

How to Help – Self-harm

These notes are taken from the course notes for 'Understanding How to Help'. Click for further details of the [Understanding Yourself](#) courses.

Introduction

In dealing with this subject, I have explained self-harm and then created a scenario which will offer guidance on how to approach the task of helping someone who struggles with this. The Melancholic is most likely to self-harm, but the Phlegmatic is capable of doing so.

Self-harm is a serious and widespread issue. It is estimated that at least 10% of young people self-harm at some point, but people of all ages do. Self-harm can take many different forms and can range from cutting or deeply scratching skin through to swallowing poison. It can include punching walls, hitting yourself, banging your head, throwing yourself against walls or a hard object, or sticking objects into your skin, burning or scalding and preventing wounds from healing.

There are many less obvious ways of self-harming, including taking physical exercise to punishing extremes, binge drinking, driving recklessly or activity that deliberately puts yourself in danger. This can include criminal activity or anti-social behaviour that can lead to punishment by the State.

What is at the root?

a. It's all about self-worth

The underlying cause of so much self-harm is low self-worth. When bad things happen around you, it is easy to believe that those things are happening because of something fundamentally wrong with you. You might know that such thoughts are irrational, but negative emotions register within your introvert at such a depth that you may not be aware at the time of how negative you feel about yourself. When exposed to painful circumstances for long enough, low self-worth can turn into a deep self-loathing. You conclude that you are a bad person – and bad people deserve punishment.

c. Dealing with punishment

We all have an inbuilt sense of justice. If we are bad, we feel that we ought to be punished. Imagine a son deliberately doing something his father asked him not to do. The father finds out but says and does nothing. This will muddle the child. He would rather pay the price of a punishment and get it over with, so he can feel better. If you feel you are a bad person and deserve to be punished and that punishment makes you feel better, then that is what you will look for. If no-one else will punish you, then you will find ways of hurting yourself. That is at the root of self-harm.

d. Creating equilibrium

There is another factor here that we need to consider. Everything in creation is constantly working towards equilibrium. The wind blows because cold air moves in to replace the rising warm air. Lightning flashes because two polarities are trying to resolve their differences! You can feel powerless to do anything about emotional pain because emotions are intangible, but you can match that pain with physical pain. Creating equilibrium means that you will physically inflict hurt upon yourself proportionate to the amount of emotional pain that you are experiencing. So, you feel bad about yourself; it follows that you must be a bad person; bad people need to be punished – so you hurt yourself.

Low self-worth can drive a multitude of psychological conditions and is often so deeply buried that it gets missed.

How can we help someone to stop self-harming?

Dealing with the root – the self-worth issue

Let's imagine that one of your friends is a mother who has a daughter who self-harms. She shares that information with you, and you offer to talk with the mother and daughter if both are willing. They are happy to do so and give you permission to speak frankly to them. Where would you start?

Don't get stuck

Within the conversation, don't focus on the self-harm. You may want to find out what form the self-harm takes but move quickly to the underlying issues. Later in the conversation, you may want to give practical advice as to how to respond when the temptation arises to self-harm.

Two things

There are two things that you want to know, preferably in the early stages of this process:

1. Who is this person? Understanding her temperaments will help, but it is more about 'getting the feel' of who she is. You want to get into her shoes and know who she is in the depths of her soul.
2. Knowing who she is and making that connection will help you feel what she would have experienced when subject to the influences at work in her life – both in the past and present.

So, here you are, sitting in your lounge with your friend and her daughter.

A natural conversation

Remember that this is God's work. He will guide you. Of course, you will lead the conversation insofar as you know what you are there to talk about, but if you trust the Lord to lead you, he brings up exactly the right lines of thought. By pursuing those openings, you end up where he intended in a way that you could never have engineered.

As you talk together, getting to know the lady and her daughter, if you listen with your heart you will pick up the tell-tale signs of low self-worth. Here are some possible clues:

1. Does the mother let the daughter speak for herself – or does she constantly step in?
2. Does Dad feature in the conversation? Where does he fit in? What kind of influence has he had in her life? If the answer is 'very little', that is a major negative factor.
3. Little put-down statements that the daughter might use about herself or that the mother might unwittingly use about her. For example, you may talk about school, university or work and she could let you know that 'I'm not very good at...' or that 'people don't really like me...'.
4. When someone is keen to get away from what they feel about themselves in their introvert, this can result in an exaggerated extrovert. What then comes across is the exact opposite of what she is feeling.
5. It may appear that the daughter's childhood was idyllic and that there could be no possible grounds for low self-esteem. There are at least two possible scenarios here:

- a. Are the blanks in her memory because there are parts of that childhood that she would rather not remember?
- b. The family may connect well as extroverts, but the introvert could be missed. In this situation, the result is low self-worth because good connection gives the introvert her sense of value. The fact that the child knows that there are good connections in the family at an extrovert level and that they were really loved, helps to convince them that there must be something wrong with them because they were surrounded by so much that was good.

Moving forward

There will come a point in the conversation at which it is appropriate to either ask further questions or start to respond to what has been shared with you.

Be patient at this point. Don't feel under pressure to rush. Sometimes it will feel as if you are looking for the end of that piece of string that will help you unravel the knot. As the picture becomes clearer to you, reflect it back to them. You will know when you are on the right track. Sometimes they will recognise immediately the truth of what you share, or, there might be resistance to look at those underlying patterns. We all have our reasons for not looking. For example, an insecure person can find it difficult to be objective about her family dynamics because she needs to see that family in as positive a light as possible. Sometimes misplaced loyalty prevents objectivity.

Potential obstacles to moving forward

1. In many people's minds, there is a tendency to link particular behaviours, including self-harm, with specific traumatic experiences in life. This can be unhelpful because trauma, in itself, often fails to explain the reasons for those behaviours fully. Clearly, trauma can have, and often does have, a dramatic effect in people's lives and needs to be addressed. What we must do, however, is start with who the person is, including how they instinctively respond to life, if we are to fully understand the effect that particular traumas will have on that person. In other words, traumatic events often link up with the fundamental disposition of that person and understanding that gives us insights into how to help. A bad or frightening experience can quickly be interpreted as deserved punishment for being a bad person, so the trauma feeds into an underlying attitude. Trauma can bring to the surface underlying fears that are normally kept at bay. Look at those traumas and their effects but don't let them distract you from the underlying issues.
2. We discussed earlier how a child, brought up in a loving home where the emphasis is on the extroverts, could well have major self-worth issues. It follows that a parent in that situation, especially if well practised in the use of her extrovert, could disagree with you out of a need to protect herself and the rest of the family. When that happens, you have a powerful clue as to why that child is struggling.
3. You will come across situations in which parents are doing all they can to connect with their child, and the child is already using her extrovert to protect herself from positive messages. This is not uncommon, and it can be found with any temperament mix. This can produce a difficult situation, with the child being defensive and argumentative.

Above all

Encourage the child to talk each time the negativity begins to build. Talk as an alternative to self-harm. Learn the times when the child is most open to talking – e.g. after physical activity, out on a walk, later in an evening. Encourage walking with the child so she always has opportunities to talk. Above all, encourage genuine friendships in which sharing together is a natural occurrence.