

Self-Harming in Sport

Background

The CPSU has produced this briefing paper to support those working with young people to better understand self harm and to enable them to be more aware of and respond appropriately to the issue.

Deliberate self harm is relatively common among young people, with research finding rates of between 7% - 14% in the United Kingdom¹. This percentage is consistent with the findings of research published by the NSPCC² in October 2011. This research explored the experiences of 6,000 individual young people involved in sport and showed that sport is reflective of society as a whole. Overall the researchers found that participating in organised sport was a positive experience for most children and young people, however 10% of respondents indicated that they had self harmed. Of those young people who reported some form of self harm:

- 56% had hit and punched themselves
- 55% had scratched and torn their skin
- 39% reported having cut themselves

Young men and women reported self harming behaviour in similar proportions. However, young men were more likely to report hitting and punching themselves while young women were more likely to report scratching, tearing their skin or cutting themselves. Interviews provided important insights into the negative role sport can have in contributing to young people's self harming behaviour:

"Even though you are good at a sport, it doesn't seem to matter how many medals you win, it matters what you look like ... just sort of ended up really miserable about my body image ... So I just used to cut a bit around my legs and stomach ... But yeah it was all carrying on with feelings when I was younger"
(Young woman: national level kayaking, district level swimming).

"I used to do it every day. It made me feel partly relieved but partly hating myself and thinking I deserved to be hurt" (Young man: local level football, recreational kayaking).

Some young people attributed the onset of these behaviours entirely to sport and indicated that the self harming behaviour ceased when they stopped participating in sport. For others, the triggers for self harming were sport-related but sport was not the main cause. For almost all of those reporting self harm at interview, there was an association with negative self image and body image. Some attributed these behaviours to the pressures associated with training and competition. Given the strictures, rigours, and control necessary to compete and be successful in sport, self harm seemed to provide a feeling of control for some young people in situations where they otherwise felt powerless.

Definition

In its broadest sense, self harm describes any damaging behaviour and covers "a wide range of things that people do to themselves in a deliberate and usually hidden way".³ It includes cutting, burning, scalding, banging heads and other body parts against walls, hair pulling, biting, swallowing or inserting objects and self poisoning. Self harm is always a sign of emotional distress and an indication that something is seriously wrong.

People self harm for a number of reasons. For some, self harm can provide the means to cope with overwhelming emotions - a way to control feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. For others, self harm temporarily combats feelings of numbness to the world around them.

No single factor has been shown to predict who will self harm. A combination of pressures at home and externally in schools or sports clubs can lead young people to self harm. Pressures may include being bullied, turbulent relationships with parents, parental divorce, unwanted pregnancy, abuse, rape, bereavement, emotional pressure, feeling isolated, entering care, academic pressures, mental-health problems such as depression, the suicide of or self harm by someone close to them, low self-esteem or poor body image. Any of

¹ ABC of adolescence: suicide and deliberate self harm in young people - Hawton K, James A 2005

² The experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK- NSPCC 2011

³ **Truth Hurts** Report of the National Inquiry into Self-harm among Young People- Mental Health Foundation 2006 (pg 5)



these pressures may make young people feel unstable and even hate themselves. Young people who self harm may do so because they feel they have no other way of coping with problems and emotional distress in their lives.

Myths and misunderstandings

Myth: Young people who self harm are attempting suicide

Fact: Self harm can help people who are experiencing emotional distress to go on living with the pain they feel, rather than trying to escape it through suicide. However, it is the primary predictor of suicide and should always be treated very seriously.

Myth: Young people who self harm are just attention seeking

Fact: Young people tend to keep their self harming behaviour a secret because of feelings of embarrassment, shame or guilt. Self harm is a cry of pain and should not be dismissed as manipulative behaviour.

Myth: You shouldn't approach a young person who self harms - send them straight to a doctor

Fact: Taking time to listen without judging encourages young people to get their problems out into the open, which is often the first step along the road to recovery.

Myth: You will know if someone is self harming because they have cuts on their arms

Fact: Cutting is only one form of self harm and is not necessarily restricted to someone's arms, other behaviours include burning, hitting, bruising or poisoning.

Myth: Self harm is just the latest fashion and young people will grow out of this behaviour

Fact: Self harm is **not** a phase or a fashion. Listening to certain music, or dressing in certain ways does not lead to self harm. People of all ages, backgrounds and of both genders self harm. Self harm is always a signal that something is seriously wrong.

Understanding self-harm

Though research indicates that around 1 in 10 teenagers self harm, the true figure is likely to be even higher as many incidents of self harm are treated at home and may not be brought to the attention of parents, service providers or professionals.⁴ Although some very young children and some adults do self harm, rates are much higher among young people.

It is important to bear in mind that everybody's experience is unique, and there are no universal rules or reasons for self harm. Self harm is something deeply personal. Individuals are likely to have a preferred method and part of the body for self harm. Due to the complex feelings involved, people who self harm will keep it well hidden from friends and family and they may go to great lengths to avoid showing the area of the body that they harm. Within sporting environments coaches and others involved may become aware of some signs of self harm because of the close bond and trust that are developed over time.

People who self harm can go through periods when they feel more vulnerable and are more prone to self harm but they also have times when they feel more able to cope with feelings, experiences or circumstances that might otherwise lead to self harm.

While self harm is ultimately damaging and may be dangerous, for many people it provides a means of coping with emotions and feelings. It is important that adults working with young people in sport understand the level of distress that can lead to self harm. This is particularly important for friends, parents, teachers or sports coaches who may become aware of the issue and wish to raise it with the individual as just taking away a person's means of self harm without supporting the person to address the underlying issues can increase their emotional distress and may make the situation worse. Young people often describe how self harm got out '*all the hurt, anger and pain*', but they also indicate that this relief is so short lived that they repeat the behaviour over and over again. It

⁴ **Truth Hurts** Report of the National Inquiry into Self-harm among Young People, Mental Health Foundation 2006



is essential to offer alternative stress coping strategies and stress reduction interventions to support the young people.

Recovery

Stopping self harming behaviour can be a long and difficult process and is not something a person can do overnight. No two individual journeys of recovery will be the same. Some people use self help groups or online support communities, others seek help from their GP who may refer them for psychological therapies.

A range of interventions can help young people develop coping mechanisms to replace their self harming behaviour and address the feelings that led the self harming to begin. Sometimes medication may be used to treat depression or mental ill health.

There are a number of self help groups and voluntary sector led self harm projects that can help people work towards developing alternative coping mechanisms. More information on such services is available in the contacts section of this briefing and also from ChildLine. You may also be aware of local services that can be actively promoted within your sports club or school.

Stigma and self harm

People may notice visible scars, often on people's arms or legs and stare, and may point or make comment. For many people the thought of someone wilfully hurting themselves is unsettling or even disgusting. The effect of this judgement and public disgust can lead to a further reduction of confidence and self esteem by the young person, and may feed into the cycle that led to the self harm in the first place.

Many people hide their scars obsessively to prevent them being seen. This can lead to problems, for example, in school, or the sports club, where kit might dictate short sleeves or shorts, or situations that might lead to peers seeing a person changing clothes.

Prevention

Many young people would prefer to turn to other young people for support, but it is the responsibility of adults within that club to ensure that no young person should feel they have to carry this burden alone. Young people should know they can turn to the lead officer within the club for support or advice. Often all a young person will want is to be able to talk to someone who will listen and respect them, not specifically about self harm but about problems and issues in their daily lives. Therefore it is important that sports and activity providers nurture the development of a culture of respect for each other (team work and citizenship).⁵ Some young people have said that had this been available to them they may never have started to self harm.

Young people should be encouraged to have the ChildLine number (*or other appropriate local helplines*) on their mobile phones, the time from considering self harm to acting on this thought is very brief and therefore the quicker they can make appropriate contact the better the outcome. Clubs should also display these numbers prominently on notice boards, club literature etc.

Responding to self harm

The reaction a young person receives when they disclose their self harm can have a critical influence on whether they go on to access supportive services. It can also be hard for family, friends, sports volunteers and coaches to respond appropriately to a young person's disclosure of self harm. As with other safeguarding issues, the club welfare officer or lead designated safeguarding person should be contacted for advice and support for both the young person and the person receiving the disclosure. The young person should be encouraged to discuss their self harming with their parents (unless there are indications that to do so would place them at further risk).

The key message from young people is that they need preventative measures that are non judgmental and respectful. Equally importantly, adults in positions of responsibility, for example in sports clubs and schools, must reach out to young people by creating a proactive and safe environment to listen to young people and provide opportunities for them to discuss problems before they turn to self harm as a way of coping.

⁵ **Truth Hurts** Report of the National Inquiry into Self-harm among Young People, Mental Health Foundation 2006



There is a need for sports coaches and others who work with young people to have a much better awareness and understanding of self harm. This includes a basic understanding of what self harm is, why young people do it, and how to respond appropriately - including what support and services are available. This alone would make it more likely that young people who self harm will get the help they need.

Young people who have self harmed stress the crucial importance of being able to distract themselves from self harm even for a short period of time. For some, distraction can be a first step towards addressing their self harm and therefore should be treated as a positive step.

Successful distraction techniques that young people use are included in the Truth Hurts inquiry report on self harm.⁶ Strategies young people used included using a red water-soluble felt tip pen to mark their skin, or rubbing ice on their skin in place of cutting. Some talked about hitting a punch bag to vent anger and frustration and flicking elastic bands on the wrist.

'I tried holding an ice cube, elastic band flicking on the wrist, writing down my thoughts, hitting a pillow, listening to music, writing down pros and cons – but the most helpful to my recovery was the five minutes rule, where if you feel like you want to self harm you wait for five minutes before you do, then see if you can go another five minutes, and so on till eventually the urge is over.'

Conclusions

For many young people the guilt and secrecy associated with self harm impacts on their daily lives; their relationships, the clothes they wear; their interactions with their friends and their sense of self worth. If and when they do tell someone else about their self harm, the whole issue is frequently taken completely out of their hands. What was previously secretive behaviour becomes common knowledge. They are aware that everyone is watching them closely in case they self harm again. Most importantly, the focus very often remains on the self harm, not the underlying causes, which may mean that they feel they have no other option but to continue to self harm.

Self harm among young people is a serious public health challenge that everyone in contact with young people must rise to - including sport. By ensuring that sports clubs and other organisations have a culture of listening to young people and responding appropriately, we will increase the confidence young people have in those around them when they need support.

Useful contacts/links

ChildLine – website: www.childline.org.uk tel: 0800 11 11

NSPCC – website: www.nspcc.org.uk tel: 0808 800 5000

Lifeline (Northern Ireland) – website: www.lifeline.info tel: 0808 808 8000

Samaritans UK – website: www.samaritans.org tel: 08457 90 90 90 / **Republic of Ireland** – 116 123

Mind – website: www.mind.org.uk tel: 0300 123 3393 email: info@mind.org.uk

The Site – website: www.thesite.org/mental-health

References

- **ABC of adolescence: suicide and deliberate self-harm in young people-** Hawton K, and James A, BMJ 2005
- **Experiences of Children Participating in Organised Sport in the UK-** Alexander K, Stafford A, Lewis R, NSPCC 2011
- **Northern Ireland Lifestyle and Coping Survey** - R.O'Connor, S. Rasmussen & K.Hawton 2010
- **Predicting deliberate self harm in adolescents-** R.O'Connor, S. Rasmussen & K.Hawton 2009
- **Protect Life - A shared vision** - DHSSPS 2006

⁶ **Truth Hurts** Report of the National Inquiry into self harm among Young People, Mental Health Foundation 2006



- **Review of Clinical Guidance (CG16) on Self Esteem** - National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) 2012
- **The relationship between child maltreatment, sexual abuse and subsequent suicide attempts** – F Colquhoun - NSPCC 2009
- **Truth Hurts: Report of the National Inquiry into Self harm among Young People** - Mental Health Foundation 2006.

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