

CAWRI

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

Left/Write//Hook: The efficacy of writing and boxing in assisting survivors of childhood sexual abuse in moving towards post- traumatic growth

Final report

23 April 2021



Figure 1: Image from Left/Write//Hook workshop (documentary). Image credit: Ella Sowinska (2020)

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Project summary

Left/Write//Hook (LWH) is a mixed-methodological, multi-modal (platform) creative arts research project. It entails three main aspects: 1) a writing and boxing workshop for female-identifying and non-binary survivors of childhood sexual abuse and trauma; 2) a book of prose-poetry generated from the workshop; and 3) a feature length documentary. Seed funding received from CAWRI was used primarily to explore the first aspect, specifically, the efficacy of the eight-week writing and boxing workshop on the mental health, wellbeing and personal agency of participants. This seed funding has enabled all aspects of the project to be realized or to move into their next phase of development in order to attract large-scale funding and support.

The first stage of the project involved adopting a mixed-methods research approach. The project brought together an interdisciplinary research team, including a practice-based documentary filmmaker and producer, psychologist and gender expert to analyse the efficacy of the workshop on the survivors' mental health, wellbeing and sense of agency. Through combining creative practice-based research (creative writing, movement and documentary filmmaking) and established psychological approaches, this arts-based intervention sought to examine how the program can assist survivors of childhood sexual trauma to move towards post-traumatic growth.

The workshop project ran from March 7, 2020 to November 7, 2020 and continues to evolve in 2021. The book of writings generated from the workshop is set to be released in late 2021 and the development and production of the feature length documentary is underway. The documentary is about the participants who come together to share, struggle, rage and reclaim themselves through the unique LWH program.

Research team

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Background

Research context

Recent research has demonstrated that talking about abuse is vital to healing and recovery (McClain & Amar, 2013). Studies have also shown that creative expression is a valid and positive self-help tool to aid healing in survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Mendez-Negrete, 2013). In Australia, no initiative has yet used practice-based approaches to address the needs of women who come to physical activity and sporting environments with the lived effects of childhood sexual abuse. The most significant research in this area thus far has been undertaken by Cathy van Ingen, who founded Shape Your Life, a boxing program in Toronto, Canada, designed to teach women and transgendered survivors of violence non-impact, recreational boxing (van Ingen, 2011). Left/Write//Hook was the idea of Coordinating Investigator Donna Lyon, who wrote about the power of combining writing and boxing on her blog (link [here](#)) in 2019:

"Boxing has become a metaphor for my recovery and my life as a survivor. The positive effect that boxing has had on me, in terms of my overall health and wellbeing, has been phenomenal. I have met many other women like me and I have a strong desire to share stories of recovery, empowerment and hope, using writing and the sport of boxing to aid this."

Project aims

Left/Write//Hook aims to support and amplify the voice and agency of female survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and trauma. The workshop aspect of the project specifically sought to answer questions about how the combined creative activities of writing and boxing can optimise cognitive and emotional functions, strengthen a sense of shared identity between the female participants, nurture their personal growth and social bonds, and enhance their personal and social resilience. The hypothesis was that participation in the workshop would assist female and non-binary survivors of CSA in their journey towards recovery and wellbeing.

Methodology

The study draws on Pink's (2015) notion of "blended practice", a methodological approach in creative practice research that encourages practitioners to engage with the affordances of various practices and discourses to enrich the project at hand (Oliver, 2018; Pink, 2015). The research team comprised researchers from varied disciplinary backgrounds in the creative arts and psychology. This interdisciplinary expertise allowed the project design to deploy different methods at specific stages of the study. The use of qualitative and quantitative approaches within a concurrent, triangulation mixed-methods research design facilitated a more robust exploration of the research questions than the use of one method alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Standardized quantitative psychological measures were used to analyze the impact of the workshops on the participants' assertiveness, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, wellbeing, depression, anxiety and stress (Blake, Bastian, O'Dean, & Denson, 2017; DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; MHC-SF; Keyes, 2009). Participants also prepared written journals as part of their

engagement in the LWH program, and a qualitative analysis of these journals was undertaken, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

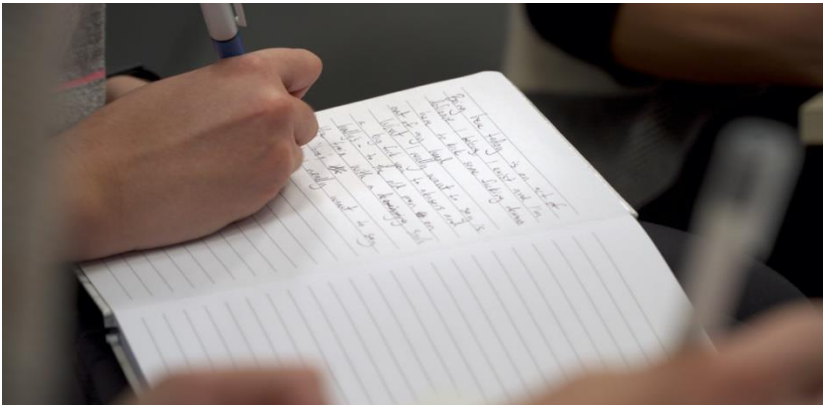


Figure 2: Writing. Image Credit: Ella Sowinska (2020)

A third strand of data collection in the form of ethically engaged documentary filmmaking and participant video diaries also took place. The creative practice research element of the project drew on Dr Steve Thomas' reflexive research and ethically-based documentary filmmaking methodology (2012). Here the participants are viewed as collaborators within the process (rather than as subjects), so that their personal stories are treated with respect and compassion. This methodology also embraces a trauma informed framework, based on safety, transparency, choice, collaboration and empowerment.



Figure 3: Boxing workshop. Image Credit: Ella Sowinska (2020)

Data sources were then triangulated to ensure that robust conclusions could be generated and to support the validity of future iterations of the project (Creswell, 2009). The documentary aspect of the study was impeded somewhat by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A complete analysis of the documentary film materials is still underway as the documentary component begins to take further shape. In the research findings; however, audio-visual data generated through video diaries was used as part of the mixed methods data triangulation and the findings were reported in a journal article, as outlined in the project outcomes.

Key findings

Quantitative findings

The key findings from the workshop program provide evidence which supports the hypothesis that the combined acts of creative writing and boxing assist female survivors of CSA in their journey towards recovery and wellbeing. The LWH workshops created a space for the women to disclose their abuse without judgement, offering them opportunities to make meaning out of their trauma, and to re-story their experiences through creative writing and embodied sporting activities. These findings support those of Graham, Powell and Karam (2011) who argued that group participation with fellow survivors increases support for survivors and reduces feelings of isolation, stigma, and shame.

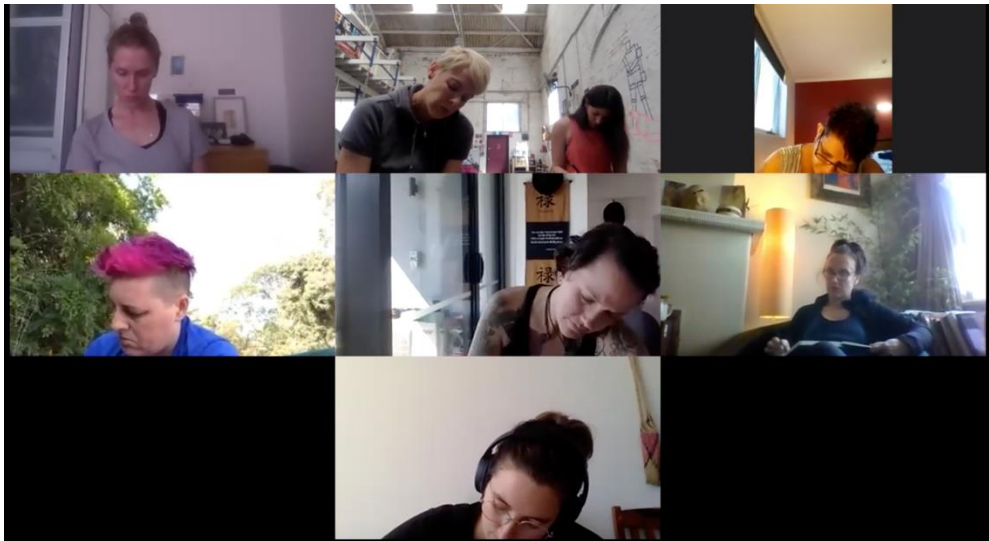


Figure 4: Writing online during Covid. Image Credit: Donna Lyon (2020)

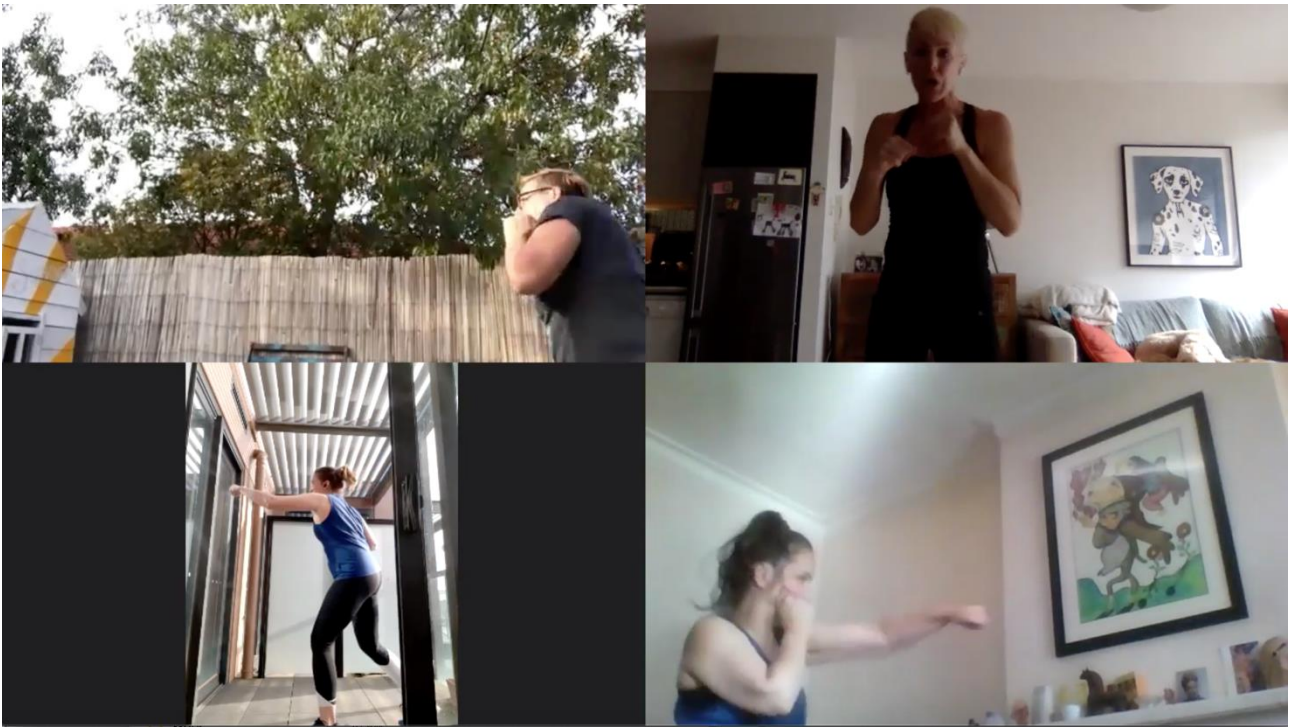


Figure 5: Boxing online during Covid. Image Credit: Donna Lyon (2020)

The quantitative analysis indicated that the creative acts of boxing and writing improved the survivors' experience of their own assertiveness over time, with an important caveat. For those whose compliance with the program was low, no increase in assertiveness was seen. Conversely, the self-rated assertiveness of some participants reduced if a participant did not attend the weekly program or participated in a more adhoc way. Given the small sample size of this pilot study, these results need replication with larger samples. Nevertheless, it is promising that quantitative, implicit measures—ones that are difficult for participants to fake and thus generally reliable—suggest that strongly compliant participation in the LWH program improves psychological assertiveness among CSA survivors.



Figure 6: Boxing it out during the workshop. Image Credit: Ella Sowinska (2020)

The women demonstrated predicted improvements in PTSD symptoms, wellbeing, and general symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress across the program. The findings also showed that participation in the LWH program enabled the women to achieve a significant, clinically meaningful improvement in their PTSD symptoms.

Quantitative wellbeing measures confirmed the experience of personal growth evidenced in the qualitative findings described below. Notably, the participants reported more frequent experiences of satisfaction (emotional wellbeing); more positive functioning through social contribution; social growth (feeling like society was a good place, or becoming a better place for all people); warm, trusting and positive relationships with others; and that their life had a sense of direction and meaning. Again, despite the small sample size, these are powerful indicators of the potential of the LWH program to enable CSA survivors to heal and flourish.

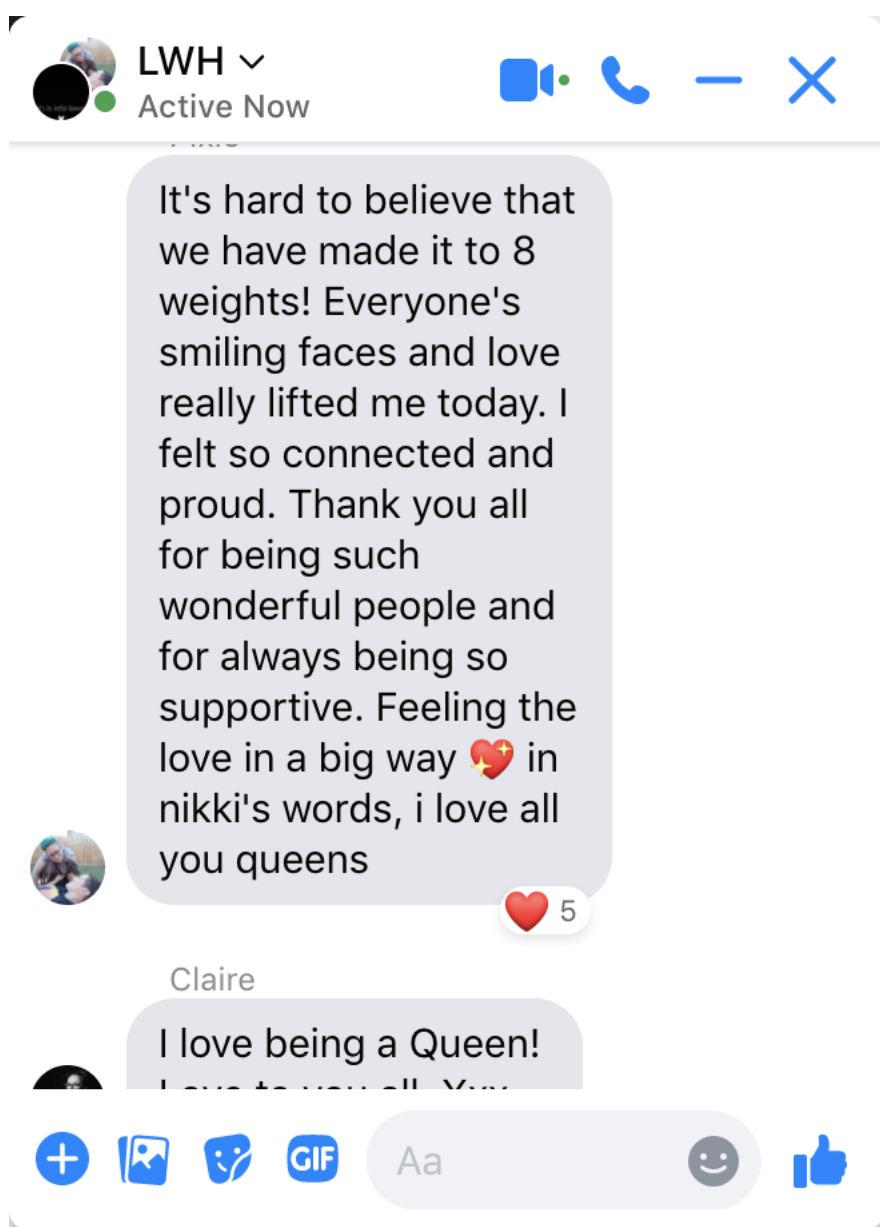


Figure 7: Facebook group messaging set up to encourage communication during Covid (2020)

Qualitative findings

The thematic analysis of participants' written journals identified crucial changes in the way the participants experienced their connection with themselves and with the other women in the group. These transformations centered on the concepts of empowerment, connection/disconnection and validation, building on previous research conducted in the Shape Your Life Program and its adjunct participatory arts project (van Ingen, 2016). The validation of the participants' experiences, especially regarding feelings around empowerment, were enhanced after eight weeks.

A preliminary review of the documentary component provides evidence to support improved wellbeing amongst participants. Central to these findings is that all participants are continuing to participate in the documentary filmmaking aspect of the project. This is important given the shame associated with CSA. As Lyon notes, allowing a camera to bear witness to this act of "coming out" as a survivor requires incredible courage. For most participants, LWH is the first time they have shared their experiences of child sexual abuse in a group setting.

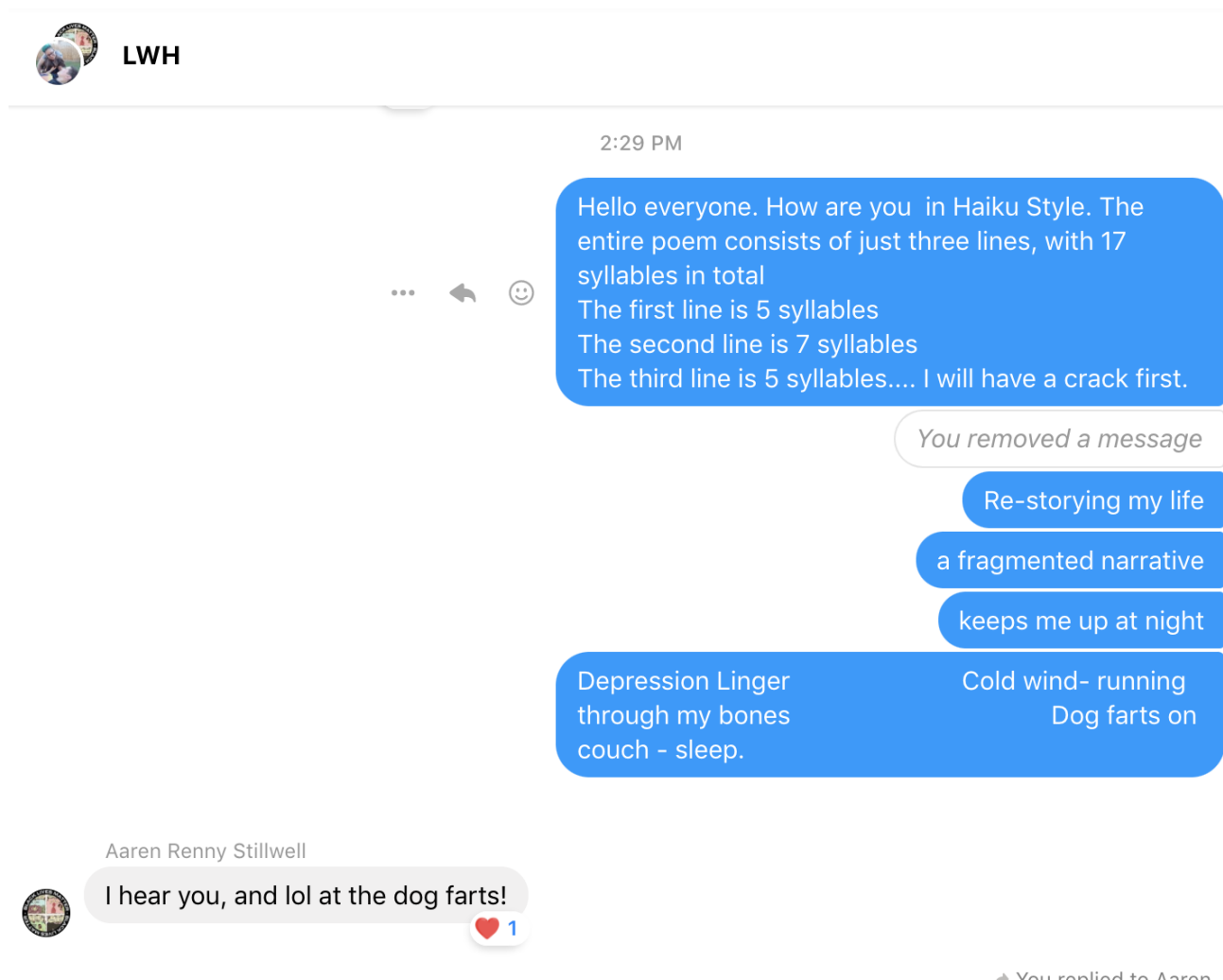


Figure 8: Facebook communication set up during Covid (2020)

Project outcomes

The Left/Write//Hook program has led to both traditional and non-traditional research outputs. It has been featured on three podcasts and the program itself was part of the Translating Research at Melbourne (TRAM) showcase at the University of Melbourne, which explored how research can be translated for the marketplace and applied in the community. The findings of the workshop have been presented in a journal article and Lyon and the participants have recently secured a book contract with the publisher, Loving Healing Press (Ann Arbor, MI, USA). The book is to be released in late 2021 and is titled *Left/Write//Hook: Survivor Stories from a Creative Arts Boxing and Writing Project*.

In addition, the documentary component of the project is underway with Shannon Owen (director) and Donna Lyon (producer) recently attending the Australian International Documentary Conference in 2021. The team met with various stakeholders to ascertain marketplace interest and project viability. The reception was enthusiastic and Owen and Lyon are preparing for development funding through Film Victoria and Screen Australia (due mid-June, 2021). This funding is for a rough cut of the material and some further filming to aid the overall narrative of the documentary project.



Figure 9: Image from documentary. Image Credit: Ella Sowinska (2020)

Selected outputs:

Events:

Lyon, D. (2020). Left/Write//Hook [online]. *TRAM, University of Melbourne*.
<https://tram.org.au/our-alumni/left-write-hook>

Publications:

Lyon, D., Owen, S., Osborne, M. S., Blake, K., & Andrades, B. (2020). Left / Write // Hook: A mixed method study of a writing and boxing workshop for survivors of childhood sexual abuse and trauma. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 10(5), 64-82. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v10i5.1505>

Engagement:

3CR Community Radio (2021). *Women on the Line, Episode 226: Left Write Hook*. [Audio podcast, February 3, 2020]. <http://www.radio-australia.org/podcasts/women-on-the-line>.

Lyon, D. (2021). *Creativity Talks Podcast (University of Melbourne), Episode 3: Left/Write//Hook*. <https://www.cawri.com.au/posts/left-write-hook-podcast>].

Verry, G., 2021. *The Fight Back Podcast: Left Write Hook with Donna Lyon*. <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/left-write-hook-with-donna-lyon/id1517269742?i=1000506946304>.

The website for the documentary can be found at: <https://www.leftwritehook.com/>

The trailer for the documentary can be found at: <https://www.leftwritehook.com/trailer>

Discussion, implications and future directions

The findings of this study affirmed the hypothesis that the LWH program enhanced the wellbeing and agency of the workshop participants, and suggested that further study with a wider pool of participants was needed to increase and measure its efficacy.

In 2020, the project underwent further development in the Translating Research at Melbourne Program at the University of Melbourne. Lyon, the Coordinating Investigator, went through an accelerator program to identify stakeholders and audiences to target for support for future iterations of the program, working towards a sustainable and scalable national rollout. Further development work is underway to expand the program and its future direction. There is a need to partner with government and women's services, such as the Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) and bring in social workers to support the rollout of the program on a wider scale. Once a development proposal is written (by mid-2021), Lyon will seek further funding for this. It is clear that psychological and wellbeing data is attractive to government bodies and organisations like CASA, who rely on this type of research data to advocate for funding.

The implications of this research project are particularly important in the current political climate. In the wake of the #MeToo campaign, the rape allegations against an Australian parliamentary Minister and the viral online petitions calling for an overhaul of sexual consent education in schools, the number of women who are speaking out about their experiences with sexual assault and violence is rapidly rising. Research reveals one in three women are abused before the age of 18 (Fergusson & Mullen, 1999). There is an urgent need to place the conversations of childhood sexual abuse and its effects on the lived experiences of survivors into contemporary discourse about gendered violence.

Grace Tame, recipient of the Australian of the Year award for 2021, noted upon receiving the award that while discussion of childhood sexual abuse is uncomfortable, nothing is more uncomfortable than the abuse itself. Tame also said that survivor stories help to “redirect this discomfort to where it belongs — at the feet of perpetrators” (Gredley, 2021).

The time for these conversations is *now*, and they need to be led by those with lived experience (Cannold, 2021). This is backed by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, whose recommendations include delivering accredited training and resources to aid the development of organisations led by people with lived experience of mental illness or psychological distress (Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, 2021).

While this project has made important strides in supporting survivors of childhood sexual abuse as they move towards post-traumatic growth, some broader questions still remain and other new questions have arisen. These include:

- What are the most effective ways to engage in participatory, holistic, and collaborative research to promote post-traumatic growth, increase agency and amplify the voices of child sexual abuse survivors?
- What is the effect of those with lived experience of childhood sexual abuse delivering accredited training and resources for survivors? What impact does this have on the survivors' experiences and sense of agency?
- How can we work with survivors to co-create and co-research the efficacy of programs and training and how can we increase their efficacy?
- How can the program be scaled to reach national level?

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More information

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For more information about CAWRI, visit <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/creativityandwellbeing>