CUTS

learning to cope

compiled, written and illustrated by

Nikkayla and Myles

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I'm tied to the knife
The knife that seems to comfort me
The knife that seems to be my only friend
Where were you
Where were you when I needed you
I'm tied to my bed
The bed that keeps me safe
The bed that holds me as I cry
I'm tied to anxiety
The anxiety that tells the truth
The anxiety that doesn't hide
Where are you
Where do you go
Why aren't you here

anonymous

Introduction

Approximately 16.5 million people suffer from mental illnesses in the UK and yet only one in eight people get the help they need. This is only the people who have spoken up and asked for help, imagine how many people are suffering in silence. The government is cutting funding, making it harder to access support platforms and raise awareness.

Self-harm is a thing that not many people feel comfortable talking about, for a million different reasons. They might not want to believe that someone would deliberately harm themselves, or maybe the topic is too personal or hard to handle for some people. Everyone has their own reasons but that doesn't mean that it's not real or that it doesn't still happen.

When people think of self-harm they see cuts. Cutting is the most common type of self-harm but it can also be something as simple as pulling your hair or picking at old scabs. There are so many misconceptions surrounding this topic and it needs to change. People have glossed over it and glorified self-harm to the point that it's now a social trend.

As contributors and co-creators, we want to illustrate through this book that the creative process can be a means of release for any emotional burden that is affecting you and a way of taking some of that weight off your shoulders. There is something powerful in expressing yourself in an artistic way that enables people to lay their feeling out on the table and create a new space in which they can begin to make more sense to their lives.

Nikkayla & Myles, Inverness, Scotland, 2020

stories

J's story

started when I was thirteen. I had troubles at home while being bullied at school, and had low self-esteem and anger issues. I had a friend with an older sister who had marks on her arm, I asked her what they were and she said; "I'm sad and it makes me feel better" I thought if it worked for her, it'll work for me.

It gradually got worse over a couple of years, the first time I had bitten the end of a hair clip and scratched my arm. I then moved on to knives and blades, until finally, I started using glass. The glass was the worst because I found it completely tore up my arm. At one point it got so bad that I can no longer feel part of my arm, I ruined all of my nerves. It was terrifying the first time I went too far. There were always things that triggered me, like breakups and major life events, but sometimes it doesn't need to be significant just the build of minor things.

A big factor of it all was the lack of knowledge. Before I sought help and found out I have borderline personality disorder, depression and anxiety, I didn't even know what they were. I was sixteen before I got any help. I think they should teach these things in school because if people

knew about them things wouldn't go so far. If I had known maybe my self-harm wouldn't have lead to a suicide attempt.

Even after I got the help I found the only person that could help me was myself. I got picked on for self-harming and I learned there is a lot of stigma that you have to work around to get better. When I was being picked on I was told I was an attention seeker and it was one of the things that hurt the most. Getting diagnosed helped me realise what was happening and how to accept it. I self-harm for the distraction from the emotional pain, so I learned other ways of distracting myself. Those distractions could be cleaning or spending time with my kids. I feel as though mental health should be treated the same as any physical illness because it is just as serious.

After you have self-harmed you feel shameful, fear the judgement and feel weak, the stigma only makes things worse, people shouldn't judge just because they don't know. I got tattoos to cover my scars and to act as an incentive to not self-harm in fear of ruining them. My kids are a huge help, always giving me hope.

My family wasn't very much help but later on in life, I found friends that are so supportive, it is amazing that no matter what happens they will always stick by my side. It's because of my friends I haven't self-harmed in a few years.

P's story

I was young when I started around the age of twelve. I am a transgender female to male, my family believes that being transgender is wrong, along with being gay. This made it incredibly difficult for me to express myself and be me. Over time I became emotionally unstable. I was pretending to be someone I am not, expecting to be punished by God, as that was what I was being told by people at my church and my family. I didn't see what was happening already, I was hurting myself socially. Falling out of friend groups, locking myself in my room, only leaving for school.

I never saw this as a punishment, I wanted to do more to myself, to do what I deserved. I started by pinching and flicking bands on my wrist. I was purposely hurting myself. People started noticing and I didn't want to tell them why I was doing that. Closing myself away from the people even more so, to begin with. I didn't know what I was doing is considered self-harm. I wasn't taught about it in school, nobody told me what it is when they noticed, they just called it 'that'.

When someone finally got the courage to explain to me what was happening, I felt so guilty and ashamed of what

I was doing. I tried stopping but the guilt made me want to do it more, I wanted to punish myself even more. I didn't want help when I was offered it as I wanted to keep punishing myself.

My parents weren't told and they still do not know. I don't know what they would do if they found out. I don't even want to think about it. When I finally got the courage to find help thinking I have gone too far. My body is littered with scars from my calves to my chest, down my arms to my wrist.

It took me two years to find the help I needed. I found friends that accept me for being transgender, I found friends that aren't disgusted by my scars, I found friends that have been through the same as me, I found friends who also struggle. We all help each other, never asking too many questions. We are the outcast broken group of the school. It's been two years now that I have stopped, I still think about it now and then. I have relapsed through those two years but I never left a mark that'll stay.

I am now in a healthy relationship, I have a huge group of supportive friends. Sometimes when I look over my past I want to do it again. I want to punish myself for the mistakes I have made, but I don't, I promised myself I wouldn't, for my friends. I am getting better, I am learning to not push people away when I have problems. I have a part-time job that I love, a family that has now learned that I am going to be the way I am whether they like it or

not. They are now really supportive and do anything they can to help me during difficult times.

I think the advice I would give is just to be patient, it'll get better soon. Try your best to seek help. Learn to love yourself, don't change yourself for others. If they don't accept you they aren't real. Leave them. Yes, it will hurt but it'll be good.

K's story

I got diagnosed with EPD (emotional personality disorder) when I was 40, my psychologist said it's probably something I've had my whole life. I've always struggled with my temper, big-time struggled. It got worse as I got older. People think I just have depression and I want people to know that there are different conditions and that they should be treated differently.

I've been told to stop pretending to be happy, I have to be honest with myself. I'll bend over backwards to help people, I want people to like me and I'm scared they don't. I don't like myself and I think I just want someone to turn around and say that I'm a good person.

I loved primary school but when I went into high school, I was shy and got picked on. I didn't fit in and I wasn't very academic. That's when I think it started. I blossomed when I was eighteen.

My self-destructive behaviours started after falling out with my brother over his girlfriend, he sided with her instead of me. My gran was the only person that believed me so when she died things got worse. That was about

six years ago. My psychologist said it was emotional distress that brought on the behavioural issues. I get so out of control and so angry so quickly, I don't know what I'm feeling. I would lash out and then hit and throw things. After that, I would go through a depressive remorseful episode. I went to the doctors and got put on antidepressants, it didn't work and a week later I took my first overdose.

The first four times I overdosed it was pain killers, it wasn't significant but it was enough to need help. My partner has high blood pressure so with the fifth overdose I took forty of his tablets, all of my own and a lot of paracetamol. I was in the hospital for four days. It was Hogmanay, my partner had annoyed me, he left and I nearly killed myself. They say if I had been in the house for ten more minutes, I would be dead and now I have permanent liver damage.

A week before that happened, I called the doctor and spoke to the receptionist, she asked what was wrong and I said it was private. She said that I had to wait until January and actively dismissed me.

When I went to the doctors after being in the hospital I just got lectured, he told me to just leave after questioning why I did it. My partner had to pick me up from the car park. I moved practices and they changed my medication. Things started to get better, I got put down for weekly sessions with a counsellor that talked through my problems. I was out of work for about six months, it helped, things were good but things got worse again.

My partner and I were supposed to be getting married, I was stressed and nobody seemed to care about us anymore, it was all about the wedding. One day my partner found me down at the bottom of the garden with sharp kitchen knives and a bottle of whisky, he called the police. Three days later I was up at New Craigs hospital, sectioned for seventy-two hours. I feel as though in some ways this made things better, if I hadn't hit rock bottom I wouldn't be where I am now.

I'm a nanny and I feel as though the kids need to know about my diagnosis, so if I'm getting stressed, they can help. If I'm struggling, they will tell me to get a coffee. One boy is about fourteen and he picks up on a lot of things, he's a great help.

My psychologist said that a lot of the time when people overdose, they don't want to kill themselves, they want help. My therapist asked for a list of my meds and I found out that I was on a placebo pill so my meds got changed again. Talking helps, it's a massive boost. I'm quite open but some people need to learn how to come out of their shells. When I overdosed a lot of my friends didn't know what to say so they didn't say anything for months. I had a close group of friends, my partner called them the Witches group. He said the second I was away from them I was a better person.

During one session the psychologist read out a passage from a medical book and I felt it described me to a tee. We are taught that you need to think of yourself first but

I want to help other people and I feel in some ways that makes things worse. My psychologist asked me how it had started but I didn't know, she suggested a bad childhood and we figured out that it could be the lack of attention from my dad.

My partner and I are scared we are gonna pass this stuff on if we have kids, however, I always tell the kids I look after that they can come to me. The diagnosis was the key to getting better. I'll be on this medication for the rest of my life to balance my mood but my therapy has helped a lot.

N's story

Did you know that when you're drowning you don't take a breath until right before you blackout? The instinct to not let any water in is so strong that you don't open your mouth until your head pummels in time with your faltering heartbeat. Until your whole body aches and your lungs scream for air. Until it feels like flames are coursing through your blood, licking your insides greedily for any resemblance of oxygen. And when you do let go, when you do blackout, that's when it stops hurting.

I grew up in a perfect home, I had parents that supported and loved me, my brother and I were joined at the hip and I had amazing friends. I've been bullied my whole life but that was okay because my brother was there and my dad would kiss it better when I got home.

Then when I was seven my mum wasn't able to work anymore, she was home more and her compressed spine was causing her more pain. The more she was home the more she seemed to resent us, all of us. After a year or so my mum and dad started to fight, a lot. They stopped hugging and started yelling. The sweet voices that once soothed me to sleep now boomed from the kitchen.

This carried on for 2 years. The whole time the bullying got worse at school and no one was there to help me get back up and kiss me better anymore. Friends stopped coming over because the yelling and lack of care in my home 'annoyed' them. So, I stopped talking as much. Slowly I drifted away from my friends and family. I started to build up walls, started to prepare myself for what was next. Then my parents broke up, my mum moved out and I was torn.

After a while my parents became friends but there was a lack of communication and organisation. We were technically homeless, my mum moved out and my brother and I went with her. We ended up in a tiny council B&B, it was cramped and left little room for comfort but we made it work. My brother and I went back and forth between our mum's and dad's but there was never a schedule, we just went to our dad's when he wasn't working.

After a while, things got hard for my brother, with his Dyspraxia and ADHD he struggled to keep up with the constant change. He slowly stopped going out, he was alone and I didn't help. I had just gotten a boyfriend, the popular boy in school, I was making friends and the bullying wasn't so bad. I guess I kind of left my brother behind. I was almost happy again. Almost. Things got worse again when one of my brother's friends moved away, he was stressed and I only made it worse, so he took it out on me.

He began to hit me. It was small at first, a slap if I pushed the wrong buttons or a kick if he was in a bad mood but gradually things got worse. When we had to move again,

the slap turned into a punch and the single kick multiplied until he would kick me until I fell down and leave me there. I was lost and confused, I just kept asking myself why it had to be me. What did I do? Nobody knew what was going on or how I felt and if I asked for help, I was suddenly over exaggerating for attention. 'All siblings fight' I was told. I was drowning.

I've never actually drowned myself, but I'd imagine it's quite similar to choking. Choking until my throat turns blue and purple as his thumb digs into my pulse point. Feeling the waves of pain as his knee grinds into my ribs and his fist collides with my stomach. The difference is that I want to open my mouth. I want to let the air flood my lungs. I know that there isn't any water, nothing can hurt me if I would just breath. Yet I don't fight.

I don't want to hurt him the way he's hurting me. I always thought it was normal. Don't all siblings fight? After a while, I started to believe that I deserved it. Why would he hit me if I hadn't done anything wrong? It has to be my fault. I had to have done something for him to be this angry. So no, I don't want to fight.

At this point, I started to fall out with people at school and after two years my boyfriend and I broke up. I was only in primary 6. It didn't bother me too much so I chose to try and mend the broken bond between my brother and I. It was hard but gradually, despite my mum's sudden plummet in mental health, we made up. It was tough and it didn't last long but I was happy for a while. I could breathe again. Over the next year, things got easier with my dad and we

moved again meaning that we were just around the corner from him. Although things were better there, the mood at my mum's plummeted. With the stress of moving and Mum's mental illness taking its toll, we all began to fight a lot. I was suddenly thrown back into the dark, I was alone again. I was about to go into high school and I had lost all of my friends. With no idea what to do, I began to lash out at school. I yelled at teachers and got into a couple of fights but my teacher was there to help me, I ended up helping organise the library instead of going to class when I was upset.

Things were getting better and yet worse at the same time. Time ticked by slowly, I drifted through life until high school struck. I loved the classes and I got put into an outdoor classroom group. Every Wednesday we would go on hikes or cycle, it was great, a chance to escape and think things through. Then I met my best friend, I didn't know who she was at the time but I always thought she was interesting. She was quiet and mysterious, the kind of person that you couldn't read but you could tell they had been through enough crap to know what they were talking about. I decided I had to make her my friend, and I did. But as I tried she shut me down, again and again, it made me feel worthless and unworthy. But I kept pushing until finally she opened up, just a little at first but she has helped me with so much since then. I don't know what I would do without her.

While all of this was happening my mum got worse and my brother got stressed. My brother and I became young carers, we care for our mum. It's a lot of responsibility and it made me feel like I was suffocating. We had to do all

the chores and cook, all while keeping up with school. I went to my mum for help but she shut me down. 'You're overexaggerating, why do you take things so personally?' My mum degraded and belittled my problems, shrinking them down until I believed I wasn't wanted if I was damaged. She didn't care that I was being bullied again, or that my brother was hitting me. He's the favourite child, the quiet one, it must have been my fault for upsetting him.

One new year my mum met her boyfriend to be, my uncle's mate. He seemed nice and all but he drank a lot. It didn't take long for them to become friends. I was glad that my mum was happy an all but I just really didn't like him, there was something about the way he acted. It only took a few months before they were officially a couple. He came over a lot, his dog was amazing and he helped with the chores. But the happy help didn't last long. Once again, I was left wondering, why me? He was kinda sexist, he was fine with my brother but not me, and he really didn't like that I was bisexual at first.

The more my mum's boyfriend was around the more comfortable he was. With comfort came a sick idea that he was in charge, that he could order us around and we'd just listen. When I forgot to do the dishes or even if I just left a light on, I was suddenly useless, I never did anything right. If he was drinking the nasty words becomes shoves and swings of his fist. He didn't have the best coordination even when he was sober so he never actually landed a hit but that doesn't erase the fear of seeing a person twice the size of you stumble as their arm

swings at your face. There were good times and bad but the good times weren't enough to make me forget all the names and bruises.

It was so hard to cope with all of the bullying and the abuse and the names, so I went to the internet for help. I looked up ways to distract myself, ways to get help but eventually, I convinced myself that I had to do it on my own, nobody could know what was happening, they wouldn't care anyway. I almost gave up, then one day I had a fight with my dad and began to scratch at my arm with a pencil. It took me a minute to realise that what I was doing hurt and I stopped straight away but it was stuck in my head. For days all I could think about was how that dull pain had made me feel better, helped relieve some of the emotional burden. I gave in and found a pin stuck to a door and thought I'd give it a try, slowly I ran it across my hand. It helped and that made me feel sick. I threw that pin away and moved on.

I drifted and hid my pain until finally, I broke. I had to tell someone. Anyone. I took some time to think about everything before I decided to tell one of the youth workers at the youth club I went to. I unloaded my feelings, I spoke about how my brother was hitting me and that he had even gone as far as to strangle me, I told her about my mum and her lack of communication with my dad and how nobody seemed to care about the bullying and my mum's boyfriends drunken mistakes. I told her that I felt lost, broken and unwanted. All she said was 'that sounds like abuse, possibly even neglect'.

I was furious. How could she accuse my family of such things? My family loves me, at least I think they do. I vowed to never tell anyone again. I didn't want to be the victim, so I bottled things up and drowned them out. I was losing myself so I did the one thing I somehow knew would help…

I cut.

I was in the tech department at lunch looking for my teacher when I came across a broken pencil sharpener, the blade was right there, practically daring me to take it. Of course, I knew what self-harm was and how dangerous it could be but all that registered in my mind was the pain I was in and how I could relieve it. I was in second year when I found that blade.

Throughout the next year, I just acted normal, I took what was thrown at me and I dealt with it later. Things stayed much the same. My mum drifted in and out of depressive episodes, belittling my problems for they weren't as bad as hers. My mums' boyfriend stayed over more, got drunk just as much. My brother hit me more, even went as far as to strangle me…regularly. And through all of that, my best friend stuck by my side, helping me find the light when I needed it and I did the same for her. But that didn't stop me from feeling broken, I kept cutting.

Over time the small cuts on my wrist, hidden by bracelets faded and moved to just above my elbow, easier to hide there. But somehow my best friend found out, I suspect she knew long before she spoke up about it. The cuts

moved to my thighs and feet. My friend gradually helped me stop but I ended up starving myself instead. Inevitably I went back to self-harm, this time the cuts were bigger and slightly deeper. I felt worse than I had before, I just wanted everything to stop. It was so hard to understand why all of this was happening. I hated myself, I felt so worthless and broken. And I couldn't understand why my friend was trying so hard to help me. There was so clearly something wrong with me. I was damaged and couldn't go one day without messing things up. It was like if I wasn't hurting myself, I was hurting everyone around me.

I later found out that she was the same, she had been hurt the way my brother hurt me, she had lost her self worth because of the names and lack of love surrounding her. She was damaged too. But I didn't think of her as damaged, I thought she was strong and always knew what to do. I thought that if she isn't damaged goods then maybe I'm not either. She is worth so much, even after going through what she went through, what she's still going through.

At one point she went as far as to try and kill herself, I remember messaging her, she said she was on a cliff and she wanted to jump. I was terrified, I couldn't make it without her, I would be lost and alone again. I was hysterical, I phoned her and she didn't answer, I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe. But she needed me. So, I steeled myself and helped her, I was gonna be there for her, even if I never breathed again. I felt good about myself when I helped others. Almost a year later, when we were talking about some stuff she said to me that I saved her. 'I wouldn't

be alive if it weren't for you'. Hearing that scared the shit out of me but it also put things into perspective. Perhaps I am worth something if I helped her maybe I can help others. Maybe I can still find my place in this world.

I started to get better, I realised that there were people there for me, that it was okay to be sad. I was optimistic for a while but things like that never last. School was still hard, I was so stressed. The bullying wasn't as bad. People no longer said their opinions to my face and it was nice, not having insults thrown at me every five seconds but I heard the whispers. The quite voices asking why I was so fucked up?

I finally got up the courage to talk to my guidance teacher. I didn't tell her much, just about my troubles in school but she helped and the names slowly stopped. I got given a place to go at lunches and break so that I wouldn't be confronted by the people that chose to ridicule me.

But I still felt broken. I was still lost. I still had so much going on at home that the help in school didn't actually do anything for me. I gave up on trying to get better. I crawled right back to where I started and pulled out that blade from my bedside cabinet. I counted as I cut, one, two…five…ten. The pain was soothing, almost like a safety blanket, there to catch me when I fell. The blood ran down my leg with the tears that burned my soul. I cried myself to sleep on top of my blood-stained sheets. It was almost like living in one of those mental health awareness short films, nothing seemed real.

I didn't hurt anymore, I just felt numb. But that was almost worse because without feeling the bad things, the good things no longer held any value. I couldn't complain though, I had done this to myself.

Sometimes something hurts you so bad that it just stops hurting at all. Until something makes you feel again. Then it all comes flooding back and you drown in the wake of the madness. You're suddenly consumed by emotions you didn't think it possible to feel and you wish to go back to that blissful numbness.

I never planned on anyone finding out about this so when someone else did I freaked out. I was at a small concert at a cafe with my friend when the singer told her story. It was a Christian group so they all talked about how God had helped them and she said that he had helped her stop self-harming. At the time, I struggled to talk about self-harm in any way, so I ran out of the room. It probably wasn't the best way to handle things but it was the only thing I could think of. Of course, my friend followed me and we talked, he kinda just figured things out.

From then on, more people found out, I had more help and support. They convinced me to try and stop again, I did my best but it was still hard. I still couldn't stop completely, I had moments when I just felt so lost that I couldn't not hurt myself. So they threatened to tell an adult, it may seem unconventional but it worked. Slowly I managed to stop. I still struggle every day but I'm trying my best.

S's story

One thing people don't understand is that people and situations are different. Not every mental illness or reason is the same. I had multiple reasons why I self-harmed, why I did the things I did. Unusually, I was willing to talk about self harm but instead of helping it made things worse. Unlike most children, I was educated about the issue because of my older cousin. She did the same but for different reasons than me. I was told I was faking it, that I was just copying my cousin.

But the truth was I wasn't. I was being bullied at school, I was being bullied at home, stress piled up. I didn't have many friends but that was my own fault, I closed myself off from people as to not hurt them. I thought if they were involved they wouldn't be able to get out, and I would go too far and harm them, I didn't want that. I didn't want to lose them either when they learn the whole truth. But I knew I wouldn't be able to keep it from them for long.

My first year of high school wasn't all that great, the bullying got worse, my parents grew apart and I drifted further from them. My dad was arrested for

illegally carrying and distributing drugs and my mum was diagnosed with depression, she also attempted suicide twice. She was then put into the hospital to be monitored, I then started living with my grandparents. I thought things would be better, I started a new school, but I was wrong again. I was made fun of for living with my grandparents. My grandparents blamed me for my mum's attempts and my dad's arrest when they found out about the bullying they said it was my fault for being a disappointment, they said it was my fault I was bullying material.

I felt so lonely and closed off. The more I cut the more I felt I should go deeper and do more. But something always stopped me, I don't know if it's because I was scared, or if it was because I didn't want to prove to my family that I am the disappointment they see me as.

M's story

My childhood wasn't the best having three younger siblings, a full time working dad and a mum who just couldn't care and just wanted me for the money. Being the oldest, I took responsibility in watching over my siblings from a young age of five. Years went by and they started pushing me away from them. I didn't know what I was doing wrong, I did everything for them. My dad started being at home more, as my mother finally wanted to get a job blaming us and boredom. The more Dad was at home the angrier he seemed to get. The angrier he got, the more I got into trouble. The more I got into trouble, the worse my punishments would get. As I got older the more regular it became, it became normal. I still did everything I could for my siblings even when they didn't want me to and now that my dad was at home more, the less I helped. I still helped, but in the shadows.

The family soon drifted apart, I lost touch with almost every part of my family. It was as if my world was only home and school. My safe place was my room, it was the only place I could be myself. Soon, it wasn't all of us drifting away, my parents drifted away from each other as they drifted from us. We got pulled apart, I thought it

was my fault. Was I interfering too much? Should I have stopped when Dad was home? Without my dad being there to punish me, I brought it upon myself to hurt myself, I started off with things that weren't noticeable. Keeping hair ties on my wrist for too long, deliberately hitting my toes off of things. I never knew about self-harm, I didn't know what I was doing was wrong. I still don't see if it as wrong, I see it as normal.

My parents broke up in early 2014, I was only ten at this time with my youngest sibling only just starting school. It was difficult, I remember every detail of that day. Mum and Dad sat us down and spoke to us, they made us aware it was not our fault, but I still believed it was. Dad was moving out that afternoon and we all sat on the couch cuddled up together and cried. It was the closest we had been in a long time. No arguments, just crying and Disney movies. Things got harder, I had to look after my siblings once more, bullying in school got worse. My life was the worst it could get, or so I thought.

I came home one day and everything was packed, we were moving house. I had just found friends and felt I could belong. I was really angry and upset. I stood washing the dishes, staring blankly out the window. Without realising what I was doing the water changed red. I didn't feel when I had cut myself but I had. It wasn't deep but it stung. I hid it from my mother and of course, my father didn't get told. I had never done anything that would leave a mark before.

Moving into the new house wasn't that bad, I liked the area and there were more kids my age. My mum got a new boyfriend and he was okay, to begin with, but the longer we knew him the more abusive he seemed to get. He didn't hurt me or my sister but he hurt my brothers and possibly my mum. We never did find out if he had hurt my mum, but I do remember being sent upstairs after he was gone for two days, my mum's phone had died and he was trying to phone her, he tried to phone the house phone but it was cut out as we couldn't pay for it. He burst through the door and started yelling. We heard loud thumps through the floor. Everything suddenly went quiet, I couldn't even hear the dogs in the back garden. After a few minutes of silence, the front door opened and closed. I could hear my mum yell his name and start sobbing.

Another ten minutes passed, and we were finally allowed to go back downstairs. My mum's face was red, tears had stained it. I knew better than to question her so I kept my head low as I walked down the stairs. My brothers chose to stay upstairs, to play their game as my sister went out to play. It was just me and my mum sitting in the living room together. It was awkward, sitting in silence after hearing what had happened. My mind jumped to the thought she had been hit, but I wasn't entirely sure if that was exactly what had happened.

Later that night he came back, I was making dinner as he burst through the door. My mum hadn't said a word since he left. He walked up to me and took the fork I was using out my hands and turned the cooker off. I was so confused.

He wasn't forceful, he was calm. He took me to his car and I wasn't sure where we were going, the only thing he told me was we were getting dinner. My mum didn't know I was gone, I didn't have anything on me. We didn't speak until we were nearly at the place. He told me not to worry about what had happened with my mum before we walked into McDonald's. This just made me worry more. Because my mum didn't say anything and there was not enough evidence that he had hit her other than me and my sister confirming the events of that day.

When I was living with my mum, I had little to no contact with my dad, over the time I was living with her. I had only seen him twice, and spoke to him over the phone once, but every time I saw him, I told him what was happening. Soon he was fed up of us being scared to go back home and running out the door to get away from them. We say that he kidnapped us willingly, we asked to stay not wanting to go home. So, my dad lied to my mum that the car was broken. We then went to the police and they said that there would probably have been a better way for us to stay, but then agreed that he should keep lying to her.

Days past and we moved in with my dad, we got a court order and passed it through. My dad won custody and we began living with him. I started school again. The first week was okay, I got to know the school, got to know people. I was the only one in my class that had a different accent to others, I acted differently. I couldn't tell people about me as it was all court protected. People started bullying me and my siblings for being new. I didn't speak

unless I was spoken to, that was a habit I had gotten from my first school. Days went by and I hadn't hurt myself as I didn't have time to, I was never left on my own as we were living in a two-bedroom flat with five people. My dad didn't hit me, he hardly yelled and I got to know him better and he got to know me better. I was finally close to the man I had idolised throughout my childhood, I almost forgot about everything he had done to me.

I had forgotten about my mum until my dad sat us all down to talk about contact with her. I was against it at first, I didn't want to go, I still hated her for allowing that man in the house and for doing what she had done to not only me but my siblings. My younger brother can no longer sleep without a light on so he can watch for the man to come into his room. My sister is terrified of the dark in case he is standing there, she has physical hallucinations of him grabbing her feet and other places, pulling her covers off of her. I couldn't sleep for ages without watching the window, watching for his car to come to take us back down there. My other brother feels as though he is no longer man enough to do most tasks, because of what the man had called him and told him.

Self-harm was a way for me to release my anger and pain in other ways. I had a knife upstairs that I kept in a cubby bit beside my bed. I would cut up my chest, hating it. Afterwards, I didn't feel better or worse. I would cut my shoulders not deep to leave marks but deep enough to hurt a little. I would keep a bottle of water by my bed and when things got bad, I would have a mouthful of water

and a belt around my throat. I wouldn't let myself breath until I started seeing black dots floating around. I would tie elastic bands around my thigh and not take them off until my leg was blue. Even though I did all this, I never considered it as self-harm. I hated myself for doing this, I knew if my siblings found out they would be hurt and yet I still continued. I never thought my parents would care. I couldn't talk to my friends, I didn't want to be seen as an attention seeker, I didn't want them to judge me. I knew they had their own problems and didn't need me to burden them more.

Today, I have people who are close to me, they assure me I am not a burden which I still find difficult to believe but they have helped me through a lot and have stopped me doing things I know I would regret in the future.

T's story

I have two younger brothers, and an older brother and sister. I am the middle child. I was seen as the weakest by my father. I didn't like sports, I didn't do well in school. I didn't succeed where my siblings did. I didn't like socialising, I didn't like sports, I wasn't very smart. I was bullied and hated. I was the quiet kid that failed at everything. My father would insult and mock me for this.

I often hid in my room, playing video games where I have multiple chances of life, pretending the world outside wasn't real, but that didn't always work.

As I grew older my father grew madder. Verbal became physical, he convinced me I was useless and nobody wanted me. I began hurting myself. Using sharpener blades, kitchen knives, anything sharp. I told myself I deserved to hurt, that I wasn't good enough. I became silent, crying for help I know would never come. When I tried to talk about myself at family gatherings I was shouted at by my father. I was told to shut up and don't speak, I wasn't worth it.

Having my story out there will mean a lot to me. I never got to speak, I was too scared to. But I don't want others to suffer as I did. I was too late to find help. I would hide my problems from people, listen to theirs, suffering in silence.

I had multiple recordings of me cutting. I recorded it keeping a record of how many. Even though I deserved it I felt guilty that I was hurting someone else, not just me. I have attempted suicide twice when things got too hard when things became too much to handle. I was always stopped by the few friends I had. I took them for granted, pushing them away when I needed them. I took it as a punishment.

One day I went too far. I was on call to a friend, both our fathers were yelling. I couldn't take it. I hung up walking to the bathroom. Recording myself as I cut. Small quick cuts became long deep cuts.

I nearly bled out. If my friend hadn't of stopped me I wouldn't have survived. I wanted to punish myself for being weak, I couldn't handle my father yelling. I couldn't do anything. I was useless.

My arms and legs are covered in scars, but they are battle scars. They are proof I survived hard times, they are proof I never gave up. I finally moved out of my father's. I got my own place. I am now recovering. No one can truly recover. I still think about it, every time it gets closer for me to return home for a holiday.

The advice I'd give is to keep your friends close, they help a lot. Find a family who loves you, even if that means making a new family and leaving one behind. Find people who truly accept you for you. They may not come as quick as you want. You will be hurt many a time before you find them, but they are out there somewhere. Just take your time.

poetry

by anonymous

1

This mask I wear.
This smile I fake.
They'll never know.
Until I break.
Every morning I'll tighten the straps.
Of the mask I wear.
Ignore their hate.
Ignore their stares.
I'll go on with my day.
Laughing as if nothing's wrong.
Pretending I'm happy.
Pretending I'm strong.
But when I'm alone.
My mask breaks.
Shattering from the hate.
As my heartaches.
I'm amazed by how they don't see.
My long sleeves, and cracking mask.
They are so carefree.
On the outside.
I'm normal.
I laugh and smile like everyone else.

But really, I'm abnormal.
I hide behind my mask.
It's my shield.
To protect me.
In this battlefield.
Where everyone smiles.
Till their teeth fall out.
And their tongue rots.
From the false compliment they spout.
How they act so oblivious.
Is beyond me.
Can they not see.
That the smile on my mask.
Is a silent plea? I say I am strong.
But I'm a crier.
"I'm doing great!" Liar.
My heart's a mess.
It's an abyss.
I won't admit it.
But I can't live like this.
Yet I keep the mask on.

Put on my best fake smile.
Because its easier to say you're fine.
When you're in this poisonous lifestyle.
So I guess its time to put on my mask.
Tell everyone I'm fine.
Laugh when I want to cry.
In this mask of mine.

2

You always hear your name even when it's not
    being called.
You hate hearing your voice in recordings.
You use the word "thingy" when you can't re-
    member what something is called.
You pretend you're writing in class so the teach-
    er won't call on you.
You say the entire alphabet because you can't
    remember what letter comes next.
You and your best friend can say one word and
    crack up.
You hate it when one of your hoodie strings is
    longer than the other.
You hate it when someone thinks you like
    someone when you clearly don't.
You hate it when your favourite song comes on
    as you pull in the driveway.
You feel like if you turn on the lights, you'll be
    safe from anything.

You push those little buttons on the lids of fast-
food drinks.
You love it when you tell a guy to shut up and
they copy you in a higher voice and you both
start laughing.

3

Every time I look at it,
I find myself revolted,
by the sinful actions,
and mistakes,
in my heart,
they shall forever sit.
Fake smiles;
empty promises,
I'm getting tired of this empty life,
for whenever I look at it,
all I see are the painful strifes.
I sit myself in front of it,
each and every time,
today I have my homework,
still blank; still empty –
I'm not doing so fine tonight I wrote a letter,
for my "friends" and for my parents,
before I downed the drink,
and yet gone I may be,
I won't be missed – you'll see,
for all that I truly ever was – a hindrance, shall
    forever be.

4

I'm tired of friends…
I'm tired of the family…
I'm tired of lying…
I'm tired of sleeping…
I'm tired of smiling…
I'm tired of eating…
I'm tired of being laughed at…
I'm tired of being "Happy"...
I'm tired of being sad…
The thing I really want to say is…
I'm tired of living...

5

I'm surrounded in darkness
I got nowhere to run
I feel trapped
I feel empty
Is this darkness me?
I'm surrounded in darkness
No one can help me
Why can't I be saved?
Why can't someone see?
Why?
I'm surrounded in darkness
You're my only light
But you're too far to touch
You're too bright to see
I'm stuck falling into darkness
I reach for you
But you run
Stay with me
Help me escape my darkness
I'm surrounded in darkness
My only hope lost
Too far out to reach

The light that is you
Is now out of sight
I fear I'll always be in
Darkness

6

I tried being who you want me to be
I tried being me
I tried being perfect
I tried being different
I tried hiding
I tried talking
I tried pretending
I tried
I tried for you
Now I'm tired of it
I'm tired of being me
I'm tired of being perfect
I'm tired of being different
I'm tired of hiding
I'm tired of pretending
I'm tired
I'm tired of you

7

The water so deep
The water so warm
The water so cold
The water that pierces
The water that hides me
I hold my breath
I hold not wanting to let go
I hold to you
Begging silently for you to save me
You let go
I'm plummeting
My head spinning
My lungs aching
My eyes close
I wake in white
Surrounded by black

8

My mirror holds my secret
My secret of me
My mirror hides the real me
I am the person they want me to be
I smile
I laugh
I break
I cry
I am who they want
When they want
I stare at the one they want me to be
The girl in the mirror grinning evilly
The boy inside me crying
I'm happy for them
I'm sad for them
I try for them
I ignore me for them
They don't see me
I struggle for them
I hide for them
I pretend for them
Why can't they see me?
Am I invisible?

9

I'm scared
I'm scared of being lost
I'm scared of being left
I'm scared of darkness
I'm scared to speak
I'm scared to move
I'm scared
I'm scared of myself
I'm scared of love
I'm scared of friends
I'm scared of being hurt
I close myself away
So I will not be scared
But to be honest
I'm scared of being lonely

10

One...two...three
The blade gliding across skin
Three...four...five
The tears staining a face
Five...six...seven
The words that hurt
Seven...eight...nine
Repeat
Ten…
The blade has gone too deep
Eleven...twelve...thirteen
Blood no longer hidden
Thirteen...fourteen...fifteen
Sleeves dyed red
Fifteen...sixteen...seventeen
The suffocating lump
Seventeen...eighteen...
Repeat
Eighteen...nineteen...twenty
The rope is readied
Twenty...twenty-one...twenty-two
The echo of a falling chair
Twenty-two...twenty-three...twenty-four
Blue skies grey

Twenty-four...twenty-five...twenty-six
The tear that falls
Twenty-six...twenty-seven...twenty-eight
The hearts that broke
Twenty-eight...twenty-nine...
The love that's lost
Thirty
Life is taken

11

Begging for love
Crying from rejection
Trying to do my best
But it's never the best
Devoured by hatred and words
Not sleeping
But not awake either
Trying to improve
Trying to be better
'I hate you' they say
'You're nothing' they curse
Trying to be someone you're not
Not being able to find yourself
Being lost in a hole too deep
Lost friends roaming
Broken hearts darkening
Skin tearing
Light shining
Hands dragging
Hearts mending
Skin healing
Love filled

'You're perfect' they say
'Don't listen' they reassure
Lost friends no longer lost

12

You're not good enough
You can do better
Try harder
Grow up
It's a phase
Words that sting more than a bee
Words that cut more than a knife
Words that hurt more than a bruise
You're ugly
You're disgusting
Fat
Words that dull the positives
Words that numb
It's just words
Words hurt more than sticks and stones
Words hurt more than the punches that land
Words hurt more

13

'Children should be seen not heard'
Children are human too
They need help
They want help
Children are the future
Children have voices
They should be heard
Everyone should
'You're a child you won't understand'
Children do understand
They know their own bodies
Don't tell them they're wrong
Don't tell them they can't
Don't put them down for their mistakes
Children learn through mistakes
Everyone makes mistakes
We're all human
Let children explore
Let them explore outside
Let them explore themselves
Let them explore each other
Don't hold them back
Don't stop them being themselves

Resources

If self-harm is a way for you to cope with life, it is important to know where to turn to if you want to stop and find a different way to deal with emotional suffering and overwhelm. Help is available. Here are some resources and what they say about themselves.

Highland

mikeysline.co.uk, *text 07779 303 303*
We run two services, a text line, as well as the Hive in Inverness City Centre. We aim to 1) Help fight the Highland wide problem of chronic loneliness 2) Provide a light in the dark for those in the depths of depression 3) Offer a distraction from thoughts leaning towards self-harm 4) Tackle head on the staggering rate of suicide in the Highlands.

birchwoodhighland.org.uk
Birchwood Highland was established in 1987 as a charity working with people experiencing mental ill-health, supporting them in their journey to recovery.

highlandpride.org
The aims of the Highland LGBT Forum are to preserve and protect the mental and physical health and social welfare of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the Highlands & Islands.

Scotland wide

breathingspace.scot, *call 0800 83 85 87 free*
We are a free, confidential, phone service for anyone in Scotland over the age of 16 experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

lgbtyouth.org.uk
We are Scotland's national charity for LGBTI young people, working with 13–25 year olds across the country. Our goal is to make Scotland the best place to grow up for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex young people.

UK wide

samaritans.org, *call 116 123 free*
Whatever you're going through, a Samaritan will face it with you. We're here 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

childline.org.uk, *call 0800 1111 free*
Childline is a free, private and confidential service where you can talk about anything. Whatever your worry, whenever you need help, we're here for you online, on the phone, anytime.

Cuts, Learning to Cope is a selection of personal stories, illustrations and poems that explore the subject of mental health and self-harm. These stories have been contributed by individuals that have experienced these issues first hand and have been collected and edited by pupils from Inverness High School in an attempt to raise awareness and tackle the stigma associated with self-harm and mental illness.

As with any difficult topic, the content of this publication is at times raw and hard-hitting, however, within these stories, there are examples of how friendship, love and care can aid recovery and help people heal.

Contains graphic material that could be triggering.

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