

CASE STUDY

Case Study: Sarah

A broken phone card, staples, paper clips, a piece of metal from a lighter, a broken pen, a pencil sharpener, a broken cup, a piece of glass and the lid from a milk carton. This is not a list of cryptic clues with some hidden meaning; this is a list of the items that Sarah has used to repeatedly inflict extensive slash wounds to her wrists, arms and neck over the past fifteen years. Afterwards, she resorts to unpicking the stitches or setting fire to the bandages protecting her wounds.

In August this year Sarah slashed her throat with a piece of glass, causing a 5cm long wound that almost killed her. But she was lucky this time due to the vigilance of the staff at Cornton Vale Prison where she is currently serving a three-year sentence. She was charged with wilful fire raising after setting fire to her apartment in a suicide attempt. Sarah is thirty-eight and has spent half her adult life in prison.

Brutally sexually assaulted when she was only nine and left for dead in a ditch, she has struggled to come to terms with what happened to her. The psychological damage she suffered was to have a lifelong effect on her. She did not receive any help at the time to cope with the trauma of the attack and the subsequent trial. Her difficulties were further compounded by the sexual abuse she had to endure at the hands of her father.

Sarah's behaviour deteriorated badly and at age 12 she was sent to a children's home for over a year. She returned home, but was finally expelled from school at fifteen. That was the end of her formal education. She served her first prison sentence at seventeen and has been in and out of prison since then.

Diagnosed with an emotionally unstable personality disorder and recurrent depression, Sarah has been sectioned under the Mental Health (Scotland) Act on several occasions. She is currently taking prescribed medication for depression. Sarah finds it difficult to cope outside and admits that she has deliberately vandalised property in order to be arrested and imprisoned again.

“I just feel safer in prison because I know that I will get some help. Nobody wants to help me outside. People just see me as a criminal not a person”.

Sarah's records show that she self harms about every six to ten days with whatever sharp object she can find. She dreads the day ahead and lacks any motivation. When not in prison she drinks heavily and under the influence of alcohol has been charged with breach of the peace, assault, vandalism and wilful fire raising. She has lost touch with her brothers and sisters and the recent death of her mother, to whom she became close, has led to an escalation of self-harming incidents.

Sarah is a very vulnerable prisoner and can be easily manipulated. Forced to provide clean urine samples by women wishing to avoid drug detection she was moved to the remand unit as it is better able to support women like her. The other prisoners there are generally quite good with her, but some on them taunt her and 'confess' to her that they are going to self-harm. This brings on anxiety attacks that can in turn lead her to self-harm. She is on fifteen-minute suicide watch due to the high risk she represents.

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Staff at Cornton Vale provide excellent care and monitor her closely. They know her well and recognise her mood swings and when she is having a particularly bad day. They are all too aware of the injuries she is capable of inflicting on herself. They see many women like Sarah coming and going at Cornton Vale, but even they are alarmed by the frequency and severity of the self-harming episodes. Her recent injury to her throat was closely followed by an attempt to hang herself using the elastic from her underwear. She has been rushed to hospital from prison on many occasions.

While it is not Sarah's intention to harm anyone, she is a real danger to herself. In her view, prison is the only place that can provide any form of stability and prevent her having access to alcohol. It cannot, however, manage to prevent the all too frequent self-harming incidents that have left her badly scared. She feels worthless and cannot understand why no one will provide the help she needs.

“The courts should not send people like me to prison. I see the same faces coming and going here all the time. Prison is not the right place for people with mental health problems. But the courts see us as something off the streets. They don't see us as people that need help. It's a disgrace and I think it is so sad”.

Sarah would like to have had a job working with children or the elderly. But that is impossible now and she accepts that it will never happen. She is still grieving for her mother as she was the only source of contact with her family. Now she has no one to go to when she leaves prison and will be homeless. She looks tired, ill and old beyond her years. The scars on her body a visible reminder of a sad and troubled life.

Sarah was sectioned once again, just days after I spoke to her, and left Cornton Vale to be placed under the care of her psychiatrist. No one knows how long she will spend in hospital this time, but staff at Cornton Vale know that is not the last they will see of Sarah.

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