

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 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.