

unpacking self-harm

understanding what it is and why it helps

sources:

- [How Pain Can Make You Feel Better](#)
- [How Self-Harm Provokes the Brain Into Feeling Better](#)
- [There's a Scientific Reason Why Self-Harm Makes Some People Feel Better](#)

Self-harm is not the same as suicidal ideation or an attempt. It is very common and everyone knows someone who has self-harmed.

Self-harm, also known as non-suicidal self-injury or NSSI, happens anytime we hurt ourselves on purpose (often as a way to release painful emotions). It is subjective, looks different across cultures, serves different purposes, and is not limited to one group, gender, or age. There is often a belief that self-harm is limited to teen girls (especially white girls), but this is not the truth. Though self-harm is often conflated with an attempt to end one's life, self-harm serves a different purpose and is not the same as a suicide attempt (though tools and methods used while self-harming may be present in a suicide attempt).

Some forms of self-harm are more socially acceptable than others.

In the US, for example, alcohol and tobacco use is normalized, and is so extreme dieting and weight loss. Burnout culture (no rest, push yourself to the ultimate limits) is standard across the workplace and in schools and academic settings. Mania and recreational use of stimulants is directly and non-directly praised when it serves capitalism or our ability to work and produce. Typically, more graphic, visible, or “violent” forms of self-harm (such as cutting, burning, headbanging, etc.) are less socially acceptable to others. These forms of self-harm tend to trigger fear and discomfort in others, who then have a strong desire to control or eliminate those behaviors.

NSSI is an effective emotion relief strategy with a spectrum of harmful impacts on the bodymind.

Oftentimes, self-harm is described by clinicians and experts as a “maladaptive coping mechanism.” From our perspective, this phrasing seems unfair. How can we label something maladaptive if it’s serving a purpose that works? It’s not uncommon that self-harm gets outcomes that cannot otherwise be achieved at that time and under those circumstances. By using self-injury, folks are able to tap into the natural emotional relief that follows the removal of intense and acute pain.

Self-harm can get our needs met, and people do it for many different reasons.

It's not uncommon that self harm gets outcomes that cannot otherwise be achieved. On an intrapersonal level, it can alter our emotions and the physical experience they manifest inside of our bodies. On an interpersonal level, it can alter our relationships with others and how they understand our experiences. Many personal narratives of folks who self-harm have described (and studies have confirmed) that it can function as a "real" and tangible manifestation of one's pain and suffering. This can communicate and signal something to supporters who may not have fully believed or understood how deeply this person was struggling.

The act of self-harm is not manipulative or attention-seeking; though, like anything else, it can be weaponized for harmful purposes.

Even if the goal is to communicate something to others, self-harm is not manipulative or attention-seeking. We need to shift our thinking from attention-seeking to connection-seeking, which is really just another way of saying we are making an attempt to get our needs met. Also, many people who self-experience experience intense shame and go to great lengths to hide our injuries from others.

Now, this is very different from individuals using self-harm as a weaponized tool for harmful purposes or to control others. Example: *"If you break up with me, I will cut myself and bleed out right now."*

Research shows:

- A diminished pain perception in people who self-harm
- Folks with the greatest difficulties in regulating emotions can withstand the most pain
- Self-criticism increases our ability to withstand pain longer (and is often cited as a reason people self-harm)
- The introduction + removal of something unpleasant makes people feel better
- People with higher levels of negative emotions are more likely to engage in NSSI (there is more negative emotion to reduce and more relief to gain)

Bodily injury can provide temporary relief from emotional suffering.

Our brain uses the same 2 areas to sense physical and emotional pain (anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex). Pain relievers have been shown to work on the same two areas – meaning physical pain relief and emotional pain relief are essentially the same thing. In order to generate emotional relief, people may resort to generating pain relief (which means they need to generate acute, intense pain via NSSI). Self-harm can actually be a sign of “**signal-scrambling** between the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex.” The fact that physical and emotional pain perceptions use many of the same neural circuits provides those who self-harm with a curious ‘out’. We’ve learned that, while the pain peaks with self-injury, it then comes down the other side. The physical pain lessens – as does the emotional pain.

Harm reduction is often a much better approach than pressuring others or ourselves to stop completely or at once.

Self-harm can be cyclical. If we hold ourselves to high standards of not relapsing at all or engaging in any self-harm behavior, we can be pretty disappointed if/when we engage in similar behaviors again. A harm reduction approach does not view completely stopping a harmful activity or behavior as the goal. The focus is on increasing safety and reducing risk for the person, in a way that respects their self-determination. Self-harm is also a tool that keeps many people alive. Instead of focusing on getting people who self-harm to stop (or assuming that's even their goal), focus on honoring that person's agency and recognizing that self-harm is not the problem, and there's always a reason for it.