Understanding Self Harm Behaviours

Project details

Sponsor: the South West Public Health Observatory (SWPHO)

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Background

A recent audit of hospital admissions for suicide and self harm was carried out by the South West Public Health Observatory (SWPHO). The audit found that in the period spanning 2002/3 – 2008/9 there was a significant increase (49%) in hospital admissions for self-harm, that young people accounted for 32% of all self-harm admissions and, in particular, that young girls and women between the ages of 15 – 24 represented the biggest rise in admissions. Self-harm is a complex practice that is defined and understood differently across different disciplines and – most importantly – by self harmers themselves. Much of the existing work on self-harm is dominated by a medical model using clinical populations, however most self harmers never come to the attention of medical or other health professionals. A small but growing body of sociological, social psychological and ethnographic work is adding to our understandings of the meanings and motivations behind self-harm. The Internet, and particularly the advent of social media, have contributed significantly to the visibility and accessibility of self-harm practices, and sparked debate about the risks and harms of this material.

The research

Funded by SWPHO, the research involves two phases:

1. A review of self-harm content online, and a fuller ethnographic exploration of user generated content featuring self-harm (such as blogs and videos) on social media sites.
2. A survey administered to young people in secondary schools across the South West in order to ascertain prevalence and preferred support mechanisms.

The first (online) phase of the project has now been completed and a report is underway. Initial findings confirm the existence of a vast amount of user generated content on self-harm online, and identify a range of meanings associated with self-harm emerging from this content (e.g. here cutting is dominant form of self-harm, differing from hospital admissions where self-harm by poisoning is dominant). The exploration of self-harm content online also underscored the simultaneous presence of other practices such as eating disorders and, to a lesser extent, problems with substance abuse. Finally, this phase of the project pointed to the importance of self-harm blogs and websites for a community of self harmers.

The second phase of the project is in preparation.

For more information please read the SWPHO's report: Suicide and Self-harm in the South West. Findings from phase 1 of the study have been disseminated at various conferences and workshops – please contact any of the project team members or BSMC staff for more information on these.