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**MIND** Granta House, 15/19 Broadway, Stratford, London E15 4BQ  
Info Line: 0845 766 0163 (Mon-Fri 9.15am-5.15pm) For deaf or  
speech impaired enquirers - Mind Info Line textphone: 0845 330 1585  
(if using BT text direct add the prefix 18001)  
*Information on mental health problems, services, rights; local MIND  
group details*

**National Drug Helpline** 0800 776600  
*Confidential 24 hour service. Advice, information, support and  
referrals where appropriate*

**National Self-Harm Network** PO Box 7264, Nottingham NG1  
6WJ  
*Survivor organisation campaigning for the rights of people who  
self-harm*

**NSPCC** 0808 8005000 (including Asian helpline) Text phone for  
deaf and hard of hearing: 0800 0560566  
*Free 24 hour helpline for abused children and their families*

**SAFE** Helpline: 01722 410 889  
*Support for ritual abuse survivors*

**Self Harm Alliance** PO Box 61, Cheltenham GL51 8YB  
Helpline: 01242 578 820 (Wed-Sun 7-8pm)  
*Newsletter, advocacy, support*

**Women's Aid** PO Box 391, Bristol BS99 7WS  
National helpline: 08457 023468 (Mon-Fri 9am-9pm, Sat  
10am-5pm)  
*Advice, help and information for women suffering domestic violence*

**Women's Therapy Centre** 10 Manor Gardens, London N7 6JS  
0207 263 6200 *Psychoanalytic psychotherapy (individuals and  
groups), advice, information and referrals*

**Youth Access** 1A Taylors Yard, 67 Alderbrook Road, London  
SW12 8AD, 0208 772 9900 *National referral service for young  
people (usually up to 25) to local advice and counselling services*

## Useful contacts

**The Basement Project** PO Box 5, Abergavenny NP7 5XW  
01873 856524 *Workshops, publications, newsletter*

**Bristol Crisis Service for Women** PO Box 654, Bristol BS99 1XH  
Office: 0117 927 9600, Helpline: 0117 925 1119 (Fri&Sat 9pm  
-12.30am, Sun 6-9pm) website: [www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw](http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw)  
*For women in emotional distress; focus on self-injury*  
*Research, information, publications and training about self-injury*

**British Association for Counselling** 1 Regent Place, Rugby,  
Warwicks CV21 2PJ 01788 550 899  
*Send sae for list of local counsellors*

**Careline** 0208 514 1177 (Mon-Fri 10am-4pm & 7-10pm)  
*Telephone counselling and referral for any problem, for children and adults*

**Childline** 0800 1111 Childline Freepost, 1111 London N1 0BR  
*24-hour helpline for children and teenagers*

**Drinkline** 0800 917 8282 (Mon-Fri 9am-11pm, Sat&Sun 6-11pm)  
*Advice and information on drink problems, sources of help, support for family and friends*

**DRUGSCOPE** Waterbridge House, 32-36 Loman Street,  
London SE1 0EE 0207 928 1211  
*Information on local services for people with drug problems (including prescribed drugs)*

**Eating Disorders Association** 1st Floor Wensum House, 103  
Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW  
Helpline: 0845 634 1414 (Mon-Fri 8.30am-8.30pm)  
Youth line: 0845 634 7650 (Mon-Fri 4pm-6pm)  
Website: [www.eda.uk.com](http://www.eda.uk.com)  
*Information and support on eating problems, details of local groups*

## Introduction

This booklet is for any woman who is struggling with self-injury. The term 'self-injury' is used to include acts such as cutting, burning, banging, picking, scratching, pulling out hair, and any other means of inflicting injuries on one's own body. Self-injury is sometimes referred to as 'self-harm', 'cutting-up', or more rarely, 'self-abuse' or 'self-mutilation'.

Booklet 1 in this series, 'Understanding self-injury', provides a general introduction to what self-injury is, and some of the reasons for it. This second booklet has been written with the help of many women who have self-injured, as a resource for individuals to use for themselves. Its aim is to help you to understand your self-injury better, and to feel more in control of it.

The booklet looks at how self-injury may affect your relationships with others, and suggests ways of dealing with difficulties which may arise. There is advice on ways to keep safe while you are still hurting yourself. There are questions to help you explore what may lie behind your self-injury, and ideas for ways to begin working on these issues. You will also find suggestions for places to get help in tackling your self-injury and the feelings and problems which give rise to it.

Many women feel trapped in a pattern of self-injury, and would like to be able to exercise more choice about whether they hurt themselves. There are suggestions for things to do if you want to work towards this. However, giving up self-injury without understanding it, or putting safe supporting measures in its place, is difficult, rather pointless and possibly dangerous. Self-injury is a sign that there are problems to be dealt with. It is a way of coping with those problems. Usually women find that as they uncover and tackle the problems and feelings which underlie their self-injury, the need to hurt themselves gradually falls away.

In this booklet there are suggestions for ways of uncovering the roots of your self-injury and understanding how it has helped you to cope. It encourages you to begin accepting and making a 'friend' of your self-injury, gradually unravelling its meanings for you, and using this understanding to help you take more control of things in your life.



If you are someone who injures herself, you may find reading this booklet painful and challenging. The parts about exploring the roots of your self-injury, in particular, might spark off some upsetting memories and feelings for you.

It's important to take care of yourself while you are thinking about these difficult things. Don't feel you have to get through the whole booklet all in one go, or read it from cover to cover. You might find it better to pick just one section from the Contents which interests you, and take your time over that, perhaps writing down your own thoughts as you go. You might also want to move backwards and forwards between sections, reading what is most relevant to your needs at the time.

Read through the ideas here and think about them at your own pace. Take what is useful for you, and use it in whatever ways will help you best on your own journey towards feeling more at ease with yourself and your life.

If you also have problems to do with eating, alcohol or drugs (including prescribed drugs) you could find out about services which focus on these from Local Health Authority units, Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous or the Eating Disorders Association. (see page 52).

### **Self-help groups**

There are still only a few groups available specifically for women who self-injure, but other groups may be helpful. Groups for women who have suffered experiences such as sexual abuse can also provide a supportive space to talk about self-injury. If there are no self-injury groups in your area, you could think about setting one up. You may be able to get help from Social Services, a local 'mental health' project, women's centre or a survivors' organisation. You could advertise the group through the self-injury newsletter, 'SHOUT' (see p.53).

### **Private counselling**

If you can afford it, you could go to a private counsellor or therapist. This has the advantages of greater independence and anonymity than may be possible with statutory or voluntary agencies, you may be able to 'shop around' more, and there is less likely to be any limit on the number of sessions available. On the other hand the cost is high (though some offer some places at reduced fees). It is important to check out the counsellor's credentials - they should be happy to tell you about their qualifications and experience, their approach to counselling or therapy, how they view and work with self-injury, and so on. You can get a list of some counsellors in your area by sending a sae to the British Association for Counselling (see page 52).

The sorts of places to try include:

- ♦ Women's Centres (you can usually chat to someone straight away; there may be counselling; they are an excellent source of information.)
- ♦ Rape Crisis Services (counsel women who were abused as children as well as in adult life; again will have local information).
- ♦ Organisations for survivors of sexual abuse (most provide groups, some offer face-to-face counselling).
- ♦ Relate (formerly Marriage Guidance; you don't have to be married and they will counsel about problems other than relationships).
- ♦ NSPCC (although primarily involved in child protection, some offer counselling to adult survivors of abuse).
- ♦ MIND Associations (may be called Associations for Mental Health; some offer groups, drop-in services or counselling and all should have good knowledge of other local services).
- ♦ Self-help organisations for users or survivors of mental health services (a good way of getting access to help which is not controlled by professionals).
- ♦ Young People's advice and counselling Projects (usually offer help to people up to age 25).

There may be other 'mental health' or counselling projects in your local area. Some more good places to get information about these include:

- ♦ Wellwoman Clinics
- ♦ Volunteer Bureaux
- ♦ Citizens' Advice Bureaux
- ♦ Health Promotion projects
- ♦ Samaritans
- ♦ Your local library.

## You and self-injury

*"It supports and helps me, but I'm ashamed and embarrassed."*

*"No-one understands this, but self-harm has saved my life - there were times I would have killed myself if I hadn't had that. But then I think, "What's wrong with me? Why do I need to do such terrible things?"*

Most women have very mixed and complex feelings about their self-injury. On one hand, they may feel frightened, upset or ashamed about it. They hate the secrecy and isolation involved. The thought that they may still be harming themselves in years to come appals them. On the other hand, self-injury may have been a valuable survival strategy, and it can be terrifying to imagine coping without it.

Much as someone may want to stop hurting herself, doing so can bring losses; loss of the way she expresses her deepest feelings, loss of the way she experiences herself as strong and in control, and so on.

The first thing to understand then, is that self-injury may have helped you to cope with life in important ways. In time, if you want to, you will be able to find other ways, which don't involve hurting yourself. In the meantime, you are doing the best you can.

You are not doing anything 'wrong' or 'crazy'. There are always very good reasons why a woman harms herself, and you do not need to feel guilty or ashamed about what you do. It can be hard to believe this, especially if others are shocked, upset or judgmental. But it is your body and your life, to do with as you wish. And paradoxically, the more you can accept your self-harm and respect your reasons for doing it, the more able you will be to choose not to do it, when you decide the time is right for you.

## Self-injury and relationships with others

*"Hardly anyone knows about me cutting myself. I'm too scared of what they'll think; - that I'm mad or dangerous or weird. But hiding has meant I've ended up losing friends and being very isolated."*

*"My husband and family just don't understand. They think I'm sick and disgusting. They expect me to be able to just stop doing it."*

If you are a woman who hurts herself, you are probably only too painfully aware of the problems self-injury can cause in your relationships with others. You may also struggle frequently with the dilemma of who to tell and how to explain your injuries and scars to others who may notice them.

### **Other people's reactions**

While some people can be very understanding and supportive, others' reactions to a woman's self-injury can be insensitive and intrusive. Friends, colleagues, family, health workers and even strangers may be shocked, upset, frightened or curious. These feelings are understandable, but do not give them the right to insist that you explain yourself and your injuries, nor to condemn you, or demand that you stop hurting yourself.

Fear of others' reactions and judgements often forces women to be very secretive about their self-injury. They may lie about their scars and take care to wear clothes which hide them (even in hot weather). They may very justifiably fear for their jobs, as well as dreading how they will be viewed when they visit the doctor, go to an exercise class, or do any everyday thing which involves undressing.

You may also be referred to a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) or a psychologist, psychotherapist or psychiatrist attached to your local hospital or Community Mental Health Team. In all cases, check that what you are being referred for is to **talk**. If you are sent to a psychiatrist or CPN and find they do not offer counselling, keep pressing for what you want. You could write a letter if you don't feel confident about asserting yourself face-to-face.

Community Mental Health Teams may offer other therapies, such as art, music or group therapy, as well as individual counselling. In some areas you can refer yourself directly to the Team; you can find out by ringing your local Area Health Authority or Trust.

## Social Services

It may be possible to get counselling through Social Services, or there may be support groups available. Social Services should also know of other local resources.

## College or workplace services

For students, there is usually confidential counselling available through Welfare or Student Services offices. Some employers have counsellors, welfare officers and nurses. These could be of help, but check the policy on confidentiality before giving details about yourself.

## Non-statutory services

There are many independent, voluntary organisations which provide counselling and groups, but these vary from one area to another and you will need to do some digging around to find out what is on offer. One advantage of these is greater confidentiality; the fact that you have sought help will not be on your medical or employment records.

## Getting help

*"Trusting other people about it is really hard as you risk rejection. Finding people who don't judge me has been a huge relief".*

*"What I needed was people to listen to me and believe me. To be told I had a right to my feelings and that I didn't have to be punished any more - I needed and deserved to be cared for. Permission just to 'be', and to believe in myself."*

Many women who have tackled and taken control of their self-injury have said that it has helped them to talk through their experiences and feelings, on a regular basis, with a supportive counsellor or therapist. If you feel this might be helpful for you, there are a number of ways to gain access to a counsellor or psychotherapist. (There is little real difference between these; both are 'talking treatments', and in both cases what matters is whether you feel safe and confident with the person, and find their approach helpful.)

Some women have also found it very valuable to join a group where they can share their feelings with others who share similar experiences. Groups may have a leader or run on a self-help basis, and may involve in-depth therapy, or aim mainly to provide support.

### National Health Service Resources

Ask your G.P. to refer you for counselling or psychotherapy, and/or to a group if you would like this. Make it clear that what you want is to talk through and resolve the roots of your self-injury. The availability of counselling and groups varies from one area to another and the picture is quite complex. Some G.P.'s now have a counsellor as part of the practice.

It seems terribly unfair that a person who copes with the pain of her life through self-injury should suffer further through the judgements of others. People whose distress leads them to drink too much, overwork, over-use tranquillisers, make themselves ill through worry and so on are far less likely to be subjected to others' scrutiny, shock and misunderstanding.

If you can accept and support yourself, you will be able deal with others' reactions much better.

### Accepting yourself

The most important thing you can do to help you to deal with others is to start to accept yourself. Self-injury is much more common than people realise, and there are always good reasons for it. Hurting yourself has helped you to cope; it makes sense to you, and you have a right to do it. Hopefully, one day you will not need to hurt yourself any more, but for as long as you do need to, it's okay and you are not doing anything wrong.

It will also help if you can view any injuries and scars on your body with compassion and pride, rather than with self-hatred or shame. They are the marks of your suffering, your struggle and your survival. They are part of you, and they tell parts of your story. Be sad for the pain they signify, but do not condemn yourself for the scars you have sustained in your battles through life.

*"The more I've been able to understand about my self-injury, the less ashamed I've felt about it. I wouldn't have done those things to myself if I hadn't had a pretty hard time in my life. It's not me that's bad, and I'm not going to give myself even more of a hard time for the way I've coped with things. If people ask about my scars I'm quite matter of fact. They can think what they like. Actually, most people I know are very understanding."*

### ***Telling people about your self-injury***

You may decide that there are people in your life with whom you want to talk about your self-injury. Keeping it secret means hiding important parts of yourself, which can leave you feeling very isolated. Trying to cover up your injuries may create tension and barriers between you and the people in your life. Important relationships cannot flourish under these conditions. It may be frightening to tell the people who matter to you about your self-injury, but it also gives them a chance to offer you their support and understanding.

When you talk to people about your self-injury, don't be ashamed or apologetic. Make it clear that you expect them to accept it as something important and meaningful to you. If friends want to be supportive, tell them how they can best help. For example, you may sometimes want to talk about problems which make you feel like hurting yourself, but feel you don't want to be regularly 'interrogated' about whether you have self-injured. You will probably find that once they understand it better and know how to approach it, friends are much more able to accept and cope with your self-injury.

*"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."*

You don't have to explain your self-injury to everyone you meet. Whether and when you tell someone will depend on the person and on what is right for you at the time. You will need to make your own decisions about whether it is appropriate to let some people know of your injuries or see your scars, particularly if your job may be at risk. Don't feel obliged to answer other people's questions or to justify yourself. In the end, what you do to yourself is none of their business.

- Do something relaxing: a bath, yoga, or listen to a relaxation tape. Some women find aromatherapy oils calming and relaxing.
- Listen to some music to suit your mood - loud and dramatic, sad, gentle, or soothing.
- Go to place in your home where you feel safe, comfortable and private. Ask yourself what you need and how best you can look after yourself. (If there isn't anywhere like this in your home, try to create a place for yourself. Make the room as warm, attractive and special to you as you can. It can be comforting to have loving, positive messages to yourself around the walls.)
- If you feel small and needy, comfort yourself kindly. You could put yourself to bed with a teddy and a soothing drink, do something your 'child self' would enjoy, or get someone to give you a cuddle.
- Decide to put off hurting yourself until later, or tomorrow. Promise yourself that you will do it then if you still want to - quite often you will find that the need has gone by then.
- If you are anxious or panicky, you can take control of these feelings. It helps to breathe slowly and deeply (concentrate on breathing out). Imagine that you are breathing out all your anxiety, and breathing in peace. Make sure your body feels safe and supported. Talk to yourself calmly and kindly ("it's okay, nothing bad is going to happen, I'll look after you....."). It can help to sip some water. Some women like to add some 'rescue remedy'.

If none of these tactics works and you end up hurting yourself, it's okay. Be kind to yourself. You haven't done anything wrong, you haven't 'ruined everything' or failed. Accept that you needed to do it this time. Use it as an opportunity to gain more understanding about your self-injury and the feelings and meanings involved.



## Things to do if you feel like hurting yourself

*"The main thing is to calm myself down and avoid cutting until I can think things through. I try to do this by going for a walk, writing my journal, painting or reading. I'm getting better at knowing when I'm likely to do it, putting it off and working out why."*

*"I still sometimes feel like hurting myself, usually when I'm feeling great grief. I deal with it by finding someone to talk to about my feelings."*

While you are trying to take more control of your self-injury, it's a good idea to have a ready-made list of things to do which will help if you get the urge to hurt yourself. This will be individual to you, but here are some ideas for things which other women have found helpful:

- Think back over the last few hours or days and try to pinpoint when you started wanting to hurt yourself and what events or feelings led to it. What would you be 'saying' now if you injured yourself? Can you find another way to say it?
- Ring or visit a friend or supporter, helpline or drop-in service.
- Draw a picture of the wound you want to create. Write or draw any associated feelings. Some women have found it very effective to use face paints to write their feelings on their bodies, later 'washing away' their feelings with the paint.
- Try other ways of expressing your feelings, such as punching or kicking something which won't hurt you (like a cushion), shouting, screaming or crying, or writing.
- Go for a walk or a run, play a vigorous game, or lift weights.

## Self-injury and close relationships

It is inevitable that the people closest to you, such as your partner, close friends and family will be particularly affected by your self-injury. They may be very upset and frightened by your hurting yourself, and may feel helpless, sad, confused, guilty or angry.

With people who are close to you it is important that you talk about your self-injury and how it affects them and your relationship. It may be very painful for you to hear how they feel about it, but acknowledging their feelings is important and supportive, and doesn't mean you have to feel guilty or bad about yourself.

Sometimes partners and family feel manipulated by a woman's self-injury. You may not intend this at all, or it may be that you sometimes hurt yourself as a way of trying to express or deal with your feelings about problems in a relationship.

If there are things wrong in a relationship, try to talk about them directly, rather than 'showing' them by hurting yourself. Give your partner or friend a chance to hear and tackle what is wrong. Encourage them to talk to you about things that are bothering them too. If the other person refuses to listen and talk to you, you may need to consider carefully whether it is really good for you to be involved in this relationship.

Some women find it hard to trust and talk freely even to a loving, supportive partner. This is often because in the past they were betrayed or unheard by people they loved. If this is so for you, be gentle and supportive to yourself but try to reach out past your fears, a bit at a time, to make contact with the person you love. It might help to talk about your fears and tell the other person how they can help you to talk and feel safe. In time you may be able to become allies in tackling the problems and feelings which underlie your self-injury.

## Looking after yourself

For as long as you are still injuring yourself, it is important to keep as safe as possible. Some important ways to look after yourself are:

### Minimising risk

- If you think you are likely to want to hurt yourself, try to avoid drink or drugs, so that you don't accidentally inflict a worse wound than you intend.
- If you cut yourself, make sure you use something clean, and never share anything you use to self-injure, because of the danger of infection. Try to avoid areas of the body where major veins and arteries are close to the surface.
- Burns and scalds can easily be more severe than you intend - the pain is often far worse later than at the time. Take care, and cool any burn with cold water for 20-30 minutes afterwards.
- Be sure to keep your tetanus protection up to date. Once you have had a course of the vaccine, you need a booster every 10 years. You should be able to get this done free at your G.P.'s surgery.

### Taking care of injuries

- Have dressings and antiseptic ready so that you can care for your injuries properly. You can learn from a first aid book or a friend or G.P. how to do this best.

## Making a decision to stop injuring yourself

For some women it can be helpful to make a definite decision to stop self-injuring. Making an explicit statement about stopping, (such as: "I don't need to do this any more. I'm leaving it behind.") can have great power. It may help you believe that you are able to stop self-injuring, and to hold on to your strength and commitment to yourself.

If you feel it would be useful to you to proceed in this way, that's fine, but it is important not to push yourself into deciding to stop injuring yourself altogether too early. If you are not ready to give up what has been an important way of coping, you might just put yourself under a lot of strain, only to end up 'failing' and feeling awful.

The time to decide to stop altogether is probably when you have worked through a lot of what underlies your need to hurt yourself. It might be best to wait until you have developed other ways of dealing with situations and feelings which might lead you to self-injure. In the meantime, it could be just as empowering to make a decision to work towards giving up hurting yourself, and to plan your strategy for this.

If you do decide to stop altogether, and then self-injure again, don't despair. It doesn't mean that the time when you have managed without self-injury 'doesn't count', or that you will carry on hurting yourself. It might be that you were in a particularly vulnerable or stressful situation, and needed your familiar coping strategy this time. If so, you could think about how to avoid such situations, or work out what would help you deal with them differently next time.

However you decide to go about taking control of your self-injury, be kind to yourself. What you are doing takes time, strength and courage. Give yourself credit for every step you take, and try not to feel bad about yourself if you 'slip up'. It is your body and your life and you are doing this for yourself, in the best way you can.

## Reducing self-injury

You may feel you would like to try reducing your self-injury slowly, rather than stopping all at once. Ways of working towards stopping injuring yourself could include:

- gradually reducing the severity of the injuries;
- hurting yourself less often - leaving just a little bit more time in between each occasion;
- slowly reclaiming areas of your body, which you no longer hurt;
- deciding to stop for a trial period - perhaps a day, a week or a month, and monitoring how it feels, what is hard, and so on.

You may find that a combination of approaches works for you, or that different ideas are useful at different times. You might also find that while it is sometimes fairly easy to reduce your self-injury, at other times it is very hard to make any headway at all.

*"Sometimes I feel like I don't know why I'm trying. If it's going to keep being this hard I'd rather just not bother. Sometimes I don't know if I'm giving up self-harm because I want to, or because other people think I should. But then I think about all the times I have managed to go without cutting and I feel really pleased with myself. I know I can do it, and I do want to. When it's hard I need to remind myself how far I've already come."*

If you sometimes seem to be making little progress, don't despair. It's not a race. Every time you take just a tiny bit of control over your self-injury (say by putting it off a bit, or doing it slightly less severely) is a real achievement. It is a sign that you are able to stop. You just

need to do it in your own time.

- For cuts: clean the cut, using a gauze swab, not cotton wool. Cover with a dry, non-adhesive dressing. Fairly superficial wounds close better if you use 'paper stitches' (sterilised paper strips, available over the counter as well as on prescription).
- For burns, ask a pharmacist for a good anti-inflammatory dressing (or cream, for small burns). Never use butter, etc. Again, cover with a very clean, dry dressing which won't stick.

Even though it is self-inflicted, an injury may leave you feeling shocked and upset. Take care of yourself by lying down and resting. Comfort yourself with a warm drink, and a blanket. Try to tell someone supportive about what you have done.

## Seeking medical help

### *Knowing when you need medical attention*

- **Severe injuries:** if a cut is deep and gaping, it will need medical attention. Try to keep the injured part raised and apply pressure to the wound until you get to hospital, to reduce bleeding. You should also seek help for any burn which is bigger than a 50p piece, or which has penetrated far into the skin.
- **Infection:** if a cut or burn is infected, the area around will redden and become hot, swollen and hard. The injury may ooze yellow or green pus, and you may have a temperature. If this happens it is important to get medical treatment or you may become seriously ill.
- **Shock:** shock may occur if you lose a lot of blood (ie. if it spurts, or runs continuously) or if you have large or severe burns. Call an ambulance if this happens.

### ***When you go for medical help***

Many women are justifiably reluctant to seek medical help because of bad experiences, when they felt they were being judged or punished for hurting themselves. You have a right to decent, sensitive treatment for your injuries. You are not less worthy of help than someone who has had an accident. Don't put yourself at risk by denying yourself the help you need. It might help to ask a friend to come with you to hospital - someone who can support you, and talk to staff on your behalf if you want her to.

At some hospitals people who self-injure may be seen for an assessment by a psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse. You may feel this is helpful, but you do not have to explain yourself to anyone if you don't want to. If the hospital feels you may present a serious danger to yourself, they may insist you see a psychiatrist, or try to keep you in hospital. Again, a friend could be very useful to help argue your case, and the hospital may be more prepared to let you go home if there is someone to 'look after' you. You can find out your legal rights in this situation from MIND (see p.52).

Your G.P. is potentially an important source of help. If yours is unsympathetic, you can change to a doctor you feel more comfortable with. It could be helpful to talk to her or him about your self-injury. Explain that much as you would like to stop hurting yourself, you still sometimes need to do it at present and you want to keep yourself as safe as possible. You may be able to have injuries attended to at the surgery, and your doctor may help you learn how to look after them yourself.

Pharmacists (in your local chemist) can also be very useful, and they don't have to know your name. If you are worried about an injury, you can show it to a pharmacist and ask for advice about infection, whether it needs medical treatment, and the best way of looking after it yourself.

## **Taking control of your self-injury**

The last section suggested ways of beginning to tackle the issues which underlie your self-injury. Now we will look at ways you might go about reducing or stopping hurting yourself.

If you feel you would like to start working directly at giving up self-injury, there are a number of ways to proceed, and things which may be helpful to you. Again it's important to go at your own pace.

Having decided you want to stop injuring yourself, you may be keen to give up all at once. This may work for you, and in this section we will explore the pros and cons of making a decision to put self-injury out of your life, once and for all.

Giving up self-injury all at once is not the only way to go forward. It may be right for you, or it may just set you up for failure and more self-punishment. It might be more realistic and kinder to yourself to take a more gradual and flexible approach. In this section there are suggestions for ways to lessen your self-injury slowly and gradually.

When you are working to give up self-injury it is useful to have some ideas for other things to do if you feel like hurting yourself. Here you will find many suggestions for things that other women have found helpful in their struggles to stop injuring themselves.

You may be aware by now of some of the ways in which self-injury has helped you cope with life. Not hurting yourself is going to leave a gap. It will help if you have worked through some of the feelings and experiences which have led you to self-injure. It is also important that you have support. Try to tell some supportive people in your life that you are working at giving up self-injury and ask them for any help you need. Take your time and be extra kind and supportive to yourself as you take up this challenge.

## Conclusion - thinking about change

In this section you have been encouraged to make major changes in many aspects of yourself and your life. There were suggestions for changing old beliefs about yourself, for attending to past and present needs and for contacting and expressing your feelings more fully. You were also asked to consider making profound changes in your circumstances and relationships.

All this is a tall order. Thinking about changing in such important ways can be exciting, challenging and frightening. Bringing about change may be very positive, but can also be difficult and tiring. You may have read through this section quite quickly, but if you decide to put any of the ideas here into practice you will need to take lots of time. Change does not happen quickly, and there is no rush. Be gentle with yourself and take all the time you need to mull over what you have read and the ideas it has generated for you. Don't expect too much of yourself all at once. And take good care of yourself as you set new ways of being in motion.

## Is it possible to stop?

*"There was a time when I was doing things to myself every day; I just couldn't have imagined being able to stop. I haven't done it for years. Sometimes I still get that old feeling of wanting to hurt myself, but it's not very strong, and I never seriously consider doing it again."*

*"I want to give up cutting, but only for myself, not because others want me to. It has got a lot less since I've had more support and worked on my feelings. I've developed other ways of coping, but I still sometimes need to do it. I definitely don't want to keep on self-harming, but I am also quite frightened of being without it."*

You may have vowed many times not to hurt yourself any more, and then found yourself overwhelmed by the urge to do it again. If others know of your self-injury, they have probably pleaded with you to stop, as though this were quite easy to do. Perhaps you feel a failure for still injuring yourself, or you fear that it is something outside your control.

Stopping self-injury is possible, you can take control of it, but it may be hard work. You probably understand something of the desperate situations which have led you to hurt yourself, and the important ways this has helped you to cope. Small wonder that you cannot just give it up at the drop of a hat. But there are ways forward.

You are most likely to be able to stop your self-injury if you can understand and work on the issues in your life which underlie it. You need to develop other ways of coping with the things which hurting yourself has helped you to survive, and other ways of expressing the important things you want to say.

Many women find that as they begin to come to terms with their experiences and to make changes in their lives, the need to hurt themselves gradually fades away. Others also find it useful to focus specifically on their self-injury, and to use each occasion on which they feel like hurting themselves as an opportunity to explore their feelings or situation and to try to find other ways of dealing with them.

Some women like to set themselves specific goals for reducing or stopping their self-harm, and there are some ideas in this booklet for ways of doing this. For some people, it has been important and empowering to make a very definite decision to stop (once they felt ready to cope with life without self-injury). Others find it better to take a more gradual and flexible approach. However you want to go about it, the important thing is to do it at your own pace, in the way that is right for you.

*"At first when I was trying not to self-harm, and to use other ways of coping with my feelings, I used to have to make a real conscious effort. But now it's much more automatic - often I don't even think about hurting myself now, in situations where I definitely would have before."*

In the next section you will find some suggestions for ways to begin developing more understanding about what lies behind your self-injury, and what meanings it has for you.

## **Relationships**

One important area to think about is relationships. Perhaps there are good relationships you could build, others that you could try to improve, and some people that it would be better to steer away from. With some people you may need to be assertive, to say 'no' to their demands, to talk about problems and ask directly for what you need.

*"I used to let people walk all over me and take advantage of me. I was so desperate for people to like me. The funny thing is, people don't even respect you when you're like that. Now I tell people when I don't want to do things for them or I want some time for myself. I still care about other people, but I care about me too."*

If there are people in your life who are hurtful to you, it really is time to put yourself first. Some people, even family members, may be so destructive to you (physically or emotionally) that the only way to look after yourself is to stay away from them. This might be very difficult. You may long for a person's love and blame yourself for the pain they cause you. Or you may feel it is your duty to carry on being there for them. But no-one has the right to abuse or exploit you and no relationship is worth the destruction of yourself. Once you free yourself from harmful relationships you can make new, positive ones.

## **Self-fulfilment**

We all need opportunities in our lives to express and develop ourselves. Work, study, friendships, writing, music, sport, travel, spirituality and many other things can provide these opportunities. If your life isn't giving you enough of these things, you could begin thinking about what you most want to do and how you could make just a small start in going about it. It's your life and you have every right to live it in your way, getting out of it what you want for yourself.

## Making changes in your life

Earlier we looked at how your present circumstances may be involved in your self-injury. You may be aware of things in your life which are wrong for you. You may also have identified some things you need and some areas of your life where you want to make changes.

### ***Practical matters***

As far as possible, you should try to make sure that the practicalities of your life are satisfactory. To be able to cope with and work on your feelings and tackle your self-injury you need to be living in safe, decent accommodation, having good food and enough rest.

Sometimes quite small things would make a real difference to your life, such as having a bit more help with your children or working fewer hours so you have time and energy for yourself. You have the right to make things easier and better for yourself.

You may also need to make major changes in your life, such as moving away from a place where you are harassed or threatened, or leaving a stressful job. Don't stay in a situation which is harmful or undermining to you. You deserve to make things better for yourself.

*"It's amazing how important my home is to how I feel. I can't live on my own - I get very frightened and negative. Having privacy and space for myself but company when I need it make all the difference."*

There may be practical problems in your life such as being unemployed, short of money, or on your own with children which are hard to change. Do approach local agencies for advice and help. Sometimes we can't change things in our lives and we feel powerless and angry. You have a right to express your anger about problems and restrictions in your life, to protest directly rather than turn your

feelings in upon your own body.

## Understanding your self-injury

This section begins with suggestions for understanding what your self-injury means to you and how it helps you. It goes on to look at ways of exploring events and situations in the past which may have caused you to begin hurting yourself. After this there are suggestions for thinking about how your present life circumstances may contribute to your urge to injure yourself. Understanding these things is the first step towards being able to exercise more choice about hurting yourself.

If like many women you are affected by other forms of self-harm, such as overuse of drink or drugs or problems with food, you can work towards understanding these in the same way. You could read most of what follows as applying to these methods of coping too.



Understanding why you injure yourself may not be easy. People injure their own bodies because it makes their emotional agony more bearable. Facing your self-injury can involve facing up to a lot of painful feelings and experiences, and it's important to take it slowly and be kind to yourself. If it is too hard or frightening, leave it for a while. Don't let it be another way to feel bad and hurt yourself.

The sense that self-harm has in your life will probably be quite complex and individual to you. Give yourself credit for every bit of understanding you build up about it. You might find it useful to talk through the process with a supportive friend or counsellor. You could also write down your thoughts and insights; you are likely to end up with a long list of varied and contradictory ideas, which you can make sense of gradually.

## Finding out what self-injury means for you

*"I feel as though it's getting rid of some of the 'horridness' inside me".*

*"The pain inside is very scary because there's no relief from it. A wound on the skin is identifiable, tangible. (It also heals of its own accord, unlike internal pain.) It's a way of somehow defining the fact that there's pain to be dealt with, even though that pain can't be seen".*

*"It's a way of taking control when I can't get it any other way".*

To help you to start mapping out the meanings and functions of self-injury in your life, you could try asking yourself some questions such as those listed below. You may need to take lots of time over this and keep coming back to a question and jotting down more ideas.

- When did I first start injuring myself? What was going on in my life then that might be relevant?
- How did self-injury help me survive in the past? How does it help me survive now?
- How do I feel before I hurt myself? How do I feel afterwards? What feelings may I be expressing or avoiding through self-harm?

You could begin planning and working towards ways of including more good, enjoyable, nurturing things in your life. You could start by making a list of the things you need, or drawing a picture of yourself, contented and surrounded with whatever will fulfil your needs.

Next you could pick one thing at a time and work out some steps you need to take to get this. If, say, you need more support you might decide to talk to your partner, to see a counsellor, and so on. This will involve your making a firm commitment to yourself. It may also involve making some changes in your circumstances and relationships. We will go on to look more at this in the next section.



It is not 'selfish' to think about your own needs in this way. Women spend much of their time anticipating and responding to the needs of others; - children, partners, family and friends. Yet we all have needs and you have the right to think about and respond to yours.

It is often hard to believe this. You may find yourself seeking others' permission for something you need. Sometimes we want others to define and fulfil our needs for us. It can be painful and frightening to think about our own needs and we may still long for others to look after us in ways we missed out on as children. Of course we do need things from other people, but we need to look after ourselves too. Only you can really know what it is you need. And only you can be fully relied upon to know what is right for you and to make sure you get it.



Sometimes what you need may be to treat yourself as you might a child who was hurt, lonely or unhappy. What would she need to feel safe and loved? What would she really enjoy doing? The strong, adult part of you is probably very good at looking after other people's needs. You can also give love and caring to the part of yourself which still feels the needs of a small, hurt child.

You may find messages from the past coming up to say you are 'being stupid' or 'babyish' or 'you don't deserve anything'. If this happens, answer back, telling yourself you **do** deserve to have what you need.

*"When I feel bad I sometimes take myself to bed with a hot water bottle and some hot chocolate. I wrap myself up in the duvet and snuggle down and give myself lots of sympathy. That can sometimes get me out of feeling really awful and self-destructive ."*

By paying attention to your own needs in this way you can gradually ease the ache that so many women feel inside, and have less need to suffer pain and injury before you can experience any caring.

### **Longer-term needs**

As you become more aware of your needs from moment to moment some patterns will probably emerge. You might find that the same needs arise again and again. Perhaps you often feel the need for a supportive person to talk to. Perhaps you often long for rest and time for yourself, or you wish your life was more exciting and full. This is a sign that you need to arrange your life in such a way that these important longer-term needs can be fulfilled.

- If self-injury was a language, what would I be saying?
- What sorts of situations in my life now tend to 'spark off' my self-injury? What is it about these situations which makes me want to hurt myself?

Once you identify some 'triggering' situations you could try to work out what steps seem to lead you from these to the urge to self-injure. For example the sequence might be:

A friend hurts me by something she says; → I don't say anything; → I feel more hurt and misunderstood;  
→ I hold in my feelings; → I want to hurt myself.

This will help you to pinpoint what self-injury is about for you. It will also give you some ideas about how to interrupt the process of moving towards hurting yourself, if you want to and feel able to.

- How do I imagine life without self-injury? What might be difficult, frightening or overwhelming?
- What do I like about my self-injury - about the act itself, the wounds, the scars?

### ***What you might discover***

As you build up your understanding of what self-injury means to you and how it has helped you cope with life, some themes may emerge.

You might have started hurting yourself when you were much younger, and feel that when you do so now it is mainly due to the legacy of bad feelings from the past. Or you may feel that it is aspects of your current life situation which cause you to hurt yourself (or past and present experiences may be relevant).

You will probably find that self-injury helps you cope with overwhelming feelings. Perhaps it enables you to communicate things you don't say in any other way (even if the communication is only to yourself). Perhaps you can only feel that you are not 'bad', and give yourself some compassion when you have hurt yourself.

Identifying these themes can reassure you that you have had good reasons for hurting yourself. Self-injury has been a valuable strategy for coping with situations and feelings which might otherwise have been unbearable. Whilst it may look as though you want to destroy yourself, in fact hurting yourself has been about survival, and you have done well to find something which has helped you to cope.

*"Gradually I began to recognise the times when I would want to cut myself. I would be feeling panicky, small and unreal. I'd feel myself falling faster and faster into this scary place from the past. Cutting stopped me falling and brought me back to now, to safety. I couldn't stop doing it until I could get through that terror and find other ways of feeling safe."*

*"Something in me needed to register my distress, kind of like a prisoner tapping on the pipes. I think of it as a 'Mayday' code of communication between my psyche and myself".*

### **Meeting your needs**

It is important to begin to pay attention to your needs and find ways of meeting them. The first step is to become aware of your needs as they arise. You can begin by asking yourself the question:

*"What do I need right now?"*

You can do this anytime, but it is particularly important to do it when you are feeling 'empty', upset, frightened or low.

If you aren't used to thinking about your own needs you might draw a blank at first. It's a good idea to start by concentrating on physical needs (and these are very important in themselves). Try to identify some simple things that you need: to sit comfortably or to do something energetic, to lie down and curl up under the covers, to be warmer or cooler, or to have something to eat or drink.

*"I used to find it really difficult to recognise any needs I was feeling. I'd feel uncomfortable in some way and I'd just reach for a cigarette or a drink. If that didn't work I'd start thinking about hurting myself. Sometimes I was just hungry, or tired, but I didn't realise it. Other times it was something I needed emotionally. I've had to practise sitting there with the feeling, trying out ideas in my head until I recognise what it is I'm in need of."*

Gradually you can begin to identify other, more complex things that you need, such as to talk to someone, to be on your own, to do something creative, to have a cuddle; - whatever feels right for you. You can ask yourself further questions to help you work out what you need, such as: *"What would I like someone to say to me or do for me at the moment?"* Many of the things we would like others to give us (such as appreciation or caring) we can also give ourselves, if we can let ourselves feel and recognise our own needs.

If you have reached a point where you would like to take more control over your self-injury, you may now have ideas about issues in your life which you need to resolve, so that you no longer need to hurt yourself.

The next section suggests some ways in which you can begin to explore past experiences and the effects these may have had on you. Next it goes on to look at the ways in which your current life situation may contribute to your need to hurt yourself.

If you have nightmares, flashbacks or distressing pictures in your mind it can be very helpful to put these out onto paper. You can also draw pictures of people you are angry with and then show in the picture what you feel like doing to them, or burn or tear up the paper.

*"I'm not very good at talking but I can express myself through art. It has to be powerful - lots of black and red. I do it fast, nearly slashing through the paper. Then I sit back and look at it, and I think, "right, that's how real and strong and important my feelings are."*

### *Talking*

Talking about your feelings with someone who will listen and respect them is very valuable. Sometimes it is hard to start because you are unsure what you feel, or why. It can help if you tell yourself that it's okay to just start anywhere; it doesn't have to make sense. Gradually what you need to say will come out, and the sense will emerge.

If you have feelings such as hurt, anger or resentment towards someone who is important in your life now, try to talk to them about these directly, rather than turning the feelings against yourself.

### *Physical ways of expressing your feelings*

Strong feelings of anger, fear, or sadness may need powerful forms of expression. Perhaps you have learnt that it is 'stupid' to cry, or 'wrong' to raise your voice. But when feelings like these are stifled they stay inside, making you depressed, tense, anxious and self-destructive. It is okay to cry, shout, or scream. You could stamp, or kick or punch something soft, like a cushion. Your feelings are important and need to be released, not turned into more self-punishment.

## Exploring the roots of your self-injury - the past

*"I think my whole childhood contributed to it. I was made to believe I was a dark-hearted and bad person, and being sent away to boarding school confirmed this for me. I felt as if I were being exiled, banished, that I was unfit to be amongst decent folk."*

For many women, self-injury began as a way of coping with distressing events in the past. These may have been childhood experiences, such as sexual or physical abuse, or emotional hurts and deprivation. Perhaps they grew up in a family where there was little communication, particularly about feelings, problems and needs.

Other women have begun hurting themselves in response to difficult experiences as an adult. These might include things such as unhappy relationships, the pressures of being alone with children and no money, or traumatic experiences such as rape or other assault.



The past still matters if its legacy spoils your life today. The point of looking back over the past is not to remain stuck in it, or to keep blaming others for their wrongs. In fact it is the opposite; to allow you to finish with the pain and the patterns of long ago. Then you can leave them behind and get on with living your life as you want to.

You may have clear memories of the past, or you may have many 'blanks'. Some women remember all too clearly the unhappiness of their past. Others say that they cannot identify anything in their lives which could 'justify' their desperation. There is often no single event which can give a neat explanation for self-injury. Instead there is a complex mixture of factors which need to be recognised and explored.

## Ways of exploring and expressing feelings

Exploring and expressing your feelings safely can be done in lots of ways. Different women feel comfortable with different ways of showing how they feel. The important thing is to choose ways which feel safe and right for you.

### Writing

Some women find writing very helpful. If you are not sure what you feel, you could try just taking a big piece of paper and writing down any words that come into your mind. It doesn't have to make sense, and no-one else has to see it. Just let it flow. You may need to keep coming back to it, but important feelings will emerge.

You can also write your feelings in a diary, or in prose or poetry. If you are hurt or angry you can write letters to the people involved. Even if it's about something that happened years ago, even if the person is dead, it can be good to put down everything you'd like to say to them. You don't have to post the letter, but later you may decide to include some of the things you've written in something you do send.

*"I've written so many angry letters to my father, and drawn pictures of him, written pages about what happened and all the things I've felt and thought. Recently I burned a lot of it; it was great, I felt so free."*

### Drawing and painting

Some women find they can explore their confusions, experiences and feelings better through painting, drawing, crayons or clay. You don't have to be 'good at art'. You can make abstract pictures which simply express a feeling, or you can show the different aspects of

yourself - strong, vulnerable, angry, needy, and so on.

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You can free yourself from the pain of the past and deal much better with feelings aroused by events in the present if you allow your feelings to come naturally to the surface. Given the chance, the feelings you need to deal with will come up. The next step is to accept them, honour them and express them, not leaving them to build up into a volcano, or turning them into depression or self-hatred.

To allow the feelings you need to deal with to come up, you need to let yourself be aware. You are feeling things all the time, so all you need to think about is now. Ask yourself the question:

*"What am I feeling right now?"*

You can do this any time, and it's a good idea to do it when you are feeling fairly good, as well as when you are agitated or distressed.

#### *Feelings in your body*

We often experience our feelings physically, in our bodies (for example 'butterflies' in the tummy, heaviness when we are sad, shaking when we are frightened). So it is very important to pay attention to feelings in your body, as well as to thoughts you have about what you feel. If you are not very used to paying attention to your feelings you may find it much easier to be aware of what you are feeling in your body than to try to identify abstract emotions.

Whatever your body seems to be 'saying' to you, or whatever thoughts come to mind, accept your feelings and respect that you have good reasons for them. Don't tell yourself that you are silly or unreasonable. The next step is to find safe ways to express the many important things you feel.

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#### ***Questions to think about***

Here are some questions which you could ask yourself to help you understand the roots of your self-injury. Again, these are things to think about slowly, perhaps talking them through with someone else, or writing down thoughts and experiences as they come to you.

- When in my life have I been very hurt, frightened, sad or angry?
- Which people in my life have hurt me, confused me or made me feel bad about myself?
- When have I been lonely and lacked support and love? Were there times when I was not allowed to talk, to have feelings and needs?
- How has power been wielded over me in my life?

It can also be useful to draw a 'lifeline' for yourself, on which you map out all the important events of your life. You can then pick out significant times and situations which may have caused some of the pain and conflicts you express through your self-injury.

Thinking about these things might upset you, so be kind to yourself. Comfort yourself for the sadness, fear or powerlessness you have suffered. Allow yourself some righteous anger. You can begin right now to soothe some of the hurts of the past for yourself. We may not be able to change what has happened to us, but we can do something about its effects on our lives now.

## How the past may continue to affect you

Painful experiences from the past can linger on inside us in several ways. Although the things you have been thinking about may have happened long ago, their legacy can continue to spoil your life. Once you can identify how the past still affects you, you can begin to undo its power over you. Some of the ways in which the past can continue to affect us are through old 'messages' or ideas about ourselves and others, as well as in leftover, unexpressed feelings and unmet needs.

### Messages from the past

*"I'm always telling myself 'you're so bad, everything's your fault', or 'you're so stupid'. They're the same things I used to say to myself when I was little. I think it helped me make sense of what was going on. In a way it still 'comforts' me, but it also makes me feel awful".*

*"The words used to echo in my mind, over and over, 'you're stupid, you're useless.' "*

One way the past can still affect us is in the form of ideas or 'messages' about ourselves and others which we have learned (often as children) and which hurt us or interfere with our lives. Old messages might tell us things like: 'you are a wicked person who needs to be punished'; or 'you mustn't show your feelings'. These sorts of messages can often be involved (even if unconsciously) in the decision to hurt yourself.

The thing about hurtful messages is that while they may have made sense in the past, most of them are untrue or inappropriate to your life now. You had to believe in them before, perhaps because they were told to you by parents you needed to trust. But now you can take another look at them and see which are untrue. It is unlikely you really are a wicked person; it can now be okay to show your feelings,

and so on.

## Dealing with your feelings

*"I used to think I just wasn't an angry person."*

*"I'm beginning to understand that when I feel guilty and bad about myself it's usually because I'm trying to avoid the terrible sadness and grief that are underneath. I feel like I've got a sea of tears inside ."*

Women often say that self-injury is the only way they can express their anger and frustration, or show the depth of their pain and despair. Others injure themselves to try to escape feelings. Perhaps you are not even sure what you feel; you only know that hurting yourself somehow helps. Many women have learnt that they don't have a right to feelings. But your feelings are important and justified. They give clues about what is right for you. And painful though they can be, feelings are part of what makes us human and gives life its richness.

This section is about ways of exploring and expressing any feelings which you channel into self-injury. This is likely to involve uncovering a lot of pain and you need to be gentle with yourself, get support and go at a pace you can cope with.

### Awareness

When you read through the last section you may have identified some leftover feelings from the past which still affect you. Things which happen in your life now will also spark off a whole range of feelings for you. It is likely that feelings from both the past and the present are important contributors to your need to hurt yourself.

Many of us hide from our feelings, not wanting to be aware of them because they hurt too much. We may avoid awareness by drinking, taking tranquillisers, being frantically busy, or injuring ourselves. Yet our feelings are still there inside, crying out for attention. The weight

of unexpressed feelings prevents us from enjoying our lives.

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### ***Erasing and replacing old messages***

Having reviewed some old messages and beliefs which may contribute to your need to self-injure, you could write down a list of things on your 'old tapes' which you have decided are untrue, and which you want to erase. It is useful to also write down where each message came from and your reasons for deciding it is no longer valid.

Under another heading you could write new, positive messages which you want to record for yourself. Include statements which contradict your old, hurtful beliefs. If you have believed, say, that you were bad and undeserving you could write: "I am a good person who deserves to be cared for", listing all the good, lovable things about you.

Having erased and replaced your old beliefs, you could think about any other new, positive messages you want to adopt for yourself. These could reflect dreams you have, or things you want for yourself, such as "I deserve to have fun and do new, exciting things".

### ***Practice***

You have had years of practice in believing the old, bad messages about yourself. Now you need to give yourself lots of chances to practise and take in the new messages you want to replace them with. It can be helpful to pin up your new, positive ideas on the wall where you will see them every day. You could also tell friends about them.

It's natural that old ideas will creep in again at times, especially at first. If you find yourself feeling bad, or behaving in ways that you don't want to, you could check whether you have revived one of your old tapes. Then you can say for yourself again, "no, I don't believe that stuff any more". Don't worry if you have to do this lots of times.

We can't change our ideas overnight, but even just being more aware of them will begin to make a difference in your life.

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### ***Identifying old messages***

First you need to identify the messages which are undermining you, and which may be contributing to your urge to hurt yourself. You could try making lists under headings such as:

- 'bad things I believe about myself';
- 'what I imagine others think of me';
- 'rules I impose on myself';
- 'how I think I deserve to be treated';
- 'what I believe about other people'.

You can also try to be more aware, each day, of the thoughts and beliefs that are shaping your decisions. If you feel like hurting yourself, try to become aware of the things you are telling yourself inside.

*"I was brought up to think I was responsible for how my parents felt. Now I always think if people are unhappy, it's my fault. Then I want to cut myself, as a punishment. I have to keep reminding myself I haven't done anything wrong."*

Fortunately, you can do something about the old messages which hurt you and may lead you to self-injure. We will look at what to do about these in the later section, 'Ways forward' (page 29). If you prefer, you could turn to that section now, before going on to look at how leftover feelings from the past may be affecting your life in the present.

## Leftover feelings

*"There is just so much anger and grief inside me - about everything: about the past, about being put in hospital.....I hurt myself instead of crying or having a go at other people."*

Many women self-injure to cope with enormous tension or terrible emotional pain. Often these feelings reflect anger, sadness or fear from long ago. If you have had painful experiences and have not been allowed to express your feelings they may remain locked inside you, poisoning the present.

Sometimes we have very strong feelings which cannot be explained by anything that is happening in our lives now. We can also find ourselves 'over-reacting' to something; feeling distress which later seems to have been out of proportion. These are often clues that what we are feeling is due to unexpressed emotions left over from the past. Another clue can be anxiety. If you often feel anxious or panicky for no apparent reason, this may be because you are pushing down frightening feelings, some of which are left over from long ago.

### **Identifying old feelings**

It is important to try to find out what 'old' feelings you might still be carrying around with you, and perhaps channelling into self-injury. You could do this in several ways. One way might be to look back at some of the times in your life which you have identified as particularly painful or significant, and think about how you felt then.

What did you do with the feelings you had? Were you listened to and comforted, or did you bury your pain inside, where it still lies? If you find it hard to remember how you felt, try to imagine how someone else in that situation might feel. It might also be useful to write about the situation, or draw pictures.

## Consulting other people

Pick some supportive friends whose opinions you respect, not people who put others down. Tell them what you are doing and that you need honest feedback. Ask them to say how they see you. Try to hear and take in the good things they say, not just any negative things.

Some of your ideas may be about relationships or life in general, such as, 'if you tell people how you feel they will reject you'. Again, ask others how they see things. Experiment with other ideas. You might try telling a friend one risky thing about your feelings, and seeing how they react. Be aware that when we expect people to respond a certain way, it is easy to see a reaction that isn't really there. It helps to check with your friends how they really feel about what you have said.

### *Looking at the source of messages you have taken in*

You probably know where some old negative messages came from (parents, school, a boss, someone you had a relationship with, etc.) What reasons might they have had for making you believe bad things about yourself? How valid do you think their judgements really were? To what extent are you a casualty of their conflicts and unhappiness?

*"I used to live with someone who was alcoholic. He always managed to blame me for his binges. Somehow I had hurt him or let him down. I ended up feeling like the worst person in the world. But he would have drunk whatever I did. He was just making up excuses."*

### *Seeing how things have changed over time*



You could also think about how things have changed since you learned certain ideas. Some things you believe probably were true in the past (such as, 'I am powerless'), but are no longer valid. As we grow up and our lives change we can throw out hurtful ideas which no longer fit reality.

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### ***Reviewing your 'old tapes'***

The first thing to do is to make a list of messages and beliefs on your 'tapes' which you think are related to your urge to hurt yourself, and which you want to review. Then try some of these ideas:

#### *Taking another look at yourself*

Write honest lists of your own qualities, achievements, and abilities. Don't just concentrate on the 'bad' things. For every negative thing, try to write at least two positive things about yourself. Try to look at yourself from the outside, as you would someone else (we usually give others much more credit than we do ourselves).

Focus on one of the ideas about yourself that you want to review (say, 'I am a wicked person'.) Then ask yourself what evidence there is for this. What evidence is there against this view of yourself? On similar evidence, would you judge someone else in the same way? (Again, we tend to judge ourselves much more harshly than we do other people).

If any of your negative ideas about yourself relate to something wrong you feel you have done, take another look. What were the circumstances under which you did the thing for which you blame yourself? What pressures were you under? Were others involved and what blame should they carry? To what extent could you really have done anything else? And how many years' self-hatred does your 'crime' really justify? (Again, use the test of how you would judge someone else in your situation.)

*"I have spent most of my life blaming myself for letting my father abuse me. For having a 'special relationship' with him which shut out my Mum. Now I see that I didn't really have any choices. I was too*

*young to understand the games he was playing. My only 'crime' was wanting to be good, to be loved."*

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Another way to identify how old feelings might be affecting you is by keeping a diary, recording how you feel each day. You may begin to see patterns in your feelings and the situations which trigger them.

You could then think back to any similar situations in the past. For example, suppose that you now feel terribly upset and angry and hurt yourself when someone seems to reject you. Looking back to similar situations from the past might reveal that you had similar feelings then, which you were forced to deny or hide. Those feelings were then trapped inside, but are re-awakened by similar situations years later.



It might feel a bit silly and 'self-indulgent' to think about the feelings you had years ago. But it is not silly to still be sad about the losses you suffered in the past. It is absolutely understandable if you still feel the rage you stifled as a child or woman who was abused or hurt in some way. And however long ago their roots, unresolved feelings from the past are very real and have important effects on us now.

Thinking about powerful feelings from the past can be very upsetting. It is important to take this slowly and be kind to yourself. The hopeful part about uncovering feelings is that you won't have to carry your old pain around with you for ever. As you let out your feelings, respect them and care for yourself, you will finally be able to let it go.

You will find many more ideas to help you deal with 'old' feelings in the section 'Dealing with your feelings', on page 33. Again, you might feel you want to look at that section before moving on to consider how needs which were not met in the past may be hurtful to you now.

## Leftover needs

*"It's like there's a child inside me, screaming. Most of the time I see her as bad. Hurting myself stops the screaming; then I can cry, see the child's wounds, feel compassion and look after her."*

*"I have an empty gap inside, that cries out for the childhood I lost, and was never able to experience."*

Some of the pain you carry inside might be about needs which have not been met. As children we have important physical needs. We also need to be protected, loved, nurtured, accepted and listened to.

For many women who self-injure, childhood held little security or nurturing. Some women were poorly cared for, others had their physical needs met but lacked love and attention. Some had parents who were ill or unable to cope. Often they were the ones doing the caring; providing for their parents' needs and pushing down their own. Girls in particular are often expected to 'put others first' and deny their own needs. Unfortunately, our needs do not just go away, but continue to cry out inside us and cause us great pain.

Many women say that injuring themselves helps them to cope with or express their neediness. Perhaps you self-injure to distract yourself from feelings of need and emptiness, or to punish yourself for having needs at all. Perhaps in being injured you hope others will see your pain and your needs and take care of you. Or you may find hurting yourself allows you to give yourself some caring.

You may feel reluctant to think about how unmet needs may still

## Ways forward

In the last section there were suggestions for developing your understanding of what lies behind your self-injury. You may have made some discoveries about how your experiences, feelings, needs and ideas about yourself have led you to self-injure. This section suggests some ways of dealing with these. There are ideas for changing damaging beliefs you may hold about yourself and for exploring and expressing feelings, as well as for recognising and meeting your own needs. There are also suggestions for making changes in your life circumstances

### Changing unhelpful messages and beliefs

You have probably identified some messages you received in the past which tell you bad things about yourself or others. You may be aware that you continue to take in hurtful ideas which may lead you to self-injure. It can be helpful to imagine that these ideas are stored on tapes, which replay in your mind. You can carry on believing them, or you can review them and decide what is untrue, or no longer relevant.

This may be quite hard to do. If you have believed something for a long time it can feel like an established fact, rather than just an idea or opinion. It may feel safer to keep believing the same things than to risk thinking something different, and perhaps coming unstuck. You may not have much experience on which to base any other views.

Supposing you have always believed that you are bad and unlovable. You have probably backed up this view by only noticing the 'bad' things about yourself, and not giving yourself credit for your good and lovable qualities. Perhaps you have not dared to seek others' love, telling yourself you don't need it. Beginning to think you are good and lovable will feel strange. Seeking love may feel risky and frightening.

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## **Conclusion - exploring your self-injury**

If you have read right through this section on understanding your self-injury, you have probably done a lot of difficult work. You will have had to think hard about your self-injury, trying to understand how it has helped you to cope with painful things. You will have explored distressing experiences from the past and difficult circumstances in your life now. You will also have dug down inside to find feelings and needs which you have previously buried to protect yourself from pain.

Thinking about these sorts of things is very hard. It takes courage and strength to explore your experiences and feelings, and can leave you feeling exhausted and upset. Give yourself credit for the hard work you have done. Be kind to yourself if it has been hurtful to you to face these things.

The next section looks at ways of overcoming the painful legacy of the past and making positive changes in your life now.

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## ***Identifying leftover needs***

As with leftover feelings, you can become more aware of your unmet needs from the past and how these affect you. You could ask yourself some questions such as:

- How well were my emotional and physical needs met when I was a child? How about since I became an adult?
- What did I do in the past to try to get others to notice me and my needs? What do I do now?
- At times when my needs have not been met, what did I do with them? Did I deny and squash them, or perhaps compensate by looking after others?
- How have I felt when my needs were not being met - angry, sad, ashamed, frightened....? What did I do with my feelings?
- How does self-injury help me cope with or express my needs?

Once you become more aware of your old, unmet needs and their connection with self-injury, you can begin to put things right for yourself. The section 'Meeting your needs' on page 37 looks in detail at how to do this. If you like, you could turn to that section now, before going on to look at how your present life situation may

contribute to your urge to hurt yourself.

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### Exploring the roots of your self-injury - the present

*"I always seem to go back to hurting myself when I'm in a bad relationship. If I'm with someone who won't communicate, who won't listen to me or who puts me down. It's partly frustration, partly defiance, and partly a way of controlling my own pain."*

*"Since I lost my job I've felt worthless and aimless. I don't know who I am. That's made me cut myself more."*

Your self-injury may reflect past hurts, but it is likely that there are also things in your life now which hurt you, or diminish your energy, self-esteem or sense of control.

There may be practical or financial difficulties which cause you distress. Perhaps other people in your life undermine, abuse or exploit you. Perhaps you have important needs which aren't being met. You may have little control over your circumstances. Or perhaps your life is dominated by the demands of children or a job which take too much out of you. These things may spark off or perpetuate self-injury.

It can be helpful to take a look at your life and identify the things in it which are good for you, and those which hurt, drain or diminish you. You could try asking yourself some of these questions:

- Which people in my life feel good and supportive; and which do I feel do not respect me, demand too much of me, hurt me or seem to have a bad effect on my self-esteem?
- In which areas of my life do I feel I have control and choice; and in which do I feel powerless?

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- Are there important practical difficulties (money, housing, employment, etc.) in my life? How do these make me feel?
- Which things in my life 'feed' me and make me feel good; and which deplete or hurt me? (These could be things such as work, leisure activities, home circumstances.)
- How well are my needs met? (The sorts of things to think about include: friendship and support; recognition and appreciation by others; satisfying work or activities; time and space for yourself; rest and relaxation; opportunities to explore new things or parts of yourself.....)
- What opportunities are there in my life for expressing my feelings and views?
- What situations in my life now tend to make me want to hurt myself? What is it about those situations?

You will probably identify both positive and negative aspects of your life and relationships - things which are good and sustaining, and

those which are harmful to you, and which you may try to cope with by injuring yourself. In the section 'Ways forward' we will look at how you might begin to make some positive changes in areas of your life which play a part in your urge to hurt yourself.

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## **Self-help for self-injury**

Written by **Lois Arnold**  
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 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 Sundays from 6pm to 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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This booklet was produced as part of a two-year 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 an sae to:

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