

New UK website to help self-harming teenagers

Mindfull gives professional advice to young people who hurt themselves, writes John Bilstein.

"I started self-harming when I was around 13," writes Eleanor on mindfull.org, the UK's new charity for adolescents with emotional issues. Self-harming is a huge problem in the UK. In Eleanor's case, it led to depression and eating disorders, and if she had not gone looking for help, she might have ended up in a sea of troubles for the rest of her life.

But Eleanor is only one of many young Britons who have turned their psychological pain inside out in the worst possible way. According to statistics from the Camelot Foundation, a youth counselling charity, around one in 15 British teenagers are hurting themselves deliberately or have done so in the past.

Such behaviour is, of course, a sign of stress, which can be triggered by anything ranging from abuse at home or bullying at school to learning difficulties or quite simply being unhappily in love with the best-looking guy or girl in class.

Some people start to self-harm because they feel it gives them power over their own bodies when life is out of control. "At first, I had no idea what I was doing," writes another girl who calls herself Amy. "All I knew was that it temporarily took away the pain."

However, the long-term effects and the physical scars are terrible, and self-harming can even lead to accidental suicide. It's a theme that nobody likes to talk about, really, because it literally goes to deep. Amy's story is typical: "At the time I never told people what I was doing," she says, "but ... I was screaming inside: How could they not see how I was feeling?"

This is where MindFull comes into play. It was set up to help young people with the stresses of growing up and to give teenagers the best advice when they are down. The website employs professional counsellors and psychologists to talk to troubled adolescents. They are supported by a team of young volunteers and mentors who know and understand what their peers are going through.

Young Saffron developed problems some months before mindfull.org went online, and she reckons the site would have been perfect for her: "[It] would have been really good, because I wouldn't have had to worry about seeing people around and then judging me."

She has a point: the difference between talking to friends and consulting a mental health expert is that professionals can help you objectively without getting angry.

Mental health care for British adults is good, but it doesn't always do enough for young people. According to the Times newspaper, it can take up to six months before adolescents with depression or mental health issues are sent to see a psychologist.

That is why extra online services like MindFull are so important. “Teenagers naturally look to the internet as a source of information and advice, so that’s where we need to be in order to help the hundreds of thousands of young people,” clinical psychologist Tanya Byron told the Times.

After surveying more than 2,000 adolescents in the UK, MindFull found that 29 per cent self-harmed or had done so in the past, while 20 per cent suffered from depression, and the charity tries to offer support at all levels.

MindFull, which is an offshoot of the anti-bullying charity BeatBullying, offers self-help guidance, one-to-one counselling, group therapy, peer mentoring and chat rooms, where troubled teens can talk to other people their own age with similar issues.

All teenage mentors working for MindFull receive training before they are allowed to talk to people online, so they can be trusted. But of course people in difficult situations cannot always get their feelings across, and it can take up to 22 online conversations with different people before they start to feel better.

However, if it weren’t for mindfull.org, many youngsters would either have to go for private counselling, which is very expensive, or receive no help at all.

ReadOn November 2013

Self-harm facts and figures

It’s hard to say how many people self-harm, but many experts believe the figure may be as high as 10 per cent of the population. Official figures for the UK are 400 per 100,000.

- Self harm takes many different forms, ranging from pinching to skin-cutting, which is the most common form of self-harm.
- Causes: stress, feeling out of place, or neurological problems
- Nearly 900,000 people worldwide are thought to have died as a result of self harm as of 2010, according to the World Health Organization.
- Young people are most at risk, but they normally grow out of it before they reach the age of 25.
- The suicide rate in adults who self-harm is five times above average. The rate of self-harm among US adults may be as high as 4 per cent.
- Men self-harm just as much as women, but they use different techniques, such as hitting themselves, which is harder to spot.
- Elderly people also self-harm, especially in hospitals and care homes.

Comprehension

A. Read the text and decide whether the following statements are true, false or not in the text.

- a) Eleanor started harming herself when she was a little child.
- b) Nowadays, people talk openly about problems like harming oneself.
- c) "mindfull.org" is really successful and can help nearly every troubled teenager.
- d) "mindfull.org" was perfect for Saffron.
- e) Mental health care in the UK is better for grown-ups than it is for teenagers.
- f) Tanya Byron offers self-help guidance.

B. Answer the following questions in your own words.

1. Why do people self-harm?
2. How does the website help?

Speaking

Find partners for one or more of the following tasks:

Task I

You have noticed that one of your friends is hurting himself regularly.

Discuss how you are going to help him.

Task II

Why do you think a lot of teenagers are under stress apart from the reasons mentioned in paragraph 3?

How can their problems be solved? Make suggestions.

Task III

Would you like to work for mindfull.org?
Discuss the pros and cons before you decide.

Glossary

cope with sth (often: can or can't cope)	
deal with sth	
come to terms with sth	

learning difficulties	
depression, depressed	
mental health issues	
troubled	
support (v, n)	
therapy, counselling	
adolescents, teenagers, teens, youngsters	
youth	
to self-harm	
issues, problems	