

Self-harm



Self-harming behaviour in young people is not uncommon. It often starts in early adolescence but may not be discovered for some time as it is usually kept hidden.

It can be difficult to distinguish self-harm from suicidal behaviour as the young person's intention may be unclear or not known. Young people who self-harm may be very distressed and overwhelmed but are generally not intending to end their lives.

Below is some information about self-harm to assist school staff to enhance their understanding and also manage potential incidents which take place in the classroom or on school grounds. Being able to distinguish between self-harm and suicidal behaviour can help school staff know how to respond.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when someone deliberately injures themselves. This is also referred to as self-injury or deliberate self-harm. Some of the more common self harming behaviours include: cutting, burning and scratching. Excessive alcohol and drug misuse does not usually come under this definition.

Who self-harms?

Self-harm is most common amongst 11-25 year olds, however is not limited to this age group. People who self-harm have often had past or current negative experiences such as:

- Traumatic relationships
- Significant loss
- Relationship breakdown
- Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Feel overwhelmed or hopeless because of a serious illness/disability
- Long-term family problems, relationship problems, problems at school

Why do people self-harm?

There is a commonly held belief that self-harming is "attention seeking" behaviour, however this is not the case. There are many reasons why people self-harm.

Some typically reported reasons include:

- To cope with feelings of extreme emotional pain such as: helplessness, despair, anger, loneliness, shame, guilt, tension and stress.
- To manage feeling disconnected and isolated from others. Some people feel that hurting themselves helps them to feel real or connected to other people.
- To try and gain control. Some people feel that hurting themselves gives them a sense that they are regaining some level of control (in the short-term).
- To communicate distress. Some people don't know how to verbally express their emotions and do it through self-harm.
- As self punishment, as a result of self loathing some people believe they deserve to be punished.

Being able to distinguish between self-harm and suicidal behaviour can help school staff know how to respond.

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What should I do if I know a young person self-harms?

Dealing with young people who are self-harming is a complex and sensitive issue. If you feel comfortable, it's important to speak with the young person and let them know of your concern for them and intention to discuss this with school welfare staff. If you don't feel comfortable having a discussion with a young person about this, you are still required to report your observation to appropriate staff at the school. Although the intent behind self-harm may not be to end one's life, there can be many associated risks and possible complications caused by self-harm, from significant injury to accidental death.

If you observe a young person self-harming at school it's important to try and contain the situation as soon as possible. The first priority should be to focus on the

safety of the young person who is harming themselves and the potential distress of the other students at the school. To try and maintain the young person's confidentiality and dignity, it may be helpful to give the young person some privacy away from fellow students and to then guide them to either the school nurse or wellbeing staff.

If you see evidence that suggests a young person has engaged in recent self-harm, this should be reported to school wellbeing staff to follow up. Ideally, you should mention your concern directly to the young person first and then support them to seek appropriate help from school wellbeing staff or other health professionals.

It's important to remember that whilst self-harm behaviour is not a suicide attempt it is still serious and risky behaviour that can have long-term consequences for the young person and therefore should always be taken seriously.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

Suicide attempts, Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide, and Returning to school following self-harm or attempted suicide available at www.headspace.org.au/schoolsupport

If you believe that a young person is at imminent risk of suicide, you should seek professional support from your local mental health service or emergency department and keep the young person safe until help arrives.

Remove any means of suicide available to them in the immediate vicinity, such as medications or weapons. Stay with him or her (or arrange for supervision) until they can be seen and assessed.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au

Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.

Acknowledgements

Reach Out www.reachout.com.au
Sane Australia www.sane.org.au
Youth Beyondblue www.youthbeyondblue.com