

Self-Harm - distractions

KS4/5

30 mins

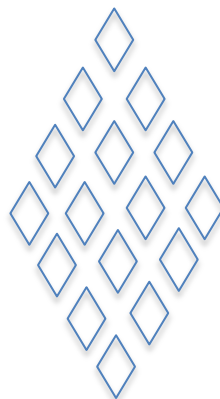
An activity which increases awareness of techniques which have been found to help young people avoid self-harming.

What you need

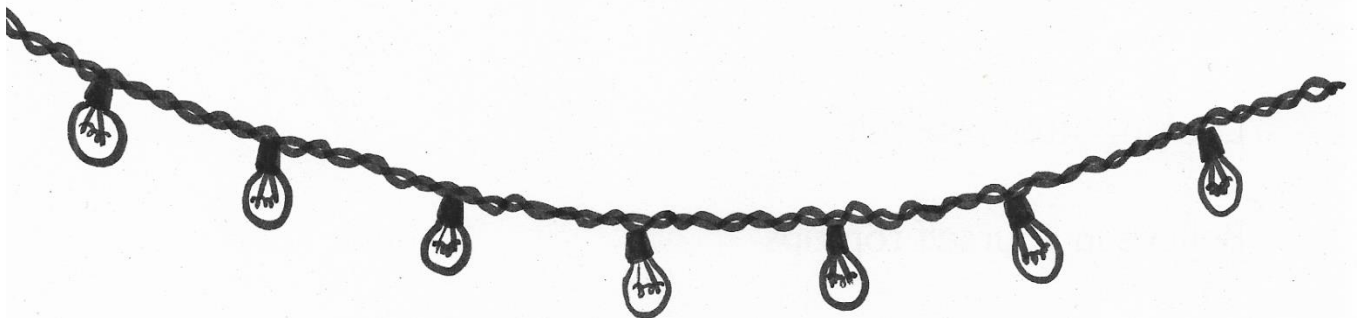
- Distraction cards
- Photo of distraction objects

Method

- Introduce self-harm, explaining that it is a coping mechanism which can be a habit or a learned response to certain stressful times or difficult situations. Some people have described the urge to self-harm, as building and then ebbing away like a wave. Therefore it can be helpful to have techniques at your disposal to help you get through the urge without using self-harm as the coping mechanism. There are no quick fixes and it probably won't work every time but celebrate the times when it does.
- Divide students into groups and explain that you are going to display a picture with a number of different objects. Each represents a form of distraction technique.
- The photo will be displayed for 2 minutes only.
- Each group should compile a list of the objects they recall. Find out which group remembers the most objects and then ask them to recall the objects displayed.
- Next present each group with a set of distraction cards, including blanks cards.
- Groups should identify what each card represents and how it might be related to a distraction technique.
- Groups are then given 10 minutes to discuss and decide what they believe each card represents.
- They then feedback their ideas and the relevance of any objects they have failed to identify is explained.
- Next each group decides which techniques they think might be the most helpful to someone who self-harms. They should do this by diamond ranking the cards so that the most helpful suggestion is at the apex of the diamond, two suggestions that come second are just below, three equal third just below that, then four in fourth place before that. At this point the diamond starts to narrow again with 3 items below in 5th place, 2 items below that in 6th place and finally the least favoured object placed at the bottom of the diamond.



- Each group then explains which objects they have placed in their top three and justify their choice. If they have added a suggestion of their own they can also share this with the class.
- It can be helpful to briefly outline the broad categories that these techniques fall into. If they would like further information refer them to NSHN
 - Displacement e.g. drawing on yourself
 - Comforting
 - Physical
 - Creative
 - Constructive
 - Fun
 - Distractions with others
 - Inspiring
 - Reinforcing e.g. thoughts that reinforce the notion you should avoid self-harming
- The young people who designed the activities felt 'Reinforcing' was a particularly helpful technique. They suggested that thinking about the consequences of self-harming can be a helpful deterrent. They mentioned:
 - How will you explain your cuts/scars to your younger sibling?
 - What about that prom dress you want to wear?
 - Swimming with friends in the summer – Having to always wear a swimsuit rather than a bikini and/or exposing cuts/scars on legs and arms?
 - Always trying to get out of PE at school. One young person said that after a while her teacher became very suspicious and made comments such as, "Do you still have your period? Perhaps you should go to the doctors."
 - If I'd known when I started at 10 I'd still be doing it at 18 I'd have thought twice before doing it that first time.



Explanations of Distractions

Pinging elastic bands against your skin

None of the young people in our group had found this worked for them but it is said to be helpful for some

The 15-minute rule

When you get the urge to self-injure, check the time, and tell yourself that you have felt the urge, but you are going to choose to hold off on any self-harming behaviour for 15 minutes; if after this period of 15 minutes, you still feel like self-harming, then you can. It's your choice; you have the power, the control - even if in the past it hasn't felt that way. Choose to wait; choose to hurt - it's a very strong lesson.

For the duration of this 15 minute 'waiting period' try to keep yourself occupied; go for a walk, flick through the TV without watching anything, or write down the cause of your distress, write a letter to yourself about your feelings. After 15 minutes, you can check how you feel, and how you feel about the urge. You could choose to hurt yourself now, or you could choose to wait another 15 minutes. You can keep playing this 15-minute game, and maybe the urge will pass, maybe not, but it's *your choice* at every 15-minute step. If you get through the urge and manage not to hurt yourself, perhaps you can ring a friend and tell them. Congratulate yourself, you made it!

(In a similar vein our young people felt that if the urge to hurt yourself was very great it was worth trying to limit the amount of damage to yourself. They suggested that for instance making paper cuts rather than using anything sharp to cut yourself was a step in the right direction)

The 'M' word: Masturbation (Warning, this may be considered controversial)

One of the distraction techniques highlighted on LifeSIGNS website is masturbation. The site suggests that it offers release and relief from tension, strain and stress, and a distraction from anxiety and upset. Therefore a person who relies on self-injury, might find that masturbation helps them move away from self-injury by releasing their tension in a way that doesn't cause physical damage.

LifeSIGNS acknowledges that it is a controversial alternative to self-harm but states, "We believe that while it's a difficult subject to talk about, masturbation does not carry any shame. You may not agree that masturbation could be a valuable alternative to self-injury, and you might feel that talking about masturbation is wrong - but at LifeSIGNS we believe that talking is a healthy form of self-expression, and we believe in the right to self-express."

Surfing the Urge

One person who self-harms suggests that for him the urge builds up over a period of time, to a peak, and then it declines, a bit like a wave. Therefore surfing that wave, waiting it out, observing it splash over could be a useful visualisation, or meditation for when the urge is upon us. Next time you experience the urge, observe it build, clear time and space for yourself to deal with it, and wait it out, noticing how it reaches the peak, and then experiencing it diminish and fade away.

Butterfly Project

The rules:

1. When you feel like you want to cut, take a marker or pen and draw a butterfly on wherever the self-harm occurs.
2. Name the butterfly after a loved one, or someone that really wants you to get better.
3. NO scrubbing the butterfly off.
4. If you cut before the butterfly is gone, it dies if you don't cut, it lives.
5. If you have more than one, cutting kills them all.
6. Another person may draw them on you. These butterflies are extra special.
7. Even if you don't cut, feel free to draw a butterfly anyway, to show your support. If you do this, name it after someone you know that is suffering right now, and tell them. It could help.

Paper chain project

The rules:

1. For every day you go without self-harming or purging, add a colourful link to the paper chain
2. If you relapse, just add a white link to the chain and carry on the chain without any disruption
3. Over time the paper chain will grow in length and you can see your progress, and see that even if you do relapse, there are still days you go without hurting yourself.
4. Over time and through your recovery watch the amount of colored links begin to increase, and the amount of white links begin to decrease.
5. If you feel like hurting yourself, look at the paper chain and realize just how far you've made it, and realize that if you've resisted before you can do it again :)

Warm Bath

Soaking in a warm bubble bath can be a comforting and calming thing to do when you are feeling stressed.

Go for a walk

Getting out of the house in to the fresh air, taking some exercise or walking the dog can also be helpful.

Ice cubes

Holding ice cubes in your hand until they melt is said to be helpful, particularly if the ice is coloured with red food colouring. However the young people who designed the lesson had not found this personally very helpful

Red PVA

One young person said she had found putting PVA on her skin an effective technique. She added that the effect of removing the dried PVA from her skin was painful but didn't leave any scars.

Music

Young people suggested that listening to cheerful, cheesy music was also an effective way to improve your mood so was worth a try. They advocated anything that you particularly like and which tends to get you singing or dancing along is a good choice worth trying

Rainbow Journal

You can get one for free if you are under 18.

<http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/files/docs/forms/rainbow-journal-request-form.pdf>

Online Support (with a health warning)

LifeSIGNS is a moderated forum with rules (see site and short video by yp explaining how it works) Some young people run their own sites and try to be very responsible and supportive to their followers but be careful as there are people who also insight self-harming, some images and messages are also triggering. A good rule of thumb is, **If it's not helpful avoid it.**

The 'Everything but' rule

If you have certain rituals around your self-harming this suggestion may help. Basically, with your ritual, you do everything but the self-harming. That means that you go through the motions of preparing to self-injure, you unpack your tools, your bandages, you get the right music, or whatever it is you find yourself doing while you hurt yourself, and then, at the moment when you would normally start self-harming, you pack it all away. You can do this again and again until the urge leaves you. You may not have rituals, many people don't, in which case perhaps the 15 minute rule would help you more. The idea behind the 'Everything But' rule is that you will satisfy your need for control, and your intention to self-injure, while choosing not to hurt yourself. Over time, you can change the ritual so that in time, you don't have to go through so much ritual to satisfy your need for control. It's not an easy rule to follow, but there have been some reported successes.

Phone a friend or speak to someone you trust

If you have someone close that knows how you feel it can be helpful to speak to them at difficult times. They can offer support, understanding and love or just be there with you.

Spending time with a family pet

Some of the young people felt their pets could pick up on their mood when they were close to self-harming. They also said they found it difficult to harm themselves in front of their pet so they felt their pets could therefore be viewed as a deterrent.

