**Title:** The role of primary care supporting older adults who self-harm: a qualitative study  
**Authors:** Troya, M. Isabela; Chew-Graham, Carolyn; Babatunde, Opeyemi; Bartlam, Bernadette; Mughal, Faraz; Dikomitis, Lisa

# **Abstract**

## *Background*

Self-harm and suicide are major public health concerns. Self-harm is the strongest risk factor for suicide, with amongst the highest suicide rates reported in older populations. Little is known about how older adults access care following self-harm, but they are in frequent contact with primary care.

## *Aim*

Identify and explore barriers and facilitators for accessing care within primary care for older adults who self-harm.

## *Design and Setting*

An exploratory qualitative methods study using semi-structured interviews with older adults and third sector workers in England. Older adults invited to participate in one follow-up interview.

## *Method*

Interviews occurred between September 2017 and September 2018. These were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and data analysed thematically. A Patient Public Involvement Engagement group contributed to study design, data analysis and interpretation. Keele University granted ethical approval.

## *Results*

Twenty-four interviews with nine older adults and seven support workers, including eight follow-up interviews with older adults. Three themes emerged: i) help-seeking decision factors; ii) sources of support; iii) barriers and facilitators to accessing primary care.

## *Conclusion*

Despite older adults’ frequent contact with general practitioners, barriers to primary care existed which included stigma, previous negative experiences and practical barriers such as mobility restrictions. Older adults’ help-seeking behaviour was facilitated by previous positive experiences. Primary care is a potential avenue for delivering effective self-harm support, management and suicide prevention in older adults. Given the complex nature of self-harm, there is a need for primary care to work with other sectors to provide comprehensive support to older adults who self-harm.

**THE ROLE OF PRIMARY CARE SUPPORTING OLDER ADULTS WHO SELF-HARM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

# **Introduction**

Self-harm is a major public health concern and the leading risk factor for suicide [1]. Defined by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as “any act of self-poisoning or self-injury, irrespective of motivation” [1], self-harm prevention and management are NHS priorities [2]. While amongst older populations self-harm rates are not as high when compared to younger populations, the subsequent risk of suicide is higher [3-4]. Furthermore, increased treatment costs exist when treating older adults’ self-harm due to complications caused by comorbidities [5]. Our previous work suggests self-harm holds several functions for older adults and suicidal intent is not the only reason they engage in such behaviour, as traditionally reported [4]. Accounts of older adults using self-harm as a coping mechanism throughout the life-course suggest the need for a more nuanced approach to intervening and providing support than one principally focused on suicide prevention.

Older adults are in frequent contact with primary care due to comorbid health conditions, and thus general practitioners (GP) may potentially offer support and management to older adults with self-harm behaviour [3-4]. NICE guidance [1] suggests multi-agency approaches to self-harm management, including support from the health sector and liaison with other agencies such as the social and third sector. Yet little is known about the avenues older adults find acceptable and/or take when asking for self-harm support. In addition to older adults’ contact with primary care, individuals also access the third sector in order to receive mental healthcare, including for self-harm behaviour [6]. Moreover, amongst older adults, there is evidence that the third sector has a potential role in providing care-coordination for older adults [7].

Existing literature exploring self-harm in older adults is mostly limited to quantitative designs [4] yet accounts of lived experiences are essential to understanding complex behaviours such as help-seeking amongst older populations. This study explores access to care for older adults who self-harm and the implications for primary care. We identify and explore the barriers and facilitators to primary care from the perspectives of older adults with self-harm history and from third sector support workers with experiences of working with them.

# **Methods**

A qualitative methods approach, using in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore self-harm in older adults. This study was carried out in accordance with the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ). Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Panel at Keele University (Ref: ERP1333).

## *Setting and participants*

Research participants were (i) older adults (aged >60 years) who disclosed recent self-harm acts as defined by NICE [1] and, (ii) third sector support workers (defined as support workers working at a third sector organisation, - either self-harm or older adults support group) with experience supporting older adults who self-harm.

## *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited in England using various strategies including: third sector groups, social media, online support groups and regional advertisement. Purposive sampling was applied. For older adults contacted through the third sector, initial contact was made with the group’s manager to inform them about the study and ascertain if they would be willing to share the study’s information with members. Where the group’s manager found it appropriate, IT, a mental health doctoral researcher, visited the third sector group to provide details of the study in person. For support workers contacted through third sector groups, the same process was followed. Contact with older adults and support workers through social media, online support groups and regional advertisement was made by posting study recruitment posters as summarised in Figure 1. After confirming eligibility criteria, participants were supplied with information sheets explaining study details. Face-to-face interviews were arranged at a time and venue preferred by participants (Keele University, third sector venue, participants’ home), with the option of telephone interviews.

**INSERT FIGURE 1**

## *Data collection*

Interviews took place between September 2017 to September 2018 and were audio-recorded. Alongside collecting field notes, an interview topic guide, developed from the literature and with the advice of the Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) group, was used. A separate topic guide was used for older adults and support workers, but they both collected participants’ socio-demographic data, information about self-harm history (of either older adult participants or older adults supported by support workers), motivations and access to care. Participants were encouraged to elaborate as extensively as possible on their accounts [8-10]. Follow-up interviews were offered to older adults given the sensitive nature of the topic. In doing so, participants had time to reflect on their initial interview and make decisions on whether or not they wished to expand or amend anything they might have referred to. It was also intended to allow time to establish rapport [10] as well as to further explore emerging themes. IT conducted all interviews.

## *Ethical considerations*

Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the start of each interview and checked again at the end. All participants had the opportunity to ask questions prior signing the consent form. For follow-up interviews, participants’ informed consent was again separately obtained.

## *Analysis*

Thematic analysis using principles of constant comparison was used to analyse the data following an inductive approach [11-12]. Software NVivo11 was used to facilitate data analysis. Initial analysis was conducted within each participant group, with separate coding themes and categories created for each. After coding, creating and revising the initial themes, themes were compared and contrasted across both datasets in order to integrate the overall findings. Analysis followed an iterative process, where each interview was coded prior new data generation. Initial codes were further explored in subsequent interviews. Data saturation [13] was reached when analysis indicated no new themes from both participant groups and thus recruitment ceased.

Figure 2 provides a summary of data analysis. IT led the process, with all transcripts independently coded by at least two authors. Coding and emerging themes were then discussed amongst five authors, each contributing their disciplinary perspectives to deepen the interpretation. This multi-disciplinary process, alongside input from the PPIE group described below, contributed to trustworthiness of the data [14-15].

**INSERT FIGURE 2**

## *Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement*

This study was conducted in collaboration with a PPIE group that contributed to the development and refinement of recruitment strategies, analysis of data and dissemination plan [16]. All PPIE members were 60 years and older and included older adults with self-harm history, carers and third sector workers. The group was consulted in five occasions throughout the three-year duration of the research.

# **Results**

Twenty-four interviews were conducted with sixteen participants: nine older adults and seven support workers. Eight older adults consented to a follow-up interview. All interviews lasted from 28 to 129 minutes. Table 1 provides a summary of socio-demographic and other characteristics of participants. All older adults had comorbid physical and mental health problems, and over half (*n=*4) of the support workers had previous self-harm history. Three major themes were identified throughout participants’ accounts: i) help-seeking decision factors on; ii) sources of support; iii) barriers and facilitators to accessing primary care. We present details of these using illustrative quotations, before turning to look at the implications for intervention, management and support.

**INSERT TABLE 1**

## *Help-seeking decision factors*

Older adults experienced self-harm throughout different stages of the life-course, however it was often hidden:

*Obviously, it [self-harm in older adults] does happen, but it's hidden.*

*-*Male older adult, aged 60 [M3]

Both participant groups mentioned older adults’ deciding to seek help during different periods in the life-course. However, these decisions were seen as difficult, sometimes occurring months or years after starting self-harm behaviour. Experiencing shame due to self-harm was seen by both groups as a key deterrent in accessing support, and they linked it to the stigma associated with mental health and self-harm, which they perceived as accentuated further amongst older adults:

*It’s harder for older people to talk about their mental health. You can imagine more so with self-harm.*

*-*Female support worker, aged 40 [F11]

*It’s just that you are ashamed of some of it (self-harm), so it’s harder to talk about it and ask for help.*

-Female older adult, aged 60 [F3]

However, older adults and support worker participants identified self-harm behaviour as reaching a point where it was out of control and was no longer serving as a coping mechanism. Once this point was reached, older adults made the decision to seek help, recognising they needed support.

*I think a lot of people only turn to help if it's sorta uh, when it gets out of control, so that I suppose, eventually, they just reach out for some help.*

*-*Female support worker, aged 49 [F10]

*It wasn’t that I wanted help, I needed [emphasis] help, I couldn’t deal with it any longer.*

-Female older adult, aged 72 [F2]

## *Sources of support*

There were different avenues, both in the formal and informal sector, older adults used to access support for their self-harm. Whilst there were periods when older adults lived with self-harm behaviour without accessing support, when they did so they used the different avenues as summarised in Figure 3. These avenues were inter-connected and used inter-changeably through different stages of the help-seeking process, depending on needs at particular moments. Furthermore, older adults relied on self-management strategies when waiting to receive care.

**INSERT FIGURE 3**

Both participant groups mentioned the third sector as a commonly used source of support, particularly self-harm support groups, where they could access peer support as well as help from support workers. Over half of the support workers reported self-harm history which made the support given to and experienced by older adults more valuable:

*[Support worker] is brilliant ‘cause you can contact him anytime, and he’s always there. You can talk to him, he understands as he’s experienced it himself. All members say that, it’s real support. I only met the group via [organisation], otherwise you’re on your own.*

-Female older adult, aged 62 [F6]

The majority of older adults recounted how they were referred to the third sector by healthcare professionals. Similarly, support workers narrated how the majority of people accessing support from the third sector had been referred by GPs.

*GPs have rung me in the past so they could refer their patients to our group.*

-Male support worker, aged 50 [M5]

Primary care was also commonly mentioned as an avenue for self-harm support, with participants explaining that GPs offered support and, in some instances, helped them manage their self-harm. However, this support was not exclusive to self-harm management but also focused on treating comorbid conditions. The complex nature of the consultations and its implications for help-seeking can be seen within the context of both barriers and facilitators.

## *Barriers and facilitators to accessing primary care support*

Different barriers to accessing primary care support existed for older adults who self-harm. As noted previously, feelings of shame and stigma were commonly described, leading older people to live with self-harm in secret, prolonging or delaying the process of help-seeking:

*They'll [older adults] mention the physical health to the GP but won't always mention their self-harm or mental health.*

-Female support worker, aged 40 [F11]

Even after older adults made the decision to seek help, stigma associated with self-harm could still be present and act as a barrier to accessing care.

*I felt embarrassed because of me age, I didn’t wanna ask for help. I’m thinking it’s girls that do it, 16, 17 year olds you know and they’re self-harming and here is me you know, I should know better.*

-Male older adult, aged 67 [M1]

Furthermore, older adults described GPs lack of interest to self-harm in older adults, reflecting stigma associated to self-harm by clinicians.

*You tell them [doctors] and they're not interested about self-harm. I’ve seen it myself, anyone that comes in with mental health problems they’re just dismissed. It’s still something not taken seriously, like it will go away or grow out of it. When the truth is, you don’t grow out of it if you don’t receive the help..*

-Female older adult, aged 62 [F6]

For some older adults, this reflected a lack of trust in their GPs’ ability to help:

*Most GPs don't know how to deal with it, much less from an older adult, and much less from a functioning adult.*

-Male older adult, aged 60 [M3]

In addition to perceptions that GPs lack expertise, older adults often felt their encounters with GPs were superficial, and described support as mostly pharmacological, with provision of psychological therapies not common practice. This was despite the high level of GP involvement reflected in frequent and regular consultations:

*Well, I got the medication from my GP and it was a case of seeing him once a week to see how it was affecting me. Now I get a review every 6 months.*

-Female older adult, aged 72 [F2]

Such treatments were viewed as insufficient to deal with the complexities of self-harm:

*There are lots of doctors that just want to pill pop [snaps fingers], here have a pill. That just masks it. You’re just skimming over it, you're not talking to them. There’s things in people's heads that a pill doesn't take. And you know some doctors don't understand mental health, don't understand self-harm. And there is people out there that take overdoses and they're not given the correct support.*

*-*Female support worker, aged 46 [F7]

This sense of superficial engagement on the part of GPs could deepen feelings of personal inadequacy and illegitimacy:

*You're just a number. Once you're out of the bed or consultation room, someone else is gonna come, so to the nurses and doctors you’re just a number.*

-Male older adult, aged 67 [M1]

Linked to this, some older adults’ accounts of their experiences with GPs were of a predominant focus on treating physical wounds resulting from self-harm, and their overall physical health, reflecting a prioritisation of the physical over mental health.

*He [GP] just kept looking at his watch. I thought, I don't want that doctor again, because all he was interested was his watch. He was interested in my physical ability. He was interested in mending me physically but not mentally. And I've found that with a lot of the doctors. You try and tell them you need help mentally but all they see and care is your physical abilities.*

-Female older adult, 60 [F6]

This prioritisation of the physical over the mental could also be on the part of the older person themselves:

*[M2]: I do see me GP frequently but it's mainly for other things like blood tests and these sorts of things.*

*Interviewer: is there any reason why you don't talk about it with your GP?*

*[M2]: I've got so many other things that need to be checked, there just wouldn't be time*

-Male older adult, 61 [M2]

Furthermore, this could be deepened by gender attitudes to health seeking more generally:

*As a male I tend to not go to the GP. It's kind of being very appreciative of the NHS. I'm not someone to call the GP all the time and kinda go like, oh I wanna tell you this.*

-Male older adult, aged 60 [M3]

When offered referral by GPs, older adults described the support and treatment received consisting of short-term interventions, which left them feeling frustrated and discouraged them from seeking further help:

*They'll do something like 6-week counselling. But if at the end of the 6 weeks you still feel you're struggling, then surely they should do something have another source of support. I remember being told well we've done the course, there's nothing else we can do, uhm if you're not feeling better, that's your problem.*

-Female older adult, aged 65 [F4]

Furthermore, support for self-harm was described as difficult to acesss as it was not seen as an urgent priority. Whilst some older adults spoke of an overemphasis on their physical health, some also experienced difficulties in accessing help at crisis points.

*I cut my stomach and it was really quite bad. I phoned my GP, and nobody would see me, eventhough I had a priority plan. They said, come here tomorrow. I said, I need to see somebody now and they said, well we've got no appointments. So I phoned my CPN and she said, well this priority care planning isn't working, and she phoned them, and they called me straight away.*

-Female older adult, aged 65 [F4]

According to older adults, mental healthcare was only provided for those who were very ill, as opposed to those who were not but were still in need of care.

*I can't see the point in it. They turn up and then they don't do it.They don't do anything that [it] says on the letter unless you're absolutely completely and utterly mentally ill. Which is fair enough for those who are like that.. Because they're so stretched, they don't do much for you unless you're absolutely crawling up the walls.*

-Female older adult, aged 62 [F1]

Lastly, older adults described practical barriers such as difficulties in travelling. Where people had mobility difficulties, it was not easy for them to travel independently, particularly in bad weather, which could have cost implications:

*It costs me £20 to get there which is a lot of money. So yeah, I just have to have to sit tight and wait for the snow to go. And then of course, you've got hospital appointments.*

-Female older adult, aged 62 [F1]

These barriers to accessing support often resulted in older people seeking support elsewhere.

*He [older adult] was looking for some support because the GP basically didn't know what to do, as is the case with many health professionals.*

-Male support worker, aged 50 [M5]

Older adults encountered several barriers to obtaining support for managing their self-harm, including feelings of shame, gender and age attitudes, perceptions of competency on the part of GPs, prioritisation of physical over mental health needs, legitimacy in help-seeking and physical barriers such as transport. Worries about stigma were an overarching barrier to accessing help.

Both participant groups also identified facilitators when receiving self-harm support in primary care. Empathy was one of the most frequently mentioned facilitators as well as reliability and continuity given by healthcare professionals, which could legitimise people’s help-seeking:

*She [GP] was real for start. I felt as I was gonna to see somebody I could talk to, as opposed as to somebody that was going to sit behind a desk and talk to me. As well, I didn’t feel like a burden.*

-Female older adult, aged 65 [F4]

Taking the condition seriously conveyed respect:

*You could see how they treated her, and they were absolutely amazing they just treated her so well. She was treated so respectfully.*

*-*Female support worker, aged 49 [F10]

Linked to this, some older adults described the high-impact from positive experiences of support from their GP:

*I have to say my GP has been fantastic, she's very good. Very caring, she listens. Which is, you know, some of them don't But she's been fantastic. She’s given me all the literature for [local self-harm support group]. The last time when I went off, that's when she said we need to change your medication, you've been on them too long. She’s very thorough. I couldn't have asked for anything better.*

-Female older adult, aged 62 [F5]

Furthermore, older adults identified the importance of having regular and ongoing support as a facilitator to receiving care:

*It’s the ongoing support. You've always got somebody you can contact. This ongoing support is really, really helpful.*

-Female older adult, aged 62 [F5]

Lastly, availability of accessible facilities made it easier for older adults to access support for their self-harm. Figure 4 summarises the different barriers and facilitators to accessing primary care support for older adults with self-harm behaviour.

**INSERT FIGURE 4**

# **Discussion**

## *Summary*

Older adults who self-harm may have comorbid and complex health conditions, which results in contact with primary care. However, help-seeking was often delayed because of feelings of shame caused by stigma associated with self-harm. Older adults and support workers identified continuity, regular support and empathetic healthcare professionals as facilitators for accessing primary care. Alongside shame and stigma experiences, older adults’ own attitudes to primary care acted as barriers to accessing care. Mobility restrictions and transport difficulties were also common barriers to accessing care. Lastly, participants experienced an over-medicalised perspective on self-harm management and support and reported a predominant GP interest on supporting physical health over a combined physical-mental health approach. However, this was often driven by older adults’ own expectations.

## *Strength and limitations*

This is the first study exploring older adults’ experiences accessing care for self-harm behaviour. Using qualitative methods, this study provides first-hand lived-experience accounts of older adults who self-harm. Through an ongoing collaboration and consultation with a PPIE group, this study included patient perspectives in the elaboration of the study design, data analysis and interpretation, a further strength of this study.

This study has limitations. First, the small number of participants included may be considered a limitation. However, across participants’ accounts, diverse perspectives were provided and data collection ceased when no new themes emerged from each participant group. Future research could explore the perspectives of GPs on older adults’ self-harm to see whether our findings are reflected in GPs experiences. Lastly, despite efforts to include a diverse sample, older adults from this study were confined to a younger age group (mean age 63.4 years; age range 60-72) and were mostly White British. We recognise that these findings may not be applicable to later life cohorts or ethnic minorities.

## *Comparison with existing literature*

The literature suggests primary care as a possible avenue for supporting and managing individuals who self-harm and preventing suicide [17-23]. However, little is known about how primary care might support older adults who self-harm. A recent qualitative study [24] conducted with Australian GPs found that GPs did not see a role for themselves supporting older adults who self-harm given the complex contributing factors to self-harm. Complexities leading to self-harm in older adults include a range of social, health and interpersonal problems, as identified in previous research [4, 24]. Research conducted with other populations engaging in self-harm suggests using alternative sources to support individuals who self-harm, including the third sector [7] and other agencies from the health sector. Although this study did not include GPs’ perspectives, findings emerging from older adults and third sector workers confirm existing literature. Findings are congruent with NICE guideline’s [25] suggestion of multi-agency partnerships between the health, social and third sector, in order to offer comprehensive support to older adults who self-harm.

Similar barriers in accessing healthcare were found when compared to younger populations who self-harm [7, 26-27]. Reluctance to seek help in people who self-harm seems to be universal across all ages, with stigma affecting help-seeking. However, when compared to younger populations, older adults contact primary care more often due to their complex health conditions, making this frequent contact an opportunity for self-harm intervention, management and support. Yet ageism amongst healthcare practitioners is an encountered problem that has shown to have significant negative impact on mental health outcomes in older patients [28-29]. Older participants expressed feeling unheard and their self-harm and overall mental health was not considered in the consultation room.

In addition, their own expectations around physical and mental health and help-seeking in later life may also act as a further barrier to older people [27, 30]. Previous literature has explored how patients’ expectations and attitudes towards medical consultations can have an impact and influence the encounter [31-32]. Our findings suggest this is also the case in older adults who self-harm. Some participants reported not seeking support from their GPs because they did not view them as a having the expertise or time to respond to their self-harm. Findings also suggest participants held certain expectations of what would be appropriate support, with time-limited or pharmacological support described as superficial and psychological interventions preferred. In addition, the notion of candidacy emerged [33], in terms of the extent to which people identified conditions or symptoms as a legitimate reason for consulting. It was only when older adults identified their self-harm as being a legitimate need for support that they explored avenues of help. Our findings argue that older adults face the double jeopardy of the stigma of self-harm and ageism [34].

## *Implications for research and practice*

Primary care is a potential avenue for effective self-harm management in older adults. GPs are well placed to manage and support older adults who self-harm. Box 1 provides a list of recommendations for GPs supporting older people who self-harm, based on the results from this study, in combination with NICE guidance [1, 25]. These recommendations are not intended as a comprehensive list. Rather, in combination with GP training, it may provide guidance to GPs supporting older adults who self-harm. GPs can help legitimate self-harm as a reason for consultation and support in a variety of ways, from ensuring patients understand their condition is taken seriously and that the language used is one of affirmation and thoughtfulness. This may improve future help-seeking and healthcare access in older adults and thus reduce repeated self-harm and suicidal risk.

Taking into account the frequent contact of older adults who self-harm with GPs, and GPs capacity to support this population, further research is needed to explore the feasibility of potential self-harm interventions for older adults in primary care. NICE [25] suggests multi-agency partnerships for self-harm management, therefore primary care may wish to work with other sectors (health, social and third sector), to comprehensively support older adults who self-harm.

**INSERT BOX 1**

# **How this fits in**

Self-harm is the leading risk factor for suicide, with suicide being an increasing concern amongst older populations given the high suicide rates reported. Although research has shown that older adults who self-harm are in frequent contact with primary care due to complex health conditions, no research has explored the role of primary care in supporting older adults who self-harm. Using a qualitative approach, the study’s findings confirm that primary care is a potential avenue for effective self-harm management in older adults, and GPs are well placed to manage and support older adults who self-harm. However, given the complex nature of self-harm, primary care may wish to work with other sectors (health, social and third sectors), to comprehensively support older adults who self-harm, as recommended by NICE.

# **Figures and Tables**

## **Figure 1. Flowchart of recruitment methods**

Third sector

Groups

Social media and online support groups

**25**National self-harm groups

**8**   
Age

Groups in Stafforshire

Regional Advertisement

**2**   
Online forums

**10**

News ads in North West & West Midlands

Publicity in libraries & pharmacies in West Midlands

Twitter

&   
Facebook posts

**1**

participant

Older adults: *n*=1

**0**

participants

(3 expressed interest but did not meet age or self-harm criteria)

**12** participants

Older adults: *n*=7

&

Support workers: *n*=5

**2** participants

Support workers:  
*n*=2

**0** participants

(2 expressed interest but did not meet age criteria)

**1** participant

Older adults: *n*=1

***n=*16** participants

## **Figure 2. Summary of Data analysis process**

1. **Familiarisation with transcripts – reading & re-reading**
2. **Generation of initial codes within each transcript**
3. **Comparison of initial codes across the transcripts**   
   **within each group: identification of second level codes**

Constant comparison methods applied

Iterative   
process

1. **Data integration and identification of themes:**   
   **comparison of codes across the two groups\***
2. **Identification and agreement of final themes with**   
   **PPIE group**

\*When data was not consistent to initial analysis, the research team discussed interpretation of this to see if adjustment of analysis was need

## **Figure 3. Support avenues for older adults with self-harm behaviour**

**Informal sector**

Family & friends

Peers

Faith

Self-management

Internet

**Formal sector**

## **Figure 4. Barriers and facilitators to accessing primary care for self-harm in older adults**

Figure 4a. Barriers to accessing primary care for self-harm in older adults

Stigma

Figure 4b. Facilitators to accessing primary care for self-harm in older adults

**Reduced stigma**

## **Box 1. Recommendations to GPs working with older people who self-harm**

* Be aware that self-harm can occur in older adults and although suicidal intent is not always present, it is important to consider patients’ suicidality
* Consider the stigma attached to self-harm, and ensure an empathic approach, so that the patient feels listened to
* Be responsive to the distress associated with self-harm; do not focus exclusively on the physical sequelae of self-harm
* Consider offering longer appointments to provide comprehensive assessment and support to the patient for physical and mental health needs
* Consider arranging follow-up as part of on-going assessment and management
* Review current medication to assess whether these may act potentially as a method of self-harm (e.g. overdose)
* Assess patient safety throughout the consultation and advise on access to means of potential self-harm
* Liaise with the third sector, social care sector, or refer to specialist care where indicated
* View the consultation as an opportunity to provide self-harm management and avoid repeat self-harm and suicide

## **Table 1.1 Characteristics of older adults**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Gender** | **Age** | **Health conditions[[1]](#footnote-1)** | **Psychosocial context** | **Start of self-harm** | **Support** |
| **F1** | Female | 62 | * Personality disorder * Fibromyalgia, diabetes, heart disease, scoliosis, arthritis | * Early start of mental health difficulties with child sexual abuse * Living alone, experiencing loneliness * Family history of mental illness * Experienced loss of children in adulthood * Limited mobility due to health | Early teens | * Long history of overdose hospital admissions * Limited family support * No longer attending group for self-harm * Medication seen by GP * Infrequent contact with CPN |
| **F2** | Female | 72 | * Depression ; alcohol misuse * Irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis, pancreatitis | * Childhood sexual abuse and overall stressful upbringing * Interpersonal difficulties with family & family history of alcohol misuse * Early retirement due to mental health conditions | Early childhood | * Regularly attends sector group for self-harm * Previous contact with secondary care * Now overseen by GP |
| **F3** | Female | 60 | * Personality disorder * High blood pressure, hypothyroidism | * Multiple childhood stressors including sexual abuse, bullying, neglect, encounters with judiciary system * Family history of mental illness * Partner bereavement leading to experience of loneliness * Full time factory worker | Early teens | * Regularly attends sector group for self-harm * Medication overseen GP * Support received by CPN * Long history of contact with primary and secondary care services |
| **M1** | Male | 67 | * Depression * High blood pressure, heart disease | * Early childhood experience of shame caused by secrecy of adoption * Experienced multiple losses of family members and friends * Health conditions disrupted life since early 40s leading to job loss * Previous experience in research as a participant | 40s | * Multiple experiences with counsellors and contact with primary and secondary care * Regularly attends sector group for self-harm * Medication overseen by GP |
| **F4** | Female | 65 | * Personality disorder, eating disorder & post-traumatic stress disorder * Osteoporosis, high blood pressure | * Early childhood experiences of sexual abuse, violence and neglect * Family history of mental illness * Previous experience in research as a participant | 40s | * Recently joined third sector self-harm group * Support from primary & secondary care services * Receives family support |
| **F5** | Female | 62 | * Depression * Fibromyalgia, sciatica, ankylosing spondylosis, arthritis | * Early childhood loss with death of mother, adopted by grandparents * Ongoing conflict with husband & interpersonal problems Multiple bereavements * Health conditions affecting mobility and everyday life | 60 | * Recently joined third sector self-harm group * Previously received support from psychiatrist * Medication for depression overseen by GP * Receives family support |
| **M2** | Male | 61 | * Pica, anxiety & post-traumatic stress disorder * Dystonia, heart failure, diabetes, liver disease, ulcerative colitis | * Limited mobility due to health conditions * Several negative experiences with health care facilities * Loss of family members * First time talking about self-harm | 40s | * Previously support by counsellors * Currently sees psychiatrist * Attends third sector dystonia group * No support for self-harm |
| **F6** | Female | 62 | * Depression, eating disorder * Arthritis, walking disability | * Ongoing experience of violence and abuse * Escaped violent and life-threatening marriage, forcing her to re-locate * Identified as ethnic minority, highlighting difficulty to access support | Early childhood | * Received limited support for self-harm * Attends third sector self-harm group * Soon to start seeing a private counsellor |
| **M3** | Male | 60 | * Eating disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), Personality Disorder * Anaemia | * Divorce of parents experienced in childhood * Self-identified as homosexual * Recently moved to England from the United States * Highly educated and with previous experience in research * High levels of insight and self-awareness | Early childhood | * Talking therapy received for over a decade but stopped once moving to England * Attends service user group and is on the waiting list for a self-harm hospital programme * No family support |

**Table 1.2 Characteristics of support workers**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Gender** | **Age** | **Role[[2]](#footnote-2)** | **Personal background** |
| **F7** | Female | 46 | Volunteer lead at self-harm charity | * Previous self-harm history * Started the only self-harm group in [city in North West England] since she saw the lack of support for people who self-harm * Has only recently started the group and supported people who self-harm * Looking for funding in order to make group a third sector organisation for people who self-harm |
| **F8** | Female | 36 | Support worker at self-harm third sector group | * No mention of self-harm or mental health history * Has worked with vulnerable populations such as supporting abused women in the past * Majority of experience supporting people who self-harm through observation of previous groups’ support worker |
| **F9** | Female | 52 | Support worker at self-harm third sector group | * Previous self-harm history * Working as a support worker for many years but only recently with people who self-harm * Looking to receive further training for supporting people who self-harm |
| **F10** | Female | 49 | Main facilitator at self-harm third sector group | * Traumatic experience in teens (rape) which led to self-harm * Received support from family and local third sector group for self-harm in the last decade * Took over support worker/facilitator role in the group 11 years ago, while still in recovery for self-harm * Has completely stopped self-harming for 8 years * Multiple experiences with research projects as well as being a lay board member for various local suicide prevention boards |
| **F11** | Female | 40 | Support worker at older adults third sector group | * No mention of self-harm or mental health history * Support offered to older adults focused on social services benefits and overall wellbeing * Has not received training on how to manage and deal with people who self-harm * Has trouble relating and understanding self-harm in members. |
| **M4** | Male | 42 | Support worker at older adults third sector group | * Previous counselling/psychology background * Previous experience in research with older adult’s population and mental health |
| **M5** | Male | 50 | Main facilitator at self-harm third sector group | * Previous history of self-harm and suicidal attempts from early adolescence due to childhood sexual abuse * Only received support for his mental health when diagnosed with cancer in his adulthood years * Started facilitating group after volunteering at service user led group given the need of setting up a self-harm group * Participated in other research projects and actively involved in public speaking and mental health and self-harm awareness |

# **Additional information**

## *Funding*

IT is funded by a Keele University ACORN studentship. Additional funding has been granted to IT by Santander Bank and the Allan and Nesta Ferguson Charitable Trust.

FM is funded through a NIHR In-Practice Fellowship (IPF-2017-11-002).

CCG is partly funded by West Midlands Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care.

LD was awarded a Senior Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy

The funders of the study had no role in study design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation. The corresponding author had full access to all the study data and final responsibility for publication submission.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR, or the Department of Health and Social Care.

## *Ethical approval*

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the Ethics Review Panel at Keele University: Ref: ERP1333.

## *Competing interests*

We declare no competing interests.

## *Acknowledgements*

We thank PPIE group members for their contribution to this manuscript. We also thank all participants who participated in the study.

|  |
| --- |
| **References** [1] National Institute for Health Care and Excellence. Self-harm: longer term management. NICE guideline CG133,” 2011. Available: https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg133. |
| [2] Department of Health and Social Care. Suicide prevention: third annual report, 2017. Available: www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-third-annual-report  [3] Morgan C, Webb RT, Carr MJ, et al. Self-harm in a primary care cohort of older people: incidence, clinical management, and risk of suicide and other causes of death. Lancet Psychiatry. 2018 Nov 1;5(11):905-12. |
| * [4] Troya MI, Babatunde O, Polidano K, et al. Self-harm in older adults: a systematic review. Br J Psychiatry. 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2019.11> |
| [5] Czernin S, Vogel M, Flückiger M, et al. Cost of attempted suicide: a retrospective study of extent and associated factors. Swiss Med Wkly. 2012 Jul 23;142:w13648. |
| [6] McManus S, Lubian K, Bennett C, et al. Suicide and self-harm in Britain: researching risk and resilience using UK surveys, NatCen, 2019. Available: http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1704167/Suicide-and-self-harm-in-Britain-Main-report.pdf |
| [7] Abendstern M, Hughes J, Jasper R, et al. Care co‐ordination for older people in the third sector: scoping the evidence. Health Soc Care Community. 2018 May 26; (3):314-29.  [8] Green J, Thorogood N. Qualitative methods for health research. Sage; 2018 Feb 26. |
| [9] Mason J. Researching your own practice: The discipline of noticing. Routledge; 2002 Nov 1. |
| [10] Saldaña J. Longitudinal qualitative research: Analyzing change through time. Rowman Altamira; 2003 May 16. |
| [11] Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual Res Psych. 2006 Jan 1;3(2):77-101. |
| [12] Glaser BG, Strauss AL. Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Routledge; 2017 Jul 5. |
| [13] Saunders B, Sim J, Kingstone T, et al. Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. Qual Quant. 2018 Jul 1;52(4):1893-907. |
| [14] Bradley EH, Curry LA, Devers KJ. Qualitative data analysis for health services research: developing taxonomy, themes, and theory. Health Serv Res. 2007 Aug;42(4):1758-72. |
| [15] Denzin NK. Triangulation 2.0. J Mix Methods Res. 2012 Apr;6(2):80-8. |
| [16] Troya MI, Chew-Graham CA, Babatunde O, et al. Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement in a doctoral research project exploring self-harm in older adults. Health Expect [Under review]. |
| [17] Owens C, Lambert H, Donovan J, Lloyd KR. A qualitative study of help seeking and primary care consultation prior to suicide. Br J Gen Pract. 2005 Jul 1;55(516):503-9. |
| [18] Chandler A, King C, Burton C, Platt S. General practitioners’ accounts of patients who have self-harmed. Crisis. 2015 Nov 17. |
| [19] Fox F, Stallard P, Cooney G. GPs role identifying young people who self-harm: a mixed methods study. Fam Pract. 2015 May 8;32(4):415-9. |
| [20] Grimholt TK, Haavet OR, Jacobsen D, Sandvik L, Ekeberg O. Perceived competence and attitudes towards patients with suicidal behaviour: a survey of general practitioners, psychiatrists and internists. BMC Health Serv Res. 2014 Dec;14(1):208. |
| [21] Michail M, Tait L. Exploring general practitioners’ views and experiences on suicide risk assessment and management of young people in primary care: a qualitative study in the UK. BMJ Open. 2016 Jan 1;6(1):e009654. |
| [22] Taliaferro LA, Muehlenkamp JJ, Hetler J, et al. Nonsuicidal self‐injury among adolescents: A training priority for primary care providers. Suicide Life Threat Behav. 2013 Jun;43(3):250-61. |
| [23] Saini P, Chantler K, Kapur N. General practitioners’ perspectives on primary care consultations for suicidal patients. Health Soc Care Community. 2016 May;24(3):260-9. |
| [24] Wand AP, Peisah C, Draper B, Brodaty H. How do general practitioners conceptualise self-harm in their older patients?. Aust J Gen Pract. 2018 Mar;47(3):146. |
| [25] National Institute for Health Care and Excellence. Preventing suicide in community and custodial settings. NICE guideline NG105. NICE, London, 2018. |
| [26] Gulliver A, Griffiths KM, Christensen H. Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: a systematic review. BMC Psychiatry. 2010 Dec;10(1):113.  [27] Taylor T, Hawton K, Fortune S, Kapur N. Attitudes towards clinical services among people who self-harm: systematic review. Br J Psychiatry. 2009 Mar; 194, 104–110.  [28] Minichiello V, Browne J, Kendig H. Perceptions and consequences of ageism: views of older people. Ageing Soc. 2000 May;20(3):253-78.  [29] Lyons A, Alba B, Heywood W, et al. Experiences of ageism and the mental health of older adults. Aging Men Health. 2017 Aug 1:1-9.  [30] Palmore E. Ageism comes of age. J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci. 2015; 70 (6): 873–875 |
| [31] Wensing M, Jung HP, Mainz J, Olesen F, Grol R. A systematic review of the literature on patient priorities for general practice care. Part 1: Description of the research domain. Soc Sci Med. 1998 Nov 1;47(10):1573-88. |
| [32] Greene JY, Weinberger M, Mamlin JJ. Patient attitudes toward health care: expectations of primary care in a clinic setting. Soc Sci Med. Part A: Medical Psychology & Medical Sociology. 1980 Mar 1;14(2):133-8.  [33] Dixon-Woods M, Cavers D, Agarwal S, et al. Conducting a critical interpretive synthesis of the literature on access to healthcare by vulnerable groups. BMC Med Res Methodol. 2006 Dec;6(1):35.  [34] Bodner E, Palgi Y, Wyman MF. Ageism in mental health assessment and treatment of older adults. In Contemporary perspectives on ageism 2018 (pp. 241-262). Springer, Cham. |

1. As reported by participants [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As identified by participants [↑](#footnote-ref-2)