



## Identifying the Causes of Self-Harm In Adolescent Girls in the Socio-Cultural Context of Kermanshah

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Due to the harmful nature of self-harm, studying in this field is especially important in adolescents. The objective of this study was to identify the causes of self-harm in adolescent girls in the socio-cultural context of Kermanshah.

**Methods:** This qualitative and phenomenological study was conducted in 2017 and the participants in the study were 21 adolescent girls with a history of self-harm that were selected using snowball sampling method. Collaizi's seven-step method was used for qualitative analysis of texts.

**Results:** The semantic units of the interviews were categorized into 135 conceptual codes. The themes related to the causes of self-harm were classified into three categories: a. Family-related factors including poor verbal communication among family members, neglect and lack of love, discrimination between the sexes, parental control, type of family upbringing, threats from the mother, fear of the father, being indifferent, and etc., b. Environmental factors and conditions including taking friends as role models, being fashionable, being provoked by sad songs, being influenced by violent movies, death of the relatives, taking role models from cyberspace, etc., and c. Individual Factors including finding grandeur, proof of courage, loneliness, nervousness, interest in experiencing, impulsiveness, relationship with the opposite sex, emotional failure, and drawing attention.

**Conclusion:** The results of this study revealed that adolescents see self-harm as a way to get rid of negative emotions or get back their neglected rights. Having disputes with parents, being overwhelmingly influenced by friends and peers, and having severe mental conditions all play a significant role in causing self-harm.

**Keywords:** Causes of self-harm, Adolescent girls, Socio-cultural context, Kermanshah

### Introduction

Self-harm is a conscious self-destruction that results from an inability to tolerate aggressive impulses and aims at punishing oneself or another. This is often done delicately and with sharp tools on the wrists, arms, and thighs and in some cases on the

chest and abdomen. Most patients with self-harm have personality disorders. Alcohol and drug abuse are common among these patients (1). Concerning self-harm, people fall into three categories: those who inflict deep and dangerous wounds with the intention of committing suicide, people with mental disorders who intend to cut off a

limb, and those causing harms that do not lead to death (2). Many researchers have studied self-harm as a separate behavioral phenomenon rather than as a sign of borderline personality disorder. At present, understanding the basics of self-harm, including its classification, diagnosis, and treatment, is not yet available (3).

The results of a study showed that the prevalence of self-harm among students in Iran is 40% (4). The researches on self-harm were mostly carried out in the context of the military organs and legal medicine centers. Accordingly, in a study conducted on self-harm among soldiers in Tehran, it was found that most self-harm patients have borderline personality disorder (74%) and antisocial personality disorder (8%) (5). Of course, the researches conducted abroad also had young people and adolescents as their study population. The findings of one of these studies indicated that occurrence of self-harm without suicide attempt in the first year of university may be an important sign of possible suicide in the future (6). Although these studies are useful, they belong to specific socio-cultural context of the study. One of the most important studies conducted in Iran on self-harm in juvenile delinquents and adolescents with a history of mood disorders found that adolescents use self-harm as a way to get rid of negative emotions (7). The mentioned research was carried out only on criminals living in correction and rehabilitation centers in Tehran, however, self-harm has become widespread in the general population.

Due to the importance of addressing the issue of self-harm and the lack of systematic research on self-harm in Iran, the need for this research is felt more than ever. Moreover, due to the insufficiency of articles

extracted from the cultural context of the West and since the issue of self-harm cannot be examined outside its context, it seems that the most appropriate way to achieve this objective is conducting research using qualitative method to answer the researcher's question as what could be the underlying causes of adolescent self-harm.

## Methods

This research was conducted in 2017 in Kermanshah using a qualitative method to explore and identify the causes of self-harm. One of the dominant methodologies in the qualitative research approach is phenomenology. Scientific knowledge with a phenomenological view seeks to identify and describe the way in which individuals mentally attach certain meanings to objects in their consciousness (8). The statistical population of the study included all adolescent girls with a history of self-harm living in Kermanshah in 2017 who met the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were willingness to participate in the study, having the ability to communicate, being a resident of Kermanshah, and having a history of self-harm. The exclusion criteria were having memory problems and forgetfulness distinguished by asking a few simple questions (temporal and spatial orientation) consistent with the clinical interview.

The participants were selected using snowball sampling. In-depth one-on-one interviews with participants were used to determine the causes of self-harm. During the interviews, the researcher tried to reflect the content of the statements and use exploratory questions in order to encourage the interviewees to ponder further and understand the hidden meanings in the words

of the participants. Data were documented and edited before analysis (9). After each interview, documentation was done and the recorded sounds were transcribed verbatim. Then, the coding process started. The data were analyzed using Collaizi's seven-step method (10) as follows:

- 1) Careful reading of all statements of the participants: All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In fact, this stage is an attempt to put aside the researcher's personal experiences.
- 2) Extracting important statements: The statements that were directly related to the causes of self-harm were extracted.
- 3) Formulating: The meaning of each important statement was extracted and written in parentheses.
- 4) Data classification: Important statements were classified into larger information units called subcategories.
- 5) More general categories: The results were merged for a comprehensive description and more general categories were created.
- 6) Explicit expression of the basic structure of the phenomenon under study: By formulating the phenomenon under study, a general picture of the intrinsic structure of the self-harm phenomenon was presented.
- 7) Credibility of the findings: The researcher presented the findings to all participants and asked their ideas.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research process, the researcher tried not to allow his previous assumptions to influence the data collection process. The data also were traceable to primary sources. Accordingly, all data were tracked by the researcher on paper and all perceived concepts and causes were linked with specific parts of the data.

The extracted themes were also evaluated by a researcher outside the research team.

## Results

In this study, 21 adolescent girls were interviewed. The most common method of self-harm in these people was scraping the skin with a knife, pencil sharpener, and the sharp edge of the pill and most self-harm was observed in the hand. From the conducted interviews, 135 conceptual codes were extracted, which were classified into 3 categories: a. Family-related factors, b. Environmental factors and conditions, and c. Individual factors (Table 1).

## Discussion

The main themes extracted from the data of the present study were classified into three categories including family-related factors, environmental factors and conditions, and individual factors as the causes of self-harm among adolescent girls. Concerning the first theme, lack of verbal communication or limited verbal communication in the family indicates the cold relationships, lack of emotions, and indifference among family members and parents which can also include the subcategory of lack of love and indifference. As a result, each of these factors, in turn, can cause a person fail in family relationships, feel lonely, and consider self-harm as a good way to end such situation, improve relationships, and gain family love. A number of research findings emphasize that the turbulent family environments and parents who deal with adolescents in discrediting ways prepare the ground for self-harm (11,12).

**Table 1. The main theme and subthemes identified in the study**

**a. Family-related factors**

- Poor verbal communication among family members
  - We do not talk at all in the family, everyone keeps himself to himself.
  - Nobody has anything to do with others in the house.
- Neglect and lack of love
  - My family does not care about me at all, they have no affection and emotion.
  - It was as if I was not in that family at all. They were so cold with me.
- Discrimination between the sexes
  - My mother used to take my brother's side, it used to bother me.
  - According to my mother, my brother was always right in any situation.
- Parental control
  - My mom and dad were always picking on me; harassing me.
  - I wanted to wear loose clothing, but my family always objected to my clothing and did not allow me to do so.
- Type of family upbringing
  - My father brought me up violent like a boy since I was a child.
  - My dad wanted me to be a boy and he treated me like a boy.
- Threats from the mother
  - My mother found out about my friend and told me she would tell my father that I had a boyfriend.
  - Mom said "I'll get you for that, your father will punish you".
- Fear of the father
  - If my dad found out I had a boyfriend, he would kill me.
  - I was very scared of my dad's reaction, I wanted not to think about it, but my dad kept coming in my mind.
- Being indifferent
  - I had no feelings for my family members and I did not talk to them at all as if I had to live with them.
  - We did not talk at home; our behavior did not matter to our parents.

**b. Environmental factors and conditions**

- Taking friends as role models
  - Because most of my friends had self-harmed, I was tempted.
  - My friends used to say that self-harm calms you down.
  - All the friends praised it with gusto. They all had harmed themselves except me.
- Being fashionable
  - Everyone says self-harm is a high-class act, everyone does it these days and if someone does not, they say he or she is a low person.
- Being provoked by sad songs
  - I listened to the song and fell to thinking about self-harm.
  - I was upset when I listened to a sad song. I always said what a life this is.
- Being influenced by violent movies
  - I always watched violent movies and put myself in the shoes of the leading actor of the movie.
  - Sometimes, I would get angry for no reason and I would do the things in those movies.
- Death of the relatives
  - I loved my aunt so much, I could not believe she wasn't here anymore. I was so restless.
  - My uncle died ... it was hard for me to bear. I could not stand it. I could not believe it at all.
- Taking role models from cyberspace
  - I saw it on the Internet. They posted a photo of their hands being cut on Instagram.
  - The news said self-harm has increased a lot, especially among the girls in Tehran.
  - They said that all girls in Tehran do this. I saw their photos on my phone with their hands full of scars.

**c. Individual factors**

- Finding grandeur
  - I wanted everyone to show me and say she is the one who has self-harmed.
  - It was regarded as something high-class if everyone knew you had beaten yourself, they would say what a clever girl.
- Loneliness
  - I was very lonely. I had no one.
  - I wanted to have someone to talk with and get things off my chest.
- Nervousness
  - I was under a lot of pressure, I did not know how to handle it.
  - When I did something wrong, I was afraid the others would find out what I did and I would get very nervous.
- Interest in experiencing
  - I wanted to experience it, I said it must feel good.
  - They said self-harm is very enjoyable, I said I have to see what it is like.
- Impulsiveness
  - I'm a short-tempered person. When I got into a fight with my dad, I suddenly cut my hand.
  - I do not know why it hit me to harm myself; I did it suddenly without thinking.
- Relationship with the opposite sex
  - I was on bad terms with my boyfriend and I couldn't stand it. I wanted him to know that I was upset that I had bothered him.
  - I broke up with my boyfriend, but, all the time, he was threatening to tell that to my family. So, I harmed myself so that he would let it go.
- Drawing attention
  - I wanted everyone to pay attention to me and talk about me.
  - I wanted my family to pay attention to me and love me.

Another subcategory that is also evident in the culture of people in Kermanshah is discrimination between boys and girls, to the extent that women who give birth to boys are highly valued by their husbands. By engaging in self-harm, the person is somehow protesting to make parents aware of their misbehavior. The subcategory of the type of upbringing can also complement the fact that parents raise their daughters like boys and bring them up violently which affects the person's mood and leads to committing self-harm by choosing the wrong patterns and imitating them. Another influential subcategory is parental control. The family restricts one's freedom to the point where one sees self-harm as a way to get rid of these pressures and persuade the family to reduce the intensity of their control.

The other subcategories are being threatened by the mother and fear of the father. The structure of power is very important in the culture of the people in this region and patriarchy has been maintained in families over time with the father at the top of the power hierarchy, which in some cases becomes a negative tool for controlling and enticing family members. As a result, a person commits self-harm out of fear of her father's reaction to her misbehavior with the hope that this action will reduce the severity of his punishment or scare the mother not to threaten her again.

The second category indicates the impact of environmental factors on the individual to attempt self-harm. Adolescents learn self-harm by observing this behavior in peers and imitating them. Taking friends as role models, being exposed to self-harm scenes in the media, talking about self-harm with peers, and having friends who have self-harmed are among the predictors of self-harm in adolescents (13). The prevalence of

self-harm, especially among adolescents, leads people to believe that self-harm is so-called fashion and if someone does not self-harm, she will not be accepted. Research has shown that people with low self-esteem are more prone to self-harm (14) and this in turn can be the result of discrimination between girls and boys. In addition, stimulating music and movies can target a person's mood. Researchers in the field of self-harm have considered the prevalence of such behaviors in the media as one of the reasons for the increase in self-harming behaviors (15).

The death of the loved ones is also one of the most difficult events that a person faces in life, to the extent that many people cannot withstand such pressure. Since self-harm activates physiological relief mechanisms, the bereaved teenagers self-harm to alleviate the pain and suffering caused by the loss of the loved ones. In explaining the subcategory of taking role models from cyberspace, it can be stated that when a teenager encounters images of people who have self-harmed in cyberspace or listens to the words of these people, she is influenced by them and somehow imitates them and in fact, observational learning takes place. It should be noted that the likelihood of turning this learning into behavior is high.

The third category explains individual factors including finding grandeur in the eyes of others and drawing attention. By so doing, one will become famous and everyone will remember her as a brave person. Of course, some people use self-harm to get the family's attention in order to receive their love and notice and get rid of the feeling of loneliness. Self-harm is a cry from the self-harming person to attract attention (16).

Inability to manage emotions of anger and



frustration was also an important subcategory mentioned in most interviews and self-harm was used as a way to calm down proving the lack of problem-solving skills in these people. This finding is consistent with the self-harm emotional regulation model. Self-harm prevents unwanted emotions, because after self-harm, the person experiences a feeling of peace of heart. As a result, the heart rate decreases and negative memories are suppressed (17). Another personality trait of people who have self-harmed is their impulsiveness in such a way that they get impatient with the behaviors of parents and others and commit self-harm to prove their point or to protest. They consider self-harm a way for others to surrender and let them achieve what they want.

Among the interviews, self-harm was found to be done with the aim of showing love, expressing regret, or controlling the relationship by scratching the skin superficially and sometimes cutting the vein. These adolescents consider self-harm as one of the most important ways to influence others and convey their message so that they can control their romantic relationship (18). Because of this, after a while, people lose the ability to control emotions and solve problems logically, and self-harm becomes the main and at the same time the most inefficient way of maintaining communication.

One of the limitations of this study was the lack of access to statistics on self-harming behaviors in Iranian adolescents. Thus, caution should be taken in using the findings of this study concerning the restrictions on sample gender, location, culture, and methods of data collection. To prevent self-

harm in clinical and non-clinical situations, teaching the skills to accept and manage negative emotions and choose good friends, resolve disputes and conflicts with family members, and express love in the family can be effective.

## Conclusion

Based on the result of this study, getting rid of unpleasant emotional states in the family and the pressure of annoying and unpleasant environmental conditions, being under the impact of interpersonal and peer group relationships, and factors related to oneself, such as gaining a position of power and attracting attention were three main causes of adolescent self-harm. The important point is that there is no single cause for a major phenomenon such as self-harm and this point is confirmed by the results of the present study. To spread knowledge about self-harm and help people who deliberately self-harm, it is suggested that similar researches be carried out in different cultures and on boys as well so that one can look at the phenomenon of self-harm from different cultural perspectives.

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