

ATTENTION SEEKERS?

Bespoke self-harm awareness training

What is self-harm? “Self-harm refers to an intentional act of self-poisoning or self-injury... and is an expression of emotional distress.” **NICE guidance**

Self-harm describes both self-injury and self-poisoning. It is not the same as suicide. Self-injury including cutting, burning, scratching, pinching, inserting objects, swallowing objects. Self-poisoning using medications or non-ingestants such as bleach.

Why do people self-harm? The vast majority of individual’s self-harm as a response to underlying distress e.g. pressure, bullying, body image. The reasons are endless; it could be one trigger or a number of reasons, but it is not a unique set of experiences that lead to it.

What are the functions of self-harm for the individual?

- **As a coping mechanism** – to manage the distress.
- **Control** – it’s the only thing they feel they have control of in their life in that moment.
- **Relief of feelings** – anything, including pain feels better than how they are feeling at that point in time.
- **A Release** – a way of release pain / distress/ frustration / anger etc.
- **A Distraction** – from the distress they are going through.
- **To feel / be numb**
- **Self punishment/Prevention of pain to another** – they feel they deserve to hurt / it’s better to hurt themselves than someone else (physically or emotionally)
- **Communication of emotional pain** – in the first instance to themselves and for some it may be to let others know they are struggling.
***Think of your ‘bad day’ and why you do what you do.**

Language use:

- ‘It’s just attention seeking’ – someone is seeking attention/support, this should be provided not dismissed.
- ‘It’s just a cry for help’ – why does the individual feel that they have to hurt themselves to get support? Let’s respond and not ignore.
- ‘It’s just a phase/trend/copycat’ – never assume that the behavior is ‘just’ any of these. Always investigate as if we don’t, distress can be missed.
- ‘It’s just superficial / not as bad as last time’ – the person may feel they need to do it worse as they are being dismissed.
- ‘When was the last time you self-harmed?’ – the focus is on the behaviour and not the underlying distress. Instead you may ask ‘when was the last time you had the urge to self-harm, whether you did or didn’t’. This then allows the young person to discuss periods where they have overcome urges, instead of solely focusing upon doing it or not.
- ‘Self-harmer’ – self-harm is not the person’s identity, it is a behaviour

How to respond to self-harm – best practice advice:

Don’t:

- Ask ‘why’ – this is a really loaded question. Instead ask about what has been going on recently and/or what was happening on the day of the incident.
- Try and ‘self-harm proof’ the environment – object removal may be necessary, but is not the long term solution. Risk cannot be eliminated, only reduced.
- Ask them to ‘promise not to harm’ – this can lead to them moving the location of self-harm or changing their behaviour.



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- Check their body, or ask them to 'prove' they haven't harmed.
- Feel the focus should be on stopping.
- Be scared to talk about the subject.
- Don't dismiss the severity of distress based upon the level of self-harm.

Do:

- Provide appropriate first aid if required – any form of overdosing or insertion/swallowing of objects require immediate medical attention. Providing first aid is not encouraging further self-harm.
- Ask them what they would like to happen.
- Appreciate and acknowledge what a big step the person has taken in order to disclose.
- LISTEN! Recovery for someone who self-harms is open linked to them building resilience and understanding what led to their self-harm. Being able to speak openly can really help them get thoughts out that otherwise they couldn't due to fear of repercussions etc.
- Appreciate their fears e.g. consequences in disclosure, fear of disappointing you etc.
- Tell them about other ways to manage distress e.g. art, music, sport, talking, TV, video games. Plan for bad days, we all have them!
- Suggest specific distraction techniques can be beneficial e.g. elastic bands, ice cubes or the CalmHarm App (see below). Even if they do an alternative once, it's one less time they have harmed themselves.

Useful Websites

- **Healthtalk.org / Youthhealthtalk.org** – A new website developed in conjunction with Oxford University. If you search for 'self-harm' it shall lead you to pages giving parents experience of self-harm.
- **HeadTalks** – take a look and see a familiar face talking about self-harm!
- **Bigwhitewall.com** – an award winning early intervention service for people 16+ in psychological distress.
- **CALM HARM App** – created by STEM4, this award-winning app is free to download and is designed to be used by young people who are self-harming. The APP is designed to reduce the level of self-harm and even prevent an episode of self-harm by providing delay tactics when the young person has the urge.
- **FOR ME App** – an app designed by ChildLine to support young people up to the age of 19. The app covers many issues including self-harm, anxiety, bullying and body image issues.
- **YoungMinds.org.uk** – mental health awareness for young people but with sections for parents too. YoungMinds also run a free parent helpline providing general advice around mental health worries in a young person - 0808 802 5544.

As a parent, we want to 'fix' the situation. Making a child attend counselling isn't conducive as they are going for the wrong reasons. It's about encouraging the child to engage with support, when they are ready.

There is no reason that if a child is self-harming now, that is going to be their future. Do not lose hope.

Remember – self-harm is a symptom of underlying distress.

Don't see it as the 'problem'.

I would be extremely grateful if you could provide any feedback to satveer@attention-seekers.com your feedback can help me get sessions in other schools alongside improving future sessions. Satveer Nijjar



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