

TOOLKIT

VOICES *TO BE* HEARD

**An Arts, Health and Justice Perspective
on Healing and Recovery from Child
Sexual Abuse**

**LEFT
WRITE
HOOK**

This document is published on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. We pay respect to Elders past and present and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers, teachers, professional staff and students we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.

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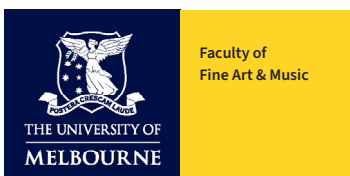
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ABOUT

Left Write Hook



LWH

Left Write Hook began as part of a research project at the University of Melbourne, through the Creativity and Wellbeing Research Initiative. As creative practice research the documentary film bridges academia, industry and social engagement. Alongside the film, academic articles and a book of survivor stories has been published ([Lyon and Gaskin 2021](#)), to further share the projects transformative impact.

The documentary film follows eight female and gender-diverse survivors in the *Left Write Hook* program, using trauma-informed, socially responsible storytelling. This approach focuses on participant agency and empowerment, making the filmmaking process a continuation of the project's transformative opportunities. Many participants from the documentary are still involved, collaborating on a study that explores how the filmmaking process has impacted their mental health and wellbeing following the films Australian release.

Today, Left Write Hook (LWH) has grown into an interdisciplinary, survivor-led, not-for-profit charity that supports people recovering from childhood sexual abuse and other forms of gendered violence. The charity's flagship program combines writing and trauma-informed boxing in a peer-led environment, with facilitators who have lived/ living experience. Evidence based research demonstrates the program's significant positive impact on participants' mental health and wellbeing ([Lyon, D. et al., 2020](#)).

This toolkit was created as a resource for audiences to accompany the film's release.

The Left Write Hook film is directed and produced by the editors of this toolkit.

Dr Shannon Owen

Director, Producer

Shannon Owen, PhD, is a documentary filmmaker and researcher whose work explores the change making potential of documentary storytelling. Working closely with participants, her films reveal the human impact of broader socio-political issues. Her work has screened widely through film festivals and broadcast and exhibited at the Australian National Portrait Gallery.

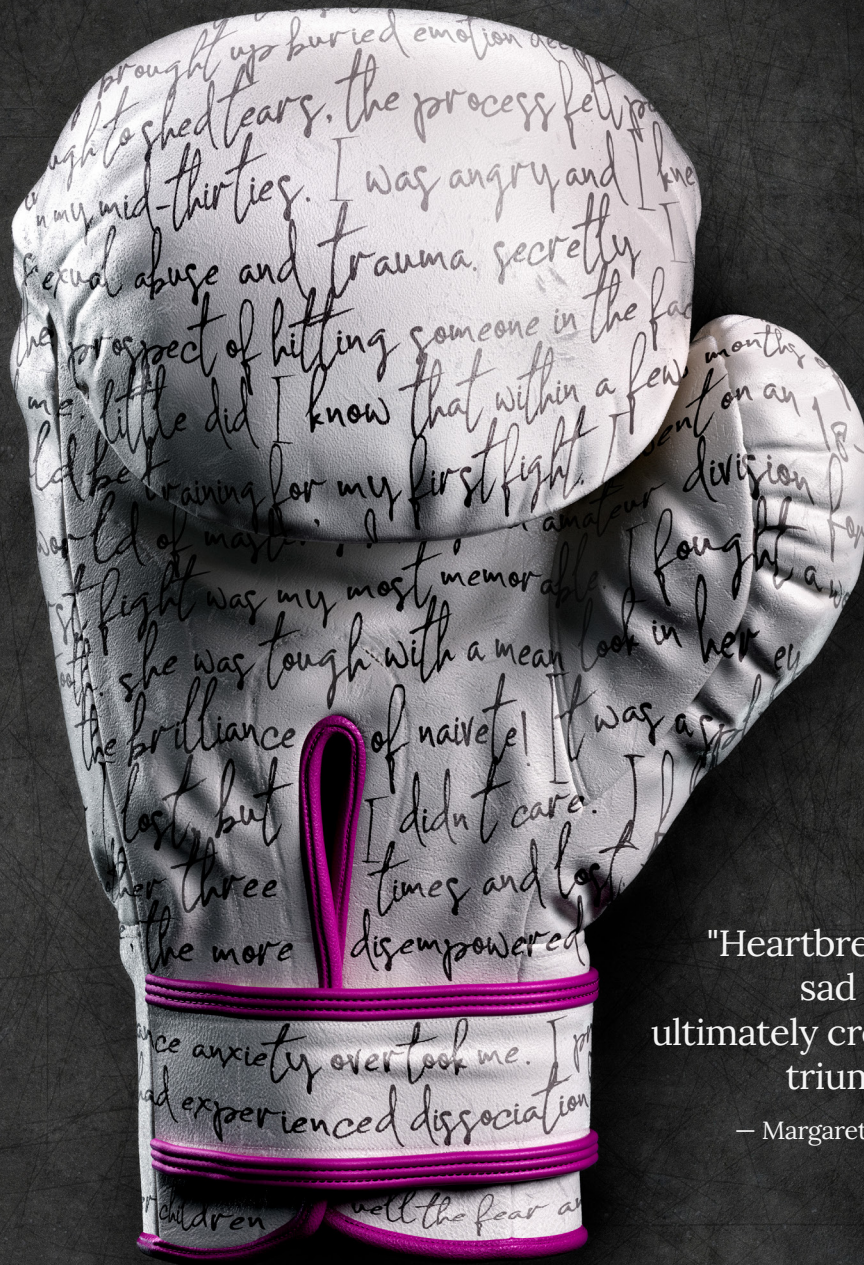
Dr Donna Lyon

Producer, Participant, Founder

Donna Lyon, PhD, is a film producing academic researcher at the University of Melbourne and founder/CEO of the Left Write Hook charity, combining writing and trauma-informed boxing for survivors of child sexual abuse and trauma. She produced the feature film *Disclosure* (2021), the documentary *Left Write Hook* (2024) and is editor of a book of survivor stories from the *Left Write Hook* program.

LEFT *write* HOOK

Silence is no longer an option



"Heartbreakingly
sad and yet
ultimately creatively
triumphant"

— Margaret Pomeranz

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY SHANNON OWEN EDITED BY LUCA CAPPELLI PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID RUSANOW & ELLA SOWINSKA COMPOSER JOSEPH FRANKLIN SOUND DESIGNER LACHLAN HARRIS PRODUCTION DESIGNER LEON SALOM
PRODUCED BY GAL GREENSPAN, ALICE BURGIN, DONNA LYON, SHANNON OWEN CO-PRODUCED BY RACHEL FORBES EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS SHARLENE GEORGE, ODILLA O'BOYLE
PRESENTED BY SCREEN AUSTRALIA IN ASSOCIATION WITH VICSCREEN, MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL PREMIERE FUND & MINDEROO PICTURES

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A SWEETSHOP & GREEN PRODUCTION



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MINDEROO PICTURES

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INTRODUCTION

Left Write Hook — A Path Towards Recovery and Justice

Lauren, LWH Participant

Early in my recovery from childhood sexual abuse, nearly two decades after the abuse had occurred, I found myself trapped in a relentless cycle of trying to think my way out of my trauma. But trauma isn't something you can think your way out of; it is not a puzzle to be solved but a profound rupture, a break in the continuum of development and embodied connection. At this moment in my recovery, my level of disconnection from myself, my body, my own experience of life, was not apparent to me. Trauma had severed my connection to my peers, my family, and my community. It isolated me, leaving me convinced that my pain was a solitary burden, a sign of my inherent wrongness.

As a participant in *Left Write Hook* – a unique blend of creative writing, boxing and peer support – I discovered that recovery from trauma is not just a mental endeavour but a process of reconnection – with my body, with other people, and with the world around me. Recovery became a practice, of becoming attuned to my fragmented selves, my emotional experiences, and my community. It was being supported to become safely at home in my body and reclaiming my place in the collective body. Through this profound experience, I began to see trauma all around me, as injuries echoing through the fabric of our interconnected lives, calling for forms of justice that are relational, collective, and deeply attuned to the complexities of human experience.

Left Write Hook taught me that recovery is a discipline, and that survival is creative. My body became a portal through which I began to understand the intelligence of trauma; the ways in which our fragmented selves hold wisdom and resilience. My body, in its wisdom, had found ways to protect me, even if those ways later

(previous) Lauren gazes into the window
of a dollhouse.

'TRAUMA
ISN'T
SOMETHING
YOU CAN
THINK
YOUR
WAY
OUT OF'


Lauren, LWH Participant



Gabrielle standing in the middle of a mini city, shooting a prop gun.

manifested as chronic illness, dissociation, and crippling shame. By recognising this intelligence, I could begin to work with it rather than against it. By changing the quality of my movements, I found that I could change the quality of my life. By changing the quality of my life, the quality of my relationships – to myself and to those around me – began to transform as well. As I learned to move with purpose, strength, and grace, I felt a shift not only in my physical body but in my sense of agency and power.

Reflecting on my journey, from my initial reckoning spurred by the #MeToo movement, through the formalities of police reporting which I abandoned soon after beginning, and ultimately to the transformative practice of *Left Write Hook*, I've gained a deeper understanding of justice and trauma. Within the conventional justice system, my experiences of harm and its subsequent effects across my life felt invisibilised; the weight of my experiences unrecognisable and incomprehensible. Culturally, those involved in supporting my 'justice' journey themselves were not able to hold space for the truth



of how my experience of childhood sexual abuse continued to impact my life. There was no place for me to voice my crushing sense of isolation, to have my chronic health challenges acknowledged, to set down my constant hypervigilance. I could not even begin to confront all the ways I had ended up in risky and abusive situations and relationships.

Negative responses to sexual assault disclosure contribute to a fear of speaking out among survivors, and as a result, experiences of sexual violence and its lived effects remain unspoken or silenced. This contributes to a broader culture of non-recognition, in which survivors bearing the lived impacts of sexual violence are left to endure substantial suffering alone, often in shame. My experiences of reporting my sexual trauma led me to realise that the pervasiveness of sexual violence, and the widespread silence that exists around its lived effects for survivors, are mutually reinforcing realities.

‘My experience taught me that supporting survivor recovery is a crucial avenue of justice, because through recovery I have reclaimed my voice and my narrative, and I have supported others to do the same.’

In that boxing gym in Footscray, having my writing witnessed by other survivors, with space held for my voice to be heard, was a profoundly life changing experience; an experience in which I felt a restoration of belonging and citizenship, in which the significance of the harm I had experienced was acknowledged and seen. Writing alongside other survivors allowed me to articulate my journey, my struggles, and my resilience. My experience taught me that supporting survivor recovery is a crucial avenue of justice, because through recovery I have reclaimed my voice and my narrative, and I have supported others to do the same.

Thus, for survivors, justice is not confined to courtrooms and legal proceedings. It encompasses recognition, dignity, and the restoration of relationships. It is a social and relational process that involves the community in acknowledging harm and supporting recovery. In *Left Write Hook*, we find a pathway to this holistic recovery. Through experiences of witnessing and recognition, we enable a societal and community context where survivors are supported to recover. Through the arts and physical movement, we learn to move with and through the world in new ways, strengthening our sense of agency and belonging. We learn that recovery is a discipline, a practice that requires commitment and repetition. And most importantly, we learn that we cannot think our way towards recovery from trauma – we must move through it, with our bodies and our communities, toward a future where justice is not just a legal concept but a lived reality of connection and care.



Dove hitting a camera with a baseball bat.

ONE

The Meaning of Justice for Victim-Survivors: A Criminological Perspective

Dr Dave McDonald

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne, with expertise in child sexual abuse, institutional abuse, and survivor-led truth telling. He is particularly interested in the role of artistic and cultural responses to victimisation, and how these enhance public understandings of such abuse.

How do issues of justice relate to a film like *Left Write Hook*? At first glance, this might appear to be a distant consideration. However, given so many victim-survivors find the criminal justice system limited or even harmful, it can be helpful to think in broader terms about justice in the aftermath of victimisation.

Shortcomings in conventional justice

Challenges associated with conventional criminal justice responses to sexual violence have been widely known about for decades. These range from issues in how criminal justice actors like the police respond to victim-survivors, decisions by prosecutors about whether a case should proceed, and the adversarial nature of the trial process that comprises a contest between the state and an accused. In study after study, victims have described how this accumulation of factors leaves them feeling silenced or, worse, retraumatised.

In a [recent 2024 review](#) by the Victorian Victims of Crime Commissioner, for example, many victims reported they did not feel like a participant in the justice system. They described feeling excluded from the process, removed from decision making, lacking adequate information, not being a party to proceedings, and lacking choice and agency. Almost half of participants said they would not want to participate in the justice system again. They described how they didn't feel safe or confident participating in the system, and how it caused further harm.

These negative experiences capture what's known as 'secondary victimisation': namely, the myriad ways in which initial experiences of crime victimisation may be made worse by the reactions of

others, including the criminal justice system (Condry 2010: 236). Secondary victimisation is not a new concept, and the problems that give rise to it have proven highly resistant to change. After all, governments of all persuasions have sought to address these, but despite decades of reform, the problems persist. Many victim-survivors also know this, the knowledge of which makes it even more difficult to come forward.

Victim-survivor perspectives about justice

While it is well established that conventional justice is often deeply limited in relation to victims of crime, the meaning of justice is a more complex question. In general, there is a tendency to think about this in terms of so-called positive outcomes – things like a conviction and sentence issued by a judge. These represent the culmination of a legal process which begins with a report to police, continues through a police investigation, a decision to prosecute, and is followed by the criminal trial.

Donna Lyon and her trainer in the boxing ring.





Claire Gaskin in an empty black space writing on the floor in white text.

Rather than take for granted that conventional justice – and positive outcomes arising from it – are synonymous with justice, some studies have sought to understand the meaning of justice from the perspective of victim-survivors. This work demonstrates that a formal legal outcome can be important, but it is not enough.

A recent example is the [2019 UK study by Clare McGlynn and Nicole Westmarland](#), which followed a [similar 2005 study](#) by renowned trauma psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Judith Lewis Herman.

One of the problems with thinking about justice in relation to positive outcomes is that it assumes a linear and one-directional process that has a finite end. Justice becomes a dichotomy: ‘you either get it or you don’t’ (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019: 181). While this way of thinking may be dominant, it belies a more complex reality.

For victim-survivors who participated in McGlynn and Westmarland’s study, justice was often more expansive than the criminal justice system, and more fluid than an official court outcome. The themes that emerged related to the importance of consequences, recognition, dignity, voice, prevention, connectedness. Implicit to these was that justice is complex and unpredictable: ‘it has a variegated feel, differing for each victim-survivor over time’ (2019: 196).

'SECONDARY
VICTIMISATION
IS NOT
A NEW
CONCEPT'

Dr Dave McDonald

Consequences as justice

Victim-survivors wanted perpetrators to experience meaningful consequences for their offending behaviour. A common assumption is that victims of crime inevitably prefer a significant punishment, for example a long prison sentence. However, this isn't *necessarily* what the participants of this study described. Rather than understanding consequences purely in terms of an officially sanctioned punishment, participants spoke in more expansive terms. It might be punishment, or it may not. 'The common ground, whether it be conceptualised as consequences or accountability, is that the perpetrator be subject to specific actions following the offending for there to be a sense of justice, and these actions – consequences – are varied' (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019: 186)

Recognition as justice

Recognition has long been identified as a key dimension of justice. This was reinforced by the participants in McGlynn and Westmarland's study. To be meaningful, recognition requires the perception of something as true and existing (such as one's victimisation). But it is more than being believed: 'It encompasses the significance of the experience being acknowledged; of its power and importance for the victim-survivor and in society more generally' (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019: 188). This might come from perpetrators, family, friends, or the public at large. In this way, there is a social dimension at stake in validating victim-survivors, acknowledging the harm they have experienced, and seeking to remedy the impact upon one's self-respect.

Dignity as justice

Associated with recognition is dignity. While conventional justice might ostensibly offer recognition, the experience can often be disempowering and insensitive. In Judith Lewis Herman's 2005 study, she describes the single greatest shock victims experience when realising just how little they matter to the conventional justice system, 'a humiliation only too reminiscent of the original crime' (2005: 581). To this end, McGlynn and Westmarland describe how dignity places 'obligations on all of us, not just representatives of the state such as criminal justice personnel' (2019: 191). The paradigm of procedural justice focuses on the degree to which procedures used by those in positions of authority (such as police, the courts,

judges) are experienced as fair and just. Rather than focusing on positive outcomes, procedural justice has helped direct attention to *how* people are treated. While this can be important however, in McGlynn and Westmarland's study, dignity is more holistic. As with recognition, this is not reducible to the criminal justice system.

Voice as justice

Voice has long been recognised as a key dimension of justice. In comparison to the marginalisation that victim-survivors describe in terms of their experiences of conventional justice, voice contrasts to this and can be understood in more than a literal sense. It is 'as much a metaphor for power; power to make and shape your future'. It can involve active participation, and may take the form of a capacity to speak out and be heard about one's victimisation.

Prevention as justice

It is well established that many victim-survivors are motivated by a commitment to deterrence or prevention when reporting their victimisation. This commitment was similarly reflected in McGlynn and Westmarland's study, where participants spoke of a desire for justice through social change. This was more expansive than a focus on an individual perpetrator or 'incident', and entailed a more substantive transformation that translates into a more just society.

Connectedness as justice

If one of the enduring criticisms of conventional justice is the way victim-survivors are relegated to a peripheral role, connectedness is the antidote of this. It refers to the holistic desire to be recognised as a complete person, and be provided with tangible, reparative supports that restore one's citizenship. This might include financial support, housing, counselling, and it is also a means through which other themes such as voice and dignity can be enshrined.

Together, these themes underscore that while the criminal justice system has a key role to play in addressing the complex and nuanced justice that victim-survivors require, a diverse range of other sites and actors are also important. This parallels recent research on the concept of alternative justice.



Donna Lyon.

Alternative Justice

Criminological interest in alternative justice has been driven by the recognition that conventional criminal justice is but one site in which victim-survivors turn in the aftermath of victimisation. The concept refers to different avenues or processes which may produce a more empowering outcome for victims. Reinforcing the reality that justice isn't a 'choice' between so-called traditional and alternative justice, serious attempts have been made at understanding the meaning and potential of these alternatives. For example, beyond the police, there are a range of other actors and services where sexual violence might be reported. This includes social networks, community organisations, advocacy groups, and health services.

Ongoing research by a team of Australian researchers, for example, is investigating the role of alternative reporting, and how it might be better designed to address the physical and mental health needs of victim-survivors. It is hoped that informal alternatives 'may assist survivors in working out what their options are and providing them with greater agency' (Heydon, Henry, Loney-Howes and O'Neill, 2020).

The use of public inquiries, such as royal commissions, may be considered another example of alternative justice. While public inquiries are official in that they are established by governments and occupy an important function in Westminster systems like Australia, they are nonetheless separate to the criminal justice system. One of the reasons they have proven popular is that in comparison to the individualistic nature of criminal justice – which is designed to adjudicate cases against individuals – they may respond to collective accounts of harm. They can also be designed to centre victim-survivors in a way that an adversarial criminal trial does not.

‘That *Left Write Hook* provides a space for survivors to come together and harness boxing and writing attests to the role of creative arts in promoting healing in the aftermath of trauma.’

The recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is a case in point. It has been considered an internationally best practice example of how to design an inquiry in a way that centres the voices of victim-survivors. Its effectiveness in this regard is attested by the esteem it has received from many survivor groups.

Alternative justice can also take less official forms. It might include social media, with the global #MeToo movement underscoring how important alternative ways of speaking out can be. This is an example of informal disclosure that occurs separate to official channels.

Understanding justice through a film like *Left Write Hook*

Together, these examples underscore the role of non-traditional sites and methods in responding to crime. After all, research investigating the meaning of justice for victim-survivors frequently emphasises the role of social audiences more generally.

As Judith Lewis Herman wrote in her 2005 study, ‘whether the informants sought resolution through the legal system or through informal means, their most important object was to gain validation

from the community' (2005: 585). This is what she called the quest for validation, which refers to the importance of bystander validation.

That *Left Write Hook* provides a space for survivors to come together and harness boxing and writing attests to the role of creative arts in promoting healing in the aftermath of trauma. However, from my perspective as a criminologist, it is also instructive of how justice entails a broader social dimension in comparison to the narrow perimeters of conventional justice.

The concept of the bystander that Judith Lewis Herman invokes is helpful in reflecting on our position as viewers of this film. In allowing cameras to film their participation, participants share the toll of their private experiences so sexual violence can be better understood.

The film thus operates as a form of cultural testimony. Separate to its legal function, testimony can entail a broader remit in relation to social or cultural memory. From memoirs or autobiography, museums, memorials, and the arts, testimony permeates culture and provides an important educative function. Within this we can include a film like *Left Write Hook*.

This is not to imply the criminal justice system doesn't matter, or that we shouldn't be worried about its treatment of victim-survivors. It means instead that alongside formal legal outcomes we should also think about other domains in which issues of justice, empowerment, and affirmation are at stake in the aftermath of victimisation.

Further Reading

Herman, Judith Lewis (2005) 'Justice from the victim's perspective', *Violence Against Women*, 11(5): 571-602. Full text [available online](#).

Heydon, Georgina, Henry, Nicola, Loney-Howes, Rachel, and Hindes, Sophie (2023) Alternative Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: Investigating their use, purpose and potential. Australian Institute of Criminology. [Full text available online](#).

McGlynn, Clare and Westmarland, Nicole (2019) 'Kaleidoscopic justice: Sexual violence and victim-survivor's perceptions of justice', *Social & Legal Studies*, 28(2): 179-201. [Full text available online](#).

TWO

Creative arts & health: a perspective from dance movement therapy

Dr Ella Dumaresq

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella is a Lecturer in Creative Arts Therapies, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Melbourne as well as a researcher and dance therapy practitioner. She leads the Dance Movement Therapy stream in the Master of Creative Arts Therapies program at the University of Melbourne and holds a PhD: her doctoral project focused on developing collaborative approaches to dance therapy practice with women navigating through the criminal justice system.

NOTE

You will find a video link toward the end of this document which include some practical dance/movement activities. If you are interested in putting some of the following ideas into action, please feel welcome to watch the video and explore movement with me (Ella) in a way that feels good for your body. The activities are informed by trauma-sensitive approaches to dance therapy and may be useful for survivors as well as professionals working with trauma and recovery.

Responding to the film *Left Write Hook* from a dance therapy perspective

As a practising dance therapist and researcher, I am struck by the film's clear emphasis on embodied empowerment and creativity. It is sometimes said that 'the body speaks' and this is evident through the many examples of embodied storytelling, survival, and self-determination depicted in *Left Write Hook*.

Embodiment and recovery

Embodiment is hard to define, but the word 'embody' essentially means to 'make incarnate' or to 'make corporeal'. Put another way, embodiment is our way of connecting with ourselves and showing up in the world. *Embodiment* describes the relationship we have with, and to, our bodies, our thoughts, our emotions and our relationships. Being comfortable in our own skin is not always easy, particularly for survivors who have been traumatically impacted in profound, unjust, and enduring ways. *Left Write Hook* suggests that recovery is possible however, particularly when it involves robust peer support, community building, creative engagement, and trauma-informed physical practice. The dance of boxing and the act of writing converge in the film to offer a unique body-oriented, strength-based, kick-ass approach to healing. The film points to the power of the arts to restore a vital connection with one's own body and mind. This project intersects strongly with perspectives from dance movement therapy, particularly in respect to therapeutic movement and its role in promoting wellbeing and recovery.

'EMBODIMENT
DESCRIBES
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RELATIONSHIP
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OUR THOUGHTS,
OUR EMOTIONS
AND OUR
RELATIONSHIPS.'

Dr Ella Dumaresq

What does the film tell us about the ‘dance of boxing’ as a therapeutic resource for survivors?

Boxing and dancing involve moment-to-moment conscious body movement and awareness. They are similar in the sense that both require practice and repetition to develop new motor skills and movement pathways. Once cultivated these skills might enable the mover to enter a state of ‘flow’: that is, a state of mind (and body) which occurs when we are fully immersed in an activity (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). This is particularly important in the context of trauma where the body may involuntarily freeze – or fight, flee, or appease – these being several defence reactions associated with traumatic experience. You might for instance recall Donna articulating her experience of freezing in the film, and then going on to convey how the high intensity movement of boxing combined with the rhythm and the flow of repetitive training enabled her to move through her triggering bodily responses in a way that gradually led to a greater sense of self-autonomy, skill and agency. Donna’s experience suggests that learning a new movement language – whether boxing, dancing, or other physical pursuits - can help our body systems to ‘un-freeze’ as new pathways, possibilities and feedback loops are cultivated between body and mind.

This process is physical, yet also involves psychological and emotional repatterning. As dancer and choreographer, Yvonne Rainer, puts it: “the mind is a muscle” (1968). In other words, the mind and the body are interconnected, and change in one body system can initiate change in the other. In the context of trauma recovery, this points to the notion that we can’t solely ‘think our way out of trauma’ or rely on cognitive strategies or emotional processing alone to heal, just as Lauren has articulated in the introduction. Trauma is a bodily experience and movement and somatic therapies which recognise this can be an important element of recovery.

‘In other words, the mind and the body are interconnected, and change in one body system can initiate change in the other.’

Movement-based interventions and therapeutic outcomes

Trauma-informed boxing offers a complementary approach which extends on verbal psychological services and offers additional benefits. If we look at literature from the related field of dance movement therapy, we see some evidence that movement-based interventions are supportive of psychological as well as physical recovery. For instance, a recent review of trauma-focused dance



Julie, Lauren and Nikki in the boxing ring.

therapy has identified therapeutic outcomes such as improved physical ability, emotional capacity, and mind-body integration (Lian & Bryant, 2024). These outcomes align with research findings from *Left Write Hook*; here, psychological scales were used to measure improvements in participants' mind-body connection and assertiveness, along with reduced stress, depression, anxiety, PTSD. These changes were accompanied by an overall increase in general wellbeing (Lyon et al., 2020) suggesting that creative programs such as *Left Write Hook* not only reduce negative symptoms of trauma but simultaneously enhance overall life satisfaction, promote agency, and cultivate strong interpersonal connections between group members. These are important protective factors which may help mitigate against the sense of isolation that is often felt by those impacted by trauma.

What does the film tell us about boxing as a 'structure' for creative expression?

Sometimes, we think of creativity as being spontaneous and uninterrupted, like a sudden rush of energy that manifests itself as an unplanned poem, an interpretive dance, a captivating story or arresting painting. While this is certainly one way that creativity shows up, it does not always arrive unbidden and unannounced. Creativity may require structure, discipline, commitment, practice, and repetition; recovery may also require these ingredients.

Recovering the self through active creation – be that dance, boxing or writing – involves the acquisition of new skills, resources, beliefs and mental structures. In physically and mentally demanding activities such as boxing or dance, the very *structure*

of the movement form offers a sense of definition, sturdiness, predictability, repetition, and familiarity. Boxing offers a structure or technique that can be repeated, refined, trusted, and mastered – a bit like learning a new dance sequence. Through practicing unfamiliar steps and applying technique to achieve a physical goal, the mover relies on their bodily intelligence, muscle memory, and other faculties such as cognition and creative problem solving. This can ignite experiences of flow: a sense of ‘being in the moment’ and of release.

This ‘in-the-moment’ awareness is also linked to creativity and flourishing. Structuring opportunities for creative expression, such as the method of write-share-reflect-box, offers participants a way of scaffolding their recovery in a stepwise manner. The combination of structured and repeated boxing steps– the bob and weave, the jab and cross, the left, right, hook – alongside the free-associative writing tasks invites organic patterns, connections, structures, and sense-making to emerge over time.

In dance therapy, sense-making refers to the use of artistic processes and dance structures which aid the process of “understanding, expressing and sharing the known as well as the unknown” (Koch, 2017, p. 88). This can be actioned through figurative expression, created by the body during dance and movement, and has been found to help survivors process difficult material in a safe way (Liang & Bryant, 2024, p. 9). In a similar way *Left Write Hook* shows how active engagement in the arts can lead to greater self-efficacy, which in plain language is the sense of personal agency, the feeling of “I can” (Koch, 2017, p. 89).

Acts of creation, be that dancing, boxing, writing, or simply allowing oneself to play freely with physical or artistic pursuits are generative and are understood to help strengthen personal resources and build resilience.

What does the film tell us about mindfulness, art, exercise, and recovery?

Rather than focusing solely on the outward performance of the athlete, trauma-informed boxing attunes the participant to their unique inner experience as a mover. Movement becomes refuge of mindfulness, release, self-discovery, and self-expression alongside physical achievement.

‘When practiced mindfully, with intention and focus, moving and creating alongside and with others allows us to heal in ways that can be profound and enduring.’

One of the lessons that I take from *Left Write Hook* connects to my own research and experience as a dance movement therapist. In my PhD I explored how dance, movement, mindfulness, physical exercise, personal expression and social connectivity can be harnessed as important elements of trauma-informed practice. In my study, previously incarcerated women told me that dancing together on a Friday afternoon was “fun” – it helped them to relax, to work toward their fitness goals, and enjoy a sense of connection with others. As I considered participant’s feedback, I theorised that dance therapy can provide people with an experience that includes physical exercise, yet is further enriched by the creative and aesthetic processes of improvised or structured dance. I understand this to be closely connected with trauma recovery, as movement discovery and personal expression are powerful vessels for therapeutic change transformation. When practiced mindfully, with intention and focus, moving and creating alongside and with others allows us to heal in ways that can be profound and enduring. As Lauren so eloquently states: “By changing the quality of my movements, I found that I could change the quality of my life.”

Mindfulness, creativity and exercise

The film also offers an interesting perspective regarding the notion of ‘mindfulness.’

Mindfulness has become a buzzword in mental health, and *Left Write Hook* shows us how this concept can be embedded within activities that are not usually considered ‘mindful’ or even very therapeutic. As Donna puts it: “Boxing challenged me to practise the sport as a form of mindfulness (Lyon et al., 2022, p. 6).

In therapy, mindfulness very often relates to the notion of ‘downward regulation’. In other words, emphasis is placed on the calming, settling, and soothing aspects of focused (meditative) awareness, which may help shift the body from an activated and anxious presentation toward a more settled and grounded state. Seated or static mindfulness-based activities are often used to facilitate this rest-and-settle response; however, this can be contraindicated in some instances. Dr David Treleaven, psychotherapist and mindfulness practitioner details the benefits as well as limitations

(following) Participants writing in the *Left Write Hook* program.





Participants boxing from a program run by the Left Write Hook charity.

of mindfulness-based therapies in his book, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*. One of the take-away messages is that mindfulness practice can sometimes trigger or compound traumatic responses which may lead to instances of deeper freezing or flooding, meaning that the individual can become overwhelmed by intrusive thoughts or memories which might be retraumatising (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). It makes perfect sense that seated mindfulness practice is not a one-size-fits-all approach and that alternatives can be found in mindful movement and trauma-informed physical practices such as boxing and dancing.

As I learnt through my own PhD research, it is important to balance down-ward regulation (soothing) with up-regulating (energising) activities such as physical exercise in trauma recovery. High intensity exercise and fitness training are not commonly discussed in my field, however, *Left Write Hook* shows us that physical exertion is immensely important; by pushing the body's boundaries in a structured and contained way, survivors can access a deep sense of personal power and agency which are critical to recovery. Healthy doses of stress through exercise and conditioning can be strengthening, and this is what physical training teaches us.

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Dr Ella Dumaresq

When we learn that our bodies can not only cope with the physical demands of jabbing and sparring, but thrive on this challenge, we connect to an inner strength nested in our own flesh and blood. There is something vitalising about feeling one's power deep inside the bones and sensing the energy transmitting from muscle into movement. Getting in touch with our embodied physicality - particularly through activities that are moderate to high intensity - we uncover a form of mindful attention and strength that we may not even know existed.

The benefits of mindful strength work are articulated by somatic psychoanalyst and conditioning coach, Jane Clapp, who integrates mindful, trauma-informed strength work in her psychotherapeutic practice to help people feel more resourced from the body up. (<https://www.janeclapp.com/newevents/introtostrength>). According to Clapp, it is possible to build physical strength from the ground up, and this allows us to enact the psychological belief that we can defend, assert, heal and renew.

‘Getting in touch with our embodied physicality – particularly through activities that are moderate to high intensity – we uncover a form of mindful attention and strength that we may not even know existed.’

Understanding recovery through a film like *Left Write Hook*

Left Write Hook offers an important story of hope and resilience and of reconnection to body and mind. Through the combined act of boxing and creative writing, the film reveals that healing from interpersonal trauma and abuse is possible and that physical expression, combined with mindfulness, embodied creativity and empowerment, can provide important pathways to re-discovering and re-storying the self. The film highlights why it is so valuable to consider the role of bodies, movement, and creativity in restoring connection and giving voice to survivors' stories of trauma and recovery.

Moreover, *Left Write Hook* complements and extends on existing therapeutic supports and no doubt helps pave the way for similar community-based, survivor led services to emerge within our communities.

THREE

Practical activities: Dance and movement for wellbeing

Dr Ella Dumaresq

The following video includes body-based and trauma-informed activities derived from dance therapy. The activities in the video are particularly informed by recommendations from a recent systematic literature review (Liang & Bryant, 2024) including:

- > Value joy
- > Allow the body to create through metaphor, imagery, and personal symbolism
- > Give choices (i.e. encourage survivors to exercise choice in how they participate)
- > Use music purposefully (i.e. use music that is enjoyable to move to)

For individuals: The video is available for you to use as part of your own self-care and creative expression.

For practitioners: The video is available for you to use in your practice with groups, individuals or whole communities.

Please note: *This video is provided to you for information purposes only and to provide a broad public understanding of how the arts can be therapeutically applied. The video is not to be relied upon as medical advice or used as a substitute for medical advice or therapy, nor does it reflect a therapist-client relationship and is therefore no substitute for individual clinical judgement.*

ACTIVITY 1.

Learning to feel ‘at home’ in the body

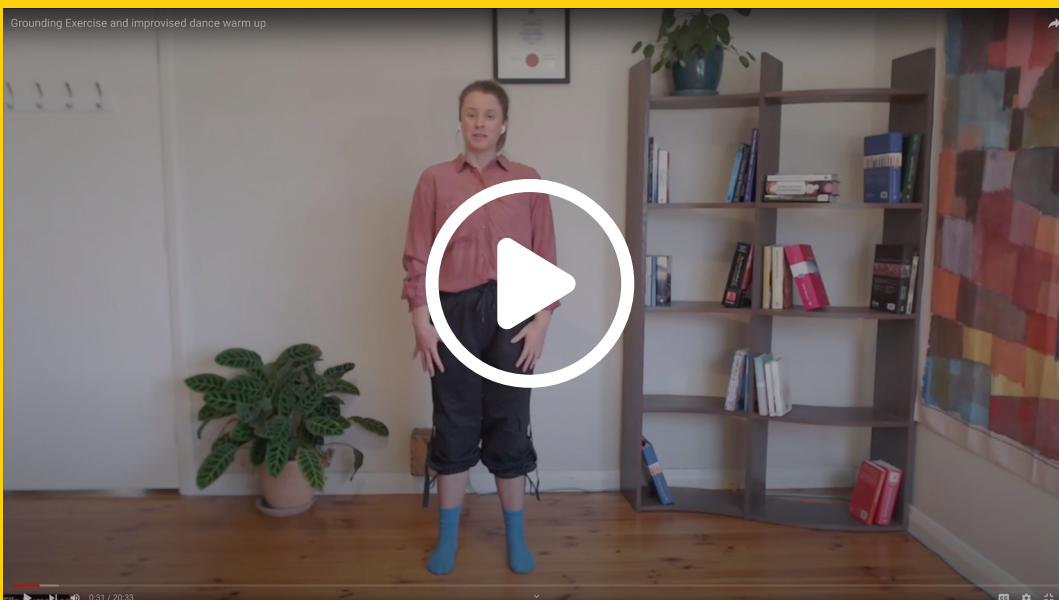
The first exercise invites you to participate in a grounding and orienting activity. Here, you’ll be invited to start paying attention to your surrounding environment and notice sights and sounds: this is a way of connecting to sensory awareness and your body-in-space.

ACTIVITY 2.

Dance for dances’ sake!

The second part of this video guides you through an improvised dance/movement activity. You will be invited to move different parts of your body in ways that feel good to you. Starting with the feet, and ending with the head, you’ll be encouraged to move your joints and muscles in different ways. You may like to play some music in the background to help inspire your movements and self-expression.

Link to video: [Grounding Exercise and improvised dance warm up](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6xwB6nW80s)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6xwB6nW80s>



Further reading

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(following) Donna Lyon, participant and producer of *Left Write Hook*.

