Deliberate Self-harm – advice for parents and carers

Self-harm is a distressing behaviour for both the sufferer and their parents or carers. Caring for someone who self harms causes a lot of anxiety and is never easy. The following are a few suggestions for parents or carers on how to manage this difficult situation.

- Try not to panic.
- Develop a self-harm emergency plan and contact list.
- Try to be supportive and non-judgemental – blame is not useful.
- Acknowledge the distress that leads to self harm without reinforcing the self harm itself.
- Try not to make home a combat zone.
- Try to carry on as normally as possible.
- Try not to walk on egg shells around the young person.
- Support the young person in counselling or therapy, with transport, etc.
- Be aware of over-watchfulness around the young person.
- Some parents may try to remove all sharp instruments and implements from the home or young person's bedroom. This can be interpreted as a lack of trust and is not always positive for the relationship.
- Self-harm can occur for a variety of reasons, such as managing difficult emotions or dealing with a difficult situation (e.g. a relationship ending). Engaging in self-harming behaviour doesn't always mean that a young person wishes to end their life.
- Self-harm can take many forms, such as taking too many tablets (prescribed or over-the-counter) or self-cutting. It can sometimes include situations that could lead to harm, e.g. drinking excessively, using drugs, or driving at high speed.
- Encourage communication. Some words to break the ice:
    - Are you alright?
    - Have a think about what I could do to support you right now.
    - What can I do to help you through this difficult time?
- If self-harming behaviours escalate in frequency or intensity, or the young person has associated thoughts of wanting to die, seek help from your GP.

Take care of yourself

- Take care of your own physical, emotional and mental health.
- Accept your own distress.

- Develop your own support networks.
- Have realistic expectations for treatment and interventions – difficult situations can take time to get sorted out properly.
- Educate yourself about any associated conditions – mental illness, drug and alcohol use etc.

Important phone numbers

- Lifeline: 0800-543-534 (available 24/7) or visit www.lifeline.org.nz
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508-828-865 (0508 TAUTOKO) (available 24/7)
- Youth Services: (06) 3555-906, or visit www.youthservice.govt.nz
- Youthline: 0800-376-633, text 234, email info@youthline.co.nz, or webchat www.youthline.org.nz
- Whatsup (kids and teens): 0800-942-8787, or webchat (1pm to 11pm) www.whatsup.co.nz
- The Word – Depression helpline: 0800-111-757, or text 4202 (available 24/7) www.depression.org.nz
- Rainbow Youth: (09) 376-4155 (11am to 5pm) www.ry.org.nz
- If there is an emergency, and you feel like you or someone else is at risk, call 111

Resources on the internet

- See the Centre for Clinical Interventions website for modules on managing a range of issues, including building self-compassion, and facing your feelings for patients (www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/consumers)
- See the DBT Self Help website for strategies (www.dbtselfhelp.com)
- Find out about various resources:
    - thelowdown (www.thelowdown.co.nz)
    - SPARX (www.sparx.org.nz)
- Common Ground (www.commonground.org.nz) – a website that aims to help parents, families, whanau, and friends support young people to manage hard times, and enjoy positive mental health and wellbeing.