

Coping Strategies for People Who Self-harm



'Self harm is one of the most misunderstood and heartlessly represented areas of British healthcare...

Traditional psychiatric responses to self-harm are to see it as an illness, a deviancy, attention seeking, hysteria, weak mindedness or suicidal intent. As a self-harmer, or as someone who works with someone who self-harms, it is readily apparent that none of the above models have any roots in reality.' (Dr Mike Smith)

Most of what I learnt about self-injury/self-harm was from my teacher and friend Dr Mike Smith who is the author of *Victim to Victor* workbook for people who self harm (Handsell Publishing, 1998) and who has been doing some incredible work over the years on supporting children and young people who self-injure. I have also borrowed some information from a pamphlet *Self-injury: Beyond the Myths*, published for the National Self-Injury Awareness Day in 2000 (I don't have the name of the publisher). I have worked closely with many people who self harm, in particular during the years of work in prisons and probation service, as well as in the NHS and in charitable sector.

Some forms of self-injury or self-harm are socially acceptable and some are even fashionable in the western society, cosmetic surgery, binge-drinking, dysfunctional relationships. One of the major issues for people who self-harm is professionals not understanding the difference between self-harm and attempted suicide, whereas there is a big difference between the two. There are a lot of myths and stigma around self-harm, but basically it is best understood is a coping mechanism for regulating the nervous system, for managing emotional and psychological pain, used to soothe and tranquillise unbearable feelings.

Coping Strategies

Below are some ideas for people who self-injure, with the possible alternatives and strategies which you could use to prevent yourself from injuring yourself - this is not to minimise the genuine distress or the underlying trauma or unmet need, but simply to support you with some choices. Depending on the type of feeling/state which creates the urge to hurt yourself (which could be rage, grief, fear, numbness, feeling out of control etc.) different things may work at different times. Some of these activities may simply act as distractors, others have a soothing and healing effect, some allow to express overwhelming emotions safely, and some others allow to experience a limited degree of physical pain (e.g. when someone who feels numb and injures themselves in order to actually feel something) without actually causing injury.

Bite into a hot pepper
Break sticks
Chew a piece of ginger
Choose a random object & list 30 different uses for it
Clean out a junk drawer
Clean your room
Climb a tree
Count all your change
Create a secret code
Create a website
Crush aluminium cans
Cut your hair
Dig the garden
Do EFT (tapping acupuncture points)
Do the laundry
Draw or paint a picture
Draw on the place you want to cut with a red pen
Draw your own comic
Dye your hair
Finger paint
Give yourself a hand massage
Give yourself a henna tattoo
Go for a walk
Go through & give away your old clothes
Have a rant
Hit a punchbag
Knead a lump of clay
Learn a martial art
Look for pictures in the clouds
Look at stars
Make a collage
Make a wish list
Make your out-breath longer than your in-breath
Move

Origami
Paint a wall
Play a drum
Play music loud
Prune a shrub
Put your finger in a tub of frozen food
Put your hands in sand
Re-arrange your room
Rip up a cardboard box
Paint your nails
Rip up an old T-shirt
Scream as loud as you can
Shred some old documents
Slash an empty plastic fizzy drink bottle
Smash a watermelon
Snap your wrist with a rubber band
Squeeze a stress ball
Squeeze ice hard
Stomp around in heavy shoes
Stroke a dog/cat
Swing on a swing
Swear
Take a bubble bath
Take photographs
Throw a cushion at the wall
Weed the garden
Watch birds
Watch fish swim around in a fishtank
Watch your favourite comedy
Write a letter
Write a list of your achievements
Write a list of things you are grateful for
Write a poem or story

You will find my playlist of simple grounding and self-soothing techniques here:
<http://bit.ly/4lhIXry>

An important note for carers and professionals – please remember that the self-harm in itself is not THE problem, it is a coping mechanism for ANOTHER problem which has caused or contributed to the dysregulation of the nervous system, so do not be punitive or attempt to force the person who self-harms to stop. The best you can do is to gently support them in a non-judgemental way to help them come to their own decisions, and be there for them whilst they find their own way to manage and heal the pain that is at the core of the problem.