

## Self-harm Stigma – A blog by Champion Hazel

I have spent most of my life hearing phrases like this, “it’s just a phase”, “they are doing it for attention”, “they are just trying to manipulate you”. The thing is I would be stood there hearing people say this stuff about those who undertake self-harm knowing none of what they said was true, but also being too scared of correcting them. How did I know it wasn’t true? Because I have undertaken self-harm for literally as long as I can remember.

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“they are just trying to manipulate you”

I am not sure when or why I first started to self-harm, I very vaguely remember when I learnt that the behaviour was “not normal” and that people who did it were judged and looked down upon, but I don’t actually remember starting. I am 34 now, and still self-harm (though far less than I used to do) and although I am a lot more open about my mental health now there are still many people in my life who are unaware of my self-harm.

Not just teenage girls – “I am 34 now, and still self-harm”

I have undertaken self-harm in various ways over the years, and for a variety of reasons. Sometimes my harming has been the result of psychosis symptoms, when I have delusions believing that I HAVE to harm myself to save others, other times it can be an expression of frustration or a type of self-punishment, a physical way to deal with the emotions that I struggle to cope with in any other way.

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experience of it”

It is really hard to explain self-harm to people without experience of it, I can fully understand how a person hurting themselves may seem difficult to understand or even imagine. The best way I can think of to explain it is like an itch. An itch is very hard to actually describe or explain, all we know for certain is when one happens you just have to scratch it, the more you try to ignore it the more it fights for your attention, and that it sort of how I experience self-harm urges. My levels of distress will grow and grow until my only solution will seem to be harming myself. I will try to distract and try to do other things, but like with an itch my mind and attention will be pulled back to the urge over and over again. Even during periods where I have not undertaken self-harm, and there have been a few where I have gone months without harming, this “itch” will still occur. I guess in a way the “itch” may never fully go away, but at times it can be easier to deal with or even ignore.

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When I hear these myths bouncing around; “it's a trend”, “they must like pain”, “they are just playing the victim”, I sort of get it, as I say it's a really hard concept for people to understand. However, it also worries me. Back when I was younger and I heard these things being said it scared me. As much as I knew that these things were not true I also knew that this is how people would see me if they knew. I didn't want to be seen as “weak”, “pathetic”, “attention seeking”, I was struggling and I wanted help but it just seemed safer to deal with it myself than it would be to risk asking for help and being judged so negatively. It worries and scares me that others may now be having these same fears, all because people don't know the truth and so are judging us on these myths and stereotypes.

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The reality is that if someone is undertaking self-harm they need help and support, self-harm is a serious issue, secrecy can fuel it, and the longer a person uses it the harder it can be to stop. This is why I think it is important for those of us who are able to cope with the potential backlash to be open, to explain the realities and debunk the myths, I hope that by doing this some of the stigma may be removed and some of the fear of being judged can be removed. I hope that one day people will be able to ask for help when they are struggling without the fears and anxieties about how they will be viewed or treated by others.

“...the spread of these negative judgements only serves to prevent people from getting the help they both need and deserve”

People who undertake self-harm do so in many different ways and for many different reasons, sweeping statements about us do no-one any good and the spread of these negative judgements only serves to prevent people from getting the help they both need and deserve. We need to move past these ideas and stereotypes and be willing to move forwards as a society in order to allow people to feel more able to get help, support, and just to feel less isolated and judged by this perceived need to hide.

## Self-harm support in England

- Harmless <https://harmless.org.uk/>

- NHS <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/self-harm/getting-help/>
- Mind <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-harm/useful-contacts/>

## York Ending Stigma



To find out more about our work and to join us to end mental health stigma in York, please refer to our website <https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/york-ending-stigma/> or email us on [yes@yorkcvs.org.uk](mailto:yes@yorkcvs.org.uk)