Who is most likely to self-harm?

According to research, the majority are young women, although the percentage of young men seems to be on the increase. Self-harming behaviour is also significant among minority groups discriminated against by society. Someone who has mental health problems is more likely to self-harm. So are those who are dependent on drugs or alcohol, or who are faced with a number of major life problems, such as being homeless, a single parent, in financial difficulty or otherwise living in stressful circumstances. A common factor is often a feeling of helplessness or powerlessness with regard to their emotions.

*Self-harm involves all of us on some level. We may all punish, distract or numb ourselves as a way of dealing with difficult feelings or situations.*

Young people

Recent research focusing on young people suggests that 10 per cent of 15 to 16 year olds have self-harmed, usually by cutting themselves, and that girls are far more likely to self-harm than boys. The most common reason is ‘to find relief from a terrible situation’. Young people are often under great pressure within their families, from school and among their peers. Many young people have said that they have friends who they know to also self-harm.

The research suggests that young people who self-harm are much more likely to have low self-esteem, to be depressed and anxious. They seem to be facing more problems in life, but may be less good at coping with them. They may retreat into themselves, feeling angry, blaming themselves, tending to drink and smoke too much and to use more recreational drugs. They confide in fewer friends, and tend not to talk to their parents or other adults, or to ask for the help they need.

Women

Women often find themselves in a caring role, putting their own needs last. This can grossly undermine their sense of worth, their opinions and strengths. In due course, a woman may come to feel she is an unimportant, silent witness to the abuses she has to endure. She may lose her sense of identity, power and rights. To survive, she may cut herself off from her real needs; for example, if the focus for this is the size and shape of her body, she may drastically restrict what she eats.

Men

If men conform to the macho stereotype that expressing emotion is a weakness, it can leave them unable to fully experience their feelings, and detached from that side of themselves. They may have less difficulty showing anger than women, but if they are in prison, where pent-up feelings can’t be released, men are more likely to turn to self-harm, especially if they have been abused.