

# SELF-HARM BEHAVIOURS

## UNDERSTANDING AND RECOVERY

Self-harming behaviour is defined as an action that results in physical damage to your body. It can be direct harm, such as cutting, burning, head banging, or skin-picking, or it can be indirect, such as engaging in behaviours that are risky to your health and wellbeing (e.g., restricted eating, alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviour). People who self-harm often do so with the intent to *cope* and *survive* and are not necessarily suicidal.

Self-harm behaviours typically indicate that someone is in extreme distress. However, there are many life-experiences that can contribute to the development of self-harming behaviour, such as trauma, loss, physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, chaotic and/or unstable family environments, and discrimination and oppression. Understanding both the current stresses and any historical factors that contribute to distress will assist in identifying options for change.

It is also important to understand the meaning and/or function of your self-harming behaviour. Listed below are some common functions of self-harming behaviour:

- To contain, manage, express and/or validate emotions
- To externalize internal pain
- To experience a ‘rush’ or feeling of euphoria
- To disassociate or detach from painful memories or experiences
- To recover from feelings of disassociation by connecting with pain
- To punish yourself for unacceptable feelings, thoughts or memories
- To reduce tension and gain a sense of relief
- To exercise control over your body
- To create or maintain a sense of security
- To communicate to others that you’re in pain and need help

The first step to recovery is to understand your self-harm patterns and other options available to meet your needs. Many people who self-harm report feeling guilty and ashamed. Some people are concerned about the permanent damage that is being done to their bodies, while others are concerned about the effect on loved ones. Consider the reasons--short-term and long-term-- why you want to stop the self-harming behaviours. As you begin your path to recovery, be patient and non-judgmental with yourself. Change and healing takes time.

## **COPING STRATEGIES**

The strategies and activities listed below are aimed at reducing the severity and frequency of your self-harming behaviour. Discover what helps you cope. It is important that you also consider working with a professional counsellor, as these strategies do not necessarily address the source of the distress.

### **1. Delay and Distraction**

Make a bargain with yourself not to self-harm for the next 10 minutes, 30 minutes, or 1 hour. Remind yourself of why you want to work on changing this behavior. Select a time that seems realistic and do-able. Once you've waited the selected time reassess your feelings and thoughts. If the need to self-harm is still present, delay it longer. While you're delaying, distract yourself with activities that will allow you to express or contain feelings, ground yourself in the present, relax, and/or self-soothe.

### **2. Emotional Expression Activities**

Self-harming behaviours may have become a way for you to express or contain overwhelming, intense emotions, such as anger and sadness. Listed below are activities that might provide a similar release without direct harm to yourself or others.

- Tearing up paper
- Ripping up clay or Play-Doh
- Throwing ice cubes or eggs into the bathtub or shower
- Punching pillows or other soft surfaces
- Slamming a door
- Breaking pencils
- Exercise
- Journaling, writing stories and/or poetry
- Drawing, doodling, painting, colouring

### **3. Sensation Inducing Activities**

The painful sensation that results from self-harm behaviours might allow you to cope with intense feelings and thoughts; for example, it may help you focus on external feelings, rather than the confusing or overwhelming internal feelings. Listed below are alternative activities that will evoke an uncomfortable physical sensation but are less severe and less damaging to your body.

- Taking a cold shower
- Holding an ice-cube or touching a sensitive area (e.g., under arm or on wrist) with an ice cube
- Rubbing a hot/cold cream (used for muscle pain) on your skin
- Snapping a rubber band on your wrist
- Rubbing a brush or cloth on your skin

### **4. Visual Stimulation Activities**

The appearance of skin redness or blood might serve as a visual cue of hurt, pain, or release. This may have also become your personal indicator that you will stop the self-harm behaviour. An alternative activity is to create lines on your skin, photograph or paper with a red pen, marker or paint.

## **5. Self-Soothing Activities**

Adults, like children, want to be comforted and soothed when they're hurt or upset. The following activities will allow you to soothe yourself through your five senses.

- Lighting a candle or incense of your favourite soothing smell
- Taking a bubble bath or warm shower
- Interacting with your pet
- Having your favourite non-alcoholic beverage (e.g., hot cocoa or tea). Alcohol is not recommended due to its depressing and impulse inhibiting effects.
- Gently brushing your hair or giving yourself a scalp massage while washing your hair
- Pampering yourself with a manicure, pedicure, facial, or new hairstyle
- Asking a trusted friend or family member for a hug
- Buying yourself flowers or visiting a garden or park
- Engaging in your favourite hobby (e.g., scrapbooking, working on cars)

## **6. Tension Reducing Activities**

You may experience feelings of tension in your mind and body, and need to find an outlet that reduces or releases these feelings. The activities listed below are non-harmful alternatives.

- Running, walking, roller-blading, skate-boarding, or biking
- Organizing drawers, closets, photo albums or school materials
- Engaging in an athletic activity, alone or with others (e.g., basketball, golf)
- Screaming or yelling aloud in a safe place
- Engaging in deep 'belly' breathing
- Expressing your feelings and thoughts with words by writing in your journal

## **7. Grounding Techniques**

When you're overwhelmed or upset you might find yourself thinking about past hurts and traumas or worrying about what might happen in the future. Grounding yourself in the present helps to make the feelings and thoughts more manageable as you focus on the 'here and now'. The following activities may ground and calm you.

- Noticing your environment-- what you see, smell, feel, taste, and hear
- Stomping your feet on the ground, and/or rubbing or clapping your hands together
- Focusing on your breathing-- notice each inhalation and exhalation
- Consuming something warm (e.g., tea) or cold (e.g., popsicle or ice cube)
- Smelling an orange and then noticing the strong citrus flavor as you eat it
- Calling/talking to a friend or contacting someone online

## **SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES**

*Talk About It:* Share your feelings and thoughts with someone you trust: friends, family members, intimate partner, counsellor, crisis worker, religious or spiritual leader and/or doctor. Develop a strong support network to help with your recovery.

*Seek Counselling:* With a counsellor, you can explore underlying causes and meanings to your self-harming behaviour. Addressing these issues will help with your recovery and long-term healing. For

example, counselling might help you learn how to regulate, contain and/or tolerate strong emotions, develop and/or maintain healthy, supportive relationships, and enhance your self-worth.

*Seek Professional Medical Attention:* Self-harming behaviours can result in significant injury and accidental death. It is important to treat and care for your injuries. Be sure to contact emergency medical services (e.g., 911) when needed!

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**References:**

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