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Self-Injury - Information for Schools and Teachers

Self-injury is increasingly becoming a recognised problem in schools, and all teachers and non-teaching staff (in primary as well as secondary schools) need a general understanding of self-injury, signs to look out for, and what to do if they become aware that a pupil is self-injuring.

“Self-injury in middle and high school students should not be minimized or dismissed as “attention seeking” or “just a fad”. When people take the radical step of harming their bodies, they should be taken seriously and the sources of their stress addressed.” (Walsh, 2006, p.38)



Signs that someone is self-injuring:

- People who self-injure often go to great lengths to conceal their injuries so it can be hard to know if a person does self-injure:
- People who self-injure can seem withdrawn or depressed.
- You may notice cuts or bruises that are always accompanied by excuses that don't seem to fit.
- Many people who self-injure will cut their arms and so they may wear long sleeves, even when it is very hot.
- Within school pupils who self-injure may look for excuses not to have to wear shorts or short sleeves and therefore may avoid activities like PE or swimming.

Particularly where younger children are concerned it is important to keep a close eye on especially vulnerable pupils such as those with a history of abuse.

General advice for teachers:

- Listen to the student and try not to show them if you are angry, frustrated or upset. “Staff should learn that the best way to respond to common self-injury is with a ‘low-key, dispassionate demeanor’ and ‘respectful curiosity’ “ (Walsh, 2006, p.245)
- Learn about the difference between self-injury and suicide.
- If someone tells you they self-injure it means they trust you and are willing to share this very personal problem.
- Some people will just want to be heard and empathised with. Try not to push them by asking questions that may overwhelm them.

Ensure that you school has a self-harm policy - guidelines for writing a policy and further information can be found at www.scar-tissue.net

Things for schools and teachers to remember

- Anyone from any walk of life or any age can self-injure, including very young children
- Self-injury affects people from all family backgrounds, religions, cultures and demographic groups
- Self-injury affects both males and females
- People who self-injure can often keep the problem to themselves for a very long time which means opening up to anyone about it can be difficult
- You can't just tell someone who self-injures to stop - it is not that easy