



How come it's self-harm if it helps?

The words 'harm' or 'injury' are used to describe the acts of cutting, burning or overdosing because they cause physical damage to a person's body. However for a person's mental health, self-harm or self-injury may at times feel helpful. Many people find that it calms them down, gives them a sense of relief and puts a temporary end to unbearable or overwhelming feelings. Often people feel a sense of being in control again when they have hurt themselves which for many is very important.

The experience of self-harm can feel confusing because it helps in some ways but hurts in others, you may feel emotional relief but then end up with scars that you feel ashamed of or you hurt yourself in ways that you feel regretful about. This confusion is often what causes people to think about whether there are alternatives to self-harm.

Often when a person tells another person about their self-harm they can be met with strong feelings and a message that what they are doing is wrong and that they should stop doing it. This response may say more about the other person's feelings rather than what is helpful for the person who self-harms and can add feelings of guilt and shame to someone who is already having some difficulties.

The experience of self-harm is complex, it raises confusing feelings both in the person doing it and those around them and this is why sometimes there are no easy answers. If you are feeling confused or ambivalent about your self-harm it may help to consider how it helps you and how it doesn't help you. If you realise that it feels more unhelpful than helpful you can start to explore other ways of getting what your self-harm is giving you.

Here are some examples of how you could think about your relationship to self-harm in order to understand what feels difficult and what feels helpful about it:

One person's experience may look like this:

Helpful:

Cutting helps me stop feeling so angry

I feel in control when I cut

I feel relief to see the blood, it reminds me I am alive.

Unhelpful

I hate it when I think I am a self-harmer, I don't want to be one.

The cuts are deeper now and the scars will be worse

I feel so lonely with my life, I wish I could just cry and talk with people like the others can

I need to cut more and more now and it doesn't help in the same way it used to.

Conclusion

For this person the drawbacks of cutting are starting to be bigger than the benefits but the benefits are still very important and she will need to find other ways to deal with her anger and finding some sense of being in control in order to give up or reduce her cutting.

Things to try

I will wait five minutes every time I want to cut and see if I still want to, if I do I will but I will praise myself that I stopped for five minutes

I will write out a really angry letter on the computer in capitals

I will hit my pillow with a tennis racquet when I feel angry

I will go running

I will tell myself three times a day that 'I am learning to stop cutting and finding other ways of dealing with my feelings'

Another person's may look like this

Helpful

I always feel better once I have cut

Cutting helps me to concentrate and get my work done

I enjoy taking care of myself when I have cut

Unhelpful

My mum is very upset that I am still cutting

I am a bit worried about my scars

Conclusions

For this person the benefits seem to still outweigh the drawbacks, there is nothing in her list of unhelpful that suggests she feels self-harm is something that she

wants to change right now, however if she does keep cutting she may want to think about how to deal with the unhelpful aspects of it.

Things to try

I can ask explain to Mum that this is what I need to do right now and ask her to get support for herself rather than put pressure on me to change

I can cut in different places, not over old cuts so that I don't make my scars worse.

I can find out about skin cream or scar treatment.

And a third person's situation may look like this.

Helpful

Overdoses are what I know, they have helped me for a long time

Sometimes I need total time out of my life where nothing can get to me.

Unhelpful

The last two times I have overdosed, I have really scared myself because I felt so awful for so long after and I'm worried about my insides and that one day I may go too far.

I've been taking overdoses for over ten years and I'm scared that I won't ever be able to stop

Conclusion

For this person, the overdoses have played a very important role in keeping her going and helping her to get through very tough times. They feel like something she can rely on, however she does not want to be dependent on them forever and is scared that she may do more harm than she means to one day.

Things to try.

It might be useful to try and understand what the triggers to overdosing are, the warning signs and feelings and experiment with some distractions to see if other ways of expressing what the overdoses express works for her.

She can stay in touch with a service like TESS whilst she explores other options, she may have to try lots of things at different times depending on what the feelings are.

Try writing your own. Copy this into your own diary or [Rainbow Journal](#) & fill it in.

Helpful

Unhelpful

Conclusion

Things to try

Who could I share this with to get some support from

If there is someone you feel safe to talk it through like a school nurse or a counsellor you could discuss it, or you are very welcome to email or text TESS your thoughts and feelings about your self-harm