



Self-help groups for self-injury

This leaflet is a brief guide to some of the issues that may be important in self-help groups for women who self-injure. It is for anyone who wishes to be involved in such a group, as a member or facilitator.

What is a self-help group for self-injury?

A self-help group is ideally a supportive space for people to explore their own issues around self-injury. There are still only a few groups around the country. Women who go to a group may have a history of secrecy about their self-injury due to the rejection they have met from others; it is vital that any self-help group should be supportive and non-judgemental – it often is the only safe space available.

How can this 'safe space' be achieved?

There is no one correct model for running self-help groups, and each group will need to establish what works best for its members. Having some ground rules is essential to provide a secure structure for all involved, and to help the smooth running of the group.

Some examples of helpful ground rules might be:

- **confidentiality:** an agreement that whatever is said within the group goes no further.
- **new members:** how and when will they join? Often a group will be closed to new people for a few weeks or months while relationships

are established, and then it may feel appropriate for new people to join. A suitable size-limit for the group needs to be decided (6 - 8 is often a good number, allowing space for everyone to be heard).

- **contact outside the meetings:** each woman's circumstances and needs for wanting contact with others, or not wanting to be contacted must be recognised and respected; groups can become very friendly and social, but can also be quite draining!
- **support outside the group:** self-help groups can be very supportive, but are different from therapy. If possible, it can be useful if group members also have some other form of support for the issues surrounding their self-injury, eg from a counsellor, voluntary agency, a community psychiatric nurse, their GP, etc.
- **what happens in the group:** an agenda for what actually goes on is helpful, and it is a good idea to start a new group by 'brainstorming' what members want out of the group, what issues they would like to discuss, and so on. This might involve talking about individual experiences or looking at specific topics (e.g. responses at Accident and Emergency, injury care, etc.). Some groups have found BCSW's booklet 'Self-injury, support and self-help groups' useful in providing starting points for discussion.
- **keeping safe:** uncomfortable feelings may arise in groups. While each member needs to take responsibility for her own feelings and actions, it is important for groups to work out their own rules for safety. In particular, a 'no self-injury during the meeting' boundary may be important, as this can shatter trust and respect for all involved.

Does the group need a facilitator?

A facilitator can provide an invaluable input to the process of the group by overseeing what is happening, keeping time and providing insight into problems that might arise. However, there can also be advantages to being in a group without an outside facilitator. There may be a greater feeling of equality and self-respect, and it can be empowering for group members to experience themselves as able to provide a supportive, healing space without the need for an outside 'expert'.

Facilitators with experience in this area and empathy towards self-injury may not be easy to find. Some people are only happy to be in groups where the facilitator has personal experience of self-injury. Local MIND or survivors' organisations may know of someone appropriate. Where there is no facilitator a group will work best if everyone is aware of looking after

their own needs, as well as sharing responsibility for how the group functions.

Myths about self-injury groups

Some professionals have been loath to encourage groups, believing the sharing of experiences would lead to worse self-injury through “comparing notes”. In our experience, the opposite is true. In an atmosphere of acceptance of the person behind the scars, a woman’s pain can be acknowledged and deeper understanding and compassion can develop. Simply meeting someone else who self-injures can be enormously important. Sharing experiences and ways of coping, finding similarities and differences is key. Being able to talk about and explore these can be significant steps in finding a path of survival through decreasing self-injury.

It is important that stopping self-injury is not seen as the primary goal. It takes a long time for a person to be ready to give up self-injury, and indeed it may worsen for a while when previously buried issues or feelings are explored. This can be frightening, but is understandable; what is important is respect for that person’s efforts to survive, and to make sense of the pain behind it all.

What other practical issues are there?

A suitable venue needs to be found, which feels comfortable and private and is available at a time convenient to the group. Rooms may be available through Social Services or voluntary agencies. Someone needs to take responsibility for booking rooms, providing tea and biscuits, and ringing around if there are problems. It is a good idea to share jobs such as these. Thought needs to be given to advertising; posters in GP surgeries, libraries, community centres etc. can be one good way. Often recommendations come through statutory service, or by word of mouth. Fundraising usually needs attention – the local Social Services and Health Trusts may be good starting points.

Bristol Crisis Service for Women keeps a listing of groups around the country. Please let us know about your group.

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