What is self-harm?

Deliberate self-harm (DSH) or 'self injury' refers to a wide range of behaviours where an individual intentionally causes acute physical harm to himself/herself.

Examples of DSH include:

- taking illicit drugs, or prescribed medication in excess, with the intention to cause harm;
- cutting the skin with a razor, knife, or other sharp edge;
- burning a part of the body;
- banging the head, punching oneself;
- swallowing indigestible objects.

Is someone who self-harms suicidal?

A person who self-harms does not necessarily want to die. The physical injury is not intended to be fatal but is a way of trying to cope with overwhelming feelings.

However, self-harm poses a risk of accidental death. For example, if someone cuts himself while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, he may cause more damage than he intended and may not get medical attention in time. Also, in some cases, the methods of self-harm get more severe over time.

Why would someone harm himself?

For many, the idea of hurting yourself on purpose is hard to understand. It is useful to remember that self-harm is less to do with causing physical pain and more to do with coping with unbearable emotional distress.

- To cope with overwhelming feelings: when some feel overwhelmed by anger, sadness, grief, shame, or hurt, physical pain can provide a sense of relief – physical pain may be more manageable than emotional pain.
- To feel something real: after traumatic experiences, it is not uncommon to feel numb inside, empty, even surreal. Some describe feeling disconnected from reality or from people around them. Physical pain can be one way to feel something real, to feel alive & connected again.

A way of communicating to people that you need some support, maybe when words don’t seem enough or don’t seem to get heard.

A way of proving to yourself, “I am not invisible.”

As a form of self punishment: for some, self-harm is a way of re-living past experiences of trauma and/or abuse.

After experiencing abuse or neglect, a person might believe that he is evil or bad, and deserves punishment (he may have been told this directly by his abuser or come to believe this was why he was treated that way). Injuring himself is a way of delivering the punishment that he feels he still deserves for being 'bad' and/or to blame.

To get a sense of being in control: self-harm may be one way to regain a sense of control over life, feelings, or body, especially if he feels other things in his life are out of his control.

The PROS and CONS

Self-harm can bring relief when you feel out of control, hurt, or depressed. Or it can be a way of punishing yourself when you feel guilty.

However, this relief is usually short-term. In the long run, DSH can become a source of stress in itself; a person can feel ashamed of the scars, fearful that others will disapprove or blame. He may then isolate himself from others more. There may be anxiety about causing more permanent physical damage. Also, there’s the frustration of not solving the underlying problem(s).

Psychologically, DSH can become associated with a sense of guilt, depression, low self-esteem, or self-hatred.

Finding other ways to cope

DSH can become a 'quick fix' for when you feel bad, almost addictive. The trick is in finding alternative, healthy ways of feeling better and/or dealing with the issues that are stopping you from enjoying a more fulfilling life. It takes time, but it's important to remember that you can move to a happier and healthier outlook.

Check out http://self-injury.net/stopping/how/
Or search for 'deliberate self harm' at:
http://kidshealth.org/teen
www.mayo.clinic.com

Talk to someone: talk with someone you trust, or call a Helpline, find an online support group, or come in to see your Student Counsellor on campus.

Write it out: keep a private diary or write a letter to explain what’s happening. No-one else needs to see it but it might help you understand better how you feel and why.

Scream it is an interactive program at http://www.reachout.com.au where you can release some of your frustrations by writing things down and shooting them off in a rocket.

Have a good cry: crying when you feel sad or frustrated is as normal as laughing when you hear a good joke! It can be a release, so if you feel the need to cry, just let it out.

Choose to postpone: when you feel the need to hurt yourself, put it off for a chosen period of time (start with just 15 minutes). Don’t sit watching the clock though – call a friend, play a few tunes, read something, check your email or browse the internet. At the end of the time, see whether you can put it off for another 15 minutes... You might find you’ve shifted your mood enough so that you no longer feel the need to self harm.

While it’s not a solution to the problem, safer alternatives may be to draw or write in red ink over your body; squeeze ice cubes (make them with red juice to mimic blood if that helps); give yourself some 'harmless pain' - eat a hot chilli, or have an ice cold shower.
Make a crisis plan for when you feel bad. Make a list of other things you can do that might reduce your distress without causing you harm. Write down reasons why you want to stop so you can ‘remind’ yourself next time you have the urge to self-harm.

Reducing stress & tensions

- **Deep relaxation techniques**: activities like yoga or meditation are often helpful in reducing anxiety & tension.
- **Exercise**: go for a run or walk around campus. Aerobic exercise boosts mood (by raising the body’s natural chemicals which are linked to mood). It also increases energy levels, helps you sleep better & improves your self-image.
- **Playing video games** is a good way to distract yourself from going over and over worrying and depressing thoughts in your mind.
- **Yell or sing** at the top of your lungs on your own or to music. (You might do this into a pillow if you don’t want other people in the house to hear!)

Helping someone else

Most important! Listen to your friend without judging him/her or being critical. This can be hard if you are upset - and perhaps angry - about what he/she is doing. Try to focus on your friend’s thoughts and feelings rather than your own.

- **Offer support** when he/she feels the need to self-harm. A chat might distract or improve your friend’s mood. But don’t promise something unless you can keep your word.
- **Take some of the mystery out of self-harm by helping find information** on the internet. Help your friend to think about self-harm not as a shameful secret, but as a problem that can be sorted out.
- **Find out about getting professional help**: maybe go with your friend to see someone. But leave therapy to the therapist.

- **Be patient** & don’t expect your friend to stop overnight. Remember (and remind your friend) that progress can be up & down and will take a lot of time & perseverance.
- **Avoid reacting strongly**, with anger, disappointment etc. Talk honestly about the effect your friend’s behaviour has on you, but do this calmly & emphasise how much you care for him/her.
- **DON’T get into a struggle** when he/she plans to self-harm; it’s better to walk away & let your friend know you are available if he/she wants to talk instead.
- **DON’T threaten** to withdraw your support if he/she self harms again. That kind of pressure is not supportive and risks denying your friend help he/she needs.
- **Most of all, DON’T feel responsible** for your friend’s self-harm; the only person who can change your friend’s behaviour is your friend. And no-one ever made a big change until he/she was ready.

Counselling services at UWI

The Counselling & Psychological Service (CAPS) offers free & confidential counselling to UWI students throughout the year. We are open Mondays to Fridays, from 8:30am until 4:30pm. During semesters, we stay open till 7pm.

Counsellors are available by appointment, although students in emergencies are seen as soon as possible.

Call 662 2002 ext 2491
Or email counsellor@sta.uwi.edu

Or pop in to see us. We are located in the Health Services Unit between Trinity Hall and the Learning Resource Centre.

This leaflet prepared by the Counselling & Psychological Services, UWI, St Augustine.