

## Let's Talk About Self-Harm

The purpose of our 'Let's Talk About...' series is to support parents in understanding and having conversations about different aspects of emotional health, wellbeing and development.

The accompanying narrated PowerPoint goes into more detail, but this handout pulls together some of the salient points that may be beneficial for parents in understanding self-harm and knowing how to support their children if they suspect or know that their child is engaged in self-injurious behaviours.

### What is self-harm?

Self-harm would be classified as any action that intentionally causes damage or injury to the body. It is a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences.

Self-harm is a way to cope with those difficulties and can include some of the following methods.

- ✓ Cutting
- ✓ Hitting/bruising
- ✓ Scratching/scraping the skin
- ✓ head banging
- ✓ Burning
- ✓ Restricting or controlling food intake
- ✓ Over-exercising
- ✓ Ligature
- ✓ Misuse of drugs or alcohol

## Why self-harm?

Self-harming can often cause a short-term release of endorphins to cope with the pain that has been induced. This can be a distraction but can also give a physical feeling to something that is otherwise intangible. Emotional 'pain' can be scary and confusing, therefore physical pain can give something more concrete to manage.

Self-harm can be an impulsive or immediate response to acute stresses or tension, or it can become a strategy for coping with longer term sources of distress, giving a sense of control in an environment where a child feels none.

Self-harm can be a way to seek care, connection and understanding from people around us. The drive behind it can be a need for adults to understand they are hurting emotionally, but they may not have the words to express that, and so self-harm brings that connection.

**Attachment seeking, not attention seeking.**

## What should parents/care-givers do?

- ✓ Non-judgemental listening, validation and empathy.
- ✓ Find a safe adult for your child to talk to if they would rather speak to another person. Reiterate your love and acceptance, but validate their concern; "there is nothing you could say to me that would stop me loving you, but I wonder if you would feel more comfortable talking to (named safe adult)?"
- ✓ Avoid shame or guilt inducing phrases like, "why have you done something so silly?", "I can't believe you would do something like this". Instead, verbalise how proud of your child you are for bringing this to you; "it must have been incredibly difficult for you to share this with me. I'm so proud of you for speaking up about how you feel and I love you."
- ✓ Attend to visible injuries medically and ensure your child understands about infection risks if they are engaged in a method that breaks the skin.
- ✓ Ask whether your child has had thoughts of suicide (if you feel equipped to do so) or contact the school to ensure that we ask the question. Asking won't

## Wellbeing at Warwick School



encourage someone who is not suicidal to take their life, but if a child is struggling with these thoughts, we really need to know to ensure they get the best help.

### Alternative strategies to self-harm

#### Soothing/distraction based:

- ✓ Going for a walk, looking at things and listening to sounds
- ✓ Create something: drawing, writing, music or sculpture
- ✓ Going to a public place, away from the house
- ✓ Keeping a diary or weblog
- ✓ Stroking or caring for a pet
- ✓ Watching TV or a movie
- ✓ Getting in touch with a friend
- ✓ Listening to soothing music
- ✓ Having a relaxing bath

#### Emotional release:

- ✓ Clenching an ice cube in the hand until it melts
- ✓ Snapping an elastic band against the wrist
- ✓ Drawing on the skin with a red pen or red paint instead of cutting
- ✓ Sports or physical exercise
- ✓ Using a punchbag
- ✓ Hitting a pillow or other soft object
- ✓ Listening to or creating loud music

For further support or advice, contact the Wellbeing Team on  
[wellbeing@warwickschool.org](mailto:wellbeing@warwickschool.org)