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SPECIAL REPORT

# WHEN CUTTING IS COPING

Self-mutilation can be a frighteningly addictive reaction to emotional pain for large numbers of young people. Breaking the cycle isn't easy, as **Louise Hall** reports

**B**ecky's 13. She's boiling inside after having a huge row with a friend. She's angry and upset. Sitting on her bed, she reaches into her bedside table, takes out a pair of scissors, and carefully draws one of the sharp blades along her upper arm until blood trickles down.

Eight years on, Becky has turned her experience into a positive one. She's now using her knowledge to help and advise others with similar problems. 'Self-harming became a pattern throughout my teens. It was a release triggered by that first bad argument. Unfortunately, it made me feel a lot better - that's how it all started,' Becky explains. 'There were long periods when I wasn't doing it, but whenever something bad in my life happened, I turned back to it.'

Becky's situation spiralled out of control when she went away to university. 'I was trying to be the life-and-soul of the party, but inside I felt really bad. I was trying to be a new person, but all my old problems came with me,' she says. Eventually she broke down to friends, found help through student counselling and told her parents. Today she refers to herself as a 'reformed self-harmer'. She hasn't cut for four months.

Becky's a founding member of an online support group (<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/siuk>). Of its 60 or so members, most are in their 20s and started self-harming in their teens, but ages range from 13 to people in their late-40s.

'Members tend to contact us when they're fighting the urge to self-harm,' says Becky. 'It helps them to know there are other people out there going through a similar experience. We all help each other.'

What's most shocking about Becky's story isn't that she regularly cut herself, but that this behaviour is far less marginal than previously thought. For girls and boys in increasing numbers, self-mutilation has become a regular, and frighteningly addictive, response to emotional pain.

Typically, most people self-harm in secret, hiding it from family and friends - the tools, like the scars, are kept out of view. The majority of sufferers never reach the attention of services or professionals. Becky agrees that self-harmers are a secret side of society. She says her scars will always be there physically and mentally: 'I keep them very well hidden, but I'll have them for life. My arms are okay, but the top of my legs are a mess.'

Research shows that the number of people being admitted to hospital for self-injury is on the rise. Annually, more than 24,000 teenagers are treated. Although the behaviour normally starts in adolescence, more than 30 per cent of women interviewed for a survey by the Bristol Crisis Service for Women said they had begun harming themselves in childhood, often in a superficial or haphazard way. The youngest age of onset was found to be six.

The findings of a 2004 National Inquiry, the UK's first major investigation into self-harm, reports a similar

story. In September, ChildLine, one of the charities involved in the survey, announced a 30 per cent growth in calls about self-harming. They also found it's a growing problem among young men aged 20 to 35.

'Whatever a person's reason for self-harming, we need to find out why an increasing number of young people in the UK are hurting their bodies in order to cope with emotional problems,' the head of the Inquiry, Catherine McLoughline CBE, said at the launch.

So why are more young people regularly turning on themselves? 'We know from research that self-harming is a way of coping with overwhelming feelings,' says Sophie Corlett, director of policy at Mind, a leading mental health charity in England and Wales.

Emotions such as anger, sadness, emptiness, grief, self-hatred, fear or guilt are given a physical outlet, which makes them easier to deal with, she explains. 'For many people, self-harm may be a way of coping with extreme mental distress. It may help get the pain out, help someone communicate to others how they're feeling or allow someone to punish themselves.'

Commonly, there's a 'trigger' or circumstance which leads someone to self-harm, such as bullying, family breakdown or depression, yet it's still a grey area: 'people who self-harm may do so without being able to explain the causes,' adds Sophie.

Breaking the cycle isn't easy. 'Treatment needs to recognise the feelings that are the catalyst for the self-harm, and simply removing the implements with

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which someone harms themselves doesn't go far enough,' says Sophie. In fact, it could make things worse. 'If you force them to stop, you may be depriving them of their means of survival,' says Katie Foulser, the youngest member of the Inquiry Board.

**THE EDGE OF LIFE**

Many self-harmers feel they're on the margins of society. One 21-year-old describes the time she went to an Accident and Emergency department three times. She went twice with a friend, when she was treated well, the third when she went alone and was treated as a 'freak'. It's stories like this that have pressured the government into action. This July, after two years of research, it issued a new set of guidelines to doctors and nurses urging them to treat self-harmers with the same respect as any other patient.

Dr Tim Kendall, a consultant psychiatrist and co-director of the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (NCCMH), warns that the problem of self-harm in the UK is 'substantial and growing'. He says, 'It's always difficult to tell how many people self-harm, as we are aware that a lot of it is done covertly, but what we do know is that over the last 10 years the number's risen considerably.'

Self-injury has only been recognised as a serious medical condition in the 1940s but 60 years on it's widely regarded that it can, and does, lead to suicide later in life – particularly among older practisers. 'Once someone has self-harmed the risk of them dying by suicide later in life is not doubled but 100 times greater,' says Dr Kendall. 'Suicide is the third most prevalent cause of adult deaths in the UK – after heart disease and cancer. It's also the third leading cause of death in 10-to-19-year-olds.'

To most people, self-harm seems a deeply upsetting and negative behaviour pattern, but, 'Cutting can give relief to people who may otherwise have attempted suicide,' says Dr Kendall. 'These people use cutting as a way of releasing these very empty feelings inside; it's a coping mechanism.' However, he encourages self-harmers to seek professional help rather than to tackle their problems alone.

What is positive is that today, thanks to the guidelines and the ongoing work of the National Inquiry, there's undoubtedly more help and support available for self-harmers in the UK. 'This is the first time that there's been such a widespread national interest in the plight of self-harmers,' agrees Dr Kendall. 'I do genuinely feel that there has never been a better opportunity to help this group of people whose distress had gone hidden for all too long.'

■ The National Inquiry's final report into self-harm will be published in Autumn 2005. For details on their findings so far, visit [www.selfharmuk.org](http://www.selfharmuk.org)

**USEFUL INFORMATION**

- **Samaritans** 0845 790 9090 (24-hour). Counsellors are available to talk on any subject confidentially. [www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)
- **ChildLine** 0800 1111 (24-hour). A free, confidential helpline for children at risk. [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- **CALM** 0800 58 58 58 (5pm-3am). [www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net)
- **SANELINE** A careline to anybody affected by mental health problems. 0845 7767 8000 (12 noon-2am) [www.sane.org.uk](http://www.sane.org.uk)
- **National Children's Bureau** [www.ncb.org.uk/projects/selfharm.htm](http://www.ncb.org.uk/projects/selfharm.htm)
- **MIND** 0845 766 0163 (Monday-Friday, 9.15am-5.15pm) [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

**I WANTED TO CUT AWAY MY DEMONS**

Former care worker Ruth Standring, 40, is single and lives in West Sussex. She began self-harming two years ago after a short-lived episode when she was a teenager



The very first time I self-harmed, I was a teenager. I remember being really depressed which is something I've suffered from all through my life. I was quite raw and angry about something, so gave myself a friction burn by rubbing a dry flannel on one section of skin for ages. I didn't tell anybody about it, and because no-one ever saw the small scar it left on my chest, I never had to explain it to anyone.

That was an isolated incident. I started to self-harm again two years ago. I was very anxious and worked up and was in the kitchen, peeling vegetables. The next thing I knew I'd cut myself on my upper left arm. It made a little red weal. Immediately, I felt relieved – as if all the anxiety inside had faded away. It was only a matter of hours until it came flooding back and the red mark had gone, so I made a shallow cut through the skin. I just remember experiencing this overwhelming sense of relief. The next day I thought 'What a stupid woman'. I thought I was absolutely crazy. I'd never known anyone who cut themselves. The next day I went to see my GP and he referred me to a psychiatrist.

Within days my cutting had escalated into a very serious problem; it's a well recognised fact that self-harm is an addictive behaviour. It quickly became an almost daily event.

After cutting, I only think about the practical stuff, 'What are the sheets like?', 'Do I need to change them?' and I disinfect and bandage. I try to keep myself as safe as I can, even though I know it's an unsafe practice.

The duration of my cutting sessions vary – they tend to be between 10 and 30 minutes. My cuts are normally very shallow. I do lots of little ones. I've only ever had to go to hospital twice, both times it was because I couldn't get the wounds to stay closed. Each time, I was given butterfly stitches and was sent home.

I tend to cut in the evenings and early mornings, between 8pm and 5am. I'm sure it's because, at night, everything shuts down and I feel more alone. Winter is the worst time for me because it gets dark earlier. When the darkness descends so does my sense of isolation. Cutting for me is like a darkness. The less traffic and noise on the road outside my house, the more I feel alone. This voice inside my head tells me how worthless and stupid I am. The only way to get it to shut-up is to cut. Sometimes I feel like there is nobody else in the world to turn to.

These inner voices, my 'inner demons' are going on all the time. It's exhausting. It's like there are two people living inside my body. I get the impression that a lot of people self-harm because of these inner voices, because they are trying to get 'something out'.

I find it very difficult to talk to my family about it. Some accept it, but for others it's very hard to talk about. Last year, I showed some of my family my left leg, which was worse than my right at the time, and I sensed they were relieved that it wasn't worse. I'm one of four siblings and we've always been equally treated, but something inside me has stopped me feeling I am anything special. I've felt like this since I was a child. I even believed that I was adopted for a while.

I do talk to my friends about it via an online email group. They're a lifeline. I log on several times a day; it gives me something else to think about. Even if they can't understand it, they can accept it. After all, how can I expect somebody to understand it when I don't myself?

When my self-esteem is hurt, that's when I self-harm; it's a way of dealing with very strong emotions. Happiness as well as anger can be a trigger, which is bizarre. I feel I must always be on an even keel and need punishing if I'm not.

Social situations can also be a trigger; I find it difficult to relate to groups of people and have always hated walking into a room where people are gathered. I joke that I've got Captain Paranoia sitting on my shoulder. I'm much better one-on-one. On a superficial level, friendships not a problem, but I don't like people to get too close.

Self-harm has become part of me. I would love to be able to stop. I see self-harm as a coping mechanism. Some people drink or overspend, I self-harm. I smoke and over-eat too. I do want to stop cutting, but I'm scared to because it means I'll have to find another way of coping. I won't be able to break this circle by myself, but I feel really proud that I haven't self-harmed for some time. One day I want to be able to say that I haven't harmed for a year.

**WHAT IS SELF-HARM?**

Self-injury can take many forms. Cutting with razors or knives on the arms and legs is the most common, but some hit, burn, take overdoses, pick or scratch themselves. Many inflict more than one type of injury. Self-harm is often misinterpreted as attempted suicide, or attention-seeking, but self-injury is generally recognised to be a mechanism for expressing and dealing with deep-seated distress.

**TRIGGERS**

- ◆ Exam stress
- ◆ Bullying
- ◆ Sexual, emotional or physical abuse
- ◆ Emotional or physical neglect
- ◆ Lack of communication/ feelings of isolation
- ◆ Divorce/family conflict
- ◆ Bereavement
- ◆ Illness
- ◆ Peer pressure
- ◆ Concerns over sexuality

**WARNING SIGNS**

- ◆ Cuts or burn marks
- ◆ Sharp instruments such as knives, scalpels or razor blades left lying around
- ◆ Plasters, bandaging or bloodied tissues
- ◆ Regularly locking themselves in bedrooms or bathrooms
- ◆ Having friends that cut or burn
- ◆ Excuses for cuts or blood marks on sheets or clothes, such as shaving cuts
- ◆ A constant state of anxiety, for weeks or months on end
- ◆ Low self-esteem and a sense of worthlessness

**HIGH-PROFILE SELF-HARMERS**



**ANGELINA JOLIE** has admitted that she self-harmed from 13 to 16. 'It was when the reality of life set in, the reality of surviving. I was trying to feel something. I really hurt myself. I was just a kid. Later I met somebody who said they'd seen my movies and then showed me where they'd cut themselves. I had to explain not to do that.'



**CHRISTINA RICCI** has admitted to repeatedly self-harming as a way of releasing her inner-pain. 'When I was younger, I did self-mutilate. I'd be upset, so I'd do it, and it would calm me down. It's a horrible way to feel better,' she says. She described how she self-harmed when she was angry about 'not looking very good.'



**JOHNNY DEPP** describes the cuts he made with a knife as 'rites of passage'. 'My body is a journal. I felt at a loss about my life and how I grew up. I couldn't understand what's right or what's precious,' he says. 'At that time, I was so miserable and self-defeating. I was feeling angry with various things. My anger came up to the surface.'

**I'M IN A TRANCE WHEN I CUT**  
Lucy Hill, 22, tried to slit her wrists when she was a teenager and has been self-harming ever since

I started self-harming in 1999 when I was 17, after I took my A-levels. I had my exam results in three days and was very stressed – I needed to get a B grade to get into University of Wales Bangor, where I had my heart set on going. I was at home in my room smoking when I slowly stubbed it out on my left arm.

After that, I carried on burning. I did it because I felt something bad inside, I can't explain what, and I needed to get it out somehow. I was quite shocked I'd done it, but I felt relieved, as if I'd released all my tension.

I thought everything would be okay once I went away to university, but I felt totally isolated. I was in student halls of residence, didn't know anyone very well and had nobody to talk to. After a couple of weeks I just crashed. I started cutting regularly using razor blades and any sharp instruments I could get my hands on. Eventually I saw a student counsellor who passed me on to the community mental health team, but by this point I was overdosing regularly with paracetamol too and wasn't ready to get help.

In my second year I moved into a house with three amazing people, and I got a part-time job working in a corner shop. At that point, I was cutting every day. It was the only way I could cope. I'd bought a craft knife and was using that.

I would get through the day by saying to myself 'I'll cut tonight, I'll cut tonight'. My cutting sessions got worse. They could take anything from a couple of minutes, up to an hour. Sometimes the cuts were small, but they got longer. I was having to go to hospital to get stitches most weeks.

I didn't really break the cycle until the beginning of my third year when I met my boyfriend. I started cutting around my sock line so he wouldn't see it. He found out and made it clear I should stop, which I did. It didn't stop the urge, but I was able to fight it with his help and inspiration.

I stopped cutting from September 2002 until Easter 2004. Unfortunately, the relationship was not going well. I had begun to cut around my ankles again so I could hide it. After we broke up I felt really isolated and lonely again. I had lost my will to stop. Sometimes I cut as a punishment for eating, or for having the urge to cut, because I know it's wrong. Sometimes I'm just on the computer with the knife in my hand and I find myself cutting...

I feel like I'm in a trance when I'm cutting, like it's something that I've got to do. It doesn't hurt when I do it. I don't feel the pain until afterwards. I know it's a release of my inner pain but I didn't, and still don't, understand it at all.

