

Working Effectively with Self Harm



What is Self-Harm ?

- To cause harm or injury to one's body on purpose to cope with difficult or distressing thoughts and feelings.
- Examples of self-harm behaviours:
 - Scratching or cutting own skin
 - Burning the skin
 - Consuming toxic substances (e.g. bleach)
 - Banging body parts against hard surfaces/objects
 - Pulling out own hair
 - Picking at own skin
 - Having unsafe sex

What are Some of the Warning Signs that Someone is Self-Harming ?

Thoughts :

- Frequent expressions of self-loathing, worthlessness or hopelessness (e.g. *"I am a bad person", "I deserve bad things", "I deserve to be punished for being bad", "I will never be good enough for anyone"*).

Behaviours :

- Withdrawal from active life or noticeable social isolation.
- Significant changes in eating patterns / sleeping patterns.
- Possible risk of sleep disorders.
- Unexplained cuts, bruises, or marks on their bodies.
- Covering up all the time even when weather is hot.
- Hiding or washing their own clothes.
- Needing to be alone for long periods of time, especially in the bathroom or bedroom.

Mood :

- Loss of interest in activities they usually enjoy.
- Obvious changes in mood (e.g. *more easily irritated or aggressive, or quieter than usual*).

Why do People Self-Harm ?

- To experience a sense of relief from intense emotional pain or distress.
- To punish themselves due to feelings of shame or guilt from past traumatic experiences.
- To regain some sense of authority in their lives as they constantly feel overwhelmed and helpless.
- To feel pain because they feel numb inside.

Myths & Facts about Self-Harm

Myth

Fact

Self-harm is just an attention-seeking behaviour

People who self-harm often feel ashamed and go to great lengths to hide their cuts and injuries. Self-harm behaviour requires intervention and support. Dismissing the behaviour as “attention seeking” can be counterproductive.

People who self-harm want to kill themselves

Self-harm is often a way for the person to cope with their emotional pain, they do not actually want to die.

Only females self-harm

Both boys and girls engage in self-harming behaviours, although the type and reasons for hurting themselves may differ.

People who self-harm enjoy or simply do not feel pain

People engage in self-harm behaviours to release emotional pain and distress. Some people also self-harm to feel pain due to feeling persistent numbness.

Self-harm is just a 'phase' that teenagers will eventually outgrow

While self-harm is relatively more common amongst adolescents than adults, it is not a behaviour that will simply 'phase out' as the young person gets older. It is an unhealthy coping mechanism that needs to be appropriately addressed.

Who is more vulnerable to self-harm behaviours ?

- Stressors / Triggers (*not limited to*) :
 - Pressures at school or in the workplace (*e.g. bullying; harassment; feelings of inadequacy*).
 - Financial difficulties (*e.g. in debt; retrenchment*).
 - Relationship challenges (*e.g. break-up; family disputes*).
 - Grief or bereavement.
- Difficulty in regulating emotions, handling stress, and/or managing conflict.
- Low self-esteem.
- Inability or difficulty in expressing oneself.
- Past experiences of neglect, abuse, or other traumatic events.
- History of mental health conditions and/or current mental health conditions. (*e.g. borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety*).
- Alcohol or drug use.
- Exposure to peers and/or family members who self-harm.



How can you support someone who self-harms?

➤ Look after yourself

- Look after your mental well-being, it is just as important. You need to be mentally and emotionally healthy before you can offer help to another person.
- Inform your Volunteer Manager as soon as possible if you observe any behaviors that lead to concerns regarding self-harm.
- This is to ensure both you and the person who is self-harming receive professional support from NuLife.

➤ Be attentive and empathetic

- Do NOT criticise the person for their self-harm behaviors. You may initially feel angry or upset that the person is hurting themselves, but reacting with anger or frustration can shut the conversation down and cause the person to feel worse about themselves.
- Listen calmly to what the person shares with you. This can help them to feel heard and understood and increase their willingness to communicate how they feel and why they self-harm.
- Acknowledge their emotions.
- Try not to force the need to stop the self-harming behaviors immediately. Self-harm is not healthy, but some individuals may use it as a coping strategy when faced with challenging situations at a particular point in their lives.

➤ Encourage them to seek professional help

- With correct support / intervention, the person can be encouraged to replace the self-harm behaviour with an alternative and healthier coping strategy that works for them.
- Reassure the person that help is available and that they can reach out for additional support.
- If you know and understand their immediate support system (*e.g. close friends, family members, partners*), offer to help rally them together to create a strong safety net for the person.
- The person may already be considering approaching a mental health / counselling professional, but may be unsure where to start. Suggest speaking to a mental health / counselling professional and refer and/or accompany them if required.

➤ Refer them to external support systems

- NuLife for counselling support at **6300 8706 / 9734 1560**
- Samaritans of Singapore (*an organisation dedicated to supporting individuals thinking of harming themselves*) at **1-767** (*their 24-hour hotline*).
- The nearest Family Service Centre (FSC). FSCs are community-based social service providers who support individuals and families in need. You can identify the closest FSC via this link:
(<https://www.msf.gov.sg/our-services/directories>)
- Their respective self-help groups:
 - Chinese Development Assistance Council: **6841 4889**
 - Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura: **6359 1199**
 - Singapore Indian Development Association: **1800 295 3333**
 - Eurasian Community Fund: **6447 1578**
- Institute of Mental Health at **6389 2222** (*their 24-hour hotline*).

