

Eating disorders and self harm

About a quarter of people with eating disorders deliberately harm themselves. The most common way of self harming is cutting with a sharp object. People may also burn themselves, pull out their own hair and take dangerous amounts of medication, drugs or alcohol.

Why do people with eating disorders self harm?

Self harm is a way of dealing with difficult and painful feelings which build up inside. Eating disorders use food to express emotions which they are unable to cope with. Self harm can be another form of dangerous behaviour expressing inner pain and unhappiness.

Some people who self harm say they feel anger or tension bottled up inside which is released when they hurt themselves.

Many people who self harm have feelings of guilt or shame which they find hard to bear. Self harm is a way of punishing themselves.

People with eating disorders take comfort in rituals, even though these rituals hurt their physical well being, because they provide a sense of control. Self harm can be another ritual, along with other dangerous behaviour such as laxative abuse, over exercising, vomiting and food denial.

The effects of self harm

There are clearly physical dangers of self harm. Many people are taken to hospital each year for emergency treatment because of deliberate self harm. There can be permanent damage to skin and internal organs.

There is also the impact upon mental health. Self harm is carried out in secret, isolating the sufferer. They are likely to be involved in other eating disorder behaviours which also isolate them from family and friends.

This can lead to deeper depression, fuelling the patterns of self-harm and dangerous behaviour towards food. The sufferer is unable to deal with stress or painful feelings in any other way.

Getting help for self harm

Self harm of any type is a dangerous form of behaviour which will be taken seriously by health professionals. Understanding of self harm has improved greatly in recent years and a GP, school nurse, teacher or other adults responsible for young people will be able to refer sufferers to professional help.

Effective treatment involves understanding the feelings which make the sufferer want to self harm and find other ways of coping with those feelings.

A person with an eating disorder who also self harms needs to have an integrated programme of treatment which addresses the cause of all of their dangerous behaviours. If you, a friend or family member are affected, it is best to discuss needs and appropriate treatment with a GP.