

Self harm: A study into the drivers, function and method



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Context

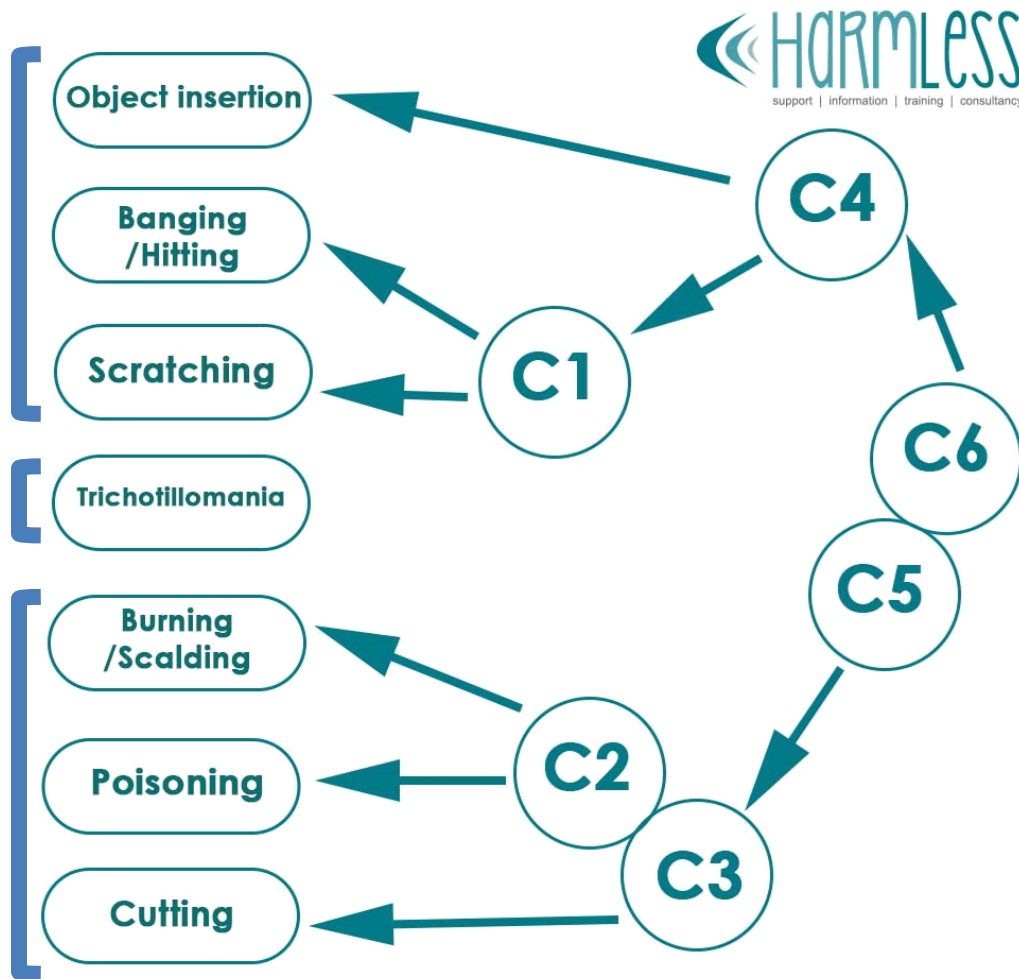
- Self harm is one of the highest predictors of suicide
- 49 times higher risk of suicide
- Must increase understanding of complex nature of self harm as a suicide prevention measure

2010-12 research

Responses on the type of self harm, its function, and reason for starting were cluster-analysed

- Opportunity sampling was used
- **399 participants** completed the questionnaire
- 96% were female
- 94% were white
- 87% were under 35 years of age
- 73% were heterosexual
- 32.3% were aged 19-25 years (the largest age group)

Method clusters

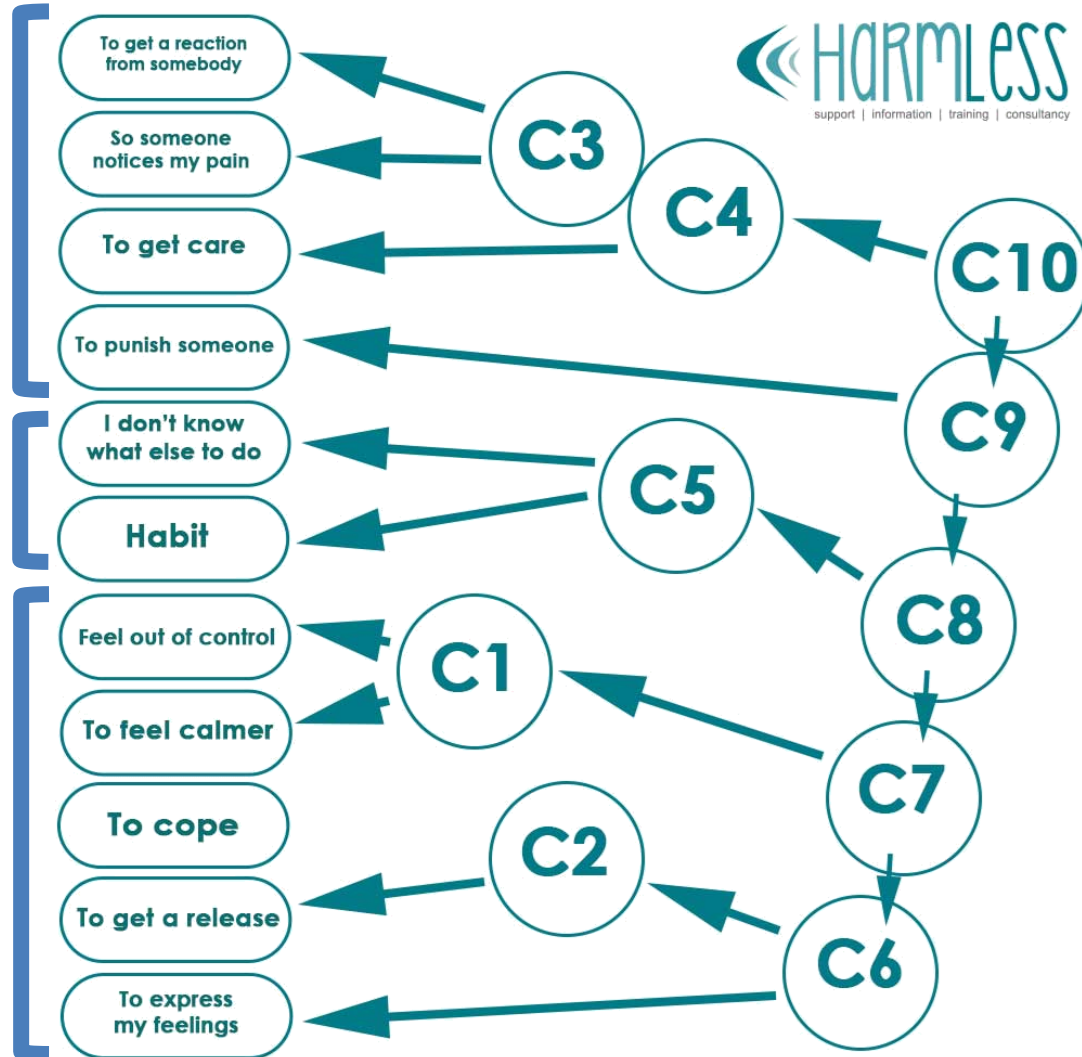


These results show that individuals who use one behaviour may also use other behaviours in the same cluster:

e.g. those who report banging and hitting may also report scratching

- 1) Object insertion, banging and hitting, and scratching
- 2) Cutting, poisoning, and burning/scalding
- 3) Trichotillomania (no cluster)

Function clusters



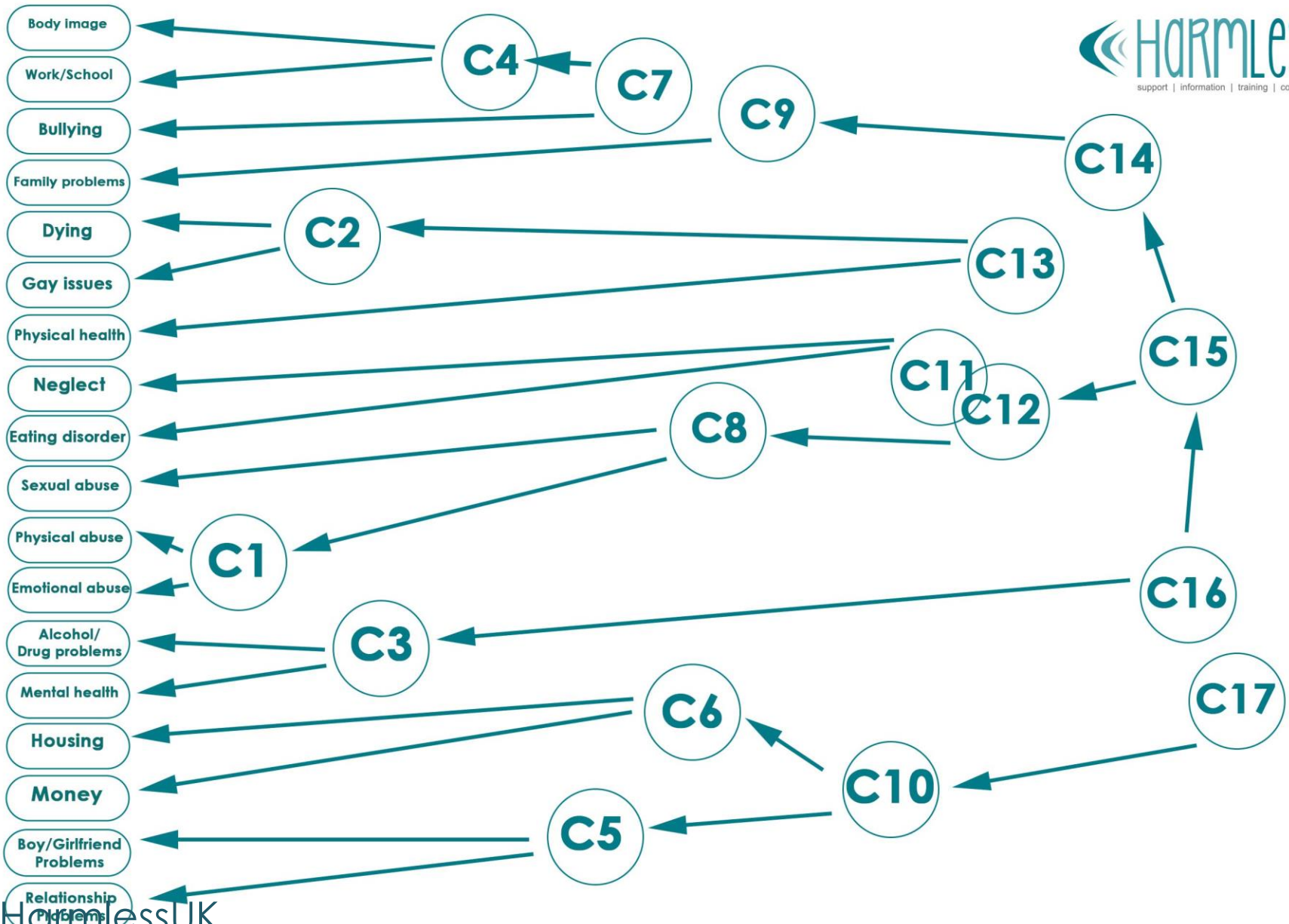
These clusters demonstrate three functions of self harm:

- 1) To get a reaction from somebody, so someone notices my pain, to care (interpersonal)
- 2) Because I feel out of control, to feel calmer, to cope, to get a release, to express my feelings (emotional regulation)
- 3) I don't know what else to do, out of habit (habitual-type)

Life events (triggers)

These clusters appear to group in a meaningful way:

- 1) Body image, work/school problems, bullying, family problems.
- 2) Someone dying, LGBT issues, physical health problems, neglect, eating disorder, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse
- 3) Housing problems, money problems, boy/girlfriend problems, relationships problems



Useful observations

The groups with the highest rate of **burning and poisoning** also are much more likely to report more traumatic life events such as **abuse, neglect** and are more likely to have **mental health problems**.

The group who show the lowest rate of reporting 'subjectively traumatic' events tend to endorse functions for self harm such as **release and coping** at high rates, and are more likely to report **banging/hitting themselves**. They report traumatic life events at intermediate rates compared with the other two groups.

Implications

1. Contributing **life experiences** appear to relate directly to the **method of harm**
2. Different **life experiences** appear to have different **psychological impacts**
3. **Tailoring interventions to life experiences** may be important to yielding improved outcome

2020 research

- Build on the previous study
- 51 participants, aged 18-35 and undergoing therapy for self harm at Harmless
- Recruited in a safe way, alongside Therapists

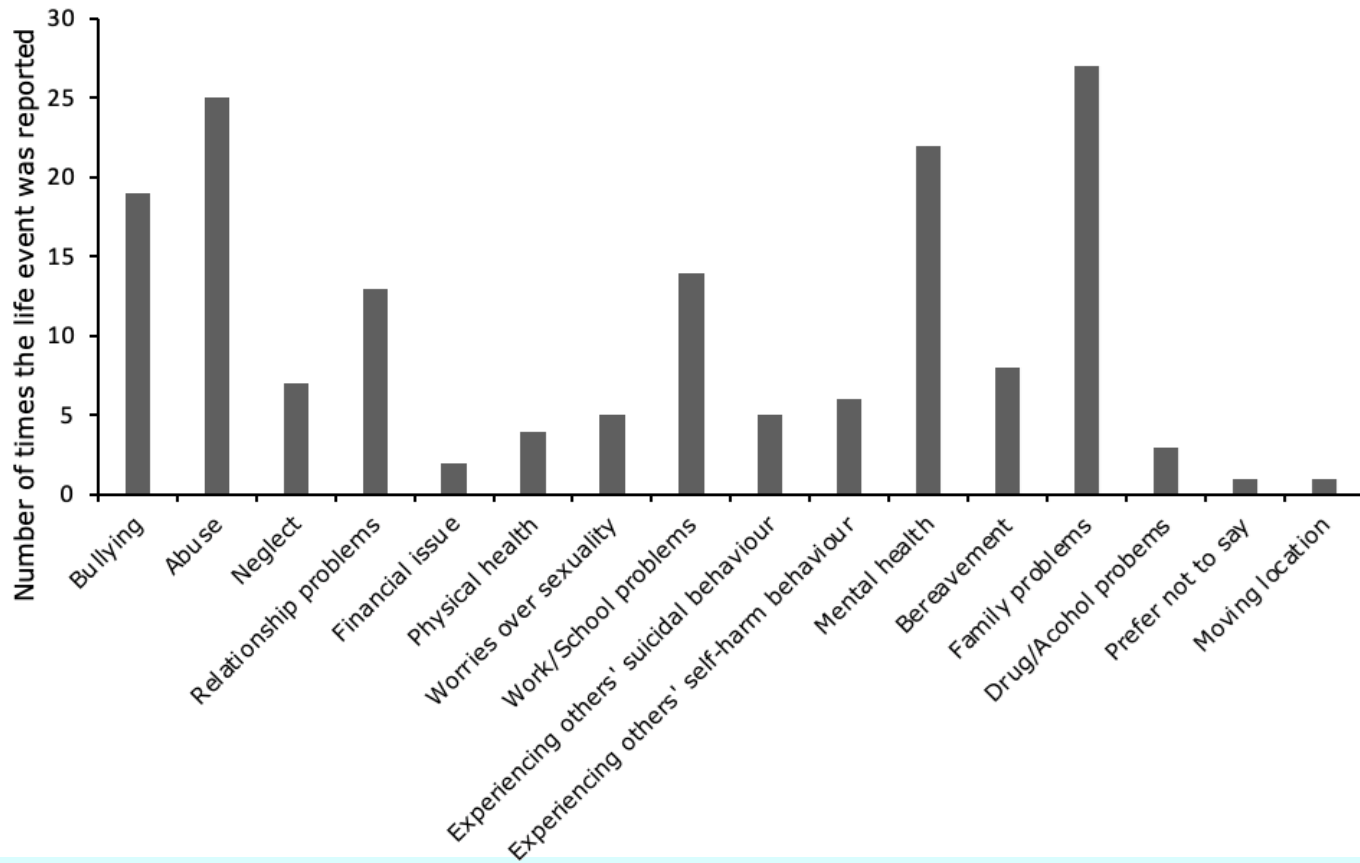
Summary

A statistically significant positive correlation was observed between:

- The number of stressful life events and the number of *common* methods
- The number of stressful life events and the number of self-harm methods used across the lifespan
- The number of stressful life events and the number of *functions* self-harm served

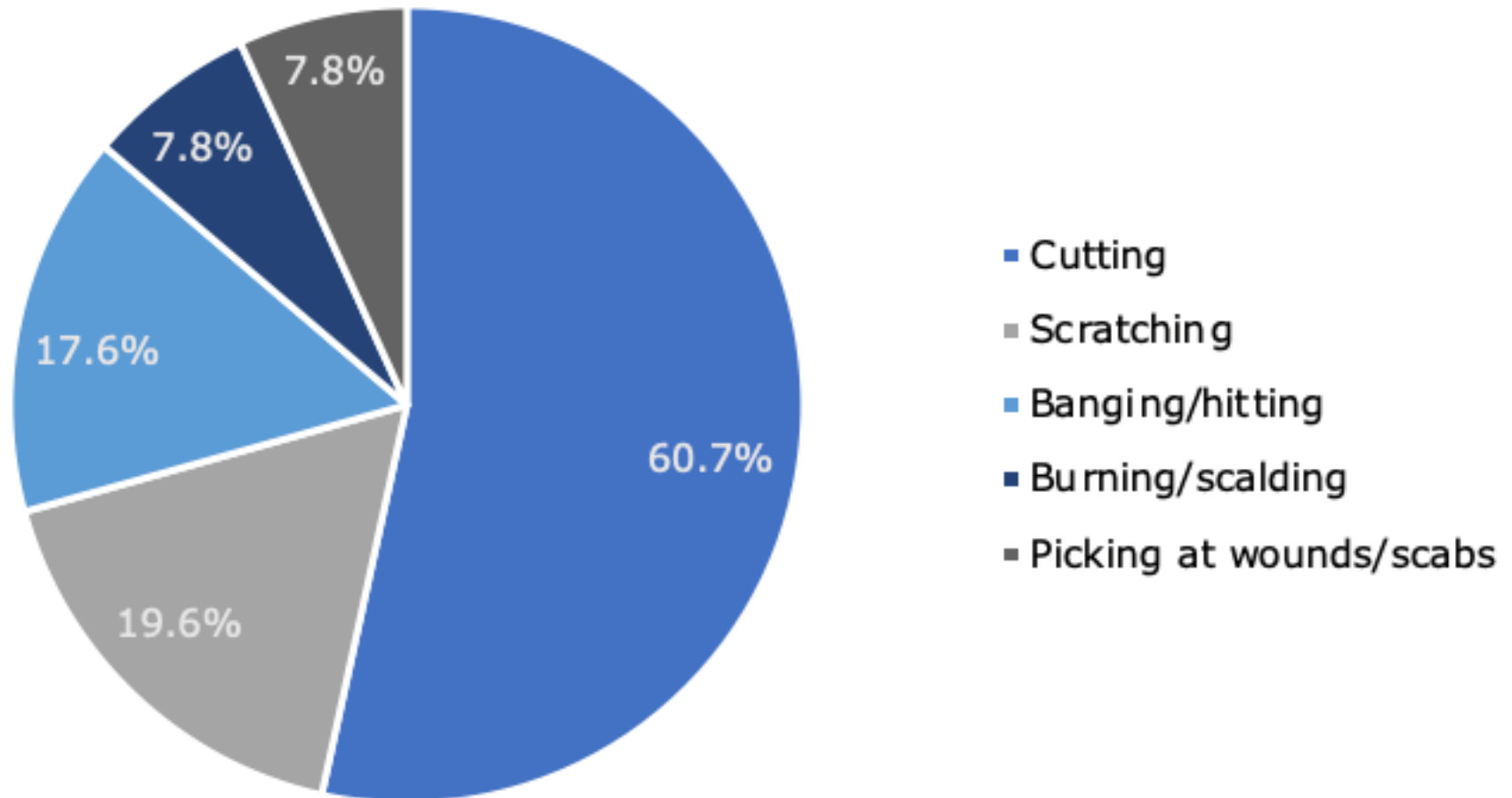
Life events contributing to beginning to self harm

Graph showing the number of times each stressful life event was reported as contributing to beginning to self harm



Stressful life event

Pie chart showing the most common methods of self harm



Function

Most highly endorsed functions:

1. To get a release
2. To punish myself
3. To feel calmer
4. To cope
5. Because I feel out of control

Life experience/function

Life event	Most endorsed function
Abuse/Neglect	to punish myself
Work/school problems and bullying	to get a release, to cope
Relationship/family problems	to get a release, to punish myself
Mental/physical health and worries over sexuality	to get a release, to feel calmer, to punish myself
Bereavement/exposure to others' suicidal and/or self-harm behaviour	because I feel out of control, to punish myself

Implications

- Reminder of the individual and important psychological function of self harm
- Drive discussions in therapeutic work
- Support the design of targeted
- Help identify those are risk

From Harm to Hope

Self Harm & Suicide
Prevention Conference
Online

Looking back and looking forward: what self harm evidence and presentations tell us about needs and practice

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