

DO YOU WANT TO WRITE ABOUT SELF-HARM?

A resource for writers and creators thinking about depicting self-harm.

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ABOUT THE GUIDE

This guide is the result of a PhD project by Veronica Heney, which looked at fictional representations of self-harm and how they impacted people with experience of self-harm. At the end of the project Veronica worked with Make Space and a group of people with experience of self-harm to create this resource.

We defined self-harm as **'an act which in some way causes direct harm to the body but one where the focus and purpose of the act is this harm itself and not some other goal'**.

If you want to think about depictions of self-harm beyond what is included on this resource you might like to read the research that it's based on, which can be found at makespaceco.org/fiction

REPRESENTATIONS MATTER

There can be a lot of anxiety around depicting self-harm (sometimes referred to as self-injury), and this often means that there are very few representations. **We hope to see more depictions of self-harm in the future**, particularly depictions which respond to the complexities and nuances of our experiences.

Although you might worry about depicting self-harm in the 'wrong' way, we hope that this doesn't mean you erase it or avoid it. **A narrative where self-harm is present doesn't have to be 'about' self-harm**; self-harm can be a part of many stories, just as it is a part of many lives.

The stakes of representing self-harm are often framed in terms of 'risk' and imitation. But these are only a few of the impacts fiction might have.

Seeing or reading representations of self-harm can be hugely meaningful - they can help us to feel less alone in what can often be an isolating experience, and they can also help others to understand our experiences.

Irresponsible or careless depictions can also be hurtful. They can reinforce shame around self-harm, and can spread misperceptions around what self-harm is.

Representations have real and tangible impacts on the world - they frame both the care that is offered and the care we can feel we deserve.

While we think there should be more representations, **we encourage creators to think broadly and carefully about the potential impact of their work**. This is a tool to help you do that.

So, before you start writing, here are a few of the things we (some people with experience of self-harm) want you to know or consider...

WHAT ARE YOU ASSUMING SELF-HARM IS?

What are the assumptions people often hold about self-harm? You might like to think about **whether your depictions reinforce these assumptions** - for instance that people who self-harm are seeking attention or are manipulative, or that self-harm itself is bizarre and inexplicable. **Cruel and inaccurate assumptions can affect the sort of care which people who self-harm receive.**

It can also be valuable to think about the ways that narratives can frame people who self-harm as illegitimate or not 'authentic' in their distress, and how these framings might be harmful or unhelpful.

WHO ARE YOU ASSUMING IT IS THAT SELF-HARMS?

While there can be stereotypes or assumptions about who self-harms, in fact **the population of people who self-harm is incredibly diverse.** This diversity is an important part of the multiplicity of meanings and functions of self-harm. Have you thought about who is self-harming within your narratives?

IS THERE WARNING?

It can be difficult to come across self-harm, particularly vivid or detailed depictions, without warning. **You might consider using a content warning at the beginning of your work,** so that **people can make an informed decision** about when, whether, and how they engage with material around self-harm.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO REPRESENT SELF-HARM?

We found that **depictions of self-harm that were used simply as a plot device, for instance to 'raise the stakes' or create drama, tended to feel frustrating or exploitative.** It could feel like self-harm wasn't really integrated into stories or characters, and instead was just being used simplistically to signal 'madness' or 'dysfunction.'

This doesn't mean that all depictions of self-harm have to be very detailed, but it can be **helpful to have a clear sense of why you are depicting self-harm** and how that might impact people reading or viewing your work.

ARE YOU TRYING TO WRITE A 'PERFECT' NARRATIVE OF SELF-HARM?

One narrative can never encompass all the many, varied experiences which the label 'self-harm' encompasses. **Self-harm can have different meanings to different people** - it can be helpful to understand the specific story you're telling, rather than trying to create something 'perfect' or 'universal'. We often enjoyed stories that were told thoughtfully and well, even when characters' experiences of self-harm were very different to ours.

HOW ARE YOU CONTEXTUALISING SELF-HARM?

Some people with experience of self-harm found that **contextualising self-harm within a character's broader life and psychological difficulties led to richer and more accurate depictions.**

We **valued narratives where self-harm wasn't the only way a character was defined**, and sometimes it was helpful to see self-harm as just one part of a character's life and story, rather than the most important part. It felt more meaningful when characters who self-harmed seemed fully realised or 'three-dimensional'.

IS YOUR STORY TRYING TO 'TEACH A LESSON'?

It can be tempting to think of your narrative as trying to 'teach a lesson' - but **with self-harm there are often few straightforward lessons or simple answers.**

For example, it can seem like it's important for stories to discourage people from self-harming, but for people who already do self-harm this can feel difficult or alienating.

It can be useful to think about **why you think certain messages are important to convey, and whether those messages are helpful or true** for all readers.

Reference: Stegals P. (2015) Making Sense of Self-harm: The Cultural Meaning and Social Context of Nonsuicidal Self-injury. 2015 New York: Palgrave Macmillan



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HOW DOES THE STORY END?

It might be easy to think that a 'happy ending' means that a character stops self-harming, but **in real life recovery can be more complex, and healing can mean different things to different people.** When thinking about endings it's also helpful to consider that some parts of self-harm, such as scars, might stay with people for a long time.

HAVE YOU ENGAGED WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-HARM?

This might involve talking with people who have self-harmed, reading testimony from people who have self-harmed, looking for their feedback on your work, or engaging them meaningfully in the writing process. **It's worth being aware that people who self-harm will read or watch your work when it's published - how do you want them to feel?**

Thank you for reading our resource. We hope it helps you to think and write about self-harm with nuance and care - we know the difference those representations can make.

If you want to think about depictions of self-harm beyond what is included in this resource, you can find more about the project at makespaceco.org/fiction

