. Statistics show that 28.1% of self harm cases in Northern Ireland were in the 35–44 year old age bracket. Although numbers of self harm admissions were highest in the L’Derry and Belfast areas, cases are fairly evenly spread throughout Northern Ireland, encompassing both rural and urban areas. According to some research, girls are seven times more

³ Department of Health, *ibid* p8, consultation document

⁴ *ibid* p77-78

likely to self harm than boys. The behaviour usually starts in adolescence but is also known amongst younger children. It is rarely manifest in older people.

Is it addictive?

It is habit forming according to the Mental health Foundation.⁵ Some people say that they can become physically addicted to self harm. It may cause chemicals to be released through the injury which can become pleasurable and makes the person less sensitive to pain. However self harm has to be understood for what it means to the person who does it. Often it is a way of coping or distracting that is habit forming. "In other words young people get used to it and come to rely on it."

What should I/We do in a self harm situation?

A report published by the University of Chicago gives some guidance on what to do and what not to do. (counseling.uchicago.edu/vpc/uchicago/self-injury.html) This guidance is affirmed by other self harm support groups:

- Don't take it personally. It's not about you.
- Understand your feelings. Be honest with yourself. It's natural to feel repulsed, frightened, angry, helpless, overwhelmed, etc.
- Take care of yourself. Set limits for yourself as well as for them. Earn their trust. Get help.
- Support the person without supporting the behaviour.
- Don't avoid the subject. In fact, bring it up. Do say: "I know that sometimes you hurt yourself, and I'd like to understand it. People do it for so many reasons. If you could help me understand why you do it, I'd be grateful." But don't push it.
- Be available.
- Set reasonable limits. Do say: "I can't handle talking to you while you're cutting yourself. I care about you greatly, and it hurts too much to see you doing that." Don't: "I can't deal with you if you keep cutting yourself!"
- Show them that they don't need to self-injure to get you to care about them.
- Distract them. Take the initiative. Don't say: "Is there anything I can do?" Do: "Can I take you to a movie?" Do think about spontaneous acts of kindness.

5 The Truth About Self Harm MHF / Camelot Foundation

- Offer physical safety. Do say: "I'm worried about you. Would you come over for a while?"
- Be hopeful. Acknowledge their pain. It doesn't make it go away, but can make it more bearable.
- Don't try to make them stop. Confiscating implements can just push them to be more creative. Punishment and guilt can feed the self-hatred that can lead to self-injury.

Don't push it.

Educate yourself.

The importance of communication

It is critical that lines of communication are open between parents, carers or friends of self harmers. The Mental Health Foundation say: "Most of the young people we spoke to say that the recovery process began with tackling the underlying problems that were causing self harm. This sometimes involved counselling, sharing problems, or tackling bullies. They also broke the habit by learning new coping strategies or pursuing distraction techniques when they felt the urge to hurt themselves. Most young people who have found help say that having someone to listen to them and help them work on solutions to their problems and stresses is the most helpful thing of all."⁶

A Christian perspective

There are some resources and web links available to help people dealing with self harm from a Christian perspective. A specific book dealing with the subject has been written by Dr Ed T Welch "Self Harm - When Pain Feels Good" (Resources for Christian Living). He offers nine action steps for the self harmer abbreviated here:

1. Do you want to change? What are the motivations behind self harm?
2. Allow other people in
3. Grow in honesty.
4. Feed yourself wit Scripture: Psalms, a Gospel, Ephesians.
5. Find good books that communicate God's grace. (Welch recommends the Cross Centered Life by CJ Mahaney)

6 ibid

6. Anticipate plans and situations that leave you vulnerable
7. Write out the meaning and purpose of your self injury, what are you saying?
8. When you blow it, don't give in to hopelessness.
9. Search the Psalms to give voice to your heart and pattern personal reflections after them.

Another very useful web resource is www.self-injury.org. This is an anonymously edited series of pages written by a former female self harmer from a Christian perspective. It gives a comprehensive list of Bible verses which relate to the subject. The author helpfully reviews other resources which have been published and writes personally about her own story.

Other sources of information on self harm can be found at www.selfharm.org.uk which is supported by the National Children's Bureau or www.nshn.co.uk - the web site of the National Self Harm Network in the UK. In the Republic of Ireland support can be accessed by contacting local Health providers or trained counselling groups such as the Samaritans. In the first instance, self harmers are encouraged to use their local A&E.

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