



WARRIOR
COMBAT GYM

MINDSET WARRIOR · EVIDENCE BRIEFING

Why the Tears Come After the Pads

An evidence-informed look at why emotion can surface after structured physical challenge

Published by Mindset Warrior, Liverpool · August 2026 · Version 1.2

Some young people become emotional after a demanding round on the pads. That does not prove one single physiological mechanism, and it should never be treated as a diagnostic sign. It can reflect the combined effect of exertion, rhythm, focused attention, reduced social pressure and feeling safe with a trusted adult. This paper sets out what the evidence supports, what remains a plausible mechanism, and what coaches actually do in the moment. The wider martial arts add something striking alone can't: a built-in curriculum of discipline, respect and ego-regulation.

1. Movement can support regulation

Stress is not just a feeling; it is a full-body physical event. When a young person carries chronic stress, from trouble at home, bullying, grief or shame, their body is repeatedly mobilised for a fight or a flight that modern life never lets them actually have. You can't fight the shouting at home, and you can't outrun a group chat. Over time that shows up as tight shoulders, clenched jaws, short fuses and poor sleep.

Vigorous, structured activity can change arousal and help some young people move from tension towards recovery. The stress-cycle model (popularised by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, and consistent with mainstream stress physiology) describes a cycle that begins with a threat and has a physical ending, with vigorous movement as an efficient route to it. Pad work also demands rhythm, breathing, coordination and focused attention. In Mindset Warrior, physical activity is never used as simple venting; it is paired with coaching, skill development, boundaries and reflection.

What follows exertion matters. As the fight-or-flight surge subsides and the recovery system rebounds, guards can drop, and that is often when emotion surfaces. It is a pattern coaches see, not a rule, and it is not evidence about any individual young person.

Emotion after hard effort is information about a young person, not proof of a process. What matters is the coaching around it.

2. Tears are information, not proof

Tears may reflect effort, relief, frustration, trust, stress or several things at once. Research summarised by Medical News Today reports that emotional crying is associated with parasympathetic activity and the release of oxytocin and endorphins, and that emotional tears have been found to contain elevated levels of stress hormones, which has led some researchers to theorise that crying may help offload them. That mechanism is still under study, and none of it tells a coach what any individual student is feeling.

Two practical implications shape how sessions are run. First, coaches never rush a student back to normal, and never interpret the emotion for them. Second, being met with calm acceptance protects the student's dignity, while embarrassment or mockery does real harm. The room a coach holds in those two minutes does as much work as the pads did.

3. Bottom-up regulation: why movement gets there before words

Child trauma psychiatrist Bruce Perry's 'Three Rs' (regulate, relate, reason) describes the sequence the brain actually works in. A dysregulated young person cannot access the thinking, verbal part of their brain until the lower, older parts (brainstem, stress-response systems) are calmed first. And those lower systems don't respond to language. They respond to rhythm: patterned, repetitive, somatosensory input. Walking, drumming, skipping, dancing, and combination work on pads, which is rhythm, breath, and pattern from the first jab.

Some young people find it easier to talk after movement or while doing something side by side, which is why forty minutes of movement can get a boy talking in the car park afterwards. The movement supports regulation, the coach relationship provides safety with a trusted adult, and reflection follows from there. Mindset Warrior's session shape (check-in, purpose and boundaries, purposeful experience, reflection, real-life connection, one action, close) is the Three Rs in order, by design.

4. Why martial arts reach lads that talking can't

There is a specific, researched reason this works for boys who would never sit in a counselling room. A BMC Public Health study of young males, masculinity and mental wellbeing through sport found that sporting environments act as safe relational spaces, a 'second family', where trusted coaches and side-by-side activity let young men open up without the exposure of face-to-face talk. The same study is honest about the barrier: traditional masculine norms code emotional expression as weakness, so boys need a context where showing emotion doesn't cost them status.

Combat sport is uniquely positioned to grant that permission. The Youth Endowment Fund's evaluation of Empire Fighting Chance, a close UK comparator to Mindset Warrior delivering non-contact boxing pad work with psychological support in schools, found the sport's status and identity is precisely what engages young men who reject conventional therapy, that the gym operates as a neutral, non-judgemental space in contrast to chaotic home lives, and that young people expected to disengage kept attending. The same logic runs right through the martial arts: in a fight gym, nobody's masculinity is in question. That is exactly what makes it safe to cry there. The hardest space in the building becomes the softest.

A lad can walk out of a fight gym having cried and still walk out feeling strong. Almost nowhere else in his life offers that deal.

5. What the wider martial arts add: discipline, respect and the taming of ego

Because Mindset Warrior is a martial arts programme rather than a boxing club, it inherits an extra layer of evidence and an extra mechanism. A meta-analysis of controlled child and youth studies (Harwood, Lavidor & Rassovsky, 2017) found martial arts training produced a **medium-sized reduction in externalising behaviour** (physical aggression, bullying, vandalism), with eleven of twelve included studies showing positive impact. Critically, the researchers credit the effect not to the fighting but to the traditions wrapped around it: the rituals of respect, the emphasis on self-control, the meditative and philosophical elements. More training tracked with less aggression: the exact opposite of the folk fear that teaching kids to fight makes them fighters.

Then there is the piece the programme's jiu-jitsu work brings that almost nothing else in a young person's life does: **a structured, repeatable practice of losing without shame**. The tap is an institutionalised act of humility. A lad concedes defeat a dozen times a session, in front of others, and discovers each time that it costs him nothing: no ridicule, no loss of standing, straight back into the round. For boys whose aggression is usually ego-protection, who would rather swing than be seen to back down, the mats train the precise skill they lack: swallowing pride, staying calm in a losing position, and treating defeat as information rather than humiliation. The belt hierarchy and beginner's role reinforce it structurally; everyone in the room is under somebody. Grappling research is younger than the boxing literature, but it points the same way: a 2019 study found clinically meaningful improvements in post-traumatic stress markers, anxiety and depression among BJJ practitioners, and a 2021 systematic review highlighted jiu-jitsu's resilience-building and its mitigating effect on aggression, with the University of Bath now running a longitudinal UK study. The ego-reduction mechanism itself rests more on practitioner consensus and emerging research than on hard trials, and we say so openly.

Pad work gives hard effort a shape. The mats do something rarer: they teach a lad to lose a dozen times a night and walk away with his self-respect intact.

6. An important distinction: regulated release, not 'venting'

There is a fair challenge any school should put to a programme like this, and it deserves a straight answer. The old catharsis idea, that hitting things 'gets the anger out', has been debunked. Brad Bushman's research showed that when people punch a bag while stewing on the person who angered them, aggression goes up, not down: venting rehearses the anger. If Mindset Warrior were 'come and batter the pads while you think about who you hate', it would be making things worse.

It isn't, and the distinction is central to how the programme is designed. What the evidence supports is exactly what runs in every session: **exertion plus skill plus relationship plus reflection**. The pads demand technical focus (which interrupts rumination rather than feeding it: attention on the combination, not the grievance), the coach provides co-regulation, and the discussion turns the experience into learning. The scoping review below describes this as combat training's built-in mindfulness: constant attention to technique and the

interplay of mind and body. The martial-arts meta-analysis makes the same point from the other direction, crediting the discipline and respect traditions, not the striking, for the behavioural gains. The release students experience is the by-product of regulation, not of rage. So to the question 'aren't you just teaching angry boys to fight?', the answer is that undirected venting makes anger worse and the research agrees, which is why every session pairs the physical work with mindset coaching and reflection, inside a tradition built on restraint.

7. What the research says about combat-sport programmes

A 2023 scoping review in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine ('Boxing as an Intervention in Mental Health') gathered 16 studies of boxing-based interventions and found: 94% reported reduced stress and improved mood, self-esteem and quality of life; statistically significant reductions in depression and anxiety on validated scales; clinically meaningful PTSD symptom reduction in trauma survivors; and among adolescents, participants became 'less aggressive, calmer, more confident' with better school performance. One large youth programme (4,822 young people) reported 88% reduced psychological distress and 87% increased confidence. The review explicitly credits non-contact boxing with providing 'a cathartic release of anger, aggression, stress, and the dissipation of anxious energy.'

Closer to home, the YEF pilot of Empire Fighting Chance's 12-week schools programme (Years 8–9, referred for behaviour and attendance) found roughly 80% of surveyed participants reported increased confidence and happiness, around 70% improved family relationships and reduced trouble, and about 60% improved attendance.

We are straight about the limits, because honesty is part of the offer: the combat-sport evidence base is promising but young. Only 2 of the 16 boxing studies were rated high-quality, the martial-arts meta-analysis flagged the same methodological weakness across its field, and the EFC pilot was too small for definitive claims. Mindset Warrior is a mentoring and emotional-regulation programme built on well-established mechanisms (stress physiology, bottom-up regulation, trusted-adult relationships, the discipline traditions of martial arts) with a promising and growing intervention evidence base. It is not therapy, and we never present it as proven treatment.

8. Holding the moment: what happens when emotion comes over the top

Because these releases are a normal part of the work, Mindset Warrior coaches are deliberate about the two minutes after the tears start. Trauma-informed sport guidance (US Center for SafeSport; trauma-informed coaching literature) converges on a consistent playbook, and it is the one followed in every session:

- **Stay regulated yourself.** Co-regulation is the mechanism: his nervous system borrows the calm of yours. Slow voice, relaxed posture, no alarm.
- **Keep it side-by-side, not face-to-face.** Stand next to him, keep hands moving if he wants (slow pad taps, a walk), don't demand eye contact or an explanation.
- **Normalise without spotlighting.** 'That happens in here', then protect him from the group's attention rather than drawing more to it. Do not interpret the emotion for him.
- **Don't dig.** Never press for the story behind the tears. If he wants to talk, listen; if not, leave it. Digging turns a private moment into exposure.

- **Land the plane.** Finish with something rhythmic and grounding, like breathing or slow shadow work, so he leaves the session steady.
- **Follow up quietly.** A word next session ('good to see you back') tells him the crying changed nothing about how he's seen.

One hard line: if tears come with a disclosure, anything suggesting harm, abuse or risk, it stops being an emotional-release moment and becomes a safeguarding one. It is recorded and reported through the school's designated safeguarding lead, and no coach ever promises secrecy. This is written into the programme's safeguarding procedures, alongside enhanced DBS checks for all instructors and a named safeguarding lead.

9. How Mindset Warrior measures what matters

A theory of change runs through every cohort: chronic stress → structured physical challenge → regulation alongside a trusted adult → reflection and practical skills → improved behaviour, confidence and attendance. Each stage is grounded in the research summarised above, and each cohort is expected to demonstrate it rather than assume it.

Outcomes are measured, not asserted. We agree the baseline and follow-up measures with the school before delivery. These can include the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), attendance, engagement and coach observations. At the end of week six, the school receives a cohort outcomes report showing what changed, what the coaches observed and what should happen next. Any measure is used in line with its licensing terms and the agreed data-protection arrangements.

This paper has a companion briefing, 'Strong, Not Toxic: boys, role models, and the vacuum Mindset Warrior fills', which addresses the wider challenge schools are facing around online influencers and boys' attitudes, and the evidence for why strengths-based approaches succeed where shame-based ones backfire. The two papers are designed to be read together: that one describes the challenge; this one explains how the programme works.

Sources

Bozdarov et al. (2023), 'Boxing as an Intervention in Mental Health: A Scoping Review', American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine · <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15598276221124095>

Youth Endowment Fund (2023), Empire Fighting Chance: Boxing-based mentoring, Feasibility and Pilot Study · <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EFC.-YEF-Feasibility-and-Pilot-Study.-2023.pdf>

Swettenham & Whitehead (2022), 'Level playing field: young males, masculinity and mental wellbeing through sport', BMC Public Health · <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-022-13200-1>

Harwood, Lavidor & Rasseovsky (2017), 'Reducing aggression with martial arts: A meta-analysis of child and youth studies', Aggression and Violent Behavior · <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1359178917300976>

British Psychological Society Research Digest, 'The art of not fighting: martial arts reduce child and teen aggression' · <https://www.bps.org.uk/research-digest/art-not-fighting-martial-arts-reduce-child-and-teen-aggression>

University of Bath, 'Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu's links to mental health explored in new research study' (incl. 2019 PTSD study and 2021 systematic review) · <https://www.bath.ac.uk/announcements/brazilian-jiu-jitsus-links-to-mental-health-explored-in-new-research-study/>

Medical News Today, 'Eight benefits of crying: Why it's good to shed a few tears' · <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/319631>

Bushman (2002), 'Does Venting Anger Feed or Extinguish the Flame?', Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin · <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0146167202289002>

Nagoski & Nagoski, completing the stress cycle (summary and practical guide) · <https://www.therapywithabby.co.uk/blog/completing-the-stress-cycle>

Perry, Regulate, Relate, Reason (Neurosequential Model; rhythmic regulation) · <https://thinkkids.org/regulate-relate-reason/>

Stress Health, 'How dance and other rhythmic movement can reduce the impact of ACEs' (Perry's work applied) · <https://www.stresshealth.org/blog/i-like-to-move-it-move-it-how-dance-and-other-rhythmic-movement-can-reduce-the-impact-of-aces>

US Center for SafeSport, Trauma-Sensitive Coaching toolkit · <https://eptoolkit.uscenterforsafesport.org/preventing/trauma-sensitive-coaching/>

Mental Health Today, 'Non-contact boxing therapy breeding optimism' (Empire Fighting Chance) · <https://www.mentalhealthtoday.co.uk/blog/young-people/non-contact-boxing-therapy-breeding-optimism-in-bristols-young>

Published by Mindset Warrior, Warrior Combat Gym, 51 South Road, Waterloo, Liverpool L22 5PE. This briefing summarises published research; it is not clinical advice. Mindset Warrior is a mentoring and emotional-regulation programme, not therapy. Enquiries: info@mindsetwarrior.academy · 0151 476 0762