Self-Harm
A guide for Students
Self-Harm

What is meant by self-harm?

According to the Mental Health Foundation, nearly half a million people in the UK are affected by self-harm. It could be argued that we all harm ourselves at times, for instance by depriving ourselves of sleep, by eating or drinking unhealthily, etc. However, for some people self-harm is more than that: it is the active and deliberate infliction of pain to one’s body as a reaction to stress or emotionally difficult situations. This can be done in many ways, such as hitting, scratching, burning, cutting oneself, taking too many tablets, pulling out hair and many other ways of inflicting pain.

What makes people self-harm?

Self-harm is not about attention seeking, as is sometimes claimed. It is about coping with difficult feelings inside, often caused by distressing life events or traumas, such as physical or sexual abuse, rape, repeated emotional neglect, losses, etc. This is why sufferers say cutting helps them: often it is a release for a multitude of feelings, such as hopelessness, sadness, fear, anger, low self-esteem, to name but a few. It often occurs together with drug or alcohol abuse.

However, as much as cutting provides temporary relief, it also leaves the sufferer feeling bad about him or herself, often giving rise to intense feelings of shame. It is not surprising then, that it is generally a private and secret activity. Friends and family, on discovering signs of self-harm, often react with equally strong emotions of shock, horror, distress, anger, etc which can make asking for help even more difficult. Self-harm is often used to cope with a crisis in a close relationship.

Rather than judging yourself or the person affected, it is more helpful to try and understand its purpose as a coping mechanism.
Sufferers give different reasons for cutting themselves:

- It relieves tension
- It is a way of expressing disturbing emotions
- It allows the sufferer to ‘punish’ themselves as an expression of self-hatred, extreme low self-esteem or guilt
- It can provide a sense of feeling alive rather than feeling numb
- It can give a sense of control
- Tending to the wound allows a degree of self-care and can express a wish for healing.

**The importance of getting help**

Self-harm can become a ‘quick fix’ for feeling bad, however it does not change the underlying issues nor change the situation, but can create a vicious circle of feeling bad about oneself – and self-harming again.

Some people may grow out of this behaviour, but in general, people who self-harm need help, for it is almost always a sign of a deep underlying disturbance. This needs addressing in order to avoid an escalation of the problem, which can be life threatening.

Seeking help can be a frightening thought for sufferers, because they fear losing the very coping mechanism which they feel helps them to survive. It is therefore common for people affected by self-harm to make more than one attempt at getting help. According to the Samaritans, 40% of young people try to speak to family members first before they seek help from outside.
How to cope with self-harm

The first important step is to admit it. Once you have realised and admitted that you have a problem, you can try and talk to someone you trust and perhaps get their support in trying to find help for yourself.

- Perhaps you might prefer to contact a telephone help line first, check websites or get some self-help literature.
- You can see your GP who might suggest medication or psychological help, or both.
- You can make an appointment with the Student Counselling Service, where you can find the time and a space to explore your difficulties, because the counsellor is not there to force you to stop, but rather to help you make sense of what is happening. Don’t worry if it takes several attempts: change is not always easy!
- In the meantime, try to limit the damage by making sure you use clean implements and that you have wound treatment ready for use.
- Try distracting strategies, like seeing friends, ringing or text messaging someone, take a walk, run, keep busy.
- Avoid having any sharp objects close at hand and where possible, reduce the amount of drugs and/or alcohol you might be using, because you might end up hurting yourself more than you really intended.

How to help someone who self-harms

If you suspect self-harm, it is important to recognise it as a sign of distress. Do convey your concern to the other person, but in such a way that they retain their dignity and you don’t add to their often strong sense of shame and embarrassment.

Also consider the following points:

Stay calm, even if you feel distressed yourself, particularly if you are actually confronted with the result of self-harm, such as wounds or scars.

- Stress the importance of getting help.
- In severe cases, share your concern with others, for instance, hall wardens, or consult the Student Psychological and Healthy Living Service to help you deal with the situation.
- In a crisis situation, respond quickly by getting medical help.
Useful contacts and information

Victoria Park Health Centre
203 Victoria Park Road, Leicester
T: 0116 2151105
www.victoriaparkhealthcentre.co.uk

Student Counselling Service
T: 0116 223 1780
E: counselling@le.ac.uk
www.le.ac.uk/counselling

Student Support (Mental Wellbeing)
Hilary Craig and Becky Talbott, Mental Wellbeing Advisers
T: 0116 252 2283/0116 2297751
E: mentalhealth@le.ac.uk
www.le.ac.uk/ssds/mentalwellbeing

Nightline—8pm to 8am in term time
0116 223 1230

Samaritans
08457 909 090
www.samaritans.org

You may find the following websites useful:

www.student.counselling.co.uk - look under ‘Guide to Problems and Solutions’, then click on the appropriate topic.

www.brightplace.org.uk/sh.html
www.lifesigns.org.uk
Where to find the Counselling and Wellbeing

Our entrance is at the rear of the building located directly on the junction of University Road and Welford Road. We have a ramp and there is a large sign on the wall. The building is accessible to wheelchair users.

Contact Details

Counselling and Wellbeing
University of Leicester
161 Welford Road
Leicester
LE2 6BF

T: 0116 223 1780
F: 0116 223 1269

www.le.ac.uk/counselling

© Counselling and Wellbeing, University of Leicester 2013