Digital Self-Harm (October 2020)

We are all familiar with the concept of cyberbullying, where others target individuals online by sending them negative and hurtful messages about, for example their appearance or about their life choices. However, a new trend has been emerging in recent years, amongst adolescents **sending *themselves*** these types of negative online comments-a practice termed digital self-harm.

Very limited research and anecdotal evidence in this area suggests that this trend is on the increase. While the majority of hurtful messages online are not self-generated and numbers who display this behaviour are still small, there should be an awareness amongst both professionals and parents/carers that, while not common, this new, often hidden, and complex type of self-harming behaviour does exist and may co-exist with a range of other online and offline factors. Further work is required in order to understand this phenomenon better, so that those who display this self-harassing type of behaviour can be better and more appropriately supported.

What is digital self-harm?

Digital self-harm can also be called 'self-trolling' 'self-cyberbullying' or 'cyber self-harm'. The term was first used in 2010, by a researcher at Microsoft, and involves the **sender and recipient being one and the same person**.

This type of self- harm is defined as *"the anonymous online posting, sending, or otherwise sharing of hurtful content about oneself"* (Patchin, 2017).

How common is digital self-harm?

Very limited small scale research studies that have been conducted into digital self-harm over the past decade adolescent students in America and New Zealand suggest that only a small percentage (between 6% and 9% of those questioned) of students anonymously posted negative content about themselves online at any time.

Research reveals that digital self-harm appears to be more common in younger adolescents aged between 13 to 14 years old as they become more active online. In a case in 2014, which gained global attention, a 14- year-old British girl, Hannah Smith, took her own life after seemingly after being bullied online- it was later revealed that she had, in fact sent herself dozens of harmful messages online.

What are the risk factors for digital self-harm?

Research has linked the following risk factors in individuals who engage in digital self-harm:

- Sexual orientation (those who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual were three times more likely to report the behaviour)
- Previous experience with school bullying (four to five times more likely to report the behaviour)
- Previous experience with cyber bullying (seven to twelve times more likely)
- Drug use

- Deviant behaviour (7% in the survey who had digitally self-harmed had also engaged in physical self-harm, such as cutting behaviours)

Researchers suggest that a range of underlying factors such as family issues, physical illness, or psychological aspects, might explain digital self-harm behaviour.

What might the reasons and motivations be for digital self-harming behaviours?

It has been suggested that there are three main reasons why adolescents digitally self-harm. Among the top reasons cited in research with teenagers are:

1. **A cry for help** - In this case adolescents seemed to want attention, support and validation from their parents. The research suggests that young people who are already feeling isolated, misunderstood or depressed are more prone to displaying digital self-harm behaviours to gain attention. Researchers found that girls, in particular, tended to engage in digital self-harm due to depression. Responses to surveys conducted in this area suggest that young people who are already experiencing low mood might digitally self-harm because they want to feel even lower or so that they can get attention from others.

2. **To look cool** - Research suggests that teenagers might think that being exposed to public criticism can make adolescents look good to their peers. Evidence suggests that boys tend to cite this as a reason for engaging in digital self-harm more than girls. Boys stated that making 'humorous' comments online about themselves was done to make others laugh. Adolescents may try to influence their social status as someone who is popular enough to gain negative comments from jealous "haters (being criticised in some schools is a sign of popularity). By posting and responding to negative anonymous questions, it is possible to look important by appearing to be "cool" enough to have hurtful things said about oneself. In this situation, cyberbullying is considered a marker of social status. Digital self-harm can be a way of self-promotion to make oneself look powerful and important.

3. **To trigger compliments** - In this case**,** adolescents are looking for compliments and support from their friends/peers. Individuals who had low-self-esteem or worries about themselves might insult themselves anonymously online, in order to "fish" for compliments, provoking their friends into saying nice things in response to the negative commentary. Research* shows that, if someone posts a nasty comment online, 30% of people will join in with the bullying, but about 60% of people will attack the troll, defending the person the nasty comment is about. It is that defence that a lot of adolescents could be seeking. Adolescents might also be seeking to gain attention from adults and peers who would worry about them and 'defend' them online.

Other varied reasons revealed in research in this area included those whose self-obsession was driven by online gossip. Reasons for engaging in digital self-harm included wanting to know how others saw them, to see how other people would react at them being bullied online, to show resilience, the pressure and need for validation from peers and wanting to show others that they could take aggression online. Loosely associated with this category were those who digitally self-harmed for narcissistic attention-seeking reasons. Others did not know why they engaged in this type of behaviour.

Identify digital self-harm

There are several approaches which parents, carers and/or professionals can take to help to identify whether their adolescent(s)is engaging in digital self-harming behaviours:

- **Create an open and trusting environment:** Adolescents can be helped to open up if they are experiencing feelings of low self-worth by creating open and trusting environments. Establish and maintain safe relationships so that young people feel that they are able to go to parents/ carers or professonals about self-trolling. Be prepared to be realistic- trust will take time to achieve.
- **Social media and online use:** Be prepared to have ongoing conversations with young people about their use of social media and other online platforms. Enquire about any negatively charged comments, giving the young person opportunity to share their feelings about them. Parents can remain vigilant for signs of self-harm online. Parents can help their children get a perspective an cyberbullying and what to do if it happens to them.
- **Avoid making judgements:** Making judgements should be avoided. Instead, try to ask open ended questions which will help adolescents work through incidents of digital self-harm. Example questions might include, "How did you feel as you were posting these messages?" "How did others respond?" "What was your reaction to others' responses?" "How did you feel after it all happened?"
- **Help build a support system:** Help with the creation of a list of trusted individuals such as teachers, trusted friends, councillors, and others who can help to support the individual. Building trust and a willingness for the young person to reach out might take time.
- **Seek professional support:** Young people who display digital self-harming behaviours might well benefit from accessing professional support from a specialist mental health practitioner to address the underlying issues and to learn appropriate coping strategies.

While it is important to recognise that this type of self-abuse can occur, the incidence of digital self-harming behaviour amongst adolescents still remains very low worldwide. If this behaviour does occur, it may well co-exist with other online and offline factors. Reasons for digital self-harm vary, however, motivations fall into two

broad categories- looking for attention and/or support. Parent, carers and professionals can adopt several approaches to help adolescents who self-cyberbully to support them to build appropriate strategies to address this issue.

References and further reading

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