

Self-harm in young people with learning difficulties

If you have a medical emergency, please contact 000 immediately

What is self-harm

Self-harm (also called self-injury, non-suicidal self-harm or deliberate self-harm) is when a person causes harm or injury to themselves on purpose. These behaviours can take many forms, including inflicting physical harm on ones body, excessive alcohol or substance use or extreme risk taking. Self-harm in itself is not a mental illness, but it can be a symptom of mental health difficulties. Self-harm and suicidal thoughts can occur together, but not always. Self-harm is often more about coping with distress than ending ones life. Self-harming behaviours are treatable. People who self-harm can and do recover.

Why do young people self-harm

People who self-harm often report that these behaviours are a way of coping with overwhelming and distressing feelings, thoughts or memories. Each person's experience will be unique to them. Some common themes include using self-harm as a way to feel in control, as a way to distract themselves, as a way to punish themselves or as a way to experience any feeling at all, if they have been feeling emotionally numb.

Self-harm in young people with learning difficulties

It is well known that adolescence is a time of emotional turbulence and turmoil. For young people with learning difficulties, this can be compounded by the experience of disability, social isolation or alienation and the difficulties of keeping up with peers at school. While still small in overall number, It is known that young people with disability experience higher levels of distress and rates self injurious behaviour than their peers.

Signs of self-harm

Sometimes there will not be any clear signs that a young person is self-harming. Young people can be very skilled at hiding these behaviours because of the shame and stigma that can surround them.

Things to be alert to can include the young person being more secretive, having unexplained injuries or injuries which don't match the explanation. Changes in clothing choices may indicate a need to hide self-harm injuries (for instance, wearing a jumper in hot weather). Young people also may become withdrawn, avoiding activities they previously enjoyed, and their engagement in school may drop.

What parents can do to help

Young people experiencing self-harm need care, support and understanding. It is possible to learn skills to manage distressing feelings and recover from self-harming behaviours. If you discover your child or adolescent has been self-harming, it is important to be aware of your own emotional response. Parents can have a variety of reactions to the news that your child has been self-harming. These can range from anger and grief, to concern, frustration, or even relief that you now know what is going on.

When you are having a conversation with your child or adolescent about their self-harming, it is important to remember to remain calm. Try to maintain a non-judgmental stance. Ask them what's happening for them and listen to their explanation with curiosity and an open mind. Let them know that you care, and you want to support them. Reassure your young person that you are there for them and that they can talk with you about how they are feeling.

Getting professional support is important when a young person has been self-harming. Talk with your young person about the types of support that are available. Your General Practitioner is often a useful first step in obtaining support, especially if the self-harm has involved significant injuries or overdoses. They will often recommend a referral to a mental health professional such as a psychologist, social worker or counsellor. Depending on the specific situation, a psychiatrist referral may also be made.

Working with mental health professionals and the school

School is one place where many young people experience feelings of distress, particularly for young people with learning difficulties. It is important to work collaboratively with the school, to develop support and safety plans.

Please note: The school has a duty of care to ensure they have a safe environment for your child. Therefore, it is important to share information and safety plans developed by other professionals with your child's support team at the school so they can plan how to help your young person stay safe. These school staff may include the year level leader, homeroom teacher, house leader, wellbeing staff and/or principal. Ask your school who will have access to the information you share, how it will be stored, and how they ensure all relevant staff have the information they need to support your child.

Emergency and other contacts

000 - for life threatening emergencies
1800 55 1800 - kids help line
13 11 14 - lifeline
1300 606 0244 Nurse on Call (24hr)

References

<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/self-harm>
<https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/self-harm/>
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/self-harm>

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Emmerson, E. et al. (2019). Emotional difficulties and self-harm among British adolescents with and without disabilities: Cross sectional study. *Disability and Health Journal*, 12(4), 581-587. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2019.04.007>.

<https://www.thermh.org.au/services/emergency/about-emergency/should-i-go-to-emergency/online-and-telephone-services>