

Self Harm and Young People

Self-harming behaviours are a complex and challenging problem. Typically commencing in adolescence, such behaviours are indicative of significant psychological distress.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm refers to behaviours in which a person deliberately hurts or mutilates their own body, but which are not directly intended to result in death (although death may still occur). Any action, which is deliberately intended to cause death, is best regarded as a suicide attempt. People who self-harm are also at greater risk of attempting suicide.

What to look for

There are many different types of behaviours that can be considered self-harming. These include:

- Self-cutting – eg cutting of upper arms/wrists
- Overdoses – ingesting excessive amounts of prescribed or illicit drugs
- Self-burning – eg using cigarettes or lighters to burn the skin

There are other behaviours that are not formally considered to be self-harming behaviours but are risk taking behaviours that can and often will lead to personal harm. A behaviour can be considered “at risk” if it places the person or others in danger. Such actions include: train surfing, driving cars at high speed, illicit drug use, or repetitive unsafe sexual practices in spite of knowledge and availability of safe sex practices.

What causes self-harm?

Many people who repeatedly self-harm suffer from depression or a personality disorder (in particular borderline personality disorder).

A significant number of people who self-harm have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse, or invalidating family environments. Such young people may experience a range of intense negative emotions (rage, despair, panic) which they find hard to deal with.

In most instances self-harm behaviours are an attempt to contain or control these distressing feelings. For example, young people may self-harm in order to gain control over the anger they feel towards others who may have rejected or abused them. Directing this anger towards their body and finding a sense of release gives

some young people a sense of control over the pain that they feel, or enables them to express it in some way.

What can be done?

Many young people who self-harm have difficulty forming stable, trusting relationships with others and are therefore difficult to engage in treatment. Encouraging a young person who is self-harming to seek assistance is often a difficult process. Even when they agree to see a counsellor it may take some time for any substantial change to occur.

If a young person is at imminent risk of self-harm workers should seek advice from the local Adult Mental Health Service, or the Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CATT).

Initial treatment involves dealing with any immediate medical complications of self-harm, if present. Specific treatment involves encouraging the young person into an on-going therapeutic process which aims to address any underlying mental disorder and help the person to cope with their distress in more adaptive ways. A here and now, problem solving approach can be helpful in achieving this.

Advice and Referral

If you are working with a young person who is repeatedly self-harming and you are not sure what to do, it is always best to contact someone with experience in this field and discuss the situation with them. Treatment of such problems can be quite complex and cause considerable distress for workers. Treatment should therefore be carried out by workers with training and experience in dealing with mental health problems and access to supervision. Referral to a trained counsellor or specialist mental health worker is advisable.

If a client refuses referral it is important that workers explain the boundaries of their relationship with their client and the limits of confidentiality. Should clients continue to be at risk and require more than the worker feels capable of providing, referral should be considered, with or without the client’s consent.

Services at ORYGEN Youth Health

ORYGEN Youth Health is able to assist some young people (15-24) who self-harm, and who live in the Western and Northwestern Melbourne. Young people

with significant previous treatment may require the services of the Adult Mental Health Service.

To make a referral or get some advice contact the ORYGEN Triage worker on 1800 888 320 or via the paging service on 03 9483 4556.

For children and teenagers under 15 years of age contact RCH Mental Health Service on 1800 445 511.

For further information regarding mental health and information in other languages visit:

→ www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

→ www.sane.org.au

→ www.healthinsite.gov.au



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