



 **DUT**
DURBAN
UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY

Department of
student
counselling
and health

understanding

self-harm

What is Self-Harm?

Many people hurt themselves in some way, either by drinking, smoking, or even maybe just working too much. But for some people this self harm can be quite severe.

Self harm is where someone hurts their body without wanting to kill themselves. Although many people who self harm may have thoughts about suicide, most feel they just need to get rid of the negative feelings by self harming.

Some people may harm themselves many times a day, in a ritualistic manner, this often becomes addictive. While, others may only harm themselves when under great emotional stress.

The most common form of self-harm is skin-cutting but self-harm also covers a wide range of behaviors including, but not limited to:

- burning,
- scratching,
- banging or hitting body parts,
- interfering with wound healing,
- hair-pulling
- ingestion of toxic substances or objects

Why do people Self-Harm?

It is often found that people are unable to explain why they self harm. However research has found some common themes:

- Self-harm can be a way of coping with ones problems.
- It may help you express feelings you can't put into words, for example to escape emptiness, depression or shame.
- Distract you from your life or to help you feel in control
- Release emotional pain and to help you feel like you still exist.
- To punish yourself because you feel you are 'bad' or to maintain your negative beliefs about yourself.
- To escape feelings of guilt.
- To let other people know how bad things are, to get people to listen to you or sometimes to punish others using your own body.



Warning Signs

If you are concerned that a friend or loved one may be harming themselves, there are some warning signs to look out for. These include:

- Scars, such as those from burns or cuts
- Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises or other wounds

- Broken bones
- Hair loss or bald spots
- Keeping sharp objects on hand
- Wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather
- Claiming to have frequent accidents or mishaps
- Spending a great deal of time alone
- Pervasive difficulties in interpersonal relationships
- Persistent questions about personal identity, such as "Who am I?" "What am I doing here?"
- Behavioral and emotional instability, impulsivity and unpredictability

Help For Self Harm

If you are harming yourself don't be afraid to get help, confide in someone you trust. You may find it a great relief just being able to tell someone what is going on. You could also to a psychologist at student counselling.

It is important to get in touch with your feelings and to think about why you cut yourself. Is it because of a particular feeling?

Once you have identified the reason why you cut, you can then try alternatives outlets for those negative feelings. Here are a few examples of different coping techniques that you could try:

If you cut to express pain and intense emotions:

- Paint, draw, or scribble on a big piece of paper with red ink or paint
- Express your feelings in a journal
- Compose a poem or song to say what you feel
- Write down any negative feelings and then rip the paper up
- Listen to music that expresses what you're feeling

If you cut to calm and soothe yourself:

- Take a bath or hot shower
- Pet or cuddle with a dog or cat
- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket
- Massage your neck, hands, and feet
- Listen to calming music
- Try relaxation or breathing exercises

If you cut because you feel disconnected and numb:

- Call a friend (you don't have to talk about self-harm)
- Take a cold shower
- Hold an ice cube in the crook of your arm or leg
- Chew something with a very strong taste, like chili peppers, peppermint, or a grapefruit peel.
- Go online to a self-help website, chat room, or message board

If you cut to release tension or vent anger

- o Exercise vigorously - run, dance, jump rope, or hit a punching bag
- o Punch a cushion or mattress or scream into your pillow
- o Squeeze a stress ball or squish Play-Doh or clay
- o Rip something up (sheets of paper, a magazine)
- o Make some noise (play an instrument, bang on pots and pans)

How to help a friend or family member who Self Harms

It can be scary to know that a loved one may be harming themselves. Here are a few things that you can do to help that loved one:

- o Ask how they are feeling
- o Do not be judgemental
- o Do not make them feel guilty about the effect it is having on others
- o Let the person who self-harms know that when they feel ready and able to talk, you want to listen to them and hear how they are feeling.
- o When they do discuss it with you be compassionate and respect what the person is telling you, even though you may not understand or find it difficult to accept what they are doing.
- o Do not give ultimatums such as 'If you don't stop self-harming you have to move out'. This is not helpful and it won't work.
- o Understand that it is a long and hard journey to stop self-harming. Be aware that someone will only stop self-harming when they feel ready and able to do so.
- o Refer them to Student Counselling

Useful Resources

You could also the following resources if you needed more information yourself or you could give them to a loved one to seek help:

- i Student Counselling: 031-3732266
- i SADAG Suicide Helpline: 0860567567
- i SADAG sms Crises Line: 31393
- i LifeLine: 031-3122323
- i Self Harm Hotline: 0800 5555 5522
- i Self-Injury.net Online Support
(<http://self-injury.net/online-support>)

