

SHAME OFF YOU

UNSHAMING MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

SHAME OFF YOU

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“The two of them, the Man and his Wife,
were naked, but they felt no shame.”

—**Genesis 2:25**, *The Message*

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all who suffer and hide silently behind the veil of shame connected with their mental health struggles. Now is the time for us to courageously come out of hiding and stand together—embracing, leveraging, and celebrating our vulnerability.

SPECIAL THANKS

To my mother Dal, and sisters, Sue, Ellie, and Annie *thank you for your positive and uplifting influence in my life. I am forever honoured to be your son and brother.*

To my wife Karen, and children, Emily and Jake *thank you for encouraging me to persevere in writing my first book. You have faithfully and lovingly stood by me, during my highest highs and my lowest lows.*

To my spiritual family, C3 Beachway and C3 Cambridge *thank you for the privilege of being your pastor for over twenty-three years and graciously accepting my flaws and weaknesses. Together we have created memories that will last a lifetime.*

NOTE TO READER

When I refer to shame, I will focus on the intimidating feeling of inferiority, or as Dr Brené Brown aptly said, “the fear that we’re not good enough.”

There will also be frequent references to anxiety. We all have moments when we feel anxious. As I reveal my experience, I am describing unrelenting anxiety accompanied by panic attacks. Mental health practitioners define my condition as chronic anxiety or an anxiety disorder.

SHAME OFF YOU is also a biography of the journey of my faith in God while navigating through the turmoil of shame and anxiety. Throughout this book, I make several references to vulnerability, brokenness, and weakness. My heart is to offer a fresh Biblical revelation between the relationship of taunting emotional pain and steadfast faith in God.

This book is not intended to provide medical advice or to take the place of medical advice and treatment from your General Practitioner (GP). Readers are advised to consult their GP or qualified health professionals regarding specific health and wellbeing questions.

Neither the publisher nor the author takes responsibility for possible health consequences of any person reading or following the information in this book. All readers, especially those taking prescription or over-the-counter medications, should consult their GP before beginning any exercise, nutrition or supplement program.

If you feel agitated and vulnerable while reading this book, please contact one of the organisations listed on page 173. Asking for help is a sign of courage, not weakness.

PROLOGUE

SHAME ON YOU!

It's astounding how three words can be so damaging and detrimental to the human soul. Have you ever had these three words spoken over you or perhaps you have spoken them over yourself?

We experience shame for a diversity of reasons. There may be the shame of addiction, abuse, unmanageable debt, unemployment, rejection, self-harm, chronic sickness, or moral failure. Some suffer acutely with the shame of their body image, an eating disorder, shyness, or issues with their sexuality.

Shame is not a loner. Shame has several close companions such as fear, embarrassment, humiliation, regret, and guilt. Together they stand as a formidable force on our daring road towards personal growth and maturity.

This book focuses specifically on the shame associated with our mental health struggles. Straight off the bat, I want to declare that I unashamedly belong to a gutsy tribe who suffer silently behind the veil of shame connected with chronic anxiety and panic attacks. If this is also your reality, you will identify with me on many levels.

However, if you suffer from any emotional turmoil such as unmanageable stress, burnout, depression, despair, or feeling overwhelmed, I know you too will find help and reassurance within these pages.

Telling my story is my coming out in the open. You will soon discover that I don't just have a skeleton in my closet—I have a cemetery. Shame has been a harsh voice and influence throughout my life.

From my experience, the shame associated with chronic anxiety has been intoxicating, paralysing, and intimidating. There have been dark moments when I have allowed shame to belittle and degrade me.

When my private world began to implode in early 2007, I was assigned a Mental Health Plan by my GP, and engaged in numerous challenging and confronting sessions with a therapist.

The clarifying revelation through therapy was that shame had been a constant battleground in my life—from a timid boy growing up in the western suburbs of Sydney, to my challenging role as a lead pastor of a church in Perth, Western Australia, for twenty-three years. There has been substantial collateral damage in my wake.

Scales fell off my eyes, and I could clearly see my predicament. My life had been sabotaged by a “shame double whammy.” Shame was a pathway to my mental health struggle. Furthermore, if that wasn't damaging enough, my mental health struggle was a pathway to intensified and compounded shame.

Because of the perceived stigma and shame of our declining mental health, many of us desperately hide and cover up our emotional and behavioural dysfunction, just like our ancient ancestors Adam and Eve, as revealed in the Genesis narrative. They were abruptly, yet graciously exposed, and they frantically hid. Sound familiar?

Shame is a primal and painful human emotion. Today, more than any time in history, we endeavour to conceal,

distract, and numb our pain of shame through medication, alcohol, shopping, social media, endless entertainment, and unrelenting busyness.

The good news is it doesn't have to be that way. As a fellow traveller of emotional brokenness, this easy-to-read, grounded, and practical book assures you that you're not alone.

Collectively, we are part of a community of the warrior or wounded, learning to navigate courageously through the shame and complexities associated with our mental health struggles.

Please let me reiterate; we're in this fight together. Your pain is my pain. Your struggle is my struggle. And your breakthrough is my breakthrough.

The message of *SHAME OFF YOU* also offers unwavering hope—there is always hope and a way forward. Let me be candid right from the start. I will not be offering a silver bullet or a magical formula of recovery. There is no cookie cutter approach or a one-size-fits-all solution.

As I have battled with the turmoil of mental health struggles, I can testify that personal growth is not a quick fix, but a daring and often slow and frustrating journey that encompasses dramatic ebbs and flows. We have our good days and bad days—that's "normal," and that's okay.

Part of your reading experience will likely be a heightened self-awareness of the nature and impact of shame in your life. As you can appreciate, self-awareness is both an incredible and, at times, painful phenomenon.

To intensify your learning experience, you are invited to complete the allocated exercises in each chapter. This book is designed to be interactive—write, circle, underline, and highlight the insights and ideas that are most helpful to you.

Shame has ruthlessly strived to expose us and subsequently force us to hide. Together we prevail as *shame busters*, and together we can turn shame on its head. Now is the time to expose the true nature of shame, and force shame to hide. Now is the time to belittle and humiliate shame. Who's with me?

This book is more than typed words on a page. As you read attentively, you will hear a gentle, yet passionate voice crying out from cover to cover. There is a voice that will connect with your pain and struggle, a voice that will resonate, a voice that will offer perspective, a voice that will rattle stigmas, and false assumptions regarding our shame and mental health turmoil.

Most importantly, you will hear a calming and rhythmic sound that is seasoned with enriching grace and profound empathy. And, if you listen carefully, there is also an echo throughout every page, three potent life-giving words:

SHAME OFF YOU!

Rob Mason

shame is a voice

“Shame is the swampland of the soul.”

—C. G. Jung

The ability to speak is a magnificent God-given gift we often take for granted. Through speaking, we can articulate and openly express thoughts, ideas, beliefs, convictions, doubts, solutions, dreams, and a whole range of human emotions.

As we speak, we can also tell stories, evoke a memory, ask questions, and explore new information. Ultimately the gift of speaking enables us to dialogue, engage, connect, and do life with one another.

From the soothing sound of a mother’s voice towards her distraught child; to the persuasive sound of a preacher, social activist or motivational speaker; speaking can lift the human spirit to new and brilliant heights.

Shame is more than a word or noun. Shame is a voice. Shame speaks. It is possible that shame is talking to you right now. If we’re not careful, we can allow shame to speak toxic words deep into our vulnerable soul. From the moment we wake up in the morning, to the time we lay our weary heads on our pillows at night, shame is shouting from the rooftops to anyone who will listen.

THE NEEDLE AND THE DAMAGE DONE

Shame is a ruthless voice, an inner critic of all things detrimental and damaging. In effect, the foundational dialect of shame is crippling condemnation. Shame rebukes and reviles. Shame is a lying and deceitful voice. Consequently, the voice of shame is notoriously venomous.

Allow me to share the first time I heard shame speak directly to me. In 1972, Canadian musician and singer-songwriter Neil Young, released the song '*The Needle and the Damage Done*.' The melodic music and raw lyrics captured the self-destruction and trauma caused by heroin addiction and overdose.

Unlike some of Neil Young's close friends, I have never been tempted to inject heroin. Nonetheless, I'm embarrassed to admit, for over twenty years I was terrified of needles.

Throughout the long night hours, I regularly experienced chilling nightmares about needles—and not just ordinary needles, but insidious and colossal needles, piercing mercilessly through my body.

Often, the night before a scheduled injection, I would be highly agitated and experienced restless sleep. In the morning, my anxiety level would shoot through the roof. I desperately wanted to run away, hide, and avoid the dreaded encounter. Where did that fear and anxiety come from?

Let me tell you a story about *the needle and the damage done*. Fear, for the most part, is a memory of danger. I can trace my irrational fear of needles and the associated acute anxiety, to a time when I was about four years old. I have a fragmented memory of my parents dropping me off at the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney for minor surgery under general anaesthetic.

To this day, I can still recall lying on an old metal frame bed when a nurse came and placed an aluminium foil tray on the bedside cabinet between my bed and the boy next to me. In utter horror, I saw a syringe in the foil tray. I was not naïve, even at four years old. Evidently, I had witnessed and confronted this instrument of terror earlier in my young life.

Surprisingly my first thought was, “Oh the poor boy next to me is about to have an injection.” But, to my utter dismay, the nurse asked me rather abruptly, “Do you want the needle in your arm or your bottom?”



How did I respond, you might ask?

I did what any normal four-year-old boy would have done in that perilous situation—I screamed hysterically. I couldn’t articulate it at the time, but in reflection, two

significant and distressing issues severely damaged my innocent young soul.

First, my parents were not with me during this childhood trauma. For the first time in my life, I was vulnerable, abandoned, and utterly alone. Second, a doctor had to hold me, face down so the nurse could pull my pyjama pants down to give me an injection in my bottom. I'm not sure why I chose my bottom as the target of my affliction.

Through the humiliation of my momentary nakedness in front of a stranger and uncontrollable screaming, I believed I made a public spectacle of myself in the children's hospital ward.

Shame is a voice, and this was the first time I heard its venomous words:

You made a fool of yourself.

You're a coward.

You're weak.

The interesting feature to this distressing childhood trauma is, I don't even remember the pain of the injection. But, to this day, I vividly remember my first experience of public humiliation, coupled with intense, and paralysing fear.

The point is (pardon the pun) fear associated with needles and hospitals was ingrained in my soul at a tender and vulnerable young age. Over the coming years, I would learn the hard way that fear can be both a memory of danger and a defective learned response to a perceived threat.

More about the connection between fear and shame later in this book.

THE SHAME FILES

What has the voice of shame been saying to you recently? Can you relate to any of these false declarations that are marinated with shame?

- ✦ *You're hopeless.*
- ✦ *You're worthless.*
- ✦ *You're unlovable.*
- ✦ *You're unwanted.*
- ✦ *You're a loser.*
- ✦ *You're a coward.*
- ✦ *You're ugly.*
- ✦ *You're weak.*
- ✦ *You're clumsy.*
- ✦ *You're pathetic.*
- ✦ *You're boring.*
- ✦ *You're dumb.*
- ✦ *You're crazy.*
- ✦ *You're a fraud.*
- ✦ Other: _____

Identify the toxic thought you relate to the most.

Why? _____

Where did that toxic thought come from? _____

How has that toxic thought impacted your life? _____

From your perspective, how has that toxic thought impacted the people in your world? _____

I QUIT!

Have you ever watched small children play sports? Especially with team sports like soccer, there is no game plan, set positions, or tactics. The moment the whistle or siren blows, the two opposing teams instinctively form one large mobile huddle and energetically chase the ball. This innocent and entertaining phenomenon is to the delight of the supporting family and friends standing on the sidelines cheering and laughing.

Kids' sports are all about having fun and, at times, amusingly imitating their sporting hero's antics when they kick a goal. Unfortunately, that was not my childhood experience of a team sport.

I was about six years old when I joined the Doonside Junior Soccer Club. Doonside is an unassuming suburb in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. Surrounding Doonside is the iconic blue-collar suburbs such as Blacktown and Rooty Hill. One distinguished person who attended Doonside Senior High School is V8 Supercar driver Mark 'Frosty' Winterbottom, winner of the Bathurst 1000 in 2013.

The Saturday morning soccer practice was my first experience of a team sport, and I was particularly thrilled that Dad was watching me play from the sidelines. However, because I was tentative, I stood several metres away from where all the action took place. I evidently didn't have any idea of what I was doing, but I desperately wanted to belong and for Dad to be proud of me.

I can still see the old brown leather soccer ball leaving the pack of enthusiastic boys and hurtling towards me. It must have been pure instinct, but I closed my eyes and kicked the soccer ball frantically with all my strength. Regrettably,

I also kicked the ball out of play. Then a voice from one of the boys screamed out from the pack, “Why did you kick the ball out?”

My greatest fear, even as a six-year-old boy, was the public humiliation of making a mistake and letting the team down. In my innocent mind, even at that young age, my value and significance as a person were on the line.

The jury of boys was out deliberating my self-worth. I believed, in my embryonic mind, I was exposed as incompetent and a failure. So much for kids’ sports just being about fun.

THE WALK OF SHAME

I have no memory of the remainder of the soccer match. All I recall of that fateful Autumn Saturday morning was walking home slowly and despondently with Dad. After an awkward moment of silence, I told him with bitter disappointment and enflamed determination, “I quit!” For me, my walk home along Kildare Road was my walk of shame. Where did that come from?

Thinking back to my second defining moment of dysfunction, there was sadly no challenge from Dad to my reckless decision to quit the soccer team. For some unknown reason, my dad made no commitment that he would help me with my kicking skills after school or over the weekend. There was no fatherly reassurance that everything would be okay. After all, it was just a game.

My only recollection during the long walk home was Dad’s silence and disengagement. My naïve childhood interpretation of Dad’s tormenting silence was he must have been disappointed in me, and he too was embarrassed by my spectacular failure on the Doonside soccer field.

If you're a parent, a life lesson to glean from this incident is never underestimate the detrimental damage of silence and disengagement with your children when they experience trauma.

Allow research professor and author Dr. Brené Brown to enlighten: "Sometimes the most dangerous thing for kids is the silence *that allows them to construct their own stories*—stories that almost always cast them as alone and unworthy of love and belonging." [Braving the Wilderness, p. 15, *italics mine*]

At a young age, I was recklessly constructing my own story of apparent inferiority and worthlessness. The hideous voice of shame continued to speak and taunt me. Despondently, I continued to listen to the deceitful voice of shame. Worse still, I believed everything it was saying to me and about me.

Kicking the soccer ball out of play, fused with Dad's silence, was my second vivid memory of the shame of perceived public humiliation. That was the entry point of the primal emotion of fear and shame entering and dominating my life. This was a new chapter in my self-narrative—the story I told myself about myself.

SELF-SABOTAGE

Let's pause for a moment and allow me to reveal how subtle and sinister shame is, especially for those struggling with mental health. Shame is darker and far more lethal than similar unpleasant emotions such as embarrassment, regret, and guilt.

From my first experience of a team sport, I didn't believe I merely made a mistake by kicking the ball out of play.

My faulty conclusion was—*I am a mistake*. I didn't just fail while playing my first game of soccer—*I am a failure*. I didn't just quit the Doonside soccer team—*I am a quitter*.

What a disturbing conclusion a naïve and vulnerable six-year-old boy came to so early in life:

Rob Mason is a mistake.

Rob Mason is a failure.

Rob Mason is a quitter.

Those three negative beliefs I repeated to myself about myself was the new arsenal of subtly sabotaging my ability to engage fully in life. To self-sabotage our lives through toxic thoughts is a form of *self-harming our souls*.

Therefore, the essence of shame is intimidating, tormenting, and paralysing inferiority, to feel utterly worthless and believe you are profoundly flawed.

Welcome to *Shameville*, the dark and sinister world of shame.

ENOUGH ALREADY

Time to pause for further reflection and to enhance self-awareness. Shame is essentially feeling inferior to other people. Shame is our inner critic, a voice shouting: "You're not enough."

Which of the following "not enough" statements best capture your false beliefs about yourself?

- ✦ *I'm not good enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not smart enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not beautiful enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not good looking enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not tall enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not thin enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not strong enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not brave enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not confident enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not creative enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not worthy enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not healthy enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not wealthy enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not popular enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not assertive enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not talented enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not spiritual enough.*
- ✦ *I'm not anointed enough.*
- ✦ Or fill in the blank:
I'm not _____ enough.

THE COMPARISON TRAP

If the essence of shame is intimidating inferiority, then at some point we have compared ourselves to other people. From afar and with envy, we gaze at other people's lifestyles, careers, houses, cars, holidays, marriages, children, and faith.

There is no doubt that social media has exacerbated and intensified the ancient comparison trap. We compare how many followers other people have and their projected happiness, success, and impact they are having in the world. Without knowing, through social media, we are often watching other people's edited, exaggerated, and glossy highlight reels.

A comparison is a pathway to unnecessary stress and anxiety. As Theodore Roosevelt insightfully said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." I know firsthand that comparison has been a thief of joy in my life.

There are two primary comparison pathways. Either way, comparing ourselves to others traps us in the *selfie-life*, whereby we become self-absorbed and self-critical.

Comparison can lead to feelings of superiority:

- *I'm smarter than you.*
- *I'm better than you.*
- *I'm stronger than you.*

Comparison can lead to feelings of inferiority:

- *I'm not smart enough.*
- *I'm not good enough.*
- *I'm not strong enough.*

Who have you compared yourself with in the past week?
My counsel is simple:

1. Stay in your own lane
2. Run your own race at your own pace

THE SHAME PARASITE

The voice of shame in my experience has been lingering and lurking in my soul, resembling a parasite. A parasite is a foreign organism living on the inside or outside of another organism.

The host of shame is the vulnerable human soul. Shame feeds off and spreads through secrecy and hiddenness. The shame parasite speaks toxic words and simultaneously gags us into silent submission. As you can see, shame is deceptive and penetrates mercilessly deep into our soul—our identity, self-worth, and significance as a person. Through my lethal inner critic, I was slowly self-sabotaging and suffocating my life from an early age.

Amidst the traumatic incident on the Doonside soccer field, my inner resolve as a child was never to put myself in that situation ever again. My life mission would be to protect myself at all costs from experiencing any further public humiliation of perceived failure. Regrettably, I also deceived myself in believing failure is fatal and final.

SHAME TRIGGERS

We all experience defining moments of dysfunction throughout our lives. Such moments often falsely define who we are and, at times, who we are not; what we can do and what we cannot.

The ordeals of my first operation in the hospital and kicking the soccer ball out of play became two new triggers and adverse influences in my childhood.

Those two traumatic experiences have not only tortured my soul but sadly increased my vulnerability to mental health struggles later in life. Remember what I said in the prologue—*Shame was a pathway to my mental health struggle.*

What is your primary shame trigger?

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| Addiction | Moral failure |
| Adoption | Nationality |
| Anxiety | Poverty |
| Bankruptcy | Rejection |
| Body image | Sexual abuse |
| Burnout | Singleness |
| Chronic illness | Trauma |
| Depression | Unemployment |
| Disability | Unmanageable debt |
| Divorce | Other: _____ |
| Failure | |
| Gender | |
| Humiliation | |

SHAME TRIGGERS (cont.)

How did that experience of shame make you feel?

If you're unsure, look at the table of unpleasant emotions. Circle all the emotions that describe your first experience of shame. Take a moment to feel that emotion. Where in your body do you feel the uncomfortable emotion of shame?

Likewise, for those struggling with fear, anxiety, or depression, circle all the accompanying emotions. Where in your body do you feel fear, anxiety, and depression? _____

Afraid	Angry	Anxious	Sad
fearful	furious	overwhelmed	unhappy
intimidated	frustrated	stressed	depressed
abandoned	agitated	humiliated	down
unaccepted	annoyed	trapped	devastated
weak	resentful	ashamed	unworthy
insecure	bitter	guilty	disappointed
vulnerable	irritable	embarrassed	regretful
insignificant	jealous	nervous	distressed
alienated	ticked off	suffocated	anguished
threatened	impatient	uncertain	sorrowful
restless	snappy	helpless	worthless

FURTHER THOUGHT AND CONTEMPLATION

Take a few minutes to be still and ponder these words from priest, author, and theologian Henri Nouwen:

“A life without a quiet center, easily becomes
destructive.”