

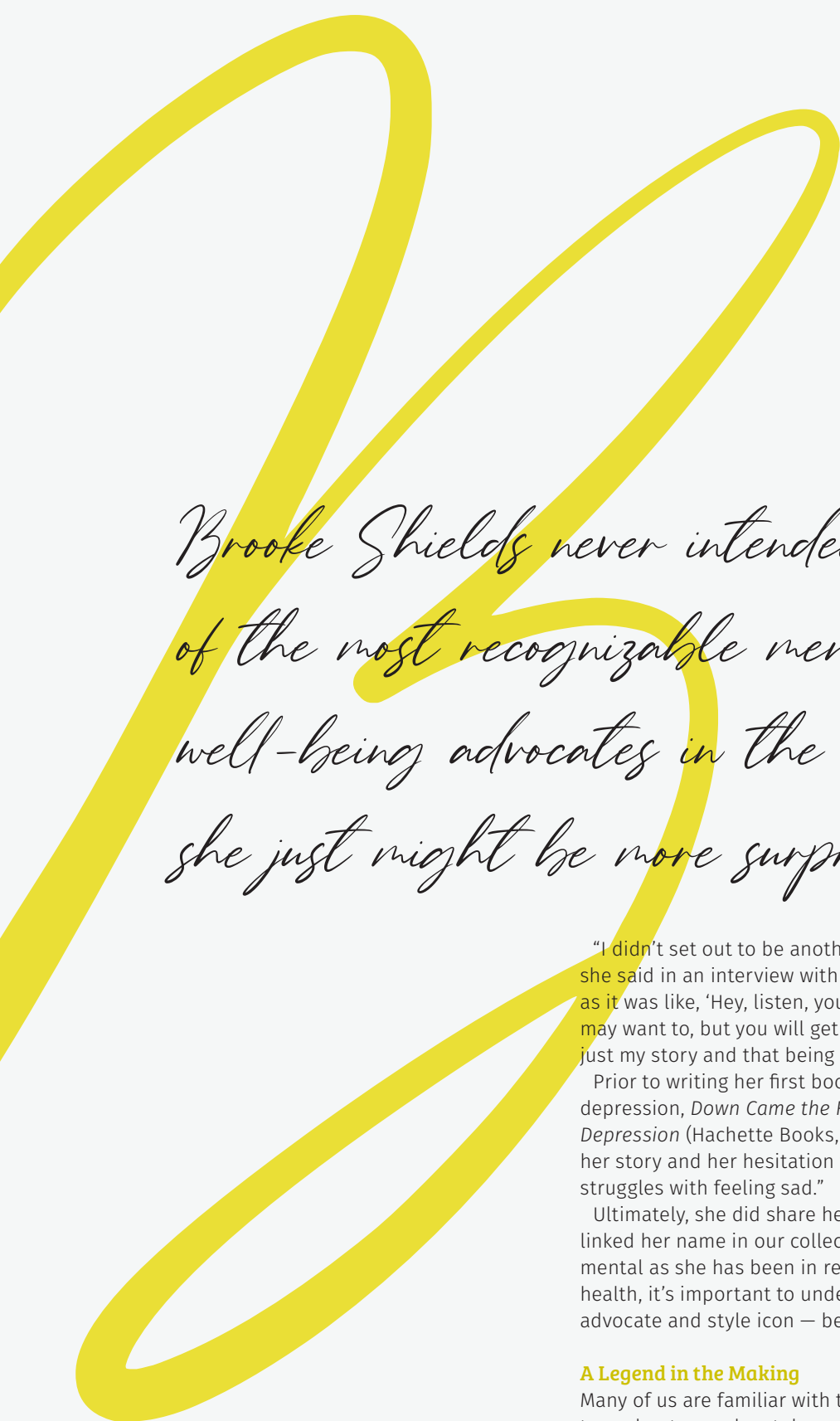




Suddenly Brooke

HOW THE 'PRETTY BABY'
BECAME A MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATE

BY STEPHANIE N. ROTONDO, WORLDDATWORK



Brooke Shields never intended on becoming one of the most recognizable mental health and well-being advocates in the world. In fact, she just might be more surprised than anyone.

"I didn't set out to be another celebrity talking about some hardship," she said in an interview with *WorldatWork*. "It wasn't a soapbox as much as it was like, 'Hey, listen, you're not alone. Please don't disappear. You may want to, but you will get help, you will get through this.' It was really just my story and that being relatable [to others]."

Prior to writing her first book that chronicles her battle with postpartum depression, *Down Came the Rain: My Journey Through Postpartum Depression* (Hachette Books, 2006), she recalls being encouraged to share her story and her hesitation to do so: "No one wants to hear about my struggles with feeling sad."

Ultimately, she did share her story and the drama that ensued forever linked her name in our collective minds to mental health. But as instrumental as she has been in reshaping the conversation around mental health, it's important to understand how Shields — model, actress, author, advocate and style icon — became the Brooke Shields of today.

A Legend in the Making

Many of us are familiar with the story of Brooke Shields, the child model-turned-actress who stole our hearts in movies like "Pretty Baby" and "The Blue Lagoon," and who dazzled and tantalized us in her Calvins. She was raised — and managed — by her mother Teri, who, by all accounts, was a powerful force of nature.

Without a doubt, Teri raised her daughter to be tough. From the start, many saw — and treated — Shields as if she were a beautiful object: something to be gawked at, but not, perhaps, taken seriously. But an "I'll show you" mentality — something she got from her mother — pushed Shields to take chances many never expected, such as pausing her career

to attend Princeton University, where she got a degree in romance languages. She even turned her sex appeal on its head, reportedly remaining a virgin until she was 22.

Through it all, Shields maintained a solid work ethic and came from the viewpoint of “what doesn’t kill you does make you stronger.”

“You tough things out,” she said. “You get over the pain, you dust yourself off, you don’t let them see you sweat. It’s sort of this survivor mentality that my mom instilled in me. I always learned, ‘OK, let’s just figure it out and let’s try to get past it.’”

For most of her life, this mentality served Shields well.

“I realized that I got stronger and I started to be somebody to be reckoned with,” she said. She was determined to be seen for who she really was and who she wanted to be. For instance, she went against the grain when she opted to take the comedy route — and eventually, she won.

“I wanted to be a comedian,” she said. “And that wasn’t where people wanted me to go, but I fought for it.”

In the 1990s, Shields returned to acting, going on to star in her own sitcom “Suddenly Susan,” as well as having truly memorable guest roles on such hits as “Friends” and “That 70’s Show.” (On a side note, that hand-licking scene in “Friends” where her psychotic character laughed maniacally? That almost didn’t make it in, but once again, she fought for it. And she nailed it.) While she also took more dramatic roles here and there (most recently on “9-1-1”), her comedic chops were apparent. This, of course, only served to support her *modus operandi*: “You don’t think I can do this? Watch me.”

Fulfilling a Dream

The life of a celebrity may seem to be a dream in and of itself: the money, the fame, the parties, and so many other glamorous and extraordinary things that many of us aspire to have. But at the end of the day, celebrities are just people, with

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many of the same hopes, dreams and even fears of non-celebrities.

For Shields, that dream was being a mother. But unlike her other dreams and goals, motherhood proved elusive. It took seven rounds of in-vitro fertilization before her first daughter, Rowan, was born in 2003. (The father is Chris Henchy, a screenwriter and producer that married Shields in 2001.) Notably, the birth took place barely a month after Shields’ father passed away from prostate cancer. (Rowan turned 17 on May 15, just before Shields’ 55th birthday on May 31.)

But instead of it being the joyous occasion she always had imagined, “it just unraveled me,” she said.

“I was knocked on my ass and I mean in a way that none of my old [coping] tricks would work,” she said. “I had no desire to pull myself out of anything. I wanted to just disappear. And no one could help me — or so I thought.

“I looked around and I thought, ‘Oh, this is really bad. You’ve finally met your match. You should really stop living right now.’”

In her first book, Shields details her early struggle to bond with her newborn:

“In general, I have always loved babies, and Rowan was not only amazing and alert but also quite beautiful. Her features were perfectly formed, and she looked like an angel. But I felt no appreciation for the little miracle. Although I didn’t dislike her, I wasn’t sure I wanted her living with us. In addition, I could hardly stand on my own two feet because of the sheer mass and weight of my body ... Besides the fact that I was physically incapable of performing many of the basic mothering duties, I also didn’t feel like I wanted to get too close to Rowan.



"I thought I was the only person in the world who experienced this. And then, once you opened up that dialogue, I was shocked by the flood of people saying, 'Oh my god, I had that too!'"

I wasn't afraid she was too fragile; I just felt no desire to pick her up. Every time I have ever been near a baby, any baby, I have always wanted to hold the child. It shocked me that I didn't want to hold my own daughter. I wished I had 'I Dream of Jeannie' powers so I could blink myself into a warm, loving embrace with Rowan. Instead I was more like the distant and unsympathetic Endora from 'Bewitched'."

Finally, Shields admitted — both to herself and to her loved ones — that she was in dire need of help, medically, mentally and physically. Slowly — and with a few setbacks along the way — she did get help. She started taking antidepressants — for which she was rather publicly shamed by Tom Cruise, among others — and started therapy. She admits that she stopped taking her medications at one point, thinking that she could go it alone. She soon realized that was not the case and went back on them.

"I felt alone and embarrassed and ashamed and that's why it was important for me [to share my story]," she said. "I thought I was the only person in the world who experienced this. And then, once you opened up that dialogue, I was shocked by the flood of people saying, 'Oh my god, I had that too!'"

"I was never the person who said, 'Here, take this medicine and you'll be better,'" she noted. "I was like, 'I don't need medicine, I don't need that. I'm struggling, but I'm not crazy!'"

But her ever-curious mind took over and she started researching the biochemistry behind mental health issues and, specifically, postpartum depression. "It became something that was very tangible instead of me looking at it as some kind of failure or weakness on my part."

"The freedom that comes from being [open] to help has been a huge lesson for me," she said. "Asking for help was never in my rhetoric. It was just huge."





"Isn't it great when you see people at a company and they say, 'God, I love working for this person, this team, they make me feel like a human being?'"

"It's hard to admit that you need help," she said. "The shame is so much and so acute."

Today, Shields is mother to Rowan and Grier, who was born in 2006. Knowing what her experience was like, as well as the experience of so many others, has made breaking through the shame and stigma around mental health and well-being even more important.

"I now have two daughters," she said. "God forbid, they ever go through this. One in seven women experience [postpartum depression] and left untreated, it can become... There's damage done no matter what. We associate it only with the horrible stories of moms drowning babies, but there's this whole other contingent of people that are suffering with these types of illnesses. It's really scary."

Opening a Dialogue

The stigma associated with mental health is often present in the workplace. Employees may feel that they can't — or shouldn't — tell their employers when they are struggling with things like burnout or other mental health-related issues. In the past, employers were all too willing to ignore the signs of mental health issues in their people, often with long-lasting negative impact.

This is why, in Shields' opinion, employers need to be increasingly cognizant of the role mental health plays at work.

"I really believe that we have a responsibility to people that we are asking to provide us with something," she said. "If your workforce is happy and you're respecting your team, you're cognizant of them as a whole person, I think productivity will increase. Isn't it great when you see people at a company and they say, 'God, I love working for this person, this team, they make me feel like a human being?' I think that makes for better productivity, happier workers and a happy place to be."

"We only get one life. How miserable is it if you're in an environment and you're working and you feel like you don't matter? I think mental health is a huge piece of that puzzle."

And, whether you're talking about a workplace or about your personal life, there's one thing that can help move the needle on the stigmas of mental health: honesty.

"I think honesty is really, really important," Shields said. "The first response that people always think is they're afraid that what they're going through isn't as bad as other people's, or that they have no reason to complain, or that they have no value there. They don't merit complaining about something."

Shields notes that even among her friends — that is, people who can hide out in their country house during COVID-19 lockdowns and can afford to do things like take time off of work — she's amazed at how many of them try to downplay their own mental health issues.

"Every time one of them gets a little depressed, they'll say something to the effect of 'Yeah, but it's not as bad as anybody else,' or 'Yeah, but in the grand scheme of things...' But what I always say is 'It is valid because you are a human being, just like everybody else.' And we need to provide environments that are safe for judgement-free conversations, dialogues, groups, blogs, messages. It can be the most beneficial thing, disseminating the knowledge that there is a community."

"Just because you think it's less than what someone else is going through does not mean that it's not valid and doesn't mean it's not worthy of attention. Mental health is not an indulgence. It's not a luxury. I think we're so ashamed of it, so we quantify it. But it doesn't mean that you don't address your mental health and find ways of coping."

"People need to know that there's a safe zone, whether it's HR or a group, because once you start hearing other people's concerns or feelings or

An Author's Note of Gratitude

When I first learned that Brooke Shields was going to be a keynote speaker at our annual conference, I was the first to call “dibs” on interviewing her. After all, I grew up mesmerized by her and this could be my first true celebrity interview! Unfortunately, I was not attending the conference — though it would soon turn out that no one was attending, at least not physically.

So, when Dan Cafaro, our editor-in-chief and my boss, asked me to take the reins, I went from giddy to incredibly nervous: How could I possibly do this interview? I mean, Brooke Shields!

I did my best to keep my nerves in check on the day of the interview, but I was also dealing with something else: my own mini-mental health breakdown. Amid all of the COVID-19 concerns, family health issues, work stress and life in general, I was about to reach my breaking point. All I had to do was get through the interview and then I was taking some much-needed time off; I was not confident that I could do it.

The time of the interview came. I tried to downplay my excitement as much as possible, though I did allow myself one to two minutes of fan-girling. Luckily, she took it in stride and laughed at all the points I had hoped she would. As we got into the interview, I was struck by how, well, normal she was. At one point, she put me on hold because she couldn't find her purse. I heard just a snippet of the conversation she was having and chuckled. She sounds like I do, I thought to myself.

As we discussed mental health and her own journey through postpartum depression, I began to feel something in me change. I began to feel lighter. The tension I'd been carrying for weeks in my head, neck, shoulders, really everywhere, was not as apparent. I didn't feel like I was being crushed anymore.

At the end of the interview, I thanked her for her time and also told her that I'd been dealing with some things personally and that what she said had struck a chord. I thanked her for making me feel a little better, even without intending to. I will never forget her response:

“Thank you. Please don't suffer, whatever it is, it's not any less valuable. You're not alone. And you get to begin now. And if you have a setback, you get to begin again.”

So again, thank you to my boss, Dan, for giving me this assignment, and to WorldatWork for bringing her to us and, of course, to Brooke for giving me just what I needed at just the right time.

I am eternally grateful.

emotions, two things happen: One, you feel that you're not alone in the world. And the other thing is empathy for others, stemming from a common ground. It's really powerful. It's extremely encouraging and empowering.”

Shields explains that she recalls her lowest moments and how she would attack herself for being weak or even just a horrible person. But hearing the stories of others resonated in a way that helped her emerge from her own “dark hole,” as she puts it.

“The problem with mental health is that we're pigeon-holed into this shameful place that you should just try to get over,” she said. “Especially in the workplace. If I was in a workplace and there were many, many people, and I felt a certain way, my first reaction probably would be *‘I'm the only one that feels this way.’*”

But, if employees feel like they can be honest and open about their struggles, if they can connect with others who are feeling similarly, “you open yourself

up to that vulnerability and then all of a sudden, you're in a community and then all of a sudden there's a power in that number.”

“It does take a village,” she said. “It's just that companies have sort of become *not* villages. The companies that seem to thrive are companies that have environments where people feel like they're treated as human beings, and they're valued and encouraged and challenged.”

“I've seen many people who are miserable in their jobs and it seems like smaller changes could make a bigger difference,” Shields opines. “It doesn't have to be the touchy-feely thing that people are afraid of. It's just valuing their people in a more multidimensional way.” ###

Watch Brooke Shields' keynote address at WorldatWork's 2020 Total Resilience Conference on Aug. 12!

Stephanie N. Rotondo is the former managing editor of #evolve. She is also a lifelong Brooke Shields fan.