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 of www.crazydiamond.co.uk who is the author of a valuable assessment tool SHARS (Self-Harm Assessment of Risk/Safety) and of “Victim to Victor” workbook for people who self harm (Handsell Publishing, 1998) and who does some fantastic work on supporting children and young people who self-injure. I am also including some information here 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).

Some forms of self-injury or self-harm are socially acceptable and some are even fashionable in the western society, such as tattooing, piercing, cosmetic surgery, overeating, binge-drinking, dysfunctional relationships. Many professionals mix up 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 emotional / psychological pain, used to soothe and tranquilize unbearable feelings.

Breathe Me is a beautiful song by Australian singer Sia Furler, referring to her own experiences of self-harm – you can find it on YouTube www.youtube.com.

Below are some ideas for people who self-injure, with the possible alternatives and strategies which you could, if you choose to do so, use to prevent yourself from injuring yourself. Depending on the type of emotion/feeling 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 distracters, 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 acupressure points)
Do the laundry
Draw 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 henna tattoo
Go for a walk
Go through & give away your old clothes
Have a rant
Hit a punchbag
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
Meditate
Origami
Paint a wall
Play a drum
Play music loud
Put your finger in a tub of frozen food
Prune a shrub
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
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

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, so don’t be punitive or attempt to force the self-harmer 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 heal the emotional pain that is at the core of the problem.