

## 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](http://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](http://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 acupuncture 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.