



Many people, including teenagers, start physically hurting themselves because they feel they are not valued

# Pain of frustration fuels self-harming

**W**hen life's mix of ups and downs gets too much for us, we often look for different ways to release the pain. In some extreme cases, people will choose to harm themselves as a form of releasing the frustrations.

Self-harm is a deliberate and impulsive decision; often it is done without any suicidal intentions. It can take many forms, including causing injury by cutting, burning, picking at wounds, hitting oneself or inserting objects into the skin.

"People harm themselves not because they want to end their lives, but because they have no way to release their frustration and pain inside," says Dr Wong Kai-choi, a specialist in psychiatry at a private clinic in Hong Kong. He previously worked with children and teenagers in public hospitals.

Dr Wong says relief created by harming oneself is always temporary and serves only to carry on a damaging cycle that extends the struggle. "It has a destructive effect on a person's physical and mental health and can worsen over time without treatment."

To Write Love on Her Arms, an American non-profit group dedicated to helping people with problems, including self-injury, estimates that 4 per cent of the Western population is struggling with the problem of self-harming.

Hong Kong's self-harm cases are often

dealt with by public and private-sector medical staff, teachers and social workers, so no total figure is available. The Adolescent Medical Centre (AMC) in Queen Elizabeth Hospital handles self-injury cases involving Hongkongers aged 12 to 19.

"People that hurt themselves often don't see themselves as being valued. In some cases, there are family problems, such as marital problems between parents, and children may see themselves as a burden to the family," says Eve Wong Wai-lan, clinical social worker and hospital manager at AMC.

To properly deal with self-injury cases, it is necessary to look at the root of problems, she

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says. Family therapy plays an important part in the healing process.

Dr Wong agrees. He says parents can play a crucial role in making a child talk about self-harm issues. "You often see there has been a breakdown in communication between parents and the children," he says.

"It is important for parents to discuss

things with their children when they notice something isn't right. If they don't do that, the child's problem will not be resolved."

Yet sometimes patients cannot discuss a problem with parents, so therapy can help. Dr Wong says using an "empty chair" - to represent the other person - can allow patients to express their "inner pain". "We ask the patient to imagine the other party, such as a parent, sitting in the chair. The patient then talks to the chair, or the 'other person'."

"The next step is to ask the patient to sit on the chair and be the other person, who talks to him or her. It helps them express their inner feelings and puts them in the shoes of the other person."

Yet Dr Wong says the most important thing is for people to learn to stay optimistic - and accept that life has many sides. "We shouldn't concentrate all our energy on dealing with a single problem," he says. "If we focus on, say, a problem with a parent, we may overlook all the good things going on in our lives, such as success at school or our friendships with classmates. We will end up thinking everything is bad, when, in fact, life is good."