

Girls self-harming at much higher rates than boys

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(Medical Xpress)—Adolescent girls are self-harming at much higher rates than boys, and almost one-in-five of those who have self-harmed have done so in front of others, new research has found.

While cutting is not considered cool, it is no longer the domain of the disenfranchised either, with self-harmers more likely to self-report as being among the popular at school.

Dr Shelley James conducted the research for her Doctor of Clinical Psychology from Massey University. She investigated the normalisation of deliberate self-harm in adolescent [girls](#) and explored whether social factors influenced them to self-harm.

Dr James, now a clinical psychologist at Waitemata District Health Board, says self-harm has increased over the last decade, and [adolescent girls](#) are up to eight times more likely to self-harm than adolescent boys.

As part of her thesis she surveyed 387 girls aged 13-16 from five Auckland decile 9 and 10 schools. Eighty-four identified as self-harmers. She compared responses on a number of measures of underlying psychological difficulties to find out the differences between the two groups.

Her research debunks traditional stereotypes of self-harmers and uncovered unexpected behaviours. "There were some surprising results," Dr James says. "The number of girls who had actually harmed in front of

other people was staggering to me.

"Approximately 23 per cent of self-harming kids had harmed in front of other people, and nearly 12 per cent had actually harmed in conjunction with another person, so they had harmed together. I didn't expect to see those kinds of figures."

This also defied the belief that self-harm happens in secrecy – while the girls reported they needed high-levels of secrecy, their behaviour showed otherwise, and people knew they self-harmed. However, the secrecy was more in relation to parents and peers than to friends.

Results showed there was no single reason for self-harm, but that underlying beliefs of vulnerability and low levels of parent influence were more common among self-harming girls. The tendency to dismiss socially-motivated self-harm as attention seeking is also not justified as there were always underlying deeper emotional problems attached.

Dr James says while deliberate self-harm is not normalised or considered cool, it is no longer shocking, and neither is it the domain of the disenfranchised or those with serious [mental health problems](#).

"You have this stereotypical image of this reclusive, socially awkward person that self-harms," she explains. "But the self-harming girls were far more likely to self-identify as being among the popular kids in school, and self-harming was not restricted to those commonly seen as the highly troubled teens."

Dr James, who graduated with her doctorate at a ceremony at Palmerston North's Regent Theatre last month, says all self-harm is an indication of underlying issues, and is often a coping mechanism for dealing with emotional pain. Early strength and function based interventions that encourage parental involvement and provide sound alternatives to self-

harm are likely to be most helpful.

Provided by Massey University

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