

HAVE YOU RECENTLY READ OR WATCHED A FICTIONAL DEPICTION OF SELF-HARM?

(This could be on TV, in theatre, books, or films)

A reading and thinking guide for professionals who support people that 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'** (Steggals, 2015; 9).

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

If you know someone who self-harms and you support them in a professional capacity, **fiction can be a way to reflect on parts of their experience that you may find difficult to understand.** Fiction can also be a good way to open up conversations around self-harm, something that people often say they find hard to do.

Discussions around self-harm in fiction are **often framed in terms of 'risk' or imitation.** But we found lots of other important ways that fictional depictions impacted the lives of people who self-harmed.

Representations of self-harm can be hugely meaningful, they can enable us to feel less alone in what is often an isolating experience.

On the other hand, **irresponsible or careless depictions of self-harm can be hurtful.** They can reinforce shame, spread misperceptions, and shape how the general public sees self-harm. It is important to consider **what assumptions are present in fiction and how they shape the care you give** and your experience of giving it, as well as the experiences or expectations of the person looking for care.



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



Here's what we (some people with experience of self-harm) want you to know...

SEEING OURSELVES

Identifying with characters who self-harmed can be complex, but was often also positive and meaningful.

CONTEXTUALISING SELF-HARM

It is important to contextualise self-harm within characters' lives, within their experiences of distress and difficulty, and within other behaviours that can be considered self-destructive. At the same time, **while it's easy to worry that self-harm only occurs within dark or sinister contexts**, we often felt it was **helpful to contextualise self-harm within the ordinary, everyday experiences that were parts of our lives.**

RECOVERY AND ENDINGS

While ending stories about self-harm with recovery could feel hopeful, it could also make ongoing self-harm or scars harder to talk about or recognise.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

WHAT KINDS OF CARE ARE SHOWN, PROMOTED, OR DISSUADED BY THE REPRESENTATION?

Representations can impact how people who self-harm are treated, particularly when they are negative or stereotypical. Do you think this representation can help us to think about how to respond to self-harm with care, or might it encourage cruelty and neglect?

SELF-HARM AND STEREOTYPES

A lot of depictions fell into **stereotypes about what self-harm is, and especially about who self-harms**: most characters who self-harmed were white, middle class, young women and this can make the **many people who don't fit that stereotype feel erased.**

INACCURATE AND OTHERING DEPICTIONS

Inaccurate or shallow depictions of self-harm were hard to identify with or even felt hurtful, especially when they reflected a broader social understanding of self-harm as attention-seeking, or difficult to sympathise with.

These sorts of **characters often didn't feel very realistic.** It could seem like self-harm was being used or exploited to help the narrative because it was associated with brokenness, strangeness or just being 'not-normal', **at the expense of what self-harm is really like.**

SELF-HARM CAN BE DIFFERENT THINGS

There is **no one way to perfectly represent self-harm**, because **self-harm can be experienced in many, varied ways**, and can mean different things to different people - even to the same people at different points in their life.

HOW DOES THE REPRESENTATION DEAL WITH SELF-CARE OR SELF-DESTRUCTION MORE BROADLY?

Self-harm can take many forms, and things that we don't consider to be self-harm can still injure us or be self-destructive. How did the book, film, or TV series depict the different ways we harm ourselves, or don't show care to ourselves?

WHAT PARTS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-HARM ARE SHOWN, AND WHAT IS MISSING?

There is **no single experience of self-harm**, and it can often feel complex or contradictory. It can be helpful to explore what parts of the experience of self-harm were present in the representation and what parts might have been left out.

HOW DID THE STORY END? HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE ENDING?

You might like to think about how the story ended, and whether it felt like there **are certain 'endings' to narratives or experiences of self-harm that are more likely, or that are preferable**

It might be easy to take for granted 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.

WHAT ROLE DID SELF-HARM PLAY IN THE STORY?

Did the story explore self-harm, or was it just there to create drama or shock, or to convey madness, or danger, or even glamour? This can be important because **the way that self-harm is used in fiction might spill over into real life**, and impact how people respond to self-harm. This doesn't mean that that all representations of self-harm have to be in-depth or detailed – sometimes it can be helpful to see self-harm as just something that occurs in the world rather than the focus of the narrative.

WHO IS THE CHARACTER THAT IS SELF-HARMING?

There are **misperceptions about what sort of person usually self-harms**. It can be important to think about what the character who self-harmed was like, and whether their age, race, class, gender, or sexuality surprised you or not. It's always valuable to **take time to consider who was included in this representation**, and who was excluded because this can be part of a larger pattern.

HOW DID THE DEPICTION MAKE YOU FEEL?

Viewing and reading depictions of self-harm can be complex or emotional in ways that are expected or unexpected. The way we respond to self-harm in life and in fiction can be shaped by our assumptions – **you might like to consider what assumptions you have about self-harm, and whether the representation challenged them or reinforced them**.

Thank you for reading our resource. We hope it helps you to think and talk about self-harm with nuance and care – we know the difference those conversations 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