



**‘Film Festivals & Looking After
Your Mental Health’**

**Written by The Film Festival
Doctor, Rebekah Louisa Smith**

FILM FESTIVALS AND LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Hello and welcome to my latest E-Book, '*Film Festivals and Looking After Your Mental Health*'. Thank you so much for taking the time to read it and also to making a commitment to looking after your mental health.

My name is Dr. Rebekah Louisa Smith and I am an award-winning Film Festival Strategist & Founder of The Film Festival Doctor. Myself and my team can create a film festival strategy for you, so you can get your film seen by audiences around the world.

So far, we have helped my clients win over 1,950 awards and have secured hundreds of festival screenings including the Locarno, Tribeca, Palm Springs, Aesthetica, Sundance, Nashville, Cinequest & BFI London Film Festivals to name just a handful.

In addition to having a huge passion for film festivals and nurturing my clients, I am a big advocate for mental health. This book came to fruition when I began to notice certain triggers occurring when filmmakers received rejection letters from film festivals which helped me to identify that filmmakers needed to take more care of their mental, physical and emotional health and that these elements are in fact a core component of a film festival strategy.

I'm no stranger to anxiety and over the past 10 years I've noticed that the film festival circuit can really flare this debilitating condition up in addition to depression a plethora of other mental health issues.

When the global pandemic began back in 2020, I noticed that there has been much more of a focus upon how important it is to look after one's mental health due to the feelings of isolation and loneliness (among other things) that it flagged up.

Many years ago, I was diagnosed with GAD - general anxiety disorder, it was pretty manageable and I could carry on living my life, however it got worse in 2021 due to the stress of my US visa problems and the sudden drastic change that occurred in my life.

This experience brought up some issues from my childhood that I wasn't aware of that needed healing. The panic attacks I'd been experiencing got worse and in January 2023 turned into debilitating anxiety. Thankfully I can leave the house now and the condition has certainly improved.

The therapist I was working with got me thinking about the topic of mental health and how important it is to prioritize it. The stress of my visa problems and my reaction to the situation is what flagged up the fact that I needed to take more care of my body & my mental health as I didn't do this when I was younger.

As discussed above, this revelation opened up my eyes regarding Film Festivals & that there are certain triggers within the Film Festival world that can flag up to filmmakers that they need to take more care of their mental, physical and emotional health.

This is by no means suggesting that Film Festivals are the cause and the reason why filmmakers experience anxiety or depression on the festival circuit and during the film festival submission process, rather Film Festivals simply bring up to the surface an issue that was already there which needs healing.

In this e-book I'm going to discuss the main trigger; coping with festival rejection letters - and how to remedy it.

The remedies I'll be covering and introducing you to (along with some help from the experts!) are EFT, meditation, vision boards and writing as a processing tool.

Here's how I identified the main trigger. Pretty much all of the awesome filmmakers I work with want to aim high and submit to the big top tier film festivals. This is a totally normal goal. Everyone has free will so even when I advise the filmmakers who don't have a film that's suitable for these kinds of festivals not to submit, they can always do what a client of mine calls 'submit and see' to give it a go just in case it might get in and also for a bit of fun.

The above is the type of approach to take only if you are emotionally detached from your film and you can accept and trust in the right type of festival strategy for it. If you are still precious that's when the mental health gremlins can creep in. For example, a client of mine wanted to submit to these bigger festivals even though I pre-warned her that the response would be a pass. She said that wouldn't bother her & she could take the rejection with a pinch of salt.

When decisions from the festivals started to trickle in, she got quite a few yeses from some lovely smaller reputable festivals (which she also later won awards at) but there were also a lot of no's coming in from the bigger festivals. I told her not to worry and joked that we both already knew that these would all be passes, however she was beginning to get very upset and after speaking with her GP she was diagnosed with imposter syndrome as she was having severe symptoms of thinking that she wasn't good enough as a director.

The truth was she was a brilliant director; she had just simply made a film that was not for the top tier festivals audiences and instead it thrived at much more suitable festivals that appreciated its narrative and saw the value in it.

The golden rule is to always create the right type of festival strategy for your film and -
Be realistic
Never take things personally
Never assume

A brilliant book that I'd recommend you read is '*The Four Agreements*' by Don Miguel Ruiz. Ruiz reveals the source of self-limiting beliefs that rob us of joy and create needless suffering. Based on ancient Toltec wisdom, The Four Agreements offer a powerful code of conduct that can rapidly transform your lives to a new experience of freedom, true happiness, and love. I personally found this to be a very powerful book, which made a tremendous difference in how I think and act to every festival acceptance & encounter I receive.

Find out more about The Four Agreements books here –
<https://www.miguelruiz.com/the-four-agreements>

There are many different types of therapy available to us nowadays. The ones I have found to be most useful are CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) and EMDR Therapy. You can find out more about these types of counselling via these very useful books -

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Made Simple: 10 Strategies for Managing Anxiety, Depression, Anger, Panic, and Worry Paperback Author - [Seth J. Gillihan](#) (Author)

EMDR THERAPY TOOLBOX: Self-Help Techniques to Eliminate Anxiety, Depression, & Anger and to Overcome Traumatic Stress Symptoms. Theory & Treatment of Complex PTSD & Dissociation to Retrain Your Brain Paperback – [David Reyes](#) (Author)

You won't get selected for every single festival you submit to and it's important to not take rejection personally (as Ruiz says and explores in further detail in his book). Rejection is part and parcel of the film festival submission process.

And this brings me on to the next topic - coping with festival rejection letters.

HOW TO COPE WITH FILM FESTIVAL REJECTION LETTERS

When you receive a rejection letter from a festival it is wrong to automatically assume that the festival hated your film (when a rejection letter arrives revert back to the Four Agreements book it will really help to change your perspective and train your brain into a different way of thinking!)

Nowadays this is very rarely the case. Festival programmers are turning down so many films that they love and that tends to be lots since a festival that receives 6,000 submissions can tend to only screen 250-300 films or in Sundance's case 65 short films.

The most common reasons that your film has not been selected for a festival are as follows –

- The festival programmer liked the film but it didn't fit their theme or topic for this year's festival
- No room in the schedule to programme it
- A coin toss between 2 similar films which was your film and another person's film – the other person's film won
- Liked the film but not the right fit for the festival's audience demographic
- Loved it but just missed out in finding a slot to programme it
- Liked it but not the type of film which would be suitable for a top tier festival programme

There's also festival politics that get in the way of films being programmed and it's true that sometimes festival programmers don't resonate with every film that gets submitted. They appreciate the work that's gone in but it just doesn't click with them. The golden rule in this

scenario is to never take rejection personally as it's not you personally that's being evaluated and assessed – it's your film and if they can do anything with it.

This is one of my favourite rejection letters from a women's festival in the USA regarding my clients film 'THE GESTURE AND THE WORD.'

'By now you likely received a notice from us that 'The Gesture and The Word' was not accepted into this year's festival. I don't typically do this but I wanted to take a minute to personally write you to let you know that the film narrowly missed advancing to the finals. Please let Helen know that we think she's a talented filmmaker and that we would very much like to see any of her future projects for consideration in the festival. We have a waiver code ready to send to her.'

In addition to 'The Four Agreements' book there is also another technique to ease the stress and anxiety of coping with festival rejection letters. This is called Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)

HOW TO USE EMOTIONAL FREEDOM TECHNIQUE (EFT)

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) is an alternative treatment for physical pain and emotional distress. It's also referred to as 'tapping'. Therapists who use this technique believe tapping the body can create a balance in your energy system and treat pain. EFT style tapping has been used to treat anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. EFT focuses on the meridian points – or energy hot spots — to restore balance to your body's energy.

I tried it myself and the therapist I was working with told me to 'tap' my shoulders once or twice a day as this was where there was an imbalance and the energy was severely blocked. She also told me to repeat the following affirmation "I am undefeated". By stimulating this area of my body, it helped me to significantly reduce the stress or negative emotion I was feeling from the experience. After one month, it helped me to restore balance to the disrupted energy in my body.

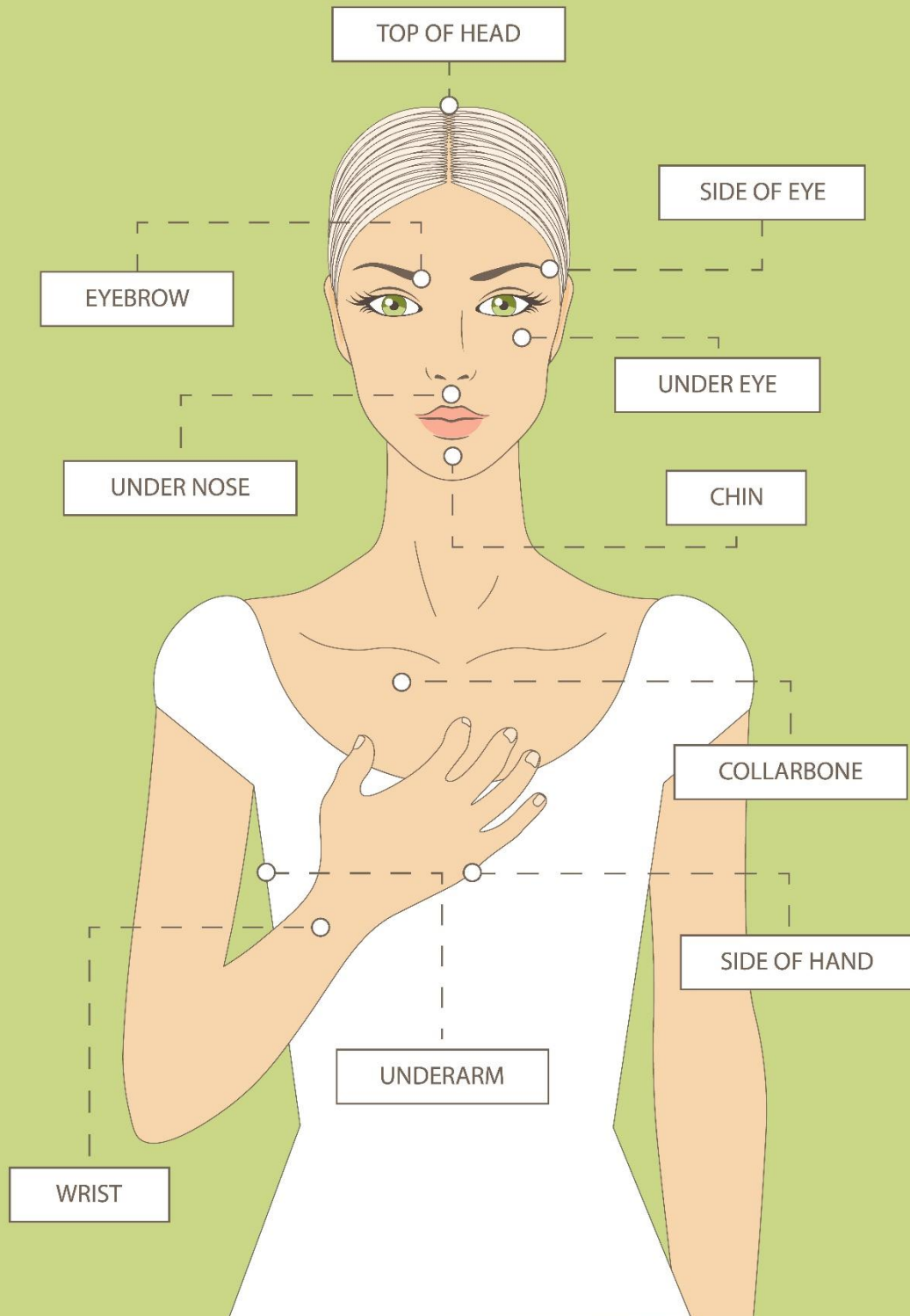
With regards to using EFT to help you navigate the festival circuit, this technique can come in handy when you are coping with festival rejection letters and/or not getting the results that you were expecting. You can use the above tapping technique and replace "I am undefeated" with for example "I am a talented filmmaker", "I have made an incredible film" "My film is having an abundant and successful festival run" and "I am proud of my film and the huge amount of selections and wins it is getting on the festival circuit." The image below shows where the tapping points are located on the body.

Recommended Further Reading -

Emotional Freedom Techniques and Tapping for Beginners: EFT Tapping Solution Manual : 7 Effective Tapping Therapy Techniques for Overcoming Anxiety (The Psychology of Mental Health & Happiness) - [Paul Rogers](#) (Author), [Robert Bloom](#) (Author)

EFT Tapping: Quick and Simple Exercises to De-Stress, Re-Energize and Overcome Emotional Problems Using Emotional Freedom Technique Paperback – by [Mike Moreland](#) (Author)

EMOTIONAL FREEDOM TECHNIQUE



VISION BOARDS & LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

In my book 'Born to Do It' I discuss the importance of a vision board. I am a firm believer in them. A vision board is a tool that can help you manifest your goals and desires more swiftly. It is a visualization tool comprising a board (of any sort) that you use to build a collage of words and pictures that represent your goals and dreams. Vision boards provide you with a daily visual reminder of these dreams and goals. The reason vision boards work so well is because you can see them every day.

It's very important that the images you place on your vision board reflect your goals and dreams and they must always be images that you are drawn to and that you would want to look at every day. Photos, quotes, sayings, affirmations, images of places you want to go, reminders of events, places and people, postcards from friends – in other words, just about anything that will inspire you.

It is also very important to get into a routine of looking at your vision board several times a day, ideally first thing in the morning and before you go to bed. Looking at pictures related to what you want helps you to feel the positive feelings you want to cultivate more easily. I created a vision board that was very specific and focused on what I wanted to achieve for myself and my business, which included being booked for high profile speaking events, features in prolific press, earning more money per month, working with more amazing films and filmmakers, winning more awards, and securing more festival screenings for our clients.

So how does this apply to your film festival strategy? First of all, buy yourself a board – A3 size is ideal. Then start collecting images that you are drawn to of film festivals. This can be your dream film festival logos, filmmakers winning Best Director awards or Best of Fest awards, looking glamorous on the red carpet, prize money, securing a distribution deal and most importantly images of people responding positively to your film.

I look at my vision board every morning and every night which kept me motivated and inspired me to stay in alignment with my goals. And this will help you stay on track and keep on top of your festival strategy. It will help you not give up when rejections pop up and stay grounded. A couple of months later one of my client's films was accepted into a very prestigious film festival – the Locarno Film Festival and I had the festival's logo on my vision board. Seeing is believing.

Vision Board Examples -

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/scrappinmichele/vision-board-samples/>

<https://healthyhappyimpactful.com/vision-board-examples-ideas/>





Recommended Further Reading -

CALMOURA Vision Board Kit for Adults Supplies — Vision Board Supplies Kit for Collage, Scrapbooking — Dream Board and Mood Board for Inspiration – Order via the Calmoura Store

Vision Board Kit for Women - Complete Deluxe Dream & Mood Board Supplies for Adults | Law of Attraction Manifestation | 100 Creative Pictures, 100 Inspiration Quotes, Folded Board, Goal-Setting Guide – Order via the Bold Tuesday store

Free Period Press Vision Board Book, 700+ Words & Images in All Categories, for Visualizing Your Life Goals & Dreams, Playful, Stylish and Diverse Pictures for Collage Making & Scrapbooking – Order via the Free Period Press Store

THE POWER OF MEDITATION - INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA GRAHAM

Hi Jessica, welcome! Could you kindly tell my readers a little more about your meditation teachings that you offer?

I started teaching meditation back in 2009. At that time I was primarily offering mindfulness meditation, with an emphasis on awakening, self-love, and grief recovery. Over time, my teaching expanded to include many traditions and modalities, with an emphasis on cultivating and integrating awakening experiences, and bringing mindfulness and meditation into sex. In 2017, my book, *Good Sex: Getting Off Without Checking Out*, was released by North Atlantic books. I've worked with hundreds of clients, from around the world, to improve and deepen their relationships and sexual well-being using meditation, mindfulness, and other practices and tools. These days my primary focus is on trauma, specifically Complex-PTSD and Post-Traumatic Growth. Sometimes meditation is included in that, but I am mostly using somatic trauma-resolution, Brainspotting, and bilateral stimulation, along with writing exercises, archetypal work, and more. I still teach a weekly (most weeks!) meditation class on Zoom that anyone can attend, and is donation based. My meditation clients these days are seasoned practitioners who need support with integration and side effects of awakening, as well as how to wake up sexually and creatively!

And you are also a filmmaker! A woman of many talents! Tell us more about your filmmaking career and the films that you have directed.

I've loved films since I was a kid. My dad was a film buff and showed me things like *Taxi Drive* and *The Godfather* when I was way too young, but I'm grateful for that. I've always been interested in performing and have acted in many films and plays and I started directing in 2018. My directing projects include three short films, *Listen* (Vimeo and YouTube), *Into Light* (Amazon Prime), and *Waves* which is currently being submitted to festivals. *Listen* is about the horror of intimate partner violence, *Into Light* is about Inez Milholland the suffragist and labor lawyer, and *Waves* is a contemplation of loss and acceptance. I like to work on projects that align with me in multiple ways, and each of these projects did. I also directed a pilot for the YouTube Women in Comedy Initiative, helmed by Elizabeth Banks. I also produced and acted in a feature sci-fi film called *The Tangle*, which is available to stream.

A lot of filmmakers say that they'll meditate but never get round to it - why is meditation so important to one's mental health?

I'd say as filmmakers we especially need to meditate! I always start the day on set with a one-minute meditation for all cast and crew. Filmmaking is inherently stressful. Even with my years of meditation practice, directing a film takes me to the very edge of my threshold when it comes to stress. When our nervous system experiences hyper or hypo arousal (AKA fight, flight, freeze, fawn) for long periods due to high levels of stress we are more susceptible to ongoing anxiety, depression, addiction, chronic illness, and weakened resilience in general. If like me, someone has a history of trauma, this stress and nervous system dysregulation can become even more detrimental to mental health. Meditation is one way to lower stress and spend more time in the "window of tolerance," which is what is between hyper and hypo

arousal. By returning to the breath or an affirmation, we can soothe the stress and calm our poor filmmaker nervous system. Meditation can also help us to let go of what we can't control (so much when making a low-budget film!) and experience more pleasure, gratitude, and compassion. Meditation can also help make you kinder and more patient with other humans, which is super important when making a film.

How did you integrate meditation into your routine when you were touring the festival circuit with your short film?

I always did my best to get a meditation in at the hotel before starting the day. I also find planes to be a great place to meditate! I am a fan of micro-dosing meditation all throughout the day, which is really helpful when navigating the sometimes intense experience of a film festival.

How did you respond to film festival rejection letters?

I've been acting since I was a teenager, so I got used to rejection at an early age! It's rare that I give a film festival rejection letter a second thought. There were a few times when I was surprised, as I thought we had it in the bag as an alumni of a festival with a world premiere. Those experiences were disappointing and I just let myself have the feelings without getting pulled into a negative story. Meditation can help separate emotional sensations from thoughts, which leads to a lot less suffering.

Did you ever experience imposter syndrome when you were touring the festival circuit with your films and doing Q&As?

Imposter syndrome generally comes in at the first production meeting or table read, then again the first day on set, and one last time first day of post. It doesn't last more than those three days. By the time I'm at a festival I figure at least a few people thought it was good enough to program it!

Did you learn anything about more yourself when you were touring the festival circuit with your films?

I learned that I need a lot of breaks and a ton of self-care if I want to enjoy festivals. That means not going to every party or the late night screenings, staying hydrated, having easy snacks on hand, and wearing comfortable shoes. It seems simple, but I was on my own at a very young age, so self-care and prioritizing my health is something I work hard at. Film festivals gave me a great opportunity to practice loving myself more.

Could you list 5 books that would benefit filmmakers who are struggling with looking after their mental health?

All About Love by Bell Hooks
Call of the Wild by Kimberly Ann Johnson
Daring Greatly by Brené Brown

Mindfulness Workbook for Panic Attacks: Healing Strategies to Reduce Anxiety, Manage Panic and Live in the Moment by Lauren Maher
Healing Developmental Trauma: How Early Trauma Affects Self-Regulation, Self-Image, and the Capacity for Relationship by Laurence Heller and Aline LaPierre

And finally what is your Instagram handle so that filmmakers can follow you on social media?

@jessicacarkgraham on Instagram and TikTok!

Thank you & looking forward to seeing the next film!

THE POWER OF GRIEF & PROCESS WRITING - INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL FOWLER

Hi Rachel, welcome! You are a (brilliant) grief coach, could you tell my readers more about what this is and how this type of coaching can help people?

I use the definition of grief from the Grief Recovery Method: “Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behaviour.”

I help people navigate endings, and the transformation that ensues. We think of grief as being related only to death, but we grieve lots of losses: end of a relationship, end of a job, moving, ending school, loss of health etc.... With endings come new beginnings, and that can be overwhelming. And it’s a time to reflect on who we are and make some active choices about who we want to be going forward.

A lot of my work is 1:1, I witness, draw attention to self judgement, ask questions, help examine current coping mechanisms and replace them if need be. I help my clients tap into their creativity – it releases dopamine, endorphins, serotonin – all happy hormones - to lift their moods, and find meaning in their losses.

The quality of your thinking improves dramatically with the attention I give you. That’s the beauty of coaching!

And you are also a filmmaker! A woman of many talents! Tell us more about your filmmaking career and your incredible short film STILLNESS?

STILLNESS is my first film! I started writing to process a loss of my own – in 2016, my nephew Ryan died of a drug overdose on my daughter’s birthday. He was 13, she turned 8. So much sorrow and joy on the same day. Oooof. I had just moved to London, having left a thriving acting/directing career in Denver, and to be honest, was grieving those losses as well.

There are a lot of transferable skills going from the theatre to film: storytelling, emotional beats, casting, visual blocking. I leaned into those, and was really lucky to surround myself with a lot of extremely talented filmmakers who knew more than I did, and lifted me up – my DOP for example, Eve Cohen. She and I had worked together on another short, MRS. DRAKE. I acted in that one (and Caitlin FitzGerald who plays the photographer in STILLNESS directed it). Eve gave me a crash course in filmmaking as we prepped the shoot. It was invaluable. My editor

Fabrizio Gammardella too - so patient as we worked through the film beat by beat. I can't wait to work with both of them again!

I am thrilled at the reception of *STILLNESS* – it's been amazing. Carrie Fisher said: Take your broken heart and turn it into art. That's what this is for me.

I am working on getting funding for a couple of other shorts, continuing to explore the theme of grief and loss and finding meaning there. And I have a feature script I am trying to get out of my head and onto paper. I have been working on sets in various positions with some other filmmakers, learning more, and just finished a directing class with Sundance Collab. I am also collaborating with Producer Rebecca Del Tufo, dreaming up a Grief and Loss Film Festival for some time in the future. Stay tuned!

A lot of filmmakers say that they'll meditate but never get round to it – do you often meditate?

Maybe they think meditation is sitting and being still and not doing anything at all, and that's why they don't get around to it? To be honest, that kind of meditation doesn't work or even sound appealing to me.

But mediation can take many forms. Meditation can be a morning walk. Or colouring a mandala. Or lying down and consciously relaxing each muscle group. Or dancing for a few minutes to your favourite 80's tune. (that's me!) It's about giving your nervous system a break, a refresh. It's centering, it's re-establishing a connection to your most powerful tool as a filmmaker too: your imagination.

You mention that writing is a powerful tool for processing - how would you encourage filmmakers to integrate writing into their routine when experiencing the festival circuit?

Oh, what a great question!!!!

First - take note of things that inspire you while you are on the circuit. Something someone said, an image in a film you saw, the place where you are staying. Use those as prompts. Set a timer, and write and explore for 10 minutes. It doesn't have to be a long and involved process, just something that gets your creativity flowing, as you explore you reveal your own thoughts, you have new ideas, and that may beget your next project!

Can you tell my readers a little more about your *WRITE YOUR GRIEF* course?

I'm so excited about this offer. It's a group coaching class, using creative nonfiction.

Over 8 weeks and in a small, intimate group, we will write together, share, witness each other and be witnessed.

I'll guide you with prompts and forms. Everything is open, everything is available to you.

“Writing means sharing. It's part of the human condition to want to share things— thoughts, ideas, opinions.” –Paulo Coelho

At the end of the course, I will compile your pieces, help you edit them and with your permission, publish them in a reflection journal, illuminated by artwork from the incredible [Jaya Modi](#), with blank pages for deeper contemplation and connection to your loss, your grief, but mostly, to yourself.

“I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn.” Anne Frank

Here are the details:

8 weeks, Mondays, starting September 11th,
from 6pm to 730pm UK time
on Zoom

Investment £499, payable by Paypal or Bank Transfer
(instalment plan available)

How did you respond to film festival rejection letters?

Depends on the festival, to be honest! I really thought I had a great chance of getting into the Women Over Fifty Festival and was really bummed when I didn't. Tribeca, well, that was a long shot. Disappointed, but not entirely surprised.

I let myself feel it. Then let it go.

I have a long history of rejection from being an actor. It's actually one of the best life lessons! Learning that being told no has nothing to do with your worth, your merit, your talent, your craft. Especially in the arts, where so much is subjective.

I focus on remembering that I have presented my best work and that there are many factors that go into whether or not a film gets chosen for a festival. I am super proud of my film.

(And it helps, of course, that I have gotten into many festivals and have won quite a few awards as well!)

Did you ever experience imposter syndrome when you were touring the festival circuit with your film and doing Q&As?

A little. Mostly just trying to be honest about the fact that I am a first time filmmaker, and owning that I had a lot of guidance and support during the making of STILLNESS. Very grateful. I am getting credit for a lot of other people's work, and want to acknowledge that. I also worked my ass off, researching, learning, rewriting, planning.... I know that there is still so much that I don't know!

Did you learn anything more about yourself when you were touring the festival circuit with STILLNESS?

I've learned how challenging I find networking. I kinda knew this already, but it's very much at the forefront of my mind when I am at a festival. I try to be like my dad, get people talking about themselves and their films. Connect with them that way.

I also love to connect with people about their grief. I know it sounds morbid but it's soooooo beautiful and powerful. Film is such a powerful medium. My sister Jill joined me at the Women's Film Festival in Las Vegas. Watching her connect with another audience member of the loss of their sons was astonishing, breathtaking - so much vulnerability and healing. That's what I long for!

Could you list 5 books that would benefit filmmakers who are struggling with looking after their mental health?

Daring Greatly and Atlas of the heart by Brene Brown. Anything by Brene Brown to be honest. She's the bees knees.

Play by Stuart Brown, MD - we learn from Play. Play is joy. Bring as much of it into your life as possible.

The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho - a wonderful delicious read that is comforting, and one I go back to again and again. *"When you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it."*

Steal Like An Artist by Austin Kleon (highest form of flattery - steal and make it your own!)

And I would say: rediscover a book you loved as a child or young person – I love Shel Silverstein, and he makes me laugh. I also love anything by Jack Kent. These are picture books, so don't take long to revisit, and they make me smile.

And finally, what is your Instagram handle so that filmmakers can follow you on social media?

@rayebeagle on IG
@stillnessfilm on IG

Email is also really good: rachelfowlerfilmmaker@gmail.com or rachel@rachelfowlegriefcoach.com

A FILMMAKER'S JOURNEY - THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF THE FESTIVAL CIRCUIT WRITTEN BY HELEN ALEXIS YONOV

If you don't have your health, you don't have anything. - Chuck Pagano

Too often we are guilty of not taking our health seriously enough. It could be mental, physical, spiritual, or emotional; however, if ignored, your health will deteriorate and you will suffer the consequences of poor choices. This goes for our daily life, as well as in our film careers. We must pay attention to our health and well-being when on the festival circuit. Health comes before

film, because you cannot make art without your health and you won't manage the long hours of a festival circuit either.

As filmmakers, we are used to grueling hours on set. Some of us (like myself) began as crew members and worked demanding hours with short turnarounds. Others spent their days and nights in production offices or editing bays with difficult, unsafe drives home. This lifestyle is very difficult and it is a daily struggle to stay healthy. In order to succeed in the Entertainment Industry, we constantly push ourselves and this lifestyle continues long after we wrap our shoots; lock our edits; and complete sound, color, and music on our films. We are then faced with the inevitable need to share our work with the outside world.

Before I continue, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Helen Alexis Yonov and I am a multi-award-winning Latvian-American short filmmaker and feature screenwriter. I have lived in the United States, Malaysia, the USSR/Russia, and France. I also have several auto-immune diseases and know my way around film festivals.

My first festival experience was in 1999 at the Newport International Film Festival in my hometown in Rhode Island. As a volunteer, I saw behind-the-scenes and noticed how brightly filmmakers burned the candle at both ends. After graduating from college, I moved to Los Angeles and worked as a set production assistant on films and TV shows, including *Seabiscuit*, *Anchorman*, *Elizabethtown*, and *War of the Worlds*. However, I did not want to work as an assistant director and in 2008, I wrote and directed my first post-college short film, "The Weight of It." The film screened at several film festivals, including the Oscar-qualifying Flickers: Rhode Island International Film Festival, the Downtown LA Film Festival, and the Paso Robles Digital Film Festival. During my trip to France's Oenovideo Wine and Film Festival, I stopped by the Cannes International Film Festival. It was an eye-opening experience and I am still amazed at how people get through the festival on little to no sleep over those twelve days.

In early 2020, as the pandemic hit the United States of America and the rest of the World, I began working with Rebekah on submitting my most recent short film, "The Gesture and The Word," to film festivals. Because of the lockdowns, my short film was primarily shown online, although it screened in theatres at several festivals throughout the World including the Cleveland International Film Festival, HollyShorts, Sarasota Film Festival & the Cordillera International Film Festival.

Truth be told, it was somewhat of a let-down to have worked extraordinarily hard on a film only for it to have the majority of its screenings be virtual. However, I also found that it helped me through the pandemic as I spent much of it promoting my film online through interviews, social media, and other festival-related avenues. Having a film at festivals and the busy schedule of promoting it helped me withstand the months and years of the pandemic. I was so busy; I did not have time to focus on the negativity happening in the World. It kept my spirits up and my creativity flowing.

During the pandemic, I also worked with Rebekah in order to submit a #metoo PSA - "We Stand Together" to festivals. In 2022, I had a different experience with my feature script "The Burden

of Light” which was submitted to screenplay competitions and festivals. This script has afforded me a very different experience. While most of the competitions are online, I have been able to attend a few physical festivals where I won several awards for screenwriting. Learning not to attach a desired outcome has helped me appreciate the experience more. Instead, film festivals have become a community that has really helped me. They don’t only bolster your resolve and inspire, but also become a supportive group.

Protecting our mental health is very important. Most filmmakers aim to show their work on the big screen with an eager audience; however, regardless of whether the festival runs for a few days or a few weeks, our health is an important part of our festival strategy, especially when an entire festival circuit can have a six month to three year lifespan. On this journey, we must remember to put ourselves and our health first, even before our film.

I try to get enough sleep, rest when necessary, eat regularly, be supportive and kind to myself, and surround myself with friends and family who believe in me. When I began this journey, I spoke with Rebekah about festival submissions. I know that festivals are amazing places to promote your work, network with fellow filmmakers, find inspiration, and if we’re lucky, win a few awards, get some press, sell our film, and find distribution. However, sometimes you leave empty-handed. After my heart-to-heart with Rebekah, I looked in the mirror and had a serious one-on-one with myself. I said: You will get acceptances. You will get rejections. You will win some. You will lose some. You will be able to attend some festivals. You will have to bypass others. Some festivals will love your work. Others will pass. Our mind influences our self-confidence and self-belief, as well as our relationships with others and the World around us.

How do we protect ourselves? When you nurture your sense of self and strengthen your own fragile nature, you can take anything on. Easier said than done? Trust me, I know. However, practicing this mental approach to the festival circuit is liberating. Perhaps it’s through the simple act of speaking kindly to yourself and not being too hard on your decisions and choices. If you are happy and proud of your work, like I am with “The Gesture and The Word,” it’s not your failure. It’s not your loss. It’s theirs. NEXT!

The physical toll on your body is another important part of the equation. Unlike the younger versions of me in 1999 and 2008, who brightly burned the candle at both ends, I now make decisions that put my health first. I listen to my body and decide to do what is best for it. When I first attended Cannes in 2009, I barely slept while I was there for the full two weeks. Having now attended over a dozen times, I approach the festival differently. I also now know that the first week is quite enough time to spend at the festival. What has changed? I sometimes go to bed early! Yes, I sometimes don’t go to those parties that last until dawn. I sometimes take full days off. Yes, I sometimes stay at my apartment and relax or even catch up on some much-neglected work. Although you are at a festival to network, watch films, and learn, it’s important to remember why you’re there in the first place: you’re a filmmaker. Make films first and foremost.

When attending festivals, you do a lot of self-promotion, which can be exhausting. During the pandemic, I did a lot of festival interviews online. After doing five in a row, my brain was toast by the last interview of the day. Now imagine doing this in person. Who knew that talking about

yourself and your film(s) would make you want to hibernate in a cave like a Kodiak bear. Not only are you promoting yourself in written and on-camera interviews, you are constantly “on” with everyone around you. In a few days time, you may hit a wall; a very hard wall. I am currently working on my stamina, both physical and mental.

This will be helpful both at festivals and on set. One way that I am approaching this stamina building goal is to train for a walking marathon. While I will most likely not participate in an actual marathon, I can use the day to day exercise schedule and healthy diet to prepare me for the future. Festivals are not only mentally exhausting, but also physically. Sometimes the exhaustion radiates throughout my body. You spend your days getting your steps in as you walk from venue to venue. You don't eat as much as you should and are probably partaking in a bit more champagne than normal. I have bowed out of festivals due to auto-immune issues instead of pushing myself through it and making it worse.

It is OK to take a step back during the festival and take time for yourself. You only have one body. Make sure that you have downtime. Find pockets of stillness in which you can calm your nerves. I occasionally feel overwhelmed by crowds and loud noise, so if you're anything like me, I sometimes need silence. Meditation also helps. However, I sometimes need to disappear into music. People always say that you must capitalize on every moment at a festival. If you are not taking care of yourself, you may blow an important meeting or brush off what could have been a wonderful impromptu introduction.

When you are overly tired at the end of the day, you might miss an incredible opportunity. Because of my sensitive auto-immune system, the physical toll of a festival affects me differently and my approach is uniquely tailored to me. Yes, I am going to feel things far more acutely than someone who is healthier. Yes, I now tend to pace myself and will not go to every screening, every party, every mixer, and every panel. As stated earlier, I will sometimes go to bed early or (for those multi-week festivals) take a day off!

In order to withstand the festival grind, I think balancing the going out and partying with a healthier lifestyle is imperative to not getting incredibly burnt out. During the festivals, the emotional highs and lows are akin to riding a bike on a rollercoaster while bouncing on a yo-yo. Of course, it's an incredible experience when you find yourself in an event space where dozens or hundreds or thousands of filmmakers are all around you. You're in the midst of “your tribe.” It's understandable that you'd want to meet as many of your fellow filmmakers as possible. The high you get can carry you through hours and even days; however, there comes the inevitable crash -especially when the festival ends. You sometimes get the blues. Some call the melancholy felt after Cannes the “Cannes blues.” So many festivals have the same post-event crash where you go from being surrounded by like-minded people to sitting in your apartment and wondering “what's next?” When you get home, don't wallow in this surreal depression. Instead write, make another film, submit to another festival, and get back out there.

Many people have FOMO (the Fear of Missing Out.) As a veteran festival goer, mine has considerably lessened. Maybe it's the realization that over time, fewer things fall in the "must-see and must-do" category. My health is my number one priority. Without your health, you're basically up a creek without a paddle. Instead of pushing myself over the edge of a metaphorical Niagara Falls, I give myself permission to slow down, because I know it will only strengthen my health for the future. Without this centered approach, other aspects of your life become uneven and fragile, including your mood and emotions.

A thick skin is necessary when you get rejected by festivals. Few filmmakers get into the top festivals, but there are dozens of amazing reputable and well-respected festivals to consider. A bruised ego leads to a negative outlook which could lead to depression and negatively impact your relationship with your film, the festival experience, and the wonderful relationships with other filmmakers that you could be forging. In a way, I look at a rejection like receiving a "bad review." I have received both scathing reviews and love letters from audience members. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If they don't like or love my work, it isn't any of my business. A festival might love your film, but they chose not to screen it. Film festivals are a learning curve. Be a perpetual student. Make sure you are mentally ready to face rejection and even bad responses. It is the key to surviving.

Last, but never least, your spiritual health also matters. First and foremost, I do not mean spiritual in a specific religious context. As the granddaughter of a Russian Orthodox Archpriest, my relationship with the spiritual is private. That said, I also liken it to a muse, inspiration, and creativity. Whatever your belief system, care for the light shining within you, which is perhaps from where our artist's soul truly originates. Call it what you will - spirit, heart, inspiration, artistry, or creativity. It's resonating energy. Do whatever possible and necessary to nurture this part of your health.

As the film festival circuit begins to go from online to hybrid to in-person again, we must continue this practice of putting our health first. By listening to ourselves - as health is a mind-body-spirit-emotion combination - our bodies will tell us that we are pushing the envelope, burning the candle at both ends, not speaking kindly to ourselves, and not coming from a centered, healthy place. LISTEN CAREFULLY.

Helen Alexis Yonov
Latvian-American Filmmaker
www.hansenwomen.com
www.helenalexisyonov.com
www.gesturefilm.com
IG @helenalexisyonov

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model meditation, EFT, self-help and offer a very supportive place for filmmakers to connect and share their experiences on their filmmaking journey.

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THANK YOU

Once again, thank you for taking the time to read this book and I hope it gave you some useful insight into taking care of yourself whilst you are experiencing and navigating the film festival circuit.

Keep in touch with me on Instagram and share your stories with me

@rebekahfilmdr

@the_film_festival_doctor

