

Adolescent self-harmers misjudge bodily sensations

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Adolescents who self-harm experience heightened sensations across their skin and misjudge bodily cues such as hunger and headaches, University of Queensland-led research has found.

UQ Centre for Clinical Research Ph.D. candidate Emily Hielscher said adolescents who self-harmed lacked [self-awareness](#) about their bodies.

"Self-harmers felt different sensations across their skin and inside their bodies, saying they experienced symptoms of hunger, stomach aches and headaches more often than others," Ms Hielscher said.

"These sensations were reported at a frequency that would not be considered normal or could otherwise be medically explained.

"We know that [young people](#) who engage in [self-harm](#) are more dissatisfied with their body – this relates to the core structure around [body image](#).

"Teens didn't feel they had ownership of their body and felt somewhat like an alien within their own skin.

"Some reported detachment from their entire body or specific body parts, like their arms and legs."

Ms Hielscher said poor emotional control was considered one of the leading factors of self-harm, and understanding these bodily and physical responses could help to further inform treatments.

"These findings demonstrate the need to further investigate the link between self-harm and bodily experiences, combined with investigating new or modified treatment approaches to prevent future self-harm behaviours," she said.

"Self-harming adolescents were not recognising or evaluating their own bodily sensations correctly, which means they may benefit from developing a better awareness and understanding of their body."

"These results were found as part of a systematic review of 64 international studies conducted by the research team, in collaboration with Macquarie University.

"We wanted to piece together how these teenagers experienced their own body by looking at a wide range of measures, which has never been done before," she said.

The link between emotions and the body could be key to understanding why young people self-harm, Ms Hielscher said.

"Poor emotional control is key, but not every [adolescent](#) who has poor emotional control goes on to self-harm," she said.

"There's something more happening, and this [body](#) disengagement could act as a potential 'switch' which then leads to these self-harming behaviours."

This research is published in *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*.

More information: Emily Hielscher et al. When the body is the target—Representations of one's own body and bodily sensations in self-harm: A systematic review, *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.neubiorev.2019.03.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2019.03.007)

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