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Concerns Regarding a Young Person Self-Harming

Swim England are grateful to the expertise of SelfharmUK, MIND and Dr Neil Martin in assisting with the following guidance.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm, also sometimes referred to as self-injury, is a term used to describe a wide range of behaviours where individuals intentionally hurt themselves; it is often seen as a physical response to an emotional pain. There are lots of different forms of self-harming. Some individuals may use the same method of self-harm all the time, whilst other individuals may use different ways at different times. Ways of self-harming can include but are not limited to:

- cutting
- rubbing/scraping the skin with sharp objects
- scratching, picking and pinching of skin
- biting yourself
- burning
- interfering with healing
- hair pulling (and then potentially hair eating)
- hitting objects, including punching and head banging
- abusing drugs and alcohol
- poisoning or overdosing
- eating disorders
- exercising excessively.

Why does someone self-harm?

The trigger for someone to self-harm will be different for each individual. It can be used as a coping mechanism to deal with something that is either happening or has happened in the past, whilst for others, the reason may be less clear. Sometimes it may be a sign of an underlying mental health issue. There are many reasons why an individual may be self-harming, these could include but not limited to:

- being unhappy and/or experiencing low self esteem
- suffering from bullying or discrimination
- coming to terms with their sexual orientation
- having problems at school
- experiencing negative life events and family issues
- bereavement
- experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect
- undergoing other psychiatric and/or psychological factors.

Self-harm can be used as a way of punishing themselves for something they have done. It can also be used as a way to make the individual feel as though they are in control of something in their life.

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Talking about self-harm

Whether someone tells you directly, or you suspect that an individual is self-harming, it can be extremely difficult to know what to say and how best to approach the situation.

- Try not to panic or overreact. The way you respond will have an impact on how much they open up to you now and in the future.
- Try to be non-judgemental.
- Let the individual know you are there for them.

It can be difficult for sufferers because they may feel scared, ashamed, think they will get in to trouble and may have difficulty in explaining to others how they feel and why they are self-harming. Parents/guardians of sufferers may equally find it difficult to talk about and deal with the emotions of what is happening to their child.

Support and guidance on how to deal with self-harm is available from the Swim England Child Safeguarding Team and in some cases a referral may be made to the Swim England Doctor under the Medical Protocol as required.

It is important to remember that club officers, coaching staff and the Swim England Child Safeguarding Team are not trained professionals in the field of self-harm and there is no expectation on individuals to provide counselling services to either the young person or their family. Self-harm is a highly complex area and requires appropriately qualified medical expertise to support the young person and their family.

Swim England Doctor and the Medical Protocol

In some cases, the club may be concerned that a young person is unfit to be swimming due to the self-harm. In cases of this nature assistance can be sought from the Swim England Doctor under the Medical Protocol.

Under this protocol the doctor can be asked to speak to the young person's doctor/consultant to discuss this further. The Swim England Doctor will require written consent from the parents/guardians of the young person concerned and the name and contact details of the medical professional charged with the young person's care. The Swim England Doctor may request further information from the parents/guardians or the club. Such requests will always be advised on a case-by-case basis.

Following this referral process the Swim England Doctor will be able to confirm, or otherwise, the fitness to swim and whether any additional support can be given by the club to enable the young person to continue in the sport. Swim England case history in this area shows that swimming is predominantly regarded as a very positive and enjoyable experience by the medical professionals. In most cases medical advice has encouraged the continued involvement of the young person in the sport due to the positive impact it has.

What to do if you suspect someone is self-harming

If an individual has concerns, has noticed marks on an individual's body or has received a disclosure, it is important that these concerns are referred to the Welfare Officer and to the Swim England Child Safeguarding Team so appropriate advice can be provided.

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In most cases the parents/guardians of the child would be informed of the concerns so the club can establish that the parents/guardians are aware and the young person is receiving appropriate professional support. Occasionally parents/guardians may be aware but don't know where to turn for help. Clubs can provide appropriate signposting to the professional help available as listed at the end of this guidance.

In cases where it is felt that the self-harm may be due to an issue at home and where it is felt that talking to the parents/guardians could make the situation worse for the young person concerned a referral can be made to Children's Social Care in order to take further advice.

In all cases the Swim England Child Safeguarding Team will support and provide guidance to any club or individual with a concern of this nature.

Who can help?

In most cases individuals may find help and support through their GP. The GP may refer the young person to specialist mental health services depending on availability. The GP may refer the young person to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

CAMHS provide specialist NHS children and young people's mental health services. Referrals to CAMHS can also be accessed through the young person's school. If the family is receiving support through the Local Authority Children's Social Care Team, they may also be able to access CAMHS through their family worker.

Help can also be accessed through private clinical psychologists and psychotherapists who may offer specialist support but these can be costly and the families would need to ensure that the practitioner is recognised by a professional body.

In addition, there are a number of organisations that can provide advice and support and these are shown at the end of this guidance.

As mentioned, discovering that someone is self-harming and supporting them can be extremely difficult and upsetting. Research suggests that children exposed to others' self-harm may be more likely to begin harming themselves, so it's important that siblings, friends and those around the individual self-harming receive support as much as the person affected.

Will the self-harm continue?

It is important to understand that self-harm may not stop when you approach a young person to discuss what you have seen or because they have felt able to tell you that they are self-harming. Some individuals will find self-harming addictive, and some may become dependent on it. Telling somebody to stop is unlikely to work and could push the young person to self-harm secretly.

Recovery can often be a long process and professional support will often provide young people with the opportunity to talk about how they feel and to look at new ways of coping.

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Organisations that support and provide advice on self-harm

This is not an exhaustive list, families can also speak to their GP and child's school to enquire about local advice and help services that may be available.

YoungMinds

YoungMinds is the UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. They have a parent/guardian helpline on:

Tel: 0808 802 5544

Web link: youngminds.org.uk

SelfharmUK

SelfharmUK is a project dedicated to supporting young people impacted by self-harm, providing a safe space to talk, ask any questions and be honest about what's going on in your life. SelfharmUK is a registered UK charity that's been working to support young people aged 11 to 19.

Web link: selfharm.co.uk

Harmless

Harmless was established at the beginning of October 2007. It is a national voluntary organisation for people who self-harm, their friends, families and professionals.

Web link: harmless.org.uk

Childline

Childline is a private and confidential service for children and young people up to 19 years of age. Contact can be made with a Childline counsellor about anything. Calls are free on:

Tel: 0800 1111

Web link: childline.org.uk/info-advice/yourfeelings/self-harm

NSPCC

Calls can be made to the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000. Trained counsellors are used to dealing with the effects of self-harm and calls can be made anonymously.

Tel: 0808 800 5000

Web link: nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/childrens-mental-health/self-harm

Kooth.com

Free online support for young people. Kooth is a service from Xenzone, leaders of online counselling.

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Web link: kooth.com

Mind

Provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. They campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding.

Tel: 0300 123 3393 (Monday-Friday, 9am-6pm)

Web link: mind.org.uk

Samaritans

Confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

Tel: 116 123 (24-hour helpline)

Web link: samaritans.org.uk

NHS Information on Self-Harm

nhs.uk/conditions/self-harm

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