OUR MENTAL HEALTH ROCKS

Have you just found out your child is self-harming?

We are guessing you are feeling an overwhelming amount of emotions right now and may not be sure what to do, how to help, or where to turn to.

Maybe you suspect your child is self-harming and are not sure if you should say anything, or what to do about it.

Below is some information that may help, it is important to know that while this may be very upsetting for you, and difficult to understand it is not about you, that is this is not happening because of anything you have or have not done.

We will explain further down so please take some time to read through this and know every child, parent or carer is different and there is no "one size" remedy, behaviour or reason.

Self-harm can take so many different types of physical forms, these include a child cutting, burning, bruising, scratching, hair-pulling, poisoning or overdosing themselves.

Many people mistake self-harm for a suicide attempt or simply a cry for attention, this is rarely true, most often it is a way for a young person to release some built-up or building overwhelming emotions.

A coping mechanism that can very easily and quickly become compulsive and seen as a quick way to feel better.

Young people can harm themselves for many different reasons and while knowing what is happening in their lives that triggers overwhelm can be helpful, remember sometimes the child may not know or be ready to disclose.

If this is the case do not put pressure on to find out, that in itself can trigger the urge to harm.

Some of the reasons can be: under pressure from school, exams, pressure to do well, emotional abuse, grieving, loneliness, numbness, a feeling of a lack of control, low selfesteem and confidence to name some.

There are teenagers who try self-harming out of curiosity as a growing number of people they know have done so, or are using it as a coping strategy.

Social media has to accept a part in this day and age as there are websites that have promoted self-harm as a coping strategy over other ways.

For some the physical pain from self-harm can feel easier to understand and deal with than the emotional pain that could be behind it, for others a feeling of having some control over something in life, play's a part.

Self-harming can very quickly become addictive due to the chemicals released into the brain during self-harming episodes. Endorphins, are our natural pain killers and are created and produced when a person self-harms. The opiate receptors in our brains produce heightened feelings of pleasure, well-being as well as numbness to pain.

It has been shown that some people who self-harm can become entwined in a circle of compulsion that keeps them harming to receive the chemicals in the brain. Often those who self-harm will take steps to conceal the marks, scars, burns or bruises, this can make identifying self-harm difficult. Often areas used are not the most visible such as stomach, inner thighs, genital or ankles.

The amount of tools used can grow, razor blades, glass, needles, rocks with sharp edges, pencil sharpeners and sometimes erasers to create skin burns.

So as you can see, even from this short help sheet, self-harming is a complex issue, however understanding the feelings you are having around this can help you help another.

It is normal for a parent or carer to be shocked, sad or to feel guilt, confusion or even anger, as it is often very difficult to understand why a person would want to inflict harm on themselves.

To help you support a person it is important to understand and be understanding of, your own emotions.

It is vital that you check in with where you are when you are communicating with your young person. If you are in an emotionally charged state at the same time your young person is you will find yourselves bumping up against each other instead of connecting and being heard.

Do not try to downplay the impacts of self-harm, to try and make a person feel better, saying things like, "the marks are not that bad" or "it is just a phase" do not help neither do telling a person to "just stop" or getting angry with them.

Try not to make them feel guilty about the impact their actions are having on others. Ultimatums saying you must stop harming or …….. (move out, go to live with another parent etc), these never work.

No matter how you are feeling it is important to remain calm and compassionate when discussing this with a young person, calm, consistent open conversations without judgement, not downplaying or attempting to fix are usually the most productive.

While it is understandable that you will be worried, the calmer you can be when around your young person the better. Leaving judgement out of the conversations, at all times. If you need to get extra support for yourself please do so and keep it separate from your young persons, do not blame them for you needing support, it never helps.

Asking a young person how they are feeling and listening without distraction, or letting them know you are there when they want to talk is the first step.

We often say when working with children look at the message behind the behaviour, not the behaviour, the same applies here, do not talk to or at the injury, talk to the person and the message they are giving you behind the actions.

Also remember a person will only stop when it feels right for them to do so.

Practical help can take the form of helping the young person distract their thoughts from injury, talking, going for a walk, watching a movie, using a stress ball, drawing a butterfly in the area they would have injured and every day the butterfly fades without injury is a positive thing, and when it is gone, it's flown away.

Drawing with red pen can help some.

To replace the chemicals released during injury going for a jog, a fitness class and even dancing will reproduce the same endorphins.

Ask the young person what they think they could do to help themselves, empowering them to be part of the solution can in itself be very helpful.

An open, blame free, compassionate yet still consistent home is invaluable.

Your young person is still your, young person, they are not their behaviour, they are simply showing you their response to their thinking at that moment.

Love always wins