

Sample

ALUMINA

MOVING TOWARDS A LIFE
FREE FROM SELF-HARM

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Youthscape



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book draws together the work of many people who have worked in the Alumina team over many years and we are indebted to all of their collective contributions. Special mention goes to the inimitable and extraordinary Jo Fitzsimmons.

We have also learnt so much from all the amazing young people who have been part of Alumina online groups in the past decade, and especially in the last 3 years. It is a privilege in every way to walk the road to recovery with you for a while.

We are indebted to Beverley Samways who read all of our material and advised us on how to make it more accessible for neurodiverse young people.

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SESSION 1:

HOW DID I GET HERE?

“MENTAL PAIN IS LESS DRAMATIC THAN PHYSICAL PAIN, BUT IS MORE COMMON AND ALSO MORE HARD TO BEAR. THE FREQUENT ATTEMPT TO CONCEAL MENTAL PAIN INCREASES THE BURDEN: IT IS EASIER TO SAY MY TOOTH IS ACHING THAN MY HEART IS BREAKING.”

C S LEWIS

DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE?

LET'S MAKE A START.

Think about what has made you begin this book. Colour in all the ones which apply:

- Someone suggested it
- I want to stop self-harming
- Other people want me to stop self-harming
- I need some other strategies
- I want to manage my feelings and emotions more
- I don't like feeling the way I do
- Someone else is pressuring me to try this
- Your reason

It's important to be honest as we start this journey. Some days we might feel really motivated to stop self-harming, and other days we might wonder why it's such a big deal. You might feel like it bothers other people more than you.

WHY DO PEOPLE SELF-HARM?

Some people know why they self-harm and some people don't. And some people have a bit of an idea but aren't sure. (And all of that is normal.) Do you know why you started self-harming?

Self-harm is often a coping strategy. It's a way of managing feelings that feel painful, difficult, even overwhelming. They might come from experiences in our past, or things going on right now, or a mixture of both. If you've been self-harming for a long time you might feel like it started that way but now it's just something you want to do. Self-harming hurts you and anyone who cares about you. We think there's a better way of living.

THE STUFF WE CARRY AROUND

TO HELP YOU THINK ABOUT WHAT HAS BROUGHT YOU TO THIS PLACE IN YOUR LIFE, AND WHAT FEELS HARD RIGHT NOW, WE WANT YOU TO USE THE DRAWING ON THE NEXT PAGE TO THINK ABOUT THE STUFF YOU CARRY AROUND WITH YOU. WE DON'T MEAN PHYSICAL THINGS LIKE YOUR PHONE AND KEYS, WE MEAN THE THINGS OTHER PEOPLE CAN'T SEE, LIKE YOUR FEELINGS AND YOUR MEMORIES. KEEP READING AND WE'LL EXPLAIN!

When people look at you, there is a lot of stuff they don't see. They don't know what you've been through. They don't know how you feel about stuff. They don't know about your dreams and hopes. They don't know about the important people in your life. Even though these things can't be seen, we have to carry them anyway, and they can weigh us down emotionally.

We want you to look at the bags the person is carrying and label or decorate them to represent the memories, relationships and experiences that you carry around with you – the things that have made you into the person you are today. There will be good and bad things that have made you who you are – people who support you as well as people who have hurt you.

THE STUFF I CARRY AROUND

Share your picture with someone you trust; talk about what has brought you to this point in your life.



EXTRA: THE TEENAGE BRAIN

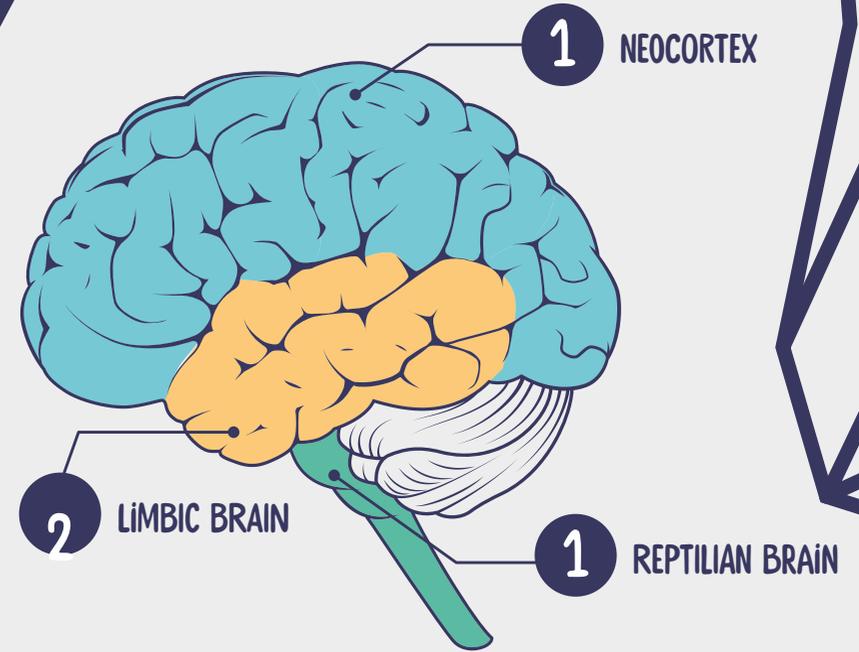
ARE YOU READY TO GEEK OUT ON WHAT'S HAPPENING IN YOUR BRAIN RIGHT NOW?

Your brain is changing and growing in phenomenal ways in adolescence – the process won't really settle down till your mid 20s. That has a huge impact on how you're feeling and how well you are able to cope. So let's think about a couple of the main changes going on right now.

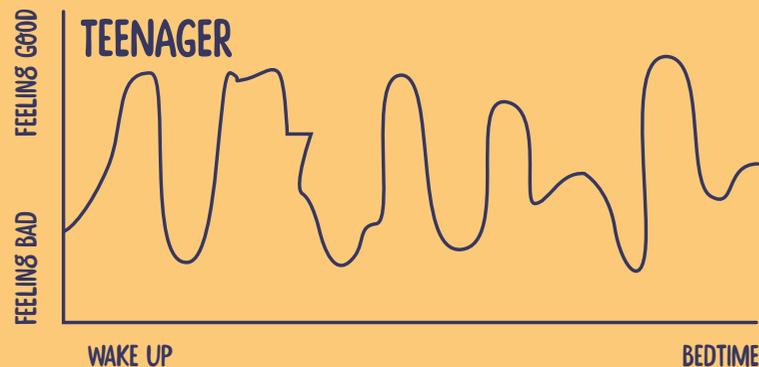
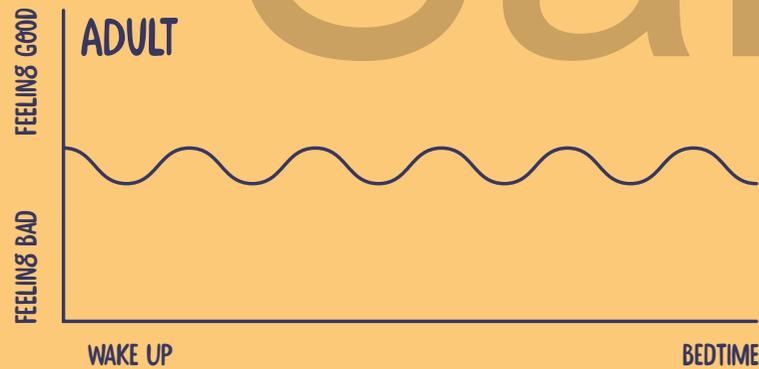
As a teenager, you have lots of hormones moving through your body that are helping you change from a child to an adult. These are also making your emotions more extreme.

At the same time, the parts of your brain that help significantly with making sense of emotions (called the temporal lobes) are still under-developed. This will become less extreme over time but for now it's a real challenge to make sense of and manage such intense feelings.

Second, the part of your brain that does your thinking, planning, prioritising and decision-making, and which helps make choices about how to respond to different emotions, is still in development. It's called the neocortex or thinking brain (and we are the only animals that have it).



AN AVERAGE DAY...



In the 1960s, a neuroscientist called Paul MacLean developed the Triune Brain Theory, which basically looks at three distinct regions of the brain shown in the diagram.

The first bit of your brain to develop is labelled the reptilian brain. It keeps you alive by keeping you breathing, digesting, and all those other fundamental bodily processes.

The next part to develop is the limbic brain, also known as the emotional or mammalian brain. If you can imagine a toddler having a tantrum you get a good picture of how the emotional brain is at work from very early on in our lives. Toddlers have hardly any filter for their feelings. One minute they're on the floor screaming, the next minute they're giggling happily because you gave them the ice-cream.

But as we get older, we develop the ability to manage our emotions as our neocortex develops.

The final part of the brain to develop in humans is known as the neocortex or thinking brain. It's the part of the brain that helps us to make plans, to think through options and to make decisions about what we do in response to our feelings. Although it starts developing earlier, the final part of the neocortex (which is known as the prefrontal cortex) isn't fully developed until we're at least 25 (and can keep developing well beyond this point). It's still under construction whilst you're a teenager.

As the neocortex develops it also increases our sensitivity to risk – so when we're younger we're much more likely to be comfortable with more dangerous behaviours. It's one of the reasons why teenagers (who are still developing that part of the brain) are renowned for doing things adults consider reckless.

If that all sounds like reasons why everything is especially hard right now, the good news is that because of how your brain is growing and developing so much in adolescence, it's primed for learning new habits and ways of coping, so you actually have a headstart on adults.

Lots of people write about the teenage brain but if you want to know more, we recommend *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain* by Daniel M. Siegel

SESSION 2:

SELF-HARM AND ME

“THE FIRST QUESTION
- ALWAYS - IS
NOT ‘WHY THE
ADDICTION?’ BUT
‘WHY THE PAIN?’”

GABOR MATÉ

EVERY PERSON IS UNIQUE.
YOUR STORY IS DIFFERENT
FROM ANYONE ELSE'S.

WE'RE GOING TO LOOK IN THIS SESSION AT WHAT KINDS OF THINGS LEAD INDIVIDUALS TO SELF-HARM, AND HOW IT BECOMES ADDICTIVE. THE ADDICTION CYCLE IS SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T JUST APPLY TO SELF-HARM BUT TO ALL KINDS OF OTHER HARMFUL BEHAVIOURS. BUT WE ARE ALSO GOING TO THINK ABOUT THE VERY PERSONAL WAY THAT YOU EXPERIENCE IT.

Let's start with triggers. A trigger is a connection: something that happens, or that you hear or see or remember, which connects with something painful inside you. And that connection can feel overwhelming.

What kinds of things do you think might trigger other people to self-harm?
Think about past experiences, feelings, relationships....



You might want to circle any that apply to you.



Sometimes you might know exactly what has triggered you to self-harm in a particular moment. Sometimes you might think there wasn't a reason. But it doesn't come from nowhere. Part of the journey towards recovery involves becoming a kind of detective, looking for clues about what you were going through or feeling before you self-harmed. How curious are you about what you're going through?

ON THE NEXT PAGE IS AN IMAGE OF THE SELF-HARM ADDICTION CYCLE. LET'S TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF IT.

It starts with a trigger, a connection. Something that feels really painful that makes you feel like you need to self-harm.

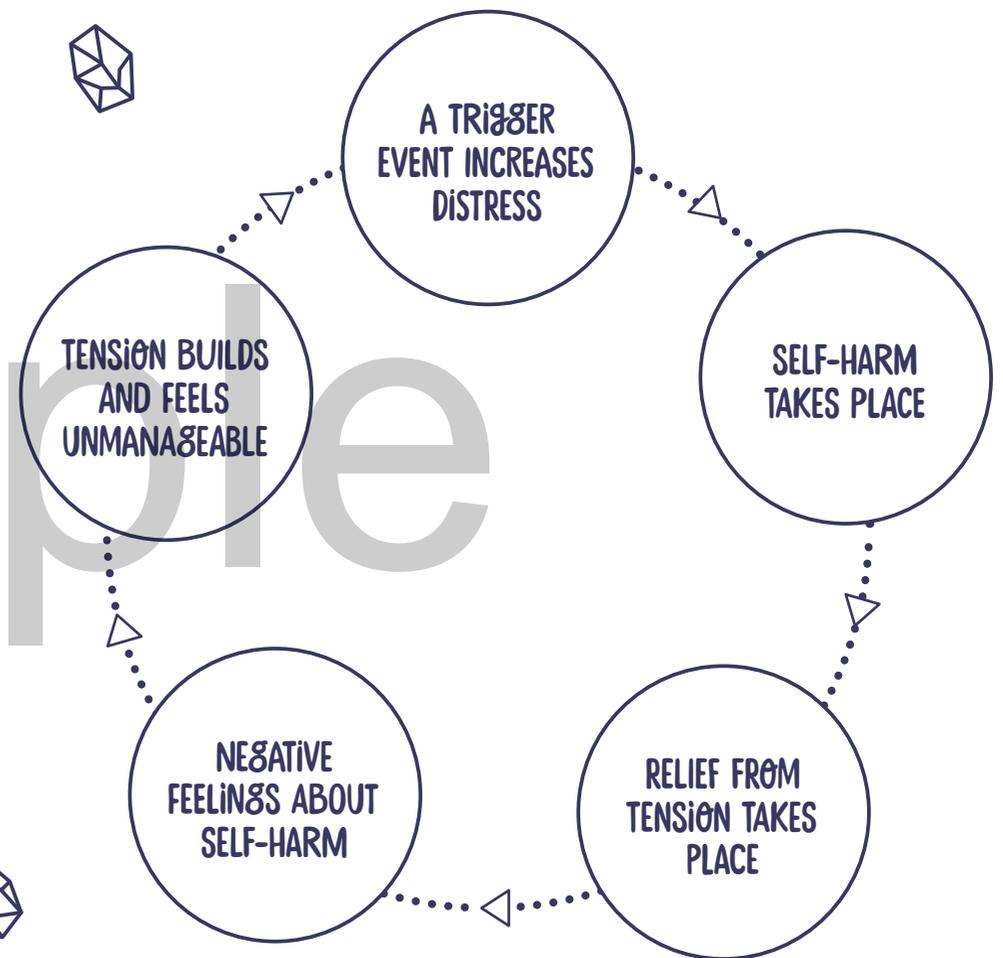
After you self-harm, you probably feel different. And that's why you do it. You might feel relief or release. Some people who felt numb before suddenly feel more alive. Some people who felt overwhelmed suddenly feel calm and peaceful.

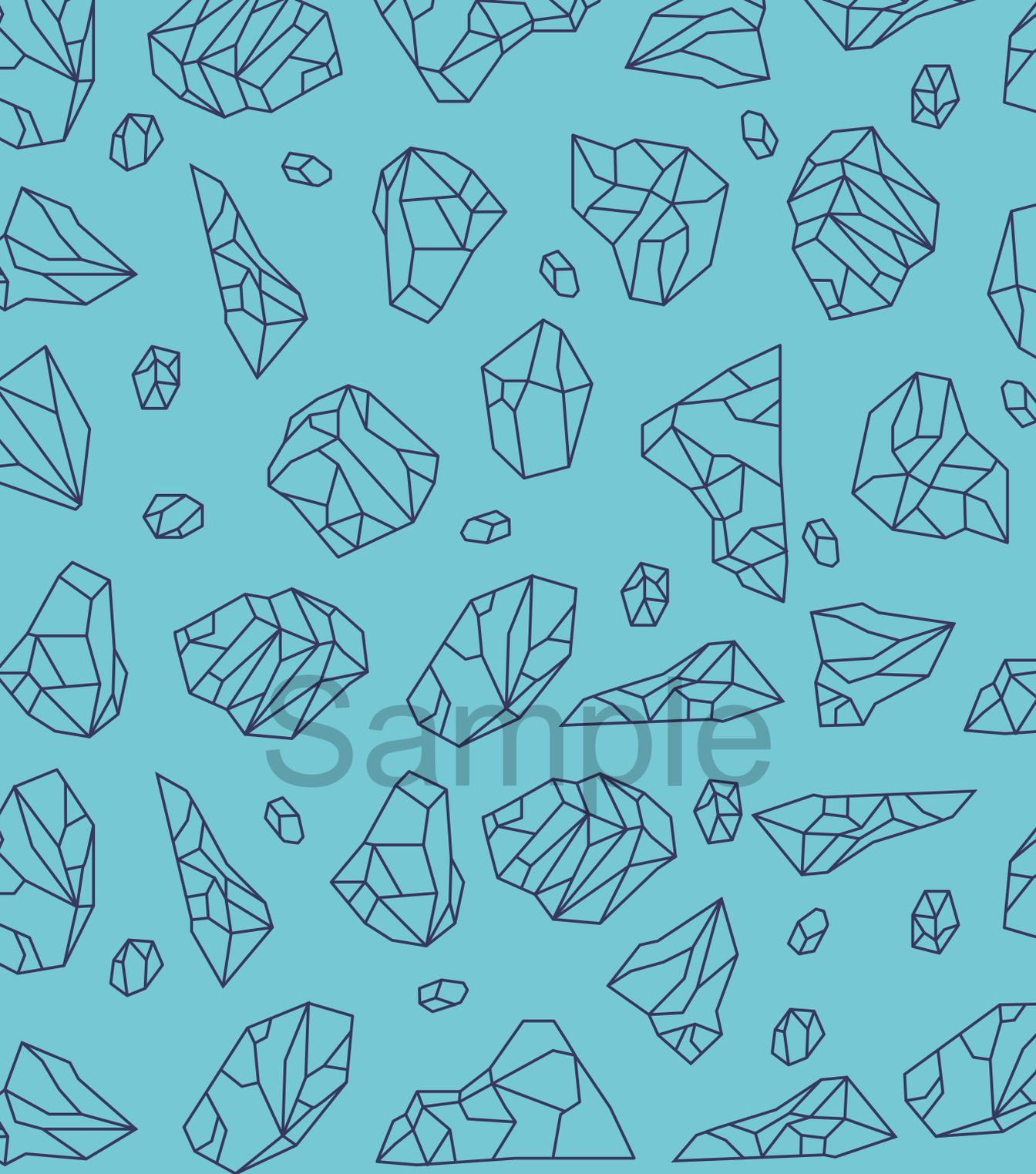
The different feeling after self-harming might last for a moment, or it might last longer. But it doesn't last forever. Usually, at some point later, difficult feelings start again. You might feel angry with yourself, or ashamed. Maybe you feel guilty or scared of what someone else's reaction is going to be.

And then life continues and there may be all kinds of things going on in your life which feel hard or which have a negative effect on you. You can maybe cope for a while but gradually it just builds and builds until something pushes you over the edge – a trigger.

And the cycle starts again.

Have a look at the drawing and think about which parts of the cycle you recognise. There might be parts that you don't recognise – and that's also ok. Try to add in some words that make sense of the cycle for you – they might be your specific triggers, or how you feel after you harm, or the difficult things that build up in life that increase the mental pressure on you.





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