

Self-Injurious Behaviour – A Guide for All Audiences

What is Self-Injurious Behaviour?

Self-injurious behaviour refers to physically harming oneself, also called self-harm.

Examples include:

- **Head banging**
- **Hand or arm biting**
- **Hair pulling**
- **Eye gouging**
- **Face or head slapping**
- **Skin picking, scratching, or pinching**
- **Forceful head shaking**

About half of autistic people experience self-injurious behaviour at some point.

Causes of Self-Injurious Behaviour

Communication difficulties:

- **The person may use self-injury to express frustration, seek desired objects/activities, or avoid tasks.**
- **Examples: head slapping to express pain, hand biting for anxiety, skin picking due to boredom.**

Mental health issues:

- **May indicate depression or anxiety.**

Repetitive behaviours:

- **Could stem from obsession or routine.**

Developmental stage-related:

- **Behaviours such as hand mouthing may persist.**

Learned behaviours:

- **Self-injury may become a learned way to control the environment or avoid unwanted situations.**
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What to Do During an Episode

- **Respond quickly and consistently, never ignore severe behaviour.**
- **Keep responses low-key: calm voice, limited facial expressions.**

- **Reduce demands:** postpone difficult tasks.
 - **Remove physical/sensory discomforts:** adjust clothing, noise levels, lighting, etc.
 - **Redirect:** use clear verbal instructions and visual cues. Offer alternative activities.
 - **Light physical guidance:** gently redirect hands, but use caution to avoid escalation.
 - **Use barriers:** e.g. pillows for head banging, alternative objects for biting.
 - **Physical restraints (only under specialist guidance):** helmets, gloves, etc. Must be temporary and combined with skill development.
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Preventing Self-Injurious Behaviour

- **Seek medical or dental advice:** rule out physical causes.
- **Use a behaviour diary:** track events before/during/after episodes to find patterns.
- **Increase structure and routine:** create predictable daily plans.
- **Provide sensory alternatives:** e.g. trampolines, chewable objects.
- **Use communication tools:** e.g. visual symbols, body part pictures.
- **Reward appropriate behaviour:** use praise, activities, or tokens immediately after positive behaviour.
- **Medication:** should only be prescribed by a medical professional for severe or persistent cases.