

The *Lancet* Commission on self-harm

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By delivering transformative shifts in societal attitudes, and initiating radical re-design of mental health care, we can fundamentally improve the lives of people who self-harm.

This Lancet Commission is the product of a substantial team effort that has taken place over five years. It consolidates evidence and knowledge derived from empirical research and lived experience of self-harm. Self-harm refers to ‘intentional self-poisoning or injury, irrespective of apparent purpose’¹ and can take many forms including overdoses of medication, ingestion of harmful substances, cutting, burning, or punching. The focus of this Commission is on non-fatal self-harm although in some settings distinctions are not clear cut. Self-harm is a behaviour, not a psychiatric diagnosis. It is a complex phenomenon, with a wide variety of underlying causes and contributing factors. It is shaped by culture and society, yet its definitions have arisen from research conducted mainly in high income countries. The field has often excluded the perspectives of people living in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and Indigenous peoples.* Furthermore, unlike suicide prevention, self-harm has been neglected by governments internationally. For these reasons, we set out to integrate missing perspectives about self-harm, from across the world, alongside existing mainstream scientific knowledge, with the aim of raising the profile of self-harm in the policy arena. Ultimately our aim is to improve the treatment of people who self-harm across the world.

There are at least 14 million episodes of self-harm annually across the world, representing a global rate of 60 per 100 000 people per year. This is likely to be a considerable underestimate, because those who self-harm often do not present to clinical services and there are few routine surveillance systems, particularly in LMICs. Although self-harm can occur at any age, the incidence is much higher among young people and within this population, rates appear to be increasing. Repetition of self-harm is common and suicide is much more common after self-harm than in the general population; 1.6% of people die by suicide in the year after presentation to hospital with an episode of self-harm. In LMICs, rates of repetition appear to be lower, because pesticide self-poisoning (the commonest method of self-harm in LMICs) has a high case fatality rate, thereby eliminating individuals at a higher risk of repetition.

For individuals, the behaviour serves a variety of functions, including self-soothing, emotional management, communication, validation of identity and self-expression. Self-harm practices are also shaped by social relationships, and class dynamics. Indigenous peoples across the world, especially Indigenous youth, have high rates of self-harm, with colonisation and racism playing important roles in driving the behaviour. Numerous psychological and social factors are associated with self-harm and the social determinants of health, particularly poverty heavily influence the distribution of self-harm within communities. Yet we know little about how individual-level factors interact with social context to drive self-harm, or when an individual might be more likely to engage in self-harm at a particular point in time. Furthermore, many of the biopsychosocial mechanisms underlying self-harm remain elusive. Granular data capture through Ecological Momentary Assessment, together with machine learning and triangulation of data sources, including qualitative data, may help shed light on the nature and timing of self-harm.

Psychological treatments can help some people who self-harm, but service users and practitioners often differ in their opinions of what constitutes effective treatment. Furthermore, treatment provision

* Across the globe, there are many Indigenous nations, languages, and cultures, both within and across countries. It is difficult to identify terminology that is appropriate and acceptable to all these groups. We have chosen to use Indigenous peoples to refer to the global grouping of Indigenous nations and use a plural to demonstrate that there is no single Indigenous culture or group, but numerous groups/languages/tribes/ways of living, even within each country. When discussing separate countries, we respect the term/s preferred by most Indigenous peoples within that country; i.e., Māori peoples for Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for Indigenous peoples of Australia; First Nations, Métis, or Inuit peoples for Indigenous peoples of Canada; Native American, American Indian, or Alaskan Native peoples for Indigenous peoples of the United States of America; and Sámi peoples for Indigenous peoples of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Greenland. Overall, our intent has been to use language that accords respect, dignity, and self-determination to Indigenous peoples and communities.

1 for self-harm remains highly variable and is often inaccessible. Unfortunately, in many settings, there
2 is a lack of a caring, empathic response towards people who self-harm and those living in countries
3 where self-harm with suicidal intent is deemed a criminal offence, may find themselves liable to
4 prosecution. Even in some liberal democracies, the police are sometimes used as a first line of
5 response to people who self-harm, compounding feelings of stigma.

6
7 We have identified 12 key recommendations that, if actioned, could transform the lives of people who
8 self-harm (see Panel 1).

9
10 We already know that tackling the societal drivers of misery can reduce suicide rates - this evidence
11 can also usefully inform government policy in relation to self-harm. From a societal perspective, the
12 punishment of people who self-harm around the world must stop and government approaches should
13 address the conditions that promote self-harm. For Indigenous peoples, effective self-harm prevention
14 strategies should prioritise self-determination and the building of healthy societies, thus empowering
15 cultures to thrive. Indigenous peoples should be able to control their health and social care services
16 and design culturally appropriate prevention and intervention strategies. In LMICs, reducing access to
17 means of self-harm may be particularly important, as well as an emphasis on self-harm surveillance,
18 and a re-distribution of current research funding to places with the greatest need.

19
20 In terms of how we communicate about self-harm, the online media industry must take greater
21 responsibility for the safety of their users, particularly young people and other users who may be
22 vulnerable. Discussion about self-harm should focus on relatable stories of survival, recovery, coping,
23 and help-seeking with an emphasis on practical strategies. These stories should ideally be designed
24 and conveyed by people with lived experience. And from the perspective of service delivery, people
25 with lived experience of self-harm should be robustly supported to lead, design, and deliver models of
26 care.

27
28 The actions that have emerged from this Commission are ambitious, but we believe that they can be
29 achieved with targeted advocacy and strategic deployment of resources. Success will require ongoing
30 effort by diverse groups across different settings collectively committed to meaningful engagement
31 and action in the long-term. Furthermore, existing fragmented, piecemeal strategies should be
32 replaced with well-coordinated, whole-of-society, and whole-of-government efforts. These efforts
33 must occur in tandem with better integrated health and social care services. By acting now, we believe
34 that it will be possible to achieve a substantial and meaningful impact on the lives of millions of
35 people who self-harm.

1 INTRODUCTION

3 Concepts and terms

5 This Commission is focused on the health and experiences of people who harm themselves. By ‘self-harm’, we refer to ‘intentional self-poisoning or injury, irrespective of apparent purpose’.¹ Self-harm can take many forms including overdoses of medication, ingestion of harmful substances, cutting, burning, or punching. Self-harm is a behaviour, not a psychiatric diagnosis and the phenomenon is complex with a wide variety of underlying causes and contributing factors. In this Commission, we focus primarily on non-fatal self-harm. There is no formal definition for "repetition of self-harm". Throughout the Commission, we use the term “repetition” to refer to instances where an individual engages in non-accidental self-injury or self-inflicted harm on multiple occasions.

14 There are some behaviours and associated mental conditions which, at an early point in the writing process, were considered out of scope of this Commission. Body modification or mutilation, whether performed for cultural, religious, or social reasons, challenges conventional representations of self-harm. While these practices may involve altering one's body in ways that some might perceive as extreme, we think it is important to differentiate between self-harm and culturally or religiously motivated body modifications. In various societies, body modifications are deeply rooted in tradition, serving as rites of passage, markers of identity, or expressions of spiritual beliefs. In these contexts, the intent is often not to cause harm but to foster a sense of belonging, identity, or spiritual connection. However, the line between self-expression and self-injury can blur, especially when viewed through different cultural or societal lenses. We think it is essential to approach these practices with cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the diverse motivations behind them, acknowledging that what might be perceived as self-injury in one context could be a meaningful and intentional act in another. For different reasons, although anorexia nervosa is, by definition, self-induced, and harmful, most researchers and practitioners working in the self-harm field would not include eating disorders under the broad rubric of ‘self-harm’. This is because anorexia is aetiologically distinct from self-harm and requires a different treatment approach to that offered for self-harm.

31 Self-harm with a fatal outcome (i.e., suicide), has received considerable clinical and policy attention, while self-harm more generally has been neglected. Although for many, an episode of self-harm may not be suicidal in intent, self-harm and suicide are strongly linked. A history of previous self-harm is one of the strongest predictors of subsequent suicide² and arguably, all that distinguishes self-harm and suicide is the outcome. Some people who present to hospital with self-harm may die by suicide without intervention. Indeed, in LMICs, because of the high lethality of methods people use to harm themselves, even those with apparently no, or low suicidal intent, may end up dying by suicide. This Commission is focused on non-fatal self-harm rather than suicide and an in-depth discussion about suicide is beyond our scope. Yet, given the complex relationship between self-harm and suicide, we have still referred to the latter construct (as fatal self-harm) in places where it is crucial, as we do not wish to ignore the existence of this important relationship.

43 There is extensive debate about how non-fatal self-harm should be conceptualised. Some argue that we should dichotomise people into those who have harmed themselves with an intent to die (‘suicide attempts’), and those who have self-harmed with no suicidal intent (‘non-suicidal self-injury’).³ Indeed, non-suicidal self-injury disorder was included in the fifth version of the Statistical and Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as a condition in need of further research. Yet some authors argue that there are difficulties with the construct of NSSI.⁴ They posit that the prefix ‘non-suicidal’ belies the fact that there is an association between NSSI and suicidal behaviour. Furthermore, self-harm methods evolve over time, and instances of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) can evolve into self-poisoning, and vice versa. Those who advocate for NSSI suggest that it may stimulate treatment research and widen treatment options for individuals who self-harm. Others assert that self-harm is part of a continuum, and that suicide attempts and non-suicidal self-injury are overlapping

1 phenonema.⁴ They suggest any distinction is arbitrary, that it may at best have limited clinical utility,
2 and at worst might be actively harmful because people who are ‘non-suicidal’ end up being excluded
3 from busy clinical services.
4

5 There is no consensus on which is the optimal approach. What is clear, however, is that motivations
6 and intent are fluid, that the behaviours often overlap, and even so called non-suicidal behaviours are
7 associated with current suicide ideation and future suicide. These discussions are far from new. Fifty
8 years ago, the World Health Organisation categorised suicidal behaviour theorists into groups which
9 included ‘Binarians’ and ‘Individualists’.⁵ In this Commission we will not revisit these well-trodden
10 debates, but we will instead take a broad and inclusive perspective of self-harm.
11

12 **Aims and scope**

13

14 The urge to hurt oneself is not a new phenomenon and accounts of self-harm can be traced back to
15 antiquity.⁶ Yet only comparatively recently has the issue of self-harm become a major concern for
16 health professionals as something which needs to be prevented, managed, and treated.⁷ Self-harm is
17 responsible for substantial morbidity worldwide and can be a harbinger of risk for premature
18 mortality.^{8,9} It is sometimes seen as primarily a problem in young people. Indeed, its onset is often in
19 adolescence,¹⁰ and it is most common in this group.⁸ However, self-harm can occur at any age and
20 when it occurs in older adults it is particularly strongly associated with death by suicide.^{9,11} The
21 occurrence of self-harm also spans the spectrum of cultural backgrounds and genders.¹²
22

23 Systematic reviews and working groups have previously explored the topic of self-harm,^{1,13–19} yet for
24 too long, key perspectives have been ignored – in particular, the views of people with lived
25 experience, those from Indigenous communities and those from LMICs. Different cultures often have
26 deep-rooted belief systems, knowledge and histories that diverge from those cultures that are
27 dominant in HICs, and this can lead to very different interpretations about the meaning, causes and
28 significance of self-harm. It is vital to appreciate the cultural differences that shape self-harm because
29 the behaviour shines a light on the impact of structural inequalities on peoples’ mental health and
30 wellbeing. For example, for Indigenous communities, self-harm often emerges from the structural and
31 cultural aspects of society and is rooted in colonialism and racism.^{20,21} Furthermore, the exclusion of
32 the voices of those who have harmed themselves significantly restricts our understanding of the nature
33 and complexity of self-harm and impairs our ability to help people. A key tension between clinical
34 and lived experience perspectives is that those who self-harm do not necessarily prioritise treatment
35 and prevention as goals. For some people, self-harm is a means of coping, a way of staying alive. For
36 others though, self-harm may be a precursor to suicide. Evidently, self-harm is about both living and
37 dying.²²
38

39 To date, there has been no comprehensive and authoritative synthesis of the literature on self-harm that
40 combines the perspectives of individuals with lived experiences, those from LMICs, and Indigenous
41 communities with mainstream science. In light of this, The Lancet Commission on self-harm
42 addressed the following aims:
43

- 44 1. To review and synthesise the literature on our current understanding about self-harm. To do
45 this, we updated mainstream scientific thinking about self-harm with new evidence on
46 individual and societal factors, and combined this, for the first time, with previously neglected
47 perspectives (individuals with lived experience, those from LMICs and those from Indigenous
48 communities).
- 49 2. To identify key gaps about our understanding of self-harm, and by doing so, to identify
50 outstanding scientific opportunities for the field.
- 51 3. To identify key actions that could rapidly improve the lives of people who self-harm around
52 the world.

1 **Working methods**

2 3 **Scope and framework**

4
5 This Commission is the product of a substantial team effort that has taken place over five years. At the
6 outset, an Executive Group for the Commission was formed (PM, HC, NK and ROC), and this group
7 provided overall leadership for the Commission and defined the structure of the final piece. With
8 support from the Lancet editorial team, the Executive determined that we should adopt a wide-ranging
9 and innovative perspective to the issue of self-harm, principally aimed at yielding novel insights
10 rather than repeating the work of prior systematic reviews, or textbook-style distillation of facts about
11 self-harm. To achieve this, we invited Commissioners from Indigenous cultures, from LMIC
12 countries, joining those with knowledge of Western traditions. Highlighting the views of people from
13 low and middle-income countries was deemed essential for promoting equity, cultural relevance and
14 community engagement, in order to improve the lives of people who self-harm, on a global scale.
15 Indigenous communities have a history of marginalisation, colonisation, and dispossession, which has
16 resulted in a lack of representation and influence in policymaking. We also invited Commissioners
17 with expertise in Lived Experience, consistent with ethical and comprehensive approaches to mental
18 health. We adopted this approach as we wished to foster a more inclusive, empathetic, and effective
19 approach to understanding and responding to self-harm. We endeavoured to ensure that all
20 Commissioners had equal voice.
21

22 **Working groups**

23
24 The Executive Group convened four working groups (lived experience, indigenous populations,
25 LMIC, individual and societal influences) who were asked to a) summarise the current state of
26 knowledge (related to self-harm), b) to identify key gaps in knowledge and c) to formulate key
27 recommendations for action.
28

29 **Commissioners**

30
31 In terms of identifying Commissioners, our primary objective was to convene a team of leading
32 academics, clinicians and lived experience experts, with a balance of representation from within High,
33 Low- and Middle-Income countries, from Indigenous populations, as well as a balance of
34 representation across genders. The Executive Group began with a list of acknowledged field leaders,
35 expanding this using snowballing techniques, and then sought suggestions from the working group
36 leads (AC, DK, OK, JP, MS and PD) once gaps in expertise were identified. The number of
37 Commissioners expanded from 38 to 43 over the course of the commission. Over half of the
38 commissioners are women and 40% are from LMICs or Indigenous communities.
39

40 **Methods**

41
42 We encouraged a diverse approach in the synthesis of literature within the working groups. Where
43 there was an established body of literature and reasonable data collection, each group selected key
44 papers from publications identified by the Commissioners. When there were gaps, we also searched
45 PubMed, Web of Knowledge, and PsycINFO using self-harm keywords: “Suicidal behaviour”; “Self-
46 injury”; “Deliberate self-harm”; “Suicide attempt”; “Non-suicidal self-injury”. All searches were
47 restricted to the English language. For the Indigenous population as well as the lived experience
48 working groups, the role of qualitative literature and story knowledge is critical, not only because
49 there is less published “scientific literature”, but because the spoken word, drawings, pictures, long
50 term cultural practices, and history, create knowledge, that is valued and considered as legitimate as
51 scientific methods in Western traditions.
52

53 **Timeline and Progress**

54

1 The written output from the working groups was regularly reviewed by the Executive Group and was
2 shared at three online workshops with Commissioners, which was attended by representatives from
3 the team at the Lancet, on 19/12/2019, 19/03/2020, and 23/06/2020. Each working group produced a
4 single document, summarising the literature, their perspectives on new ideas and recommendations
5 for action. The findings and key recommendations from these documents were also discussed at a
6 face-to-face meeting held in Sydney, Australia (attended by representatives from the editorial team at
7 the Lancet; and 35 Commissioners) on 9th and 10th November 2022. At that meeting, agreements and
8 differences were reviewed around the main themes, together with gaps in Commission. Members of
9 the Commission presented the key findings to an audience of 250 stakeholders in Sydney. Together,
10 this allowed us to gain further feedback on the nature of self-harm, its influences, as well as how to
11 treat or support people who self-harm. Wider public health approaches were also considered.
12 Feedback from the audience has been incorporated in this final document.

13 14 **Limitations**

15
16 The views expressed in this Commission necessarily reflect those of the contributors. Although we
17 endeavoured to have global representation on the Commission, unfortunately potential participants
18 from Africa were unable to join, the Indigenous groups were primarily from countries with a history
19 of colonisation, and marginalised groups, with high risk of self-harm, such as prisoners, and refugee
20 populations, were not represented. Furthermore, some marginalised groups, with high risk of self-
21 harm, such as, prisoners, and refugee populations, were not represented among our team of
22 Commissioners. Our synthesis of literature was restricted to papers written in English, with the
23 majority of the papers being derived from HIC countries (which reflects the state of self-harm
24 research globally). Although non-English papers were not sourced directly, experts in the LMIC and
25 Indigenous communities did consider unpublished material, including knowledge in spoken form.
26 We acknowledge that there are many gaps in the research literature, specifically, we recognise that
27 there is still much to learn about the distribution and nature of self-harm in LMICs.

28
29 Figure 1 summarises the approach we adopted.

30
31 Inevitably, with such a large diverse and multidisciplinary group, we did not agree on everything.
32 Indeed, our aim was not to integrate all our different views into a singular voice. Some tensions that
33 exist in relation to the conceptualisation of self-harm defy integration and easy resolution. There were
34 particular tensions about whether or not we should include relevant literature on fatal self-harm (i.e.
35 suicide). When considering the lived experience of self-harm (including, and especially, across
36 different global settings), the line between fatal and non-fatal is very indistinct and extremely difficult
37 to parse out. For this reason, where appropriate, in places, we have judiciously retained the term ‘fatal
38 self-harm’ and distinguished this clearly from non-fatal self-harm. The other area where we
39 experienced differences in opinion related to the role of clinical services in managing self-harm.
40 Professionals often saw cessation of self-harm as a key aim, indeed responsibility, for clinical
41 services. However, for some lived experience contributors, self-harm was viewed as a positive coping
42 strategy or even a core part their identity, not something to be ‘treated away’. In addition, while
43 recognising that clinical services can be important sources of support for those who self-harm (and
44 vital in cases of life-threatening injury), it is equally important to recognise that clinical services can
45 also be sources of harm. People who self-harm may encounter judgemental attitudes from healthcare
46 providers which may discourage them from seeking further help. An over-emphasis on risk
47 assessment rather than therapeutic engagement can make patients feel like they are being scrutinised,
48 judged or excluded rather than supported. Moreover, medicalising self-harm without addressing the
49 underlying emotional issues may result in a focus on symptom management, rather than the provision
50 of care. Furthermore, social and psychological support for self-harm may, in some cases, be more
51 effectively provided in non-clinical, community-based settings.

52
53 In Panel 2 we provide a short reflective account from each of the writing groups that contributed to
54 the Commission to capture the respective positions of each writing team.

1
2 The structure of this report follows the aims described above. The most important section highlights
3 the actions that we collectively identified as being potentially life-changing for individuals who
4 engage in self-harm. These are grouped under key recommendations for governments; the delivery of
5 services; the media and wider society and finally, recommendations for researchers and research
6 funders.
7

8 **CURRENT UNDERSTANDING ABOUT** 9 **SELF-HARM**

10 **The epidemiology of self-harm**

11
12
13 There are at least 14 million episodes of self-harm annually, representing a global rate of
14 approximately 60 per 100 000 people per year.²³ This is likely to be a considerable underestimate
15 because those who self-harm often do not present to services and there are few routine surveillance
16 systems, particularly in LMICs.²⁴
17

18 International community and school-based surveys suggest a lifetime prevalence of around 3% among
19 adults and 14% in children and adolescents.^{25,26} Rates are higher in females than males and highest in
20 young people aged under 25 years, although self-harm can occur at any age.²⁶ Rates, particularly in
21 young people, may have increased in a number of countries recently.^{27,28} Methods of self-harm are
22 varied, but in general self-cutting is the most common method in community settings and self-
23 poisoning is the most common method presenting to hospitals.²⁶
24

25 The incidence of self-harm rises sharply during adolescence,^{8,10} earlier onset may indicate a more
26 severe trajectory,²⁹ and rates of youth self-harm are increasing.³⁰⁻³³ Adolescence is a period of marked
27 transition, neurodevelopmentally, biologically and socially,⁸ and mental health problems and risk-
28 taking behaviours often have their onset at this time.⁸ An unpredictable and rapidly changing social,
29 economic, and technological environment, the COVID-19 pandemic and even more pressingly,
30 international conflict and climate change, have all increased stress and pressure on young people and
31 that may confer increased risk for self-harm. Young people are often reluctant to seek help if they are
32 struggling and when they do, they usually turn to friends, family members, and online solutions as
33 opposed to healthcare professionals.³⁴ This is partly due to the stigma associated with self-harm,³⁵ and
34 partly the result of structural barriers like cost, access, and privacy concerns. These issues are
35 compounded by the fact that some young people who self-harm may be dismissed by services as
36 attention-seeking.³⁶
37

38 Repetition of self-harm is common. The pooled incidence of non-fatal repetition is 16.3% at one
39 year³⁷ and one third of people who repeat self-harm within a year report do so in the first month³⁸
40 Clinically important risk factors for repetition include the presence of borderline personality disorder,
41 a mood disorder,³⁹ alcohol misuse, and reporting suicidal plans at the time of the index episode³⁸
42 Among those who present to clinical services, suicide is much more common after self-harm than in
43 the general population, with 1.6% of people dying by suicide in the year after presentation.³⁷ The
44 majority of individuals who self-harm do not present to healthcare services for self-harm^{31,40-42} — a
45 phenomenon termed the ‘Iceberg Model’ of self-harm, with people presenting to services being the tip
46 of the iceberg.
47

48 Within societies, certain groups are at substantially higher risk of self-harm. Individuals diagnosed
49 with mental health disorders are more vulnerable to self-harm, in particular those diagnosed with
50 borderline personality disorder,⁴³ depression, anxiety and alcohol misuse,⁴⁴ as well as eating
51 disorders.⁴⁵ Marginalised groups are also at risk. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,
52 queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic + (LGBTQIA+) people in HICs have approximately
53 double the risk of engaging in self-harm,⁴⁶ a finding that has more recently been replicated in

1 adolescents in at least one LMIC.⁴⁷ Other at-risk groups across different global settings include ethnic
2 minority groups,⁴⁸ veterans,⁴⁹ prisoners⁵⁰ and migrants.⁵¹

3
4 The economic costs of self-harm are considerable and one way of estimating these wider costs is to
5 place a monetary value on all disability adjusted life years lost to self-harm as reported in the Global
6 Burden of Disease Study 2019.²³ This approach has been used to estimate the global economic costs
7 of non-fatal and fatal self-harm for young people up to age 24. Extending this approach to cover self-
8 harm at all ages, and valuing all Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) lost at mean world GDP per
9 capita in 2021, would imply a cost of \$639 billion globally for the 34 million DALYs lost worldwide
10 in 2019, with 81% of these costs incurred in countries classed as having a low or middle socio-
11 demographic index (SDI). Globally, 25% of the costs would fall on those under the age of 25, but this
12 increases to more than 33% of costs in low and low-middle SDI countries.

13 14 **Lived experience of self-harm**

15
16 In recent years, the lived experience research evidence on self-harm has burgeoned and deepened our
17 knowledge of self-harm beyond traditional biomedical models. People describe diverse motivations
18 for self-harming behaviour, including: self-soothing, self-care, emotional management, expression
19 and communication.^{52–54} A systematic review of self-reported accounts of self-harm by Edmondson et
20 al.⁵⁵ highlighted additional motivations for self-harm that might be considered ‘positive’ such as
21 finding comfort, self-protection, validation of identity, self-expression, and enaction of power/agency.
22 Research pre-filtered through a (however well-intended) lens of medicalisation or pathology may,
23 however, be less likely to access such meanings, preventing valuable insights into caring for,
24 responding to, and understanding those who self-harm.

25
26 Interview-based studies that have explored accounts or narratives about self-harm have underlined
27 that: self-harm relates to broader social and cultural trends;^{56,57} self-harm practices are shaped by
28 social relationships, and class dynamics;⁵⁸ some explanations about self-harm are more palatable than
29 others;⁵⁹ and that self-harm sometimes intersects with LGBTQIA+ experiences.⁶⁰ Participatory
30 research methods, where researchers work collaboratively with people affected by a given issue,⁶¹
31 recognises ‘lived-experience’ not only as an object of study, but as a valuable source of insight or
32 expertise. Autoethnography, where the person with ‘lived-experience’ is both researcher and
33 researched, has provided rich and powerful accounts where stigmatising discourses are resisted and
34 disrupted.^{62–64}

35
36 Qualitative research has indicated significant phenomenological differences between different forms
37 of self-harm⁵⁹ and the complex social, political, cultural religious and spiritual meanings that these
38 acts can have.⁶⁵ Yet many studies of self-harm ask only a single question, incorporating a range of
39 methods and meanings under one category (see Figures 2 and 3). Those researching or working with
40 individuals with experience of self-harm should therefore be prepared to engage with uncertainty,
41 with an openness to multiple and changing methods and meanings.⁵⁵

42
43 Self-harm is readily identified as ‘stigmatised’, in ways that relate to broader stigmas about mental
44 health difficulties. Yet there are also unique features of self-harm which accentuate stigma.⁶⁶ Self-
45 harm is often visible, and it is active – it involves ‘doing something’ to oneself.⁵⁴ In this way, it may
46 parallel other practices that are marked as pathological or stigmatised, such as drug and alcohol use.⁵⁹
47 Self-harm also shares with these an intimate relationship with society and culture,⁶⁷ as the meanings
48 attributed to it are dynamic, and shaped by social factors, including gender, sex, age, disability, class
49 and caste.^{60,68} Whether self-harm is recognised, punished, criminalised or treated with care and
50 empathy can be affected by not only the meanings attributed to self-harm, but also to the social
51 position of the person who self-harms and where in the world they live.^{69,70}

52
53 Globally, the types of care available to people who experience self-harm varies widely. In many
54 countries, financial barriers are in place, inhibiting access to therapy or to care for wounds or injuries.

1 Geography further shapes this picture, with those living in more rural communities facing particular
2 challenges. Individual responses to self-harm, taking place in clinical spaces, might be understood as
3 treating symptoms, rather than causes, and in doing so, not responding fully to the lived experience of
4 self-harm. Such lived experiences are located often in situations of oppression, marginalisation, and
5 disenfranchisement.⁷¹ While responding well to self-harm in clinical spaces is vital – so too is
6 responding effectively to the structural drivers of the misery which often precipitates self-harm:
7 colonialism, capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy; drivers that target diverse groups, bodies, cultures,
8 and peoples differently.^{56,60,72}
9

10 **Self-harm in low and middle income countries**

11
12 The distribution of self-harm globally is unequal with the greatest burden experienced in LMICs.^{24,73}
13 Definitive sources of data are lacking in these settings with few surveillance systems²⁴ and therefore
14 international comparisons are based on indirect intelligence. The Global Burden of Disease Study²³
15 uses various data sources to model the incidence of self-harm. Coverage is far from complete and only
16 two African countries had data available to include in the models. Furthermore, data quality, case
17 ascertainment, and likelihood of presentation to health services varies considerably between countries
18 and so estimates should be interpreted cautiously. Rates of self-harm appear to be the highest in
19 northern hemisphere and the lowest rates appear in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean
20 (although there were few countries with data in these settings). Yet one finding which is relatively
21 consistent between high income and low and middle income countries is the higher incidence of self-
22 harm in young people (those aged under 25 years). Globally, India accounts for the largest proportion
23 of global self-harm episodes – nearly one third of the total.
24

25 As in HICs, self-harm may be used by individuals in LMICs to serve a variety of functions, including
26 emotional regulation and the communication of distress.⁷⁴ The major difference is that in HICs, these
27 acts typically employ means which have a low case fatality, whereas in LMICs the most frequent
28 method of self-harm is highly toxic pesticide ingestion – a method which often results in death (see
29 charts on page 43 of Eddleston & Phillips⁷⁵). In LMICs where data are available on near-fatal self-
30 harm by pesticide ingestion, these acts tend to be associated with low suicidal intent and occur within
31 5-30 minutes of self-harm thoughts.^{76,77} Simply put, in LMICs, it is difficult to meaningfully separate
32 self-harm from suicide. Rates of self-harm repetition appear to be significantly lower in certain
33 LMICs, because pesticide self-poisoning has a high case fatality rate, thereby eliminating individuals
34 at a higher risk of repetition.⁷⁸
35

36 The available evidence suggests substantial global differences in the correlates of self-harm in
37 LMICs.^{78,79-106} For example, it is widely acknowledged that men are at higher risk of fatal self-harm
38 than women in HICs, by a ratio of approximately 3:1.⁷⁹ However, this varies widely by region, with a
39 higher female age-standardized rate of fatal self-harm compared to the global female average rate of
40 fatal self-harm.⁷⁹ The high rate of fatal self-harm seen in young women may be explained by the high
41 case fatality associated with pesticide self-poisoning.¹⁰⁷ When comparing the age and sex profiles of
42 those who self-harm using self-poisoning in Sri Lanka compared to England, the pattern is similar,
43 with high rates in young females. The notable difference is the case fatality ratio, which means that a
44 larger proportion of those who self-harm with poisoning in Sri Lanka die.
45

46 Some risk and protective factors also appear to be context specific. For instance, marriage and having
47 young children are protective factors against self-harm based on HIC data, yet they appear to be risk
48 factors (especially for women) in some Asian settings.^{88,89,108} While 80%-92% of those who self-harm
49 in HICs are estimated to meet diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder, this proportion is
50 estimated to be much lower in LMICs (pooled estimate: 58% fatal self-harm; 45% non-fatal self-
51 harm).⁹⁶ Nonetheless, it is important to note that substantial heterogeneity exists between studies of
52 psychiatric morbidity among self-harm populations in LMIC. It is possible that there is a genuinely
53 lower prevalence of psychiatric disorder among people who self-harm from LMIC countries.
54 However, it is also possible that psychiatric morbidity is under-detected in LMIC settings.¹⁰⁹

1
2 The significant reduction of China’s fatal self-harm rate by nearly two thirds over two decades⁸¹ has
3 received the attention of policymakers and international media.¹¹⁰ Possible explanations include
4 improved standards of living, medical care, access to education, and economic development.^{92,111}
5 Although these may be part of the explanation in China, it does not necessarily follow that
6 improvements to these macro-social drivers in other LMICs would yield similar reductions. For
7 example, a consistent finding over time is that Kerala, an economically developed state in south India,
8 with strong social indicators and a robust public health system,¹¹² has one of the highest rates of fatal
9 self-harm in India, whereas less developed northern states, such as Bihar, have significantly lower
10 rates.¹¹³

11 12 **Indigenous peoples**

13
14 Indigenous peoples across the world, especially Indigenous youth, are disproportionately impacted by
15 self-harm¹¹⁴ – see Panel 3.^{115–127} In particular, there is growing recognition of the link between climate
16 change and Indigenous mental health and self-harm.¹²⁸ Yet current estimates of self-harm among
17 Indigenous peoples are likely to be conservative. This is because Indigenous self-harm rates are often
18 identified by hospitalisations which only represent the tip of the iceberg. Furthermore, Indigenous
19 peoples are often underrepresented in general population and community studies of self-harm.¹²⁹ The
20 need for better data sources with Indigenous data governance and sovereignty is therefore becoming
21 increasingly recognised.^{130,131}

22
23 Indigenous peoples across the world are disproportionately impacted by mental illness, social and
24 emotional distress, negative early life experiences, substance use, incarceration, homelessness, and
25 interpersonal violence, which are associated with increased risk of self-harm.^{122,132–135} The
26 pervasiveness of this crisis of health inequity, of which self-harm represents the tip of the iceberg,
27 “tell plainly the structural nature of our problem”.¹³⁶

28
29 Though there is huge diversity between and within Indigenous peoples across the globe, there are also
30 important commonalities, such as holistic knowledge systems and experiences of colonisation. The
31 alternative worldview offered by Indigenous self-harm research is relational, holistic, and systems-
32 focused. Subsequently, self-harm is conceptualised by Indigenous researchers as a mourning response
33 to intense, enduring, and pervasive grief, loss of hope, and enduring despair following attempted
34 genocide and centuries of colonial trauma and oppression.^{137–139}

35
36 *“After extensive consultations and study, Commissioners have concluded that high rates of suicide
37 and self-injury among Aboriginal people are the result of a complex mix of social, cultural, economic
38 and psychological dislocations that flow from the past into the present. The root causes of these
39 dislocations lie in the history of colonial relations between Aboriginal peoples and the authorities and
40 settlers who went on to establish ‘Canada’, and in the distortion of Aboriginal lives that resulted from
41 that history. We have also concluded that suicide is one of a group of symptoms, ranging from truancy
42 and law breaking to alcohol and drug abuse and family violence, that are in large part
43 interchangeable as expressions of the burden of loss, grief and anger experienced by Aboriginal
44 people in Canadian society... Collective despair, or collective lack of hope, will lead us to collective
45 suicide.”* (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p. 2)¹⁴⁰

46
47 This grief response, the physical manifestation of which includes self-harm, has been described as
48 cultural soul wounds,¹⁴¹ wounded spirit,¹⁴² mauri noho - languishing spirit¹⁴³ or kahupō which refers
49 to hopelessness or spiritual blinding.¹⁴⁴ The spiritual wounding is a result of genocide, cultural
50 alienation and forced acculturation to the colonial state and leads to fragmented identity and disrupted
51 personal and societal narratives. The suffering is theorised to take root in kinship and transfers inter-
52 generationally until grief resolution,¹⁴⁵ or mauri ora - flourishing life force,^{143,146} strong spirit or strong
53 heart¹⁴⁷ is achieved.

1 Colonisation and racism are key factors in the aetiology of Indigenous health crises, including self-
2 harm. They are also the most complex to address, empirically predict or measure, and remain under-
3 examined in the conceptual underpinnings and intervention science driving much research in the
4 field.^{21,148}

5
6 *“There is no single clear diagnosis to this crisis, yet certain factors have been identified as key*
7 *drivers behind the phenomenon of self-harm amongst our people. The brutal history of colonisation,*
8 *the inter-generational trauma left by Stolen Generations policy, and ongoing racism, combined with*
9 *the everyday realities in many Aboriginal communities, such as unemployment, poverty,*
10 *overcrowding, social marginalisation, and higher access to alcohol and drugs. Together they have*
11 *created a very difficult life context in many communities. With muted voice, the pain and hurt being*
12 *experienced by our young is being turned upon themselves.” (Gooda and Dudgeon, p. 7)¹⁴⁹*

13
14 Colonisation was characterised by the violence of frontier wars and massacres, attempted genocides,
15 dislocation and dispossession of land, assimilation and child removal policies, and systemic racism
16 and exclusion. The aim of colonisation was to destroy Indigenous cultural and kinship structures,
17 processes of knowledge sharing, and spiritual and traditional practices, which in turn led to the
18 breakdown of social and family functioning, with associated transgenerational trauma, stress,
19 marginalisation and powerlessness.¹⁵⁰ The impacts of colonisation on individuals and populations are
20 difficult to quantify. Studies investigating the long-term psychological effects on the survivors of
21 Indian Residential Schools in Canada have identified high rates of mental disorder, impaired
22 relational attachment and developmental maturation, negative cascades of events, and social
23 marginalisation.¹⁵¹ The impacts of government relocation policies in the United States and Canada
24 include generational impacts on substance use, mental health problems, and parental warmth and
25 support for children.¹⁵² Similarly, in Australia, the Stolen Generation survivors and their descendants
26 have experienced significant social, economic, and health disadvantage compared to the Indigenous
27 population that has not been removed.¹⁵³ For example, 90% never completed high school, 70% rely on
28 government payments, 67% live with a disability, 40% have experienced homelessness, and 39%
29 report poor mental health. In New Zealand, the impact of incarceration of Māori men and women,
30 removal of children from their parents, and decades of abuse in state institutions has resulted in
31 educational disadvantage, low economic status, health inequities and disconnection from cultural
32 foundations and supports.^{154,155}

33
34 The impact of colonisation and racism as drivers of inequality among Indigenous peoples has been
35 devastating. Colonialism is the policy of domination and control that is pursued by the powers of one
36 state against another for the economic benefit of the former. Colonialism was primarily achieved
37 through colonisation, the active process of establishing and maintaining a colony. Racism is a
38 structural and social determinant of health and mental health.¹⁵⁶ The ongoing individual and collective
39 injury associated with repeated exposure to race-based stress is described as racial trauma.¹⁵⁷ These
40 two factors drive unequal power relations in society and have complex ripple effects at economic,
41 political, and cultural levels.^{137,142,158–161}

42 43 **Individual-level risk factors for self-harm**

44
45 People engage in self-harm for a wide variety of reasons. The most often endorsed contributing
46 factors are to decrease or escape from aversive psychological states,^{162–168} to effect change in their
47 environment, and in some cases, to end their life.^{41,166} Conversely, some individuals also engage in
48 self-harm to prevent themselves from attempting suicide.⁵⁵ However, there is generally no single
49 reason why an individual engages in self-harm, and it is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.
50 Risk factors for self-harm include both internal (e.g., neurobiological, psychological) and external
51 (e.g., interpersonal relationships, culture, and the socio-political landscape) factors, which together
52 form the context in which self-harm thoughts and behaviours emerge.^{106,169,170}

1 Numerous individual-level psychological and social factors are associated with self-harm, including
2 emotion dysregulation,¹⁷¹ affective variability,¹⁷² perfectionism¹⁷³ and self-criticism,¹⁷⁴ anger,¹⁷⁵
3 fear,¹⁷⁶ adverse childhood experiences,^{177,178} beliefs and expectancies about self-injury,^{179,180}
4 interpersonal violence¹⁸¹ and peer victimisation,^{182,183} peer and family relationships,^{103,184–186} social
5 support,^{181,187} life problems,¹⁸⁸ social problem-solving,¹⁸⁹ pain experiences,^{190,191} hopelessness,^{192,193}
6 psychopathology,^{177,192,194} sleep problems,¹⁹⁵ exposure to others' self-harm,^{103,196} media and online
7 exposure to self-harm and related content,^{197–199} and past-history of self-harm,¹⁹² suicidal
8 ideation,^{181,193} or behaviour.¹⁹² See Panel 4 for an overview.

9
10 Self-harm is one of the nine core symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Individuals
11 diagnosed with this condition experience enduring instability in the domains of emotion regulation,
12 interpersonal relationships, impulse control, and self-image.²⁰⁰ BPD has a community prevalence of
13 2%²⁰¹ and individuals diagnosed with BPD experience serious health problems and a suicide rate that
14 is fifty times higher than it is in the general population.²⁰² As is common with other groups who
15 engage in repetitive self-harm, the motives for the behaviour often vary between episodes, although a
16 reduction in tension, anger and dissociation are commonly cited as being of particular importance in
17 people with BPD.²⁰³ Ecological momentary assessment studies indicate that among young people
18 diagnosed with BPD, the acute onset of negative feelings is strongly associated with subsequent
19 incidents of self-harm.^{204,205} It has even been suggested that self-harm may be an early, readily
20 observable phenotypic marker of later BPD,⁴³ although currently there is no robust longitudinal data
21 to support this. Perhaps more importantly, self-harm is often targeted as a focus for the psychological
22 treatment of people with BPD. Within this population, there is evidence showing that compared to
23 general psychiatric management, psychological interventions such as dialectical behaviour therapy,
24 and mentalisation based therapy are moderately effective at reducing the occurrence of self-harm.²⁰⁶

25
26 There are also neurobiological contributors to individual risk for self-harm. A key challenge in
27 addressing this topic is that within this particular field, a spectrum of behaviour has been considered
28 including “suicidal behaviour,” and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Indeed, a range of studies
29 regarding the neurobiology of self-harm have examined either “suicidal behaviour” or NSSI. That
30 said, neurobiological factors related to self-harm can be broadly organised into three distinct
31 categories:²⁰⁷ 1) **distal factors**, which may be present from early in life, such as genetic and
32 epigenetic processes;^{208,209} 2) **proximal or precipitating factors** such as stress and associated
33 biological alterations,²¹⁰ including pain, and deficits in reward processing²¹¹ that may immediately
34 precede a single episode of self-harm; and 3) **mediating factors**, which connect the effects of distal
35 and proximal factors, such as impulsive-aggressive behaviours and their neurobiological correlates,
36 including molecular,²¹² brain and neuroendocrine markers.²¹³ Adolescence is a period of vulnerability,
37 when the onset of self-harm^{10,163} and the development of psychopathology²¹⁴ commonly take place, in
38 a context where new social skills are also developed.²¹⁵ As such this is a period of great interest for
39 understanding the neurobiology of self-harm.

40
41 From the field of genetics, no specific genes have been conclusively identified as conferring risk for
42 suicidal behaviour,²¹⁶ although recent genome-wide association (GWAS) studies have identified 12
43 significant loci associated with self-harm, some of which remained significant when adjusting for the
44 presence of mood disorders.^{217–219} A challenge is that the loci identified in these latter studies are in
45 non-coding parts of the genome and thus the exact protein and function that is being impacted remains
46 to be determined. However, these loci are close to genes such as *CACNG2*, *NLGN*, *DRD2* and
47 *SLC6A9*, that code for proteins relevant to behaviour and these discoveries suggest that suicidal
48 behaviour may have a unique genetic architecture, distinct from that of accompanying
49 psychopathology.

50
51 The ability of the brain to adapt to both internal (emotional, cognitive, and behavioural) and external
52 (interpersonal, social, and environmental) contexts, has led to increasing interest in the role of
53 epigenetic processes in self-harm — a key mechanism through which external contexts and events are
54 internalised and biologically encoded for a given individual. For example, exposure to early-life

1 adverse experiences is associated with several stable changes in epigenetic markers, such as DNA
2 methylation and histone modifications, which differentially regulate systems such as the HPA-
3 axis,^{210,216} and in turn, are associated with increased risk of suicidal behaviour.²⁰⁹ Individuals exposed
4 to early life adversity display an increased response to psychosocial stressors presented in laboratory
5 settings using tests such as the Trier Social Stress Test,^{210,220,221} and these individuals are also at
6 elevated risk for suicidal behaviour.^{210,220,222} However, to date, no studies have empirically
7 investigated childhood adversity-related epigenetic changes and their relationship to self-harm.²⁰⁷
8 Epigenetic changes in certain biological pathways, such as those related to stress response, have been
9 implicated as possible mediators of the effects of the early-life environment on risk of self-harm,
10 possibly through the regulation of behavioural traits such as aggression and impulsivity.^{208,210,213,222,223}
11 As well, suicide attempts were recently reported²²⁴ to be associated with 3 probes for methylated
12 DNA in a statistically robust manner, including methylation of a non-coding locus on chromosome 7,
13 and 2 loci in the genes for PDE3A (from a family of enzymes that hydrolyse energy generating cAMP
14 and cGMP); and RARRES3 (with function related to skin aging), respectively. Nonetheless, more
15 work to clearly identify the pathway from the external event, to biological encoding through
16 epigenetic modifications, behavioural characteristics, and the risk of self-harm, is warranted.

17
18 Relatively few studies have investigated the neural correlates of non-suicidal self-harm,^{211,225} whereas
19 a sizable literature has focused on the neural correlates of suicidal thoughts and behaviour.^{211,216,226,227}
20 Self-harm appears to be associated with alterations in volume or connectivity in cortico-striatolimbic
21 systems that regulate emotions and impulsive behaviour. Among the cortical structures most
22 commonly identified are the prefrontal, cingulate, and insula cortices whereas among the limbic
23 structures, studies have particularly pointed to the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, and striatum.²²⁶
24 A large consortium investigating structural changes pointed to lower frontal pole surface in youth
25 with self-harm.²²⁷ Functional neural correlates of self-harm have generally focused on processing of
26 social and reward information, emotions, cognitions, and self-related information.²¹¹ Given literature
27 connecting suicidal behaviour with psychic pain or “psychache,” pain pathways have also been
28 investigated and altered pain processing has been associated with self-harm,^{190,191} and with suicidal
29 behaviour.²²⁸ Yet, neurobiological evidence regarding the mechanisms of action and the integration of
30 these findings with broader theories about self-harm are lacking.²⁰⁷

31
32 Enhancing our understanding about the neurobiology of self-harm may help inform the development
33 of effective interventions.^{16,211} Yet, currently, we do not have a clear picture about whether particular
34 neurobiological risk factors are associated with general psychopathology, or are specific to self-harm.
35 Furthermore, we know little about how neurobiological factors associated with self-harm relate to
36 self-harm thoughts and behaviours outside of the laboratory, and over what timeframe. Combining,
37 neuroimaging with real-time digital monitoring techniques, might enhance understanding about the
38 relationships between distal neurobiological risk factors for self-harm as they occur during
39 individuals’ normal day to day lives.^{207,211}

40

41 **Social and cultural contributors to self-harm**

42

43 Self-harm often arises in the context of deficits in key social determinants of health which can lead to
44 hopelessness and misery across societies.¹² Social determinants that influence health equity include
45 income and social protection, education and literacy, employment and job insecurity, food and water
46 security, housing and the environment, early childhood development, social inclusion and
47 discrimination, structural conflict, and access to health services. These factors account for up to 55%
48 of health outcomes²²⁹ and are also likely to heavily influence the distribution of self-harm within
49 populations. At both individual and population levels, social determinants increase health inequity and
50 subsequently increase the risk of self-harm and this is particularly so for people living in LMICs and
51 for Indigenous peoples.^{116,230,231}

52

53 A multitude of structural factors in societies may contribute to the higher rates of self-harm seen
54 among women, compared to men. Women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence,

1 sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence. The trauma from such experiences can
2 lead to mental health struggles, and in this context, self-harm may emerge as a coping mechanism.
3 Sexual discrimination and lack of opportunities in education, employment, and leadership contribute
4 to feelings of powerlessness, which may in turn lead to mental health difficulties and associated self-
5 harm. In addition, women are more likely to experience economic hardship and dependency due to
6 wage gaps, higher rates of part-time work, and responsibilities for unpaid care work. The associated
7 financial strain can adversely affect mental health and may lead to self-harm. Furthermore, social
8 media amplifies the prejudices and attitudes of our societies and facilitates their spread. All these
9 societal factors interact and are likely to be closely linked to the increased rates of self-harm among
10 women.

11
12 In HICs, socioeconomic inequalities play a substantial role in hospital presenting self-harm²³² and
13 represent an important potential target of social policy interventions. Moreover, the incidence of self-
14 harm is substantially higher among homeless people compared to those with stable housing.²³³
15 Adolescent offspring of parents with lower education and lower income are more likely to engage in
16 self-harm.²³⁴ Furthermore, change in socioeconomic status plays a key role in shaping trends in self-
17 harm. For example, during the 2008 global economic crisis, self-harm presentation rates to hospital
18 increased in areas with greater unemployment.²³⁵

19
20 While HICs may have advanced economies, they are not exempt from issues related to social
21 inequalities experienced by Indigenous peoples or those living in LMICs. Even in wealthy nations,
22 structural inequalities persist, with minoritised groups facing discrimination in employment,
23 education, and healthcare.²³⁶ Certainly, within HICs, experiences of marginalisation and racism
24 contribute to stressors that increase vulnerability to self-harm. Some ethnic minority communities
25 living in HICs have experienced colonialism or historical trauma, and this contributes to the ongoing
26 mental health challenges they face, which may in turn manifest as self-harm. Immigrants and their
27 descendants living in HICs may face migration-related stressors and acculturation challenges. The
28 process of adapting to a new culture while preserving one's cultural identity can create unique mental
29 health stressors, which increase the risk of self-harm, particularly among younger migrants.²³⁷
30 Feelings of alienation or cultural conflict can contribute to mental health struggles and increase the
31 risk of self-harm. Individuals at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities, such as being
32 both an ethnic minority and a migrant, may face compounded challenges.

33
34 Furthermore, healthcare disparities, including limited access to culturally competent mental health
35 services, can affect ethnic minority populations.^{238,239} Inadequate representation of diverse
36 perspectives in healthcare systems may result in services that do not address the unique needs of these
37 populations. Negative stereotypes and misrepresentation of ethnic minority groups in media may also
38 contribute to the perpetuation of harmful narratives. This in turn, this may influence societal
39 perceptions which increase marginalisation and stress within communities,²⁴⁰ and thus also
40 conceivably increase the risk of self-harm.

41
42 Within HICs, all these factors can shape the overall social context in which minoritised individuals
43 navigate mental health challenges. Addressing the impact of these intersections in HICs requires
44 acknowledging and dismantling systemic inequalities, promoting cultural competence in healthcare
45 and support services, and fostering inclusive policies that recognise and respect diverse identities and
46 experiences.

47
48 As Ishita Mehra discusses in Panel 5 focusing on an Indian context, there are complex relationships
49 between social structures (gender, caste) and economic organisation and availability of services.
50 These shape and are a part of the lived experience of self-harm, further complicating attempts to fix
51 what 'self-harm' is and how best to respond to it.

52
53 As Ishita Mehra's commentary also illustrates, attending to lived experience means taking seriously
54 the social and cultural drivers of self-harming behaviour. Self-harm is not equally distributed across
55 different social groups⁷¹ and the meanings and 'functions' it may have vary according to the social

1 location of those who self-harm. However, social, political, cultural, and ecological aspects of self-
2 harm are often ignored, or are only superficially acknowledged, resulting in narrow interpretations of
3 self-harm as a pathological sign of psychiatric disorder.^{55,59,241,242} This individualising perspective may
4 not sufficiently address social and structural drivers of pain and misery,^{241,243} and may result in
5 individual interventions that ignore wider factors that impinge on wellbeing.

6
7 All of these factors must be considered in the context of a society's pre-existing rates of self-harm as
8 well as socio-cultural attitudes, particularly those that may encourage shame, and/or hopelessness.
9 The latter can be shaped by cultural messaging and portrayals in news, entertainment, and social
10 media.¹⁹⁷ The cultural milieu may have a substantial impact. Both explicit and implicit messages
11 about what constitutes socially acceptable coping strategies likely have a strong influence on whether
12 individuals self-harm.

14 **Commercial determinants of self-harm**

15
16 Whilst the recognition of the commercial influences on population health is growing, the contribution
17 of corporate activity on self-harm risk is largely ignored and under-researched. Given the broad
18 contributing factors for self-harm, the opportunity for commercial influence is significant, and their
19 influence may be greater in LMICs.²⁴⁴ Outlined below are examples of two of the key industries that
20 influence self-harm and suicide prevention (directly and indirectly).

22 **Agrochemicals**

23
24 Perhaps one of the best examples of industry involvement in self-harm prevention is the pesticide
25 industry, which has funded World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Association of
26 Suicide Prevention activities in the past. Pesticide-related self-harm deaths account for a large
27 proportion of suicide deaths in many LMICs,²⁴⁵ and given the significant case fatality associated with
28 pesticide ingestion,¹⁰⁷ many acts of self-harm with no/low suicidal intent are translated into deaths.
29 There is strong evidence that banning acutely toxic, highly hazardous pesticides is the most effective
30 way of reducing self-harm deaths in LMIC,²⁴⁶ and has the potential to save lives in the immediate
31 term. An industry favoured alternative is the secure storage of pesticides, a strategy that was
32 developed during industry funded workshops and for which funds were provided to WHO for
33 feasibility studies.²⁴⁷ There is, however, no evidence showing that the introduction of locked boxes to
34 households is effective in reducing pesticide-related self-poisoning.²⁴⁸ Despite this, industry-
35 supported reviews still promote continued efforts into expensive, time-intensive trials to test out
36 "community interventions that show some promise for reducing pesticide suicides by restricting
37 access to means".²⁴⁹ Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that the pesticide industry has put
38 profits ahead of self-harm prevention in relation to the addition of safety measures for one of their
39 highly toxic products.²⁵⁰ The extent to which the pesticide industry has influenced self-harm
40 prevention is unknown, but it is likely all-pervasive including delaying regulatory action,
41 misclassifying toxicity, and diverting attention towards risk factors that have lower prevalence in
42 pesticide self-harm deaths (e.g., mental disorder).

44 **Alcohol**

45
46 Alcohol is a known risk factor for self-harm.^{251,252} The alcohol attributable fraction for fatal self-harm
47 is as high as 18% (i.e., assuming causality, removing this exposure would prevent roughly 140,000
48 fatal self-harm deaths annually). With increasing awareness of alcohol-related harms and government
49 regulation, many HICs have seen reductions in overall alcohol consumption.²⁵³ The shrinking market
50 has resulted in industry focusing their efforts on other avenues for profit generation, namely LMIC
51 markets,²⁵⁴ which have seen steady growth in alcohol consumption.²⁵³ Evidence from the African
52 continent has documented corporate influences on health, where companies are lobbying governments
53 and guiding policy to support growth.²⁵⁴ The alcohol industry has not only influenced but has
54 provided (exact) wording for national policy documents in at least 4 sub-Saharan countries which are

1 in line with the industry’s policy vision, but against public health.²⁵⁵ Notably three of the countries
2 have a fatal self-harm rate that is 2-4 times higher than the global average, with Lesotho and
3 Botswana in the top 5 countries with the highest rate globally.²⁵⁶

4
5 The field of self-harm prevention has largely neglected the study of the overt and covert influences of
6 industry. The above examples are a small selection, research into the influence of other industries of
7 relevance to self-harm, such as the gambling industry and the pharmaceutical industry, is also
8 warranted. We know little about the process and tactics used by these companies to subvert
9 preventative activities and policies, and this hinders our ability to counteract them.

11 **The influence of media on self-harm**

12
13 Despite substantial recent public health efforts in HICs to decrease stigma and to increase and
14 improve discourse about mental health, rates of self-harm are increasing. A scan of the media
15 environment may yield clues, given that media exposures can be among the most powerful influences
16 on behaviour at a societal level.²⁵⁷⁻²⁵⁹ The social environment influences behaviour through social
17 learning whereby individuals may emulate the actions of others with whom they identify.²⁶⁰ This
18 happens at a macro level (e.g., identification with media portrayals of celebrities or with fictional
19 characters who engage in self-harm) and at a micro level (experiences of self-harm behaviours in
20 family and friends/peers). Empirical evidence suggests that people exposed to self-harm in others, are
21 more likely themselves to engage in self-harm.²⁶¹

22
23 Widespread depictions of self-harm as a “useful” and/or culturally sanctioned behaviour have almost
24 certainly resulted in social learning across multiple domains – within peer groups, via social media
25 platforms, in popular culture, and in the entertainment media (as an example, see Panel 6 for a
26 quotation from the Netflix series ‘13 Reasons Why’).^{257,258,262} Cutting for emotional regulation, for
27 example, a behaviour once considered restricted to people diagnosed with borderline personality
28 disorder,²⁶³ is now much more widely practised in youth across mainstream populations, especially
29 among young women,³¹ and this has likely to have arisen through a combination of these mechanisms.

30
31 Visual images of self-harm, which may be particularly powerful, are pervasive and this fact must be
32 contextualized with revelations that social media platforms have not taken sufficient action to prevent
33 their algorithms from pushing potentially harmful and distressing imagery at users, including young
34 people²⁶⁴ who may be especially susceptible to suggestion. These exposures likely serve to increase
35 the psychological (or cognitive) availability of self-harm as a coping strategy in general and of
36 specific methods of self-harm such as self-cutting. In other words, mainstream populations worldwide
37 have recently received a steady stream of information on “what to do”, and “how to do it” with
38 respect to self-harm often with the highly contextualised subtext that this behaviour is somehow
39 fashionable or acceptable or the most “normal” way to react to distress. These messages are
40 sometimes paired with the message that the alternative of help-seeking is ineffective or counter-
41 productive, as was the case in ‘13 Reasons Why’.²⁵⁸ ‘13 Reasons Why’ is an instructive example as
42 some have argued that it encapsulates numerous aspects of problematic cultural messaging including
43 that help-seeking is useless, that self-harm with and without suicidal intent are effective ways of
44 coping, how to go about these behaviours, and that the responsibility to prevent a person’s self-harm
45 rests only on others. The messaging landscape, which that series is only one example of, informs
46 cultural norms which may have inadvertently entrenched self-harm as an accepted coping behaviour.
47 That said, emerging qualitative evidence indicates that the relationship between exposure to media
48 narratives and self-harm practices may be far more complex and should be further interrogated.

49
50 While social media is often linked with negative impacts on mental health, it may also have protective
51 effects under certain circumstances. Social media platforms provide opportunities for individuals to
52 connect with others and this may be particularly beneficial for people who self-harm who are isolated,
53 or who have difficulty forming in-person connections. For these individuals, online support networks
54 may offer emotional support, helpful advice, understanding, and even a sense of belonging. However,

1 clearly the impact of social media on mental health varies among individuals, and this area warrants
2 ongoing scrutiny and investigation.

4 **Psychosocial and pharmacological treatments for self-harm**

6 Three recent high-quality systematic reviews have highlighted a paucity of good quality evidence
7 regarding effectiveness of psychosocial and pharmacological interventions to treat self-harm in
8 adults^{16,17} and children and adolescents.¹⁵ Whilst the number of randomised controlled trials (RCTs)
9 testing efficacy of psychosocial interventions for self-harm in adults¹⁷ and children and adolescents¹⁵
10 has increased since the previous intervention reviews in 2015, there were no new RCTs of
11 pharmacological interventions for self-harm identified for adults¹⁶ or children and adolescents.¹⁵ In
12 adults, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) may reduce repetition of self-harm and Dialectical
13 Behaviour Therapy (DBT) may reduce frequency of self-harm repetition, however trial evidence
14 reviewed was low to very low quality, meaning there is a high degree of uncertainty about the
15 effectiveness of these interventions to reduce self-harm.¹⁷ Moderate to high certainty evidence
16 indicated that mentalisation-based therapy and emotion-regulation therapy may reduce self-harm
17 repetition, however there were very few trials investigating these interventions.¹⁷ More recently, there
18 has been growing focus and evidence on brief interventions to reduce self-harm.^{216,265} Another
19 challenge for the treatment field is that it is not clear whether any of the psychosocial interventions
20 work for specific sub-populations (e.g., men). For adolescents, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT-
21 A) may reduce self-harm repetition, but again clarity regarding the effectiveness of this treatment is
22 highly uncertain given the very low to moderate quality of evidence.¹⁵ Interventions for self-harm in
23 adolescents may be more effective if they have some focus on family interactions,²⁶⁶ yet a multi-site
24 RCT found no benefit of family therapy over treatment as usual in reducing self-harm in
25 adolescents.²⁶⁷ Both the intervention and control participants received a mean of five sessions, while
26 meta-analysis indicates that interventions with more treatment sessions are associated with significant
27 reductions in self-harm.²⁶⁶ The intervention was more effective for participants who reported both
28 poor family functioning and ease in discussing emotions, suggesting benefit from tailoring
29 interventions to specific families.²⁶⁸ Although current evidence in children and adolescents does not
30 indicate CBT for self-harm reduction, the (low to moderate quality) evidence for its effectiveness in
31 reducing repeat self-harm in adults may indicate there is value in further developing CBT-based
32 interventions for self-harm in children and adolescents.¹⁵

34 Most RCTs of pharmacological interventions for self-harm in adults[†] are very low to low quality and
35 have largely focused on the use of antidepressants and their utility in this regard remains
36 uncertain.^{16,269,270} Nevertheless, several high quality RCTs have investigated the impact of lithium on
37 suicidal behaviour, since observational and naturalistic data suggests lithium reduces risk of suicide
38 attempt and suicide death. The handful of RCTs comparing lithium to placebo or to an active
39 comparator have had disappointing results²⁷¹⁻²⁷³ in three different populations: adults with a recent
40 suicide attempt and affective spectrum disorders,²⁷¹ adults with Bipolar Disorder and past suicidal
41 behaviour,²⁷² and US veterans with a mood disorder at risk for suicide.²⁷³ In contrast, an international
42 multi-centre trial comparing the effectiveness of clozapine with olanzapine, in the management of
43 suicidal behaviour in schizophrenia, found that patients treated with clozapine showed a greater
44 reduction in suicidal behaviour compared with those treated with olanzapine.²⁷⁴ These findings have
45 also been replicated.^{275,276} Studies of ketamine — either intravenous or intranasal — have been
46 promising. Over the last decade, several groups from multiple countries have shown positive effects
47 of ketamine on suicidal ideation. Of note, many of these studies do not have suicidal behaviour as an
48 end-point and negative studies do exist (for a review see Nikayin et al.²⁷⁷). Thus, there remains a
49 strong need to develop a pharmacologic armamentarium to address risk of suicidal behaviour.¹⁶

[†] In the study of pharmacological treatment of self-harm, the terminology in relation to self-harm and suicidal behaviour is heterogeneous and for accuracy, we have retained the terms used by the study authors.

1 Even when evidence exists for means of preventing and treating self-harm, such as the value of
2 psychosocial assessment, there is a major implementation gap.^{278,279} Indeed, much could be achieved
3 simply by ensuring that existing evidence-based strategies for preventing and treating self-harm are
4 used in practice. Panel 7 summarises the current knowledge about treatments and interventions for
5 self-harm.
6

7 **Healthcare responses**

8

9 Much self-harm never comes to the attention of health services. For example, a household survey
10 from the UK suggested that only half of adults received help from clinical services following self-
11 harm.²⁸⁰ Rates of help seeking for adolescents are even lower, with a large UK multicentre study
12 finding that just 1-in-7 adolescents presented to hospital following self-harm.⁴⁰ Whilst data on help-
13 seeking following self-harm in LMICs is lacking, there is some evidence from Ghana and Malaysia
14 suggesting that young people who self-harm are unlikely to access services.^{281,282} Healthcare use after
15 self-harm may be even lower in settings where self-harm is criminalised. Yet globally health services
16 have an important role to play in helping people who self-harm. In many HICs, self-harm is a
17 common reason for presentation to health services. People who present to primary care, emergency
18 departments or mental health services with self-harm have a much higher risk of suicide than the
19 general population.^{37,283,284} There is also some evidence of this in LMICs.^{78,285} Clinical services
20 therefore have an opportunity and responsibility to intervene when people seek help.
21

22 Treatment provision for self-harm remains highly variable, but an essential component is a caring,
23 empathic response. Unfortunately, service users in many settings still report adverse healthcare
24 experiences.²⁸⁶ Comprehensive psychosocial assessments can facilitate access to evidence-based
25 aftercare but perhaps more importantly can be therapeutic in themselves.²⁸⁷ An undue focus on risk –
26 either in the form of broad ‘high’ and ‘low’ risk categories or scores on risk scales – is experienced by
27 patients as unhelpful.²⁸⁸ Such risk assessments have little predictive validity even in prospective
28 studies.²⁸⁹ A large systematic review aggregated positive predictive values and found that risk
29 assessments were incorrect in their designation of high risk 75%-95% of the time.²⁹⁰ Some have
30 argued that the challenge is that we simply need to improve risk assessment – AI approaches have
31 been suggested as one promising approach.²⁹¹ However, the issue is the impossibility of predicting
32 statistically rare events even in high-risk populations. This has been discussed extensively in the
33 literature.²⁹² Risk assessments can also have adverse effects - they may provide false reassurance or
34 exclude people who will go on to repeat self-harm.²⁸⁸ They are also sometimes used as a post-hoc way
35 to rationalise treatment decisions²⁸⁸ (e.g. ‘this patient is not high enough risk to warrant in-patient
36 admission’ or ‘this service user has active thoughts of self-harm and so is too high risk for our
37 service’). Leaving prediction behind does not of course equate to not assessing people. Some
38 qualitative work has suggested how assessment/risk assessment practices might be improved (making
39 them more individualised, collaborative, involving families, undertaking assessments which directly
40 inform management).²⁸⁸ A focus on clinical needs (rather than risk) and population-based approaches
41 to intervention have been suggested as alternatives to a high-risk paradigm. Aftercare is an important
42 component of management and should be provided quickly since follow up studies conducted in HICs
43 suggest that repetition is most likely in the period immediately after a person has self-harmed – one in
44 10 people who repeat self-harm after attending hospital will do so within 5 days of presentation.³⁸
45

46 A number of clinical guidelines are available internationally.^{1,13} These summarise the latest evidence
47 and provide research or consensus-based recommendations for health services. However, these are
48 generally from HICs. The role of health systems in self-harm in LMICs is less certain. There are few
49 data on help seeking after self-harm and health and social care services may themselves be less
50 available in LMICs. In LMICs where we have data to suggest repetition is low,^{78,293,294} any health
51 response must focus on primary prevention by supporting individuals to address the underlying risk
52 factors for self-harm. These are likely to be factors which would be difficult to address in health
53 services alone (e.g. poverty, domestic abuse), and so the healthcare response needs to act to join up

1 existing services to best support individuals. This might be best supported by community health
2 workers in these settings who have intimate knowledge of their communities.²⁹⁵

3 4 **NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT SELF-** 5 **HARM**

6 7 **Developing an evidence base with lived experience at its core**

8
9 It is essential that research about self-harm engages meaningfully with lived experiences (e.g., Figure
10 4). Unfortunately, research about self-harm has prioritised methods which rely on quantitative
11 approaches, drawing on statistics rather than stories.²⁹⁶ This may have resulted in an impoverished
12 understanding of experiences of self-harm and how best self-harm might be responded to across
13 different arenas of social life.^{297,298}

14
15 Qualitative methods are a key approach which can centre lived experience in research. In the context
16 of self-harm, qualitative approaches can help to extend understandings beyond epidemiologically
17 centred approaches which prioritise self-harm's prevalence, or its association with a range of other
18 'risk factors'.⁶⁰ This aligns broadly with a Mad Studies or Survivor Research tradition which
19 emphasises attending to experiential knowledge.^{299,300}

20
21 Debates persist regarding whether individuals with lived experience are in control of research, or
22 simply occupy a consultative role.³⁰¹ Similar concerns can be raised about the current emphasis (in the
23 UK) on Patient and Public Involvement in research; 'user-involvement' in self-harm research can
24 enhance the quality of insights, however questions of power and ownership over the research process
25 remain pertinent.³⁰² While methods such as autoethnography counter this by positioning the person
26 with 'lived-experience' as one of authority and knowledge, the inherent exposure involved can itself
27 bring challenges to personal wellbeing – an issue exacerbated by ongoing criminalisation of self-
28 harm. Some authors have creatively worked around this, such as Presson et al.³⁰³ who collaborate with
29 pseudonymised Author X as 'a method for keeping identities concealed when risks and secrets are in
30 play' (p. 121). In addition, financial (as well as other) barriers have traditionally impeded meaningful
31 and fair involvement of individuals with lived experience. However, most research funding bodies
32 now insist on payment to those with lived experience and required lived experienced reviewers to rate
33 the quality of grants.

34
35 Institutional gatekeeping must also be acknowledged. People with recent experience of self-harm for
36 example can be prohibited from taking part in research, due to concerns about institutional liability
37 should a death by suicide occur in proximity to a study. In addition, research ethics procedures weigh
38 heavily on young people and can create barriers to their full participation in research. This results in
39 self-harm being mediated by strict parameters that can push inquiries farther away from lived
40 experience. While 'involvement' of people with lived experience may be seen as desirable,
41 particularly in attracting research funding, the institutional and financial contexts which make such
42 involvement possible are often lacking.⁶¹ Indeed, despite significant shifts in recent years it can still
43 be difficult to identify sources of funding to compensate those with 'lived-experience' for the time,
44 energy and expertise they may provide to researchers (e.g., see Beresford et al.³⁰⁴).

45 46 **How we conceptualise self-harm**

47
48 Self-harm research and management approaches should not overlook the *interaction* between
49 individual-level and broader social contextual factors. Poverty, poor social integration, structural
50 disadvantage and racism, and other forms of discrimination, may all form part of the individual
51 context for the development of self-harm. Although these factors are implicit in contemporary

1 theoretical accounts of suicide, they should be addressed more explicitly in the research, prevention,
2 and management strategies for self-harm.

3
4 One helpful framework for organising and understanding the putative causes of behaviours and their
5 antecedents at multiple contextual levels is the Social Ecological Model (SEM),³⁰⁵ which has been
6 adopted by the CDC as a model for violence prevention³⁰⁶ and for reducing mortality from mental
7 illness.³⁰⁷ The SEM³⁰⁵ describes four levels of contextual factors that influence individuals'
8 behaviour: individual; relationship; community; and society, ranging from internal to external
9 contexts. The application of the SEM to suicide research and prevention is gaining increasing traction
10 across various fields.^{170,308–311} To our knowledge, however, SEM has rarely been applied to
11 understanding self-harm,³¹² but its application to understanding and preventing, and managing these
12 behaviours is highly relevant.

13
14 Research into self-harm has tended to prioritise positivist³¹³ and psychocentric inquiries.³¹⁴ Positivist
15 inquiry seeks to understand the world in a systematic way, by focusing on observable phenomena.
16 Psychocentric inquiry focuses on understanding individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours from
17 a psychological perspective. Such approaches can inhibit our ability to engage with the complexity of
18 lived experience, as well as diminishing the value of affective, personal accounts of lived experience.
19 Conventional thinking about self-harm has been challenged by Indigenous peoples.

20
21 Indigenous health researchers have critiqued the over-emphasis and over-investment in biomedical
22 and psychocentric frameworks, at the expense of the development of frameworks and interventions
23 that are appropriate to Indigenous contexts.^{230,315,316} These critiques recognise the role of individual,
24 biological or psychological factors, but highlight their limitations in understanding the aetiology of
25 self-harm.³¹⁷ The need for decolonising research methodologies is crucial to the development of
26 culturally safe frameworks and interventions. The evidence hierarchy is based on a value system
27 derived from High Income settings, that has traditionally been positioned in opposition to Indigenous
28 knowledge systems.^{318,319} Furthermore, the evidence hierarchy is impractical, in that the standards are
29 difficult to reach in resource strained contexts, and unethical, in that resources are allocated where
30 they can 'prove' effect and not where they make the most difference. 'Gold standard' research
31 approaches, therefore, often fail to align with the needs of Indigenous communities and perpetuate
32 colonising behaviours and power structures.³²⁰ There are pervasive deficit narratives around
33 Indigenous self-harm research and intervention and an effective 'evidence ceiling'.³²¹ Indigenous
34 psychology challenges the traditional hegemony of science, advocating for an ecological reflexivity
35 approach and identifying the need to recognise human rights, counter-colonial research and
36 interventions that deconstruct societal structures and systems of oppression, and the reclamation of
37 Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.^{317,322} One example of an alternative way of theorising
38 self-harm is 'felt theory', which Ansloos and Peltier²⁴¹ have argued for as a way of considering – and
39 transforming – responses to suicide, with clear resonance for self-harm (see Supplementary Panel
40 1^{241,323}).

41 42 **Improving knowledge about the epidemiology of self-harm**

43
44 Although there are some remaining uncertainties about the epidemiology of self-harm in HICs,
45 particularly in community settings or among population subgroups, the knowledge gaps in LMICs are
46 more profound. Less than 15% of research evidence on self-harm originates from LMICs, with only
47 3% from India and China despite these countries accounting for 40% of fatal self-harm across the
48 world.³²⁴ The continued involvement of industry in self-harm prevention may also further impede
49 progress.^{107,216,244–256,325} Because of the methods employed (i.e., pesticide poisoning) many acts of self-
50 harm with no/low suicidal intent result in death. Given the social and economic impacts of these
51 deaths (over 500,000 deaths in economically active age groups each year in LMICs⁷³) policy has
52 perhaps understandably been directed towards the prevention of fatal self-harm. This has meant that
53 non-fatal self-harm has received less focus, attention, and funding. Indeed, recent evidence from

1 Uganda, a country with a high fatal self-harm rate and many deaths due to pesticide poisoning,^{326,327}
2 shows high rates of non-fatal self-harm (1-in-4) among young people.³²⁸

3
4 Not only has self-harm prevention in LMICs failed to make it onto the global agenda, but its
5 importance is neglected at a national level. Suicide prevention strategies are important vehicles for
6 ensuring that the prevention of self-harm is a policy priority. Yet only 15 LMICs have a standalone
7 national suicide prevention strategy³²⁹ and India and China, where over a third of the global
8 population live, are not on this list.

9
10 The lack of understanding about the epidemiology of self-harm in LMICs is compounded by major
11 disparities in funding. Less than 2% of research funding into fatal (0.6%) and non-fatal (0.8%) self-
12 harm has been allocated to LMIC organisations.³³⁰ Whilst researchers in the United States received
13 76% of funding for self-harm research (despite accounting for 6% of fatal and non-fatal self-harm⁷³),
14 less than 1% of funding was allocated to India (0.2%) and China (0.5%) (see Supplementary Figure 1
15 and Supplementary Table 1).³³¹

16
17 Finally, the relevance of some of the concepts and measures used to assess self-harm have also been
18 questioned, with the authors of a recent systematic review from sub-Saharan Africa arguing that “the
19 findings of the reviewed studies were overly influenced by the use of pre-existing Western derived
20 models and measures”, with questionable validity to the local setting.³³² In contexts where certain
21 individuals (i.e., those at the bottom of generational and gender hierarchies) are disempowered and the
22 verbal communication of distress or disagreement is socially unacceptable;^{333,334} self-harm may be
23 seen as a non-stigmatised socially sanctioned means of communicating distress.³³⁵ In these contexts,
24 therefore, self-harm, may serve an important social function which in turn, may influence recovery. In
25 addition, socio-cultural differences between settings have a substantial influence on the presentation
26 and course of self-harming behaviours,³³⁶ for example, as illustrated by the lower rates of fatal self-
27 harm in countries where the dominant religion proscribes these acts.³²⁵ Limited evidence also
28 highlights important differences in self-harm practices in LMICs, with head banging and hitting being
29 more common methods of self-harm.¹⁰³

31 **Improving our knowledge about individual-level risk factors for** 32 **self-harm**

33
34 Although numerous individual-level factors are known to be associated with self-harm, key gaps in
35 our knowledge remain.

37 **Understanding the dynamic nature of self-harm**

38
39 Despite self-harm thoughts and behaviours being dynamic phenomena,^{337–339} fluctuating over hours
40 and days, most research has investigated self-harm thoughts and behaviours over months or even
41 years. The average follow-up periods for prospective studies of self-harm risk factors have been
42 around 12 months and we need to learn much more about short-term risk factors for self-harm.¹⁹² The
43 lack of fine-grained understanding about the temporal course of self-harm and its associated risk and
44 protective factors, means that we do not know when individuals are most at risk of engaging in self-
45 harm, when thoughts of self-harm may transition into self-harm behaviours, or when interventions
46 should be targeted. This is particularly important for the development of interventions that can be
47 delivered in a timely fashion to individuals.

48
49 Understanding temporality is also central to evaluating the effectiveness of interventions for self-
50 harm. For psychosocial interventions where participants need to acquire new skills that take time to
51 learn and implement, we need to know when a particular outcome, such as repetition of self-harm,
52 may be expected to be observed.¹⁷ On this issue, however, it is important to note that whilst repetition
53 of self-harm is commonly employed as an outcome in intervention studies, this outcome may not be
54 of central importance to individuals with lived experience of self-harm.³⁴⁰

1
2 Capturing self-harm thoughts and behaviours in context, at the moment they occur, as well as the
3 biopsychosocial processes that precede them, is achievable by employing Experience Sampling
4 Methodology (ESM^{341,342}) – also referred to as Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA³⁴³). ESM
5 typically involves prompting individuals to complete brief, self-report questionnaires, multiple times
6 per day over days or weeks, regarding their thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and context. Such methods
7 bring myriad possibilities for understanding the internal and external contexts that lead to self-harm
8 thoughts and behaviours, but also for investigating the variability^{172,337,338,344,345} and frequency³⁴⁶ of
9 self-harm thoughts and behaviours during individuals’ normal everyday lives.

10
11 ESM research has already delivered valuable new insights regarding the context of self-harm thoughts
12 and behaviours. Nock et al.³³⁹ demonstrated that adolescents’ likelihood of engaging in self-harm
13 increased when they felt rejected, numb, anger towards themselves and others, and self-hatred, but
14 decreased when they felt sad/worthless. More recently, Kleiman et al.³⁴⁵ found that feelings of
15 hopelessness, loneliness, and burdensomeness varied considerably during individuals’ daily lives, but,
16 in the short term, did not predict thoughts of self-harm. Subsequent work has demonstrated distinct
17 digital phenotypes associated with thoughts of self-harm, based on differences in intensity and
18 variability.^{220,338,347} ESM research has also shed light on the differential functions of self-harm both
19 between- and within-individuals.³⁴⁸ ESM is therefore a powerful tool for understanding individuals’
20 self-harm thoughts and behaviours in the context of everyday life and as such, potentially lays the
21 foundations for personalized models of self-harm and precision treatment.

22
23 Although ESM has thus far primarily been used to understand self-harm in the context of research,
24 this method also has the potential to address the management and prevention of self-harm thoughts
25 and behaviours.³³⁷ Recall bias and issues of inconsistent reporting may mean that clinicians do not
26 have an accurate picture of their patient’s self-harm between clinical contacts, and evidence suggests
27 that single-timepoint assessments of suicidal ideation are underestimates compared to ESM-based
28 real-time assessments.³⁴⁶ Real-time monitoring of self-harm thoughts and behaviours and their
29 correlates could, in principle, provide patients and clinicians with more accurate information, and new
30 insights regarding patterns in the proximal risk and protective factors for an individuals’ self-harm.
31 These data from ESM digital monitoring could be used to inform the delivery of ecological
32 momentary interventions (EMIs),³⁴⁹ including personalised just-in-time-adaptive-interventions
33 (JITAs),³⁵⁰ which could prompt participants to use skills learned in therapy at the very moment in
34 their daily life when are at risk for engaging in self-harm.

35 36 **The need to triangulate different sources of individual-level data**

37
38 As noted elsewhere, qualitative^{340,351–353} and co-produced research^{340,353,354} are key to gaining insights
39 into self-harm as complex, individual experiences. ESM and digital monitoring techniques can also be
40 used to develop personalised, idiographic models of individuals’ self-harm, which centre individuals’
41 unique experiences. Although ESM and digital monitoring techniques can help us to develop
42 personalised models of self-harm thoughts and behaviours, this is primarily at the micro level. At the
43 macro level, the complex, multifaceted nature of self-harm thoughts and behaviours requires the
44 integration of quantitative and qualitative data, from a range of different sources, such as social
45 media, ESM, and electronic health records.

46 47 **Outcomes of importance to those with lived experience of self-harm**

48
49 Recent qualitative research has demonstrated a divergence between the treatment outcomes found to
50 be relevant to people with lived experience of self-harm and those considered to be relevant by
51 researchers.³⁴⁰ Individuals with lived experience valued alternative outcome measures: general
52 functioning and activities of daily living; social participation; and engagement with services, above
53 traditional trial outcome measures of self-harm frequency.³⁴⁰ These results emphasise the need to
54 consider alternative outcomes. For example, an individual’s self-harm frequency may not be reduced,
55 but their social participation may increase, potentially indicating a positive effect of an intervention

1 that would not otherwise be captured by typical trial outcome measures. Similarly, qualitative
2 research with young people with lived experience of self-harm has demonstrated marked differences
3 between individuals in proximal risk factors for self-harm.³⁵¹ Risk factors were diverse, including
4 emotional distress, feelings of isolation, relationship, and school difficulties, as well as exposure to
5 self-harm. By co-producing self-harm research with individuals with diverse lived experiences,
6 outcome measures are more likely to capture relevant outcomes and can inform the development and
7 evaluation of new management approaches. Qualitative research may also expand the array of
8 potential risk and protective factors for further study in research, and consequently, their translation
9 into clinical practice and policy. When co-producing outcomes of relevance for people who self-harm,
10 it will be important to keep in mind that these outcomes are likely to vary across countries, cultures,
11 and identities.^{308,309}

13 **Personalised models of self-harm thoughts and behaviours**

15 Self-harm thoughts and behaviours differ not only between but also within-individuals. One of the
16 most powerful advantages of ESM, is that it enables research to move beyond between-person
17 comparisons to investigate *within-person* differences in self-harm thoughts, behaviours, and their
18 antecedents. A typical between-person research question using ESM would be ‘do people who think
19 about self-harm spend more time alone than in company, relative to people without self-harm
20 thoughts?’ A within-person approach, however, would provide us with far more personalised insights:
21 ‘is a specific individual more likely to think about self-harm when *they* are alone relative to when *they*
22 are in company?’ These insights can facilitate the development of personalised formulations and
23 treatment models for self-harm.^{337,355} In principle, personalised interventions, such as safety
24 planning,³⁵⁶ ecological momentary interventions (EMIs),³⁴⁹ and just-in-time adaptive interventions
25 (JITAI),³⁵⁰ have the advantage of being deliverable in the right context and when most needed.
26 Personalised monitoring (e.g., ESM) can also be used to track effects of pharmacological and
27 psychological therapies in individuals’ daily lives.³⁵⁷ Such interventions are not intended to replace
28 clinical or community-based support; in fact, they may enhance individuals’ experiences of these.
29 Sharing of ESM data between patients and clinicians could empower individuals who self-harm to
30 become active agents in their own treatment, by providing both the individual and their clinician with
31 better insights into their experiences of self-harm as it occurs in context.³³⁷ Researchers and clinicians
32 can make use of single-case experimental designs to test novel interventions or those tailored to the
33 needs of individual types of patients.^{358–360} Additionally, machine learning techniques could be
34 utilised to help guide selection of optimal interventions and to evaluate the development and
35 implementation of contextually-embedded interventions,³⁶¹ e.g., via Bayesian adaptive trials³⁶² or
36 Sequential Multiple Assignment Randomized Trials.³⁶³ Access to technology and healthcare services
37 may, however, be a barrier to using technology-based interventions such as EMIs³³⁷ and machine
38 learning-based interventions,^{364,365} especially among populations experiencing structural disadvantage.

40 **The application of machine learning**

42 The prediction of self-harm thoughts and behaviours requires techniques to explore complex
43 relationships among many distal and proximal biopsychosocial risk and protective factors. Whilst the
44 predictive capacity of each single risk factor is very limited,³⁶⁶ machine learning techniques are well
45 adapted to handle large, diverse, and complex data sets. To maximise predictive capacity, future
46 advances in machine learning that include both traditional (e.g., electronic health records data)^{367–371}
47 and non-traditional data sources (e.g., digital phenotyping data) will be useful.³⁶⁵ Machine learning
48 can integrate data from a broad array of contexts using digital phenotyping and allows the collection
49 of continuous data at a granular level in real-world settings^{344,372}. For example, the InSTIL platform³⁷²
50 aims to collect passive and active sensor signals from smartphones to model and predict health
51 outcomes, particularly focusing on mental health. Personal digital sensing technologies (such as smart
52 phones and wearable devices),³⁷³ have introduced new ways to monitor self-harming behaviours. In
53 addition, sensing techniques offer a rich set of modalities, including genetic, molecular, neural,
54 physiological, and behavioural data,^{226,373–379} which can be studied simultaneously. Different sensing
55 modalities (e.g., ambient sensors, wearable sensors, and software and social media sensing)³⁸⁰ can be

1 used to collect information at different contextual levels, including individual characteristics (e.g.,
2 physiology and behaviour), interpersonal relations (e.g., social interactions), and environmental
3 contexts (e.g., location and social context). Because different types of data are characterised by very
4 different statistical properties,³⁸¹ future research on the combination of these different data types
5 (multimodal data fusion methods) and novel analytic approaches to high-dimensional data in self-
6 harm is important. As these various channels of information provide increasingly powerful models to
7 predict behaviour in real-time, the field must simultaneously consider the changing ethical
8 responsibilities to monitor and intervene in real-time.^{337,382} Such developments also are relevant in
9 discussions about the use of increasingly sophisticated machine learning models³⁶⁵ and in the need for
10 more rapidly deployed digital interventions.

11
12 Most of the health-related machine learning research has been conducted in HICs,^{365,383–385} making
13 global interoperability an important concern. This reflects the wider issues with underrepresentation
14 of LMICs in research and intervention development. In HICs, electronic health record data is
15 frequently biased and does not adequately represent individuals from important sub-populations at
16 risk of self-harm.³⁸⁶ To ensure that machine learning-based prediction models do not further embed
17 health inequalities, data standards to establish representativeness criteria will be key. Sometimes,
18 however, such levels of data standards might be difficult to achieve because a data catchment area
19 may naturally have demographic sub-population inequalities. Modern machine learning methods
20 suggest statistical techniques to resample the existing data to correct distributional bias for all sub-
21 groups for whom data exists, although non-uniformly.³⁸⁷ When a sub-group is completely absent in
22 the data, active and purposive data acquisition methods will be required.³⁸⁸

23
24 An additional challenge for applying machine learning to investigate self-harm is that many
25 psychosocial risk and protective factors for self-harm thoughts and behaviours are not included in
26 typical data sources for machine learning, limiting the scope of available information that models can
27 learn from.^{365,389} Although specially designed studies could be set up to gather data on psychosocial
28 risk and protective factors for self-harm thoughts and behaviours (e.g., Ribeiro et al.³⁸⁹), the scale of
29 data needed to rigorously train and test machine learning models would require either huge numbers
30 of participants (e.g., from population level studies) or huge numbers of observations (e.g., high-
31 dimensional data from ESM, wearables, social media, etc.), which presents significant feasibility
32 challenges for researchers.

33 34 **Raising the bar on data quality**

35
36 Generating the quality and quantity of data necessary to apply complex analytic and methodological
37 techniques and derive meaningful, robust conclusions from the results requires a fundamental shift in
38 the priorities of researchers, journals, and funders. Meaningful engagement with measurement and
39 methodological issues is too often considered outside the scope of substantive research on self-harm
40 and is mostly — if at all — covered in specific methodological papers and projects. Studies of self-
41 harm are often underpowered, likely because the statistical infrequency of self-harm thoughts and
42 behaviours in the population means that the time and funding required to collect data from enough
43 individuals to produce an adequately powered sample is unfeasible within a typical grant. The field of
44 self-harm research has also been less prominent in conversations about the replicability crisis in
45 psychological science,^{390,391} despite being no less vulnerable to issues of poor transparency,
46 reproducibility, and replicability. Initiatives to raise the bar for methodological quality by funders,
47 such as the open research policy of the Wellcome Trust, can be powerful incentives for researchers to
48 attend to pressing issues with measurement and data quality. Beyond rewarding open research
49 practices, funders should also align the timescales of grants with the reality of the time required to
50 collect high quality data from large samples of individuals who think about and engage in self-harm.

51 52 **Resolving challenges in relation to data integration**

53
54 Assuming we have a valid and reliable measure of self-harm thoughts and behaviours, where should
55 this be implemented to capture data from as many individuals as possible? National data registries

1 provide a wealth of data about a broad range of risk and protective factors, and outcomes, including
2 self-harm.^{392,393} Linking data from different national or regional registries — for example, linking
3 medical records with indices of area-level deprivation and judiciary records³⁹⁴ — enables us to build a
4 rich picture of the context in which self-harm emerges and changes over longer periods of time, across
5 different levels of the SEM. Linking different data sources raises considerable privacy issues and
6 developing secure platforms and workflows for handling these data is essential. DATAMIND
7 (<https://datamind.org.uk/>) is an excellent example of how this can be achieved. Whilst some registries
8 were specifically established to record self-harm data^{395–397} and we urgently need more of these
9 worldwide, such registries record only clinical service presentations for self-harm, and most
10 individuals who self-harm do not present to services for self-harm.⁴⁰ Where intervention trials’
11 primary outcome is hospital-treated self-harm (e.g., Cottrell et al.²⁶⁷), loss to follow-up and non-
12 presentation to clinical services for self-harm may compromise outcome assessment, as also indicated
13 by the disparity in hospital-recorded vs. self-reported self-harm.²⁶⁷ Large-scale,³⁹⁸ and ideally
14 multimodal cohort studies^{399,400} — including, for example, ESM and wearable, and self-report
15 questionnaire data to enable fast and slow moving processes to be captured — allow us to assess self-
16 harm thoughts and behaviours among the general population, irrespective of whether individuals have
17 presented to clinical services for their self-harm. In the case of cohort studies, we can follow the same
18 individuals over time to assess longer-term patterns of self-harm and even the onset of self-harm.^{401,402}
19 Multimodal cohort studies with data linkage capabilities represent our best opportunity for moving
20 towards and integrated contextual approach to understanding and managing self-harm.

21

22 **Resolving challenges in relation to data analysis**

23

24 There is no single reason why an individual thinks about or engages in self-harm; thoughts and
25 behaviours emerge from the interaction of multiple risk and protective factors. It is a complex
26 system.⁴⁰³ Yet, many studies — in particular, cross-sectional, self-report questionnaire studies — of
27 self-harm do not approach the analysis of data on self-harm in a way that reflects this. Studies often
28 examine the relationship between a single risk or protective factor and a single outcome, or sometimes
29 small numbers of risk and protective factors are analysed in relation to a small number of self-harm
30 outcomes. Fully understanding self-harm from a whole context perspective, will require the
31 application of advanced statistical methods including machine learning,^{365,404} network analysis,^{405,406}
32 and dynamic and multilevel structural equation modelling.^{172,407}

33

34 The use of latent class and clustering analysis may also be helpful in identifying sub-groups of self-
35 harming behaviour with different profiles. Latent class analysis has been used to classify self-harm
36 subtypes in populations of young adults,⁴⁰⁸ as well as in an outpatient sample.⁴⁰⁹ In a very large
37 sample of more than 10,000 community-dwelling adolescents, Uh et al.⁴¹⁰ reported clustering on
38 multiple behavioural/emotional longitudinal risk factors; those with a long history of pathology, and
39 those without, both experienced sleep problems, but the first group were differentiated by greater
40 experience of being bullied and having poorer emotional regulation from an earlier age.

41

42 A caveat of applying these complex modelling techniques is that the data should be suited to the
43 analytic technique, and this will require new approaches to data capture and a shift away from small,
44 underpowered cross-sectional studies to large, well-powered, multicentre collaborative studies, ideally
45 with a prospective component. Related to this, there is a tension between seeking to model the
46 complexity of self-harm thoughts and behaviours, and achieving precision in self-harm measurement
47 and theory. For theory-building, using large numbers of predictor variables can result in a lack of
48 precision, compromising the usefulness of theories of self-harm,⁴¹¹ such as the four-function model⁴¹²
49 and the Integrated Motivational-Volitional model.⁴¹³ Computational models of self-harm that strip
50 back theoretically-derived hypotheses about the relationship between self-harm and risk and
51 protective factors to their simplest form, may help refine theories of self-harm to be more precise.⁴¹¹

Improving our knowledge about societal contributors to self-harm

There also remain fundamental gaps in our knowledge about societal contributors to self-harm. We know that each of the social determinants listed earlier in this document contribute to self-harm in a broad sense, however a precise quantification of their relative contribution and the degree to which they may act synergistically is missing. Numerous studies examining suicide have demonstrated that rates are reduced with increased per-capita GDP, employment, minimum wage, as well as governmental spending on social welfare and labour market programs.⁴¹⁴⁻⁴²⁰ We would expect similar findings for rates of self-harm. However, studies are absent even though, in principle, it should be *easier* to detect the impact of such measures on self-harm as it is a much higher base-rate phenomenon. The fact that these have yet to be conducted underscores the limited research emphasis on self-harm. Likewise, we would expect that efforts to improve overall social wellbeing (e.g. improved access to healthcare, access to green spaces, supports encouraging social connectivity, effective substance control policies) and to address fundamental upstream causes (e.g. support programs for new parents to promote secure attachment, prevention of childhood and inter-generational trauma, educational programs in schools fostering coping and resilience) would reduce rates of self-harm. However, at present, the evidence in this area is quite limited.

NEW WAYS OF RESPONDING TO SELF-HARM

An appropriately skilled and trained workforce

Assessing someone who has self-harmed is one of the most complex of all tasks in mental health.⁴²¹ High quality assessment requires a work force which is appropriately trained and supervised. Although there are many training packages available (many of which are marketed commercially), there is limited evidence on the efficacy of training. One randomised trial from the Netherlands showed a significant impact on staff knowledge and confidence after training and a significant clinical effect on some of the patients they went on to treat.⁴²² Patients with a diagnosis of depression showed a greater reduction in suicidal ideation after being seen in departments where staff had received training based on national self-harm guidelines compared to those treated in departments where staff had not been trained. A recent quantitative review of training interventions for non-specialist staff in high income countries⁴²³ included only one randomised controlled trial and eight observational studies. It concluded that training was linked with post-intervention improvements in staff knowledge. The effects on skills, attitudes, and confidence were less consistent and evidence on patient outcomes was lacking.

There is also little high-quality evidence to guide the content of the training. Instead, the content tends to be agreed by consensus. A recent authoritative systematic review of qualitative studies (Evidence Review P of the NICE guidelines¹) suggested that training should focus on enabling staff to approach self-harm sensitively, engage the service user, provide knowledge and skills related to specific aspects and interventions for self-harm, while recognising personal limitations and maintaining an appropriate professional distance. The content of many training packages is based on previous training or clinical experience. Others have been developed using consensus methods. One example is the competence framework developed in England which outlines the key competencies (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) that mental health and non-specialist staff who come into contact with people who have self-harmed might be expected to acquire.⁴²⁴ This framework covers areas such as basic knowledge, communication skills, working with others, assessment, formulation, and providing psychological interventions. The health and mental health of the workforce is of course also crucial in providing high quality, safe care to service users.⁴²⁵

1 Training needs to be general but also tackle the specific needs of groups who might have been under-
2 served by traditional services. Clinicians in mental health services should be equipped to provide
3 culturally sensitive support. Racially minoritised groups often experience myriad risk factors for self-
4 harm, greater barriers to treatment, and decreased likelihood of receiving evidence-based
5 treatments.⁴²⁶ LGBTQIA+ communities may be discriminated against, excluded, and not receive the
6 mental health care they need.⁴²⁷ The direct involvement of those with lived experience in staff
7 training, particularly for groups who may have been marginalised in the past, could be transformative.
8 In addition, there should be effort to employ a diverse health workforce, where there is opportunity to
9 include under-represented groups, for example Indigenous health workers and staff from ethnic
10 minority backgrounds. Finally, it is important to recognise that health and social care professionals
11 may have their own experiences with self-harm and specific supervision needs. There is some
12 evidence that recruiting staff with lived experience in mental health services can reduce stigma.⁴²⁸
13

14 Peer support

15
16 All care provision – in any setting – for those who self-harm should prioritise validation, choice, and
17 patient empowerment. One way of addressing the deficits in care for those who self-harm is the
18 provision of peer-support and peer-led services. This offers a way in which ‘lived-experience’ is not
19 just listened to but is propelled into action-driven innovation in care. Though evidence regarding self-
20 harm specifically is relatively sparse, there are indications that experiences of peer-support (including
21 in online spaces) are positive.^{429–431}
22

23 Recent reports commissioned by UK-based Self-Injury Support demonstrate service users’ desire for
24 peer-support based services.⁴³² In Supplementary Panel 2,^{433,434} Veronica Heney discusses *Make*
25 *Space*, a user-led collective she co-founded with two colleagues, emerging from their own and others’
26 experiences with self-harm. The work of *Make Space* builds on a rich history of user-led organisations
27 in the UK, including the National Self-Harm Network, and the Bristol Crisis Service for Women (now
28 Self-Injury Support).⁴³⁵
29

30 Peer support is increasingly visible in LMIC settings. For example, HeartSounds Uganda and
31 UPSIDES both of which provide empowered peer support workers to take an active role in the
32 provision of mental health care. The Global Mental Health Peer Network ran virtual peer support
33 groups during the acute phase of the COVID pandemic.⁴³⁶ In Malaysia, there are also active peer
34 support groups, both face to face and online, led by patient advocacy groups such as Mental Illness
35 and Awareness Support Association Malaysia. The Mariwala Health Initiative in India provides peer-
36 led support for those who experience distress and identify as LGBTQIA+ , and another for those who
37 are survivors of suicide loss. Yet, we were unable to identify examples of peer support in LMIC
38 which focus specifically on self-harm.
39

40 For many people with lived experience of self-harm, the development of alternative forms of
41 expression or management of distress may be best supported by the peer groups who intimately
42 understand the experience. The radical nature of the relational change that can occur within these
43 contexts, and the relationships built in them, as well as peer support relationships more generally,
44 inspired a dramatic poem ‘An Open Letter’. Supplementary Panel 3 contains an excerpt of this poem,
45 which evocatively demonstrates the importance of relationships in shaping experiences of treatment
46 for self-harm, again pointing to the potential power of peer support in transforming understandings
47 and facilitating ‘recovery’ (see also Figure 5).
48

49 Within peer-reviewed literature, there has been very limited research into non-clinical peer-led
50 support for those who self-harm.⁴³¹ This absence can be related to Fricker’s⁴³⁷ testimonial and
51 epistemic injustice – whereby the knowledge and expertise of those who self-harm is not validated or
52 recognised in ‘evidence-based’, peer-reviewed research literature. In turn, such approaches are rarely
53 included in high-profile evidence reviews on interventions for self-harm.^{16,438} A recent systematic
54 review of peer-support for self-harm identified two studies of face-to-face peer support interventions

1 for people who self-harm, each: “*reported a reduction in self-harm following group membership. [as*
2 *well as] other positive changes [...] attributed to group membership, including friendship and*
3 *decreased isolation, and improvements in self-awareness, mood and interpersonal skills [...]* a sense
4 *of empowerment and self-worth through witnessing and supporting each other's struggles and*
5 *successes.*” (Abou Seif et al.,⁴³⁰ p. 3-4)
6

7 The suggestion that effectively managed peer groups can lead to improved self-awareness,
8 interpersonal skills and reduced self-harm, in the absence of a clear clinical model of intervention,
9 corroborates anecdotal observations of many with lived experience, including some of the authors of
10 this Commission. Peer-to-peer relationships can be effective in confronting those who self-harm with
11 the relational impacts of their actions, forming a radical and ‘positively disruptive’ incentive and
12 catalyst for change. Pairing this confrontation with a context that creates relationships on which group
13 members can rely during times of distress as an alternative to self-harm, can, for some, be more
14 effective than restrictive interventions (such as those found in traditional clinical contexts) in reducing
15 risk. As indicated by Abou Seif et al.,⁴³⁰ however – evidence in peer-reviewed literature which
16 explores such changes, or which evaluates peer-support for self-harm in general, is limited. This may
17 reflect biases in research which tend to diminish the role and value of lived-experience in mental
18 health-related interventions and support, instead emphasising the importance of clinical or
19 professional support.³⁰¹
20

21 Crisis support is another crucial arena where peer-support can prove revolutionary – in both clinical
22 and non-clinical spaces.⁴³⁹ Frequently, ‘crisis alternative’ care contexts such as recovery houses and
23 crisis cafes are run by voluntary and community non-government organisations, and often include
24 peer workers. However, the pay of these workers, and the resourcing of these community-based
25 services, are often uncertain, contingent, or absent.⁴⁴⁰ The lack of robust research evidence in this
26 area⁴³⁰ likely further contributes to the failure to properly resource and value such non-clinical, peer or
27 community-based spaces in supporting those who self-harm. Observational research from Sweden,
28 has found that brief self-referred admission to hospital may be an effective crisis intervention for
29 young people who self-harm⁴⁴¹ and in the UK, the James’ Place community-based crisis model⁴⁴² is
30 emerging as an accessible crisis intervention for men. The effectiveness of these crisis interventions
31 warrants testing using randomised controlled trials.
32

33 Peer-support can also be valuable in longer-term, therapeutic spaces, away from a crisis event.
34 Therapeutic approaches to treating distress which may be expressed via self-harm often include a
35 relational emphasis and peer-to-peer relationships, such as those found within therapeutic
36 communities, where the “presupposition is the [...] view that a peer community can facilitate
37 recovery” (De Leon & Unterrainer,⁴⁴³ p. 3). Therapeutic community treatment is associated with a
38 promising signal of efficacy in reducing self-harm among people diagnosed with personality
39 disorders.^{444,445}
40

41 **Digital health for those not presenting to health services**

42

43 Given that most individuals who self-harm do not present to health care services for their self-
44 harm,^{31,40,42} and that most available interventions require service presentation, most individuals who
45 think about or engage in self-harm are being missed. Digital or mobile Health (mHealth)-based
46 interventions may partially help to deal with this problem. There has been a substantial increase in the
47 availability of digital crisis chats or text lines, as well as smartphone apps. However, most smartphone
48 apps are not evidence-based.⁴⁴⁶ mHealth interventions for self-harm have also been tested in
49 predominantly White female samples from affluent societies, and the results may not generalise to
50 other groups of individuals and settings.⁴⁴⁷ Furthermore, until recently, few mHealth interventions
51 have been co-produced by individuals with lived experience of self-harm thoughts or behaviours.
52 Therefore, the extent to which available mHealth interventions effectively meet the needs of
53 individuals who think about or engage in self-harm is unclear and this warrants further
54 investigation.⁴⁴⁷

KEY AREAS FOR ACTION

We have discussed the state of our current understanding and identified gaps in knowledge but where does this leave us in terms of the actions we need to take now? Self-harm is an issue for all, but specific actions may be most effectively carried out by particular sectors and actors. Although there is inevitably overlap, here we consider recommendations for governments, those who deliver health and social care services, the media and wider society, and the research community.

Recommendations for governments

Addressing society-level antecedents of distress that contribute to self-harm

It is clear from the previous literature that within countries, rates of self-harm reflect levels of societal distress. Thus, improving the overall wellbeing of populations may reduce the incidence of self-harm.⁴⁴⁸ This can be done through individual-level strategies, but society-wide efforts to improve wellbeing may be much more impactful.^{449,450}

At present, relatively few governments and other high-level stakeholders are considering self-harm as a factor in economic, social welfare, and climate policy decisions. This represents a key missed opportunity for advocacy and change. For example, a stronger financial safety net and more social spending (along with improved access to targeted self-harm prevention interventions) in Denmark, may have played a role in fewer hospital presentations for self-harm observed from 2007 to 2016, in contrast to many other European countries.⁴⁵¹

There is a dearth of studies examining the economic cost-benefit of investment in education, employment programs/unemployment protection, and the general social safety net as a means of reducing self-harm. Such studies ought to be undertaken to investigate whether investment in education, and employment programmes yields longer-term healthcare savings (including fewer emergency department visits and hospitalisations) as well as improved work capacity and productivity. Governments should already appreciate the strong ethical imperative to address self-harm. However, a rigorous business case highlighting potential economic benefits may increase the chances of more widespread implementation of robust policies aimed at societal well-being. It is also important to highlight the potential multiplicative effects of society-wide interventions aimed at reducing risk factors for self-harm. For example, a stronger financial safety net would directly impact poverty but, it may also reduce the stress on households that could otherwise lead to more relationship breakdowns and separations. Reductions in poverty and family disruption may both decrease rates of self-harm.

The global pandemic has provided evidence that cross-national efforts to protect the economic security of populations are possible and indicates an opportunity for self-harm prevention going forward. At the outset of the pandemic, the suicide prevention community was one of many voices calling on governments to provide financial protection to those experiencing unemployment and negative economic consequences.⁴⁵² Such protections, which were widely implemented in HICs, are likely to have played a substantial role in the observation that, overall, rates of self-harm presenting to health services have not risen internationally during the pandemic.^{453,454}

Many countries have already created national strategies for prevention of suicide.³²⁹ A parallel effort to prevent self-harm in general would require a more holistic whole-of-government approach with a broader mandate to address the conditions that promote self-harm. This could build on existing national strategies aimed narrowly at suicide to acknowledge that many other societal efforts can have the potential to reduce self-harm. These may include greater investment in social welfare as described above, added support for families with children, school-based interventions aimed at improving

1 mental health and reducing bullying,^{455,456} responsible climate policies, efforts to reduce gender-based
2 violence, and criminal justice reform. Furthermore, healthcare systems should focus on enhancing
3 access to specialized interventions.

4 **The punishment of people who self-harm around the world must stop**

5
6
7 Punitive responses to self-harm are widespread, despite being unacceptable –this must stop. This is
8 seen starkly in those countries where self-harm is interpreted as ‘attempted suicide’ and subject to
9 prosecution.^{457,458} One-in-ten countries criminalise self-harm,⁴⁵⁹ many of which are LMICs.
10 Decriminalisation is actionable and requires multipartisan policy change at the legislative level, as
11 well as community and societal stakeholders to view self-harm non-punitively. Removing the
12 legislative barrier would reduce stigma and encourage countries to invest in developing national
13 strategies to prevent self-harm. Decriminalisation would also encourage individuals to seek help and
14 support without fear of criminal punishment or legal consequences and would also reduce an
15 unnecessary burden on criminal justice systems.

16
17 Punitive responses to self-harm are also implicit in negative and abusive responses from clinical
18 staff,⁴⁶⁰ as well as in ‘bans’ of self-harm related content on social media.⁴²⁹ Even in countries, such as
19 the UK, where self-harm and suicide are decriminalised, people can still face criminal justice
20 consequences.^{461,462} These can take several forms, including community protection notices which
21 restrict people from self-harming, and the use of police ‘welfare checks’ in place of health or social
22 care responses to self-harm. Increasingly, police are used as a first line of response to some people
23 who self-harm⁴⁶³ and people have described healthcare plans that instruct and plan for calling police
24 in a crisis.^{462,464} Lived-experience perspectives have been key in challenging this,⁴⁶⁵ but for
25 individuals, speaking about their own experiences can come at significant personal and social cost.

26
27 In Panel 8, Emma McAllister highlights the way that criminalisation of self-harm continues to
28 intensify the problems faced by those with lived experience of self-harm.

29 **Addressing the needs of people who self-harm in Low and Middle-Income countries**

30
31
32 There is no one-size-fits-all formula when addressing the needs of individuals who self-harm in
33 LMICs. The development of intervention responses in LMICs should not be constrained by
34 theoretical models which have been developed from a HIC perspective, informed by the features of
35 self-harming behaviours observed in North America, Western Europe, or Australia. These prominent
36 theories focus predominantly on individual-level psychological processes and fail to consider broader
37 contextual factors.^{216,466,467} Many people in LMICs (and in marginalised communities in HICs) do not
38 have their basic needs met. Therefore, understanding the full range of factors leading to self-harm,
39 and the relationship between these, requires a broader lens that considers not just the individual but
40 the family, community and society within a given context. Researchers’ reliance on theories
41 developed in HICs has real-world implications when it comes to their application to more diverse
42 settings, leading to the use of scarce resources to evaluate interventions that are contextually
43 inappropriate and possibly ineffective (see Supplementary Panel 4^{293,467} for an example). Interventions
44 therefore need to be developed which are specific to the context and assumptions that an intervention
45 suitable in one LMIC would be applicable in another need to be eliminated.

46
47 We provide some practical suggestions for ways forward in terms of interventions to address the
48 needs of those people who self-harm in LMICs, and present these as structural/social, and individuals
49 approaches.

50 *Structural and social interventions*

51
52
53 With nearly 11 million people each year in LMICs estimated harming themselves or dying as a
54 consequence of self-harm,^{73,468} and a further 4 to 82 million affected/bereaved by these acts,^{469,470}
55 there is an urgent need to prioritise self-harm prevention in these countries. Achieving this will

1 require radical shifts in the policy and practice. Decriminalising self-harm is just one of the factors
2 which may help to reduce self-harm rates LMICs. Others include tackling the vested interests of
3 commercial entities which waylay any attempts to implement interventions that work. Additionally,
4 there is a need to address the upstream economic, social, and structural determinants of self-harm
5 (e.g., state sanctioned discrimination of sexual minorities). The implementation of such changes
6 requires the building of a coalition across ideologies - a formidable challenge, but one which needs to
7 be addressed in order to prioritise self-harm prevention globally.

8
9 There is strong evidence that the banning of highly toxic pesticides at a national level led to
10 reductions in non-fatal and fatal self-harm and is recommended by the WHO⁴⁷¹ without negatively
11 impacting crop yield.⁴⁷² This needs to be urgently actioned in LMICs. Many pesticide self-poisoning
12 deaths may be the result of a non-suicidal self-harm attempt in LMICs where highly toxic pesticides
13 are readily available. The banning of these pesticides can lead to a reduction of pesticide related fatal
14 self-harm by 35-50%, and a reduction of overall fatal self-harm by 24-50%.²⁴⁶ A global change to
15 legislation could lead to 140,000 fewer self-harm deaths each year.

16
17 Prevention responses in LMIC settings should address the basic needs of populations with an
18 emphasis on those who are most disadvantaged, guaranteeing food, housing, and safety (including
19 protection for those at risk of domestic violence and vulnerable groups, to reduce the social
20 determinants of self-harm. Given that the burden of self-harm is probably most acutely experienced
21 by young people, efforts should be made to target investment on this population.

22
23 Socio-economic interventions, such as cash transfer programmes, could potentially improve welfare
24 and reduce self-harm by mitigating socio-economic hardship, as observed in a recent longitudinal
25 study of over 100,000,000 Brazilians in which financial protections for the most economically
26 vulnerable reduced fatal self-harm rates by 61% (see Supplementary Panel 5).⁹⁷ Strategies targeting
27 poverty and financial hardship due to unemployment during the pandemic should be urgently
28 evaluated across contexts to assess their efficacy in preventing self-harm.⁴⁵² There is a further need for
29 intersectional strategies that synergistically target self-harm and issues that frequently co-occur with
30 these – such as gender-based violence and economic marginalisation.⁴⁷³ Similarly, public awareness
31 campaigns should focus on locally relevant risk factors and be informed by an understanding of the
32 context of self-harm, rather than importing generic approaches to reduction communications from
33 settings where these phenomena vary substantially.

34 35 *Individual interventions*

36
37 Universal health coverage needs to be invested in to ensure that all those in need can access healthcare
38 – including mental healthcare, when needed – without impoverishment. Expanding access to the
39 internet, along with digital literacy support, will be important to address inequalities in accessing
40 online services, but strengthening systems of in-person healthcare and social services is also essential
41 for those requiring face-to-face treatment.

42
43 As previously highlighted, the healthcare response has a significant role to play in preventing self-
44 harm by supporting individuals to access services and support available in sectors outside the medical
45 sector. This could be via the establishment or upskilling of existing community health workers to
46 identify risk factors for suicide and providing support.

47
48 In addition, reforms to medical education are needed to ensure that support for people who self-harm
49 is in line with regional evidence, rather than importing theoretical models or assumptions from very
50 different contexts. Medical curricula should emphasise that what is known from HICs may not be
51 universally applicable (as it is currently presented), and where available, point to evidence from
52 diverse settings on risk and protective factors, patterns of recurrence, and evidence for effective
53 intervention strategies.

1 Attempts to implement mental health services based on HIC models frequently encounter low uptake
2 when they fail to take into account important contextual factors to which people attribute their
3 distress.⁴⁷⁴ Interventions therefore need to address social, personal and historical contexts to be
4 acceptable, particularly in settings where mental illness seems to contribute less to self-harm and
5 social causes contribute more.⁹⁶ For instance, in Ghana, religion and social values provide strong
6 frameworks for interpreting acts of self-harm as condemnable, negatively influencing the willingness
7 of families to provide early help.^{475,476} Successful intervention strategies must respond to these social
8 factors, requiring community participation in their design. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach
9 is needed that marries robust epidemiological evidence with research from the social sciences to better
10 understand why particular groups are at risk and how specific factors confer risk or resilience in a
11 given cultural and economic setting, using methods such as ethnography and qualitative approaches.
12 Without these, interventions are likely to be ineffective.

14 **Addressing the needs of Indigenous peoples**

16 Many existing interventions do not address the root causes of self-harm among Indigenous peoples.
17 Health and mental health service providers can be seen to be parts of a system that continues to
18 colonise and oppress Indigenous peoples. The imposition of mainstream ‘Western’ views about
19 mental health may cause institutional racism and create barriers to treatments that are incongruent
20 with the views, values, and practices of Indigenous peoples. Further, by lacking cultural respect and a
21 historical perspective, these interventions often contribute to individual suffering further by failing to
22 promote collective dignity and psychological liberation. They also unintentionally inflict further
23 psychological oppression by promoting social conformity and reinforcing existing power structures.¹⁴¹
24 The lack of cultural safety in mainstream services is a major obstacle to help-seeking for Indigenous
25 peoples who self-harm.⁴⁷⁷ Indigenous peoples are best placed to ensure safe and appropriate responses
26 to the causes of self-harm in Indigenous communities. Indeed, ‘cultural wounds require cultural
27 medicines’.⁴⁷⁸

29 Experiences of colonisation have varied across time and space. There is no single Indigenous culture
30 or people, but numerous nations, tribes, kinships, and ways of living. Place-based, community-led
31 solutions and interpretations that consider the basic issues of community context, need, resources, and
32 readiness are always essential. Still, common principles to guide a framework of action for Indigenous
33 self-harm prevention can be extrapolated and below, we present six guiding principles for action (see
34 Figure 6). It is likely these guiding principles will be beneficial to all peoples, yet they are especially
35 necessary for effective prevention and management of self-harm among Indigenous peoples. We will
36 now describe each of the principles in turn. We also provide illustrative case studies to highlight the
37 principles in action (see Supplementary Panel 6).^{230,231,479–487}

39 *Guiding principles for action*

41 i) Human rights

43 *“When we have power over our destiny, our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and
44 their culture will be a gift to their country.”* (Referendum Council¹³⁶)

46 A human rights framework is essential to health equity more broadly, including the prevention of self-
47 harm. Although the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), was
48 adopted by the General Assembly on 13th September 2007, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the
49 United States initially voted against it. Although their positions were later reversed, none of these
50 countries nor others with Indigenous populations have meaningfully engaged with the
51 Declaration.^{116,488,489}

53 What would meaningful engagement entail? Truth-telling and reconciliation, an acknowledgement of
54 colonisation and for the structures of colonisation to be reformed to enable Indigenous self-
55 determination. As a result of colonisation, many Indigenous communities have collectively

1 experienced an assault on their ability to self-determine their future, which has resulted in an extreme
2 sense of powerlessness and loss^{137,490,491} – key drivers to self-harm. Conversely, there is some
3 evidence that Indigenous communities who were able to maintain self-governance and a sense of
4 cultural continuity despite existing within a settler colonial nation have lower rates of fatal self-
5 harm.⁴⁸¹ However, the issues of sovereignty and self-determination are complex.⁴⁹² Participation in
6 society, without ownership and resources, is not the same as self-determination and autonomy. Case
7 Study 1 in Supplementary Panel 6 illustrates the steps that are being taken to create Indigenous
8 specific self-harm prevention strategies.

9
10 ii) Indigenous community control

11
12 Indigenous efforts to prevent self-harm must have substantive involvement with Indigenous peoples
13 and empower the self-determination of community-controlled health organisations that address social
14 determinants of health. Mainstream self-harm prevention strategies rarely engage in critical or counter
15 colonial rationales (e.g., Stoor et al.⁴⁹³). However, Indigenous communities and community-controlled
16 organisations are able to challenge the status quo.

17
18 Holistic approaches to the prevention of self-harm must concurrently target individual distress,
19 community wellbeing, and systemic barriers to self-determination by prioritising Indigenous Elders
20 and healers, young people, traditional governance structures, and community-controlled organisations.
21 Indigenous participatory action and community-led research methodologies constitute best practice
22 for research with Indigenous peoples and communities.^{322,494} Indigenous methodologies ensure that
23 self-harm research and prevention practice is tethered to community leadership and decision-making,
24 that communities shape the needs and priorities of the research, and that the research meets
25 community needs and priorities, and engages and empowers community peoples and
26 organisations.^{322,494} See Case Study 2 in Supplementary Panel 6 for more details.

27
28 iii) Upstream and midstream prevention of self-harm

29
30 Self-harm prevention efforts need to address the complex conditions of Indigenous peoples' lives and
31 the social determinants of health. By creating healthy, safe societies and increasing resilience among
32 Indigenous peoples, the risk of self-harming behaviour emerging may ultimately diminish.

33
34 Upstream (structural) interventions address the foundational social and economic structures, including
35 colonial structures, which impact health equity on the macro level.^{495,496} This means addressing the
36 root causes of the social and economic conditions that are conducive to self-harm for Indigenous
37 peoples through restorative justice and redress. Midstream interventions alternatively are enacted on
38 the level of policy and seek to reduce the harm caused by structural drivers of inequality. For
39 example, research might consider how the provision of affordable housing might decrease Indigenous
40 deaths by fatal self-harm. Downstream interventions are those which seek to increase the quality,
41 relevance, and equitable access to health and social services, including mental health for Indigenous
42 peoples.

43
44 Although all three levels of intervention are necessary, there is perhaps an urgent need for prevention
45 research at the upstream and midstream level to address the issue of intergenerational poverty and
46 trauma in Indigenous communities and the resultant lack of access to resources and sense of agency.
47 By focusing on upstream and midstream approaches, the provision of and access to services
48 downstream becomes a natural outcome. See Case Study 3 in Supplementary Panel 6 for more details.

49
50 iv) Life promotion

51
52 Indigenous communities are now focussing efforts to improve wellbeing on life promoting and
53 strengths-based practices. Life promotion frameworks move beyond merely achieving the goal of
54 Indigenous survival to achieving thriving.

1 “Aboriginal health means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual, but refers to the social,
2 emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve
3 their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. It
4 is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.” (National Aboriginal
5 Health Strategy Working Party⁴⁹⁷)
6

7 In research and practice, life promotion prioritises holistic wellbeing as the key strategy and
8 mechanism of change.^{231,486} This enables a systemic shift towards the creation of comprehensive
9 socio-political, cultural, environmental, and economic conditions conducive for thriving. While
10 innovative to non-Indigenous communities, this approach is not new to Indigenous communities
11 whose inherent value systems privilege harmony and wellness among all peoples, beings, lands, and
12 in relation to the cosmos. Subsequently, these systems resist the evidence hierarchy that quantifies
13 health in indicators of deficit and instead embed centuries of practice-based evidence that recognise
14 holistic health as harmony evident by thriving individuals, communities, cultures, and natural
15 environments.⁴⁹⁸ See Case Study 4 in Supplementary Panel 6 for more details.
16

17 v) Cultural determinants 18

19 Systematic policies of cultural dispossession and disintegration, including the criminalisation of
20 cultural practices and languages and socio-political sovereignty, have been implemented in the name
21 of colonisation. The effect of these policies has been described in many ways: colonial trauma,
22 historical trauma, intergenerational trauma, and cultural genocide.^{155,158–161} The role of these cultural
23 determinants of self-harm must be recognized.
24

25 Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith⁴⁹⁴ describes colonisation as experienced by Indigenous peoples to a
26 process of “*disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social
27 relations, and their own ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with the world*” (p. 29). Western
28 systems and societies are yet to acknowledge their histories of colonisation and systems of racism.
29

30 Truth-telling and consciousness raising about historical trauma are essential to grief
31 resolution.^{145,487,499} Given the impact of Eurocentric research on Indigenous communities, care is
32 needed to ensure that self-harm research considers the breadth of Indigenous knowledges to offer
33 understandings and solutions to their distress.
34

35 The role of maintaining traditional culture in enhancing wellbeing and preventing self-harm is
36 described by Elder Bernard Tipiloura in the Elders Report, “*not supporting homelands, not
37 supporting cultural education, and not supporting cultural activities is actually a matter of life and
38 death for us. It’s not just a nice little thing to support; it’s our people’s inner soul*”.¹⁴⁹ The literature
39 has consistently demonstrated that culture is significantly and positively related to physical health,
40 holistic wellbeing, and negatively related to risk-taking and self-defeating behaviours.^{500–502} See Case
41 Study 5 in Supplementary Panel 6 for more details.
42

43 vi) Indigenous knowledges 44

45 There is a long history of the exclusion of Indigenous people’s worldviews, epistemologies and
46 philosophies. Yet the science of understanding and preventing self-harm stands to benefit deeply by
47 the inclusion of the expertise of Indigenous peoples. This requires ecological reflexivity and epistemic
48 pluralism in the scientific community and a need to include Indigenous people’s diverse healing
49 traditions and practices in thinking about self-harm among this population.
50

51 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson⁵⁰³ makes clear that “*the goal of Indigenous resistance can no longer
52 be cultural resurgence as a mechanism for inclusion in a multicultural mosaic, instead, calling for
53 unapologetic, place-based Indigenous alternatives to the destructive logics of the colonial state*”.
54 Health inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can be redressed by preventative
55 practices that affirm and nourish cultural identity and restoration, recognise cultural idioms of distress,

1 and identify culturally connected and community-based approaches to health.^{139,490,504,505} The
2 decolonisation process therefore represents recovery and healing using Indigenous knowledge
3 systems.
4

5 Most Indigenous scholars agree that the wellness of Indigenous individuals and communities can only
6 be measured using an Indigenous knowledge framework.⁴⁹⁹ In future, approaches need to be multi-
7 factorial and underpinned by self-determination and community empowerment to ensure
8 sustainability, allowing Indigenous peoples to return to their ways of knowing, being, and
9 doing.^{490,506–509}
10

11 **Recommendations for the delivery of services**

12

13 Clinical services play a clear role in responses to self-harm and those who self-harm benefit from
14 medical treatment to reduce long-term injuries or prevent death. However, services designed to help
15 those who self-harm may also cause iatrogenic harm.⁵¹⁰ Evidence of poor treatment and negative
16 attitudes among healthcare practitioners goes back at least as far as the 1970s and continues
17 today.^{59,435,511,512} In the UK, extensive ‘survivor’ testimonies were published in the 1990s, detailing
18 problematic treatment experiences^{52,513} which are echoed in more recent reports. People who self-
19 harm report being sutured without anaesthetic, told that they ‘liked’ pain, being ignored, having
20 treatment withheld, told that they were not as ‘deserving’ of care as other patients, and told that they
21 need to ‘help themselves’ rather than seeking medical care.⁴⁶⁰ Abusive, dismissive, or otherwise
22 negative treatment can have far-reaching impacts on those who self-harm. In the UK, Owens et al.³⁶
23 reported a range of negative consequences highlighted by those who self-harmed, following poor
24 treatment. This included avoiding future help-seeking and exacerbation of distress, leading in some
25 cases to severe acts of self-harm. In this study, concerns about being ‘taken seriously’ when seeking
26 help were said to result in the infliction of more ‘serious’ wounds prior to help-seeking.^{36,460}
27

28 “...I ended up doing some damage to my wrist so that they’d admit me, because I knew that if I went
29 home where I had knives...So it’s kind of like you feel you’ve got to turn up the volume loud enough
30 by doing stuff before they take you seriously.” (Strike et al.⁵¹⁴, p. 36, in MacDonald et al.⁴⁶⁰, p. 475)
31

32 In light of such reports, there are frequent calls for more training for clinical staff, to help them better
33 understand and respond to self-harm (e.g., Quinlivan et al.²⁸⁷). However, without more radical
34 changes occurring in the way that care is delivered to people who self-harm, training efforts can only
35 achieve a limited amount. As Monteux and Monteux⁵¹⁵ argue, all too often care practices centre on
36 ‘doing to’ rather than more everyday care of ‘being with’ (p. 3).
37

38 In Panel 9 (Tash Swingler, Australia) and Supplementary Panel 7 (Fiona Stirling, UK), personal
39 insights are provided on the characteristics of ‘good care,’ arguing that a radical shift in care for self-
40 harm is needed globally. The regularity of ‘horror stories’^{59,287,460} suggests that there has been an
41 overall ‘failure to heed’ the knowledge shared by testimonies of those who self-harm.⁴³⁵ Furthermore,
42 the regularity, and apparent resistance to change, may represent a form of testimonial injustice (also
43 see Supplementary Panel 8).⁴³⁷ The question is not ‘how do we hear about these experiences?’ but
44 rather ‘how do we transform listening into real change?’
45

46 **Co-production – a way forward?**

47

48 Co-production is defined by Boyle and Harris⁵¹⁶ as being a means “of delivering public services in an
49 equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their
50 neighbours” (p. 11). Similarly, co-design provides a way in which people with lived experience of
51 self-harm can be meaningfully involved in the design and delivery of services. In Supplementary
52 Panel 9, Tash Swingler provides a summary of recent work she has been involved in, providing just
53 one example of how co-design can work in practice.
54

1 Clinical guidelines, such as those from NICE¹ emphasise the importance of involving individuals who
2 self-harm in the decision-making process regarding their care and treatment plans. Such guidelines
3 aim to promote a person-centred approach and encourage a collaborative partnership between
4 healthcare providers and patients in managing self-harm. The benefits of co-production as a means of
5 democratising assumed expertise related to the design of services has been written about extensively
6 elsewhere.³⁰⁴ This work is time intensive and requires adequate resourcing. There are also significant
7 challenges to be met, regarding power, and the relative value that knowledge from lived experience
8 may be accorded.^{301,517} However, there are radical benefits of co-production – by challenging
9 hierarchies of knowledge, developing meaningful relationships between service providers, service
10 users, some of the injustices and silencing we have detailed above may be avoided.^{301,340,438,518}

11
12 Having those with lived experience of self-harm more centrally involved in design, delivery, and
13 leadership of care may offer some ways forward in tackling long-standing mistreatment and poor care.
14 In relation to this, young people warrant particular attention. First, the incidence of self-harm rises
15 sharply during adolescence. Second, both clinical interventions and those offered outside of standard
16 healthcare generally fail to adequately address the specific needs of young people, do not reflect the
17 ways in which young people interact with their world, and are not developed in partnership with
18 young people.³⁵³ Youth instead express a strong wish for supportive environments in schools,
19 families, and communities where they feel comfortable disclosing their distress and where those
20 around them will respond in helpful, non-stigmatising ways.⁵¹⁹ Third, young people interact with the
21 world in a different way from previous generations. They are digital natives who are comfortable
22 interacting in online environments. Understanding self-harm and its prevention through the lens of
23 today's young people will help to facilitate better outcomes for both the youth of today and the adults
24 of tomorrow.^{520,521} This may be particularly important for groups who may experience stigma such as
25 LGBTQIA+ youth, many of whom may feel more comfortable speaking about self-harm in supportive
26 online environments. What is needed, therefore, are high-quality, age-appropriate, holistic, and
27 compassionate policy and practice responses.

28
29 Systems must also shift away from a philosophical standard of care where interventions are wholly
30 designed by adults and located within a health (or illness) paradigm. The solution requires a youth-
31 focused approach that makes young people with lived experience the key actors in future efforts to
32 prevent self-harm, not only at the intervention level or treatment level but they must also be key actors
33 in society-wide strategic planning. Recent evidence suggests that suicide prevention videos developed
34 by youth themselves can increase help-seeking and reduce suicidal thoughts and feelings.⁵²² Youth
35 self-harm prevention efforts should therefore be co-designed with young people to optimize their
36 effectiveness (see Supplementary Panel 10).^{523,524} This requires an infrastructure to support
37 meaningful and ongoing youth involvement, and adults who are willing to forge genuine partnerships
38 with young people.

40 **Enhancing the coordination of care**

41
42 People who repeatedly self-harm often have complex needs. These needs may be clinical, but many
43 are social and economic, such as unemployment, homelessness, and social isolation.⁵²⁵ In some HICs,
44 this need is being partially met through services that offer care coordination to people who have
45 presented to the emergency department following self-harm.⁵²⁶ At the same time, the fragmented
46 nature of our health systems, often funded and managed by separate agencies, means that many
47 people who might benefit from this coordinated approach are not receiving referrals to 'aftercare
48 services' or are not presenting to services at all. Overly complex care pathways with insufficient
49 capacity represent additional barriers to ensuring high quality care for individuals presenting to
50 hospital following self-harm.^{527,528} Better integration of services and adequate staffing capacity is
51 needed to ensure that people do not fall between the cracks in the system. There are currently no
52 evidence-based care pathways for self-harm, but the principles underpinning them as well as their
53 components have been well delineated in clinical guidelines and previous research.^{1,16,17} Principles
54 include providing care which is compassionate, collaborative, and timely. Involving family members
55 and carers can be helpful and continuity of care (both in terms of health and care personnel but also

1 informational continuity) is key. Continuity might best be achieved through having multi-disciplinary
2 specialist teams who work across traditional boundaries such as primary and secondary care, acute
3 and mental health settings. In terms of the essential components of care pathways, these should
4 include treatment for any urgent physical health needs, high quality psychosocial assessment, and
5 treatment of underlying conditions as well as the ready availability of psychological interventions
6 specifically designed for self-harm.^{1,16,17,529} Of course (and like many other areas of service provision)
7 there is limited evidence or consensus to guide the design of care pathways for self-harm in LMICs.⁵³⁰
8

9 **Recommendations for the media and wider society**

10 **Modelling healthy coping across society**

11
12
13 Any effort undertaken by mainstream societies to tackle the issue of self-harm must begin by
14 revisiting the basic premises of the messages we send to the public about stress and how to cope with
15 distress. Given this context, we consider healthier and safer messages to be those that a) validate that
16 emotional distress can be difficult to manage but b) model alternative, adaptive coping strategies such
17 as help-seeking instead of self-harming behaviour. These messages do not normalise, encourage, or
18 glorify self-harm. Reshaping cultural norms and reorienting mainstream society toward healthier
19 messaging presents a highly complex challenge and entails the need for alignment between diverse
20 stakeholders including marketing experts, celebrities, and related “influencers”). Historically, a lack
21 of awareness of the need for safer messages and understanding of how to communicate them, has
22 often resulted in counterproductive discourse.⁵³¹ However, recent evidence regarding messaging for
23 behavioural change is instructive. There is an opportunity to learn from the innovative approaches
24 developed in LMICs as showcased by the SIREN project – see the case study in Supplementary Panel
25 11.⁵³² There is hope that communication challenges can be overcome as they have been successfully
26 in other efforts to shift norms and discourse to improve public health (e.g., smoking prevention, safe
27 sex practices, road safety, physical distancing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic). We argue
28 that self-harm-related communication across media and society requires a reorientation towards safe
29 communication that establishes adaptive coping and help-seeking as the norm. In Panel 10, we set out
30 our Commission’s 4 key principles which we believe should underpin healthier and safer
31 communication about self-harm.
32

33 We acknowledge that achieving such a reorientation will be challenging, given differences in opinion
34 about the functions and effects of media consumption, along with difficulties in regulating an ever-
35 increasing number of media outlets. To do this effectively, we must leverage the fact that social
36 learning can also lead to positive change. Dissemination of stories of resilience and survival in people
37 facing suicidal crises may lead to reduced subsequent suicides across a population and there is every
38 reason to suspect that the same principles would hold for self-harm in general.^{259,533–536} The scientific
39 community has an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the kinds of content and narratives
40 that cause harm and those that often confer benefit.^{258,259,536–542} Narratives of mastery involve a
41 scenario in which an individual, ideally a highly identifiable one, finds themselves in a crisis situation
42 with the urge to self-harm but instead takes concrete steps to find another way to cope, such as calling
43 a crisis helpline. Such portrayals of resilience at times of adversity appear to have benefits in that
44 they establish a norm of mastery and help-seeking. Australia’s ‘Man Up’ series and American hip hop
45 artist Logic’s song ‘1-800-273-8255’ are two examples of public messages of help seeking and
46 survival and each appeared to lead to an increase in help seeking.^{534,543} The latter was also associated
47 with 245 fewer suicides (-5.5%) in a one-month period across the United States.⁵³⁴ Against this, we
48 also acknowledge that there is literature highlighting the potentially detrimental effects of recovery
49 stories if, for example, they include certain problematic content (e.g. depictions of self-harm methods)
50 and the necessity to tell only ‘appropriate’ stories about self-harm.^{544,545} The key gaps in this area,
51 therefore, do not relate to a lack of theoretical or practical understanding. Rather, there are challenges
52 with knowledge transfer and exchange as well as implementation, for example, because journalists,
53 news editors, and social media platforms are incentivised to spread “edgy” material and “bad news”
54 that capture the public’s attention. This circumstance, nevertheless, provides one of the most

1 promising opportunities for mainstream societal-level intervention as long as there is careful attention
2 to content so that inadvertent harm is avoided as described below.

3 4 **Changing how we view self-harm as a society**

5
6 The way in which society views self-harm can have a major impact on the likelihood of its members
7 engaging in these acts (those both with and without a history of prior self-harm). The overarching goal
8 of a cultural reset must be *reducing* the psychological and social availability of self-harm while
9 *increasing* the psychological availability of coping strategies in response to emotional distress (see
10 Figure 7).

11
12 One of the challenges of this approach is that some discourse about self-harm, even discourse that
13 may be harmful in certain circumstances for some people, may confer benefit in others and/or for
14 specific individuals (e.g., youth who share about self-harm on social media receiving support from
15 peers) (see Figure 8).⁵⁴⁶ Nevertheless, such benefits are undermined if they are not paired with broader
16 efforts to avoid normalization and to promote alternative coping strategies for managing adversity as
17 well as help-seeking.⁵³⁸ It is therefore essential to strike a careful balance between speaking openly
18 about self-harm while avoiding inadvertently presenting these behaviours as normative or desirable
19 outcomes.

20
21 Furthermore, it is important to strike a balance between having supportive environments in which
22 people can openly engage in discourse about self-harm and not inadvertently normalize these
23 behaviours. To accomplish this, we must adhere to four principles aimed at cautious, thoughtful, and
24 limited self-harm-related discourse (see Panel 10). These principles are sufficiently general that it
25 should be possible to implement them within and across HICs and LMICs. Indeed, an emphasis on
26 wellness promotion may be more acceptable and easily integrated within many nations and globally.

27
28 Encouraging broad implementation across society has been and will continue to be a challenge given
29 that there are numerous vectors of potentially harmful and helpful messaging. Historically, efforts in
30 this area have mainly focused on the specific outcome of suicide rather than the broader issue of self-
31 harm and these have largely involved the dissemination of guidelines or recommendations for media
32 professionals.⁵⁴⁷ Such recommendations have substantial value and can indeed, over time, be used as a
33 way to affect change; however, they are insufficient for the sort of fundamental change that is
34 necessary to shift cultural attitudes and lower self-harm rates. Future efforts must promote “standards”
35 and “norms” for a broader range of stakeholders (e.g., from the social media industry, schools and
36 other educational settings, community organisations) on how to communicate about self-harm, in
37 keeping with the four principles.

38 39 **Creating safe and supportive environments for young people**

40
41 One of the functions of self-harm can be to communicate distress to others in circumstances where
42 youth feel unable to do so in other ways.⁸ In keeping with the messaging goals described above, it is
43 important for society to model to youth that distress is not a sign of weakness and that sharing is a
44 sign of strength. This will serve to lower barriers to help-seeking, which can be substantial for people
45 who self-harm given issues of stigma, as long as it occurs within a culture that promotes positive
46 coping and in the context of health systems that ensure timely access to targeted services. In keeping
47 with this approach, it is particularly important for us to ensure that supportive environments exist
48 where young people can disclose their difficulties and receive compassionate, supportive responses.⁵⁴⁸
49 There is increasing evidence that, when done thoughtfully, it is safe to talk to young people about self-
50 harm,^{524,549} and we know that young people discuss these issues among themselves in their own
51 environments. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined above, we need to make sure that the benefits of
52 facilitating openness and encouraging help-seeking are balanced against risks of harm. Central to
53 these supportive environments are young people themselves, and we need to make sure that they are
54 equipped to support each other. Schools are an obvious environment where this idea can be taken
55 forward, but to date, school-based interventions have focused mainly on “gatekeeper training” (i.e.,

1 educating non-expert school staff to identify and respond to those at risk to specialized services).^{550,551}
2 This remains important, but as noted above, young people often prefer to seek help from each other.³⁴
3 We therefore need to reframe our understanding of who “gatekeepers” are in this context, and include
4 young people themselves. This is starting to occur in mental health more broadly, with a number of
5 school-based programs designed to increase awareness of mental health difficulties and equip young
6 people to seek and offer help (e.g., Youth Aware of Mental Health, Teen Mental Health First Aid),
7 but well-evaluated self-harm specific examples are rare.⁵⁵² It is important to emphasise the need for a
8 balanced approach to avoid undue pressure on young people or an inadvertent message that finding
9 solutions rests entirely on their shoulders.

10 **The online environment**

11
12
13 Much peer-to-peer communication about self-harm occurs on social media,⁵⁵³ where young people
14 create their own content and curate their own communities. As such, social media provides an
15 important platform for young people to build a sense of community, share their feelings with peers
16 who have had similar experiences, seek help, and help others.⁵⁵⁴ However, the potential for negative
17 impacts also exists, with concerns that sharing distressing or explicit content may cause harm. High
18 profile cases of young people engaging in self-harm as a result of online communication are
19 frequently reported by media in high income countries. Both individually targeted ‘attacks’, such as
20 trolling, or generalised mass delivery of harmful messages, videos and stories, through Instagram or
21 TikTok have occurred. Recent examples include a young Australian man who took his life hours after
22 being blackmailed by people in Nigeria who tricked him into sharing images of himself.⁵⁵⁵ There are
23 many others.⁵⁵⁶ Parents of young people are particularly alarmed by the potential for social media
24 harms and want something done⁵⁵⁷ and in the UK, for example, they have been instrumental in
25 advocating for new legislation for the regulation of social media services.⁵⁵⁸ However, the issue is
26 complex. Social media can be a source of support for those who self-harm and a means by which
27 people can seek help.⁵⁵⁹ Indeed, recent meta-analyses of the association between social media and
28 mental health report only weak effects.^{560,561}

29 The uptake of social media, combined with excessive parental restrictions on children’s freedom
30 (helicopter parenting) is considered by some, including Haidt,⁵⁶² to be the cause of the recent increase
31 in self-harm among young people— via a range of mechanisms reflecting possibly “a new way of
32 growing up”. Technological innovations have long had fundamental effects on social norms and the
33 structure of societies, so concerns about the impact of social media on mental health must be taken
34 seriously. However, there have also been more nuanced reflections of the relationship between social
35 media use and mental health. For example, Etchells argues that the question we need to answer is
36 “*why do some people prosper online while others get into real difficulty?*”⁵⁶³

37 Currently, the evidence for Haidt’s proposition is uncertain. There is evidence that rates of anxiety,
38 depression and self-harm may have increased in successive generations of young people, although this
39 is disputed by some and may not have happened across the globe.⁵⁶⁴ However, whether smartphone
40 and social media are the culprits is not clear.^{565–567} Longitudinal data reveal associations between
41 levels of social media use and depression, but these associations are weak, and do not imply
42 causality.⁵⁶⁸ Any explanation for the role of social media must also account for the greater rise of self-
43 harm in young women. The “social media argument” is that girls engage in social media more
44 commonly than boys and that the content of social media impacts girls more, as they are affected
45 more than boys by social comparison, are subjected to more severe judgements, seek ‘idealised
46 bodies’, more likely to share emotions and are subjected to greater harassment.

47 Concern about the potential danger of social media is likely to ramp up with the widespread use of
48 Large Language Models (LLMs) and generative AI.^{569,570} Although AI algorithms have long been
49 used in the generation of information on smartphones and social media platforms, LLMs such as
50 ChatGPT, released to the public in November 2022, have made this technology accessible to anyone

1 with a laptop or a smartphone. Generative AI is capable of creating information, not just sharing it. It
2 can thus deliver relevant, targeted, ongoing and updated information to young people about self-harm.
3 It can also create and build information and mythologies around self-harm and promote non-scientific
4 information directly into the phones of young people and their friends. Generative AI may accelerate
5 the generation of falsehoods about suicide and self-harm, feeding on the explicit and uncensored
6 misinformation generated by others.

7 Ultimately, a nuanced understanding of what is helpful and harmful, for whom, and under what
8 circumstances, is required. So too are strategies that harness the benefits of social media while
9 simultaneously mitigating the risks. Initiatives might include protocols and targeted education to
10 ensure that interactions in the online environment are safe and helpful, and information about youth-
11 friendly services and tools for at-risk individuals is disseminated. This requires strong partnerships
12 between the self-harm prevention sector, young people, social media platforms, as well as social
13 media influencers who may be particularly useful as a means of delivering information to the public at
14 large.⁵³³ It also requires that the social media industry take greater responsibility for the safety of
15 young people. Governments have a key role in providing regulatory frameworks for this industry and
16 some are starting to take appropriate steps. An extensive list of proposed actions to be taken by
17 governments, media companies, parents and young people has been compiled by the US Surgeon
18 General’s Advisory.⁵⁷¹ These include government regulation through frameworks, standards, policing
19 and legal interventions, and regulation of companies who own the platforms.⁵⁷² Mitigation of the risks
20 associated with AI will require safeguards – where the constraints of what generative AI can and
21 cannot do are baked into AI tools.

22 **Recommendations for researchers and research funders**

23
24
25 When extrapolating evidence, it is important to ensure the countries are similar at least in the
26 epidemiology of self-harm. For example, in LMICs, funding discovery research might constitute a
27 better use of resources than funding intervention studies based primarily on evidence and theoretical
28 models derived from HICs.^{530,573,574} An essential first step is to establish robust local register systems
29 to monitor trends in self-harm,⁵⁷⁵ ideally with consistent indicators to allow comparisons over time
30 and between settings. This will require careful design to consider potential under-reporting of self-
31 harm due to the continued illegality of such acts in some LMIC settings, and societal taboos against
32 self-harm in many contexts.^{576,577} In addition, given the wider context of illegality in certain settings,
33 additional privacy concerns need to be considered to ensure that the case registers do not inadvertently
34 put people at risk.

35
36 Research funding should be directed towards LMICs, with priority given to areas where the burden is
37 greatest. International funders need to strengthen research capacity in LMICs in a sustainable way.
38 This will also require experienced researchers to take an active role in supporting and mentoring
39 researchers in settings where self-harm research capacity is lacking. The increased capacity within
40 LMICs could also support policy makers to make evidence-based decisions which are relevant and
41 appropriate to their local context.

42
43 Leadership change is also required. The dominance of HIC researchers in leadership positions gives
44 disproportionate prominence to issues pertaining to these contexts. The two main international
45 research communities for research in the field have been led by HIC researchers, with the notable
46 exception of the most recent past president of the International Association for Suicide Prevention
47 (IASP). It is noteworthy that after over a decade of IASP receiving a large proportion of their funding
48 from the pesticide industry, the executive committee, under the leadership of a Pakistani president,
49 decided to stop accepting donations from industry. The high death toll associated with pesticide
50 related self-harm is almost exclusively a LMIC issue.²⁴⁵

51
52 Research leadership from LMIC settings is essential to ensure that research questions and methods are
53 informed by a full understanding of the local context, and to avoid further perpetuating neo-colonial

1 relationships within global health research.^{578,579} Researchers, especially those in HICs with greater
2 voice, need to advocate for change and challenge structural barriers which hinder engagement and
3 development (e.g., hosting conferences solely in Europe/North America and only in English).
4 Diversity of experience is needed to support the advancement of self-harm prevention, and this will
5 only happen if active and continued steps are taken to review LMIC representation in positions of
6 power and research in the self-harm field. Similarly, there is a pressing need to challenge
7 ethnocentrism in publishing, and in the development of international guidelines.
8

9 Currently, most of the evidence about self-harm is tucked away in specialist journals, many of which
10 are not fully accessible without fees. Furthermore, most literature is written for a scientific audience;
11 it should be tailored to a lay readership to ensure better utilisation and uptake. In this respect, evidence
12 synthesis and knowledge translation can play crucial future roles, by ensuring that research findings
13 are synthesised and then packaged in ways that are accessible and meaningful for public consumption
14 and particularly for decision-makers and service providers.
15

16 CONCLUSION

17
18 This Commission has brought together a diverse literature to improve our understanding of the
19 meanings, causes and impact of self-harm across the globe. Integrating the different discourses into a
20 singular voice was never our aim; it would have defeated our purpose which was to embrace
21 neglected viewpoints. Arguably the tensions that exist in relation to the conceptualisation of self-harm
22 defy integration and easy resolution. Yet, despite some differences of opinion about the nature of this
23 phenomenon and the associated responses from others, a clear message has emerged from the work of
24 this commission: self-harm is a global concern and it matters to everyone. To those who experience
25 self-harm and who may have no other voice or outlet for their feelings; to the world's oldest living
26 communities who have been subject to centuries of colonial trauma and oppression; to the health
27 professionals treating patients who have harmed themselves and then ambivalently sought help; to the
28 parents of children viewing images of self-harm online. Self-harm also matters to the researchers who
29 are trying to understand why people hurt themselves and whether this can be prevented, treated, or
30 managed more safely and compassionately. It matters to all these groups because it is intimately
31 linked to the identity of individuals and communities and has significant effects on the health,
32 wellbeing, and the survival of human beings. However, to date, self-harm has been neglected as a
33 public health concern with adverse consequences for large populations across the world. Critical gaps
34 currently exist in our knowledge and understanding of self-harm; these gaps need to be addressed.
35 Integrated perspectives from lived experience, Indigenous Peoples, and those from LMICs should
36 challenge the way we have previously understood self-harm; stories from people from these groups
37 should be considered alongside the statistics and privileged above more conventional High-Income
38 approaches to understanding self-harm. Self-harm must be understood as an intensely individual
39 experience but one that occurs in an interpersonal, community, and societal context.
40

41 We have identified significant opportunities for action to make a difference to the lives of people who
42 self-harm across the world. These calls for action are distilled into 12 key recommendations (see
43 Panel 1) for action by governments, those involved in the delivery of services, researchers, and
44 research funders, as well as journalists, entertainment and social media companies, and content
45 creators and others who may facilitate public discourse about self-harm. These recommendations
46 reflect the need for involvement from the whole of society. These include schools and universities,
47 technical companies and business, for the ethical and appropriate design of digital technologies,
48 Indigenous leaders to advocate and implement change in their communities, not-for-profit
49 organisations to implement new models of care, train peer support workers and support co-design, and
50 for philanthropy, to fund projects that will target self-harm compassionately, equitably, and within
51 groups that have the greatest need, wherever they are located. Although we all must take
52 responsibility for our roles in actioning these recommendations, ultimately, governments, human
53 rights organisations, and international agencies must take the lead responsibility for changing harmful
54 policies and to implement, monitor, regulate and promote actions to achieve the goal of improving the

1 lives of people who self-harm across the globe. Our role in this Commission is to provide the
2 evidence and advocacy needed to see change.

3 4 **Contributors**

5 PM developed the original idea for the Commission which was co-led with HC. PM, HC, NK and
6 RCO were the executive group for the Commission providing overall leadership and attending regular
7 Commission meetings to discuss structure and content. AC led the drafting of content on Lived
8 Experience, which was co-written with RA, MAB, VH, IM, SP, FSt, EM, and NS. PD led the drafting
9 of content on self-harm and Indigenous peoples, which was co-written with JA, VMO, JPAS, WW,
10 MW, LD, and KLD. DK led the drafting of content on self-harm and Low- and Middle-Income
11 Countries, which was co-written with LFC, DBM, JO, VP, SP, AL, and TR. OJK led the drafting of
12 content on individual risk factors and treatments, which was co-written with AL, MLK, MAO, RCO,
13 FSh, GT, and SV. MS and JP led the drafting of content on public health and societal factors which
14 was co-written with KH, SH, TN, JR and PSFY. DM contributed analysis on the economic costs of
15 self-harm. All authors contributed to drafts of the Commission. PM led the revision of the final draft
16 with input from HC, MJS, NK and RCO. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the
17 manuscript.

18 19 **Declaration of Interests**

20 PM reports grants from National Institute for Health and Care Research, The Medical Research
21 Council, Bristol & Weston Hospitals Charity, and The Cassell Hospital Charitable Trust. PM received
22 salary support from the National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration
23 Southwest, the NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS
24 Foundation, and Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust. NK reports grants from
25 National Institute for Health and Care Research, HQIP, DHSC. He is supported by the Greater
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33 member of the International Academy of Suicide Research; He was a member of the National Institute
34 of Health and Care Excellence's guideline group for the management of self-harm; and reports grants
35 from Medical Research Foundation, the Mindstep Foundation, Chief Scientist Office, Medical
36 Research Council, Public Health Scotland, Scottish Government, and National Institute for Health
37 Research (NIHR), Shout 85258, Scottish Association for Mental Health, Zoetis Foundation,
38 Jonathan's Voice, ADHD UK & Barfil Charitable Trust. HC reports grants from the NHMRC, the
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44 Research Foundation. MS declares salary support through Academic Scholar Awards from the
45 Departments of Psychiatry at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and the University of Toronto. OJK
46 is currently supported by a Research Foundation Flanders Senior Postdoctoral Fellowship. She also
47 reports grants from Research Foundation Flanders, and the King Baudouin Foundation. She is co-
48 chair of the International Association for Suicide Prevention Early Career Group, for which she
49 receives complimentary student membership, and is a former member of the Samaritans Research
50 Ethics Board. She has previously received travel grants and waived registration to present at
51 conferences of the International Academy of Suicide Research. JP reports grants from the National
52 Health and Medical Research Council, the Medical Research Future Fund, the Australian Government
53 Department of Health, New South Wales Health, and the National Suicide Prevention Office. LFC is
54 the third Vice President of the International Association for Suicide Prevention and is a permanent
55 member of the Malaysian Technical Working Group for Suicide Prevention. LFC reports grant from

1 Centre of Pesticide Suicide Prevention (University of Edinburgh), has received honorarium from
2 Johnson & Johnson as a consultant and speaker, and, through her institution, has received industry-
3 sponsored medication sampling programme (compassionate patient programme) for clinical use for
4 medication samples of esketamine (Johnson & Johnson), brexpiprazole (Lundbeck), Abilify Maintena
5 (Lundbeck), and Trinza (Johnson & Johnson). DK is funded through the Elizabeth Blackwell Institute
6 for Health Research at the University of Bristol, UK, which is supported by the Wellcome Trust. DK
7 is also in receipt of a grant from the Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention and the American
8 Foundation for Suicide Prevention. DK is also a steering group member of the UK's National Suicide
9 Prevention Alliance, and the Migration Health, and Development Research Initiative. VP has
10 consulted with Google and Modern Health. AC reports grants from Wellcome, Leverhulme Trust,
11 Economic and Social Research Council, and funded consultancy from Scottish Government and
12 Alcohol Change UK. She is a member of the Academic Advisory Group to the Scottish Government's
13 National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group. SP reports a 2021-2024 Vanier Canada Graduate
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18 yLab (a division of the Foundation for Young Australians). She reports previous employment with
19 Orygen, previous roles with Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and the Victorian Department of
20 Families, Fairness and Housing and Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet and Moonee Valley
21 City Council, funded travel through Black Dog Institute and International Association of Suicide
22 Prevention, current research tie to Orygen. FSt reports a grant from the Burdett Trust for Nursing and
23 support from Abertay University. PSFY is a member of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health of
24 the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. PD, RA, JA, MAB, LD, KLD,
25 DG, VH, SH, AL, DBM, EM, DM, IM, TN, MKN, VMO, MAO, JO, TR, JR, FSh, JPAS, GT, SV,
26 WW, MW, and MJS have no interests to declare.

27 28 **Acknowledgements**

29 Financial support for a Commissioners' meeting held in Sydney on 9th and 10th November 2022, was
30 provided by The Black Dog Institute. Funders were not involved in the writing of the manuscript or
31 the decision to submit it for publication. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not
32 necessarily those of the NIHR, NICE, or the Department of Health and Social Care. We would like to
33 thank Digital Science (<https://www.dimensions.ai>) for providing data on funding amounts received for
34 mental health research globally. These data were sourced from Dimensions, an inter-linked research
35 information system provided by Digital Science. DeQuincy Lezine and David Gunnell kindly
36 provided input on early drafts of the Commission. Philip Batterham recorded and summarised
37 proceedings. Lorin Williams, Amelia Hamilton, and Jo Hocking at The Black Dog Institute provided
38 administrative support and helped coordinate online and face-face meetings. We wish to thank
39 Jonathan Pimm, Tamara Lucas, and Mabel Chew at the Lancet, for stimulating the idea of the
40 commission and providing editorial guidance. PM wishes to thank Alison Jones-Moran for comments
41 made on an earlier draft of the Commission and for her encouragement and support throughout the
42 writing process.

43

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