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**For friends and family
ISBN 0 9531348 3 0**

For friends and family

**A guide for supporters
of women and girls
who self-injure**

**Bristol Crisis
Service For
Women**

For friends and family

ISBN 0 9531348 3 0

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for **Bristol Crisis Service for Women.**

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We are indebted to many women for their generosity and courage in contributing their own experiences of self-injury to our work, and so helping us to produce these booklets.

Bristol Crisis Service for Women

Bristol Crisis Service for Women is a voluntary organisation and charity, set up in 1986 to respond to the needs of women in emotional distress. We have a particular focus on self-injury.

We provide a national helpline for women in distress, on Friday and Saturday evenings from 9pm to 12.30am, and Sunday evenings from 6pm - 9pm on 0117 925 1119. We offer any woman who rings a chance to talk through her feelings in confidence, without fear of being judged or dismissed. Over half of our calls relate to self-injury.

We also support and facilitate self-help groups, and provide training and publications on self-injury.

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Introduction

This booklet is for anyone, partner, friend or family, who wants to understand and support someone who is struggling with self-injury.

Self-injury seems to be more widespread among women and girls than among men. The emphasis here is on women's experience, but much of what is written may also be of relevance and interest to men who self-injure and their supporters.

The booklet begins by explaining what self-injury is, setting it in the context of a range of 'self-harm' with which most people are more familiar. It suggests ways you might develop more understanding of your friend's self-injury, by gaining insight into the sorts of things which may underlie it. An important focus of this booklet, however, is on you as a person involved with someone who self-injures. It considers what that experience may be like for you, and how to look after yourself as well as how to help the person you care about.

In the booklet you will find a special section for partners, which looks at some of the important issues which may arise for someone in an intimate relationship with a woman who injures herself. There is also a section on the particular concerns of those with responsibility for young people who self-injure. Other than in these sections, the word 'friend' is used throughout, to refer to a woman you care about who self-injures.

What is self-injury?

"When I was little I was always managing to have 'accidents' - falling off apparatus at school; shutting my hands in doors... I started scratching myself with pencils and compass points. Later on I progressed to knives and bits of glass."

"When I get really wound up I punch myself in the head and face, or put my hand on the iron. Once I poured boiling water over it."

The term 'self-injury' includes acts such as cutting, burning, scalding, banging, or scratching one's own body in order to cause injury. Some women also swallow or insert harmful objects, pull out their hair, 'pick' themselves, and so on. Self-injury is also sometimes called 'self-harm' (a term with much broader application), 'cutting-up', 'self-abuse' or 'self-mutilation'.

The injuries people cause themselves are seldom life-threatening and are not intended as suicide attempts. In fact self-injury is a means of helping a person carry on with life, often in the face of great emotional distress.

Self-injury can be understood within a wider context of self-harm, which can include such things as drug and alcohol abuse, overdosing, putting oneself in danger in various ways and eating problems. While some people self-harm particularly severely, in fact almost all of us self-harm in some way, usually less dramatically. Examples of ways we do this include smoking, worrying, taking a lot of risks, not getting enough sleep, and so on.

Supporting someone who self-injures

"One of the hardest things is accepting that, no matter how much you love someone, you can't make everything all right for them. You can't stop them hurting themselves. Sometimes I just feel so helpless".

Being close to someone who injures herself can be frightening and upsetting. You may feel shocked, angry, sad, or helpless. If you live with someone who self-injures frequently or severely, your daily lives may be dominated by crisis, anxiety or despair. Even if the person you care about only hurts herself occasionally or superficially, the possibility that she may do so can feel like a cloud hanging over you.

Self-harm of any kind is likely to affect close relationships. Perhaps you sometimes feel manipulated, and this makes you resentful. You may find yourself thinking that you have 'failed' if your friend hurts herself; that your love or caring should have been enough to stop her. Or you may feel hurt and rejected if you offer support and the person you are close to still continues to injure herself.

It is natural to be upset if someone you care about is hurt. It is also understandable to want to try to stop them from doing such apparently inexplicable things to themselves. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be successful and may result in frustration and distress for both of you.

The best way to help a friend who self-injures, and to look after yourself as well, is to offer your support but not to try to take responsibility for her. Destructive though it seems, it is likely that self-injury has been helping her to cope for some time. When she is ready and no longer needs this way of coping, she will be able to make her own decision to stop. This may take a long time, and although you may be able to help her considerably in her journey, you need to accept that she must make it in her own way, at her own pace. In the meantime you can be a very valuable supporter.

Understanding your friend's self-injury

"When I first learnt of self-injury I was in a state of shock for days."

"I don't know how she can do such terrible things to her own body. I'm so afraid of what she's going to do to herself next".

To someone who has never deliberately hurt themselves, self-injury may seem completely negative, destructive and unnecessary. It is hard to understand how someone would choose to inflict on themselves something we mostly take care to avoid: pain and injury to our own bodies.

Women who self-injure may also feel shocked, confused and distressed by their own actions. Yet they are often also aware that self-injury fulfils some important and positive functions for them. Frequently women say that hurting themselves help them to cope with great emotional pain.

"It relieved me, distracted me from the awful pain and guilt and frustration inside. It gave me something real to focus on, an injury I could look after. It made me feel like I mattered."

"Cutting keeps me alive, gets me through a crisis."

"I'd go for a while, then it would build up again, and eventually I would explode like a volcano. Only when the blood poured out of me was I able to let go and cry. Like the bad was coming out of me."

To understand how this works, it might be helpful to think about a sort of 'self-harm' which is more widespread and socially acceptable, or even approved: working too hard. Overwork can be harmful; it can lead to stress and illness, and perhaps threaten relationships. Why then would someone choose to overwork?

Of course a person may overwork in order to earn more money, or to get on in their career. But there may be other reasons. Throwing oneself into work can provide a distraction from unhappiness, loneliness, or grief. We can use it as an escape from the stresses of our personal relationships. Working hard may assuage our guilt for something, or prove to us that we are 'good'. Perhaps through our work we see that we exist, we are recognised by others and we act on the world. And the more and harder we work, the more this is so.

"Weekends terrify me. I'm fine at work all week; I feel strong and capable and I don't think about things. I am my job. Then two whole days to face myself and my feelings. I usually end up taking work home with me. But it means I never just rest and relax."

Someone who overworks does not consciously set out to hurt themselves, and would probably protest at the idea that this is a form of 'self-harm'. Nevertheless, there are many parallels with self-injury.

Many women who hurt themselves say that it helps distract or numb them from their unhappiness or anxiety. By providing a distraction or an outlet for feelings it helps someone cope with difficulties or abuse in relationships. Or a woman may be trying to draw attention to her distress and its causes.

A woman may hurt herself as self-punishment. It may feel as if she is 'atoning' for past wrongs or her own 'badness', and so relieve guilt or shame. For a woman who feels unreal or insignificant, her injuries may prove that she is important and alive. Self-injury can also be about control, a way in which one's actions are self-determined and effective, even if the only thing controlled is one's own injuries.

Self-injury is about coping. Somehow it makes your friend's life more bearable or manageable. (It may also cause her great shame and distress.) To fully understand why a person should need to cope in this extreme way we need to look further, into the events and circumstances of her life as a child and as an adult.

What may underlie self-injury?

Childhood experiences

"My foster-parents were very critical; nothing I did could ever be right. They laughed at me if I cried. When a teacher at school started touching me up I didn't do anything; I thought it was my fault. I started harming myself out of desperation. I couldn't tell anyone what was happening to me in words, so I tried to show it by my wounds. I couldn't cry, so the blood was like the tears I could not shed."

Often self-injury begins in response to painful or difficult childhood experiences. You may know a lot about your friend's past, or she may have told you very little. Often the sorts of childhood experiences which underlie self-injury are sources of great pain and shame to a person, and may be very difficult for her to talk about. These may have involved abuse of some kind, or neglect and deprivation. Some women may have lost a parent through death or separation, others faced excessive expectations or responsibilities.

"My Mum was very ill and depressed when I was little, but it was all hushed up. Nobody outside knew, and we didn't talk about it at home either. I was frightened and worried and confused, but I just had to get on with it. I think when I started hurting myself I was trying to show that something was wrong and that I needed looking after too."

Often women who self-injure come from families where there was little communication and their feelings and needs went unheard and unrecognised. Again, if this was true in your friend's life, it is likely to make it hard for her to talk about things now. (There is more information about the ways in which a young person's experience may lead her to self-injure in the section for those responsible for young people, on page 22).

Adult experiences

For some women it is aspects of their lives as adults which underlie their self-injury. You may be aware of some of these factors in your friend's life, but the connection with self-injury is not always obvious.

Again, experiences such as violence or rape may be significant. Sexual and racial harassment can also lead to the kinds of distress which a woman may turn in upon her own body.

Powerlessness is often an important factor. Women sometimes begin injuring themselves when they are in a situation where others have a large measure of control over them, such as in prison or psychiatric hospital. Feelings of powerlessness and lack of control may also become overwhelming where a woman is in a relationship with someone who abuses her, undermines her or refuses to listen to her.

"My marriage failed because of my husband's violence and his confirmation that I was no good. The way I dressed, the way I looked. I had to store up any feelings I had, out of fear. I was totally alone, too afraid to have a friend or a conversation with anyone. I became trapped in a world of my own, suffering the hurts and pains in silence. Cutting was my only release."

Self-injury may also be sparked off when a woman is under great stress, perhaps feeling isolated and unsupported.

"When I got to college I was out of my depth. Everyone else seemed to be making friends and having a great time, but I felt so lonely and inadequate. I was up all night studying because I was so scared of failing. Somehow hurting myself was a comfort."

Often a woman's self-injury can be seen to stem from both past and current circumstances. Perhaps her experiences as a child have left her with a legacy of emotional pain, low self-esteem, and difficulty in expressing her feelings, all of which make her vulnerable to self-injury. Distressing experiences as an adult may add to her difficulties.

Some women harm themselves only periodically, with episodes of self-injury being 'triggered' by stressful events, difficulties in relationships and so on. This is something you are likely to be particularly aware of, especially if your friend's self-injury sometimes seems to follow problems or experiences which you and she have shared.

Perhaps you have felt upset or frustrated when the person you care about has hurt herself following something which to you really does not seem to warrant such a drastic reaction. Of course, your friend's feelings about the immediate situation are important and should be respected. But it can help you if you remember that her actions may be being influenced by past as well as present experiences and feelings, and that for now she is coping in the best way she knows.

"I tend to feel like hurting myself if we have a row and can't seem to sort things out. I get so frightened and desperate, like I'll do anything to make things all right. And I know that's how I felt when I was little. Nowadays I try to 'catch' those feelings early and deal with them rather than harm myself, and my cutting has got a lot less."

Somehow, then, your friend's self-injury 'makes sense', in terms of her experiences in life. At the moment it fulfils some important purposes for her. It is good that she has found a way to cope with her distress, to show that she has feelings and needs, but it is sad that this involves injuring her own body. Hopefully, she will gradually find other ways.

Understanding these things may help you feel less shocked, upset and confused by what your friend does to herself. In the next section we will look at what you may actually be able to do to help.

How to help someone who self-injures

If you have been feeling helpless, frightened or despairing about someone's self-injury, it may be difficult to imagine that anything you do will make any worthwhile difference to her. Perhaps it seems like a problem which only 'experts' can cope with. But your friendship and help are really important.

Many women who self-injure feel terribly alone with their distress and their shame about what they do. Don't underestimate the power of your support and caring to make a real difference to your friend's life right now, and perhaps longer-term to her ability to live without needing to harm herself.

"My friends have been so important to me. Far more than doctors or professionals. I wish I had started trusting people earlier. I thought they'd think I was mad, or wouldn't want to know. But they just accept me as I am, and I know I can ring one of them up and talk about things if I need to, and they'll try to understand."

Acceptance

It is good to let your friend know that, even if it upsets you, you understand and respect that self-injury is helping her to cope at the moment. It is her body, and she is doing nothing wrong.

Acceptance doesn't mean you have to like what a person does, or that you do not see it as a problem. Of course it upsets you that your friend injures herself, and you hope she will stop doing so. But you can acknowledge that it is her right to hurt herself if she needs to, and that she has valid reasons for coping in this way.

Sometimes people try various means to prevent someone they care about from hurting herself. They might ask her to promise not to do it, hide anything around which she might use, or threaten to withdraw their friendship. This is usually very well-meant, but not helpful: If a woman could stop injuring herself that easily, she would have done so already. Instead she may feel more isolated, guilty and self-hating, becoming secretive about her self-injury.

Your friend will probably be used to people telling her she is 'just doing it for attention', or that she is sick, manipulative and a nuisance. You will be giving her a precious gift if, with you at least, she doesn't have to hide or feel guilty and ashamed about what she does.

Listening

Many women who self-injure have seldom been listened to in their lives. Their feelings and views have not been sought or taken seriously. In particular, it is likely that people will have made false assumptions about why they self-injure and told them why they are wrong to do so.

Simple though it seems, it is rare and special to be really heard by someone. You will be doing something very valuable if you just listen, respect and try to understand what your friend says about herself, her feelings and her needs, especially in relation to her self-injury.

Offering support

One of the most supportive things you can do is to show your friend that you see and believe the pain which lies behind her wounds and scars. Realise that although it is less visible, her emotional pain is probably much more distressing to her than her physical injuries.

If you feel able, you could encourage your friend to talk about the feelings that lead her to self-injure, the ways it 'works' for her, and so on. Over time this can help her to recognise when and why she is likely to self-injure, and to develop alternative ways of communicating or coping with her distress. (You can find more ideas about this in Booklet 2, 'Self-help for self-injury').

Tell your friend if you can be there to call on if she is upset or feels like hurting herself. But respect your own needs and limitations. Only offer what you can cope with, and remember you aren't responsible for stopping her from injuring herself.

Practical help

If your friend shows you a recent wound, try not to panic - it will probably look worse than it really is. Show your concern for the injury, and help her look after it if you feel able and she wants you to.

If the injury is severe, you could go with your friend to hospital or her doctor. It is not uncommon for women who self-injure to be treated unkindly or with condemnation by medical staff. Attempts might also be made to have her admitted to a psychiatric hospital against her will. (MIND can advise you about her rights in this respect, see page 29.) You can be an invaluable supporter and advocate in helping your friend get the decent, appropriate help she wants and deserves.

Communication

Try to ensure that you and your friend communicate directly about issues in your relationship. Particularly if you are the woman's partner, make sure that you listen to her and address problems between you. (There is more about the particular concerns of partners on pages 13-21).

Helping communication

Women who self-injure have often grown up in families where there was little real communication and feelings were taboo. That is why they now communicate indirectly, by hurting themselves. You and your friend may need to work quite hard together at communicating.

The basis of good communication is listening. Your friend will be able to talk to you most easily if she knows that there is plenty of time and you will listen and accept what she says. That you won't immediately try to find solutions or give advice, but will just hear her out and try to understand.

It is also very helpful for someone to know that what they say doesn't have to make perfect sense straight away. That they can explore things in a confused or roundabout way until they become clearer. These same 'ground rules' can equally help you to talk.

It may help to talk about what your friend fears or finds difficult about talking honestly and directly to people. Communication is also helped a lot if you know you can trust each other to keep private matters to yourselves, and not to use painful things which have been revealed to hurt each other, say when you are angry.

Sometimes people feel manipulated by a friend's self-injury. If you feel like this, say so gently, and encourage your friend to tell you what she feels and wants in words, not by hurting herself.

You may feel afraid to talk about your own needs or resentments in case this 'makes' your friend self-injure. But relationships cannot thrive if important things are not discussed. Talking about your feelings, problems and needs will ensure that your friend is not the only one expected to make herself vulnerable in the relationship. And by showing her that it is okay to talk about things, you will be offering a valuable alternative to self-injury.

For partners

"The cutting felt to me so completely destructive and self-hating. That was the person I loved, the body I loved that she was doing that to."

"I felt so inadequate, so guilty. Whatever you do, you're bound to feel guilty".

If you are the partner or lover of a woman who self-injures, you are likely to be deeply and painfully affected. Whilst a friend may be able to keep some distance, a close partner is almost bound to find themselves struggling with enormously difficult and complex feelings about a woman's self-injury. It is inevitable that your relationship will be affected, and that many issues will arise which you will both need to acknowledge and deal with, if the relationship is to survive and flourish.

Some relationships cannot survive the strain placed on them by one partner's self-injury. Others continue in spite of the self-injury, which is perhaps hardly talked about, though it remains a source of distress and tension. However, relationships in which a partner struggles with self-injury can be good and rewarding, as long as the couple communicate and respect each other's feelings and needs.

Some couples also manage to become allies in tackling the problems which give rise to a woman's self-injury, and their relationships are enriched by the communication and closeness that result.

Your feelings about your partner's self-injury

When you first find out about your partner's self-injury, you are likely to feel very shocked and frightened. Perhaps the injuries and scars upset or disgust you. These feelings are likely to be particularly strong for lovers and partners, since an important part of your relationship is loving and sharing each other's bodies.

If you can see the distress which drives your partner to hurt herself, you will probably feel great pain and compassion on her behalf. Partners often feel responsible; as if they should be able to make everything all right and stop the woman they care about from wanting to hurt herself. When this doesn't work they may feel helpless and frustrated. Anger and impatience may follow.

"When I first saw my lover's scars, I felt so sad for her. I felt I'd do anything to help. But when she cut herself without telling me there was something wrong I was devastated."

A woman's self-injury may go on for a long time. If a couple are not able to talk about and find ways of dealing with its impact on the relationship, partners may find themselves losing compassion and feeling only anger, or distancing themselves altogether.

Particular problems are likely to arise if you feel manipulated by your partner's self-injury; afraid to upset her in case she hurts herself.

"I felt so controlled by her cutting. I couldn't get angry, in case she cut herself. I felt she was punishing me, getting back at me, saying 'look what you've made me do'."

If your relationship is to survive and be good for both of you, you will need to talk to each other about your partner's self-injury and about how it affects you and your relationship.

Talking to each other

Talking together may be the key to sorting out problems, but it may also be quite difficult. Your partner probably feels ashamed, guilty and embarrassed about her self-injury, which may make her secretive and protective about it. She may fear that you will try to rob her of what is an important coping strategy for her. Perhaps you also feel awkward about the subject, or feel you just don't know what to say. You may be afraid of voicing your anger or distress about your partner's self-injury in case this upsets her.

However awkward or difficult it may be, talking to each other is worthwhile. It will help you both to be less afraid and less isolated with your feelings about the self-injury. It should help break down barriers between you and bring you closer.

"I used to feel so desperate and alone about my partner's cutting. The times when we should have been talking the most about things seemed to be the times we were just so far apart. I think talking about it was hard because we had to admit there was a real problem and it wasn't going to just go away and stop bothering us by itself. The most important thing for me was that once we talked and I understood more, I stopped thinking it was somehow my fault when she cut herself. Freed from that, I was much more able to help her."

Talking will allow you to identify and tackle any problems in your relationship which may trigger your partner's self-injury, or which may arise from it. By talking you will be able to tell each other what you need; what you can each do to make things better. It might be easiest to have a calm and productive discussion about these things at a time when your partner is not currently hurting herself, or at least when there is no immediate crisis.

Things you may want to talk about

What you need to talk to each other about will, of course, be individual and specific to you and your relationship. Here are some possible themes which might be important.

• What is your partner's self-injury 'saying' ?

Perhaps your partner began hurting herself long before you met her, and her self-injury still reflects past rather than current hurts. You may have satisfactory circumstances and a very good, caring relationship, but your partner may still feel driven to hurt herself to cope with the legacy of pain from the past. On the other hand, perhaps her self-injury is expressing distress about her current situation.

Some women begin injuring themselves because of unhappiness in their lives as adults. There may be things wrong in your partner's life, or in your lives together, which you could tackle jointly.

For some women self-injury begins while they are in painful adult relationships. Sometimes this is because of physical or sexual abuse, but there may be less obvious problems. A woman may hurt herself because she feels constantly undermined, criticised, pressurised, unsupported or unheard. If your partner is hurting herself in response to factors in your relationship, it is a sign that urgent and profound changes need to be made. The first step towards making these changes is for your partner to be able to tell you what is hurting her so much that she takes it out on her own body.

A woman may also self-injure because of intolerable stresses in her life, such as being very lonely and overburdened with childcare responsibilities. Again, it is important for you to talk together about what pressures there are in your partner's life and your lives together.

Another possibility is that your partner began hurting herself in response to events in the past, but episodes of self-injury are sometimes triggered by events in the present. These might include issues in your relationship. For example, she may hurt herself if you have a row, if communication is lacking between you, if she is not getting what she needs, and so on.

Again, talking to each other and unravelling what seems to spark off her self-injury is vital. You will then be able to work out together how to handle things in ways which are less likely to lead your partner to the 'solution' of hurting herself. This might, for example, involve your both setting some ground-rules for communication between you.

You may need to agree to be very direct in stating what you each feel and need, and not to use self-injury, sulking or any other indirect strategy to communicate or control one another. Together you can work towards a situation where you each have a right to express your feelings and needs, and to have these heard and respected (but not to expect the other to take responsibility for everything you feel). This can considerably reduce the likelihood of your partner injuring herself when there is tension between you.

- **How does your partner's self-injury affect you?**

You have the right to tell your partner how you feel about her injuring herself, and to have her hear and acknowledge your feelings. The point of this is not to make her feel bad, or to pressurise her into stopping hurting herself. Rather, it is so that you and your needs are recognised and supported. If you do not share your feelings you will feel increasingly isolated with them and resentment will build up.

"It would have been okay if she had been taking responsibility for it, working on it, and on the relationship, telling me what support she wanted. Not choosing self-injury over me. If she'd just once seen that it was hurting me, and said 'I'm sorry'. If she'd recognised that I was vulnerable too".

You may also need to talk about any practical ways in which you are affected by your partner's self-injury. For example, if she expects you to join her in hiding her self-injury from others, or if it causes you embarrassment, these things will affect your relationships with other people. They need to be talked about and the problems for you resolved as far as possible. You may also need to agree between you how to handle the issue of self-injury around your children.

Your partner, too, may be very relieved to be able to talk to you about the difficulties which self-injury creates for her in her life. It might be hard for her to do this, since the obvious and feared answer is "well, don't do it then". But for as long as she needs to keep hurting herself (and afterwards), your partner will be struggling with distress and ambivalence about what she does, as well as with others' reactions to her injuries and her scars. You can be an important support for her in this, and it can provide an opportunity for the two of you to ally with each other about problems you face.

- **Secrecy and trust**

Some women who self-injure find it very difficult to talk to others about their feelings and to seek support in tackling their self-injury. This is usually because they grew up in situations where they could not trust the people around them to listen and care about them.

Some women are very secretive about their self-injury. Of course your partner has a right to privacy, but what she does affects you. It can be enormously painful to be shut out of your partner's distress and not to be allowed to show your caring.

"The most hurtful thing is the person not talking to you. She wouldn't give me a chance - she'd just go away and cut herself and tell me a few days later. It felt like complete and utter cruelty to not give me a chance to love and to help".

Of course, you cannot force someone to talk to you. However, you could tell your partner how you feel and what support you want to offer. You could ask her to try sharing things with you, a bit at a time. If she has a commitment to your relationship, your partner should be prepared to work at trusting you and being more open.

It may help to talk directly about what she fears, and what you can do to make talking to you feel safer for her. For example, you may need to reassure her that you will not try to stop her from hurting herself if she needs to. It will also help if you ensure that she is not the only one expected to make herself vulnerable in the relationship; that you share your feelings, problems and needs too.

- **What support do you each need?**

For an adult partnership to be good, each partner needs to be able to be vulnerable as well as strong; to seek support as well as to give it.

It is important not to allow a situation to develop where your partner is the only one who ever has problems or needs support, while you are the 'strong' or 'normal' one. On the other hand, neither should your needs dominate and put unfair pressure on her. These sorts of imbalance can be accommodated for short periods, but if they continue the relationship will suffer, and it will be difficult for you to return to relating as equal adults. Among other things, this can make it hard to have a good sexual relationship.

Be sure to let your partner know that you have needs too. Talk about things that are bothering you in your life and tell her how she can support you in dealing with these. You could also discuss what support your partner can draw on from you in respect of her self-injury and the problems and feelings which underlie it.

- **Your limits**

Some women who self-injure are keen to talk about their feelings and are willing to express their need for support. If this is the case in your relationship you have an excellent basis for communicating and working at problems together. What you may need to allow yourself to do, however, is to sometimes back off.

You cannot always be available for someone else's needs, and it is important that you do not offer more support than you can reasonably give. You also need to be wary about taking responsibility for your partner's feelings and problems, including her self-injury. Her decisions to hurt herself or not are, ultimately, hers alone to make.

It is great to offer support, but take care not to be intrusive, and try not to take it personally if it doesn't 'work' and your partner still hurts herself. Sometimes the best and only way to care is to stand back and accept that a woman still needs to injure herself for the moment.

If problems persist between you

Sometimes, your partner's self-injury and the problems it presents you with may bring you to despair. Perhaps you sometimes feel like leaving the relationship. All relationships face difficulties and need work, but if this one feels just too painful to go on with you should allow yourself the option of ending it. In the long run it would not be good for either of you if you forced yourself to continue in an unhappy relationship.

"The relationship was very destructive for me. In the end I wasn't getting anything out of it, and I'd lost all tolerance and sympathy. But I was still too afraid to leave, in case she killed herself."

Even if you are afraid that your partner cannot cope without you, you still have the right to put yourself first. Allowing yourself the choice to leave may also enable you to feel less obligated and resentful. This could actually help you to reclaim some of your good feelings about your partner, and to choose to carry on working at the relationship.

Seeking help

If, over time, you feel that the two of you are not managing to sort out the issues which self-injury brings up in your relationship, it might be a good idea to seek some outside help and support. You could go together to a counsellor, who could help you to talk about things and perhaps look at them in different ways. You might also like the chance to each talk separately with someone about your own feelings. (There are some organisations to contact for help listed on pages 28-30).

It is also important to have the support of friends. Try not to allow yourselves to become isolated with your problems. It is good to spend time with friends who support you as a couple and to share things with them. This can often help you regain some perspective and appreciation of your relationship.

"It seemed so weird and frightening to me. I wanted to run from it and it nearly destroyed our relationship. We saw a counsellor together and I began to understand what it was about for her. I also saw some of the ways that I self-harm, like smoking and not eating properly. It feels more equal between us now - we both talk about things and help each other, rather than pretending everything's okay and then taking it out on each other or ourselves."

For those responsible for young people who self-injure

Sometimes quite young children engage in self-injury, and many women who hurt themselves report that this began in adolescence. Young people may hide their self-injury surprisingly successfully, although some parents are only too painfully aware of what their child does. If you are a parent or worker with responsibility for a young person who self-injures, your role is particularly vital, but difficult.

"I feel very strongly that someone should have said 'that child is injuring herself, there is something deeply wrong with her life'. I think every school should have some sort of counsellor, trained to pick up this sort of thing. A lot of grief and sorrow could be averted by a bit of early caring".

It can be terribly distressing for a parent or carer to find that a child is injuring their own body. You may feel shocked, frightened, and desperate to stop them. Panic, disgust, and anger are also natural. Or you might find yourself wanting to minimise what the child does, perhaps putting it down to a 'silly craze' at school, 'naughtiness' or 'attention-seeking'. This sort of reaction is also very understandable.

However, self-injury by children and young people is important and should always be taken seriously. Sometimes children at school do engage in brief episodes of superficial self-injury, perhaps in making 'blood-pacts', or scratching names into their skin. If it is short-lived, this is probably not a sign of any serious problem. But if a child hurts herself persistently or severely, it is a sign that something is very wrong in her life, and needs investigating.

What to do if a young person is injuring themselves

Young people who self-injure almost always feel very guilty about what they do, and are often terrified of their parents or other adults finding out. Yet, whatever else it is, self-injury is an attempt to communicate, and on some level the child is desperate for someone to 'hear' and help them.

If you are to help a child talk about the problems that are leading them to hurt themselves, you will need to approach the topic gently and calmly. Let them know that it is okay, that you are an adult, you can cope, and you won't be angry or tell them off.

The young person will not necessarily know themselves why they self-injure; they may only know that they feel awful, and hurting themselves helps. You may need to spend a lot of time talking with them about their lives and feelings, if you are to get to the root of the problem. You may also need to talk to other adults in the child's life to find out what may be wrong. What to do next will depend on the reasons for the young person's self-injury.

Possible reasons for a young person's self-injury

• Problems outside home

The problems that a child is expressing through self-injury may lie in their life and relationships outside home. Are they being bullied, abused or made to feel a failure at school? Is there someone they have contact with who may be abusing them sexually? Difficult though it is to face, children are abused by teachers, family friends or neighbours, youth leaders, etc. and they often hide this from their parents. Children in such situations need encouragement and support to talk about what is wrong. And they need adults to take this seriously and tackle problems appropriately.

• Puberty and sexuality

There may be problems connected with puberty or sexuality. Some girls suffer great distress as their bodies develop and they may cut or hit (or starve) themselves in an attempt to control or punish their bodies.

Often teenage girls come under great pressure to become sexual before they are ready, or with boys or men they do not want to be involved with. They may feel they don't have the right to decide for themselves how and when they want to be sexual. Perhaps a boyfriend is even abusing them in some way ('domestic' violence can begin this early). Other problems around sexuality may include the anguish of being lesbian or gay in a society where there is still considerable prejudice.

A young person who is distressed about her body or sexuality needs opportunities to talk about her problems and feelings with a supportive adult. She needs help in building up her self-esteem and good feelings about her body. She also needs support for her own choices about her sexuality.

• Problems at home

It is particularly painful for parents to face the possibility that something in their child's home life may be causing them the distress which leads them to self-injure. Adults who self-injure often recall childhood abuse, and it is vital to check whether someone in your own family may have abused the young person in some way (and may still be doing so). If this is the case, you can get help and support for yourselves as well as for your child.

Young people may also self-injure because of a range of other factors in their family life. In particular, lack of communication about feelings and problems may drive a child to express herself through self-injury. Family crises such as bereavement, illness, or parental conflict may affect a child considerably and they need encouragement to talk about their distress.

Low self-esteem is common in young people who self-injure. Sometimes illness or disability has left a child with a bad self-image. Or perhaps too much is being expected of them, they receive too much criticism, or they do not feel valued just for themselves.

Opening up communication in your family and making sure that everyone's needs and feelings are valued, that they are appreciated and loved, will help considerably. If you feel that there are problems in your family that you cannot tackle alone, seek help. Parenting is a very hard job and there is no shame in getting support to help you work out problems. There are parents' advice services and helplines in most areas (sources of information can be found on pages 28-30).

If you are a teacher, youth worker or other professional and you are concerned that a young person's self-injury reflects serious problems at home, do something. Talk to the child. Seek support and advice from other staff and from procedural guides at your workplace. Difficult though it may be, you are right to respond seriously to the problems a young person may be signalling through self-injury.

Looking after yourself

"I used to think that I'd got to be available constantly, however I was feeling, in case she felt like hurting herself and needed to talk to me. I felt like it would be my fault if she did it, for not giving her enough support or whatever. It was too much. I realised I need times when I can just switch off to everyone else and do what I need for myself".

It is very important that you look after yourself as well as being concerned for your friend. Being close to someone who self-injures can be a great strain. Particularly if you live together, you may feel that you are always on your guard, or that you should always be available and supportive. If a child or young person is hurting herself your feelings of anxiety and responsibility may be overwhelming.

Your feelings

It's okay to sometimes feel resentful towards a friend who self-injures; to get fed-up with being understanding and caring. It is also natural if you feel frightened or upset by your friend's self-injury and the pain which lies behind it. Or you might find you feel other uncomfortable things, such as anger or embarrassment about what she does.

When you are trying to be supportive to someone it is hard to admit that you also have negative feelings, or that sometimes you just don't want to know. But you have a right to what you feel. And if you carry on pushing down negative feelings they will eventually squeeze out all the positive feelings you once had for your friend.

Let yourself have your negative feelings. Talk about them to someone supportive, write them down if you like, and consider sharing some of them with your friend. You don't have to make her feel bad. You can just gently ask her to understand that sometimes her self-injury is hard for you too.

Time and space for yourself

Take space away for yourself when you want to. Don't feel that you're the only one who can help - encourage your friend to get support from other people too. You don't have to be available all the time, and you have the right to do things you enjoy for yourself.

Your needs

There will be difficult things in your own life and times when you need support. Whatever distress your friend may be in, what you need is important too.

Someone else's self-injury and obvious pain can bring you in touch with your own distress, about problems in your life. At the same time, you may feel you are not justified in being upset or needy, since your friend's problems are so much more apparent. Some people find themselves wanting to self-injure, perhaps as a way of saying, "look, I hurt as well".

Be careful not to deny your own needs in the relationship. Support should be two-way most of the time, or a relationship becomes unbalanced. As well as support, you may want other things from your friend who self-injures. Perhaps you sometimes need to just relax and have fun, instead of thinking about feelings all the time. You can ask your friend for these things too. If she isn't able to respond to your needs some of the time it doesn't mean that you are wrong for what you want (or that she is wrong for not being able to give it). But seek out other friends who can be with you in the ways you need.

Make sure you also get support for yourself from other sources - other friends, or a counsellor. On the next two pages you will find a list of organisations from whom you can obtain support for yourself, or get information about sources of help in your area.

Useful Contacts and Resources

ADFAM National helpline 020 7928 8898 Mon, Wed-Fri 10am-5pm. *Confidential support and info for families and friends of drug or alcohol users. Also project for families of drug using prisoners.*

Al-Anon Family Groups Helpline 61 Great Dover St, London SE1 4YS. 020 7403 0888 10am-10pm daily. *Support for families and friends of alcoholics.* www.al-anonuk.co.uk.

Afro-Caribbean Mental Health Association Suite 37, 49 Effra Road, London, SW2 1BZ 020 7737 3603. *Advice and support.*

Asian Family Counselling Service Suite 51, The Lodge, 2-4 Windmill Lane, Southall, Middlesex. 020 8571 3933 *Counselling for Asian families.*

The Basement Project PO Box 5 Abergavenny NP7 5XW. 01873 856 524 *Training, workshops and publications.* www.freespace.virgin.net/basement.project/

Bristol Crisis Service for Women Helpline: 0117 925 1119. Fri/Sat 9pm-12.30, Sundays 6pm-9pm .PO Box 654, Bristol BS99 1XH. *For women in emotional distress; focus on self-injury. Information, publications and training about self-injury. Including the Rainbow Journal for young people who self-injure.* www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, BACP House, 35-37 Albert St, Rugby, CV21 2SG. Tel: 0870 443 5252 *Send sae for list of local counsellors.* www.bacp.co.uk

Careline 020 8514 1177 Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 7-10pm. *Telephone counselling and referral for any problem. For children, young people and adults.*

Carers UK 0808 808 7777 Wed and Thursday 10am-12pm & 2pm-4pm. 20-25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JT. Free helpline for anyone who is caring for a relative, friend or neighbour.

Childline 0800 1111. *24-hour helpline for children and teenagers.*

Drinkline 0800 917 8282, Tues-Thurs 9am-11pm, Fri-Sun, SatSun 6pm-11pm. *Free helpline. Advice and information on drink problems, sources of help, support for family and friends.*

Eating Disorders Association 103 Prince of Wales Rd, Norwich, Helpline: 0845 634 1414. 18+ years. (Mon-Fri 8.30am-8.30pm, Sat 1.00pm - 4.30pm). Youth line: 0845 634 7650 Up to and including 18 years of age. (Mon-Fri 4.00pm-6.30pm, Saturdays 1.00pm - 4.30pm). *Information and support on eating problems, details of local groups.* www.edauk.com.

Get Connected 8 Glentworth Rd, London, NW1 5PG. 0808 808 4994. *UK Wide helpline for young people. Open 1pm - 11.00pm daily.*

MIND infoline 08457 660 4621 Mon, Wed, Thurs 9.15-4.45pm Granta House, 15/19 Broadway, Stratford, London E15 4BQ. *Information on mental health issues services, rights; local MIND group details.* www.mind.org.uk

National Drug Helpline 0800 77 66 00. *Confidential 24 hr service. Advice, information, referrals, counselling where appropriate.*

National Self Harm Network PO Box 7264, Nottingham, NG1 6WJ. E-mail: info@nshn.co.uk, web: www.nshn.co.uk. *Support people who self-harm, provide information about self-harm. Also raise awareness and challenge myths around self-harm.*

NHS Direct 0845 4647 24 hrs. *Any health enquiry. Information, local contacts, library.* www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

NSPCC 0808 800 5000 *Free 24-hour helpline. Counselling, information and advice for children or young people who need help, and for anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse.*

Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222 Mon-Fri 8am-10pm, Sat 9.30-5pm, Sun 10am-3pm. *National helpline for anyone in parenting role. Offer support and information.* www.parentlineplus.org.uk.

Relate 0845 130 40 10 Mon-Fri 9.30am - 4.30pm. Herbert Gray College, Little Church St., Rugby, CV21 3AP. *Counselling and support service for individuals and couples with relationship difficulties. Information on local services.* www.relate.org.uk.

Young Minds - Parents Information Service 0800 018 2138 Mon and Fri 10am - 1pm Tues - Thur 1pm-4pm. 102-108 Clerkenwell Rd, London EC1M 5SA. *Information and advice to anyone with concerns about the mental health of a child or young person.* www.youngminds.org.uk

Youth Access 020 8772 9900 Mon - Fri 9am-1pm; 2pm-5pm 1-2 Taylors Yard, 76 Alderbrook Rd, London SW12 8AD. *Information and referrals about youth agencies (14-25 years)*

Video

"Visible memories" Available from Mind in Croydon 020 8668 2210 www.mindincroydon.org.uk *People who self-injure describe their experiences and approaches they find helpful or unhelpful.*

Books

The Scarred Soul. Understanding and Ending Self-inflicted Violence Tracey Alderman, 1997, New Harbinger, Oakland.

A Bright Red Scream - Self-mutilation and the language of pain. Marilee Strong, 2000, Virago, London.

Websites (Also in useful contacts)

www.ncb.org.uk/projects/selfharm

Young People and Self-Harm Information Resource, by the National Children's Bureau.

www.nice.org.uk

National Institute of Clinical Excellence. Information for the Public, Self Harm: Short-term treatment and management. Understanding NICE guidance - information for people who self-harm, their advocates and carers and the public (including information for young people under 16 years).

www.selfharmuk.org

Young People and Self-Harm. A National Inquiry. To investigate how public services across the UK can best work with communities, families and young people in order to understand and prevent self-harm and intervene effectively into the lives of young people who self-harm and develop services accordingly.

www.siari.co.uk Self Injury and related Issues is an information site maintained by a counsellor and trainer.

For other sites, type 'self-harm' or 'self-injury' at a search engine.

For a fuller list of resources and books, please contact Bristol Crisis Service for Women

How this booklet came about

From 1994 to 1996 we carried out a research project into self-injury by women, funded by the Mental Health Foundation. The aim of the project was to increase understanding of self-injury amongst the public and professionals.

The project was set up as a result of the large volume of requests we receive from individual women and from professionals for information and advice about self-injury. It was clear that women who self-injure often feel that the response they receive from health and other 'helping' agencies is inappropriate to their needs, while workers feel inadequately informed and supported in working with people who self-injure.

Our research involved interviewing and obtaining written responses from a large sample of women who self-injure. We also sought the views and experience of professionals working with self-injury in various settings. We carried out a review of literature on the subject, held a national conference on self-injury, produced information and publications, and developed training for professionals.

For further information about our work, training or publications, please send a stamped addressed envelope to:

Bristol Crisis Service for Women
PO Box 654, Bristol BS99 1XH

phone: 0117 927 9600

website: <http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw/>