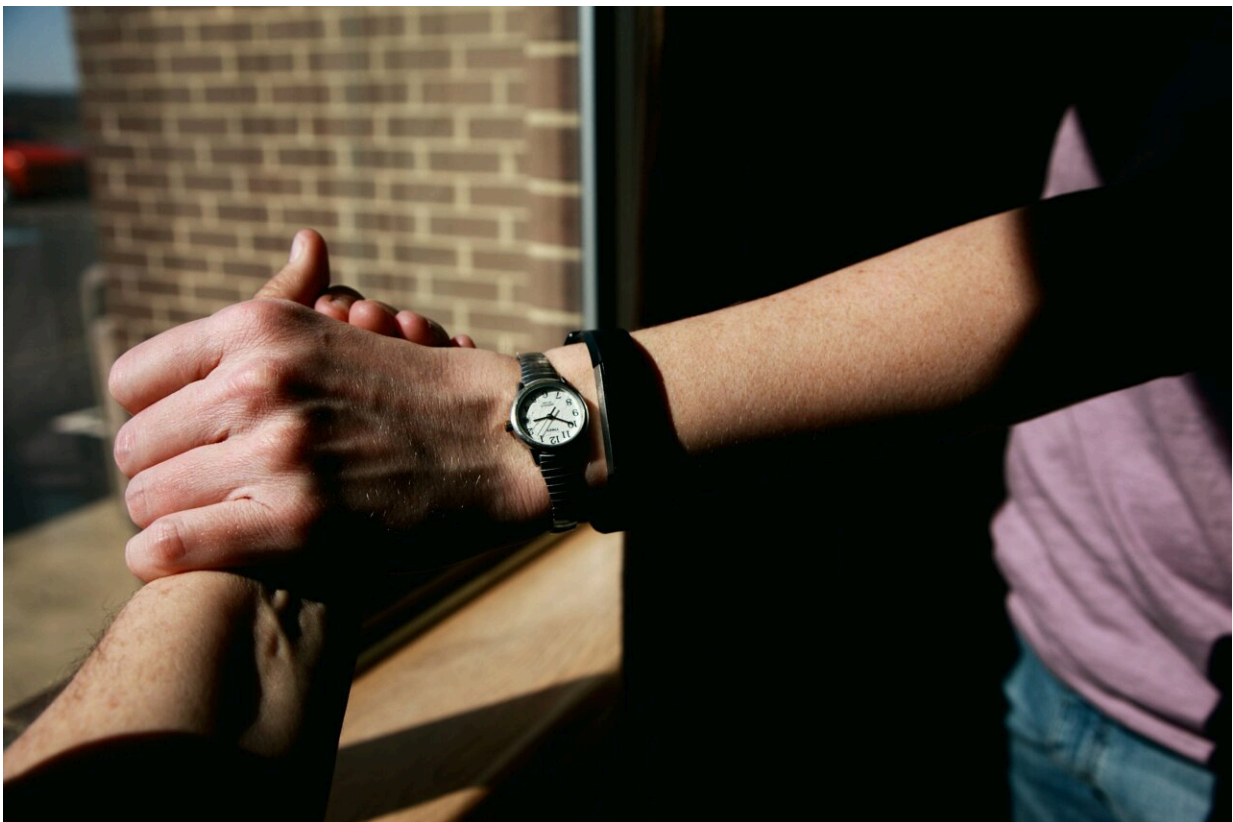


# New resources designed to prevent cruel and inaccurate representation of self-harm in literature

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Experts and campaigners working to prevent cruel and inaccurate representation of self-harm have created new resources to encourage

better portrayal of those in mental distress.

There are few representations of self-harm in fiction or other media, perhaps because writers feel anxious about depicting characters experiencing these struggles. But more thoughtful depiction—which reflects complexities—could help people feel less alone and support treatment.

The resources are designed to show there is no one way to perfectly represent self-harm—it can be experienced in varied ways and can mean different things to different people—even to the same people at different points in their life. They also show that fiction can be a way to open up conversations around self-harm or to reflect on assumptions we take for granted—this can be helpful for health care professionals, for teachers, and for family and friends of people who self-harm.

The research is designed to encourage writers and creatives to avoid misperceptions about what sort of person usually self-harms, and to reflect on how their representations might shape how people who self-harm are treated.

It encourages writers not to reinforce false assumptions, for instance that people who self-harm are seeking attention or are manipulative, or that self-harm itself is bizarre and inexplicable. It also encourages writers to be aware that always ending stories with recovery could feel hopeful but can also make ongoing self-harm or scars harder to talk about or recognize.

The two guides—one for writers and creatives and another for professionals who support a person who self-harms—are written by Veronica Heney from the University of Exeter and Durham University. Dr. Heney worked with people who had self-harmed to learn more about their experiences and to collaboratively produce the resources.

Dr. Heney, who is based at Durham University's Institute for Medical Humanities, said: "The stories we tell about self-harm are incredibly important. They can help people to feel less alone in what can be an isolating or difficult experience. If you know someone who self-harms or you support them in a professional capacity then fiction can be a way to reflect on their experience or gain insight into it. Fiction can also be a good way to start conversations around self-harm, which is something people often find difficult.

"But irresponsible and careless depictions of self-harm can reinforce shame and spread misperceptions. Stereotypical or inaccurate depictions can have an impact on how people who self-harm are treated. It's important for writers and creators to think about how their work might shape how the public sees self-harm. And it's helpful for people who support self-harm to think about how fiction might be impacting their assumptions around the self-harm."

During interviews and workshops people with experience of self-harm discussed how shallow depictions of self-harm were hard to identify with or even felt hurtful. They said self-harm was sometimes portrayed as attention-seeking, or as strange and difficult to sympathize with.

Many depictions of self-harm in fiction used stereotypes about what self-harm is, and especially about who self-harms: most characters who self-harmed were white, [middle class](#), [young girls](#) and this can make the many people who don't fit that stereotype feel erased.

Dr. Heney said: "Although we've talked and written about what we think is unhelpful or inaccurate in depictions of self-harm, we hope this doesn't mean creators erase or avoid self-harm in fiction. In fact something that came out strongly from the research was a desire to see self-harm depicted more often, especially in ways that are nuanced or that represent the multiplicity of self-harm. 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.

"Across the research there was a sense of the real value of representations of self-harm—they can be really meaningful both to those with experience of self-harm and to others trying to understand our experiences. But they can also reinforce shame, and they can make it easier for others to treat people who self-harm cruelly or without care."

The resources urge writers to focus on telling a specific story rather than trying to create something "perfect" or "universal." It encourages them not to use self-harm as just a plot device, or to signal "madness" or "dysfunction" or to "raise the stakes." They encourage health care professionals and teachers to think about what stories or narratives might have shaped their own attitudes around self-harm. The resources are designed to show how with self-harm there are often few straightforward lessons or simple answers. They suggest that an important step in any creative process might be talking with people who have self-harmed, reading testimony from people who have self-harmed, or looking for their feedback on the work. Experiences are diverse and nuanced—understanding this can be helpful both for those creating fiction and for those reading or watching it, especially those who support people who self-harm.

The resources were created collaboratively with people with experience of self-harm, and with Make Space, a user-led group that facilitates conversations around self-harm. You can find out about Make Space's work and see the resources around [self-harm here](#).

**More information:** Self-Harm and Fiction:  
[www.makespaceco.org/fiction](http://www.makespaceco.org/fiction)

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