Myths around self-harm
by Liz Scarff

People who self-harm are not necessarily suicidal or seeking attention. But these are just two of the misconceptions you may come across.

Myths and stereotypes

Negative stereotypes around self-harming can make you feel like you don't want to come forward for help and advice. You may be worried because you'll be judged and that you won't be taken seriously. If you're frustrated that a friend or family member just doesn't get you, remind them that self-harm isn't about attention-seeking or part of a 'youth culture', but often a response to emotional pressure and distress. "Self-harming is not a disease or something that can be narrowed down like dyslexia or a cold, or the flu," says Jay, 17. "It's something far bigger and more complicated than that."

Self-harming is attention-seeking

Stripping naked and running down the high street would be attention-seeking, but self-harming is very private and personal. People who self-harm often go to great lengths to cover up their injuries. The attention that self-harming does bring is often negative and doesn't help to relieve distress. Positive attention such as lending an ear and listening can help somebody who is experiencing distress and dealing with the pressures of everyday life. "Self-harming was never a cry for help, I just wanted people to understand that I was hurting." Alice, 19.

People who self-harm are suicidal

People who self-harm aren't usually trying to kill themselves. For many it's a coping mechanism used to survive - not die. Just because you self-harm, it doesn't mean you are suffering from a severe mental illness, either. Although there is a relationship between self-harm and suicide, many more people self-harm than kill themselves - it's the feelings behind the stress they want to get rid of. However, some people who self-harm also have suicidal feelings or are not sure if they want to live or die as a result of an episode of self-harm. In addition some forms of self-harm can lead to accidental death.

It's only a teenage thing - you will grow out of it

It's not easy to say exactly how many people self-harm and it's definitely not just something that affects young people. If somebody is hurting themselves, either by cutting, repeatedly banging their head or pulling their hair out, it's a sign that something is seriously bothering them. They need help and somebody to listen to them. If not the problem may become more severe over time. "Self-harm isn't the problem; the problem is what is causing the self-harm in the first place," says JD, 16. "We wouldn't have to deal with self-harm if there weren't bullies and pressure around us."
People who self-harm could stop if they wanted to

Self-harm can become a habitual or addictive behaviour for some people. Telling somebody to “just stop it” will not work and could possibly alienate them further. They need help and understanding to recover and learn other strategies for coping with emotional pain and stressful situations. "I wish I never started because it becomes an addiction. I still think about it and sometimes I just scream so loud inside, but I can't go back to it and I won't," says Susie, 24.

People who have self-harmed have been abused

While some people who have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused may self-harm, it would be wrong to assume that is the case for everybody. There are many different triggers and often young people find it difficult to pinpoint the exact thing that caused them to self-harm in the first place. For many self-harming is a way to cope - to release tension, stress or pressure. Seeking professional help can enable those who self-harm get to the root of the problem.

Self-harm is when you cut yourself

Cutting is only one form of self-harm and although it's one of the most common reported forms, there are other ways that people may hurt themselves intentionally. This might be, hair pulling, head banging, scratching, burning and overdosing.

People self-harm to fit in or be cool

Young people self-harm because in response to emotional distress. Thinking that somebody is burning or cutting themselves just to be cool is a little extreme. Even if somebody did do it once to fit in with mates at school, repeatedly continuing to hurt themselves shows that there is an underlying emotional problem that needs to be addressed.

The wound isn't that bad - so the problem can't be that bad

If somebody has the courage to tell you that they self-harm it is incredibly important to them that you take them seriously, regardless of how severe, or not, the injury is. Your reaction may have a tremendous impact on them, so tread carefully.

If you self-harm you have Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)

BPD is a complex condition and there is a lot of debate among mental health experts about what it is and how to treat it. Some people argue that as a diagnosis it has little meaning and that labelling someone as having a BPD is not useful. Self-harm can be a feature of BPD but only as part of a complex set of other features. Even if someone is diagnosed as having a BPD they will still need treatment and support that deals with the underlying emotional issues and patterns of behaviour - as will all mental health problems.