



### A Definition of Self-Injury

Self-injury is any deliberate, non-suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical harm on your body and is aimed at relieving emotional distress. Yet self-injury only provides temporary relief, it does not deal with the underlying issues. Self-injury can become a natural response to the stresses of day-to-day life and can escalate in frequency and severity. It is evident that despite increased interest in self-injury there is still a lack of understanding of the behaviour, which can prevent appropriate treatment and leaves such people without the support they need.

### Treatment

There is currently no clear evidence base for the treatment of how self-injury can be treated. This could be due to the fact that many people who self-injure rarely seek medical attention for the self-injury itself so are unlikely to be part of studies or trials of various treatments. It is also difficult to measure an outcome as the behaviour is not clearly defined.

It appears that talking therapies may be of most benefit in self-injury, where the individuals are able to learn to express themselves and recognize what it is that causes them to self-injure. However, each episode of self-injury can be triggered by something different, and every personal experience will vary in some way.

LifeSIGNS aims to support all people who are affected in any way by self-injury in the UK and beyond. We support people using self-injury, people who know others who self-injure, and people (including Health Care Workers) that are interested in self-injury.

### The Behaviour

The two most common forms of self-injury are **cutting** and **self-poisoning**, but self-injury can take any form of deliberate harm inflicted on oneself such as burning, scratching of the skin, pulling of the hair, bruising and so on. Often the injuries will not require hospital attention, thus the behaviour can continue for many years before being picked up by a healthcare professional.

The acts may be sporadic or they may occur on a daily basis, and they can vary in severity - from superficial scratches for example, to an extreme situation where someone may deliberately break their own bones.

While self-injury is not a clearly defined syndrome in itself, the feelings that surround self-injury are commonly experienced. The state of mind that immediately precedes an act of self-harm is likely to fit one of two descriptions.

- **Hyperstress**

The individual can feel under incredible pressure, with a racing mind and an urge to somehow just get out of their skin. It is often borne out of feelings of frustration that build up over some period of time. This may be accompanied by an increasing need to put everything on hold for five minutes, and self-harm can release this tension and bring a sense of calm.

- **Dissociation**

The individual may feel completely numbed to life and unable to wake up or feel anything. At an extreme it can be a totally dissociated state where the person may self-harm and not be able to remember doing it. Thus self-harm can act to wake the person up.

In both cases, self-injury is used as a coping mechanism – it can seem very effective and is something that can become relied upon in the future. However it is clearly maladaptive, and is often accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame, which contribute to feelings of low self-esteem and invalidation that perpetuate the self-harm cycle.

If you are dealing with someone who has self-injured or is currently self-injuring, bear the following points in mind:

- Self-injury is a coping mechanism, therefore the person in front of you is trying to cope with something so it may be worth asking what that is.
- Self-injury can also develop due to a lack of ability in expressing oneself, thus the person may have difficulty in responding to your questions
- Do not dismiss the behaviour as attention seeking or unimportant, especially if the wounds appear to be superficial. The size of the wound frequently bears no relation to the amount of emotional distress.
- **Do not ask the person to stop self-harming.** Such a request has the ability to do more harm than good and also disregards the fact that the coping strategy will need to be replaced with something healthier before the person will be able to move on.