

Self-harm not always a sign of serious mental health problems

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Knowledge is needed in order not to over-interpret the behaviour of the young people, according to psychologist Jonas Bjärehed, who has recently presented his thesis at Lund University in Sweden.

Jonas Bjärehed and his supervisor Lars Gunnar Lund carried out a survey of 1,000 young people in southern Sweden which showed that four out of ten young people had at some time intentionally hurt themselves.

The researchers have now broken down the data and it appears that only a [small minority](#) of the young people self-harm on a regular basis and in a way that can be compared with self-harm in adults with [mental health](#) problems.

"It is important that school and [health professionals](#) know how to deal with young people who self-harm. They need to react appropriately and not judge all young people alike," says Jonas Bjärehed.

"For many of these young people, the behaviour seems to be fairly mild and often of a temporary nature. It may be viewed as a matter of experimentation or problems that are not of a serious nature."

When Jonas Bjärehed began his research six years ago, knowledge about self-harm was limited among many professional groups that come into contact with young people.

However, the situation is improving: Nowadays, knowledge of [eating disorders](#) in young people is well established among school and health service staff.

Jonas Bjärehed hopes that awareness of self-harm will also become as widespread. Even if all young people who self-harm do not suffer from [mental illness](#), the behaviour can become a vicious circle: once a person has started, the risk is greater that they will continue and the self-harm causes their mental health to deteriorate.

Jonas Bjärehed calls self-harm the teenage disease of our day: "It is not the first time young people worry those around them with new types of behaviour," he says, giving the examples of the increase in eating disorders in the 1970s and 80s and the 'hysterics,' who worried those around them at the turn of the last century by fainting for various reasons.

"Nowadays, we are grappling with the fact that many signs of stress and mental illness appear to be increasing in our society, especially among young people, without us really understanding why. The fact that many young people suffer [mental health problems](#) during a time in their lives when they are in the process of becoming adults and developing the skills they need to contribute to society has become a serious public health problem.

An important challenge is to understand this trend and the signs of mental illness that we are seeing in [young people](#), in order to be able to take the necessary measures to prevent it or provide help," says Jonas Bjärehed.

More information: Jonas Bjärehed defended his thesis on 28 September. The thesis is entitled "Characteristics of Self-Injury in Young Adolescents: Findings from Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal

Studies in Swedish Schools".

Provided by Lund University

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