
Self Harm and Self Injury

Many survivors of rape and sexual abuse have deeply distressing emotions and memories that they find difficult to deal with or talk about. Feelings of fear, anger, guilt, shame, helplessness, self-hatred, unhappiness, depression or despair can build up over time. When these feelings become unbearable, self-harm can be a way of dealing with them.

Reasons people have given for their self-harm include:

- When the level of emotional pressure becomes too high it acts as a safety valve - a way of relieving the tension. It diverts the pain into something tangible, thereby alleviating the difficult emotional feelings.
- Cutting makes the blood take away the bad feelings.
- Pain makes them feel alive when they feel numb or dead inside.
- Punishing themselves relieves feelings of shame or guilt.
- Self-harm is something they can control when other parts of their life may seem out of control.

Some people self-harm on a regular basis while others do it just once or a few times. For some people it is part of coping with a specific problem and they stop once the problem is resolved. Other people self-harm for years whenever certain kinds of pressures or feelings arise.

RASASC recognises self harm as a coping mechanism for survivors of rape and sexual abuse. If you are self harming/injuring, we do not believe you are attention-seeking or mentally ill. You are in a situation where you have lost control over what is happening and have no other means of expressing your feelings or asking for help. What you need at this time is compassion, support and understanding.

Asking for help can be difficult. Many survivors who self harm feel too ashamed or bad about themselves. You may be worried that who you tell will be shocked or angry with you. You might be frightened of being labelled mad or suicidal or have had bad or negative experiences with telling people in the past which have made it difficult for you to trust people.

If self-harm has become part of your life and helps you deal with your feelings it may be difficult to imagine coping without it. You may not feel ready to stop right now. This is understandable as stopping will mean a big change in your life.

Until you feel ready to stop you should try to look after yourself and take care of your injuries:

- If you are cutting use something clean and preferably sterile.
- Never share needles or cutting tools with anyone else.
- Clean any bleeding wounds, no matter how small, to stop them becoming infected with a clean dry cloth (towel or tea towel) - just ordinary tap water will do.
- If you think a wound might be infected - if the skin around the wound becomes tender painful, red or swollen - or an injury doesn't heal, see a doctor or nurse as soon as possible.
- Put burns under running cold water to cool the injury, loosely cover the burn in cling film as a temporary dressing
- For any overdose seek medical attention
- If there is a lot of blood spurting from a wound - ring for an ambulance

When you are ready, you may want to explore other less harmful ways of expressing or coping with your feelings. The first step is to try to understand what makes you do it. Lots of people don't know why they hurt themselves so it may be useful to think about:

- What was going on in your life when you first began to harm yourself?
- How do you feel just before you want to hurt yourself? Some people find it useful to keep a 'mood' diary so they can write down their feelings at different times.
- Are you always in the same place or with a particular person?
- Do you have any bad memories or thoughts that you don't feel you can tell to anyone?

When you feel anxious or upset, doing something you enjoy or trying to release feelings in a safer way may help you to stop hurting yourself. You could try:

- Phoning a friend.
- Writing down your feelings in a diary.
- Write down how you felt before, during and after self harming
- Listening to music, drawing or reading.
- Going for a walk or a run, dancing exercising or playing sport.
- Counting down slowly from 10 to 0.
- Grounding yourself by breathing slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- Focusing on objects around you and thinking about what they look, sound, smell, taste and feel like.
- Find a safe punching bag like some pillows.

If you still want to hurt yourself it may help to:

- Put your hands into a bowl of ice cubes for a short time or rub ice on the part of their body you feel like injuring.
- Use a red felt tip marker or lipstick to mark your body instead of cutting.
- Put on and pull off sticking plasters on parts of your body.
- Put an elastic band tightly around your wrist and pull it when you feel that you want to cut your arms.

The most important thing to remember is that for survivors, self harming and self injury is a coping mechanism which helps deal in some way with the memories of the abuse. At its base is intense emotional pain caused by unresolved issues. The best way to deal with these issues, and move towards recovery, is with the help of a specialist counsellor that you trust and do not feel judged by. RASASC can help put you in touch with specialist agencies in your area.

That you have begun speaking about self harming or self injuring is a brave and positive step. The helpline at RASASC is here if you feel you need to talk or explore further on 0808 802 9999.