

MEMBER'S HUB

John Finkelde: Hey members of the hub, great to be with you in this interview. I'm interviewing today Rob Mason. Rob Mason is a good friend of mine. He has pastored in Perth, WA for nearly 30 years. Now as an itinerant ministry, Shame Off You. He's also working in aged care as a chaplain. He's been married for 27 years and has two adult children.

Welcome Rob to the members hub.

Rob Mason: Thank you John, it's so good to be with you and all your members.

John Finkelde: Well it will be great chatting with you about a whole range of things. We're going to start off with a 60 seconds lightning round.

What's your favourite food?

Rob Mason: Italian, except recently, as in probably 12 months, I've gone gluten free. So that's been challenging with no pasta and no pizza! But I still love Italian.

John Finkelde: What's the best book you've read in recent times?

Rob Mason: It would be Eugene Peterson, As Kingfishers Catch Fire. He's just a wordsmith and I just love his writing. I love his heart.

John Finkelde: Your dream holiday destination?

Rob Mason: I've just got back from Bali I think for the 10th time and the traffic, volcano, earthquakes it's probably no longer my favourite so maybe Fiji. I'll try Fiji!

John Finkelde: Besides Jesus, who's your favourite person in the Bible?

Rob Mason: That would be David. I love David because he's masculine, he's a poet, he's a warrior, he's a king, and he's vulnerable. So all those things about masculinity really is captured in David.

John Finkelde: What's your favourite down time activity?

Rob Mason: It would be a bit of sport. I love surfing, jogging on the beach and then reading, I love to read and play the guitar, get a few of those major chords out or maybe an E minor from time to time.

John Finkelde: Coffee or tea?

Rob Mason: As of three weeks ago I would have answered coffee but I've just gone caffeine free. I do it periodically so what you're hearing now is not caffeine. It's just Rob in the late afternoon!

John Finkelde: Book or podcast?

Rob Mason: Definitely books. I just love paper.

John Finkelde: Beach or mountains?

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Rob Mason: I love the beach. Waves, surfing, body surfing, running on the beach.

John Finkelde: Jog or bike?

Rob Mason: I used to be a cyclist. Some people may be aware that we've had a few accidents here in Perth, our motorists aren't that tolerant and I think because of that, and I don't look great in lycra, I'll stick to jogging on the beach. That's my thing.

John Finkelde: On your website (robmason.co) you talk about how your world imploded in 2007. What happened in 2007?

Rob Mason: Ok, therapy time! We're going back, I'm lying on the lounge!!

2007 is a memorable, defining year and I use the word exploded quite intentionally on my website because that's exactly how it felt. All was going quite well as our church. We were growing steadily. We probably had at this stage 150, maybe 200 members. We had a great not for profit indoor play centre that was thriving.

The church was in a good place and we had just appointed a young couple - we had brought them out of the corporate world, a very high capacity couple, they were going to be Associate Pastors and lead youth and young adults. So everything was set for, what I was ready for my best year ever.

So on one particular evening in February 2007 I invited this couple, with my wife, to meet a C3 pastor from Sydney who was going to spend the weekend with us, preach, do some leadership meetings and I knew within an hour he was going to say to me, Rob these guys are amazing and you guys, as a church, are about to explode.

So we've taken our orders for our meals and in a moment, and I literally mean in milliseconds, all I can describe is I had this feeling of absolute terror and my heart started pounding, my breathing went all over the place. I'm not one to want to draw attention to myself but I just ran out of the restaurant. I didn't think of oh this doesn't look good, what will Karen think, and what will this couple think. I was so terrified, all I could do was run out of the restaurant, no plan. Got into the car, not thinking Rob what are you doing. I just sat in the car absolutely terrified.

John Finkelde: Wow! There was no warning to this at all, it just came out of the blue?

Rob Mason: Nothing, it was just so out of the blue and I didn't know what was happening. All I thought was happening was I was having a meltdown, I was having a mental breakdown. Then I thought of my father who after a year or two in ministry had a meltdown and was clinically depressed. He was out of ministry for over ten years and I thought I'm going to be like my father.

So anyhow, the story goes, because I'm just in my car but Karen stays with the couple saying hey hang in there, I don't know what that was but ministry is really good for your health! The C3 pastor came in the car and it was just what's going on? I have no idea but I'm overwhelmed, I'm terrified, I think I'm having a breakdown and I'm crying uncontrollably. He was great, he was just everything's going to be ok, we're going to get through this.

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In time I calmed down and went back into the restaurant. I didn't eat very much but in my mind I'm basically saying to myself Rob you're out. You're disqualified, you can't be a pastor, and you'll be resigning.

John Finkelde: *So those thoughts came that quickly?*

Rob Mason: Oh very quickly. Rapid fire, which is actually part of the issue which I'll get to in a moment. Some of your listeners will know what's happening. They'll say Rob was having a panic attack. Well I know that now, but I didn't know there was a name for it. I just thought it was a meltdown and I was going to be institutionalised.

I talked to a lady in our church, who is in mental health. I explained what had happened and she just said oh Rob you just had a panic attack. I said well what is that? She said well its adrenalin, it impacts your breathing, your heart. I've got a colleague and I'll set up an appointment for you on Monday. So this happened Friday night, so Monday is pretty quick.

Somehow I got through the weekend. This guy's preaching, doing leadership meetings, there was even a meeting where the team got to speak into my life and the things I'm doing well, the things I could improve on and I'm just in la la land, thinking hey don't worry guys I'm about to resign because I'm losing it.

So I end up meeting this counsellor, but I realise she's not just a counsellor, she's a cognitive behavioural therapist. A CBT which I'd never heard of. Basically her style of counselling or her premise would be for most people the cause of an anxiety disorder and panic attacks is your thinking. So if we could look at your thinking and what are those things that are causing anxiety and breathing exercises and that will help you calm down, lesson the cortisol which is the stress hormone and slow everything down.

Of course all I wanted from her was medication. I thought look if you can give me medication and I can get on with ministry that would be so much better.

John Finkelde: *Just give me the pills and I can get out of here and get on with my life!*

Rob Mason: So we go on this journey and I wanted the quick fix but it was probably 12 - 15 one hour sessions with a lot of work in between those sessions where I had to do journaling and a whole lot of different breathing exercises, taking an inventory of my thoughts and over a period of time, I realised wow a lot of my thinking is negative and irrational.

John Finkelde: *Can I ask you Rob, so you're having 12-15 sessions with this therapist, did you experience any other panic attacks during that time as well or was it just this once.*

Rob Mason: No it was pretty well a daily experience.

John Finkelde: *A daily experience!*

Rob Mason: Sometimes multiple times so what was happening is because I had a panic attack in a restaurant I then had an association, every time I'd go to a cafe or a restaurant and for those who

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are pastors we spend a lot of our time meeting people, it would be the panic of panic. What if I have another panic attack in front of people?

John Finkelde: *If you're having coffee with a member of your church or someone like that.*

Rob Mason: That's right. I'm this amazing pastor guy whose church is growing!

John Finkelde: *You'd get a reputation for running out of cafes in the middle of coffees!*

Rob Mason: So every time I was in a cafe meeting with someone, there was just that dread of it could happen again. Again I would talk to my therapist about it, ok Rob well you're thinking is creating anxiety and so she took me through an exercise, and it's really easy to remember.

It's 3 C's. The first C - catch your thought. So if you imagine you're a fisherman, you're on this beautiful lake and the fish are your thoughts. And you start catching fish. So I started catching all of these thoughts and apparently, I don't know whoever researched this I've seen it on google so it must be true! But we have about 50,000 thoughts a day, or thereabouts, and so every time I was catching my thoughts it would be I can't cope, what will people think, I can't do this.

John Finkelde: *So you were having these thoughts but you weren't kind of consciously aware of it.*

Rob Mason: I wasn't aware of it. So just by thinking about your thinking and doing an inventory, I mean I've never done that before. I was thinking my gosh I reckon 60%-70% of my thinking is negative, catastrophic, always worst case scenario.

John Finkelde: *So can you give us an example of a worst case scenario that would come upon your thinking.*

Rob Mason: Ok, so say if I had a difficult discussion with a person in the church, at night I would catastrophise it by going ok so they're going to be offended and they're going to talk to these people, and they will talk to those people and that person's a leader. They're going to step down.

Now if they step down, then those people will step down. Now if those people step down tithes and offerings are going to go down so I'm going to have reduce my staffing.

John Finkelde: *So you would kind of lay out a thought that would go over results that would go on for days and weeks into the future.*

Rob Mason: Yeah, and that was my normal. I just thought that's what you do. Isn't that what everyone does? I'd talk to Karen about it and she'd say I just don't think those things. Well I think about those things all the time. So just having that self-awareness, catching your thoughts.

John Finkelde: *Just before we move onto the next element of those three elements, there's a difference between a catastrophic thought process which takes you into all sorts of bad scenarios, compared to say if someone rings you up and says hey I want to catch up with you and you have a thought, oh ok I wonder if this is bad news or good news, and then you go ok whatever I'll just go and have a coffee.*

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That's I guess normative thinking but you would go into a rolling downhill scenario.

Rob Mason: I would role play it. My first thought, which is probably for a lot of pastors or leaders of hey I'd like to catch and you think oh no what have I done wrong. Then most people probably then move on and think I'll have a conversation.

I don't move on from there. I stay in that place and roll play worst case scenarios. 90% of the time after the conversation I would think to myself what a waste of energy.

That was my normal for over 40 years.

John Finkelde: So you catch the thought. - What's next?

Rob Mason: Next you challenge it. You start asking a few questions. Number one it might be where did that come from? Where did that I can't cope, nothing good ever happens to me, it will fail - where did that come from? So with the therapist we would look at some of the issues with my dad, some childhood trauma, things at high school.

Then you might ask a question like where's the evidence? Where's the evidence that I can't cope or this is going to happen? You really start getting to the nitty gritty of Rob this thought is random, it's just a thought it's almost like I just thought every time you have a thought it must be right.

I don't know why, I just thought if I'm thinking it then it must be right. And the therapist was saying Rob challenge it. Where did that come from? Is it true? Where's the evidence? And for me it was like and is it Biblical? Well no, it's not true. A lot of it is in my mind. It's a pattern of thinking, its habitual negative thinking and it's manageable. You can change your thinking.

You've got to be quite brutal. Another good question was how has that thought served me? And then I start thinking well it has distracted me, it has robbed me of joy, it has robbed me of confidence, it has been soul destroying. Then you actually get, in a healthy way, angry at the thought. I've actually believed the father of lies for all of these years but I'm taking responsibility because it's me that thought it. No one else put those thoughts in my mind, Rob Mason put those thoughts. I've challenged it and now you get onto the third C which is basically you replace or change those toxic thoughts with Biblical life giving thoughts.

Almost like the opposite. The opposite of I can't cope is God will be my strength, God will restore my soul, it's God's church, it's not my church. If those people believe, it's ok, it's not my church. You start role playing a different scenario. You start telling a difference narrative and it is amazing.

It sounds easy but when you've had that type of thinking for 40 years, it has taken several years to change my thinking to where it is now. However, there are times when I'm under pressure I still default back to the catastrophic but now that I've got the self-awareness I can identify Rob this is an old pattern, c'mon.

John Finkelde: What did you find most difficult initially to do. Catching the thought, challenging it or changing it. What was the most difficult to do initially?

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Rob Mason: Brilliant question! Catching it was quite easy. It probably was the changing. I could catch it - is it true? No it's not. Where's the evidence? There is no evidence.

Ok now change the thought - oh! It's like it's a discipline in my thinking. It required discipline, it required energy, and it required attentiveness. It didn't come natural. It's almost like I was learning to re program my brain, which Biblically it talks about renewing your mind and pulling down strongholds and that's hard work.

John Finkelde: *And at times I guess you are emotionally stronger than other times and when you've got that emotional strength you have mental strength to go alright I'm going to meditate on a scripture now or think about something happy, I'm going to think happy thoughts or truthful solid thoughts rather than this shady lie. But other times when you don't feel strong I can understand and relate to that. It's hard to focus in on that.*

Did you find that over the years you've been able to build some habits or resilience into those three C's to make it more a part of your world?

Rob Mason: Oh absolutely. I think there's definitely a lot more of emotional resilience, self-awareness, a confidence in if you do these things regularly, meditating and chewing on God's word, those life affirming words, if we get time I can share with your listeners a basic breathing exercise that can change your physiology, it calms you down and movement, exercise.

I still, if I'm being honest, am vulnerable so I'm not I've been there done that. I think it's still an area where I'm vulnerable but I've got an awareness that I'm vulnerable.

John Finkelde: *I think that's helpful really that the truth is that all of us have our mental demons as it were, or thoughts that we have to keep coming back to. Fundamental principles that you're sharing.*

Yeah I'd love to jump into some of the breathing or other areas. I was going to ask you if the pastors and leaders who are listening, if you could give them three practical things that will help a pastor or leader take better care of themselves in a preventative sort of way.

Most of us get overwhelmed at times with anxiety or fear or concern. What are three things leaders could do that would help them take better care of themselves.

Rob Mason: Let's face it, I think even pastoring in the 21st century 2018, church life is a lot more complicated and intense. There's a lot more pressure and expectation. Social media, comparison, highlight reels on social media of all these pastors who are doing so much better than I am!

It is unusual to talk about breathing because it's a natural thing. It's involuntary, we just breathe but unfortunately when we're living constantly in this place of stress and adrenalin, it's a vicious cycle. It does impact your breathing. It becomes shallow and rapid and what that does is it increases our adrenalin level so we start getting into a bit of a fight / flight mode and there's the stress hormone called cortisol.

Through breathing we can actually switch our whole physiology within about 5 minutes through deep breathing.

John Finkelde: So run us through a breathing exercise.

Rob Mason: There's probably at least 15! But the one that I was taught, it's called 3, 3, 3.

You breathe slowly through your nose, not your mouth, for the count of three. The reason through your nose is because you're getting less oxygen. When you go through your mouth you actually start to hyperventilate which increases adrenalin. So breathe slowly through your nose, count to three, one, two three.

Then you hold your breath for a count of three - one, two, three.

And then you breathe out - one, two, three.

You can breathe out through your mouth or your nose, it doesn't really matter. The key with breathing though, it's amazing when you talk to someone and say take a deep breath they breathe through their chest, their shoulders come up. You need to breathe through your belly or your diaphragm.

What you can do, if you've never done a breathing exercise, put your hands on your belly and when you breathe in you should feel your belly going out, that's your diaphragm you're feeling. As you do that, what happens in your physiology is adrenalin starts dialling down, cortisol starts dialling down, serotonin which is like a natural anti-depressant, starts increasing.

The fascinating thing about this, in eastern philosophy religions, kids at the age of 5 are taught breathing exercises. It's a natural part of their philosophy, their religion. But isn't it interesting in the west, who teaches us these breathing exercises?

John Finkelde: No you just think we just do it sub consciously!

Rob Mason: So that alone, doing breathing exercises a number of times a day. So don't just think ok I've done it, it's got to be part of your daily routine. The first thing when you wake up, before you go to sleep, before you make a phone call, before a meeting, before you preach. Without anyone knowing you can just start doing your breathing exercises.

And while you do your breathing, even say something quietly to yourself, be still, be still, God is with me, God is with me.

John Finkelde: Ok give me a second one. I can see you're a fanatic about breathing exercises, you want to fill up the next 30 minute with this!

Rob Mason: We could, there's all these others!

John Finkelde: I know, google it folks!

Rob Mason: Another one, and we've all heard about it but I'm going to use a different word so rather than using the word exercise, I'm going to use the word move.

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We need to move more. Run, jog, walk, skip, dance, whatever but every day, and even a few times during the day. You might be sitting down preparing a message but just get up for a couple of minutes, do a few squats, walk to the letterbox, do a few push ups. Just regularly move.

And say things as you're moving. In Him I live and move and have my being. Get the heart rate up. Do a bit of sprints training.

John Finkelde: *Also get a stand up desk. I'm at my stand up desk while we're recording this.*

Rob Mason: I've heard about those. So you reckon that helps?

John Finkelde: *Oh brilliant! I move more because I've got a stand up desk, absolutely. I've had it for about 10 months and would never go back to a sit down. I sit down sometimes but I can stand up for 6-8 hours at my desk and work. I love it.*

Rob Mason: Now the last point, and a lot of listeners will go oh it sounds selfish, me time. Every day, do something, it might be half an hour, but just do something that you love doing. However, don't have your phone on, no social media, have all your notifications off and just have some time where whatever it is, read, watch something, listen to a podcast, but just have some time.

Me time or self-care is not selfish because as leaders, if we're not in a good place, and in 2007 it caught up with me, it's that sense of hey yeah I've got to look after my body because you could be the most passionate person in the world, got great convictions, but if your body is letting you down, you're not guaranteed of longevity in ministry.

John Finkelde: *Now you have launched a ministry called Shame Off You. I really like that, rather than shame on you. If folks want to contact you, talk to you about that or get you in to minister or to preach or to read your blog, robmason.co is your website.*

Rob Mason: Yes I'd love to be in touch. There's a few blogs. If you want to become part of the Shame Off You tribe, it's a free thing you just sign up and you get a few articles but the whole thing for me was that it's not just the journey of my mental health it was the shame of my mental health.

My ministry now has come out of my pain, my pain is my platform. I just know shame is a huge issue, not just in our member's congregation but I think in pastors and leaders a lot of us are carrying shame and we're not even aware of it and it's so impacting. So shame off you!

John Finkelde: *I love this, it's so helpful this interview. Let me wrap up with the question I always like to wrap up with. You're going to have a dinner party and you can invite four leaders from any era, living or dead. We'll exclude Jesus, we'll just count Jesus as though He'll be in the room. I like to take that off the table, sorry Lord we'll get you off the table otherwise people feel pressure to say Jesus.*

Four leaders from any era, living or dead. Who would you have?

Rob Mason: I'll say the list and then I'll explain why. Moses, Mary of Bethany, the apostle Paul and AW Tozer.

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John Finkelde: A very Christian table!

Rob Mason: I should have probably had an atheist or someone who would have been a lot of fun! But the reason for the four is each one of them in their own unique way, were passionate pursuers of the presence of God and I would love to know and glean from them in different times of history and different styles.

Particularly like Mary of Bethany, we don't know a lot about her but this woman sat at the feet of Jesus and anointed his feet with oil and probably didn't know how significant it was.

We can get passionate about ministry and growing the church and raising leaders but in 30 years of ministry there are times I really felt I haven't always been passionate for the presence of God. I think those guys could teach me a thing or two about c'mon Rob get that fire in you. It's all about Him. To Him, for Him, because of Him.

John Finkelde: *I love it Rob. A couple of murderers around the table as well so you just want to watch yourself during dinner!*

Rob Mason: Yes, they've all got a past. We've all got skeletons in the closet. I tell people I haven't got a skeleton in my closet, I've got a cemetery!

John Finkelde: *Rob, thanks so much for joining us in the hub.*

Rob Mason: Oh I've thoroughly enjoyed it! Thank you John for the invitation. I feel so honoured to be able to speak to the guys but for you personally, over the 20-30 years, you've had a huge influence in my life. I'm very grateful for the John Finkelde's in my world so thank you John.

John Finkelde: *My pleasure mate. Thanks for joining us. Bless ya.*