Why do people harm themselves?

A person who self-harms is likely to have gone through very difficult, painful experiences as a child or young adult. At the time, they probably had no one they could confide in, so didn't receive the support and the emotional outlet they needed to deal with it. The experience might have involved physical violence, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse. They might have been neglected, separated from someone they loved, been bullied, harassed, assaulted, isolated, put under intolerable pressure, made homeless, and sent into care, into hospital or to other institutions.

“I am a survivor of both sexual abuse and self-injury. I no longer self-injure, but it has been a long struggle to try to acknowledge and work through emotions that once felt overwhelming in their power.”

Experiences like these erode self-esteem. Emotions that have no outlet may be buried and blocked completely out of awareness. If a trusted adult betrays or abuses them, and there are no other witnesses, children will often blame themselves. They turn their anger inwards. By the time they become adults, self-injury can be a way of expressing their pain, punishing themselves, and keeping memories at bay.

There is often an absence of pain during the act of self-injury, rather like the absence of sensation that often occurs during abuse or trauma. The body produces natural opiates, which numb it and mask the emotions, so that little is felt or realised consciously. A badly traumatised person may end up feeling quite detached from their feelings and their body. Some may injure themselves to maintain that sense of being separate, and to convince themselves that they aren't vulnerable. Others may injure themselves in order to feel something and know that they are real and alive.

There can often be myths and negative attitudes surrounding self-harming, even within the healthcare industry. Professionals can often make assumptions as to why someone is self-harming and therefore how to treat them. There can be instances of healthcare professionals with an unsympathetic attitude to someone who comes to them with injuries; for example, believing that people who are cutting themselves are causing their own injuries and therefore wasting the time of the nurse who has to stitch their wounds. NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) produces guidelines on the treatment of self-harm, explaining the need for exploring the underlying reasons someone may be self-harming, rather than just the self-harming behaviour itself.