



# Uplands Identity



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In recent years, the phenomenon of self-harm has become more prevalent among both boys and girls and in this edition we will address the issue in more depth.

## What is self-harm?

Self-harm is defined as the deliberate, repetitive, impulsive, non-lethal harming of oneself. Self-harm can include: cutting, scratching, picking scabs or interfering with wound healing, burning, punching self or objects, infecting oneself, inserting objects into body openings, bruising or breaking bones, some form of hair-pulling, as well as various other forms of bodily harm.

## Understanding self-harm

Those who use self-harm as a way of 'coping' with difficult emotions or situations often deny that it is a cry for help. For some self-harm is a release that does not - or need not - attract the attention of others. It can be performed in private, dealt with in private and then covered up by clothing. What should be fully understood is that self-harm is not a form of attempted suicide, although research does suggest that those who self-harm are 100 times more likely to go on to commit suicide.

Self-harm can be a way of seeking relief; where many people cope by, say, crying on another person's shoulder, self-harmers cope by injuring themselves.

Extract from a letter written by a student:

*"This might sound absolutely crazy, but by cutting myself, hurting myself, I feel so much better. I don't want to die; I just want to see myself bleed. It's like all the stress, all the problems disappear for one second. Am I doing it for attention? No, I'm not. I guess it's an escape, a really bad one!"*

## Why engage in self-injury?

Self-injury is a risky, dangerous behaviour that some teens use **to cope with negative emotions**. For some teens, self-injury can diminish an overwhelming sense of helplessness, and may reduce anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

## Warning signs

Warning signs that someone is harming themselves include: unexplained frequent injury, including cuts and burns, wearing long pants and sleeves in warm weather, wearing multiple bracelets to cover the lower arm, low self-esteem, difficulty handling feelings, relationship problems and poor functioning at school, work, or home.

## Getting help

Self-harm poses serious risks and may be a symptom of a mental-health problem that can be treated. **Self-harm is used to cope with, or relieve, painful or hard-to-express feelings** and is generally not a suicide attempt. But relief is temporary, and a self-destructive cycle often develops without proper treatment. The effective treatment of self-harm is most often a combination of medication and cognitive behavioural therapy. If you are concerned about a young person, please contact the school psychologist or a family physician.

**It is important that help is obtained.**

Ashdown Youthworx in Sandton, Gauteng consists of a group of specialists in this field. They have a website: [www.youthworxwellness.com](http://www.youthworxwellness.com).

Recommended reading:

- \* *The Scarred Soul: Understanding and ending self-inflicted violence* by Tracey Alderman: New Harbinger Publications
- \* *A Bright Red Scream: Self-mutilation and the language of pain*, by Marilee Strong.

## Sources:

- Conterio, Karen and Lader, Wendy, About Self-Injury.
- Connors, Robin E., Self-Injury: Psychotherapy with People Who Engage in Self-Inflicted Violence.
- The Dakota County Public Health Department.
- (TES Editorial © 2008 TSL Education Ltd.)