

Self-Harm & Suicide

Introduction

For a person dealing with addiction and other mental health issues, it is natural to have strong feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety, and self-loathing. This often manifests itself in self-harm, which can lead to long-term physical effects such as severe wounds, scarring, and in some cases, nerve damage. Although it is not always the case, self-harm can also be indicative of thoughts of suicide. In this section, we will cover the following:

- Signs of self-harm and/or thoughts of suicide,
- Safely confiscating objects that can be used for self-harm,
- Responding to and treating self-induced injuries,
- Responding to patient suicide,
- Working with your patient's counsellor to further prevent self-destructive behavior through positive coping strategies.

Whenever you're ready, let's get started.

Self-Harm

Self-harm is the intentional, direct injuring of one's own body. Although the most common form is cutting the skin with a sharp object, such as a knife or razor, it can also include burning, scratching, purposely hitting body parts, hair-pulling, and ingesting toxic substances or objects.



Warning Signs

Most of the warning signs of self-harm are physical, such as frequent bruises or cuts, inserting objects into body openings, and scratching with the intention of drawing blood. However, there are also emotional indicators such as:

- Poor daily functioning,
- Difficulty handling emotions,
- Avoidance towards outside relationships.

Those who self-harm often try to conceal their wounds, so take notice if a patient is wearing inappropriate clothing such as long sleeves or pants in hot weather.



Response

If you suspect a patient is self-harming, the first thing you need to remember is to approach them in a way that is not strict or judgmental. They are already in a considerable amount of pain emotionally and physically, and a negative reaction will only exacerbate the situation.

Remind them you are here to support them during their recovery, and that you understand they might need to express their feelings in this way. However, you also need to emphasize that continuing to harm themselves will only inhibit their recovery, and that you are willing to work with them to find and establish coping strategies.

For the patient's injuries, the recommended treatment depends on their severity. For minor cuts and burns, simply clean the wound with water, apply an antibiotic such as Neosporin or Polysporin, and bandage it. For more severe wounds, further medical attention such as stitches may be required. If the wound is deep or unclean, check to see if the patient has had a tetanus shot in the past five years. If not, ensure they get one as soon as possible.

While the wounds heal, make sure the bandages are changed at least once a day or whenever they become wet or dirty.

Moving Forward

To prevent further occurrences, ensure all objects a patient uses or may use to harm themselves are confiscated.

If the patient reacts negatively, assure them that their belongings will not be taken away permanently, and that it is your job to make sure they are safe. Objects needed for hygiene, such as razors and tweezers, can be used under supervision.

Work with the patient and their therapist to help them establish positive strategies to cope with their emotions. Depending on the patient's interests, this can include painting, drawing, writing, playing sports, going for walks, gardening etc.

Moving forward, the patient should have allotted time devoted to this activity. If they are focused on doing something they enjoy, they are less likely to self-harm.

Make sure they attend therapy every week to receive ongoing care.



Suicidal Behaviour

Suicide and self-harm are not necessarily linked. However, the same thought patterns and behaviours, when not addressed, can lead to suicidal ideation. The warning signs, especially in conjunction with self-harm, may remain the same but can also include some or all of the following:

- Obsessive talking about death,
- Trouble eating or sleeping,
- Despondency,
- Fatigue,
- Withdrawal from outside relationships,
- Giving away items of personal value to other patients,
- Reduced concentration.



Response

If you think a patient is suicidal, approach them gently by saying you have been worrying about them and ask if there is anything they would like to discuss. Remind them it is okay they are struggling and that you will work with them to get through it.

If it at any time you do feel a patient's life is in imminent danger, make sure they are in a safe space and call 911 immediately.

Moving Forward

Work with the patient's therapist to help them move past their suicidal thoughts and feelings. This can include making sure they take any prescribed medication, attend therapy sessions, or pursue any activities they enjoy. Ensure they have time to devote to caring for themselves and be attentive to any signs of further suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Should a patient under your care commit suicide, follow your centre protocol for notifying their family, collecting/disposing of their belongings, etc.

If at any time you feel in need of emotional assistance, please do not hesitate to contact a counsellor at your centre or one you already have an established relationship with.

Further Readings & Videos

These readings and videos are meant to increase your understanding of and empathy towards those who experience suicidal ideation and self-harm. Content from the supplementary material will be used in the discussion questions at the end of the course.

Books

Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness by William Styron

<https://www.amazon.ca/Darkness-Visible-Madness-William-Styron/dp/0679736395>

DSM 5 In Action: 3rd Edition by Sophia F. Dziegielewska

<http://ca.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-111813673X.html>

Videos

TED Talk: Marta Carvalhal- Self Harm, What is it About?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnQOTP30ve8>

TED Talk: Timothy Lawson: Preventing Suicide Before We See the Signs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2uxiEfFils&t=285s>



Thank you, you have completed this section. Whenever you're ready, go to Physical Harm to Others.