

# nshn

The National Self Harm Network



# What is self harm?

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## Definitions

*“Intentional self poisoning or injury, irrespective of the apparent purpose of the act”* NICE 2004

Self harm (also known as self injury or self mutilation) is the act of deliberately causing harm to oneself either by causing a physical injury, by putting oneself in dangerous situations and/or self neglect.

Forms of self harm:

- Cutting, burning, biting
- Head banging and hitting
- Picking and scratching
- Pulling out hair
- Over dosing and self-poisoning
- Substance abuse
- Taking personal risks
- Neglecting oneself
- Eating disorders

## Who self harms?

There is no 'typical' person who self harms. It can be anyone. An individual who self harms can not and should not be stereotyped; they can be of all ages, any sex, sexuality or ethnicity and of different employment status etc.

*“The UK has one of the highest rates of self harm in Europe at 400 per 100'000 population”*

Horrocks, J. Self Poisoning and Self Injury In Adults, In Clinical Medicine, 2 (6), 509-512 (2002) Cited in Samaritans Information sheet, Self Harm and Suicide March 2005.

## Why?

Each individuals relationship with self harm is different. There can be many reasons behind self harm such as childhood abuse, sexual assault, bullying, stress, low self esteem, family breakdown, dysfunctional relationships, mental ill health and financial worries.

Self harm is primarily a coping strategy and can provide a release from emotional distress and enable an individual to regain feelings of control. Self harm can be a form of self punishment for feelings of guilt. It can also be a way to physically express feelings and emotions when individuals struggle to communicate with others.

In the majority of cases self harm is a very private act and individuals can go to great lengths to hide scars and bruises and will often try to address physical injuries themselves rather than seek medical treatment.

Whilst some individuals who self harm may have suicidal feelings, those feelings are likely to originate from the experiences and traumas behind their self harm rather than being influenced by self harm itself. Self harm is rarely an attempt of suicide but where an individual may have suicidal thoughts self harm can provide an alternative way to cope with those thoughts and lessen their intensity.

### A release of tension, frustration and distress:

*“I think it's somewhat of a release when you do it, you know you've not really dealt with your feelings properly but you have dealt with them in a way that's possibly the only way you can see at the time”*

### To feel and regain control:

*“When things were happening to me that I had no control over I started hurting myself, this was something that I could control, I could do as much or as little damage as I wanted, it only involved myself and I could care for the wound after”*

### To punish:

*“I would say there is a definite punishment element involved in my self harm, a feeling that I have to take things out on myself, to drive the bad feelings away, punish myself for what I let happen to me, and to get the badness out”*

### To feel, to ground oneself:

*“When I feel numb or go to the place where I disconnect from reality I need to feel pain to bring me back to the here and now, nothing else will ground me. The pain makes me realise that I am really here”*

### A way to express:

*“It's a way of expressing negative feelings about myself that build up inside me. As someone who finds it difficult to put things into words, it can at times be the only way of expressing how I am feeling”*