

# **A Qualitative Study of How Legal Guardians Experience Deliberate Self-Harm among Adolescents under Their Custody**

**Roberto Galea**

## **Abstract**

Deliberate Self-Harm is the intentional act of causing harm to oneself in the absence of suicidal intentionality. Despite the absence of suicidality, the repetitive nature of Deliberate Self-Harm increases the risk of fatality which emphasises the need for further researching this phenomenon. This is a serious subject matter which has severe repercussions on global public health. The overall aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of legal guardians of adolescents who Deliberately Self-Harm. Martin Heidegger's Hermeneutic Phenomenology was the philosophy underpinning the whole study while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis guided the extrapolation, interpretation and analysis of the results obtained.

Four participants and one pilot study were recruited in this study. The sample was composed of mothers in care of adolescents who received care from the Child Guidance Unit and engaged in Deliberate Self-Harm in the past year. Two in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with every participant and transcripts were produced. Interviews and transcripts were analysed and themes were extrapolated through abstraction. Depths of despair, Enduring Deliberate Self-Harm and Schools and Services were the main themes identified. Results demonstrated the anguish and distress experienced by legal guardians due to social, financial and familial circumstances faced while taking care of their adolescents. Guilt and feelings of defencelessness and helplessness were reported as devastating while trying to cope and maintain an adequate level of function-ability.

Recommendations include the provision of support and education with regards to the aetiology and management of Deliberate Self-Harm for the legal guardians from the psychiatric services utilised. While providing additional guidance teachers to adequately tackle the circumstances faced. Recommendations for future research include other studies recruiting adolescents coming from different cultural backgrounds and investigating any possible discrepancies. A longitudinal study exploring the skills learned, coping skills used and satisfaction gained from services exploited should be also conducted with legal guardians.

**KEYWORDS: Deliberate Self-Harm, lived experiences, legal guardians, parents, hermeneutics, adolescents**