

**Can I Tell You About Self-Harm? A guide for friends, family and professionals**, by Pooky Knightsmith, London, Jessica Kingsley, 2018, 71pp., £9.99pbk, ISBN 978-1-78592-428-6.

Deliberate self-harm is a perplexing and emotive issue. For those encountering it for the first time, typical reactions are of revulsion, panic and bewilderment. Why (we wonder) would anyone intentionally cut, burn or otherwise injure themselves, repeatedly and often in a highly organized and planful way? And how sad and distressing when the self-harmer is young and otherwise healthy and intelligent. If we are the parent, a mixture of terror about what such behaviour might lead to and guilt that we must somehow be responsible for it, are understandable responses. And if we are a teacher or other professional working with the young person, our responsibility *in loco parentis* will weigh heavily on us.

Having researched educational responses to self-harm (Best (2005; 2009), I am well aware of the complexity of the problem, and I know what a challenge it is for teachers and schools when a student is found to be self-harming. I know that self-harm takes a great many forms, that the boundaries between pathological and 'socially-acceptable' forms of self-injury (such as alcohol abuse and poor diet) are blurry, that the psychological roots of the behaviour are many and varied but are emotional in nature and frequently constitute coping mechanisms, and that there are chemical and neurological processes which, if not causal, are correlated with self-harming behaviours. In short: this is not an issue which lends itself to a quick and easy 'read'.

So what were the chances that a small book of around 5,000 words could possibly do justice to its topic without falling foul of the old adage that 'a little learning is a dangerous thing'? A lot depends on who reads it and in what context, and in what ways it is used by those who are responsible for the education of the young. Used properly, I think it has a lot of potential.

The Foreword (by Jonathan Singer, an American academic and clinical social worker) is directly addressed to a young person who has begun to self-harm. It sets the scene by making the point that although people self-injure because it 'works' in the short term, in the long-run it doesn't, and that alternative ways of coping with the pressures that lead to self-harm need to be found. The correlation noted here (and later, see p.26) between self-harm and subsequent suicide attempts would be misleading if it were not made clear (as it is on p.25) that self-harm can be a means of defending *against* suicidal impulse rather than the beginnings of a 'slippery slope'.

The remainder of the book is presented in the first person through the persona of a 14 year-old who self-harms. That 'Asher' is male helpfully avoids the stereotype that all self-harmers are adolescent girls, a point explicitly made on p.17. While the conversational style should be accessible to young readers and adults for whom this is their first encounter with the literature of self-harm, the account is surprisingly nuanced. The definition of self-harm (p.16) is properly inclusive, the reader is cautioned not to give too much detail about our own behaviours lest it puts ideas into the heads of others (p.16), and we are warned that social media and websites may be helpful and supportive to those seeking advice, but may also be 'toxic' in setting out to encourage self-harming behaviour (pp. 20-21). There is a useful summary of some of the reasons (NB, not *causes*) of self-harm (pp. 23-24) and a warning not to assume too quickly what the causes are of one's own behaviour.

The need to avoid going into shock when the harm is too great (p.28) and the importance of harming oneself as 'safely' as possible (by having clean bandages and antiseptic to hand) may be thought by some readers to be actively encouraging self-harm, but it is important to understand that safety must be prioritized while the young person finds alternative ways of coping. The importance of talking to someone who is a good listener, and of using teachers, counsellors and other specialists as sources of informed support is stressed. The potential of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and

similar approaches is mentioned (P.34), although the problems of waiting-times and the limited number of sessions available are noted.

The vicious circle of the 'self-harm cycle' illustrated on p.40 and the need to 'create a whole toolbox of different ways of coping we can call on at different times' (p.45), lead to a range of practical actions one can take to deal with feelings and to distract oneself from the immediate impulse to self-harm. However, this is not to suggest that it is easy; when self-harm has become a significant part of the identity of the person concerned, simple remedies are not a 'silver bullet'. And of course, having a network of support and understanding is crucial to the success of any strategy. How teachers and friends can provide such support is the welcome focus for the last part of Asher's narrative, and there is a short list of reading, help-lines and websites in the appendix.

There are a dozen or so illustrations of Asher and others at intervals throughout the book. I suspect these will make the book more appealing to the younger reader, although I would need to consult my grandchildren (!) as to whether this is the case, and whether, given the fluidity of hair- and clothing-styles, it will continue to be so.

So, despite the impossibility of delving into the depths of psychology and psycho-dynamic therapies in a booklet of this length, this is a surprisingly comprehensive introduction founded on both personal experience and a good understanding of the nature and the challenge of deliberate self-harm. I can see it being used effectively with young people in schools where there is a clear policy and within a properly-structured pastoral and curricular context. I can also see it being used in the context of initial teacher-training and CPD, although it would need to be complemented by substantial additional material if teachers are to appreciate the full complexity of the issue. And I can see how, for parents and friends, this could be very useful in getting through the unhelpful emotional responses that tend to accompany the initial disclosure or discovery that someone they love and care about is self-harming.

### **References**

Best, R. [2005]: 'Self Harm: a Challenge for Pastoral Care', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 23(3), 3-11.

Best, R. [2009]: 'Students who self-harm: A case-study of prevalence, awareness and response in an English university', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27(3), 165-203.

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