

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 behaviour 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 and is not in itself an illness. Evidence suggests that the experience of a severe life event, trauma, abuse or symptoms of depression/anxiety are likely triggers for self-harm.<sup>1</sup> Commitment 1 of the Scottish Government's Suicide Prevention Strategy 2013-2016 commits the government to tackling self-harm in the context of supporting people in distress.<sup>2</sup> In 2012 SAMH surveyed over 200 people on their experiences of self-harm, to inform our report *Beyond Appearances*.<sup>3</sup>

## Key points

- In 2014/15 7% of adults said they had deliberately self-harmed at some point in their life: a 4% increase since 2008/2009.<sup>4</sup>
- While self-harm affects people of all ages, young people are most at risk: 1 in 15 young people in the UK has self-harmed.<sup>5</sup>
- Sixty-one per cent of respondents in *Beyond Appearances* began self-harming prior to the age of 16.<sup>6</sup>
- Self-harm is distinct from suicide – as a coping strategy it can be life preserving<sup>7</sup> – 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.<sup>8</sup>
- People who self-harm often face a stigmatising response including from health and other front line services.<sup>9</sup> This includes refusal of anaesthetic or pain relief when wounds are stitched.<sup>10</sup>
- Evidence-based treatment includes distraction techniques, harm minimisation, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and Problem Solving Therapy.<sup>11,12,13</sup>
- There is a lack of research into self-harm in Scotland, including the impact of health inequalities.<sup>14</sup>



## SAMH calls for:

- A national Scottish Crisis Care Agreement to be developed across the statutory, emergency and non-statutory sectors in all Health and Social Care Partnerships
- Mandatory training in responding to self-harm for all frontline NHS staff
- The Scottish Government should commit to providing information and training for parents and key professional groups about self-harm.
- The Scottish Government to reinstate a permanent National Self Harm Working Group to improve the evidence base on self-harm in Scotland.
- Access to the full range of psychological therapies listed as effective for management of self-harm in Scottish Government's Psychological Therapy Matrix.
- Use of harm reduction techniques to reduce physical risks resulting from self-harm. This should only be one part of the person's support or treatment regime.

## 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)
- Scottish Government [Suicide Prevention Strategy 2013-2016](#)
- Choose Life [Prevention of suicide and self-harm: Research briefing](#) (May 2014)

## Notes

- 1 Choose Life [Prevention of suicide and self-harm: Research briefing](#) (2014)
- 2 Scottish Government [Suicide Prevention Strategy 2013-2016](#)
- 3 SAMH [Beyond Boundaries Experiences of Self-Harm](#) 2012
- 4 Scottish Government [The Scottish Health Survey 2015 Edition](#) (2016)
- 5 Mental health foundation [Truth hurts](#) (2006)
- 6 SAMH [Beyond Boundaries Experiences of Self-Harm](#) 2012
- 7 Scottish Government [Responding to Self-Harm in Scotland Final report](#) 2011
- 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 NICE [Self-harm in over 8s: short-term management and prevention of recurrence](#) 2004
- 14 Choose Life [Prevention of suicide and self-harm: Research briefing](#) (May 2014)
- 15 Scottish Government & NHS Education [The Matrix](#) 2013 (page 160)