



Social Issues

Self Harm



Definition:

Self-harm is when someone deliberately hurts or injures themselves.

Examples:

- Cutting or burning
- Taking an overdose of tablets or medicines or alcohol
- Being anorexic, bulimic or binge eating
- Scratching, picking or tearing at their skin
- Inhaling or sniffing harmful substances
- Swallowing things that are not edible

Why the situation occurs?

There are many reasons why young people will harm themselves:

- They may have lived through a very difficult experience or relationship, for example: bullying or discrimination, bereavement, a lack of love and affection, neglect, abuse.
- They may start to self-harm as a way of dealing with the problems and pressures of everyday life, for example pressure to conform or to perform well (for example getting good exam results).
- Some young people who self-harm may have low self-esteem. For some this is linked to poor body image, eating disorders, or drug misuse.
- Peer pressures may occasionally be a reason for self-harm.
- Extreme feelings of fear, anger, guilt, shame, helplessness, self-hatred, unhappiness, depression or despair can build up over time. When these feelings become unbearable, self-harm can be a way of dealing with them.

Asking for help can be difficult as they may not know whom to ask or may not know that confidential help is available. They may feel too ashamed of themselves and/or be worried that the person whom they tell will be shocked or angry with them. They may have had a bad or negative experience in the past, which makes it difficult for them to trust people.

It may be difficult to understand why somebody would deliberately harm himself or herself but it's important to remember that many people do things that are harmful from time to time. Some people smoke, drink too much, or overeat. While these things may be thought

to be more socially acceptable than self-harm they can also be harmful ways of dealing with stress and the pressures of everyday life. People who self-harm are experiencing extreme distress. They are not usually attention seeking or mentally ill. They need compassion, support and understanding.

If you know or suspect that someone you know is harming himself or herself, then you should try to be supportive and understanding. Allowing them to talk about how they feel is probably the most important thing you can do for them. Just feeling that someone is listening and that they are finally being heard can really help.

Supporting someone can be difficult and upsetting so you must take care of yourself too and recognise your own limitations. If you don't feel able to talk to them about their self-harm then be honest about this. Consider helping in some other way such as finding information for them or helping them find a counselor, support group or organisation.

To understand this subject better, it is important to be aware of the problems that lead people to self-harm, see the list above. Many of these are social problems, and if greater understanding, tolerance and acceptance was shown, then the problems may be eased and would not necessarily lead to young people seeking such drastic measures.

How you can make a difference:

Tackle the issue - learn about the issue and how to empathise with the situation. Try to understand what leads people to chose to harm themselves. Could these situations in society be improved? How, as a Scout, could you help to spread understanding of the problem?

Use the materials and tools provided to follow the process of:

1. Identifying the problem
2. Developing Awareness and Empathy
3. Taking action
4. Measuring the change

Resources and Links:

<http://www.selfharm.co.uk> - an information resource for young people who self-harm, their friends and families, and for professionals working with them. This site provides a great deal of useful background information. (In English)

<http://www.nshn.co.uk> - National Self Harm Network, and organisation to support people who self-harm and the people that this affects indirectly. (In English)