

HELPING A YOUNG PERSON WHO SELF-HARMS

*This document has been produced by
Clyst Vale Community College's
Counselling Service.*

This document is not intended to be a definitive guide, but does hope to provide some support to families with a young person who self-harms.

Generally speaking a young person who self-harms does not have intentions to commit suicide. Stopping a young person from self-harming may leave them feeling vulnerable to more drastic action in order for them to find relief. A young person who self-harms can find their actions as confusing and distressing as their parents, they only know it helps them 'feel better'. Many young self-harmers find their scars ugly and may wish they didn't self-harm.

What is self-harm?

This is usually defined as a deliberate act to harm oneself, often by cutting or burning, punching, pulling out hair, scratching or abusing medicines.

Why does my child self-harm?

Currently therapists believe the simplest answer to this question is the young person may have difficulty communicating strong feelings to someone important in their life. This 'gagging' may be self imposed, or a result of unspoken rules in the family not to discuss certain issues, or fear of how the family will react to a particular conversation. The inability to communicate a strong feeling may also be a result of the young person's lack of skills, poor emotional development, shyness or embarrassment. A low self esteem is often present.

What can I do?

As a parent the most important thing you can do is help your child express their thoughts and feelings:

- Make time, in a safe place, for your child to share their thoughts
- Suspend any judgement, avoid blame or accusing your child of being 'silly'
- Look beyond your own fear so you can really listen without dismissing any issue
- Avoid displaying anger
- Bear in mind discussing something that is obviously difficult for your child will take time, be patient
- Give your child permission to talk about anything, including subjects that may be difficult for you personally, or perhaps you believe to be untrue

The counsellor's approach

At Clyst Vale Community College the counsellors aim to do the following:

- Check immediate dangers of any self-harming act and offer advice on how to make it as safe as possible – for instance advising they disinfect any blade used etc.
- Offer an alternative, safer method, such as wearing and snapping an elastic band against their wrist, crushing ice cubes in their fist etc.
- Explore any issue the student wants to discuss, helping them find the words and phrases to describe how they feel
- Promote sharing their thoughts with a significant other (usually a parent)
- Boosting their self confidence

The counsellor may take measures to ensure the young person is seen by a doctor who can provide access to the appropriate mental health services.

The counsellor will not demand the young person stop self-harming, though we will promote safer means.

Young people who are denied access to their method of self-harm may feel their only remaining escape is suicide.

Boosting a low self esteem

A parent can play a crucial role in boosting a young person's self esteem. If the student can learn to value themselves they may experience greater respect for their own body.

What is a low self esteem?

Self esteem is our own sense of self-worth. Are we likable? Are we worth being valued?

What contributes to low self esteem?

If we hear something bad about ourselves said often enough, or by significant people in our life, we can begin to believe it is true. This can be very damaging to our self esteem.

Things to look out for

- Do you belittle or dismiss your child? Try to avoid doing this.
- Is your child always last in line when the family contribute to decisions? Try putting them first.
- Does each member of the family have an equal say? Try to value all the family members input.
- Do you find yourself frequently blaming, or punishing or putting the child down? Try to avoid this.
- Are there any family in-jokes, that may contribute to your child feeling unvalued or put down? Avoid using humour that may inflict wounds to the child's ego.

Things that boost a low self esteem

- Receiving genuine praise
- Being really listened to and taken seriously
- Being reminded of things they can do well
- Being told they are loved and valued
- Showing the child they are appreciated

Try to spend quality time with your child doing things they enjoy. Why not get another handset and join them in one of their computer games? Or go for a run with them, join them on bike rides, take them to a fun park and challenge them to the death slide? Try to be present at any sports activities they do and support them from the sidelines.

Other help

The Opal Project and the Bristol Crisis Service for women both offer free journals in which students can record their thoughts and feelings

<http://www.selfharm.org.uk>

<http://www.childline.org.uk>

<http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk>

(Bristol Crisis Service)