



Self Harm

'Regrettably Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have twice the rate of hospitalisation for intentional self harm compared to Non-Aboriginal people'

Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005) Australian Government, Canberra

It is important to note that there are differences between intentional self harm and some cultural practices. It is very important to find and distinguish between what could be perceived as sorry business or ceremony and self harm. We must remember that in some communities it may be the culture to practice 'sorry cuts' when grieving a family member. Obviously these acts can be misinterpreted by people outside the community who may not understand the grieving practice of the community. We must remember may be depressed and situations like these need help from professionals.

So what is self harm?

Self harm describes a range of things people do to harm themselves deliberately. It is usually done in a hidden way, and can go on for a long time without being exposed. These things can include cutting, burning, banging, scratching or hitting their own body, or even taking / drinking toxic products.

A person who is self harming doesn't necessarily mean that they want to commit suicide, but if people are not helped, the desire to end their lives might become stronger, or their methods of self harm could go horribly wrong, and could potentially lead to death.

So what are some warning signs?

Although many people who self harm want to keep it hidden, they can go to great lengths to ensure that no one finds out, and some warning signs of self harm are:

- Unexplained injuries like cuts and burns
- Wearing heavy clothing in warm weather (jumpers, long sleeves etc)
- Low self esteem
- Problems with relationships
- Not wanting to go to places like the beach or a pool as they would have to wear more revealing clothing.

So why do people self harm?

There are a number of reasons why people self harm, some cry, get angry, avoid social situations as a way to cope. Sometimes people face situations that bring them enormous amounts of pain and intense emotions. Some people who go through these intense emotions have not been taught how to effectively cope with them. They build up these feelings inside, which sometimes makes it difficult for them to think clearly, and the pain inside gets too much. Often, people who self harm do it to feel pain physically so that they don't have to feel it emotionally. They could be doing it because emotionally they feel numb, or they want to punish themselves. There are many things that could lead a person to self harm and this can include:

- Bullying or discrimination
- Losing someone close to them
- A serious illness
- Pressures of everyday life
- Physical or sexual abuse

Where can I go for help?

Sometimes we face events in our lives that we are unable to handle ourselves or with help of family and friends and sometimes there are situations in our lives that might be too much for us to cope with. In these cases, there are options out there for you to take.

Some of these options can include:

- Counselling (Someone to yarn too)
- Behavioural and Lifestyle changes (Health Choices)
- See a doctor who might give you medication that can help

If you just want to have a yarn or if you would like to find out more information contact any of your local Community Mental Health or other services listed below.

The Aboriginal Social & Emotional Wellbeing Fact Sheet Series was designed by the Aboriginal Social & Emotional Wellbeing workers David Freeman & Brenda Freeman based at Campbelltown Community Mental Health Service
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The information provided was adapted from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health First Aid Training Manual and the SANE Australia website. www.sane.org