

I began cutting myself at age 14 and have made a commitment to stop since last year at age 23. I have also partaken in other forms of self-harm like burning and breaking bones. For most of the time, I had an undiagnosed mood disorder and an undiagnosed psychotic disorder. I didn't have strong relationships with my parents, I had generally been neglected by them. I believed if I told anyone about my emotional difficulties, my parents would find out. This, I felt, would freak my parents out. They'd overreact and my life would become even worse. In retrospect, I think these intuitions were probably right and it was sadly sensible for me to not seek help. Cutting was my way of coping with this situation.

Sometimes I get to the point where I just have to *do something*. Everything seems wrong, discomfoting, and boring. I become agitated. This is when I used to cut – in order to disrupt the loop of unpleasant feelings. Usually, cutting did actually work, albeit temporarily. After I decided to stop cutting, I got into the agitated state again. It was very difficult for me to figure out how to cope without cutting and my symptoms got much worse. I ended up staying as an inpatient in a private hospital in order to stop myself from self-harm or even attempted suicide. When we talk about cutting, we're talking about the very powerful emotions that compel it too.

I'm dubious about the idea of self-harm as contagious, just because it is so personal. Since I was 14, I've covered up my scars with long sleeves and/or cosmetics. Even though I'm now open about the fact I have a mental illness amongst friends, only my husband and clinicians are aware of my history of self-harm. It's the most shameful part of my experience of mental illness. The shame arises from the fact that often when self-harm comes up in conversations it is referred to as 'silly' or is trivialised as being a private school girls on tumblr thing. I don't want to subject myself to that level of judgement, even though I do feel able to tell others about my paranoid delusions.

At age 15 I had the experience of self-harming to the extent that I definitely required stitches but I was too afraid to get help. I didn't want my parents finding out but I was also afraid that I would be poorly treated. This fear turned out to be justified. Much later, in my 20s, I went to a GP fearing that a cut would require stitches because it wouldn't stop bleeding. It didn't need stitches but the doctor assumed that I had attempted suicide, even though I told him that's absurd. He threatened to ring the police if I didn't agree to go with him to the hospital straight away. I was in the waiting room for six hours until a nurse with some expertise in mental health convinced the registrar to let me go. It was an exhausting and distressing experience, and never was I treated as though the feelings underlying the self-harm were worthy of an ounce of humanity. Moreover, my personal explanation for what was happening to me was never taken into account. I was at the mercy of the system.

When I was silent about my self-harm, I found tremendous support on online forums. We would help each other commit to cutting less often and just share our stories and frustrations for the day. It was nice to know that there were people out there who understood, which put me in good stead when I did

eventually get help at age 20. I knew I wasn't alone, I wasn't a freak, and that a therapist wouldn't judge my self-harm.

Ultimately, my experience of self-harm is that it is a useful tool for people in desperate moments of their lives. It is a coping strategy which can be viewed as unhealthy, but may still be the best a person has. It was the best I had for the course of nine years. The tool is heavily stigmatised, partly because people tend to focus on the behaviour and not the emotions, nor the human, behind it. For me, the shame was tempered somewhat through online connections. The internet connection throughout my teens probably saved my life and mitigated the potential damage of cutting. I was able to stop when I was finally correctly diagnosed and, as a result of taking helpful medications, had the space to start addressing my issues through therapy.