

Spotlight

on Women & Self-harm

March 2018

Self-harm is the act of deliberately hurting one's own body, and includes cutting, biting, burning, poisoning and scratching.¹ Women are more likely to self-harm than men and are at risk of starting to self-harm from early adolescence.² They are more likely to hide their self-harming behaviour and injure themselves in places on their body that can be easily covered.³

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health found that 45% of Australian women aged 18-23 years reported ever self-harming.⁴ Young women make up a significant proportion of self-harm-related hospitalisations.⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are hospitalised for self-harm at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal women and hospitalisation rates generally increase with level of disadvantage and degree of remoteness.⁵ Self-harm rates are high for young women with a mental illness² including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and eating disorders.^{2,6} It is a diagnostic feature of borderline personality disorder.² Trans youth also have high rates of self-harm.⁷ Though incidents of self-harm often cease in early adulthood, a recent Australian study found that 2.5% of women aged between 25-30 years reported self-harming.⁹

Though previous research on self-harm and suicidal behaviours in women has focused on individual or clinical factors predicting self-harm, recent qualitative research has highlighted the role of interpersonal and social factors in precipitating self-harm. These factors can include: socio-economic disadvantage, a history of sexual and physical abuse, issues at home (sense of disconnect from family, dysfunctional family), social isolation or problematic friendships.¹⁰ Self-harm in adult women specifically is associated with experiencing depression, dieting behaviours, tiredness of life, stress, and physical and sexual abuse.⁹ Cessation is linked to improved ability to regulate emotion, increased self-awareness and support and developing positive coping abilities.⁹

Reasons for self-harm are diverse. The behaviour can be a coping mechanism in response to intense emotional pain and psychological distress,² a way to gain control over one's body,¹⁰ a form of self-punishment or a means to release tension.³ As women are socialised to conceal anger, self-harming may also be a way of turning that anger and stress inwards.³

The relationship between self-harm and suicidal intent is overlapping and complex. Self-harm is sometimes, but not always, accompanied by suicidal thoughts and/or intention, and suicidal intent can also be ambivalent.² Those who self-harm are at an increased risk of suicide.²

Due to the stigma associated with self-harm, many women do not seek treatment.² Suicidal behaviour and self-harm in women can be viewed by family, health professionals and the community as attention-seeking, manipulative and non-serious, which can negatively influence how young women are treated.¹¹ In Australia and internationally¹², self-harm in young women is on the rise, highlighting the need for widely available, gender-sensitive treatment which addresses coping behaviours as well as the reasons women turn to self-harm. With effective treatment, and if the underlying distress is managed, it is anticipated that self-harming behaviours will likely remit.

WHV thanks the following expert reviewers for their input:

- Dr. Jo Robinson, Orygen The National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health
- Professor Deborah Loxton and Natalie Townsend, Australian Longitudinal Study of Women's Health, The University of Newcastle.
- headspace Clinical Team

Overview

[Suicide and hospitalised self-harm in Australia: trends and analysis](#) AIHW, 2014 – *from 2012 data*

[Looking the other way: Young people and self-harm](#), Orygen National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, 2016

[Chapter 6: Self-harm and suicidal behaviour of young people aged 14-15 years old](#) *In: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children: Annual statistical report. Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2016*

[Understanding self-harm: for young people](#) headspace, 2012

[Insight: Scars- why do people self-harm \[Video\]](#) SBS, 2013

Young women

[New statistics reveal dramatic increase in self-harm hospitalisations for young Australian women](#) ABC Online, 2013 – *references AIHW report*

[Young women's experiences of self-harm : commonalities, distinctions and complexities](#) Young, 2016 [N.Z.]

[Chapter 11: Adolescent reported self-harm and suicidal behaviours](#) *In: The mental health of children and adolescents: report on the second Australian child and adolescent survey of mental health and wellbeing. Australia Department of Health, 2015, p 103-106*

[Submission to the National Children's Commissioner: Intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children](#) Women's Health Victoria, 2014

Relationship between self-harm and suicidal behaviour

[Suicide and suicidal behaviour in women: issues and prevention](#) Suicide Prevention Australia, 2015

[Differences in risk factors for self-harm with and without suicidal intent: findings from the ALSPAC cohort](#) Journal of Affective Disorders, 2014

[The gender paradox in suicide](#) Suicide and Life Threatening Behaviours, 1998

Care and treatment

[Care after a suicide attempt](#) Australia. National Mental Health Commission, 2015 – *self-harm treatment cited*

[Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists clinical practice guideline for the management of deliberate self-harm](#) Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 2016

[Solutions that work: what the evidence tells us: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project \(ATSISPEP\) report](#) University of WA. School of Indigenous Studies, 2016

[Chapter 4: Experience of care](#) *In: Self harm: longer-term management.* British Psychological Society, 2012

[A systematic review of the relationship between internet use, self-harm and suicidal behaviour in young people: the good, the bad and the unknown](#) PLoS ONE, 2017

[Self-harm in older people: a clear need for specialist assessment and care](#) British Journal of Psychiatry, 2012

International context

[Incidence, clinical management, and mortality risk following self-harm among children and adolescents: cohort study in primary care](#) BMJ, 2017 and [Media Release](#) [UK]

[Trends in emergency department visits for nonfatal self-inflicted injuries among youth aged 10 to 24 years in the United States 2001-2015](#) JAMA, 2017

[Suicidal behavior and self-harm in girls with eating disorders](#) Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment, 2016 [Czech.]

[The truth about self-harm](#) Mental Health Foundation UK 2016

List of supports and resources

headspace	National Youth Mental Health Foundation
ehespace	Online support for young people and their families
Lifeline	13 11 14
beyondblue	1300 22 4636
Kids Helpline	1800 55 1800

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