

Spotlight

on Women & Self-harm

March 2018

Self-harm is the act of deliberately hurting one's own body, and includes cutting, biting, burning, poisoning and scratching.¹ Women are more likely to self-harm than men and are at risk of starting to self-harm from early adolescence.² They are more likely to hide their self-harming behaviour and injure themselves in places on their body that can be easily covered.³

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health found that 45% of Australian women aged 18-23 years reported ever self-harming.⁴ Young women make up a significant proportion of self-harm-related hospitalisations.⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are hospitalised for self-harm at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal women and hospitalisation rates generally increase with level of disadvantage and degree of remoteness.⁵ Self-harm rates are high for young women with a mental illness² including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and eating disorders.^{2,6} It is a diagnostic feature of borderline personality disorder.² Trans youth also have high rates of self-harm.⁷ Though incidents of self-harm often cease in early adulthood, a recent Australian study found that 2.5% of women aged between 25-30 years reported self-harming.⁹

Though previous research on self-harm and suicidal behaviours in women has focused on individual or clinical factors predicting self-harm, recent qualitative research has highlighted the role of interpersonal and social factors in precipitating self-harm. These factors can include: socio-economic disadvantage, a history of sexual and physical abuse, issues at home (sense of disconnect from family, dysfunctional family), social isolation or problematic friendships.¹⁰ Self-harm in adult women specifically is associated with experiencing depression, dieting behaviours, tiredness of life, stress, and physical and sexual abuse.⁹ Cessation is linked to improved ability to regulate emotion, increased self-awareness and support and developing positive coping abilities.⁹

Reasons for self-harm are diverse. The behaviour can be a coping mechanism in response to intense emotional pain and psychological distress,² a way to gain control over one's body,¹⁰ a form of self-punishment or a means to release tension.³ As women are socialised to conceal anger, self-harming may also be a way of turning that anger and stress inwards.³

The relationship between self-harm and suicidal intent is overlapping and complex. Self-harm is sometimes, but not always, accompanied by suicidal thoughts and/or intention, and suicidal intent can also be ambivalent.² Those who self-harm are at an increased risk of suicide.²

Due to the stigma associated with self-harm, many women do not seek treatment.² Suicidal behaviour and self-harm in women can be viewed by family, health professionals and the community as attention-seeking, manipulative and non-serious, which can negatively influence how young women are treated.¹¹ In Australia and internationally¹², self-harm in young women is on the rise, highlighting the need for widely available, gender-sensitive treatment which addresses coping behaviours as well as the reasons women turn to self-harm. With effective treatment, and if the underlying distress is managed, it is anticipated that self-harming behaviours will likely remit.

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- Dr. Jo Robinson, Orygen The National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health
 - Professor Deborah Loxton and Natalie Townsend, Australian Longitudinal Study of Women's Health, The University of Newcastle.
 - headspace Clinical Team
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Overview

[Hidden side of a visible problem](#) *InPsych*, 2018 – *added 09/20*

[Chapter 12: Intentional self-harm](#) *In: Trends in hospitalised injury, Australia 2007–08 to 2016–17* AIHW, 2019, p. 115-119 – *updated 09/20*

[Self-Harm \[Indicator\]](#) Victorian Women's Health Atlas, 2019 – *added 09/20*

[Chapter 6: Self-harm and suicidal behaviour of young people aged 14-15 years old](#) *In: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children: Annual statistical report 2016*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017

[Looking the other way: young people and self-harm](#) Orygen National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, 2016

[It's not only teenage girls, and it's rarely attention-seeking: debunking the myths around self-injury](#) *The Conversation*, 2019 – *added 09/20*

Young women

[New statistics reveal dramatic increase in self-harm hospitalisations for young Australian women](#) ABC Online, 2013

[Chapter 11: Adolescent reported self-harm and suicidal behaviours](#) *In: The mental health of children and adolescents: report on the second Australian child and adolescent survey of mental health and wellbeing*. Australia Department of Health, 2015, p. 103-106

[Submission to the National Children's Commissioner: Intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children](#) Women's Health Victoria, 2014

[Adolescent girls at risk for self-injury can be identified using a short psychological profile](#) *Medical Xpress*, 2020 and [\[Research article\]](#) – *added 09/20*

Relationship between self-harm and suicidal behaviour

[Suicide and suicidal behaviour in women: issues and prevention](#) Suicide Prevention Australia, 2015

[Non-suicidal self-injury: suicide risk or social activity?](#) *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 2017 – added 09/20

[A cross-national study on gender differences in suicide intent](#) *BMC Psychiatry*, 2017 – added 09/20

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[Differences in risk factors for self-harm with and without suicidal intent: findings from the ALSPAC cohort](#) *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2014

Care and treatment

[Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists clinical practice guideline for the management of deliberate self-harm](#) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 2016

[Care after a suicide attempt](#) Australia. National Mental Health Commission, 2015 – *self-harm treatment cited*

[Solutions that work: what the evidence tells us: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project \(ATSISPEP\) report](#) University of WA. School of Indigenous Studies, 2016

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International context

[Incidence, clinical management, and mortality risk following self-harm among children and adolescents: cohort study in primary care](#) *BMJ*, 2017 and [Media Release](#) [UK]

[Trends in emergency department visits for nonfatal self-inflicted injuries among youth aged 10 to 24 years in the United States 2001-2015](#) *JAMA*, 2017

[Suicidal behavior and self-harm in girls with eating disorders](#) *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 2016 [Czech.]

[The truth about self-harm](#) Mental Health Foundation UK 2016

Supports and resources

headspace	National Youth Mental Health Foundation
ehespace	Online support for young people and their families
Lifeline	13 11 14 – 24/7 crisis support
Beyond Blue	1300 22 4636
Kids Helpline	1800 55 1800

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