

SAMH'S VIEW:

SELF HARM

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ABOUT THE SAMH'S VIEW SERIES

SAMH's View statements set out SAMH's position on a particular policy topic. They are produced by the Public Affairs team.

Context

Self-harm includes a broad range of behavior-ur that causes injury, such as cutting, burning or scratching the skin and non-fatal overdosing. Self-harm is often a coping mechanism for managing psychological and emotional distress. Evidence suggests that the experience of a severe life event, trauma, abuse or symptoms of depression/anxiety are likely triggers for self-harm.¹ Action 5 of the Scottish Government's Suicide Prevention Action Plan 'Every Life Matters' commits the National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group (NSPLG) to make recommendation to government on the effectiveness of different models of crisis support including for those who self-harm. The Action Plan also commits the NSPLG to creating a Scottish Crisis Care Agreement, to standardise and improve care pathways and responses to crisis and distress.

In 2012 SAMH surveyed over 200 people on their experiences of self-harm, to inform our report Beyond Appearances.²

Key points

- In 2016/17 6% of adults said they had deliberately self-harmed at some point in their life: a 3% increase since 2008/2009.³
- While self-harm affects people of all ages, young people are most at risk: 1 in 6 young adults aged 18-34 in Scotland have self-harmed.⁴
- Young girls are at particular risk: The 2018 Good Childhood report found that 22% of 14 year old girls and 9% of boys had self-harmed.⁵
- Self-harm is distinct from suicide - as a coping strategy it can be life preserving⁶ - but it is a risk factor for suicide. People who have self-harmed are 100 times more likely to take their own life within a year.⁷
- People who self-harm often face a stigmatising response including from health and other front line services.⁸ This includes refusal of anesthetic or pain relief when wounds are stitched.⁹
- Evidence-based treatment includes distraction techniques, harm minimisation, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and Problem Solving Therapy¹⁰¹¹¹²
- This is a lack of research into self-harm in Scotland, including the impact



of health inequalities¹³

- Distress Brief Interventions (DBI) are being piloted (2016-2022) by the Scottish Government to improve the response to people presenting in distress. A DBI is an intensive time limited and supportive contact with an individual in distress.¹⁴

SAMH calls for:

- The Scottish Crisis Care Agreement, announced in the Scottish Government's Suicide Prevention Action Plan, to be developed in partnership with people with lived experience of distress and self-harm. The agreement must include shared standards and care pathways across emergency, statutory and non-statutory sectors.
- Age specific responses to crisis and distress to be developed by the NSPLG and rolled out nationally including training for all school staff on mental health.
- Mandatory training in responding to self-harm for all frontline NHS and emergency service staff
- The Scottish Government to commit to providing information and training for parents and key professional groups about self-harm.
- Access to the full range of psychological therapies and evidence based interventions effective for management of self-harm, including harm minimisation, listed in NICE guidance and in the Scottish Government's Psychological Therapy Matrix.¹⁵
- The national roll out of DBI following the November 2016 to March 2021 pilot period, incorporating any learning from evaluation

Further detail:

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

- NICE Self-harm in over 8s: long-term management (2011)
- NICE Self-harm in over 8s: short-term management and prevention of recurrence (2004)

SAMH RESEARCH

- SAMH Beyond Boundaries Experiences of Self-Harm 2012

OTHER INFORMATION

- Mental health Foundation Truth hurts (2006)
- Every Life Matters Scotland's Suicide Prevention Action Plan (2018)



Notes

- ¹ Choose Life [Prevention of suicide and self-harm: Research briefing](#) (2014)
- ² SAMH [Beyond Appearances Experiences of Self-Harm](#) 2012
- ³ Scottish Government [The Scottish Health Survey 2017 Edition](#) (2018)
- ⁴ BJPsych Open [Suicide attempts and non-suicidal self-harm: national prevalence study of young adults Vol4\(3\)](#) (2018)
- ⁵ The Children's Society [The Good Childhood Report 2018 Summary](#) 2018
- ⁶ Scottish Government [Responding to Self-Harm in Scotland Final report](#) 2011
- ⁷ Scottish Government [Responding to Self-Harm in Scotland Final report](#) 2011 [citing Self-Harm Scope Final version 3, NICE 2002]
- ⁸ Scottish Government [Responding to Self-Harm in Scotland Final report](#) 2011 [citing Self-Harm Scope Final version 3, NICE 2002]
- ⁹ Scottish Government [Suicide Prevention Strategy 2013-2016](#)
- ¹⁰ SAMH [Beyond Boundaries Experiences of Self-Harm](#) 2012
- ¹¹ Mental health foundation [Truth hurts](#) Chapter 4 (2006)
- ¹² NICE [Self-harm in over 8s: long-term management](#) 2011
- ¹³ Choose Life [Prevention of suicide and self-harm: Research briefing](#) (May 2014)
- ¹⁴ Distress Brief Intervention <https://www.dbi.scot/> (2018)
- ¹⁵ Scottish Government & NHS Education [The Matrix](#) 2013 (page 160)