

Self-injury in young people

Self-injury can take many forms, including skin cutting, burning, pinching, scratching, and biting.

Why might young people injure themselves?

- To manage overwhelming unpleasant emotions (such as anger, anxiety, fear, sadness)
- To combat feelings of unreality or disconnectedness

Is this behaviour attention seeking?

Usually not, but self-injury can be **help** seeking. A young person may be using self-injury as a way of expressing that something is wrong. This is an indication that they are seeking help not attention.

When is self-injury different to a suicide attempt?

Self-injury is quite different to a suicide attempt. There is intent to die when a suicide attempt is made, whereas with self-injury the person is not intending to end their life. However there can be overlap, and you should always ask about suicide when young people self-injure.

What questions can be asked?

The best general question to ask about suicide and self-injury is: "Have things got so bad that you've thought of hurting yourself in anyway?"

If it is already clear that the young person is self-injuring you might ask:

- When you hurt yourself was it that you wanted to die or for some other reason?
- Can you describe to me what was happening for you at the time you injured yourself?
- How were you feeling after you injured yourself?

Allowing a young person to talk openly about their self-injury is a useful way of reducing shame and linking them into support.

For further information contact Emma Hanieh, Dept Psychological Medicine. emma.hanieh@health.sa.gov.au