

SELF-HARM AND AUTISM



Autism is described as **“a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them.”** It is estimated that it affects more than 1 in 100 people in the UK, increasing to nearly 3 in 100 10-14 year olds in a 2018 English sample. This means that autism affects the lives of approximately 2.8 million people in the UK.

Self-harm is often a way young people are trying to cope with, process or express difficult experiences and feelings. For autistic young people, self-harm can be meeting this same need, however there seems to be more going on as there are higher reported rates in autistic than non-autistic people, and recent research highlighted that 50% of a sample of Autistic adults have harmed in some way. Sometimes, but not always, the way harming behaviours can occur is different for autistic young people than allistic young people. It may include repetitive practices of hand-biting, hitting, excessive skin and hair picking or the banging of heads, fists and self into objects.

People harm for a wide range of reasons and due to many different difficult experiences and emotions, but as the data shows more autistic young people struggle with this and there are additional triggers that can cause this, such as Meltdowns, Sensory or Emotional overwhelm and Communication difficulties, as well as Discrimination and Social Isolation related to Autism.



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It is also important to acknowledge the frustration that a person must feel if they are having communication difficulties, their feelings are not understood, or they are struggling to interpret the intentions of others. An expression of this frustration might come out as self-harm, which is very similar to the experiences Allistic teenagers share of self-harm, where they feel misunderstood, frustrated or overwhelmed.

Alternatively, it can happen without an obvious cause for autistic young people, potentially due to sensory seeking or because it has become a repetitive behaviour autistic individuals engage in for stimulation or routine. For example, some autistic individuals experience hypo-sensitivity (decreased sensitivity to input) and engaging in self-harm may help increase arousal and meet a certain need. While hyper-sensitive (increased sensitivity to input) people may experience self-harm as a way to release tension caused by this overwhelm.

This means that when we think about self-harm and Autism we need to be aware that there are additional things that can impact self-harm such as difficulty regulating and expressing emotions. BUT that doesn't mean that we cannot begin to understand our emotions more, find alternatives and accommodate some of the struggles we are facing.

How we do this, may depend on the struggles the young person is facing and the function the self-harm is serving for them.



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We will likely understand this the more we explore the individual's experience of self-harm and observe when they struggle with it most. When treating self-harm we often find that behavioural therapies, such as CBT and DBT, help build in new coping strategies and emotional regulation. For example, through emotional identification and expression tools, e.g. feelings wheels or art to express how we feel; or by learning new repetitive behaviours and positive coping strategies, such as moving our bodies or using breathing exercises to regulate.

It may mean finding safer ways to seek sensations if we need stimulation, such as using specific fidget toys (e.g. accu-pressure rings), seeking stimulating environments and planning in time to avoid sensory input if we need that. This could look like removing ourselves from sensory overwhelming places, wearing our headphones, finding a safe & quiet space or ensuring we feel comfortable in our clothing. We may also need to find different ways to communicate, such as feelings wheels, flashcards or text to speech apps. These are great ways to reduce communication difficulties and to help us express what we need or how we feel when we are. It isn't silly to need accommodating in this way, they are so important and so are you.

Due to communication differences, it can sometimes be very hard for parents of autistic young people to know how to help them, and it can take a long time for the right intervention to be found. Both autism and self-harm are under-researched areas and are not fully understood, so facing the two together can feel scary and isolating. Families and individuals dealing with these issues need lots of support and encouragement, and it's important they are supported to find it.

