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## The punished self, the unknown self, and the harmed self towards a more nuanced understanding of self-harm in adolescence

Self-harm among adolescents - from 12-13 years - is an increasing problem in many countries. The prevalence has been found to be 13-17% in the normal populations (during the last year) and 40-60% in clinical populations. It is 5-6 times more common among girls than boys. Stänicke's dissertation contributes with important new knowledge about risk factors, patterns of development, and attempts to solve the problems.

The introduction presents a broad and interesting overview of how to understand self-harm, comprising a systematic historical overview of psychoanalytic perspectives and recent developments in the area. Among risk factors are poor problem-solving capacity, low self-esteem, impulsivity, trauma, abuse, violence, bullying, suicide in the family, psychiatric disorders, and low socio-economic status.

### **What was investigated**

The aim of the study was twofold: *Firstly*, to enhance understanding of the vulnerable adolescents' subjective experience of their own self-harm. *Secondly*, to explore differences in how self-harm became important in their life. While epidemiological and survey studies on self-harm have yielded

knowledge on frequency, risk factors, associated mental illnesses, and some evidence-based models. theories and available questionnaires have mainly been based on adult patients.

### Who participated

Stänicke's dissertation is based on her study of adolescents from 13-18 years who had developed self-harm. The 21 participants were undergoing treatment in psychiatric units for adolescents. The focus was to understand the development of the problem – which took different paths.

How was the study carried out

*The first step* was to collect findings in qualitative studies on adolescents' descriptions of self-harm in clinical and nonclinical samples. This meta-synthesis showed that self-harm was described as an attempt to: 1) obtain release, 2) control difficult feelings, 3) represent unaccepted feelings, and 4) connect with others.

*The second step* was to collect personal data (Life-mode Interviews) from a clinical sample of 21 adolescents (13-18 years old) who self-harmed (with or without suicidal intentions). In the data analysis of the personal interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was applied along the lines of exposed themes of descriptions and essential features of the participants' experience.

### What were the findings

The findings nuanced the theory of self-harm as affect-regulation by proposing that self-harm can be an attempt to express or share important emotional and relational information without words. Self-harm may be used as a destructive solution to conflictual developmental tasks during adolescence, to regulate and express experiences. As part of a relational need for care, difficult experiences are kept private – to avoid being a burden to others. Some thought they deserved to be punished.

At the outset, some started self-harming due to self-hatred and self-blame, others emphasized diffuse experiences of stress, or traumatic experiences early in their lives. The self-harm represented an attempt to communicate. Several adolescents claimed that self-harm helped them to cope with life

on their own, to not involve their parents and thus protect their family.

But they appreciated the treatment possibilities that were available.

### Conclusion

Stänicke's dissertation revealed that there were different ways into self-harm and different ways of coping with the problem. It is important to be aware of the variety of developments – there are different ways into self-harm and different ways of coping with the problem. It may be seen as one of the adolescent's way of communication. Specific coping strategies may be helpful for some, whereas others feel an urge to get away from overwhelming affects and areas of personal deficits, or self-punishing thoughts.

### Implications

Therapists should listen carefully to the adolescents and adjust the treatment to each patient's needs and self-understanding. Specific coping strategies may be helpful for some, whereas others feel an urge to get away from overwhelming affects and areas of personal deficits, or self-punishing thoughts. It is important to explore what the self-harm represents in each adolescent.

### References

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#### Article 1

Stänicke, L. I., Haavind, H., & Gullestad, S. E. (2018). How do young people understand their own self-harm? A meta-synthesis of adolescents' subjective experience of their own self-harm. *Adolescent Research Review*, 3(2), 173-191. doi:10.1007/s40894-018-0080-9

## Article 2

Stänicke, L.I., Haavind, H., Rø, F.G., & Gull-estad, S.E. (2019). Discovering one's own way: Adolescents' different pathways into and out of self-harm. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. doi:10.1177/0743558419883360

## Article 3

Stänicke, L.I. (2021). The Punished Self, the Unknown Self, and the Harmed Self – Toward a More Nuanced Understanding of Self-Harm Among Adolescent Girls. *Front. Psychol.* doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.543303

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