

Introduction

Recent research indicates that up to one in ten young people in the UK engage in self-harming behaviours, and that this figure is higher amongst specific populations, including young people with special educational needs. Tutors and staff can play an important role in preventing self-harm and also in supporting students, peers and parents of students currently engaging in self-harm.

Scope

This document describes Winchmore Tutors (WT) approach to self-harm. This policy is intended as guidance for all staff and tutors including non-teaching staff.

Aims

- To increase understanding and awareness of self-harm
- To alert staff and tutors to warning signs and risk factors
- To provide support to staff and tutors dealing with students who self-harm
- To provide support to students who self-harm and their peers and parents/carers

Definition of Self-Harm

Self-harm is any behaviour where the intent is to deliberately cause harm to one's own body for example:

- Cutting, scratching, scraping or picking skin
- Swallowing inedible objects
- Taking an overdose of prescription or non-prescription drugs
- Swallowing hazardous materials or substances
- Burning or scalding
- Hair-pulling
- Banging or hitting the head or other parts of the body
- Scouring or scrubbing the body excessively

Risk Factors

The following risk factors, particularly in combination, may make a young person particularly vulnerable to self-harm:

Individual Factors:

- Depression / anxiety
- Poor communication skills
- Low self-esteem
- Poor problem-solving skills
- Hopelessness
- Impulsivity
- Drug or alcohol abuse

Family Factors:

- Unreasonable expectations
- Neglect or physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Poor parental relationships and arguments
- Depression, self-harm or suicide in the family

Social Factors

- Difficulty in making relationships / loneliness
- Being bullied or rejected by peers

Warning Signs

WT staff and tutors may become aware of warning signs which indicate a student is experiencing difficulties that may lead to thoughts of self-harm or suicide. These warning signs should always be taken seriously and staff or tutors observing any of these warning signs should seek further advice from one of the WT Designated Child Protection Officers.

Possible warning signs include:

- Changes in eating / sleeping habits (e.g. student may appear overly tired if not sleeping well)
- Increased isolation from friends or family, becoming socially withdrawn
- Changes in activity and mood e.g. more aggressive or introverted than usual
- Lowering of academic achievement
- Talking or joking about self-harm or suicide
- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Expressing feelings of failure, uselessness or loss of hope
- Changes in clothing e.g. becoming a goth

Staff and tutor roles in working with students who self-harm

Students may choose to confide in a member staff or a tutor if they are concerned about their own welfare, or that of a peer. Staff and tutors may experience a range of feelings in response to self-harm in a student such as anger, sadness, shock, disbelief, guilt, helplessness, disgust and rejection. However, in order to offer the best possible help to students it is important to try and maintain a supportive and open attitude – a student who has chosen to discuss their concerns with a member of staff or tutor is showing a considerable amount of courage and trust.

Students need to be made aware that it may not be possible for staff or tutors to offer complete confidentiality. If you consider a student is at serious risk of harming themselves then confidentiality cannot be kept. It is important not to make promises of confidentiality that cannot be kept, even if a student puts pressure on you to do so.

Any member of staff or tutor who is aware of a student engaging in or suspected to be at risk of engaging in self-harm should consult the Designated Child Protection Officer, or the Deputy Child Protection Officer

Following the report, the designated person will decide on the appropriate course of action. This may include:

- Contacting parents / carers
- Arranging professional assistance e.g. doctor, nurse, social services
- Arranging an appointment with a counsellor
- Immediately removing the student from lessons if their remaining in tuition is likely to cause further distress to themselves or their peers
- In the case of an acutely distressed student, the immediate safety of the student is paramount and an adult should remain with the student at all times
- If a student has self-harmed in tuition, a first aider should be called for immediate help

Further Considerations

Any meetings with a student, their parents or their peers regarding self-harm should be recorded in writing including:

- Dates and times
- An action plan
- Concerns raised
- Details of anyone else who has been informed

This information will be recorded in WT's Safeguarding incident file.

It is important to encourage students to let you know if one of their group is in trouble, upset or showing signs of self-harming. Friends can worry about betraying confidences so they need to know that self-harm can be very dangerous and that by seeking help and advice for a friend they are taking responsible action & being a good friend. They should also be aware that their friend will be treated in a caring and supportive manner.

The peer group of a young person who self-harms may value the opportunity to talk to a member of staff or tutor either individually or in a small group. Any member of staff or tutors wishing for further advice on this should consult the Designated Child Protection Officer.

When a young person is self-harming it is important to be vigilant in case close contacts with the individual are also self-harming. Occasionally schools discover that a number of students in the same peer group are harming themselves.