GLIMPSES

By Artist Paul D Robertson – www.pauldrobertson.com

A compilation of uncensored real life experiences with Mental Illness

Foreword

This series of works about mental illnesses are an illuminating insight into the life of those with a mental illness. The personal experiences depicted within are an excellent example of the reasons why we should publish them. Stories of hallucinations, standing on top of cars wondering what it is all about, are the deep seated feelings that have to be expressed publicly by those with a mental illness because if they are not people don't know what it is like.

Mental illness is no different from any other illness. It has symptoms and it can be treated and managed. The difference is the mind is altered, changed to not think within the normal paradigms that exist in our society. Strange behaviour it treated as strange rather than as an illness. Many people in our society suffer or are affected by mental illness. More than people realise. Unless people tell their story, the truth of the suffering and experiences will never be known. We cannot let the story be told by those who haven't had the experience. We cannot let it be left to those in the media or government. They have to come from the people who know like the ones who have told their stories here.

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Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre

Bipolar Survivor
Playwright

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Introduction

Since I was diagnosed as having Bipolar Affective Disorder in November 2001 I have had the good fortune to meet and work with a multitude of people who have a mental illness. These people are far from the stereotypical mentally ill portrayed by the media and sensationalised in film. These people work, own businesses, run companies, are highly trained and/or qualified, exceptional artists, volunteers; they raise families, socialise and all the other things so called 'normal' people do. For that is what we are, 'normal' people, with a treatable, but not curable illness; similar to other illnesses caused by a chemical imbalance such as Diabetes, Hypertension and Hyper/Hypo-Thyroidism.

It was through my desire to reduce the fear and sense of isolation associated with diagnosis for sufferers and their loved ones, as well as increasing awareness and reducing stigma surrounding mental illness, that the goal of producing an uncensored and accurate glimpse into the lives of those with a mental illness was put into action.

All who have contributed to this book did so in hope that their story will help others with a mental illness, their families and friends, by benefiting from the 'real life experiences', encouraging better communication and acceptance of mental illness within their immediate circle; most of all recognising that they are not alone in this endless struggle.

Some contributions were written in the midst of an 'episode' where the writers perception is askew and their ability to articulate their thoughts are diminished, disjointed and inconsistent; therefore their stories may seem hard to understand or follow due to the irregular thought patterns. Where this occurs, I ask that you do not try to understand at the time of reading but take on board that what is being shared, accurately reflects what the person is experiencing at that point in time.

There are far more people with a diagnosed mental illness than is acknowledged in society and I would not be exaggerating if I said every third person I speak with has a relative or friend with a mental illness. With many of us choosing to 'come out', society will learn of the many positive contributions we make to society and this will inturn reduce the stigma surrounding mental illnesses.

There are some wonderful books available to increase understanding of the manifestations of these illnesses. These are of particular importance to families and friends of those with a mental illness. Knowing the danger signs as they begin to appear can be the difference between a full-blown episode and a little bump on the charts. But more importantly, they assist our ability to recognise the signs leading up to a suicide attempt.

If you know where to look, support networks are available to assist or refer you to other appropriate organisations/groups and many have recommended reading lists. For your benefit the larger organisations are listed at the back of the book, so that you do not encounter the circular attempts to find assistance as I, and many others have encountered when first diagnosed.

If you would like to tell your story to help increase awareness send it to c/o 43 Browallia Dr Rose Park 3214, fax 03 5222 6847 or forwalls@xi.com.au, the more people we can touch with our stories, the better.

I wish you well on your path to insight, education and recovery.

Nicci Wall

Georgia's Story

I was diagnosed - if you could call it that - as having an eating disorder in 1996 when I was 14 years old and in year 9. This meant I had to get weighed every week and my parents got me to see a psychiatrist immediately. I dreaded both these visits every week - I felt like I was up for judgment and assessment and that - in hindsight - was very damaging on my mental state and perception of myself. In the following years this diagnosis progressed to anorexia nervosa. I never ever learnt to like the medical visits but my sessions with my psychiatrist became a safe haven as I looked to him for an answer and the help, which I now know he would never be able to give me. Today I would consider my diagnosis to be that I suffer from disordered eating but no longer possess the anorexic demons that can manifest into seriously harmful behaviour. I learnt to identify every part of me that was associated to my mental illness, every activity that was encased in those horrible feelings of ' this is not the true me' I wrote them down and one by one I removed them from myself. My eating habits no longer affect how I live my days, they do not rule my decisions about where to go, who to see, what to wear etc, although on days when I am not my strongest they do attempt to have a say in these choices. I now make sure everyday is full of 'things' so that my eating is just a minute factor and I am looking forward to the day when I won't even have to worry about my reflection and what thoughts it may stir in me if I see the 'wrong' thing.

I now work as an actor, children's entertainer, theatre producer, playwright, freelance Public Relations consultant and journalist. And these are just a few of the 'things' I referred to above. I also do promotions, voice over work, volunteer with the Melbourne Community Friends program and baby-sit. I love life and if I could fit 10 more professions into my schedule and 20 more hours into everyday I would. In April 2005 - after my play titled readMylips... , aimed at stopping the silence surrounding eating disorders and mental illness, is performed I will leave to Los Angeles to join an acting studio for as long as it takes till I realise my goal of becoming a well know film and TV actor.

The first signs of an eating disorder and the first signs of a propensity to suffer from such and illness are two very different factors. As with all sufferers I was born with a heightened risk of possessing an eating disorder. Having now looked back through my childhood I can identify so many moments when I displayed that personality that will turn to self-harming behaviours if one feels sad or insecure. It has been said to my parents that when they hugged my brothers once when we were infants they needed to hug me three times for me to feel the same love. To me this is a perfect summation of how I felt as a child. Even as a very young child I did not trust that people - including direct family - loved me or that they would always be there. I hasten to add that they gave me no reason to doubt their love but I would still be shocked and racked with guilt when my Mum would stay up half the night if I was sick and I would still think I was causing my parents to split up if they rose their voices because of me (they are still happily married!) These were all warning signs of a dangerously sensitive soul who could - if her environment encouraged it - suffer from any of many self-harming mental illnesses.

As for the first signs of the eating disorder - they came when I became consumed by the size of my body. I was receiving all the wrong messages from the kids around me at school. I was a fit strong girl and my skinny girlfriends got the boys so I decided to make myself look like them. I cut back on food straight away - my first day I planned to eat only a slice of cantaloupe but survived eating not even that. Those around me started noticing the problem when they (mainly my Mother) would find yoghurts hidden in odd places in my room, bread squeezed into other rubbish in the trash and other food just never being taken out of the fridge.

After a health day at school I left a fact sheet titled 'Warning signs of Eating Disorders' on my Mum's bed - how's that for a cry for help? So she responded immediately after reading a number of my behaviours on this list. She confronted me and then booked me straight into see the GP who then connected us with the psychiatrist. Technically they had it all right and I began to be 'treated' abnormally early in my illness. But I now realise that the method of treatment was more harmful than helpful.

Unfortunately there is a huge lack of understanding amongst everyone – including medical professionals about these illnesses and how they should be treated. My journey however was quite an uneventful one really. In comparison to some of the stories I've heard - such as girls being turned away from hospitals because they weren't thin enough - my treatment was very good. I do not blame my GP or my psychiatrist for the anger or disappointment I felt with their treatment. They didn't understand me and they were missing crucial knowledge on certain elements of my illness, but they were trying their best to help.

Without doubt the two worst weeks of my life were the two weeks I spent in the Austin Hospital with a nasal-gastric tube stuck up my nose. I will never forget the horrid fear that came over me in the hours before I was admitted. I hung on to the door pane and my Mum had to actually pry my fingers from it. The hospital staff did try their best to scare you because their rationale was that this was not meant to be a pleasant experience; you were not meant to want to come back. Well they achieved that!! Their big line was "we are here to resuscitate your body not your mind" – lovely hey? For two weeks I listened to the dripping of the feed and felt myself growing. I was allowed off my bed twice a day; first to have a shower – which was watched by a nurse and then to go to the toilet before bed. My visiting hours were restricted and I have never ever felt more pathetic and miserable. It made me realize why sufferers regularly pull the tube out of their noses and try to escape. I was determined to retain some dignity – and I didn't want anyone to dislike me of course – so all I did was sit-ups and push-ups the minute I was left alone.

I guess those two weeks served one purpose – they made me so vehemently determined never ever to return. I came within .1 of a kilo a week later but once was more than enough for me, thank you! I know that there are other hospitals that take a more holistic, caring approach these days – I just wish they had been around for me, because I am certain my recovery would have been much happier and faster had I been in one of them.

During the serious stages in my illness I was on a number of different anti-depressants. I really resented people telling me I had depression – I had anorexia, but I was a happy person. I understand that the medication served its purpose at the time – stopping me from going too far. But when I was considerably recovered I wanted to be free of the medication because I was certain my natural personality was not that of a depressed person. I can't imagine me on any sort of anti-depressant now – I am one of the cheeriest happy people I know and I only have one drug in my life – natural endorphins, I'm a serious addict.

I have had to learn what helps me to cope with all of the remaining bits of this illness. I am now completely in-tune to all the little warning signs. There are so many different levels of coping though. When I am getting stressed or worried I run more and more – then I have to be careful. When I am feeling myself growing and I start regimenting everything again I have to do some serious talking to myself. If everything is getting too much for me I have to write lists, make piles and organize. And when I feel lost or sad I have to pick up the phone and call a friend. A very important part of this is just listening to myself and trusting that I know me better than anyone. When I give myself this trust and responsibility I gift myself with the ability to know really where I am 'at' at any moment.

This may sound like a sweeping statement – but I guess it is. The general public do not understand eating disorders. I was so certain of this that it lead me to write my play, which is now the focus of a campaign to stop the silence and the misunderstanding. Since placing myself in the public and talking about my experience I have received proof everyday that people just don't understand. The wonderful difference right now is people do want to understand.

When I was really sick it was as if that was all Georgia Van Cuylenburg could be – an eating disorder. I couldn't ever have a headache – it was because I wasn't eating. I could have sh*tty day – it was cause I had depression – because I wasn't eating, I couldn't ever just be working really hard for something – it was because I wasn't eating. And the most damaging was I didn't have a great group of friends and I couldn't find a real connection with most people at school – and that was, of course, because I didn't eat!

Everyone forgets that you are just another human being. And just like my brother had glandular fever (as did I) when he was in high school – I had Anorexia. But people didn't dismiss him, they didn't walk on eggshells around him, never wanting to 'tip him over the edge', they openly sympathized with him and supported him. From the minute people found out that I was sick I felt the difference in the way they treated me. They were always asking my family how I was, but they were too afraid to talk to me at all. I think most people are just to scared of this unknown thing. I believe that it needs to not be this secretive unknown if there is going to be real change. How are sufferers meant to recover without honest and real discussion? Both sufferers and the people around them need to know that it is Ok to have this illness. It is just an illness- an alien has not inhabited the sufferers' body! It is so important that everyone realises that they didn't choose to have it – just like you don't choose to have Glandular fever. And if the sufferer really feels that those around them love them for who they are with or without this illness – then they will find the strength to live without it

My relationship with my family and friends has really been the roller coaster aspect of my seven-year journey with this illness. At times I have only wanted my family around at other times I wanted nothing more than to be free of them forever. There is so much love shared between me and my Mum, that an illness such as Anorexia turned our bond into turmoil. She was there at my lowest times, she yelled at me, she said so many wrong things but she also did so much good for me by just sticking in there. For so long she and everyone else just wanted to fix me or wanted me to be better the next time they saw me. Comments such as "All I want is for you to be happy and healthy" tore me apart and it was only when I realized that I would never be able to make them happy that I could move above this. In the last year or so I have finally been able to communicate to them what is really happening to me and how what they do affects me. When my brother said "I don't understand why you can't just eat that spoonful of rice if it would make your family happy" I could explain to him that that exact pressure and responsibility that he placed on me was why I couldn't do it!

In the last month or so everything has improved out of sight in my family for one reason. My parents have 'given up' they say this like it is a failure, but they have stopped trying to make sense of my illness on my behalf and stopped trying to solve it. And I was able to say to them that because of this they have in fact helped me more in the last few months than they have in the entire seven-years.

My relationship with friends has been so very hurtful at times and the joy of my life at others. When I was very sick I lost all my friends but one girlfriend. Girls in high school separated themselves from me because I did so many things, kept so busy and never ever just ‘hung out’. But in the last few years I have learnt how amazing the bond is between girlfriends (what a marvellous lesson!!) I now put my friends first no matter how busy I am. I just love that they think I’m ok without all the other stuff – the achievements and excitements. My favourite moments these days are spent just hanging with my friends; they have taught me so much about myself and they help me relax every now and then. And when you went for so long not trusting females and thinking they would never like you – this is a dream come true!

As for partners: when I was in the midst of my illness I stuck with my boyfriend 24/7 because I knew he was the only one that would just hug me if all else failed. The horrible irony was that he was the one thing I had to change about my life before I could get better. He loved me so much – he was loving me for me, so I had lost any desire to love me. What’s more I had fallen out of love with him a long while ago and should have been honest. So without him as my other half I had to fill the rest with love for myself.

I have not had a successful relationship with a man since. And in truth I have really kept myself to myself. In the years since I have become so aware of who I am and what works with me. I have met some wonderful fellas but a girl who is dealing with her ‘sh*t’ honestly and won’t put up with her special someone not dealing with theirs – isn’t a very attractive prospect to most guys apparently! One guy has been honest with me and told me he found me too skinny but no one else has ever expressed that my illness was a problem. In-fact I have usually managed to find the ones who have a lot more ‘going on’ inside their heads than me. Currently I am with someone who says the right things gives me hugs and completely respects my experience with Anorexia and was just pleased that I told him right from the start. He said he thought it would scare him but for some reason it made him like me more. And if I’d heard that from even just one person a few years ago I doubt I’d still have disordered eating today.

To those who are newly diagnosed - Keep a very clear idea of who you are. People will try and tell you what is best for you and others will treat you like you are suddenly a different person. But remember you are still the person you always have been. Try and show that to others, gain a confidence in just being yourself and being honest about what you’ve got. People – or at least most people – react well to someone who is comfortable with; and is taking ownership of their illness. Those that don’t are usually struggling with a reflection of something within them that they are confronted by.

Education and understanding needs to be less facts and figures and more reality. Everyone can tout statistics and quick facts about these illnesses but the real education comes from personal stories, experiences and the reality of these illnesses. There needs to be much more communication about the individual experience so that large organization and even individuals that can make a difference feel moved to act.

There is of course the issue of funds – there is nowhere near enough funding for any mental illnesses treatment or awareness. Money would mean so much – proper training of professionals, suitable facilities for sufferers, support networks and – very importantly – the ability to promote the correct messages of what these illness really mean to those effected by them. But with out those funds all we can do is be honest and talk about these issues. If we create an environment where educators can learn as well as sufferers everyone could work together in the same way for the same result. And if this is no longer such a problematical health area the general public will not feel a need to stigmatise it and push away from gaining any real understanding.

Nicci's Story – Distress, Hope & the Road to Recovery

There were so many twists and turns for me pre and post diagnosis, that it is hard to know where to start and even harder to try to capture snippets of my life with Bipolar. It is with open, honest and uncensored glimpses of my experiences I hope you will benefit, gaining insight to the daily struggle of those with a mental illness.

I was diagnosed as having Bipolar with Obsessive Compulsive tendencies in 2001, at the age of 35. I had my first major suicidal depression at 14; however I remember days of overwhelming sadness as early as 4 or 5, where I just cried and cried and didn't understand why. At 7 I was sexually abused, following which I was found hiding in the back yard with a handful of tablets ready to swallow them. I still have trouble coming to terms with the fact that at such a tender age I understood what it took to end my life.

From a very young age, extreme sensitivity to all that I experienced altered my moods, my life, my self-esteem, my perception and view of the world in general. A majority of the time my feelings were exaggerated and I was seen to be a 'drama queen', 'in love with myself', 'self absorbed', 'fixated', 'irrational' and out of touch with reality. However whatever state I was experiencing, it was my reality at that point in time. My feelings, fears, beliefs, perception and resulting reactions, were in my eyes justified and no different to what anyone else would be experiencing or doing under the circumstances. Hopefully the following will adequately portray these experiences, providing you with a unique insight into my life with a mental illness.

Whilst Bipolar Affective Disorder sufferers experience many common symptoms, each person with Bipolar experiences aspects of the illness differently due to previous life influences, experiences, as well as the individuals underlying personality traits. Depression is the main factor of my illness, especially in the early years and is very debilitating. As my illness progressed I started having more manic and mixed episodes, often with my moods cycling numerous times within one day. Family, friends and co-workers were walking on eggshells, not knowing what I would be like from hour to hour.

Depression

For me depression manifests its self as extreme tiredness, lethargy, negativity, physical aches and pains, slowing of movement, increased sleep and loss of libido, self-esteem, concentration and will to live. My worst times with depression were when my children were quite young.

Typically it starts with a heavy pressured head, sensitivity to light and noise, desire to withdraw from contact with others and irritation at all or any expectations placed on me, because I don't have the energy or inclination to do anything. I become critical of others and negativity is clearly evident in conversations, views, with an inability to gain any enjoyment from activities that would normally bring me a great deal of pleasure.

Thoughts such as being worthless and a burden to my family, a failure as a wife and mother, people disliking me, I'm fat, ugly and a drain to be around. My body aches similar to when I have the flu, only worse; it is heavy and I just drift in and out of sleep. I fear being alone, but push everyone away, wishing they would stop talking to me, asking me questions I cant answer because I cant think, my brain is too heavy, too foggy. I wish that I could shrink to the size of a pin and hide in the corner where no one can see me, so that I am not alone but others cannot place their expectations on me.

I just want to sleep and never wake up, everything is too hard, I cant cope and I don't want to be here, I cant see anyway back from where I am, it's hopeless, I'm hopeless and just want to die. The feelings, pain, black sadness are all consuming, I don't want to be like this, I can't live like this. This is not a life, it's an existence and I want to escape it, if only I could escape it.

I drag myself out of bed to go to the toilet, not even opening my eyes as I make my way to the bathroom. I come out and wash my hands; I am thirsty but I don't have the energy to go to the kitchen, so I drink from the bathroom tap and drag my sorry body back to bed.

The next day I might be determined to get out of bed and do something, anything. I shower because I haven't bathed in 3 days. I sit on the floor of the shower crying just letting the water run over me; I don't have the energy to stand or wash myself. I crawl out of the shower and straight back into bed, without even drying myself, I'm so exhausted.

My children are up; I am an awful mother. They are too young to prepare their own meals and bath themselves, but I can't get up to look after them. They come to me, they need and want my attention, but I have nothing to give, no energy and just wish they would leave me alone. I am letting them down, they would be better off without me and in the care of someone who can give them the love and attention they need. My husband comes home to find me asleep again, no meals prepared, the house a pigsty and the children in their pyjamas. He doesn't understand. I feel he doesn't really love me; he just wants his meals cooked, the house cleaned, the kids cared for and sex. If he really loves me, he would just leave me sleep and crawl in beside me, hold me and take all this pain away.

I can't take this anymore, if only I could escape, but I know that I cannot escape myself, this illness, unless I end it all. Past mistakes, behaviour and indiscretions haunt me, churning over and over in my mind, reliving the humiliation and self-loathing all over again.

They are all better off without me; I should ring someone to have the children. What will they think when they come to pick them up, the house is a complete mess, there are no clean dishes or clothes, oh it's all too hard, please God, take me now. I don't understand, I use to have the children bathed, fed, the house tidy and the washing on by 9am; how come I can't do that now, I'm so useless, I can't bare this any longer, I would end it myself, but I just don't have the energy.

I can't afford any more time off work I must go to the psychiatrist and get a certificate. He'll ask me what's wrong, but I don't know, if I did maybe I could do something to change it, make it better. He wants to put my antidepressant dose up, why bother it doesn't work anyway. Tells me I need "to get out of bed and look after my children, I can't leave them to be raised by the television, they need me and I must be there for them. Open the blinds and let the sun in, take the children to the park, get outside more, it will make you feel better" he says. That's easy for him to say, he's not in my body. Oh how I wish I were dead, please someone come rescue my children, they don't deserve this, I want their lives to be better than this.

My mum comes and picks up the kids, saying I need a break, some time to myself, I'm not coping. I hate it when she lies; what she really means is that I'm a hopeless mother and don't deserve to have children. And what about me, I need someone to support and take care of me; I desperately need help and love and care and support and to be held and told everything is going to be ok. Why doesn't anyone understand what I need? Why doesn't anyone try to help me? Can't they see I'm not well and that I just want to die? Hey, I don't have the children around to give me that sense of responsibility that usually prevents me from crashing into a tree or taking an over dose. What if I get worse? I shouldn't be alone, I'm scared, where can I go? I could go to; no if I go there they will never let me forget it or tell me to pull my socks up and get on with life! Ha! That's like telling a kid with a broken leg to run around the oval five times, they just don't understand, no-one does. I've got no one, I'm all alone.

At this stage I would usually get my finances in order, make sure my will was in my document folder and then I would write letters to each of my children and to my parents. My letters would always be apologetic; for letting my family down, not living up to their expectations, not being an attentive mother, for pushing them away, for being so critical and most of all, not being strong enough to go on anymore.

Then at some stage something changes, the medication increase kicks in and I begin to come out of the depression; it's a very slow process and can take months; but day-by-day I regain the ability and energy to do things.

These days I understand the progression of my symptoms as I spiral down into the deep and black abyss of depression. I discuss changes I've noticed with family or co-workers to gain their feedback, so that I can get to my Psychiatrist to assess my medication dose, put coping strategies in to action, hopefully heading off the depression before it takes over completely.

Mania

The early stages of mania are addictive and those with Bipolar have been known to stop their medication or try sleep deprivation to elevate their mood, because they miss the highs medication has taken from them.

Who wouldn't want to continue experiencing the wonderful heightened senses that come with mania? The feeling of wellbeing, elation, energy, motivation, clarity of thoughts, the list could go on forever. However, it seldom stays in this place of wonderment for long and usually ends up with the loss of perception, psychosis, hallucinations, risky behaviour or sheer exhaustion.

My major manic episode came on shortly after I separated from my first husband in 1990. I felt wonderful, free and eager to meet life head on.

A typical day for me would start with a 1-hour aerobics video; get the children ready for school and kinder. I would ride to the gym; do two 1-hour aerobics classes and then a 1 ½ hour workout in the gym. I would then ride home, clean the flat and visit friends or go for a 1 to 2 hour walk. After tea, bath the children, tuck them into bed, I would do another 1-hour aerobics video, while drinking wine. The wine helped me to slow down enough to get to sleep. Sleep was allusive and interrupted by strange dreams, vivid, realistic, but weird dreams.

I was so self-confident, extremely flirtatious, an exhibitionist, attention seeker, extravert, in awe of myself. I had an over active sex drive and no inhibitions, wearing low cut tops and high hemmed skirts; the skimpier the better. I wanted attention. I craved attention. I would become so fixated on sex that it was my main topic of conversation and much to others disgust, I would share the intimate details of my sexual exploits. Or sometimes I would stir up the young guys next door (my landlords son) by telling them I was a prostitute and that was why there was a constant stream of young men visiting me; never once considering they might actually take my ramblings to be true. Many a time my behaviour was very risqué and overtly suggestive, which I often followed through on. Believing I was making all men drool, I was known for dancing on tables and playing up to friends' partners. I could go out and dance all night and with no sleep still have the energy to get through the next day without a problem.

Ideas abounded, many were put into action but never finished. Things around me had to be in order, draws tidy, cupboards clean, cake and biscuit tins full of goodies cooked in the middle of the night. Long phone calls were made to friends at all times of the day and night, conversations all one sided because I didn't stop talking long enough for them to get a word in edgewise. Flitting from one topic to another, I often made no sense at all or people couldn't keep up with what I was saying. A lovely old Doctor I knew years ago once told me of a person who talked incessantly and he had termed it 'verbal diarrhoea'; I think this description is very fitting. I was known to be self absorbed, fixated, unswayable and over opinionated. I knew everything, could do anything, other people frustrated me because they slowed me down and it was easier and quicker to do everything myself, particularly as others could not do things to my standards or expectations.

But then things would change and I would become paranoid about what people were saying about me, what people wanted from me, what hidden meanings there were in conversations with me and that men didn't want to get to know me, they just wanted sex. I would become caustic, critical and cruel; often offending those who meant a lot to me, in turn loosing their friendship and trust in the process. But at the time I would be totally oblivious to the extent to which my behaviour was inappropriate. I couldn't trust anyone; they were just using me for my generosity. After all, here I was a single young woman with children; they would know I was home and just drop in and expect to stay for a meal, have a drink, but never bring anything with them to share with me. Many men dropped in to see me, assuming they would get sex. Whilst I never denied there had been numerous sexual partners in my life, I didn't get involved with anyone I didn't want to.

These days when I have episodes of hypomania or mania, I put the extra energy to good use. As an Office Manager there is always work I can do while my family sleep and I am well known for being in the office at 1 am. Sometimes I sleep for four hours, wake up and set about doing things. Other times I may not sleep for 36 to 48 hours, then crash and sleep for 16 hours straight. When sleep eludes me I clean out cupboards, write procedures, do administrative work for the support group I established in our local town, devour books, search the internet for good documents/web sites on mental illnesses, write letters to parliamentarians or add dot points to the list of things I want to cover a book I am writing.

Mixed Episodes

It was the progression to mixed episodes that finally lead to my diagnosis of Bipolar. Over the 21 years of symptoms from my first major depression at 14, I had been to various Doctors, Counsellors, Psychologists and Psychiatrists, none of who ever treated me for anything other than depression.

I was sleeping less, but was tense and agitated. I would get up and go to work at one o'clock in the morning, then work all through the day in an aggressive state, angered by the feeling that I could never catch up on my workload. The aggression and anger would give way to rage and I would yell, scream, swear like a trooper, throwing tantrums at home and work. I felt unappreciated and over utilised at work and home. I felt that I did everything and was expected to do everything, while my husband, children and co-workers sat back and waited for me to do it all.

Irritable was an understatement and God help anyone who tried to stand up to me. I hated life, my family, my job, the world and myself. In my eyes I had nothing to lose, nothing to live for and felt like putting my hands around someone's neck, throttling them or venting my frustration and anger through a deep guttural scream to release the pressure. I knew there was something wrong and I was scared, no I was petrified. I had verbally abused my family up hill and down dale, but now I felt like lashing out physically, I was loosing control and didn't know why I was like this. I would clench my teeth and growl, but what I really wanted to do was scream my lungs out to release all the tension and rage. I was afraid of myself, that I might loose control and hurt someone; most of all I hated the person I had become.

I went to the doctor and told him what was happening and he wanted to put up my antidepressant dose again; the 3rd time in as many months. I voiced my concern about another increase when the previous 2 hadn't helped, it seemed to be getting worse and I was also concern about the dose I was now on. His response was "do you want me to treat the patient or worry about the dose?". He wasn't listening to me; he didn't pick up on the fear in my voice or eyes. The next day I made an appointment with a different doctor and asked for a referral to a psychiatrist. The doctor obliged and ran a series of blood tests to ensure there were no underlying physical illnesses causing the symptoms I had indicated.

Two weeks later, I was seen by the psychiatrist who asked many questions: about what I was experiencing, my family history of depression or other mental illnesses. By the end of the appointment he advised in his opinion I had Bipolar. He would start me on Epilim, which is a mood stabiliser and if I did not have Bipolar it would not have any affect on me. However within two weeks I was starting to feel changes; calmer, relaxed and happier with myself.

Hallucinations and Paranoia

Hallucinations can affect any of the five senses; touch, taste, smell, hearing or sight. Some people do not hallucinate; others have hallucinations across several of the five senses. I experience several hallucinations, but have through questioning people close to me, learned to identify and cope with them.

I can trace my first hallucination, which was touch sensory, back to when I was 16. It feels like I am being bitten by something small like a dust-mite and my body reacts with itchiness. When I scratch the affected area, the result is the same as if I had really experienced multiple bites. This hallucination was quite bad following a car accident in which I was a passenger when I was 17; the rash had doctors totally baffled. They couldn't find a cause for the rashes and treated me for everything from allergies to scabies. I still suffer from this hallucination, particularly when stressed; but have found through trial and error that Tea Tree lotion relieves the itchiness and I have learnt not to scratch until I draw blood. But I do still have the scars from the years of experiencing this hallucination.

My other main hallucination is smells. Now it would be fantastic if these were nice scents like roses or pine trees following the rain, but no such luck! No, I smell dog sh*t, vomit, urine, body odour and rotting flesh. With the help of a co-worker, it was identified that not long after this particular type of hallucination, paranoia would raise its ugly head.

I occasionally hear an ambulance siren, which generally stays with me for about 20 minutes at a time. Because of this I have to be fairly vigilant when driving, just in case there is actually an ambulance coming.

Paranoia is one aspect of my illness that I am still trying to come to terms with, mainly because this is something I do lose perception with and don't realise that I am being totally irrational until I am well into a paranoid episode.

My paranoia starts with vivid, realistic dreams in which I am in danger, being threatened or my husband is having an affair. I will often lash out in my sleep. My husband now has a sixth sense and usually wakes up as soon as I start to exhibit signs that I am having one of these dreams, which are mumbling and movements similar to spasms. He now restrains, then wakes me. Sometimes when he restrains me it fits into my dream and I fight harder, often leaving me with significant bruising. If he doesn't wake up before the climax of the dream, I usually sit bolt upright and scream the most blood-curdling scream; which often wakes my children, who are down the other end of the house and they come running to our room to make sure I am alright. My husband will keep me awake for 20 to 30 minutes and make me get up to have a drink, because he knows that if I go back to sleep in under 20 minutes, it is highly likely that I will resume the same dream. I often wonder if the neighbours ever hear my screams. As yet no one has come to check that everything is ok.

My paranoia usually centre's around being talked about or laughed at behind my back, being left out, someone being favoured over me when I believe I am putting in more effort or are nicer to people than the person being favoured; being lied to by my husband and everyone else knowing what is going on and being subjected to the resulting humiliation. When people talk to me I take things out of context and believe they are conspiring against me or trying to undermine me in some way. The other one, which I can laugh about now, is the feeling that everyone is looking at me. I use to check that I hadn't sat in something or my top wasn't undone or my skirt wasn't tucked into my knickers or I would say to my husband "do I have sh*t on my face? Well why is everyone staring at me?"

This is such a hard symptom for me to deal with because the hurt, frustration, fear, anger, rage, anxiety and confusion associated with paranoia is so real and all consuming. Even when I do realise that it may be my mind playing tricks on me, I still find myself driven to prove or disprove what I am experiencing, because I'm not sure if it is gut instinct or paranoia. I fear putting it down to paranoia and then finding out the feeling was gut instinct and I had reason to feel this way. Paranoia wreaks havoc on my relationships because of the need to confront people to get my beliefs/concerns out in the open, which I rarely manage to do in a way that does not come across as an accusation.

I have also been known to rummage through my husbands draws and wallet looking for unknown names and phone numbers, smelling his shirts for perfume, trying to catch him looking at other women. At work I have been known to put myself in a position where I can eavesdrop on conversations when I think I am being talked about, challenging the boss over things I believe to be happening and showing no respect for anyone in a position of authority if I believe I have been wronged. I become very fixated and cannot be swayed from what I believe to be happening. No matter what explanations are offered to me, I find fault in them; there is no placating me when I am paranoid. My husband says nothing when I begin to challenge him when I am paranoid, because he knows there is nothing he can say that I will believe; I just shoot to pieces anything offered in hope of appeasing me. When I told my Psychiatrist this, he said that my husband is a very wise man, because this is the best way to deal with someone on a paranoid tangent.

Most of the things I have done while experiencing Bipolar episodes, I have accepted and moved on. However, there are things that I have done when I am paranoid that I am truly ashamed of and I can't believe I would sink so low; but I know that I have and it comes back to haunt me when I'm depressed.

I am currently working with my Psychiatrist to identify triggers for my paranoia and challenge them, which seems to centre on fears of abandonment and humiliation. This is one area of my illness I have not been able to establish my own coping strategies. I have no ability to control an episode even when I realise I'm being irrational, no matter how much I tell myself this is not real. This frustrates me immensely because I can't find a solution, I have no control over my behaviour, I can't put on a brave face and my insight into this aspect of my illness is totally useless to me. My Psychiatrist tells me I have the most insight into my own illness that he has ever witnessed, but I need to accept that I have an illness that I can't control totally, regardless how hard I work at doing so. I thought I fully accepted this illness, but it appears that I am still working through the denial of some aspects of the illness.

OCP Tendencies

Many of the actions and reactions associated with my OCP tendencies I have learnt to deal with, but once again I thought they were normal for everyone.

For example, my cutlery draw had to be laid out in a specific way; soup spoons stacked at one end and dessert spoons at the other, entrée forks one end and main forks the other, bread and butter knives one way and main knives the other, teaspoons one way and cake forks the other. Now whilst this may be usual for some people, the anxiety caused if they are not exactly as I want them is irrational. My husband laughs now that he understands the reason behind this behaviour when remembering having put the cutlery away, not stacking them as I do. He went to get something out of the garage and came back to make a cuppa, only to find in the short space of time he was out of the kitchen, I had rearranged the cutlery 'lining them up like little soldiers'.

Stacking the grocery trolley and then the grocery items on the register conveyor in a particular order was another problem for me. Or the way in which my pantry was compartmentalised or arriving five minutes early for everything, my allocation of time for travelling, visiting, completing tasks etc, etc.

I have managed to overcome a lot of these tendencies; I had to, with my children helping do the dishes or my husband helping with the groceries, washing clothes or cooking and all of them being blasé about being on time for things. Once I have identified that something is causing me extreme anxiety, I talk to my family about ways in which I can over come my reaction and resulting behaviour.

For instance, my husband and I were going to ride our motorbikes to his mothers for a visit. I had allowed 1½ hours for travel each way, 2 hours visiting time, by which time it would be getting dark and cold. Based on that I told my teenagers what time we should be home. However, my husband decided to take me via the scenic route, which took 2 ¼ hours to get to his mum's. I was so anxious that I did not enjoy the scenery and so concerned that his mum would not be satisfied with the reduced time we would now be spending with her. I realised the cause of my anxiety, explained it to my husband and asked him to let me know in advance if he was going to take the scenic route anywhere, so that I was prepared and then able enjoy the scenery and the ride. It had the desired affect in this instance and I no longer subject my husband to ugliness of my anxiety and anger.

Admittedly I still occasionally rearrange the cutlery, pantry, etc; but usually only when I'm heading for a manic episode.

Medications

Medications react differently for different people and sometimes the side effects are worse than the illness itself. It is very much a case of trial and error to find the right medication combination to suit each individual. Some people are lucky and hit on the right combination fairly quickly. Others I have spoken with are still trying to find the right combination 7 years down the track.

One of the most regularly used mood stabilising medication for Bipolar is Lithium. I know many people on Lithium, for whom it works really well; but not for me! After two weeks on Lithium I began to get head aches, then headaches with a migraine once a week, then twice a week, until it got to the stage where I had 5 migraines in 11 days. Theses migraines were so severe, the constant violent vomiting pulled stomach muscles and I would lose control of my bladder. Apart from the terrible side effects, I had no quality of life and as an Office Manager my absence from work was a real concern, causing me great distress.

Another mood stabiliser called Epilim actually sent me into a deeper depression and the same with Tegretol. Yet once again, I know others for whom these medications have worked really well.

These three medications are the only mood stabilisers on the Australian PBS listing of subsidised medications. I therefore had to look at medications not on the PBS list. As my presentation of Bipolar is mainly depression, mixed states and rapid cycling, my Psychiatrist recommended Lamictal. For me Lamictal is fantastic, but it comes at a cost $180.00 for a 28-day supply. This puts us in a place of financial hardship and debt, but my family would rather go without than have me discontinue the Lamictal. This further illustrates that the Lamictal is working.

I also take antidepressants and antipsychotics, as well as medication for an under-active thyroid and a back injury. On average my monthly medication is $240.00. It is quite large chunk of our combined monthly income and at times I feel guilty or get very angry at having to pay out this much money just so that I can enjoy some form of normality.

Over the period of my illness I have been on 6 different antidepressants, 4 different mood stabilisers and antipsychotics, until finally just 2 short months ago finding the right medication combination for me. Some of the other side effects I have experienced are: - fluid retention, weight gain (5 kg in 7days), nausea, akathisia (muscle agitation making you appear like you have ants in your pants), the shakes so bad that you can't write, constipation, eye and skin sunlight sensitivity, excessive perspiration, teeth grinding, Tardive Dyskinesia (which can leave you with long-term side effects) and extreme agitation. For some people certain antidepressants can send them into an acute manic/psychotic episode where they require immediate hospitalisation.

Hopefully this has given you some insight into why many people regularly take themselves off their medication or choose to pursue holistic/natural therapies to control their symptoms. Also that taking medication does not necessarily mean an automatic improvement in the symptoms of the illness.

The Road to Recovery

There are so many important factors in taking back control of your life following a lifetime of being on an emotional roller coaster.

The biggest step is acceptance of having a mental illness. For some people this is very hard, particularly if they were diagnosed during an involuntary admission to an Acute Psychiatric Hospital. The other thing that prevents sufferers from accepting their diagnosis, is not being provided information regarding their illness so they can better understand what it is they are experiencing. I remember well the fear and isolation I felt when I was diagnosed. I knew nothing about Bipolar, I didn’t know anyone with Bipolar and I didn’t know where to get information on Bipolar. At the same time I felt great relief, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, because I was told this illness was treatable and I would finally be able to regain some control over my moods and my life.

In order for me to accept my diagnosis, I needed to educate myself about this illness. I started by doing a web search and was lucky enough to come across some good overviews of the illness, as well as the Australian Bipolar Website – “Fyreniyce”. The quality of information and insight into Bipolar was fantastic and best of all, it was in layman’s terms, so I didn’t need a medical dictionary by my side. I joined the F&I online support group and over the next 18 months learnt more from my co-sufferers than I could ever learn from a book or most likely, even the most knowledgeable doctor. There is a lot to be gained by interacting with other sufferers of mental illnesses, as only they can truly understand and have insight to what you are experiencing; whether it be in relation to having an episode or battling the side effects many of the medications cause. In addition to this, it provides a chance for those with a mental illness to vent about stigma, lack of doctor/patient rapport and pressures placed on them by family members. It also gives rise to good humour, where realisation of shared experiences can be openly laughed at without offending or feeling offended.

This interaction lead to several good books being recommended, as well as a couple of ‘Mood Charts’. Some doctors ask that you complete a mood chart to assist them in identifying mood cycles, the progression of your symptoms and the effectiveness of the medications you are taking. However, I recommend you complete a mood chart over a 3-month period for yourself.

In completing a mood chart on a daily basis, logging changes in your moods, sleep patterns, medications, menstrual cycle and significant events during the day, you increase your ability to identify shifts in your moods and external triggers. It also helps you to remember to take your medication, because you have to fill out what medication you are on, the dose you take and the frequency you take it.

For me the mood chart was the stepping stone to becoming self aware and able to identify patterns, triggers and other factors that affect my moods; which then enabled me to put in place strategies to minimise the underlying external causes of my mood changes. I cannot change the genetic causes of chemical imbalances that create mood changes, but each external trigger I identify and overcome through change, allows me to regain more control over my life and my future.

Finding a psychiatrist that will work with you is of extreme importance. If your doctor talks at you, doesn't discuss options with you, doesn't explain possible medication side effects, you don't feel totally comfortable with or trust them, then it is time to try another psychiatrist. You have an illness, you are not a child and do not deserve to be treated as such. Undermining your self-esteem and self-respect, not listening to what you have to say, being dismissive or not adequately answering your questions, is unacceptable.

I learnt the hard way, via a doctor who lied to me regarding the side effects I was experiencing from an antipsychotic. This particular side effect is called Tardive Dyskinesia and can have life long repercussions. If it wasn't bad enough that I have Bipolar, an under active Thyroid, Endometriosis, Irritable Bowel Syndrome and a debilitating back injury, this doctor put me in a situation that could have potentially left me with disfiguring facial movements and my eyes intermittently rolling back into my head. I went to my GP, when in addition to the facial movements and rolling eyes, my pupils dilated to the size of my irises. She absolutely freaked and took me off the medication immediately and I never went back to that psychiatrist. There were several other antipsychotic medications he could have had me trial, as soon as symptoms of Tardive Dyskinesia became evident. The betrayal of my trust and his neglect for my wellbeing triggered a mixed state and psychosis; I would have been hospitalised had there been a bed available. But close monitoring by my psychologist in conjunction with my husband got me through a potentially dangerous period, particularly as I was a threat to myself in that state.

Another important aspect of my road to recovery is that I adhere to my medication regime like it is my lifeline, which it is. A common misconception by sufferers, family and the general public, is that once medicated we no longer have the illness or episodes or symptoms. A day does not go by in which my illness does not affect me in some way and I still regularly have “break through episodes”; however these are at reduced severity in comparison to not taking any medication. Some people only have break through episodes on once a month, or every few months or some times not for a year. But there is always a chance of a break through episodes due to external triggers, taking medication inconsistently or not looking after your wellbeing; such as healthy foods, good sleep routines, etc.

Some people do not believe in taking any medication and this is their individual right. I know two people who control their symptoms by daily meditation, a healthy diet, regular exercise and a great sleep pattern. They also have regular massages to release muscle tension and burn oils. Meditation is something I would love to get into and plan on doing it; unfortunately I have been planning to start meditation for about a year and a half! I have tried tapes and CD's, but can't get my brain to stop processing, so I will have to join a group.

A very important step on the road to recovery is openly and honestly communicating with family. While they are trying their hardest to understand and be supportive, it often doesn't come across that way, because they truly do not know what you are experiencing, unless they have the illness themselves. So you must do whatever it takes to help them understand if you wish things to change.

There are many ways to help your family to help you. Firstly, the best time to communicate with family is when you are relatively well. When well, it is easier to explain what you experience when you are in different states giving them insight in to what you go through. If you have any idea of what you are actually in dire need of during those episodes, tell them. Remind them that not every time you get upset or angry is due to your illness, it is sometimes because some thing that is said or done has disappointed or angered you and you would appreciate their not blaming your condition for every thing that appears to go wrong. Also that you are not a child and do not need to be reminded to take your medication (if this upsets you). You are more than capable of setting an alarm on your phone, clock radio, watch or setting up weekly medication trays.

As you come to understand the progression of your illness and changes in states, you can explain to your family (and friends) what signs to watch out for when you are heading up or down, so that you can seek help from your doctor earlier and hopefully head off a full-blown episode. There are scales and charts available, which will help you to explain at what level intervention is required, eg Feive & Dunner Mood Scale. I prepared a table of contact details of my Psychiatrist, Psychologist, Family members, Boss and the CAT Team, printed it on one side of the page with the mood scale on the other side. I then laminated several copies and gave them to family members, close friends and my boss, so they all had points of reference if I should require intervention. Doing this relieves a lot of pressure on those who are close to you, when time is of the essence.

Most importantly you always need to remember, whilst others can make suggestions or give you guidance and support, only you can make the changes and take the necessary steps to take back control of your life.

If you are not open and honest with your Psychiatrist and Doctor, they do not get all the information required to treat you appropriately. They also need to know if you have any other illnesses or an addiction to anything (alcohol, gambling, drugs, etc), to enable them to work with you from that aspect as well. Once again, it comes down to how much you personally are prepared to aid your recovery.

I have met several people who expect others to “fix” everything for them. They take no responsibility for undertaking steps to aid their own recovery. This often causes them to change Dr’s frequently because they expect 24/7 access, so they can call every time they have an episode. Each time contact is made, they will be given direction and advised of coping strategies, etc; but do implement any suggestions to minimise the severity of their episodes. Dr’s and friends alike, begin to avoid taking their calls, as the calls become longer and more frequent; with an expectation of immediate access and total disregard of the Dr’s or friend’s other commitments. Thus they get more disgruntled, claiming that no one will help them. If someone is not prepared to help themself, until they are ready to do so, I believe they cannot be helped.

Whilst there is a serious side to having Bipolar, there is also a very comical and humorous side as well. As advised earlier, we tend to experience emotions on a deeper level and this includes seeing the funny side of things. When sufferers get together, the ability to laugh at ourselves, our symptoms and our indiscretions, allows us to build a rapport different to the norm. It is a wonderful sight and sound to be surrounded by a group of people in the throes of big belly laughter’. And when hypermanic or manic, big belly laughter can often be heard several doors away; sometimes to the dismay and embarrassment of those with you at the time, but laughter in any form is good medicine for the soul.

There is so much more I could impart, however I hope that sharing some of my most intimate memories and experiences helps you in some way and gives you the confidence to move forward in your life; regardless of whether you have a mental illness or a loved one/close friend with a mental illness.

I encourage you to always hold your head high, as sufferers of Bipolar are well known for putting in 110%, where 'normal' people (if there is such a thing) generally only give 80 to 85% of themselves. We are also well known for having higher IQ's, being more artistic, fantastic coordinators/organisers and making important contributions to society and our local communities. Don't become a shrinking violet, blossom like the orange tree for all to see and show them what you are made of.

Just A Few Famous Bipolar Sufferers: -

Vincent Van Gogh - Artist

Mozart - Composer

Rene Rivkin - Business Tycoon

Sting – Singer & Writer

Ben Stiller – Comedian, Actor, Producer

Craig Hamilton – ABC Broadcaster

Jim Carey – Comedian, Actor

Daniel Johnston – Singer & Writer

Spike Milligan – Comedian & Actor

Virginia Woolfe – Novelist

Axl Rose - Singer Guns 'n' Roses

Rosemary Clooney – Singer

Carrie Fisher – Actress Star Wars

DMX – Rapper & Actor

Michael Slater – Cricketer

Peter Gregg – Race Car Driver

Neil Cole – Playwright

Paul Robertson – Artist (WA)

(www.pauldrobertson.com)

<u>That was then, this is now</u>

It is now 2011 and 10 years since I was diagnosed with Bipolar. I have come a long way, achieved much, experienced many new things and am relatively stable.

It took 5 years before we found the right medication combination for me to be able to function fairly well. I am on 400mg Lamictal (mood stabiliser), 600mg Effexor (anti-depressant) and 100mg Solian (anti-psychotic) per day, as well as 2000mg Flaxseed Oil tablets. Whilst I still experience side effects such as migraines if I forget to take my Solian, Metabolic Syndrome (high cholesterol), not menstruating (which I see as a plus, as all women would) and the shakes, these are side effects I can live with and the positives of the medications far out way the negatives, even if it does cost me on average $210 per month to buy them.

I still regularly experience some symptoms like pressured head (it's like wearing a swimming cap 5 sizes to small), low grade headaches, irregular sleep patterns, sound and light sensitivity, smell (olfactory) and touch (tactile) psychosis; however I seldom have full blown episodes. Full blown episodes are usually triggered by prolonged high stress situations, family or work politics, inequality, cruelty to animals, prejudice, etc.

For the most part, I have put coping strategies in place to combat the severity of my episodes and I am extremely lucky in that I have a fantastic husband and family who monitor me closely (without being suffocating or controlling) and are very supportive (it wasn't always this way). Although I hate it when I lose the ability to control my life due to my illness, I just have to keep reminding myself I do have an illness that sometimes takes away my ability to control what is happening in my life. Not that that makes it any less frustrating at the time.

I am also lucky that my work hours are flexible and I can be open and honest with my employer about my illness. The only day I must absolutely go to work, for at most 2 hours, is payday; regardless of how I feel. But there have only been 2 occasions in the past 4 ½ years that I was just not able to get out of bed and my co-workers were receptive to being paid a day late. My employer also offered to give them some money if they absolutely needed it to tide them over, to be repaid when their pays were done, which is something not a lot of employers would do.

I have always worked and find that working gives me some structure and makes me get out of bed and face the day. I'm very much a home body and without my job I would become a total recluse and close myself off from the world. I avoid places with a lot of people and tend to only socialise with small groups. I will not go to the shopping centre or in town unless I absolutely have to and usually wait until I have several things I need to do; then I get in and get out as fast as I can. I pay all my bills and do most of my shopping on line to reduce the need to expose myself to the discomfort of being in a crowd.

Mental Health advocacy, Glimpses and Minds Unleashed are my passion. I have been involved in a lot of research programs and am a registered brain donor, because if there is any way I can help increase the knowledge of how bipolar works and can be treated, I will. I have just started a dual Certificate IV course in Alcohol & Other Drugs and Mental Health and hope to secure a position in the Mental Health field in the near future. If I can make a positive difference in even one person's life, all my hard work and effort will have been worth it. There is no better person to learn about mental illness from than another mental illness sufferer, even if our symptoms are not exactly the same, it reduces the sense of isolation and helplessness.

I have found it important to my recovery to set achievable short and medium term goals as a means to maintain some semblance of motivation and drive to face each day. For a long time I could not and would not set anything over a short term goal or make commitments because I just never knew what state my health would be in and I could not cope with starting something then not being able to finish it. Because of my need to be so strictly in control of my life and surroundings, I am often referred to as a 'control freak' or 'anal retentive'. I however, do not see this as a negative, because these are good 'qualities' to have in the workplace in relation to paying attention to detail, organisation, preparation and completion of tasks. So if you are like me in this respect and are told you are a 'control freak' or 'anal retentive', be sure to say thank you!

My puppies are the other things that have a very positive affect on my moods. I can come home from work or wherever feeling yuck and the happy, tail wagging, unconditional love I am greeted with by my puppies has an immediate impact on my mood. I find sitting on the floor playing, brushing, training or cuddling them to have a wonderful relaxing and calming effect on me. I cannot imagine my life without the presence of their effervescent personalities and love.

For a long time I struggled with trying to understand what were symptoms of my illness and what was me, my personality. It was like I didn't know who I was anymore, like my life to date was a lie and I questioned everything I had done or said and was now doing or saying. I totally lost my sense of self and analysed everything, but in doing so I have learnt so much about myself and am very in tune with my mind and body; as we all know, bipolar’s symptoms can also be physical. My psychiatrist told me of all his patients I was the most knowledgeable about my illness and in tune with how it manifested in me, my only fault was that I still couldn’t accept loss of control when I had an episode.

Through this new self-awareness I became more aware of how others reacted to me, what I did and said. Whilst my experience of being open, honest and out there about having bipolar has been predominantly positive, I found that a few people changed in their perception of me. I stopped being a person with an illness and became an illness with a person attached. These people reacted to most things I said or did as being because of my illness, for example, if they said or did something that was hurtful or made me angry, they treated me as if it was my illness responding to them and not the fact that I was angry or hurt by them, with every reason to be angry or hurt. But this too I have learnt to cope with.

I have had very few experiences of stigma related incidences and if those people are not receptive to the insight I can provide them I just write them off as a lost cause. I learnt long ago through other life experiences that getting upset by others closed mindedness is futile and no longer let it fester or take it personally. Although it was a hard lesson that took a long time to learn. I think in part that I got to this point through my unerring strength, determination and belief that while I might have bipolar, I am intelligent. I do not suffer people who seem to be confused in thinking that having a mental illness makes you dumb and am very quick to point this out. Did you know that the majority of people with a mental illness have a higher than average IQ? Well I undertook a genuine IQ test and have a high IQ and am not slow in pointing that out.

Looking back I can see how far I have come and how much I have achieved in the past 10 years. Unlike many I have built a good group of support people around me, but most importantly I have the love, support and understanding of my family. Family generated stigma is the hardest stigma to deal with and overcome. I cannot imagine what it must be like and how much further impact some cultural beliefs/customs can have on this. If this is the situation you are struggling through at the moment, I encourage you to seek and build a group of support people from outside your family as a start and provide your family with as much literature and contacts as possible to help educate them about your illness. Whether it is your family or others holding you back, challenge your resulting feelings of being valueless, unworthy and second rate. As hard as it seems at the time, try to reiterate to yourself repeatedly, your positive traits, strengths, abilities, knowledge and experiences. It takes a long time and is hard work, but I am glad to say from personal experience, it is worth the effort.

Once I got past ‘what will other people think and say?’, being ashamed and embarrassed, feeling isolated, weak, a burden and unworthy, things changed dramatically. I now approach each day with confidence that I am the best person I can be, I have a lot to offer the community/world, I am intelligent and I make a difference. I wish you well on your journey.

Michael's Story

My name is Mick and this is my short story of surviving with Manic Depression.

This is an illness that I wouldn't wish on anyone, unless I was in a foul mood. Which unfortunately, is regularly, but at the same time spasmodic.

It is not easy describing this sometimes-evil merry-go-round. Most people in their lives grow up, and mature as they get older, but I have found in my life I have gone around in circles as I have gone through life. Having great goals and aspirations one day and the next day you couldn't be stuffed getting off the couch.

To get away from the doom and gloom for a while, I will quickly explain my interpretation of leaving with Manic Depression.

My symptoms of the illness are as follows. Feeling totally lethargic most of the time, never feeling rested or alive after sleep. Quick tempered, at times very quick tempered and at other times it is a case of "please leave me the f*ck alone! Or else!" Varying appetite, anxiety, and massive isolation for long periods at a time.

I grew up in an Eastern suburb of Melbourne. I was fairly good at school, but I excelled as an athlete at a young age; football in particular. Along with football, other sports occupied a lot of my time. I played with several football clubs and met a lot of people along the way. Not to mention the amount of grog that has been drunk, moving to the outer Western suburbs of Melbourne, my life changed a lot as the lifestyle was different.

By 14 years of age I was playing footy and other sports, then getting pissed on the weekends. I started working at 15, in an apprenticeship I despised. This job to me, was a great excuse for me to drink; the frustration of not being in-sync in what I was doing for 8 hours a day, was more than enough for me. Then having to train for football hours twice a week, my outlook was, I'll do this, but, if I don't win Tattslotto one day, I'm f*cked.

Since my first job at 15, I have had over 50 jobs in my 28 years of work. Throw in 30 resident shifts, 10 football clubs, a lot of grog and hooch, then it is not hard to see how life can be up, down and all around.

At age 18 I was the captain of an under 18 footy team, we had a good year and came runners up to a good side. We loved our coach and were very close as a side. Later on that year, I found out that our coach had died in bad circumstances. This affected me dramatically and as a result of binge drinking to a degree, my life spiralled into a dark state.

I began having blackouts on alcohol, leading to many incidents such as fights, major embarrassing situations involving friends, creating a feeling of paranoia, denial and regret. Soon after this period, I was loosing control of everything around me and even my mind. Towards the end, I was running on empty.

There was one day in Melbourne where I was meeting a girl from the East at Flinders Street station, she was hotter than what I had remembered when I spotted her. To cut it short, I got sidetracked walking down Flinders Street; all of a sudden I stopped, walked into a tattoo shop and got a tat that I couldn't even pay for! How stupid is that; I left this gorgeous blonde girl out the front of a tattoo parlour, in at the time a sleazy part of Flinders

Street, while dickhead here gets a tat. This is just one of a multitude of imbecilic things I've done.

I was close to my first full nervous breakdown, as they were called at the time. I can remember my parents taking me to Royal Park, a Psychiatric Hospital in Melbourne. To say I hadn't had much sleep was an understatement. I was in a total state of mania. The quacks there stuck a drip in my arm, then said to my parents "this should knock him out for 24 hours". The only problem with this, was that I was locked up in Bluela, which was the Jail section of the hospital. Eight hours later I was still awake and climbing the walls, the drugs had no affect on me at all.

It was a bit of a spin out. I can remember being given 2 hours a day outside. We had like a security guard; he was like Bruce Lee, but twice as friggin heavy. I use to play games of wit with him by continually looking for opportunities to piss off out of there. I was released after 4 days; it should have been 4 weeks.

After that, and every other hospitalisation, I rebuilt my life slowly and sometimes quickly. At present I have been hospitalised up to 10 times, the places are irrelevant, most people wouldn't know of places like Royal Park, Footscray Psych, Werribee Psychiatric Hospital and so on. These places aren't bad, but then they're not good either. The idea is to get yourself well and either pick-up where you left off or start again.

I'm not going to go over the symptoms of the illness, because I figure if anyone is interested enough to read this book, they will find literature in this area at the ready. I'm chopping and changing stories at the moment, to show you that this is how I think a lot of the time, changing moods and changing situations equals instability.

People might read this and say, yeah I've been through most of those. Ok, but try them all together and regularly, and a chemical imbalance doesn't always regulate itself. Some manic times when I was younger were great. I would liken them to being on coke and speed at the same time. Although I have only tried coke, smack and speed a couple of times.

I'm getting tired, so I'm gunna finish this; there is so much more I could write in this area. I hope that more Manic Depressives can get in contact with each other, because I feel that we are comfortable in each other's company. Stick in there manic's, we wont have to put up with sh*t forever anyway.

I hadn't intended writing anymore for my contribution to this book, but I was asked by the gutsy woman who started the support group and this book, to write some more. The following is a short story to show how a manic-depressive can plummet from working and getting by in life, to slipping into a state of madness.

I mean what a buzz, leaving your relatively normal state of mind, from a short blackout to a long one, and the long ones are very scary, with lots of withdrawal and remorse. Cop this!

When I was younger I received a payout from an accident. When given the payout for compensation, I walked across a bridge in Melbourne, where I worked as a builders labourer, straight into a Flight Centre and booked a $4200 trip around America; 21 states in 23 days, f*cken unreal! I thought I'd wanted to go to America from when I was a kid. Those American girls seemed to love Aussies, and it was a known fact at the time, and probably still is.

I can remember the last 5 or 6 weeks leading up to the trip I was working and playing footy, seeing some different women casually and generally getting through life. I had started growing a few plants out the back (marijuana) they turned out to be purple headers, this stuff was awesome. When I pulled the plants, I was told to have some boiling pots ready for the roots to sit in, shocking the plant into shooting all the resin from the plant into the head and tips of the plant.

Six weeks of smoking dope and pissing on down the footy club and pub, was not a great lead up to a hectic overseas trip. When I look back, when was I anymore organised in the past?

O the day that I left for the trip a good mate and his wife drove me to the airport. I had a few bongs about 8.30am before I got picked up and was stoned when I hopped on the plane at 10am. There was no smoking on the bird for the 14 hours to Hawaii. It was murder, but the amount of piss I drank was unreal. When we got to Waikaki and hopped off the plane, I was rooted. I had already had a mix up at L.A. Airport, which was very embarrassing.

I had a week in Hawaii, before starting the trip in New York. I had 2 grand in traveller's cheque, so I had to be a bit careful. I caught the bus to Wakaki and went to a back-packers inn, where it was $15 per night. I stayed there for a few days, even working there for a day. I woke up one morning on an uncomfortable bed with a gorgeous blonde bird from somewhere in Europe, sleeping across the room. I thought, how long has this been going on?

I went up to sunset beach with a few people this one day and got dumped body surfing. I've never been so fast in the water; I got dumped right on the shore from about 10 feet. I should have started to realise that I was fatigued to the sh*thouse, when I didn't really feel the pain from the dumping. The body was tired and starting to shut down; from here on in, the pendulum was turning.

On about the third night a couple of us were walking to see a live band, when I crossed paths with a woman I had seen previously; I put my arm around her and the next thing we were walking into the night club together. Maybe I wasn't sliding after all! Her name was Laura and one of the nicest people I have ever met. We clicked straight away and I moved into her hotel room the next night. Even though we were on the 8th floor, the sound of stereos in the back of 4-wheel drives pounded through the building. I got less and less sleep, to the point where I could have snapped at times. I somehow kept it together, a lot of that was to do with Laura. I can remember the day Laura and her 2 friends dropped me at the airport. I can remember feeling absolutely sh*tful. I kissed Laura, vowing to meet her in L.A. at the end of the trip.

I spent on day and night in New York; I checked in to a hotel in Manhattan for $80 bucks a night, it was the best I could find. I spent all day trying to sleep. No Hope! I had to be at the bus early in the morning and I was sh*tting myself that I would miss the bus; at about 8pm I said, f*ck it, had a shower and looked for a pub. I walked into this long sort of bar in this street, I didn't know where the hell I was and I had trouble remembering where my hotel was. *It gets to the stage where you almost need to leave a trail of sand to find your way back, when like this*. Some of the people in the pub were coming up to me and telling me the grouse joints to go to, but I just felt too rooted, my charm had almost disappeared.

I was standing there with a Millers in my hand, when this little Hispanic bloke came up and introduced himself. He said he had been to Melbourne on business a few times. He couldn't believe that we still punch on and don't pull out guns. It made me feel proud that here I was in New York getting told that!

I bought half a dozen of Fosters cans, got back to the hotel and opened one. I felt good, that I had got home without any bullsh*t. I took a mouthful and spat it out on the carpet; I read the can and it said "Brewed in Canada". They must all drink something else there!

I started the trip the next morning, we all boarded the bus and it took off out of the city. On the bus, left over from the last trip were two full esky's of beer and spirits. We all hopped into it, before you knew it, we were all the best of friends.

Later that night we stopped at a hotel in Maryland. I was still having trouble sleeping and still drinking piss to feel better. There was a bus trip to George Washington Memorial what a thrill! It turned out that I just missed the bus anyway.

The turning point; I was on my own trying to sleep, but it was no good. I can remember sitting outside the hotel and starting to get some strange thoughts. I started to get the hits with the other tripper. A group of us spent the night at the club; another night of poor sleep. I was running on empty.

The next day I missed another bus trip. I was by myself and I thought, I don't need this 4 grand trip, I'm going to hitch-hike to Laura's place in L.A. I got picked up and taken to Dulles Airport, where I bought a ticket to Washington for $500. Now I was loosing my mind and my money. I arranged to meet Laura at the airport. When I found her after leaving the plane, we went straight to her place. There was a chick from Hawaii staying at her place; this Sheila gave me the creeps; we had a blue the next day and she pissed off.

I'll start to wind this up, as I'm starting to get impatient with it all!

This was good, but I was starting to show another side of me to Laura. I started to get a bit nasty with Laura, verbally that is. After I got a little bit weird, she suggested that I leave; she drove me to the airport with her brother. I quickly explained to him that I was a manic-depressive. He sort of understood, but said that I had really upset hi sister and that best thing would be to leave. I had bugger all money left and needed to get home.

I thought I had organised things with my parents about getting home, but I must have just assumed it. I walked into the airport, kissed Laura and hugged her goodbye; we were both very upset at how things had turned out. I don't what happened next. I stuffed my ticket up by leaving it in my bag and sent it somewhere wrong. I was trying to explain this to the airport staff, when I accidentally walked behind a counter. Two federal police grabbed me and handcuffed me. They then dragged me around the airport floor, with a 250 pound black female cop jumping on my shins. They embarrassed me in front of at least 100 people. The police lead me out to a car at the airport. I was sh*tting myself; there were three giant cops sitting with me in the car. I quickly explained my situation; they drove me to a holding cell and put me in a lock up.

I explained that I was manic-depressive, so they drove me to the L.A. Hospital psychiatric section. The first night they strapped me to the bench, arms and legs. That is how you spend your first night when you are in a state like I was. That isn't the way you want to spend your first night in hospital; it freaked me out. After a while they let me walk the entire hospital, very generous! I met a bloke who was in the general part of the hospital, I used to go and have baked dinners in his ward. He was the son of the leader of the 'Hells Angels' in L.A., I met his old man, he looked like Santa Clause in leathers.

I rang my Oldie in Melbourne and they inturn rang Laura. Laura picked me up from the hospital and drove me to the airport. We vowed to one day see each other again. I hopped on the plane to Melbourne; I had just f*cked up what should have been the holiday of my life. It was a trip to hell and back.

This situation has happened on two other overseas trips; that's right, I've been on three!

I was ignorant, in not taking better care of myself leading up to the trip, but unfortunately you can't turn back time. My biggest battle is to never get to these drastic lows in my life again.

I have come to realise that there is no guarantee of this and I tell myself, "Do your best Micky and stay cool.

For the love of Rob

My son had to "die" to be believed or heard; to have his fight with depression acknowledged. **Does it help him now? Does it give me any comfort now?**

I first became involved with Area Mental Health approximately 10 years ago. I entered the system blind, not knowing the minefield. This was due to the case overloading, the understaffing and under funding issues. The term 'banging your head against a brick wall' certainly applied, with not even referrals to other services or sources.

I was literally feeling my way in the dark, seeking help and being turned away time and again. I entered the system as a consumer, but the reality was I needed education and advice on mental illness, and most of all support as a carer with no other support.

When does a carer become a consumer? I am a consumer because I am a carer! The problem is that 24 hours a day, 7 days a week care of a partner for over 30 years with an undiagnosed and untreated mental illness left me totally physically exhausted. The constant stress has left me with permanent damage to my heart, my mind cannot take anymore; it has entered survival mode and is shutting down.

I have been a sole parent, even though I had a partner. I have been a woman in an era that allowed women very few rights or recognition. My children and I were victims of the social system, of untreated mental illness and domestic violence; and as a mother I was an unsupported carer for my three traumatized children.

Mental illness is very much a family issue; it has a huge impact financially, physically and mentally on the family as a whole. Mental illness affects judgement, decision making and logical thought. Just how can a sufferer with these malfunctions of the mind make a sound decision about responsible action for treatment? Admitting to mental illness is opening the door to grief, to the loss of your very self; it leaves you very, very vulnerable to the stigma and often the stigma is worse within the very system in which you should feel safe. The system you look to for help for change, for a future and recovery from an illness and resolving grief for the loss of yourself.

My eldest son Rob became severely depressed when with the birth of his first and only child, his partner ended their relationship. His treatment within the system was our 911. Over a period of 12-years he sought help and support within the system and at 34 years of age he suicided on Easter Sunday 2001.

The world was outraged at America's 911, it affected so many people. Yet numerous innocent, ordinary people; people with valuable and worthwhile lives, like my son, die by their own hand every week. Why? Because mental illness doesn't buy votes! The very issues of the illness, the exhaustion of the carer, the feelings of guilt of the family and friends leaves these deaths and the affected people 'isolated'. My son and I have lost our fight for help, he is gone forever, our war with the system is over, I have failed, what more can I lose, whatever I do now, it will not bring my son back. My lack of knowledge in trying to support him, the stigma within the system and the continual closed doors were overwhelming. My son knocked on these doors, he did try, he did want to be well, he did want a life, but he became too exhausted and lost all hope. My emotions through watching my son suffer so, so much, made my help and support ineffective. He didn't choose to die, he saw it as the only respite from his pain.

Rob continually questioned: “Why, why won’t you listen? Why, why won’t you believe? Why, why do you question the truth of what you hear? Why, why must I be forced to defend the valuable, intelligent, worthwhile person I am?”

I have now been diagnosed with a “mental illness”. The throw away insult sometimes used in professional circles of a “Personality Disorder”, “Major Depression” or how about “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” are often used, with little investigation into the range of symptoms experienced. Well it is definitely POST; my son is dead! TRAUMATIC definitely, what can be more traumatic than the nightmare of the system and the preventable death of my son by suicide! The STRESS!!! Well what could be more stressful than watching your child die before your eyes of a treatable, curable illness and not be able to do anything to stop it! DISORDER; is my life in disorder? Yes, but more like shattered and although I can try and put the pieces of my life back together, they will always be pieces, nothing I or anyone can do can make them whole again. The slightest touch can shatter me once again.

I have all these labels and more applied to me by some professionals; well let me add one more. Let me, who has lived this nightmare call it “Cared Out”. I separated from my husband some years ago, but when my son died and while I was in shock and grieving, well meaning professionals without my knowledge or consent, elected me once again to be my estranged husbands’ carer. “SOMEONE has to be responsible for him!” WHAT SORT OF SYSTEM ALLOWS THIS TO HAPPEN?

I wrote to the Prime-minister regarding my son’s death and I was hot potatoed through the system. I didn’t even have the chance to voice my concerns, to challenge the truth and lies of statements made through the Coroners Court. I was notified 2 years after my son’s death that there would be no hearing. I was under the belief that the Coroner investigated preventable deaths and made recommendations to prevent further deaths by similar causes. Mental Illness is to hot an issue, it can so easily be swept under the carpet.

My son and I were further insulted by some professionals and their biased statements, protecting their professional egos and careers. Their half truths, twisting of the facts and cover ups are what keeps the system the way it is.

I recently wrote to the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament. I received a response from his ‘Campaign Office’, containing political notes of their policies on the mental health system. They are just words, not actions for change, hope and recovery.

I was recently asked to write our personal story on ***change, hope and recovery***, during Mental Health Week 2004.

I have seen some ***change***, mainly brought about by change in staffing, with some very special dedicated professional caring people entering the system, to support the too few already there, who were struggling to make a difference. I have seen some ***hope*** for carers and consumers with the role of a carer consultant being established, shamefully only part-time; well it is back to the issue of funding, not need, once again.

Recovery. I would ask that each and every person affected by mental illness, consumer, carer, health professionals, social workers, ANYONE involved, to flood your local government with your concerns, needs and respectfully DEMAND for these concerns and needs to be put before the State and Federal Government.

It is only through the voice of many that change will happen. Only then will we have a workable system to handle the real number of consumers, carers and all people affected by mental illness.

RECOVERY IS IN YOUR HANDS!

My personal change will be to be my own carer, to resign from the forced roll as carer for my estranged husband, someone who will not take responsibility for his own illness.

Hope for me personally is that I haven’t lived this nightmare for no purpose, that my son’s death was not without reason. That through our story we might encourage people to overcome their fear of stigma and speak out.

My recovery will be to regain some level of functional health to enable me to fight for change, to give hope to someone else’s child. To enable someone else’s child to recover and live a valuable, worthwhile life.

Janelle's Story

Living with bipolar yet still trying to embrace my real self.

I was diagnosed with bipolar on the 22 December 2002. I was 31 and had just arrived in Victoria after driving from Bunbury, Western Australia. As a single parent I was already receiving a government pension. I was residing in a caravan park at the time of my diagnosis and had no family or friends in Victoria aside from my soon to be husband.

The day I was diagnosed, my sons and I returned to our caravan and the play station my son had to help his hand-eye co-ordination was stolen. The first drug I was prescribed was Epilim, after taking two of these tablets I felt like I was going to do harm to myself and/or my sons. I rang the doctor straight away and told him I wasn't taking them anymore. I put the rest of the tablets in the bin and tried to give my sons a good Christmas. Strangely enough it was Christmas day when it actually sunk in what the doctor said. Needless to say I felt like a sack of sh*t. Not only with the burglary or the diagnosis, but my best friends were also battling bushfires in Canberra that came within 1 km of their homes. Wanting to be with them and not being able to made me very anxious and extremely forgetful. I should explain that I have known my best friend for 28 years and I have known her husband for 11 years, they are godparents to both my sons and I am godmother to all of their children. Thus I feel as they are family more than friends and desperately wanted to be with them at their time of need, alas finances would not even consider it at the time.

When I was diagnosed with ADHD in 1997-I thought that was pretty bad, but when I was diagnosed with bipolar I spent the next two years denying it. Now that I am trying to accept it I find myself getting very angry and frustrated at the lack of understanding and knowledge in our society. I find myself wanting to make the media and the public understand Mental Illness but I have no idea how. I find myself looking back at my life and I am now able to recognize times in my life when I was either hyper manic or when I was crashing. I know things that I can do to help my friends and family understand my ups and downs but I yearn to be able to have the ability to make non sufferers aware of the dilemmas that myself and other sufferers go through. I also know that I cannot do it on my own, and with all the education and material available I wonder why there is still such a stigma placed on mental illness.

When I tell people that I have bipolar or mental illness, I get comments like “But you seem so normal” or “Really? You look ok to me”. The problem is that Mental Illness cannot be seen. Its sort of like being told as a kid about Santa that you don’t need to see something to believe in it. How appropriate that is to mental illness. I hear quite often about celebrities who have mental illness and I feel for them, it is hard enough for me in a bad time to keep it together in front of my kids, how hard it must be for people in the public eye to keep up appearances and to perform when required.

Some of the things that I can recall that I have done in my life at high and low points are quite amusing to myself and somewhat embarrassing as well. I was quite a drinker when I was only 15 and kept drinking up until I was around 23, don’t get me wrong I still like a drink, but I have 2 or 3 glasses now instead of 2 or 3 bottles. I would drink before school and during school in year 10. I was nightclubbing at the age of 16 and although I had a lot of fun I did some very dangerous things as well. I was well known to drink as much as I could in one night, whether it was cocktails, spirits or beer. I would drink for a bet, dare or fun. I would find myself undressing in nightclubs, fighting and just getting myself into all sorts of trouble. Yet I didn’t see any of that until just recently and I just hung my head and said to myself “My god woman, you are soooo lucky to be alive”. I am sure that people I knew 15 or 20 years ago would be surprised to find out that I am still kicking and haven’t killed myself or been killed. I know I am, because I was certainly on the track to self-destruction. At least now I can recognize that behaviour and though I sometimes have those urges again, I also have the ability to stop myself from succumbing to them.

Another thing I used to do regularly was run away. I started running away from home very young at the age of 11. Anytime I thought I could get out of the house that was it, I was gone. Into my adult life, I still ran away frequently, very frequently. I found myself running away every six months, and at that time I would move house, move city or move interstate. Needless to say that this behaviour has had an effect on my children, as I would uproot them as well when we moved. I often got to the stage where I felt as if everyone would be against me if they saw that I was unable to cope with difficult situations that would arise, so instead of dealing with it I would run.

My last big move was from Bunbury to Melbourne, one day I decided I didn’t like Western Australia anymore so I told my sons we were going back east. When we got half way across the Nullarbor I found myself asking, “What the hell am I doing? I am in the middle of the desert of Australia with 2 young sons”, but I kept going.

Little did I know at that time, but in Melbourne there was a man who was gentle, caring and loving, that I would meet and whom would help me turn my life around and for that I will be eternally grateful to him. He has helped me to confront and accept my illness, he encourages me to write and to embrace my art, he cares for my children when I cant even care for myself and he keeps our house functioning. Occasionally we have disagreements, usually about seeing the doctors, yet he still persists without getting angry with me. He has even sat up through the night when I have had a bad night just to make sure I am comfortable.

What is it like to live with Bipolar?

Some day’s its not so bad, other days it is completely unbearable. For me the hardest thing is for me not to run away, especially when that's all I want to do right now. Don't get me wrong I love my partner and my children, but for the past 22 years when things got hard I ran away. And right now, accepting that I have this disorder is the hardest thing I've ever had to deal with. My partner deserves some sort of an award; he helps me out soooo much that I just can’t thank him enough. I bet you're wondering, "If she's so happy and she's got so much support, why does she want to run away?" Well, unlike the other times when I haven't wanted to return, this time I would, at least I think I would. I just wish some days that I didn't have this disorder, that I didn't go up and down like a seesaw that I was somewhat normal, but then what is normal these days?

Let me try and word it so you understand what I mean. On a really bad day I wake up wishing that I hadn't, then everything I do seems to go wrong, I might spill the milk whilst making my morning coffee and then I get aggravated and I throw the milk back in the fridge and no matter what anyone says to me during that time they will get a very rude, nasty and aggressive response. I also, quite often misunderstand what people say to me and then ask them to repeat themselves. On a daily basis, I'm sure that this aggravates my family, yet they seem to deal with it ok now. I do this only so as I don’t snap at them for something completely different to what they are actually saying. I also lose interest in doing the housework, or my hobbies and I often withdraw from society.

But I have recently been able to talk to my partner about how I get angry and because I don't want to fight or argue with him I keep it inside myself. In other relationships I would push until I pushed him over the line, not that I would aim to get hit, but just to see how far I could go. The other thing a lot of former partners have done to me is to ask about any previous violence I had been through and then use that information against me in an argument 6 - 9 months after the initial conversation. *The funny thing was I would be called a liar because I could not remember what I had said six months ago. For me I could have moved states twice in that time, so my memory is stuffed as well, I do have ADHD as well*. And my kids have ADHD so our house sometimes feels like the cha-cha at the carnival, other times it feels like the ghost train not knowing what will attack you next. But I have a great family and wonderful kids and I love them so much and am so proud of them all. (This was written during my last crash on the 10th April 2005)

How long has it taken me to accept that I have been correctly diagnosed?

Honestly, I still don't think I have, I believe that at this moment in time I have moments when I accept the bipolar and see the positives of it and embrace my creativity and know that I only have to make me happy sometimes. However, there are a lot of times when I still try to analyse every little symptom and the more I try to deny it the more I am proving to myself that the doctor may be right. All in all I now know I have bipolar and I have found a wonderful support group and am starting to accept it and deal with the symptoms much better. When I think about any predominant symptoms the more I learn and accept the further back I can remember. From the age of 11 to as recently as September 2004 I would run away, or try to. I would move house, city, and state at least every six to nine months. And every second move I made was back to Canberra because I would go down and feel unsafe and return to where I felt the safest and most welcome, my best friends' home in Canberra. They have never judged me, never turned me away and never laughed at me. And I will love them for as long as I live.

I am currently waiting to see a new psychiatrist at this moment in time, but the last time I crashed badly was on the 17th Jan 2005. My partner took me to a new doctor as we had only moved one month earlier. The doctor that I saw was absolutely fantastic and has monitored me closely since then. When I was really bad, our doctor even went to the extent of ringing us to make sure that I was ok. At the moment I am on Tegretol, a mood stabilizer, dexamphetamine for ADHD that I was diagnosed with on the 25th June 1997 and Aropax for depression and also Tamaze for insomnia. I feel as though I rattle when I walk some days, and I loathe taking tablets and have been known to refuse my medication and just stay in bed for 2 or 3 days. Though on the 14th April 2005, I believe I had a huge breakthrough, I was able to talk to my partner about how I get angry and how that makes me depressed because I know if I allow myself to get really angry I can be very abusive and sometimes violent. So my partner is going to help me get some anger management in the near future. This is the first breakthrough I have had whilst being on my medication and I feel a lot better now, a lot calmer and more able to concentrate. I also feel like I can talk to my partner about anything and he will help me to understand what I am going through and what I am putting him and the kids through too.

Hallucinations

Some of the hallucinations I have had are quite funny. I will go through and give an example of a situation that surrounds each hallucination.

Smell of onions on my hands:
Each time I have been pregnant I have had the smell of onions on my hands. This occurs about four or five times throughout the pregnancy from about the 3rd or 4th month and the longest it has occurred for it 8 days.

I got to the point in each pregnancy to stop eating onions; I wouldn't even eat anything with onions in them. Despite doing this, the smell still lingered, at least to me anyway. I would wash my hands with dish washing detergent, disinfectant, even bleach, and yet, after scrubbing them red raw and sometimes drawing blood, I could still smell the onions. I would go up to friends and shove my hands under their noses and ask them if they could smell onions. Despite them always saying no, I could still smell them, and then after a couple of days it would go away. Luckily I only experienced this one while I was pregnant with my kids.

Smelling Vomit:
I have a real phobia of vomiting and it really sucks when I am pregnant and I get morning sickness. I have only become aware of this hallucination in the last two months. It only occurs just after my menstrual cycle is finished. When I wake up some mornings as I make my coffee, I start to smell vomit. I start to think that it is on me or my clothes and I become irrational about it washing and rewashing myself and my clothes, this smell will stay with me for up to 3 hours and it is disgusting.

Feeling itchy and scratching:
Never would I be a person to ever admit to self-harm, yet when I think about it, I think maybe I do. When I get manic, and I don't get there very often, but when I do I get so much energy and so many ideas that it feels as if the energy is some how making my skin crawl. Up until recently when my partner pointed it out to me, I would never have admitted that I do self-harm. When my skin crawls I feel like I have to scratch it yet if someone points it out to me, I become more aware of it. I used to scratch myself until I drew blood, I would blame mosquito bites which sometimes they were but mostly I wouldn't even know why I was scratching and then I feel the pain when I look at what I did to myself and wonder why myself. Since my partner told me about it four months ago, I have only scratched myself twice.

Being able to conquer the world:
Even though I know this is a hallucination, I really enjoy it. Except that those around me look at me as much to say, "Oh my god, here we go again". When I started painting my entry for the mental illness awareness art competition, I started to believe that my work would be good enough to win an Archibald prize. When I was accepted onto "Who wants to be a millionaire?" in 2004, I was initially talking about winning the million dollars, let alone getting to the hot seat, which as it turned out, I only got to the top ten, but I will keep trying and one day I will get to the hot seat.
When I am in this world-conquering phase, I believe that I am it and everyone should listen to me and do as I say. My latest plight is to take on the media single handedly, which of course I know now that I can't, but I can certainly help the cause, I am helping by writing this chapter after all. So even though sometimes I try to take it all on at one time, it gives me a positive road to follow and maybe if I can help one person understand the nastiness, and indiscriminate ways of this illness maybe I can help one person accept and learn about this illness.
Some symptoms I have had for years, yet am only noticing now. Having only started to accept my illness, I am only now becoming aware of symptoms that have been there for a long, long time.

Drinking and clubbing

I am sure that many people have, as young adults, gone out drinking and nightclubbing. Though like everything else, I took it to the extreme. When I was working, I would get home at about 5 pm and start drinking at 5:05 pm. I would go out on the Friday night and crawl home on Monday morning still half drunk and somehow make it to work. Other weekends I would just have an open house where up to 50 friends would float through during the weekend. And we would all drink and do silly things. But when I went clubbing it was nothing for me to pick up a bloke go back to his place, f*ck him, and go back out, pick up again and repeat this over the weekend and if anyone tried to stop me I would downright abuse or fight him or her. Then there were the nights I would go out and strip off at the nightclubs and to me it was because I was hot, somehow I didn't understand that it wasn't all right to take your top off on the dance floor and would often be asked to leave.

Fighting and being nasty

Other nights I would go out just to cause trouble, I wouldn't drink all that much but I would want to fight and I would not go home unless I had been in at least 2 fights. I am not proud of these moments at all but it has helped me to understand why I went through a lot of domestic violent relationships as well. Believe me sometimes I gave as good as I got, but when my partner at the time started breaking bones, I started to cool off. I have recently recognized some of the feelings of rage that I used to feel and I am going to seek help through anger management.

Promiscuity

What can I say; I think I used to have a mattress strapped to my back. As I said earlier I would go out, pick up, get laid and return to the pub so I could pick up again. Then I started running away interstate and on one of these trips I met a train driver and he was very nice and I would tell him all about what I did and everything and quite often he would pick me up drunk and let me sleep it off in the drivers cabin. As we got to know each other we also had an affair. I would not think twice to give him oral sex whilst he was driving the train and occasionally I would have sex with him whilst he was driving, despite the fact that people could see what we were doing, I had no shame. I then developed some sort of a fetish for public transport, I did it on the Manly ferry in Sydney, trains in Sydney, buses and taxis in Canberra, there was no stopping me. Even when I got into relationships I would cause arguments so that I could go on the prowl. And then when it caused friction I would blame the person I was with at the time of making me do it.

I must say though, that since finding out about my disorder and having a wonderful supportive partner, I have stopped doing these dangerous things.

Being obnoxious, arrogant and ignorant

I was told in 1993 that I was the most, obnoxious, arrogant and ignorant person anyone could know. I think that was the first time I really took a good look at myself and how I treated others. And I still believe that if I am off my meds I am the most obnoxious, arrogant and ignorant person I know. I would never think about what I said when I was out, I would cause scenes in public places because I would make claims that everything I said was right, the sky is purple and the grass is blue. I would be in people's faces all the time telling them how great I was and how inefficient they were, I would interrupt all the time and have no respect for anyone. I am really glad that I am not like that anymore. I was also very loud and would often be told to lower my voice cause I was being heard in the next suburb.

Since accepting my illness, the only ignorance I have experienced is from my own mother. After sending her information on the disorder and trying to explain to her that I had crashed badly in the days before she last called, she told me that I "should be over this bipolar nonsense by now". Yet friends that I have known between 2 and 28 years have said to me to feel free to call them anytime, even if it is only to cry into the phone. And lord knows I have and true to their word, they always listen and never judge me and for that I say THANK YOU!

One thing that I have found that helps is writing and painting, I find that when I am down I can get my feelings out on the computer and though it may make no sense to anyone else, it helps me and that, at times, is all that matters. I do quite a bit of writing. I have been known to write some poetry and of course doing this chapter has also helped immensely. It would be nice if there were more places where the mentally ill could go and use their creativity when they are either up or down, it would also be nice for the government and the media to focus more on the positive side of mental illness instead of always concentrating on the bad.

For example, I was recently informed about an art competition being held during Mental Illness Awareness Week. I have been encouraged by my support worker, doctor, partner and family to enter a painting. After some deliberation I decided that, yes, I would enter the competition, luckily, at this time, I still have time to get it in.

Having only recently accepted my disorder after being in denial for 2 years, I would suggest a support group first. The amount of advice and help I get from going to the support group is invaluable. After joining a support group, if you have issues with going out in public, I know I used to, try joining a day group. I go to one that is only for the mentally ill. Through them I have found that I can do art and show it to others, because they wont laugh at it. They also have units that concentrate on improving life skills and basic skills used in office situations. We also have access to an employment course, which enables us to compile our resumes, write out applications, improve interview technique and they can also assist us if we want to return to do further education. There are also specific men’s and women’s groups where we do yoga, go shopping, go on a cruise, go on camps and they have workers on hand at all times if you just want to chat. You don’t have to be happy to go there, I have been there on many bad days and I have never been made to feel uncomfortable. The thing that I am currently doing myself, is setting realistic goals; if you want to move a mountain, aim to dig 2 feet a day.

Some coping strategies I have in place vary depending on my mood. When I am down or depressed I write or paint and start to feel better. Either that or I go out to the kids totem tennis pole and belt the life out of the ball. When I am happy I often call my friends and chat away for ages.

Ian's Story

Hey who took My Life Away?

I have been living the roll of a carer now for two and a bit years; I have a spouse and three fantastic kids [that is on a good day] but blow me, on a bad day things can be horrific. Living with someone with bi-polar, manic depression, ADHD can really take it out of you; throw in three kids aged between 4 and 15 all with at least ADHD, it's 'kick back' and let the good times roll. Hey don't get me wrong I don't begrudge playing the carer roll, but boy it would be nice to know what the hell I am doing. Most days it's like hey I can help, I am helping, then other days it more of 'gee this [that] has made it even worse'.

Imagine waking one day to be told your entire f*cking life has been taken from you! No you don't get to die, you get to live everyday as if you are in a vacuum, your thoughts don't gel, its like your living on a deserted island except you have to contend with sh*t-loads of other people. Please don't think for one minute I know what it is like to have, say 'bi-polar', god I hate that word [same as 'mental illness' it just brings up all these awful connotations]. If someone in government was diagnosed I bet there would be a nice new name for the disorder quick smart. I am only going by what has been said to me or I have read or seen of what these people actually go through each day. To me 'mental illness' is a shocking word, if you meet someone on the street and they tell you they have a mental illness, do you embrace them as a friend or do you run like blazes. [Hey run slower you won't pant so much]. I used to be like that, I came to learn of such a disorder by first falling in love and then the diagnosis came along, how do you deal with this. I didn't even know what I was dealing with! How many spouses have run when their partner is diagnosed later in life after they meet, after the kiddies arrive, when the mortgage is nearly paid off, but this is a 'piss poor approach'; as they say 'in for a penny in for a pound', or with a sufferer of bi-polar [from now on I will use 'bop' instead of bi-polar][[such a sh*tful word]] I'm beginning to think the saying should be ' in for a penny in for the roller coaster ride of you life'.

Believe it or not I actually enjoy the learning, in the beginning I would come home from work [and I'll tell you after 10/12 hours with no more than 25 minutes off during the day you come home pretty buggered, not at all receptive to bullsh*t] and you see last night dishes still on the dining table sh*t all over the place, a coupla kids that never got to school and the missus in bed still, lets just say it is not a pretty sight .I really hate to tell you this guys, but the only remedy is dig in and lend a hand. To me HELP is the only way. However you look at a sufferer of bp, help is everything. Whether it be dealing with the disorder, coping with the: 'why me's; I don't deserve this; who is to blame; the shopping; paying bills; helping with the kids; the house and on the list goes, help is what's required, not pity, no shame, just a bit of bloody understanding. It's somewhat of a shame that a human life is worth rather less than a gram of cannabis these days. It astounds me that going buy published figures a person with a mental illness is way less likely to commit an aggravated crime. Most murders are committed each year by people who are supposedly ok! At some point the mongrels in government and the media MUST be accountable for their actions, especially the media! Gotta good story; well that's all that matters! We'll get good ratings. Surely there is a nice story out there about someone with mental illness. Peoples thinking, the way they deal with someone who appears different must change and what is the best way to change a persons thinking' through the media .we all need some help.

HELP, you walk into one of those Govt. offices that hands out all the money and you see signs everywhere saying 'we care for carers' what utter codswallop a bigger load of bullsh*t I have never heard. Hey you gotta care for someone, good, then do it on two hundred a week .pay your petrol, pay this, pay that, come on you can live on pittance. I personally haven't been out anywhere in two years, just simply cannot afford it. As a carer would appreciate most of the money is purely for the family. When I first signed on in 'that' office I was told produce your birth certificate and you'll be paid immediately, beauty, need it now I had to give up the full-time job last month. I received my first pay some 18 days later [they managed to put someone else's birth certificate in MY file and then told me I didn't hand it in. I'm not saying to lie but as a carer when you fill out the forms lay it on as thick as possible. Why cant the government hire someone with 'bp' or other illnesses to work in these areas so they may have some sort of insight into the problems that people actually have. it seems to me there is so much dishonesty and ineptitude in the system even those being honest are looked at as criminals. Looking back I wish I had of told a few white lies I would be so much better off now, not that I am condoning lying to the Govt. but if you rely on them you are in for a battle. If it weren't Govt. run the liquidators would have been involved a long time ago. Somehow we need to get someone in Govt. that cares for something other than their super pay out or trying to look good on the world stage, how about helping our people first, when was the last time someone came to our aid?

It's a bit like the drug problem in Australia people are found dead in the streets every day, what do we do, we call 'em' junkies and create safe injecting rooms what about looking at the reason why our society is so messed up, fix it from the beginning not the end. Look at mental illness, how many people are diagnosed in there 30's or forty's, later on in life, unless you have an illness that shows like autism or cerebral palsy the odds are you will be pretty old before someone notices .it seems general practitioners need better training in these areas not just to dole out meds and send you on your way. We need to know we can go to a doctor and get value for money not just more pills thrown at us. It doesn't matter who you are meds are not cheap and how many sufferers out there are on the wrong meds through ineptitude or a doc simply not caring enough to find out what is actually wrong and the way to fix the problems .I am not in anyway qualified on the medical side of things but I know my spouse is on the wrong meds for her. But you try and change them. What to do, go and see a shrink that doesn't bulk bill and you are up for a lot of money, go to one that doesn't bulk bill and the wait can be eternal. Not long ago I was talking with a triage nurse [who was an excellent help] and he suggested keeping away from doc's that bulk bill because you get exactly what you pay for, the shrinks that don't bulk bill are way better, what a wonderful system, you live somewhere under the poverty line and because your finances are limited you must put up with inferior care. we are now excited about seeing a new shrink nest week but this has taken three months of knowing the meds are wrong and putting up with side effects that may not have been necessary. Do we have to wait until little jonnie w bush is diagnosed before there is a change?

I would strongly suggest that if you have just been diagnosed join a support group talk to as many suffers as you can, find out about the different meds their side effects, what they do, do they help, all these sorts of things so when you see the shrink you have some knowledge of what's going on, so when the meds are handed out you will have some idea what your in for and if they are not helping you'll be in a better position to get the meds changed. The meds are for you not the person next door they must be specific to an individuals own needs. Like would Michael Hutchens be alive today if it wasn't for Prozac? It seems funny to me that drugs that have been available for years have now been taken off the market because they seem to lead to suicide .I'd love to know what Paul Hester was put on for his depression, not just that he hung himself, but that is how terribly important getting the right meds is. Its not like we are talking you will get a tummy ache, if the meds are f*cked up there is a very real chance you will end up dead. And if you are not in the public eye basically no one will ever even notice. Parents, doctors, teachers etc need to be better trained/informed of the warning signs so help can be found much younger in life. How many young boys and girls have to throw themselves in front of a train before we really try and help?

As a carer life can occasionally a little bit stressful, you are looking after others and I find it rather difficult to look after myself, you can't do this. How, often do we put something off to care for another? Finding the time is the hardest thing, by the time the kids are dressed, in school, a little housework, look after the missus, get her up, dressed etc, make sure the meds are given on time [personally I make sure no meds can be found around the house] feeding yourself picking up kids and the day is gone [I will never make a derogatory comment about a housewife again this is a bloody hard job you need to be switched on 24 hours a day [at least] trying to give the meds consistently is also very important , the more stable the meds seems to create a more stable person , moods can swing quicker than the Melbourne weather so you have to be reliable. then there are the days when the meds are refused, getting around this can be quite difficult I find a gentle approach is needed .it can be very frustrating trying to explain the importance of the meds regularly being taken especially when someone cannot see any benefit to them .it must be horrible knowing you have to take a sh*t-load of pills for the rest of your life when you cannot see any benefit to them. when a person is up the meds are ok but when on a downer they seem totally useless .maybe this is a sign that the meds are crap and not of any benefit, time for a change of meds? if a mood stabiliser is not stabilising the moods then of what benefit is it? this is time to talk to the doctor get the meds changed ,how many people out there have different meds for the good times and the bad? its like when someone is down your left to bring yourself up . I often wonder if the meds actually help, I've seen people with' bp' that take no meds, they still have ups and downs; is there really a difference, martin plaza asked us years ago 'what are all these chemicals doing to my brain' sometimes you have to wonder!

Talking seems to be one of the biggest problems to overcome. If the person you are caring for is yet to come to terms with the illness [accepting it] they have then you're in for a bumpy ride. Instilling trust to a degree where communication is possible is a must .I found asking things like 'what's wrong 'will send you in a backwoods direction, mollycoddling can also be disastrous. find it imperative to talk in a calm even voice, not to be patronising and be honest. Yes you have bi-polar but you're not on your own. The feelings and emotions your going through are not unusual, not uncommon and as I have mentioned to the missus once or twice when she says she just wants to be 'normal', 'show me someone in this mixed up world who is normal'; look around you, you may see someone different to yourself but normal? Is it normal to blow some-ones head off to go to war, to steal to rip off your people to the extent they are dying in the streets through lack of food and hygiene. What is normal and who around you is in a position to say that your not. To me normal is being happy with what you have got and being happy with yourself. Keeping in mind you are dead for a long time, somehow we have to learn to cope. We don't know nothing when we go to school, we don't know nothing when we go to work, have children, but WE LEARN, we cope, we survive. It may be one of the most monumental challenges in life, but a sufferer of a mental illness must learn to adapt to what they have. Join a support group now! No doctor can even dream about helping you like a support group can. No drug will ever help like a support group.

If your caring for someone, getting them into a support group will open their eyes so wide and I found this helps people open up to loved ones, not to mention the benefits in lifting a persons self esteem. And to know that you're not alone with your problems seems to be an immense help.

Clare's Story

Clare's story ended on the twenty seventh of October 2000 when she made a tragic decision to end her life. There had been other attempts but always there had been someone near by to seek help. Medical help and intensive care had always brought her back to us. This time was to be different. On that day she was determined to be successful and escape the Bi-polar disorder that had made her life a shambles.

She was born the youngest of six children; She was a loved and loving child of high intelligence. With so many brothers and sisters there was always someone available to do her bidding. When she was three years old her father and I separated and we went to live in a regional city in South Australia. It was here that she went to crèche and then started school. I know that she missed her father of whom we saw very little but overall she seemed a happy child who readily made friends. Clare was six years old when we returned to Victoria to live because of the terminal illness of my father.

I can think of nothing in her primary school years that indicated anything amiss.
We took a trip to England where I worked for a year. It was probably here that her love of that country began. In later unhappier times she was to speak of the happy times she had there. After our return to Australia she started Secondary school. There were no problems in year seven but in year eight she began to change. In my ignorance I thought it was just teenage moodiness but in hindsight I should have been less complacent. She was often excitable and excited yet at other times she was lethargic and disinterested. She began to truant from school and to become quite aggressive. She would steal her sister's clothes and give them away to other people. The first of her self -harming occurred when she cut a large hole in her leg with a bottle top. I transferred her to another school in the hope of changing things but it was to no avail. At fifteen she refused to go back to school. I felt this to be a sad step as she was a very bright girl who would have been capable of achieving many things.

Clare began to work as a sales assistant. This bored her and she changed her job several times. Her nightmares had begun and they so frightened her that she began to sleep with the light on and to leave her radio playing softly all night.

Alarm bells should have begun to ring for me yet I still thought she would grow out of her aggressive behavior, her risk - taking and moodiness. I knew that my husband's mother had been in and out of mental institutions, as they were then called, and had heard stories of her contradictory actions but she had died some years before Clare was born so I made no connection. My husband had also suffered a lot of depression and had used alcohol to help him cope. I now know that this is a common coping mechanism, particularly among men.

Again we went back to England, this time for three years, to my old hometown. Clare began work and made some friends. She was more stable in her moods in that there was less aggression and paranoia but there was still some excited and risky behavior. One memorable example of this type of behavior was her overnight disappearance to London, some 200 miles away. The following evening I received a phone call from her from a small village about forty miles from home. She asked me to pick her up, as there was no transport from there. She did not ever give me any explanation as to how she got there or where she had been so the obvious conclusion is she had just gone off on a hitch- hiking spree.

In Clare's sixteenth year she had a brief affair with a man twelve years older than her and became pregnant to him. Initially she put the baby up for adoption but after he was born changed her mind and decided to keep him. The next two years were very stable years for Clare. The nightmares disappeared and although there was a little depression there were no major happenings. She was absorbed in her baby and was a very careful mother. She remained living with me and our relationship was warm and close.

Eventually we returned to Australia. Very shortly after our return she met, and later married, the man who was to be the father of her second son and her little daughter.

The depression and mood changes returned, as did the nightmares. Her behavior became unpredictable. She would go on a spending spree and use money she knew was for her bills. Clare began to be paranoid about how other people viewed her and to see hurt where none was intended or even existed. She would spend hours on the phone running up huge bills. She cut off all contact with the brother to whom she was closest, over a perceived slight. She said to me that she felt her persistent nightmare was now occurring while she was awake.

On one occasion she put the children into the car and headed off for Central Australia. There was not even a spare tyre in the car. Fortunately she did not get further than Adelaide where she had turned up at a relative's house at two o'clock in the morning. Her husband was then able to make contact with her and persuade her to return. He found that she had not being paying the rent and frantic negotiations were necessary to avoid eviction.

Now it was my turn to be cut off for an imagined slight. I received many abusive phone calls and Clare threatened to call the police if I tried to see the children or her.

Clare had been involved in a car accident shortly after we returned from England and had received some quite severe injuries. Some years later she was to receive a relatively small compensation payment for a permanent injury. On the receipt of this money she and the children disappeared. Again we discovered that she had not been paying the rent and eviction was imminent. We were eventually able to trace them to the north of England. She had simply bought tickets and traveled without luggage to England. Here she changed her name, telling the children that someone was out to get her. A few months later she was persuaded to return. She had spent the entire compensation money on fares and living expenses.

It was obvious on her return that she was now very ill. She was very thin and taking so much medication that her hands shook continually. She made the first of her suicide attempts by overdosing on medication. On her recovery she took out a restraining order against me with all sorts of fanciful accusations even though I had made no attempt to contact her. Her second brother was the next recipient of her irrational anger and was cut off from all contact with her. This period of isolation from her was very difficult for all of us as we now realised how very ill she was but were unable to help in anyway. Three more attempts at suicide followed, the last of them came very close to being fatal. She remained in a coma for four days before regaining consciousness.

By now she was being more appropriately medicated and there followed a period of relative stability. Clare began working again and was fairly content. It was not to last. Gradually the depression took such a hold on her that she had to give up work, as her attendance was unreliable.

Clare made efforts to re-establish contact with her family. First she contacted the brother closest to her and then some months later she telephoned me and said that she wanted her family back. I was so delighted as it had been nearly three years since I had been able to see her. I found that she was very ill and that the dominant emotion was now depression. Clare felt that the psychiatric support was very poor and principally consisted of a fifteen-minute consultation resulted in yet another prescription.

Not long before her death she was on six different medications. This left her lethargic and unable to express any genuine emotion. Most of her day was spent in bed and the state of the house deteriorated greatly. After her death I was to learn that if you have plenty of money you have access to some fairly successful therapies and too, hospitalisation when your condition deteriorates.

Clare had for some months been self-harming. She regularly slashed herself with knives and razors and required stitches. Although each time this occurred she attended a hospital no medical person saw fit to do more than stitch her up and send her home.

Clare’s husband James could no longer cope and went to live in a caravan park nearby, although he came to see her each day and to assist with the children.

Clare could not sleep without medication and told me she felt her nightmare was taking possession of her. One night, when a group of people was at the house, she said that she was going for a walk but in actual fact had taken an overdose of all her medication. Fortunately one of the group participants followed her and was able to call for an ambulance. The skill of the hospital staff saved her life. She was sectioned and remained in hospital in a psychiatric ward for a week. Although still not yet well she was sent home. Because all of her suicide attempts had been by overdose the medical staff decided to remove ALL her medication. This abrupt removal without any support or crisis care, I believe, was for Clare the final straw. In the last week of her life she made two unsuccessful attempts to contact support groups. One of them told her she was too aggressive in her manner for them to see her!

I visited Clare, finding her in bed curled up in the foetal position. She told me “I can’t cope. My head’s doing me in, Mum, it’s doing me in.”

On Friday the twenty-seventh Clare took her oldest boy to secondary school where he was in year seven and then drove the other two children to their primary school. At twenty past ten she called her husband at work and asked him to pick up the children after school, as she would be unable to do so. He asked her where she was going and she replied that she wasn’t going anywhere but would not be able to collect them. She told him that she loved him. They were to be the last words she was to speak to anyone.

When he returned to the house she was not there. Later that night she was found dead in her car on an unmade road not far from her home. She had made the final decision.

Since her death we have tried to learn as much as possible about Bi-polar Disorder and we are aware that the disease can largely be managed by appropriate care and support. It is apparent however that there are inadequate crisis care places and that good psychiatric care requires one to have plenty of money. I believe, as does Clare’s husband that if Clare could have had access to these facilities she would still be here with us.

Andrew's Story

PREAMBLE

Although my real name is not Andrew, I have chosen this alias to protect my real identity, as this story contains some very descriptive accounts of my experience with Bipolar disorder. This sickness has led me to some close encounters with suicide. I wish to protect my family and loved ones from the sigma that still remains even in these enlightened times. In this story, I have tried to capture some descriptive accounts of my depressive and manic behaviour that took me on more than one occasion, to the edge of suicide. There are some factors and events in my experience that I have chosen to omit, as they still today, remain painful to both me and my family. I see little value in regurgitating such details for all and sundry to read about. The chronology of this story begins at a time where I can't specifically recall. Upon reflection, depression had been a factor in my life for so much longer than I had initially realized, perhaps several years in various episodes and intensity. I do know however, that it became starkly apparent during the year of 2001, where my condition and state of mental health had begun to seriously deteriorate. This account of my experience is factual, and absent of theatrical embellishment. This story is not a fiction, it is real, and it happened to me, these events are to the best of my recollection. Far too often, experiences like mine happen to other people as well. To those of you who have had a similar experience, you may read of some similarities in your own feelings and occurrences in your own life.

PART ONE - ALL ABOUT ME

As a child, I spent a number of years as an outpatient at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne resulting from some apparent behavioural anomalies. To date, I am still not fully clear as to what those behavioural issues were. In those days, it was uncommon for parents to discuss such matters with children, so many decades passed before I was to discover the truth about my illness back in that period. While at the R.C.H, I was under the care of a child Psychiatrist tried to make a clinical diagnosis and provide appropriate medical/psychiatric treatment for my apparent condition. There have been many unanswered questions from this period, and although not obsessed, a curiosity about that period had hounded me throughout my adult life. I had been vaguely aware of my behaviours, but many gaps in the Doctor's analysis remained unclear to me. My mother shared my curiosity, but like myself, had never been provided with any conclusive diagnosis or conclusions. While I was a child, it was my father that facilitated my visits to R.C.H, and as typical of that period, did not share much information with my mother either, as in his mind; he was protecting us from the uncertainty and misunderstanding of what was happening with his son. He shielded my mother and me from the truth with all the best of intentions, and I can only assume he planned to keep a watchful eye on me as I developed into adulthood. This plan never fully came to fruition, as my father died when I was 19, so the mystery of my apparent illness back then remained intact. In recent months, I have attained under the freedom of information legislation, all remaining medical files from the R.C.H on my condition back in the mid seventies. Although the documentation was limited, it did confirm an interesting entry notated by the R.C.H Psychiatrist. It said "I predict manic depressive disorder in adulthood" (manic depressive disorder is what Bipolar used to be called several years ago). This observation was made when I was 12 years old. Although this is retrospective information after I had been diagnosed with the condition in adulthood, it's interesting to note that the signs were evident as a child before it became brutally obvious in more recent years. It sets the course for the events that would unfold in later life.

I am now in my early to mid forties; I have lived a stable life in a typical middle class socio economic environment. I grew up in a loving and caring family with a mum and dad, an older brother and a younger sister. I am now married with 3 school age kids, and I hold down a secure semi professional job with a large organization, and I have the potential for promising career opportunities should I seek to peruse that avenue. I get paid a comfortable salary, and as such, my family and I have financial security. I drive a flash new car, and have a nice home in a nice suburb. I have a good circle of friends, who know me as a person who cares, and I have been told that I am a steadying influence in times of crisis. I'm someone that people turn to and confide in during times of trouble and uncertainty in their own lives, for they seek my thoughts, perspectives and guidance. I'm a sociable person with a capricious and sometime bizarre sense of humour, and I make people laugh with my quick wit. I'm a deep thinker, university educated, and I sometimes posses an uncanny sense of wisdom in times where the waters are muddy. On the face of all this self-praise, I appear as a person who has it all. I am essentially a happy and well-balanced individual, with a clear direction for my life. I have a sense of priority that involves the people and things that I love, and I build my life around those values. My goal is to be happy, healthy and in control of my life and to contribute the same to those that I love. An integral part of that happiness equation entails the happiness of my family and the other special people in my life. This is my purpose and my philosophy, and it's my personal value system. In spite of all of this stability, things are not always as they appear on the outside.

PART 2 - BIPOLAR DEPRESSION & MY SELF IMPOSED STIGMA

This story, describes something quite different from the perception I portray outwardly, it's a story of mental pain and destructive behaviour that was to emerge in my life as I approached the last few years. Although much of this anecdote speaks of some euphoric, grandiose, albeit muddled thoughts racing around in my mind, it is also mixed with, and all too often, episodes of the blackest and most ghastly life threatening depression imaginable. In previous years before this monster consumed me, I had never contemplated the notion of suicide. I had never understood the thoughts that must gather in the minds of those that have taken their own lives, but now, only after I have been on the doorstep of self inflicted death, do I understand the horrors in the mind of those who needlessly die at their own hands.

I suffer from Bipolar Disorder, but I was originally diagnosed as having clinical depression a few years back before the symptoms of hypomania also became apparent. I recall a feeling of deep sadness emerging a few years back, it felt like something was desperately wrong, but I just didn't know what it was, I can't quite describe it, but it felt terrible and became progressively worse. During this period, (in the last 3 years or so), I had begun on occasions, to withdraw from my family, and avoiding people who may have challenge me about "everything being OK". I began to blame my feelings of sadness and unhappiness upon my job, my marriage and my family. At this time, I was in a job that required me to do a lot of interaction with people; these negotiating and problem solving skills began to diminish. The demands upon me in that job were rigorous and often stressful, so I thought to myself that maybe that's what the problem was. The irony here, is that I have previously thrived on stress, and enjoyed the minute to minute, day to day challenges of work, and always coped well, but this all seemed to have changed, I was baffled why this had suddenly altered. There seemed to be a particular cycle emerging within a given day. I would usually wake quite early, several hours before the alarm clock was due to go off to kick start me into my daily routine. This was strangely uncharacteristic of me, as I had always been a solid sleeper. The early waking was in itself not so much the problem, but it was more the desperate feelings of sadness and total despair. A feeling of uselessness, being unworthy as a husband, parent, and an employee. This sometimes caused me to silently sob in my pillow in the small hours of the night, but doing it quietly so as to not alert my wife who was slumbering beside me in our bed. This feeling continued on and off, for a number of weeks, sometimes in blocks of time over months on end. I often felt like I could no longer cope, I just wanted to curl up in a dark place all day and interact with nobody.

Alas, I had a job to do, and a family to support, so in the midst of all this, I continued on with regular life, portraying an outward persona that all was just “fine and dandy” in the life of Andrew. This outward portrayal became a carefully planned strategy to fend off any probing questions by those perceptive people who had the compassion and courage to confront me regarding my state of well-being. I was infinitely fearful that someone might see through a chink in my armour that protected me from others discovering the blackening torment in my mind. There was one particular individual (his name is Colin); who I had some occasional interactions with by virtue of my job, as well as having known him in other roles with the company we work for over several years. He confronted me one day in his easy going, but typical manner; he told me straight out, that he “knew something was wrong with me”. He told me he could read it in my body language and insisted he was going to keep an eye out for me, and he did, (and still does to this day). I felt threatened by this person, and over the ensuing months, I made a conscious effort to avoid him, as I had been obviously “busted”. He must have been a movie director in a previous life, because he was the only person who saw through my carefully rehearsed acting skills. Perhaps however, others also saw it, but this man was the only person who had the courage to step out of the comfort zone and confront me. He did this only with my best interest at heart, he was purely motivated by a genuine concern for me, and it was that factor alone that drove him to affront me. I still recall feeling almost panicked by his knowing glare, his perceptive insight into my muddled head, although I don't think he knew how severe it actually was at the time. This person was later to become one of those people in my life that I would lean very heavily upon, and he remains today, a person and a friend who I hold in the highest esteem, and regard him with respect for his compassionate wisdom and insight into the condition I suffer today. He was later to be instrumental in helping me discard the stigma of mental illness, much of that stigma was self imposed, but be he played a major role in reconciling my thoughts about my mental condition, and how to deal with other people’s misconceptions.

I had become a second rate actor, and a master of hiding the secret disturbance that had been raging in my thoughts. I often used to talk to myself under the shower in the mornings in anticipation of questions people may fire at me during the day about my inadequacy, and its manifestation in the way I behaved. I would stand there muttering and sobbing until the water went cold and my eyes red from sobbing, as I was rehearsing my lines. I wanted to ensure I had a pre planned response to any of those questions that I may be faced with at any given time. I had a whole series of excuses as to why I had lost so much weight, “It must be all the healthy living”, I would reply with a forced smile and a rehearsed laugh. I even went to the extent to share ridiculous and eccentric stories of nonsensical things I had done in my life, just to entertain and play the clown, and to reassure those around me that I was doing all right. Occasionally, as the day wore on, my mind eased, and the storm subsided, but sometimes it didn’t. I concluded from this, that I must have hated my job, but during those periods, I hated pretty much everything, mainly myself. I began to hate going to bed at night, as I knew what was awaiting me when I woke. It’s a strange situation that we usually desire to wake from a nightmare to gain relief from the terror, but in my life, it was waking from the relief of sleep, into the nightmare of being awake and facing the reality of my secret anguish once again.

I can recall one particular morning, I was driving to work and upon arrival, I got as far as the entrance to the plant, only to surrender to the impulse that I could no longer do this. I could not face another day interacting with people, my acting skills had become tarnished and worn and so I needed some time to reinvigorate them. I remember driving past my work telling myself I just need some “time out”, and as such, headed back toward my home. After about one kilometre, my memory went blank. I have no recollection of the journey, but found myself a couple of hour's later, sitting in my car on the foreshore of Apollo Bay in a sobbing and blubbering uncontrollable mess. At first, I had no idea where I was, nor how I got there, but this was the first apparent sign to me that not all was well in my mind. I had not yet acknowledged nor recognized this as a clinical condition. I didn’t know at the time I had the symptoms of depression, I couldn’t associate a name for it in my own mindfulness, I only knew that whatever this was, it was a ghastly feeling. I remember I so desperately wanted to reach out to someone, to tell someone of how I was feeling, but my feelings of inadequacy had stopped me. What would people think of me if I made some bold confession that my mind is a jumbled mess of sadness, despair, and a diminishing will to live? I had no idea what had caused all of this. I had everything to live for, my wife, children, extended family, friends, my job, etc., I had it all, and so what on earth has triggered this feeling that had begun to erode the person I had once been. When I finally contained my emotions, I drove home to find my wife whom I poured out my heart to. She had expressed to me that she thought things were wrong, but assumed it may have been the pressure and long hours of work. In her typical fashion, she had nothing but total empathy and support, and suggested I see our local Doctor to get some medical treatment, and so she made an appointment for me for the following Monday. By the time that week had ended, and Monday had rolled around, I was feeling a sense of relief, so I decided to forego the Doctor’s appointment and return to work. The symptoms had eased slightly, but the next few months still held periods of deep depression, but in varying intensity. They were waves that came and went, and my acting skills were now very much under control, even if the depression wasn’t. It was far from under control, it became a spiralling slide into a black hole where there seemed to be no escape.

A number of months went by, and my waves of depression came and went in bursts, each episode comprising a daily cycle that usually followed a particular pattern of horrendous beginnings, and often easing as the afternoon progressed, (although never completely leaving me, it just improved from ghastly and unbearable, to a feeling of darkness and despair). There were many days, increasing in frequency, where the mood didn’t lift at all. On these occasions, I felt it almost impossible to interact with my family and often disconnected myself from them on weekends and when I got home from work in the evening. My wife had become like a single mother where her and the kids did things together, minus my participation as I had become notably withdrawn from them. I had begun to lose interest in other things I previously enjoyed. I found myself silent and unenthusiastic at the football with mate Ed, where this had previously been a great outlet, and a day filled with passion and laughter, but it had all changed. Ed noticed I was different and asked if everything was alright. I felt like telling him to get f*cked, but I didn’t because I couldn’t be bothered. I had enjoyed playing squash and probably spent more time laughing at my own skill shortcoming than I did actually trying to hit the ball. In the end, I stopped playing completely; I just couldn’t be bothered anymore. The humour that Taryn (my squash buddy), and I shared seemed to have gone. I’m sure she wondered what was up with me, I sense she wanted to ask, but wasn’t sure how. I was sinking, but it was so subtle yet so profound, I didn’t realize how serious it was becoming. I’ve always described it as a storm that creeps up out of nowhere; before I knew it the black clouds surrounded me with no blue sky in sight.

A few months after the episode where I finished up in Apollo Bay, I had changed jobs. Although still within the same company, I was now in a different role, and in a different department. I had nominated myself for this position as a means of escaping my existing role, because I thought at that time, my job was the major cause of my misery. I was later to discover that was not the case, I now feel that it is largely caused by biological factors, more than a reaction to environmental situation like stress. My depression continued to grow to the point where I saw no solution to the predicament, so I began to entertain the idea of suicide, usually in the early hours of the morning when I felt at my worse and on those days where things didn't improve as the day went on. In the midst of this, I dared not to share these thoughts with anyone fearing the stigma relating to my self-perceived inability to cope, making me feel worthless as a person. Suicidal pensiveness began with a passing thought from time to time, but rapidly grew from a concept, to something far more serious. As this condition deteriorated over time, death had now become more than a notion, but a serious contender on the list of options to end my torment. The evolution from abstraction to being a highly conceivable outcome moved quickly, but I don't recall a long period of consideration. I don't specifically remember when it began, but I do remember it becoming apparent to me that suicide was very much on my mind and often in the midst of my thoughts in the later stages; it had become almost an obsession.

PART 3 - A JOURNEY TOWARD A DEATHLY RELIEF

I thought in depth about the impact and aftermath of my passing. I thought of the grief it would cause my immediate and extended family, my friends, neighbours, and workmates. I thought long and hard about the effect it would have on my three beautiful children, and my infinitely supportive wife of so many years. I pondered upon my kids returning to school a few days following my funeral, and my family, sitting around the dinner table in the evenings, minus a place usually set for me. I pondered upon how my kids will be growing up without their dad, and how my middle child, a daughter, would cope not being able to cuddle up to me on the sofa when I got home from work each night as she usually does while we watch television together. I contemplated how my oldest daughter would cope not having me around to share our common and sometimes bizarre sense of humour. I wouldn't be able to talk to her about things that trouble her, for we have forged amazing father/daughter closeness. I am her mentor, and someone she can lean on when she is moody and uncertain about things. I also thought about my youngest child, a boy, who would not have his dad to wrestle with on the lounge room floor, with his screams of laughter echoing through the house when my hand becomes “the claw”, and attacks his rib cage in a fun filled and loving interlude with my beautiful boy. He would miss out on our occasional visits to a local coastal spot to search for sand crabs as we had sometimes done together, just the two “blokes” in the family hanging out together. I pictured what life would be like for my wife having to raise those children on her own and not having me there to support her and being someone to help, respect, and love her in our jointly committed endeavour to be the best parents we can possibly be. My family needed me, not just the memory of me, but they need me in person every single day, they crave to have me “on tap”, but at that time in my life, I could not see that as a priority through the blackness of depression. I had everything to live for, yet I had nothing to live for, although my life had been filled with priceless treasures, depression “doesn't give a f*ck” for these things. Regardless of these wonderful riches in my life, I still wanted to die. The notions to instigate my death matched the frazzled thoughts that had invaded my mind. I had explored options such as hanging myself, ramming my car at high speed into large trees, or perhaps finding some sort of toxic substance that would quickly result in death.

During this period, my job entailed travelling from Geelong to Melbourne almost on a daily basis and as such, provided me with ample opportunity to consider my mode of suicide. As there had been some significant road upgrades on the main highway at the time, I opted to travel back to Geelong via Bacchus Marsh so as to avoid the lengthy speed restrictions imposed on the conventional route. It was also a reconnaissance mission as I wanted to survey the practical aspects to executing my death, and so on one of my journey's back from Melbourne, I took a short drive off the main road from Bacchus Marsh to Geelong, to find a suitable tree that was out of the main view of traffic. I found one, and it was on a gravel road overlooking a quarry of some sort, but far enough out of view not to be spotted by anyone unless another vehicle happened to come along that same road. This tree had a decent size branch that would take the weight and impact of my body weight, but it meant I would need to stand on the roof of my car to allow sufficient freefall. I didn't care for what happened after that, I was beyond worrying about the trauma it would cause the next person who would drive down that road and find my hanging lifeless body. I had a suitable length of rope in my garage at home, so I checked it that night to make sure it would be long enough and strong enough to take my body weight.

The following Tuesday, I awoke to the decision that today was going to be the day. This was the last time I would awake, and the last time I would walk out my front door in the morning. I would never return home from work to my family as I had done for many years. Today was the day I would die, but the irony in this decision bought about a special feeling, one I had not experienced before since my depression had emerged. I felt an easing, and a lifting of my depression because in my mind, I had arrived at a solution to end this torture. It's quite ironic that my decision to die offered a long awaited solution, so a feeling of relief emerged that this pain was to end once and for all. I showered, went downstairs to have my morning coffee, gathered my things for work, and walked back upstairs to view my children asleep in their beds for the final time, and to say goodbye to my wife. She thought it was just a regular goodbye as I did each morning, but her context was all wrong. It was actually a goodbye forever, but she knew nothing of my plans to die that day. She would discover that reality later in the day when the police arrived at our door to inform her that I had committed suicide.

Later that day, I was in a series of meetings with the people I interacted with in the Melbourne plant. My role at that time entailed understanding some of the technical and engineering aspects of a major program the company had been in the midst of at the time, and to translate problems into specific actions in the Geelong plant to devise solutions. During this day I had become particularly diligent in spite of my plans to die later that afternoon. I discussed some difficult high priority problems with the engineering fraternity, and was feverishly taking notes on their problems while making outlandish but unrealistic commitments to have those problems resolved. I specifically went out of my way to interact with those people that had the most difficult problems to resolve, and falsely portrayed a passionate and enthusiastic desire to get these things fixed. I was filled with grandiose but fictitious commitments, I'm sure they must have thought I was just really motivated to get the job done, I'm sure they were impressed with my energy and keenness to make a significant impact on some problematic issues.

Despite all of the energy and enthusiasm I displayed on this day, there was a lurking factor behind this highly overt behaviour. I actually had no intentions of following up these issues. I was merely playing games with these people, for I continued to look at my wristwatch that day, calculating in my mind how many hours I had to live. They had no idea as they discussed problems with me, that in a few hours, I would be dead, (even though I knew it myself), so I decided to have a bit of fun with it all. As I walked back to my car that afternoon, armed with countless notes and fictitious action plans, I found myself laughing about the whole situation. I thought it so funny that I had behaved in such a way, but only to pour cold water on their expectations when they discovered that I had suicided only hours after our discussions, and our well mapped out solutions to these problems, was purely a game I played with them. I had never been serious about my commitments to follow through; I was only humouring myself one last time before I died. It was an abnormal feeling to get into my car that afternoon with the intention of going to my predetermined place of death, almost counting down the minutes in my mind how much longer I had to live. I think I must have broken just about every road rule that day with my excessive speed along a busy suburban road, and then my uncharacteristic speed and radical lane changes on the main arterial road that leads to the turnoff toward the Bacchus Marsh area. I desperately wanted to arrive at my destination, climb upon the roof of my car parked beside my tree of mercy that I had picked out, armed with my trusty rope, and hang myself.

For some time, the exact duration I can't recall, I stood on the roof of my silver coloured Ford Escape, with one end of the rope around the branch, and the other end around my neck. Time at this stage had become indistinctive as I made some final reflections upon my children, my wife, and extended family. I can recall thinking about the happy times we had together, the emotions I experienced when my kids were born, childhood memories with my mum, dad, brother and sister, and the impact this action I was about to take would have on those people in my life. I recalled the exhilaration and euphoria when my first daughter was born and laid on my wife's tummy all wet and gooey, crying her lungs out as new born babies do, and myself in a sobbing outburst of emotion that was driven by the amazing joy of becoming a parent for the first time. I told my wife through my tears the she is my hero for what she just achieved. She was later to become my hero again, but for so many different reasons. I imagined the phases this tiny child would go through in her life, the stages she would pass through and with me being there as her dad to experience all of that, and feel a sense of joy in watching her grow up and develop. The notion that one day, I would one day change her life forever with jagged scares of pain by ending my own life, but this had never occurred to me at that time of her birth. I also pondered upon that special and significant time in my life where due to unforeseen circumstances, I would be to play midwife to my other daughter at the time of her birth on the floor of our ensuite at home. Her tiny newborn body was wrapped in a towel to keep her warm while we waited for the ambulance to arrive. My wife and I sat there on the floor leaning against the wall with my arm around my wife's shoulder as we looked in wonder at this miracle birth as we held our brand new little girl in our arms. It was a feeling of amazing peace, both of us shell shocked by the rapid birth of this beautiful little girl that would as she grew older, snuggle up to me every night when I got home from work. And there were memories of my little boy, and how I cut his chord when he was born in the same room, and in the same hospital as his oldest sister. As he cried, I commented on the shape of his mouth, it was a beautiful shape as he cried, and he still has it today. I still see features in my children today that I noticed when they were new born babies, and those features make me smile and bring so much joy to me when I reflect upon their entrance to the world, but this joy was not enough to neutralize the devastation of depression, and my desire to end my life. There were many things about my family I reflected on while I stood there, but I wanted one last escape from my torment before I jumped.

I didn't notice the white coloured four wheel drive vehicle pull up on the opposite side of the gravel track I was parked on, and the single occupant, a male aged maybe in his mid to early thirties get out and approach me standing on my car. I can't recall the exact conversation we had, but it was something to the effect that "it looks like you have a few things on your mind there matey". He was extremely calm, and not in the least bit confrontational in the face of what was my obvious intention. "How about you have a chat with me about it, and we'll see if I can help you sort a few of those problems out". I replied something to the effect that we all need to die sometime, so I guess now is as good a time as any. He kept asking me why I hadn't jumped yet, "what's been stopping you?" he just kept going back to that question until I gave him a reply about having some final memories of my family. Then he just focused in on my family and asked me all about my kids, he asked me their names and how I reckon they will cope with this. He knew that was my weakness, he knew if that factor became the core focus, he would stand a chance of getting me down off the car, minus the rope, and he succeeded. This man was a Good Samaritan and he came along at the right time, I think destiny played a hand in my survival on that day. I'm not a religious person, but if there are any such things as angels, this man was one of them. Perhaps he was sent to me from a higher authority to save me, perhaps not. Maybe it was pure fate that he arrived when he did, I was within seconds of dying, and he stopped me. My specific memories of what transpired after that remains unclear today, other than as I drove back to my home in Geelong He followed me in his car the whole way back. When I pulled into my driveway, he did a "U" turn in the court where I live, gave me a toot of the horn, and a "thumbs up"... and then he drove off. I went inside the house, and pretended nothing had happened. I went to bed early that night.

On the Tuesday of the following week, I was required for another meeting in Melbourne plant, and as was now the norm, I woke to face the usual nightmare of depression in the early hours of the morning. I was still somewhat traumatized by the events of the previous week, and the horror of my close encounter with suicide and its almost horrendous effect on my family had I succeeded. A death in the family is hurtful enough, but for that death to be self inflicted increases the horror many times over, so I had a change of plan about how I were to die. I decided that instead of hanging, I would make it appear as a road accident by "apparently" falling asleep at the wheel of the car. I would slam into a tree at very high speed, and of course, I must have forgotten to fasten my seatbelt that day. This all had to be done out of sight of any other motorist either behind me, or approaching from the opposite direction, as the police would obviously question any witnesses. I knew, of a long row of large trees on the side of the road on the approach to the town from the Melbourne side. I had noticed this in my past entrances to town on previous journeys home via this route, so it seemed like a logical location to stage my mysterious but fatal car accident. Like the previous day, I left the Melbourne plant bound for Geelong, but in a similar frame of mind, I planned not to return home, but to end my life in this mode, thus mitigating the emotional trauma on those I left behind, by removing the stigma component to my death., as suicide would not be an apparent cause of my demise. I recall taking the exit ramp from the main highway onto the road that lead into town, and while doing so, surveying my rear vision mirror for vehicles behind me, and for those approaching from the opposite direction. I could see myself approaching the row of trees, and as such, removed my seat belt so that upon impact, my body would be thrown perhaps through the windscreen of the car, or at the very least causing such grave injuries, it would surely result in my eventual death. But for this to happen, I would need to be travelling at very high speed, and collide with one of the trees directly without any braking. I was continually frustrated by the occasional flow of vehicles coming the other way, or alternatively, travelling behind me. At one point, I pulled over to allow a car behind me to pass, and then waited for another I saw in the distant in my rear vision mirror to pass by me also, before continuing my quest. I rounded several bends in the road at a somewhat high speed, in readiness to make that drastic swerve off the road when the coast was clear, and I was out of view of anyone.

With each bend I took, there was another vehicle in the distance heading in the opposite direction to me who would surely have seen me make a deliberate approach at one of these trees. Eventually, I had travelled too far, and the generous menu of trees had diminished as I approached the proximity of the town itself, so this ploy of mine was too risky to do without being detected my motivation being obvious. Having been still intent on carrying out this deceptive plot of mine, I made a “U” turn and drove back to the spot where that road met with the main highway, and doubled back again to make a second approach along the tree infested road, with the hope that this time I could do it without another vehicle in sight. This plot had now become a frenzy of watching for vehicles at my rear, and those coming toward me; each time one went past, another would appear in my rear view mirror. At the same time, I had to keep a watchful eye on the speedometer of my car to ensure I was travelling fast enough to result in my mutilation upon impact. I have little recollection of events after this second failed attempt, other that screaming at the top of my voice in shear frustration the words “f*ck f*ck f*ck f*ck f*ck, continuously and in several bouts each lasting many minutes, as I drove back to Geelong. I had failed once again to end my torment. My voice was croaky when arrived to pick up my daughters from girl guides later that evening, but by this time, I had contained my emotions, and replaced the mask I usually wore to conceal what was really going on in my irrational and twisted mind. That evening, I went to bed early again, and sobbed silently in my pillow, I felt like a failure because I was still alive.

PART 4 - MY BOLD CONFESSION AND PERSONAL REALISATION

A week had gone by and the desire to die hadn’t really diminished, but the depression had become increasingly more difficult to conceal. My nonsensical banter had sometimes become unintelligible at times, and increasingly preposterous to the level where it had begun to defeat the purpose for which it was intended, because of the attention it attracted to me. I think I behaved like this as a decoy to distract people from scrutinizing me; and my state of mental health. Although I laugh about it still today, as I certainly did back then as well, I adopted an affectionate nickname given to me by my peers at work as the Chimp, because of my screams of laughter at the most trivial things. It would be heard from quite some distance in the department where I worked at the time. It seems ironic that in the midst of my depression, I was also more often than not, overcome with the loud laughter about some very trivial events.

So this morning required me to be in an 8:00 am daily meeting in Geelong. I had a role in this meeting to report out on various issues that fell within my area of responsibility. After this, I was to go to the Melbourne plant to participate in a similar forum. Following this meeting, I walked back through the factory to my office, but I gave thought to not going back to the office at all. The rope I had used the week earlier, remained in the back of my car, and it would be convenient for me to drive off right there and then to Bacchus Marsh. I was feeling terrible on this morning in spite of my raucous laughter and “chimp like” screams of humorous laughter. As I walked through the plant, a few people said hello to me, I uncharacteristically ignored them as I walk in a dazed state toward the exit door. The sight of my car parked near the area I worked, was like a bittersweet object. I saw it in the distance as I approached that location, not knowing weather to get in it and drive off, or to bypass it and seek some help from somebody, but I didn’t know who. This is as I recall my first glimpse in this entire storm, my first acknowledgment, that something was desperately wrong with me. I had a small moment of rational thought, it was like a brief glimpse of reality that overtook the muddled thoughts of suicidal depression. I said to myself. “What the f*ck are you doing, this is bullsh*t”, in acknowledgment of my destructive plans. For the first time since all this began, I realized that I was unwell, but didn’t know what to do about it, or who to turn to, or what to say to them if I did turn to someone. I was faced with two choices, either get in my car and drive to a place where I could die, or take the more courageous step and raise my hand for help, but my mind was confused and indecisive, so I needed time out to think. Having returned to my office, I removed my “little boy’s jacket”, (that's a term given to the standard issue jackets we wore at my work, that a friend would humorously call it). I decided that what I needed at that time was to go for a short walk away from my work, just to clear my head and form a plan for my next move. I decided to go on foot as I knew the likely outcome had I chose to take my vehicle, and as such, left it parked in the spot where I parked inside the plant each day. As I walked out of the door of the area where I worked, I said to a couple of the guys I worked with, in as much controlled fashion as I could muster, that I’ll be back later, “shouldn’t be too long”. I was very wrong, for it would be several months from that time that I would eventually return to work. This process marked the ending of my acting, and the beginning of an acknowledgment to myself and those around me that I was unwell.

I stepped out of the office and walked out of the main gate of the plant, which was just adjacent to the area where I worked, and where my car was parked. I had no idea what direction I would walk, or where I would walk to, but all I knew at this time was that I desperately needed some think time away from the distractions of the rigors of my job. I also found within myself, a sense of relief that I had chosen not to take my car; this was a time to reflect upon taking a step forward, rather than being confronted with the option of driving to a secluded place where the outcome of this escape had the potential to be disastrous. It had also become apparent to me that I was in no fit state to drive, I felt sedated and light headed by this drastic realization of the trauma in my life I had only minutes earlier become to finally acknowledge to myself. The plant where I work is located on a busy multi lane split highway and as such, took me a number of minutes to find a break in the heavy traffic to cross the road toward some parkland that I’d spotted, and saw that as a quiet place to sit for a little while on my own and think about options for seeking help. I recall entering that parkland area once I had crossed the busy highway, and the last thing I remember is seeking out a lonely place to sit, sob, and think, but from that point, everything went blank and I still today, have no memory of what transpired in the ensuing hours from that moment. I have no recollection of where I walked, what I did what I said to anyone, if anything at all, for I had gone into total shutdown mode once again A few hours later, I found myself sitting on the steps of a well known seafood restaurant in town which is located by the waterfront in Geelong. I have don't know what route I took to get There, but I was sitting with my head buried in my hands sobbing and openly wailing in total depressive despair. I can only begin to imagine the glares and attention I must have attracted by passers by to see a grown man sitting there in a blubbering emotional mess, for how long, I have no idea as I can’t recall. When I contained my emotions, I decided to call my wife; it was time to come clean with her about my state of mental health, although she had suspected for some time that not all was well with me. To act at work is one thing, but to continue that facade 24/7 becomes quite a challenge, even for the most accomplished actor. When she answered the phone I just said in a blubbering mess, “It’s me, I don't know what’s happened to me, I don't know what’s wrong with me, but I need you to come and get me. I need help”. I gave her instructions at to where I was located, and as such, sat in that place and waited for her green car to arrive at the traffic lights adjacent to where I was sitting and waiting. Not long after, she was there and I got into the passenger side and cried like a baby was out in the open with how I had been feeling. We pulled off into a small parking area next to where I had been sitting, and I told her in very broad terms (without too much detail at this stage), that I had become suicidal, and had been feeling so low, for so long, and I just couldn’t take this anymore. She immediately took her mobile phone and called our family doctor and explained the situation, he in turn instructed us to go directly to the psychiatric unit of the Geelong Hospital (Swanston Centre), where I could seek some specialist psychiatric assessment and immediate containment of the crisis. This became the beginning of the path back to good health, and the long road to recovery.

We arrived at the TRIAG unit at the psychiatric ward, and within a few minutes I found myself with my wife, in consultation with a psychiatric nurse who had been questioning me about the events leading up to where my health was at that time. She expressed her grave concern for me and indicated that I was suffering serious depression, (which had subsequently been re diagnosed as bipolar), and that I should consider being admitted to hospital until I had become stabilized, and the immediate risk of suicide had subsided. At that time, a consulting Psychiatrist who does work for this area of the hospital, happened to be onsite, and as such, they located him to come and talk to me for further assessment from a medical perspective. As I described my suicide plans to both the nurse and the Psychiatrist, I was wary of the emotional trauma this had caused my wife to hear such graphic details about my plans to die, she was hearing all this for the first time, and as such, I moderated some of my accounts to protect her from the reality of how close I became to making her into a widow. Those specific details have since been shared with my Psychiatrist in private consultations, and have been also shared with my wife prior to the publication of my story, as painful as that may be to recount such a hurtful and drastic time in both of our lives. I can recall my wife sitting beside me crying, her eyes red with tears as this frightful truth unfolded in front of her. It is uncharacteristic for my wife to express such emotion particularly in front of strangers, needless to say, she was very traumatized to hear all this. And so this day began and ended in an uncharacteristic way. It began with me getting up to go to work as I usually did, but ended with me sitting in a psychiatric ward having been diagnosed with a mental illness, not quite the typical day at the office to say the least, but at least some of the pressure had now lifted. I no longer needed to act, and a plan was in place to see if I could get better, although initially, I was sceptical about ever feeling better, but would give it a try at least. The Psychiatrist prescribed some medication to get the process underway. As a long-term drug to deal with the depression, I was given a course of a drug called Mirtazapine. This is an anti depressant drug.

Later that day, my wife phoned my boss at work to inform him that I was sick, but not providing any further detail than that, mainly at my request. She was quite “matter of fact” about it, polite, direct, but nothing more. My time of return to work was unknown at this stage pending further medical advice, although both she and I realized it would be quite some time, at least a number of weeks, but as it turned out, it was considerably longer than that. My employer was fully supportive of my situation.

PART 5 - MISGUIDED IGNORANCE & STIGMA

In the first few days I had been absent from work, I just wanted to sneak back to the office and hope that nobody realized it had been away. My biggest concern at this time was centred on what people would think of me. In those first few days, I insisted upon taking the phone off the hook so that nobody could call to inquire about me, I was petrified that this thing, had gone too far and that the perception others had of me would be forever changed. In some ways, that has been the case, but I am unable to control the perceptions of those around me, I can only manage my own response to those misconceptions. This is a strength I have since developed since that time, but back then, I was a significant cause for concern. Reality told me that at some stage, I would be forced to make contact with the outside world, it would be obvious by now that something significant had happened to me as my vehicle would still be parked in the same spot inside the plant, but not a sight of Andrew anywhere to be found.

A few days later, I decided it was time to leave the phone on the hook, and just wait for whoever wanted to call me, to call me. I answered the ringing phone late one afternoon, and it was my boss from work. He indicated he had tried to call a few times, but the line was engaged, and he understood that I may not have wanted to talk to anyone. He put my mind at ease so much with his compassionate and understanding tone of voice, I felt a sense of relief. The next day, he and another mate I work with, delivered my car back to me during the day. They came into my home with my wife to find me in a fairly nervous and agitated state sitting at our family dining table sipping a coffee in the warm winter sunshine that was beaming in from the window area surrounding our meals area. They both joined me for a coffee and engaged in a bit of small talk, both of these guys I knew quite well for a number of years. One of them was my boss, the other was a person whom I was his boss, but we were great mates nevertheless, and they were so supportive and just wanted to do anything they could to help, they already had done that just by being there and understanding my situation. They both emphasized that if I need anything at all, just let them know, regardless what it was, they were just there for me if I needed them. When they were leaving after a coffee, I followed them out to the street where they had parked my car and were about to get into my boss's car, and I said, "There is one thing you can do for me, and I didn't want to ask this in front of my wife". I went on to say words the effect, "could you please remove that length of rope from the back of my car and throw it in a bin somewhere, I cant even bare to f*cking well look at it". My boss and I engaged in small talk while I had my back to my car so I couldn't lay eyes on the rope, while the other person took it, apparently rolled it up and placed it in the other car out of my sight. We said our good-byes, and they drove off. I will never forget the look of shear shock on the face of that mate of mine who removed the rope from my car, it was a ghostly, sickly look, and I'll never forget it, as they both knew what that rope was for, without me even saying a word. I think reality hit pretty hard that morning.

I tried to get some routine into my day so that one day didn't just roll into the next, although for prolonged periods, that did happen where time became indistinctive, and I often forgot what day it was. There were a number or mornings where I had to force myself out of bed because I knew if I didn't, I would lay there all day and not even bother showering or eating, I'd just lay there consumed with lifeless depression. During these months, (it had now emerged into winter), and as such, the gas wall Furnace was always in operation in the living area downstairs. Often, I didn't even have the energy to dress myself, sometimes I didn't even see the point in getting dressed, but I forced myself to carry out this rudimentary task. I would gather my clothes and walk downstairs just in my underwear to get dressed in front of the heater, (this was always well after the kids had gone to school for the day). On many mornings, I would crouch down with my head in my hands in front of the heater, just wearing my underwear, and cry, sob, wail... I was just so depressed, but at least I didn't have to conceal it anymore, so in a sense, I was relieved as well. Some mornings, my wife would have one of my favourite CD's playing quietly through the speakers in the main living area, she just wanted to do little things, and do anything for me that would ease my situation. There is one CD in particular by Enya... I think the album is called "Watermark". It is one of those soothing CD's, well it always was, and it had that effect upon me then. It was like a supportive gesture from my wife that she was thinking of things to ease my troubled mind, as small as those things were, but I have such memories of those gestures of support in one of my darkest periods. Although that is a beautiful CD, I can no longer bare to listen to it today even now I am in reasonable health, it triggers memories of those ghastly times sobbing in my underwear in front of the heater. On most days, if even for just half an hour, I'd go for a walk. Although this walking would not have been sufficient exercise to prepare me for the Olympic Games, it provided some routine in my day, at least it was something I did for myself. It was hard, it took such prompting from within to do it, it went against all my natural instincts at that time to curl up and do nothing.

Throughout these months of self-imposed semi isolation and absence from work, I had some visitors from time to time, so I had eventually began to reconnect with the world again. There was an event I still remember that remains today, a defining moment in my drawn out recovery. There was an evening where I was sitting in one of our family room chairs waiting for the usual onslaught of noise and activity when my children were to arrive home from school. As I watched Judge Judy on television, my kids came in through the front door and paraded down the hallway in their typical raucous manner, and my little boy made his way to sit upon my lap. Usually, I would have resisted this type of interaction as I had normally been in a state where I needed my space, and would have rejected such close interactions, alas, he planted himself on my lap to watch television with me. After some conversation about his day at school, he fell asleep with his head nestled in under my chin, and soon after, I too fell asleep. While I slept, my face rested on top of his head as we both slumbered. I awoke before he did, and I felt the warmth of the top of his head on the cheeks of my face. It was a beautiful warmth, and it made me smile. I remember feeling good and at peace with myself, even if just temporary, but I was reminded that these feelings still existed. I tightened my arms around my little boy and hugged him with purpose and love, and I kissed the top of his head. This event may seem insignificant to most people but for me, it marked a turn around and a move in the other direction toward feeling well again. I'll never forget it, and when my boy is old enough to understand, I'll tell him how he helped to make his daddy feel better just by being himself.

I had began to feel restless and bored, with one day rolling into the next, my little daily routines were no longer sufficient to satisfy that need. Although still depressed, but to a much lesser extent, I was getting better at last and I felt the ability to function at work again in some sort of capacity. At my own initiation, I contacted the Human Resources people at work, and mooted the suggestion that I return on a part time basis if that arrangement met with the business needs of my employer. The HR person whom I had contacted, set up a meeting at work, and along I came that afternoon to make the appropriate arrangements, and before I knew it, I was back at work but only part time for a while. My re-emergence at work was pretty low key, and I would usually turn up in the late mornings or early afternoon, as my depressive cycle was particularly at its worse first thing in the day. I had been positioned in another department to that which I had previously occupied as due to my lengthy absence, that previous role had to be filled by another person, and although it was a bitter pill to swallow, I was still in no fit state of health to return to the rigors of that job. And so, a new routine had begun, it one of getting into my work clothes, and going to work once again. The job I was doing, although an important function, was well below the level I was classified. I was still being paid a generous salary and still retained my company car, even though I was only performing a job quite below that grading. Eventually of my own undertaking, I decided to return to work full time but continued in the role given to me upon my part time return. As time went by, although I still didn't feel 100% well as I still endured periods of mild to moderate depression, I began to give thought to where I were to head from here regarding my future job status. I was keen to return to a role within the company that was commensurate with my grading classification as I was feeling the pressure of receiving the benefits, but not delivering the outcomes of someone at my level. Eventually I was placed into a role at that level, and so found myself back into the flow of regular work and normal life once again. All appeared to be good, and in the main it was, but a lurking feeling remained that it was a temporary recovery, I felt the inevitable relapse would again return someday.

PART SIX - MY TEMPORARY RECOVERY AND INEVITABLE RELAPSE

A year and a few months moved on, and eventually I progressively got back into line and length of normal life again. I felt well, invigorated, and reconnected with the world around me, but it took one hell of a long time. Life seemed to have returned to where it once was and the old Andrew was back at long last. It had been an epic struggle so a feeling of wellness was something I would never again take for granted. My family and I did a couple trips to Queensland for a holiday, we did stuff together again on the weekends, and my kids got to know the dad they used to know before the black clouds arrived. I also did a separate trip with my mother to catch-up with my estranged brother who I had not seen in nearly 10 years as I felt the need to reconnect with my past, and deal with some demons that had been a part of my life for so long. Under the advice of my Psychiatrist, I reduced my intake of mirtazapine, and began walking, playing squash again, and eating properly. I lost quite a bit of weight and began to feel physically better than I had felt in many years. All these signs pointed to someone who had conquered depression and had it all under control, but that was not to be the case as it was soon to return, but in a far worse form than it had ever been before.

In early 2004, I felt the dark clouds of depression begin to emerge once again, but this time it felt different. Prior to the clouds, I had gone through a period of unrealistic expectation upon myself, with a mind riddled with grandiose and racing thoughts. On some occasions I was barely able to complete a sentence without changing the topic midstream, and often forgetting what I had initially began talking about. People sometimes commented on the rapid manner in which I spoke, and the comment “hey slow down a bit”, while I was trying to explain things to them. I often perceived myself as someone with powers and ability to intimidate people well outside my circle of influence. There are some examples of this that I choose not to discuss in detail, but my behaviour at times could be considered as highly in appropriate. Although always known for an overt sense of humour, this feature of my personality had become a noticeable feature to those I work and socialize with, more so than in previous times. The list of my behavioural traits and the change that had emerged in my personality and behaviour is long, & far too detailed to include in this story, but they were evident nevertheless.

On one particular occasion, I went on a crusade to purchase an expensive waterproof jacket so I could use it to wear at the football in the rainy wintry months. I had a clear idea in my mind about what sort of jacket I wanted. It had to be 100% waterproof, and brightly coloured as my reserved seat at the football was on the front row, and likely to be scanned by the television camera while the play was happening in that area of the ground. I wanted to be seen on television, so a bright colour was imperative to make me stand out from the crowd, On the face of this, its seems quite normal and random that people at the football seek to see themselves on the replay, but in my own mind, a prime purpose of this jacket was to make me stand out, and maybe even become semi famous as I wanted television viewers to see me on a regular basis so that I could become recognisable. This unrealistic expectation goes beyond the typical jovial quest most people pursue to get their heads on television

The actual purchase of the jacket was in itself an unusual procedure. Having investigated the various styles and bright colours from many of the outlets in Geelong, I had narrowed my purchase choice to two particular outlets that stocked an almost identical jacket, (approximately $5 separated them in price), but otherwise almost analogous in the product itself. One of these stores was located in the northern suburbs of Geelong opposite the Ford plant, the other located in Torquay, and they were both approximately 25 kilometres apart. One Saturday afternoon, I travelled between these two stores (among several others), comparing the features of each jacket, which had almost identical appearance & functionality of the other, before finally making my purchase decision purely out of shear frustration. I traversed between each store, back and forth between North Geelong, and Torquay approximately 10 times over the course of the afternoon. I was in a state of high irritability and reverted back to my radical high speed, lane changing, behaviour I had experienced once before on my way to Bacchus Marsh. I was unable to make a simple decision on what was essentially the same product. This is not typical behaviour for me, it is a confused and indecisive reaction to my rapidly deteriorating mind, and hinted at my diminishing ability to make a rational decision about a simple purchase choice. This event became a precursor to my subsequent loss of rational decision making skills about anything at all, as the skill of rational thought was soon to dwindle in more ways than one, and was to be replaced with a confused mess of confused racing thoughts that didn’t make any sense, combined with an increasing sense of emerging depression. My recollection of this period, particularly after the jacket purchase, remains a bit of a blur when it comes to recalling specific detail, other than remembering it as a maze of twisted and convoluted nonsensical thoughts, very little sleep, and mixed in with waves of black ugly depression. My sequential recollection of this period remains all out of place and inconclusive, even as I write this. There are many details I do recall, but can't recall in what order they occurred relative to each other, so I will talk about some of them, but they are not necessarily in chronological flow.

It was around this time that my Psychiatrist had removed Mirtazapine, and introduced lithium to my medication to try and stabilise my radical mood swings that are conducive with Bipolar. By this time I had been absent from work for an indefinite period, and it would be some time before I would return. I can't recall if that leave commenced before or after the jacket purchase, but I had been away for a couple of weeks at least. Without going through the specific detail, I felt aggrieved that the income protection scheme I had once signed up to would not recognize my illness as a legitimate condition, and classified it in the same category as stress, personal problems, etc..etc... (So much for destigmatising mental illness, but that's another story). As a result of having this discrimination forced upon me, I embarked on a crusade to seriously embarrass the instigators of this shameful policy. Over the course of what I recall as about a week I sent something in the order of 25 scathing emails to various influential people both at my work, and to the underwriters of the income protection insurance policy. I made a complete menace of myself to numerous people and organizations, by sending all these emails. I took on crusades regarding various other matters and social injustices. My behaviour had become destructive to myself, my family, and it placed me in a position where I could have faced some serious penalties. All of this harassment took place in the small hours of the morning, and was not uncommon to hear the tap of my keyboard at 4:00am, when I was at my most productive and unable to sleep. Although my continuous flow of correspondence to my work and insurance underwriters was in itself not morally corrupt, (as stigmatisation is a serious issue), it was out of character for me to undertake a crusade such as this. I stopped sending emails when my shop steward from work visited me at home and told me it has to stop. I look back at that and realise that I could have been sacked for this, but at the time, I saw myself as the saviour and "Grand Master" of those that were subject to the trivialization and misunderstandings of mental illness. In terms of sleep, I saw little need for it, for it had become a waste of time and energy, it was a meaningless non-productive period in the day. I had evolved into a state where I believed I was one of those people who didn’t need sleep, and would often go the whole night without even bothering to try and go to bed. Some nights I wrote stuff down, some nights I would disrupt my family by music playing or watching television with the volume up, and often sit and play my guitar and write music for the whole night. Sometimes I'd be writing poetry, but night time was my time, its when my thoughts and creativity flowed at their best. I'd carry on the next day as normal, either manic, depressed, or a combination of both, regardless of sleep or no sleep the night before.

Not all days were filled with beans, in fact, most days were filled with extreme irritability trying to cope with the massive flow of diverse and irrational thoughts that were flowing through my mind, coupled up with the depression, a depression that was growing and taking some higher presence. As a result of all these racing thoughts, I had dosed myself up almost on a daily basis with a drug called Alprazolam. Under the influence of this drug, I was unable to drive, and upon reflection, should not have been driving anyway because of my terrible state of health and inability to behave rationally. I went through a phase where each morning, I'd catch a bus into town just for the thrill of riding on a bus. I would walk town around and hang out in the city with no particular purpose, I'd just walk around to nowhere like a homeless street person, often walking very fast as if I were in a hurry to get somewhere, but I was going nowhere then I'd catch another bus back home again. One day, I made an impulsive decision to get another two tattoos on my chest to match the one I already had. I can't remember what made me do that, I just did because I had lost my sense of rational judgment. There is no harm in getting tattoos, but not what I would usually do. It was an impulsive thing I did on the spot with no consideration for it being permanent.

One evening when my wife was at work and I was supposed to be responsible for the kids, and I was doing it particularly tough with depression. I can recall that I was on the brink of calling my mother or my mother in law to come over, I just wasn't coping with the rigors of caring for 3 demanding children. My oldest daughter took charge, she could sense that it was all beyond me. She had organized her brother into the bath, she had cooked dinner, and assumed a leadership role with her siblings. When everything was under control and my boy was tucked into bed, she and I passed each other in the hallway. I thanked her for doing what she did to help me. She was old enough to understand what was happening with me, so I owed it to her to provide an explanation. She was only 12 years old, but she behaved in a manner well beyond her years. We hugged each other in front of the laundry door near our family room. We both cried, I sobbed on her shoulder and told her how proud of her I was, she cried too, and told me she loved me. She said, "I love you dad, I love you. I understand, its ok, its ok, I'm here for you, I love you dad", we made a special connection that night, and without either of us ever needing to refer to it again, Maybe it's something we will both hang onto in various situations throughout our lives when we recall that occasion.

Time rolled on, I had lost all perspective on how long a period all this happened, I can't recall exactly when my mind really began to betray me. I knew my mind had become a mess, but I think there was a time when it decided to really cut lose with depression and muddled racing thoughts and behaviour. I couldn't make sense of anything, and found my perspective on sounds around me had begun to change. The times I didn't go to bed at all had become more frequent than the times I did go to bed. One night I heard weird sounds from my backyard and thought a dog had got in to maul my kid's guinea pigs. Other nights when I tried to sleep, I laid in bed hearing the sound of a machine rhythmically thumping in the distance, I thought it was someone operating a small factory in the area. Other times I heard a car with a diesel engine out the front of my house with its motor idling, so I was constantly getting up and looking out the front window throughout the night as my mind was all over the place with racing thoughts. I would often, (and sometimes still do), talk to myself, and mutter strange phrases with no meaning, then go onto another phrase. I'd speak random words that didn't relate to anything, they just flowed out of my mouth. My wife was beside herself with worry for me but she didn't say much, she didn't know what to say other than reassure me. Maybe those sounds were actually there and my hearing had become over sensitive. Eventually I grew weary of even going to bed at all, it was a lost cause. I was weary of the sounds, weary of laying there trying to quench my mind, I had become weary and frustrated with life. I went through a pattern for I think about 5 nights on end where I did not go to bed at all, nor did I sleep during that period. I just sat up all night, restless, sometimes overtaken by hysterical laughter over something on television, or playing my guitar. I remember one morning as the sun was coming up, I got into the flow of some really nice chords, and felt an almost spiritual connection with a new day, it was a euphoric feeling and a relief from what had been going on, but it was soon swept away by a tidal wave of depression. My memory of this period is really shaky, so I'm light on with detail, but I certainly remember the next bit.

PART SEVEN - HOSPITAL

One Friday night (about 3:00am Saturday morning), after I had not been to bed for what I think was nearly a week, my wife came downstairs and insisted I try get some sleep, so I laid on the bed fully clothed and just waited for the sun to come up, still no sleep. When the sun began to come up, (but it was still mainly dark), I got up to go for a walk, and set off. I got to the intersection of the main highways near where I live, and purposely stepped out in front of a blue and white coloured Kenworth truck. I stood slightly off centre so the wheels would go over me and really do a job of it. All I can recall is the sound of its horn, and the truck doing a radical lane change, and seeing a multitude of wheels going past my face. The irony of my survival is that the reflective sleeves on the red jacket I bought probably saved me in the end, as the sun was not fully up at this stage. I think an alert truck driver played a big role too. I turned around and walked home, sat at the table and pretended to read the newspaper, all as if nothing had happened. I watched my kids staring out the window at the hailstorm, they were amazed to see all the little white bits of ice on the trampoline and over the path. I sat at the table for hours, expressionless and dazed. In the end, I decided to go to Bunnings to buy some rope to hang myself, but instead of turning left into the car park, I turned right toward Deakin University where I parked in the car park and cried for about an hour. I rang a friend and told her I had tried to suicide earlier that morning, she was calm and in control. She talked to me, asked me where I was, told me to think of my family, and to seek help. She told me she understands, and she didn't judge me. She told me to go home and tell my wife, tell her everything that I tried to do that morning, and to not follow through with suicide. She was strong for me when I couldn't be strong for myself, she saved my life through her calmness and rational mind. I drove home and walked inside, took my wife and asked her to come with me to the lounge room away from the kids, and then I told her what I did with the truck, and that I don't think I'll survive the day without dying, and I told her that I think I need to go to hospital. We made some phone calls to the emergency section of the psychiatric ward and they advised us to come in urgently. My wife arranged for our oldest daughter to be in charge of the two younger ones, because mummy needed to take dad to the doctor. Our oldest daughter sensed something was going on, and in her typical manner, assumed her usual leadership role as she had done many times before due to my illness. We left the house without me even acknowledging the kids or talking to them as I couldn't face their fears of uncertainty. We arrived at the Swanston Centre (Geelong Hospital psychiatric unit), and she asked me if I was sure I wanted to go through with it. I replied to the effect that I either have the courage to do this, or the alternative is that you go to my funeral later this week, so we walked in and I was soon admitted.

The next block of time I spent in hospital, spending the days just wandering around asking myself how the hell had I had been reduced to this situation. I apparently phoned various people while I was there that I don’t remember calling, for reasons that I cant recall today. I hated the hospital, I was obsessed in getting out, but at the same time I felt safe. Hospital was a haven and a sanctuary, a time for me to gather my thoughts and wait for the suicidal desire to pass. The first thing they did when I was admitted was to confiscate my belt so that I couldn’t hang myself in my room away from view of everyone. I met some interesting people from all walks of life, professional people, drug users, and family people just like myself. Mental illness is so democratic, it doesn’t care who it strikes at. On the Monday, I saw a different Psychiatrist from the one I usually see as I had been admitted as a public patient and didn’t have a choice of doctor. He told me that I was clearly manic. “You’re manic, very manic” he told me. He wanted me to have a course of Electro Convulsive Treatment, as he felt it was the only thing to treat my condition. I had only been on Lithium for a short time at this stage, and had only just within a few weeks got the dosage to the correct level, so I was taken aback by this suggestion on the basis of a five-minute consultation. I told him that I want a second opinion from my regular Psychiatrist before agreeing to that, and as such, I discussed that with him the next day as I had already had a prearranged appointment before all this had happened. It was suggested that although ECT is an effective treatment, that option is a little bit down the track, and to allow Lithium a bit more time to kick in. I was stressed out over the prospect of ECT; I pictured it as something I saw in the movie One Flew over a Cuckoo's Nest, although in reality, it's not at all like that anymore. That afternoon, my mother came to visit me and I had to try hard to keep a brave face to shield my dear mum from the trauma her son was enduring. I made her a cup of tea and introduced her to my regular Psychiatrist who just happened to be in the ward at the time, and came over to say a casual hello to me. I tried to prepare her for the prospect that I may have to have E.C.T and that it was nothing to worry about. In spite of my attempts to portray a calm persona, mum saw right through me as I babbled on in my customary manic “rapid speak, change of topic mid sentence” talk. She must have seen the depression in my eyes as well, I won't ever forget the look of confused worry on her face, and I think the reality of mental illness took quite a swipe at mum that afternoon. She hugged me, then she left in time to get her bus back home, very much a worried woman for her son, she was confused about what was happening to me. When she left, I burst into tears and was comforted by a visitor of another patient. One of the male nurses took me to a private room and sat with me until I regained my composure. The staff in this ward are outstanding people. They are so professional, well trained, but above all, they genuinely care about what they do. They do their job with compassion and conviction, and they do it so well. I can never speak highly enough of these people, I can't remember any of their names, but I’ll always remember them as wonderful people and professionals in their field.

That night, my wife bought my kids in to visit me, I had been missing them so much. My seven-year-old boy came and hugged me as I met them near the reception area, and that was followed up with a hug from my 10 & 12-year-old daughters. The whole time, I felt so much like bursting into tears because my precious little kids were visiting their dad in a psychiatric ward, I had to be strong and put on a happy face because I was wondering if they would be freaked out by it and what they would think of me. I wasn’t the strong reliable daddy anymore, maybe they’ll never look up to me again. I know now, that's not the case, but at the time, my mind was fragile, and I was an emotional mess. They didn’t stay all that long, I hugged my boy, then my two girls both hugged me at the same time, then I hugged my wife, and they left. I couldn’t hold my emotions in any longer, I bolted down to my room where it was private, fell onto both my knees, held my head in both my hands, and wailed like a baby, I don't think I have ever cried that much in my life. I was only beginning to contain my emotions, when a friend from work turned up to visit me. She gave me a hug, and with her even having to say anything, she knew what was making me cry as she saw my family leaving on her way in. She sat and listened to me waffle on about what was in my head. Sometimes people say so much without saying much at all, and just having her there meant a lot to me, and she was there at a time when I really needed it.

There are so many details about hospital I cant remember, I was very dosed up on medication, its all a bit of a blur other than just wanting to go home. A couple of times I was on some sort of anti-psychotic medication, "just to give the mind a bit of a break", so I was told by one of the nursing staff. This stuff kicked like a mule and I found it hard to walk due to its effect. The medication took the edge off the hell life had become, but there remained an underlying desire to get out of that place. The second last day I was there, I got up one morning to have a cup of tea before breakfast arrived, and that morning I noticed I was feeling a little bit better. On the sugar satchels for the tea, they had little proverbs or sayings of inspiration. The one I used that morning said "If you can laugh at it, you can live with it", I grinned as I read it. It was my first spontaneous smile in ages, I had forgotten what it felt like, but that morning, I remembered again and it felt nice. I still have that empty sugar satchel taped to the wall adjacent to my desk at work. It reminds me that when the chips are down, things can turn around if we truly believe in it. I noticed also that as I drank my tea, my hand had a tremor and I felt a little sick in the stomach. It was beautiful nausea, a welcome friend. Nausea and hand tremors are a side effect of lithium, and I think it may have begun to have its effect at last. There may have been a whole host of reasons for that feeling, but I wanted to believe it was my Lithium taking effect. I felt a breeze of well-being, just a little one, but a breeze nevertheless, perhaps I had turned the corner at last.

During that day, I found it a lot easier to read. I tried to make this my main pastime in hospital where I would try and become lost in a novel to distract me from the reality of being in this situation. I was fairly reclusive, and spent most of my time on my own reading a book. It's difficult to read when the mind is so manic and racing around everywhere and a feeling of terrible depression, sometimes at the same time, and sometimes in isolation. Reading requires a level of concentration, something I did not have a lot of during that period, and other at times during my struggle with bipolar. Reading became a lost cause at times, it became part of a facade to convince the staff I was settled and ready to go home, even though a lot of the time I wasn't reading at all, I just held the book up to make it look that way. Later that evening, my sister Kathy came to see me. I think she suspected that I was pretending to be better just to get out of hospital. She said she would come over and have dinner with me the next night, (she is a general ward nurse in the main part of the hospital). The Psychiatric Nurse that was sitting talking to me about another matter gave us a look to indicate I wouldn't be still in hospital tomorrow night, it seemed like I had been earmarked for discharge the next day. Kathy was very concerned for me, and when she left, we told each other we loved one another. She went home, but this time, no tears from me. That night, I had sat in the main area of the ward and watched big brother on television with a few of the other patients. That's something I had not done much of before. I found myself chatting and laughing with one of the other male patients about some stupid thing in Big Brother. It was spontaneous conversation, it wasn't forced, but it flowed easily. Later on, we watched C.S.I, then Rove. After Rove, I went to bed filled with anticipation of being discharged the next day. I didn't sleep a wink that night, but I dared not ask for any medication to sleep in fear of it being reviewed by the doctor, and having him withhold my discharge. Kathy was right, I was putting on a bit of an act so that I could go home, I did a lot of that while in hospital to convince the staff I was actually alright, but they saw through it, they are professionals and they care for people like me and have my best interest at heart.

The following day I felt slightly better again, I was still in a fragile state, but a definite improvement had emerged. I had an appointment with the public health system Psychiatrist and was anticipating he would grill me about my suicide attempt again. I told him that the crisis that bought me here has been and gone, and although I'm not out of the woods yet, I feel better. He was a gentlemanly person, dressed in a grey suit, and said to me, "Well I think you can go home now". I get the impression he was a genuinely nice person, although a bit confrontational, but that comes with the turf. He stood and smiled, and shook my hand, and he wished me luck with my sickness. I thanked him for his help in a very difficult time, and I left the room. It all took about 60 seconds. I went to the reception area, phoned my wife and merely said, "Come and get me", she arrived 15 minutes later. By this time I had my red jacket and other belongings all together on a chair near reception, and we did all the administrative Medicare things, collected my belt & medication, and left the building. She drove me home, and as I walked in the front door, I kissed the bricks in a gesture of hello to our house. It was so nice to be home again, it seemed like an eternity since I had been there. My wife made me a coffee and we sat around the same table I sat at where I silently planned my suicide attempt, but things were different now. I was feeling weak and nauseous, I had hardly eaten in days, and had no sleep the night before. I had lost an amazing amount of weight, as I'd got out of the habit of eating, and when I did, it was usually just crap food. I had given up caring about my physical health quite some time back. Later that afternoon we went to pick up our kids from school. While I sat in the car waiting for my wife to come back with our oldest daughter from the entrance of her high school, I was very close to opening the passenger side car door, and vomiting on the road, but I held it back, and the nausea eventually passed. I still didn't feel at all well both physically and mentally, my mind was still all over the place and I felt depressed, but not to the same extent I experienced in hospital and the period leading up to it. When my daughter arrived at the car, she saw me sitting in there and her face said it all, I could tell she had a huge wave of relief wash over her to see her dad out of hospital, it was a nice surprise for her. I got a similar response from my other 2 kids when we picked them up from primary school, they were surprised yet thrilled to see me. It was nice to be home again, but it occurred to me that I had done some damage to my relationship with my family over the period I had been sick. I realized the trauma they must have undergone and how the innocent minds of my younger children in particular, must have been so confused by my radical change in behaviour leading up to, and definitely including my episode with bipolar. My son said to me that night while only the two of us were in the room, in the coolest voice he could muster up, "It's great to have you home dad". There was much rebuilding to do particularly with my son, to repair the relationship damage my sickness had caused.

PART EIGHT - GETTING BETTER AGAIN

Over the next few weeks, my health improved very significantly at an almost frightening pace. I wasn't sure if this was something I should just embrace, or something to be concerned about, as it could have just been a cyclic thing and I may have been headed for another manic bout. Perhaps I was ramping up to take a massive dive into suicidal depression. Upon reflection, it appears that I had in fact become well again, and as such, we reignited our lost hopes of another family holiday to the Gold Coast. We had planned and paid for this trip many months prior to this time, but when I became gravely ill, we assumed our holiday was a lost cause due to my health. So off to Queensland we trekked in my new Ford Territory that I had just taken possession of a few days after getting out of hospital. I loved this vehicle and commented on it so much en route to the Gold Coast as I demonstrated all its features to my family. This enthusiastic behaviour was vastly different from the manic state that had overtaken me previously. It was indicative of a reinvigorated Andrew, there was a sense of life and future, I sensed it, my wife and kids certainly sensed it too. No words were spoken, but the intrinsic message I got was, “welcome home”. Not welcome home from hospital, but welcome home from hell. They all sensed I was better, without me having to tell them, they felt my well being return to our family.

Everything was sensational, we had a great time together and spent bucket loads of money on all sorts of fun things. It was on this trip that I confirmed the plans in my mind to return to work when we got back. I desperately wanted to get right back into mainstream life again, and I felt well enough to do that. I am often asked how I’m going, sometimes although I feel ok, I’m just not sure. I think people like me lose calibration on what normal is, we lose our way, the benchmark of wellness is not always clear. I returned to work and sat down at my desk on that first day to recap what I was up to prior to becoming ill. Apart from a few people who had actively supported me while I had been away, not many people spoke to me, certainly not about my illness. It was starkly apparent that most people through no fault of their own, were ignorant about mental illness, and just didn’t know what to say. Although they all cared for my well being and wanted nothing but the best for me, they didn’t know how to convey that sentiment. When I refer to people’s ignorance about mental illness, I don't mean that in manner that is critical of those people. There are many sicknesses I have never confronted, because myself, or my loved ones have never been exposed to them, so I too am ignorant, that's nothing to feel uncomfortable about. With the vast myriad of knowledge in the world, it’s unreasonable to expect people to have an in depth knowledge in everything, unless it’s something they have been confronted with, or need to understand for a whole host of reasons. My wife and other people close to me, people who have supported me, have made it their business to research and understand. These are the people who speak openly with me about it, and keep a check and balance on my progress, without the awkwardness some may assume is present in situations like mine. I have never had a problem talking about it, I’m neither embarrassed nor ashamed of having Bipolar and I’m not at all uncomfortable in discussing it. There is a sense of uneasiness from other people, simply because they have not taken the time to find out about what I endure. I’m happy to educate them, but they need to be receptive to that, and initiate the conversation themselves, it's not for me to force my knowledge upon them. So therefore it becomes a “catch 22” situation where the ignorance prevails, and I can do nothing about it until they ask me to educate them, but they don’t know they’re ignorant.... it’s an interesting argument.

At the time of writing this story, I feel well and pretty much free of my symptoms. I have had some relapses since my discharge from hospital, some of them somewhat severe, but definitely not to the lowly suicidal levels I experienced in the past. I have had bouts of depression, and in more recent times, periods where hypomania has been very evident. My Psychiatrist has added Valproate to my medication to try and enhance my mood stability, so far it seems to have worked, but time will tell in the long term. I’m fortunate that I don't seem to experience much of the usual side effects associated with mood stabilizing drugs, I have a wonderful and robust support structure. I am a fortunate bipolar sufferer, (if there is any such thing), I have all the odds working in my favour. Although I anticipate ongoing episodes of mania and depression in the future, I will work through those periods and come out the other end knowing more about how to manage it, as experience tells me that if I take some ownership for my condition, I can ride those times out. I cherish life and have a deep desire to be a grumpy old man one day, and all the experiences in between are something I look forward to as I have a lot to live for. I cannot live my life worrying about my future health, I can only accept the feeling of wellness and take all the steps I need to, to prevent serious reoccurrences. I have to plan for success and not place my life on hold, or restrict myself in fear of what might happen if I get sick again.

I also believe that my personality has changed a little since being on Lithium. I have quietened down and have lost the edge to my often loud & overt sense of humour. I'll never know how much of my raucous laughter was driven by early level mania, and how much of it was my natural jovial sense of humour. I still laugh, I am quick with a joke and definitely enjoy my silly banter, but it has had the edge taken off it. I'm happy to lose some small components to my joviality as a trade off for stabilizing the devastation of Bipolar. It's an easy trade, as I come out of it as the winner, the investment in taking stabilizing drugs pays a generous dividend. This story is only a brief overview of my experience with mental illness. There are so many anecdotes and experiences I have not included here. There are many gaps in my story, but to include them would go well beyond the scope of transcending my experience to paper. I'm sometimes asked by people around me what they can do to support me when I'm unwell. The answer is simple, I need them to be educated about my illness. I don't seek sympathy or attention, but I do seek empathy and understanding, those virtues are a vital part of being a good support person. Mental illness is not a taboo subject for me, I'm not sensitive about discussing it. I don't wish to throw it in people's faces, but for those that wish to support me, all I ask is that the talk to me about it, preferably with some background knowledge. The most supportive people in my life are those that can "shoot the breeze" with me about it and ask me how I'm travelling. We pretend that the stigma has gone, but as a community, we are largely ignorant about mental illness, so therefore the words of mass destigmatisation are empty rhetoric without a solid understanding of the illness by individuals, and as a broader community.

Thank you for taking the time to read my story, it has often been a difficult task to recount those times when I was so unwell, and in particular, the times I came close to death. It's been a painful reflection and a stark reminder of how far I've come to manage my condition. If you are a sufferer of mental illness or a person who supports someone, I hope you find the courage to see your way through.

FOOTNOTE

I'm alive today for a number of reasons. One of those is the help I got from the staff at the Swanston Centre in Geelong. I have been in a position on 2 occasions where I needed their help in a crisis situation. I could use so many words here to portray the professionalism and dedication of these people, but my descriptive skills would fall well short of capturing the true essence of their compassion and commitment. The same applies to my Psychiatrist. Over the time I have been consulting him, we have built a Doctor patient comprehension second to none. He has been a wonderful teacher and as such, has helped me to accept my illness for what it is, and aided me to apply strategies to manage it, by understanding it.

There are some very special people in my life who have taken centre stage at various times and have been instrumental in helping me to get better. One of them is my wife. Her support and understanding has never wavered or faltered, it has remained rock solid regardless of the circumstances. She has endured my behaviour and rode the rough times. She has suffered along side me, but she has never complained, and it has never been too much for her. When I have been unwell, she just takes care of business in her typical no fuss, no nonsense manner. She looks after the nuts and bolts of running our home in the face of my sometimes horrendous state of mental health, and then she looks after me too. She has bared a heavy load through my illness, but rarely shows it outwardly. She epitomizes the ultimate support person and is the prime example to those that care for someone like me. She should step up and take a bow, for this woman has been a star performer.

Sandy's Story

Schizophrenia: A Journey into the Dark Wood

If I were to think of my life's journey, like many of us it resonates with Dante's words that begin his journey down into the festering interior of *The Inferno*. Dante tells us:

> *Midway along the journey of our life*
> *I woke to find myself in a dark wood,*
> *for I had wandered off from the straight path.*
>
> *How hard it is to tell what it was like,*
> *this wood of wilderness savage and stubborn*
> *(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),*
>
> *a bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer.*
> *But if I would show the good that came of it*
> *I must talk about things other than the good.*

I have issues that have driven my life, demons to exorcise, but *if I would show the good that came of it, / I must talk about things other than the good.* Unlike Dante, whose guide through the Inferno was the poet Virgil; my guides have been the various people who, over the years, have either knowingly or unknowingly given me the strength to go on when all seemed lost. In my adult years, I have been fortunate to have wonderful friends who have seen me through countless bad times. My guide has also been an inner voice, not the voice of my madness, but the voice of my creative spirit, the thing that has sustained and enriched my life, especially over these latter years.

My *wood of wilderness savage and stubborn,* the mire through which I have waded with sometimes failing energy, is the experience of growing up in a family torn to shreds by alcoholism and domestic violence, and my descent into maelstrom of madness. I do not talk about these things to seek sympathy or pity, I speak of these things because, for many of us who have experienced these major life events, we have been disempowered and silenced by them. So I speak to the world at large about my world within.

Family Matters

My father was a wife-beater, a violent man with a temper that raged when in full flight. He was scheming and deliberating in his persecutory ways. I witnessed his vile acts, his vile, vitriolic abuse of my mother and its aftermath. It was the silencing of my siblings and me that was the most extraordinary thing about witnessing domestic violence. For so long no one knew what was happening in our house. We would witness pure terror one night, go to school the next day and tell no one, not even our best friends, what had happened. It was a silence that tore our inner world to shreds. We I didn't talk much about it to each other and our parents said nothing the morning after, as though it hadn't happened, as though it was a figment of our imagination. Of course there were my mother's black eyes and bruises that were testament to the night before. The silence was unbearable.

It is a function of our society that we do not air the family's dirty linen, rather we hide it and let it rot in the basket, its stench permeating everything, contaminating us like a poisonous gas. The dysfunctional family limps on, never being honest with itself, never allowing itself the space to reflect on the damage being done to each of its members. This is the nature of domestic violence and all the baggage, and damage, it carries with it.

I was sent into the world vulnerable, melancholic, unprepared and ill adapted for what was going to enmesh me in my early twenties. Nothing could have prepared me for my meeting with madness. My world had been falling apart and I had been powerless to arrest the decline. With my emotional desperation that came from trying to come to terms with my family, and my gradual unraveling that took place while at university, I was a mess. When madness came, I plunged into an emotional torpor.

Into the Dark Wood of Madness

When I was 23 the '*dark wood'* engulfed me. In madness *'I wandered off from the straight path'.* Suddenly my mind was full of spooks and phantoms that thrust me further into a miasmic chaos of veiled meanings and blurred reality; into a complete unknown. The nights and days of the voices, the delusions of grandeur where I thought I could *'change the course of mighty rivers and bend steel in my bare hands'*, or the paranoia of persecution and fear, have been a defining force in my life. I cannot imagine a life without the voices; without the dark thoughts and cascading emotions. I have lived with schizophrenia and all its moods for thirty-four years, its path littered with shards of glass and deep holes, with its constant embarrassing moments over which I have no control, with its unreal other worldliness that takes you to places never imagined, with its utter confusion that renders you paralysed.

Imagine having a nightmare from which you cannot wake. Imagine being tormented by voices in your head that won't relent in their damnation of everything you have ever said, thought or done. Imagine the terror of thinking everyone can read your thoughts, or see into your mind, as though your skull is made of glass. Imagine the aloneness and loneliness of living in a mind space where you think you are the most evil person in the world, and cannot let anyone touch you because your evil is so powerful it will destroy those who do. It is impossible to explain the isolation one feels during a psychotic episode. The emotions are profoundly raw and one's sensitivity is heightened to a fever pitch, where everything impacts on you in a way that is unbearable and disturbing. When Information floods in unfiltered creating such confusion, simple things like having a wash or choosing which chair to sit in, are almost impossible to do. And then there is the deep depression, the dark, black hole into which your mind disappears; the endless spiraling vortex that often accompanies, or follows, the psychotic episode.

There have been times when my head has been filled with voices, all of which seem to have a mind and agenda of their own. I wonder, is it possible that in a past life I was subjected to brain surgery, where someone implanted a transistor radio in my head and then gave the controls to someone who fiendishly delights in randomly switching them on and off? How else can I explain these uninvited visitors? I don't know where these voices come from or where they go, why they torment me, why they are unrelenting in their pursuit of my demise. They speak with an authority that is unearthly. They say the most extraordinary things.

Sometimes there are several voices engaging in a dialogue, commenting on my thoughts and actions, passing comments on how ugly I am or that I have bad thoughts and that I am disgusting. They swear at me and call me hideous names like a slut, moll, hag, and Satan's whore. They say how loathsome I am, that I am the scum of the earth. They talk about me as if I am not there, talking about me in the third person, chanting obscene things and laughing at my imperfections. Other times there has been an insidious whisper quietly undermining me, turning me against my friends whom they claim are my enemies wanting to kill me. Then there is the chorus that sounds remarkable and magnificent like a chorus from Handel's *Messiah*.

I am never totally free of the voices and I have learned to live with them in a fraught relationship. I go to bed every night to their persecution and denigration and wake up to them in the morning. The voices are unrelenting in their attempts to undermine me. I try to drown them out with loud music (my MP3 player is a godsend) or sing to myself to distract my attention. I do mental arithmetic at night to ward them off. We have a very complex relationship that has meaning only between ourselves. I always have this unnerving feeling that maybe the voices are right and I am as evil as they say; that I do not deserve love or kindness from my friends; that I should kill myself and let world be without my evil presence.

There has also been a rich delusional world. Some delusions have been very amusing, some deathly dark and disturbing. I once thought Beethoven had stolen the nine symphonies from me thinking I was a genius! It was disappointing when I realised I hadn't composed the music and wasn't this wonderful person with a remarkable talent. I thought my friend Veronica had just given birth to the new Messiah and, as it was a girl child, I wanted to tell the world of this feminist Second Coming! I once thought I was Eve and had given Adam the apple. I thought I was responsible for the terrible state of the human condition and had to apologise to God for what I had done. This was a modern delusion because I thought if I could get God's email address I could email him my apology. The way I would do this would be to contact the Pope in Rome and he would have the address because he has a hotline to heaven. I consulted the Melbourne telephone directory, only to find that there are a lot of Popes in the listings but none that said Pope John Paul II who was the Pope at the time. Running parallel with this delusion was another one where I thought I had shot the albatross of Coleridge's poem and could feel the bird hanging around my neck. I felt burdened and overwhelmed with all this going on in my mind. I was Atlas with the weight of the world on my shoulders. It was exhausting and unrelenting. When it was over, I remember feeling absolutely spent and only wanted to rest.

There was the time, during one of my hospitalisations, when I thought I had been raped by the devil. That was particularly terrifying, especially when it was time to go to bed, because I thought he was in my bed waiting to rape me again. I would ask the night nurse to go into my room and pull the blankets and sheets of my bed down so I could check to see if the Devil was waiting in my bed to rape me again. I was terrified of going to bed because I was going to some horrific meeting with the Devil who would violate me again. I also was certain I was carrying the Devil's child and felt the evil writhing in my womb. I remember asking the doctors for an abortion to rid me of the child that was poisoning my body and sullying my soul. I kept asking the Catholic priest, who would visit the ward, if he would perform an exorcism for me to purge me of the Devil. He refused. I felt abandoned.

I once very nearly killed myself when I thought I heard Bob Hawke, who was then the Prime Minister, talking to me on the radio saying I was contaminating his society and should rid myself from the world. There was no questioning the truth of how I felt, I was certain that I was a bad influence that had to be dealt with. I had to quickly remove myself from society before I destroyed it. It was a serious suicide attempt and I am lucky to have survived it.

The delusions have been many and varied. Many have a religious aspect to them. I was, and still am, fascinated by religious symbolism and imagery. I use it a lot in my poetry and it features heavily in my delusional and hallucinatory worlds. I have actually had visual hallucinations of the Virgin Mary - she looked just like a statue in a Catholic Church! The delusional world of psychosis is a richly embellished and mysterious world and you can see why people could get into the false notion that people with schizophrenia are on a journey of spiritual discovery.

A psychotic episode is like a huge dream or nightmare from which you cannot wake. It is like a Brueghel or Bosch painting, a Webern quartet, a mysterious Kafkaesque world. It is a fantasy of demons and angels, a pageant of lively characters from a miracle play, a procession of popular cultural identities in the guise of heroes and villains sent to give cosmic messages. To the uninitiated it seems richly creative. We utter the unutterable, see the unseeable, sense the insensible, all making us appear to have a special knowledge of the world. In our madness our imagination is in overdrive, we are at the limits of our creative capacity that makes the experience seem inventive, like a work of art. This world, unfortunately, renders us at a loss to act in any real, meaningful way. We are in a world we are unable to share with the rest, lost to the hallucinatory fervour of a fractured mind. In the end, there is nothing spiritual or wonderful about some of my delusions. They are painful and disturbing and lead to a loss of functioning. They have led to an intrinsic confusion that cripples the resolve to make sense of the world. I was confused for years.

I have also been accosted by a hag I see in the mirror. She is an ugly sight. Her hair is a tangle of incandescent wire, her eyes are blood red and pierce me like a laser, her mouth is smudged with bright red lipstick, her face is pock marked and her teeth are decayed. She laughs at me and mocks me. And I wonder to myself: is this hag the embodiment of the evil woman my voices tell I am? She is a dark force.

The Search for Identity

There I sat for an eternity, at least what seemed an eternity, in and out of Larundel Psychiatric Hospital, changing from medication to medication to find one that suits with the least debilitating side effects, drifting from one aimless year to the next. At the age of 23, I was, like many other young people, in the process of forging a life. For many young adults, the rites of passage include entering significant relationships, finishing tertiary studies, staring a job. When these life events are interrupted by becoming psychotic, the chances of consolidating your identity are swept away. With the onset of my mental illness, my emerging fragile identity was systematically stripped from me. It was an inexorable process. It was unrelenting. It was demeaning and destructive. I would lie in bed feeling sedated by the medication and found I was not doing anything. The less I did, the worse I felt about myself, the worse I felt about myself, the less I did and so on. It all conspired to render me helpless and inactive and without a sense of who I was. I spent years in bed too ashamed and stupefied to engage with life; too afraid to meet new people because I feared the question; *hello, what do you do?* I had no answer. I walked in the shadows of others and cast none of my own. I had no self-esteem or confidence. It was harrowing and humiliating.

To have an identity is pivotal to leading a life with dignity. People create an identity in various ways; through work, through relationships, through cultural and sporting pursuits, through creativity. Some people seem to have an innate feeling of self-worth that is just there no matter what they do. We all do it differently. We all need an identity to facilitate getting through the problems we face each day; to process the complex world in which we live and which surrounds us with its cloying spectres. When I had no identity I moved as a though I was invisible without anyone taking much notice of who I was, or what I did. Even if that was not how others saw me, it was how I thought of, and saw, myself. The misery of having no identity is compounded, and made more painful, by the frequent journeys into the unreality of madness and subsequent hospitalisations.

Identity is something that enriches the inner world, and affects how one perceives oneself and how one then relates to others. Identity is a tool that sometimes allows communication and sociability, and fosters self-worth. And it becomes linked into a spiral that feeds itself. The more self-confidence you have the more you do, the more you do the more self-confidence you have. But you have to break the barriers set in place that prohibit the first tentative forays out into the world.

For many of us we are only seen as our illnesses and nothing more. We become the label to which we are shackled and thus identified. Treatment and recovery ought to be about restoring self-esteem and finding something that gives feelings of self-worth and, ultimately, identity. Treatment should be about helping people find their creative spirit, to understand who they are in a world that is often unforgiving and harsh, especially towards people who are deemed different or problematic. Treatment must be about helping people get beyond their illnesses and labels, to become citizens with the same rights and privileges as everyone else. Quality of life is about living in an environment that allows someone to express themselves freely and have a sense of self that is strong, healthy and validated.

The Kindness of a Stranger

In the wilderness of a psychiatric hospital, an unlikely place, there have been moments of great humanity and kindness. I have always maintained that one unpleasant aspect of suffering from schizophrenia is that I never know when I am next going to embarrass myself, because it is an illness that does not always obey the rules of society. Those of us who find ourselves in those mad spaces are often at the mercy of the kindness of strangers. Such is our vulnerability with an illness that places us in perilous situations. We are everywhere and anywhere: cafes, church, the footy, the tennis club, at university, on the street, next door. Perhaps we all are at the mercy of the kindness of strangers, but we, especially, who find ourselves in the most vulnerable of situations, are in particular need of kindness and humanity. I was given this in the most desolate of places. I was taken to the old locked ward of Larundel and on being admitted was physically and emotionally abused by the nurses. I was upset and was sitting in the day room weeping when a woman came up to me and started brushing my long hair. It was late at night. This woman was unaware of her impact, but I remember her well, even though I never saw her again. She spoke no English but her strange words were comforting as she gently kept on brushing. She taught me a great truth and showed great humanity in a place of utter despair. I felt calmer and appeased by her kindness and I remember the moment like it was yesterday. Even in the grip of psychosis, you can remember things as clear as day. I sometimes wish I could forget some of the embarrassing things I have done in the sway of madness.

Seeking Wellness

Wellness is a state in which I can make connections with the people around me and intersect with daily activities. Even a simple thing like being able to get out of bed is an achievement of wellness. In fact, getting out of bed is an act of hope. There were the chronic years of lying in bed because I lacked motivation and could not face the day that was laden with the black threatening clouds of self-hatred and loathing. When you cannot always be sure of reality it makes you extremely vulnerable. You are sometimes reliant on others to create reality for you. There is also the deep sense of alienation from oneself and others that has to be negotiated. There is the enormously difficult labour of having to rebuild yourself and reintegrate yourself back into a world that generally does not understand mental illness. The Maori people with a mental illness talk of themselves as *tangata whaiora,* which means *a* person seeking wellness*,* and that is how I see myself. In one sense we are all people seeking wellness though some of us have a more difficult path to tread.

Seeking wellness or recovery is a unique experience. Mental illness is as individuated as the many people it touches. Because it is an illness of the imagination, an illness that consumes your life, recovery is going to be a singular experience too. My recovery is not someone else's. Recovery for one person might be getting out of bed for one day of the week, while recovery for someone else might be finding full time employment. Recovery is a process sometimes with two steps forward and one step back. It can be slow, painful or quick. It is not linear but circular, sometimes with symptoms recurring and with set backs. There can be periods of rapid change or little change.

Recovery is a process rather than an end point, and it needs to be helped by clinicians and friends who understand the difficulties associated with having a mental illness. Much of my recovery has been aided by having good friends who have given me a home and space in which to live a life of comfort and stability. I could not live as well as I do without their support and love. They have helped me on my journey and made it possible in the face of complete annihilation. Recovery is a deeply personal journey in which one's attitudes and feelings grow beyond the *catastrophe of mental illness*. It is about self discovery and self renewal and is a very emotional, transforming experience. Recovery for me is accepting that I cannot deal with my schizophrenia alone and recognising that the enemy is not my friends or doctor, but that the enemy is the illness. Recovery is a journey of hope, a rediscovery of who one is and an affirmation of oneself in the community; to be able to say with conviction but without egotism: I am.

Asylum

In the 1990's there were vast and sweeping changes made to the mental health system in Victoria. There was a shift away from the stand alone psychiatric hospitals to what is called *care in the community*. Psychiatric wards were established in already existing general hospitals and services were integrated into these institutions. The average stay in hospital has been reduced to around 8 days and people are discharged to be looked after by case managers and ancillary workers or private psychiatrists. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of medium term beds in these wards and people are being sent out into the world unwell, often to the care of relatives or friends who themselves are not resourced or supported to undertake their intensive caring role. We have lost the notion of asylum, a haven, sanctuary, safe place or a retreat, by making people who are unwell live in a community that really doesn't want to know, let alone care for, them. In the old days people would say to you, never let yourself be put in a psychiatric hospital, you'll never get out. And it was true. You would be there for weeks, months, if not years. But now it is impossible to get into hospital such is the pressure on the small number of beds available in the acute wards. We, the mentally ill, are in the gaze of the community more unwell than ever before and it is creating a fear and loathing of us. Stigma is an issue because people see us as unwell and as a nuisance. At least we were fed and housed in the old hospitals and had time to rediscover our sanity and could just be without the stress and pressure of knowing were might be tossed out after a short time. It takes time to recover from a psychotic episode. I am not suggesting we go back to the days of large hospitals, but what we have at the moment is inadequate and leaving the mentally ill and their friends and family in a situation that is untenable and failing everyone.

Healing Words

Poetry has been a lifeline, the hook on which I hang all my queries and ruminations about the human condition and my place in this world. Poetry is the place in which '*I must talk about things other than the good'*. Poetry is my way through the wilderness. It is my interface with the outside world; my way of contacting it and grasping it. I offer myself in my poems to the reader in the hope of bridging the abyss that sometimes seems so profoundly deep and insurmountable. From the ashes of my madness my poems have risen giving me a new life and reason for being.

The social theorist Theodore Adorno said two things in response to the holocaust. *To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,* and *a beautiful thought in a time of pain is a lie*. In times of distress and pain, whether cultural or personal, we more than ever need the compelling powers of poetry. Poetry seeks to peel the layers from life's distortions and travails, to give meaning where meaning cannot be found. Gary Geddes (1996) suggests *poetry has the power to cut through all the crap we accumulate in our lives and touch us to the quick*. There is exhilaration in poetry. Language seems to be elevated to a new level that goes beyond reason's domain, and poetry explores this unknown terrain, some saying it enters a kind of madness of its own.

It is through poetry, a language imbued with endless possibilities to peel away the layers of the myriad meanings society has developed over time, in which I speak. It is a way in which we can understand each other and ourselves; a way in which we can delve into the depths of our souls and contact parts of ourselves we barely thought existed. Poetry can be *subversive* in the way it can use language as a rallying point around which we can gather to express our inner feelings. Poetry is a language that can talk about madness in a challenging and unique way. Poetry can give meaning where meaning cannot be found. It can reveal aspects of life that often remain obscured. The mind's eye is provoked by a use of language that confronts and challenges, that lets one enter the wild side of meaning and experience it in a creative and powerful way.

Some say, *poetry is the view from the sick room of life.* My poetry comes from a similar place; my 'sick room' of madness, but it always rests in the cradle of language, waiting to be formed into utterances of an emerging child fired with a revelatory fervour. My poetry comes from my mad mind's journey into its interior mindscape, the inner reaches of the 'sickroom' of the other side, from which it emerges, in a creative capacity, distilling the many shades of life's travails and joys. My aim is to move angels to tears.

I make poetry out of the misery of existence, using whatever language I can to transcend the barriers my madness builds around me. The troubled mindscape becomes a palette, with its textures and colours the raw materials that inform the creations bursting forth from the senses, enabling me to document the ravages of madness on those it touches. And language is the tool that enables this to happen. This is my language of madness. This language connects us to the *collective unconscious.* Poetry is at the forefront of this urge to understand what it means to be human and to incite rebellion.

If nothing else, poetry has given me the means by which to recreate my identity. With the onset of mental illness, I was left with a sense of failure and distress. I felt like a shell; a being of no substance, a victim of the spooks and phantoms that pervaded my mind. Escaping this island of madness came in the form of poetic utterances. Regaining an identity where I felt at home with myself, and at ease in the public gaze, was essential to surviving the onslaught of mental illness. I am not, however, saying you only have to write a poem and you will be healed. It is not that simple.

The experience of creating something, bringing into being a work of art that did not exist before the creative moment, is wonderfully empowering. And this is especially important for those of us who live sanity-challenged lives, where we need every bit of empowerment we can find. Poetry has opened doors I never thought would open for me. It has been like a miracle. The creative life is a vocation, a calling, a way of forging an identity with substance and meaning, a leap of faith.

Over the years, *poets have discovered that beauty could be made from ugliness, sublimity from sordidness* (Pratt 1996). Baudelaire saw the role of the poet as being the one to bring *golden verses out of stones' and 'flowers out of evil* (Pratt 1996). Wallace Stevens says, the *poet is the priest of the invisible* (Pratt 1996). And what is more invisible than the inner world of madness? I have discovered that writing about my madness, and life experiences, has enabled me to delve the depths and turn disaster into celebration, to lay claim to experiences outside the norm and explore their meanings. My poetry has taken me on a journey to lands never before seen, where I have found myself crying with angels and writing words that attest to who I am.

More recently I have moved on from poetry and turned my hand to prose. I have written my memoir called *Flying with Paper Wing.* This is a new direction for my writing and something I never thought I could achieve. Seeing my story laid bare before me was confronting and puzzling. The book is a like a gift from a benevolent angel, the words leaping at me from the pages with their pain and joy, their anger and peace, their complexity and simplicity. New doors have opened and a whole new world beckons me because of it. I wrote *Flying with Paper Wings* to explore my life and reconcile much of its conflictions and pain; I also hoped that in writing it I would be able to connect with people who have shared some of my experiences and to tell them they are not alone.

So I call myself mad and write about my madness as a way of reinventing my life. Being mad is like having a living hell in one's mind, and is an experience I would not wish upon anyone else, including my worst enemies! However, it is through writing that I seek to *subvert the dominant paradigm*. I seek to give the experience validity. I seek to order the disordered through the use of ordered language, to connect with other mad people and celebrate our difference. I am not afraid to claim my madness**.** And being the madwoman*,* I declare war on a society that uses language to vilify and stigmatise those it chooses to marginalise. I seek to be non-conformist in talking about madness that has been buried beneath the rubble of society's inability to cope with that which it has perceived to be anti-social and renegade.

The future, however, always looms with its unpredictability. The fragility of sanity renders its own story with its own meanings and I walk in its midst with trepidation, walking in the '*dark wood*' where my nightmares wrestle with my dreams. Nevertheless, the Muse inspires me, allowing me to revel in her poetic utterances when she claims me for herself. At least I now have hope and an identity, something I didn't always have.

I am no well of wisdom. I am simply someone sharing my vulnerabilities through my writing; someone making a journey with countless others who have their own stories to tell. My guides have been, and still are, vigilant, like Dante’s, for which I am thankful. I am hopeful my wanderings will end in triumph like Dante's.

We climbed, he first and I behind, until,
through a small round opening ahead of us
I saw the lovely things the heavens hold
and we came out to see once more the stars.

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Paul Robertson's Story of Mania

I have a huge swelling feeling growing in the back of my head, reaching forward in grasping fibrillated and soggy claws. I know this feeling, frenetic as it is, coiled and sprung and filled up with sand. It is MANIA jumpstarting my head and collapsing into itself like a singularity or a sandcastle or a limestone blow hole. I love it and cherish it at the same time as despising it and feeding it my wants and desires and lust to make it bigger and nastier and more of itself as it swells.

There is nothing to it but what I have invented and scoured from the crusty sides of my eyes but it exists with strength and yes futility that I can not help and can almost touch. I AM filled up with it though in twitchy and hyper accelerated mannerisms and cigarettes smoked too fast with dark music always always in the background.
And I'm so tired f*cking sick of it wish it would go the f*ck away out like I always dreamed of being able to control it and switch it on to the times when it's wanted and fun for one and all. Wish I could eat but can't huh that's prey for my meat than the other way around, and it hurts me just to keep breathing sometimes when it's sharp and red so red like a blow to the head huh. Oh yeah ah huh right now for f*ck's sake. I must say this I have to spit it out though I don't know that I really want to see it all laid open like a finger on a slide.

I was committed first time in - voluntarily no I sure didn't want to go there. I asked the psychiatrist filling in forms if she wanted to have sex with me and took off my shirt and lay on her desk and told her secret things about the stars. I couldn't accept it because I believed that I was smarter than the people who committed me, and I still f*cking do. I did put blades in my arms and I did want to die far more than I wanted to live I did cut In school when I was twelve years old I sat in class and cut my fingers with a pocket knife. "Paul, what are you doing?" "Is this some kind of f*cking trick question?"

These things are real, they exist in my messed up and inaccurate memory but they ARE still there.

And for a moment a singular pervasive short-lived killing moment memory floods every sensation that I have. Twitch lurches across my face like a wire hook. Brilliant so bright but hard to see. I remember I do some weird party no idea how I got there kissing and groping some old woman while huge old men did lines and watched me with ugly wasted eyes. Running thru the forest afterwards blood streaming down my face didn't know where I was how I got there it was the middle of f*cking nowhere and it sure felt like the end. Beaten to a pulp but wild with energy and painting my face with fingers full of blood I felt like I had slid into a Bosch painting. I remember my face swelling I think some guy had hit me with a BAT. They stamped on my head while I lay in the road and fractured my eye orbits apart from other things I had deep black under my eyes for a YEAR.

And I stood in the trees in the woods spinning around and around and laughing before I sat quietly by myself found my knife tried to write my name in my arm with cuts. Woke up in the dark with ANTS in my wounds everywhere my face swollen up like a sick balloon. No idea where I was; none. Started running and kept running. Memory fades in haze. A few days in hospital the normal kind I walked to the bottle shop every day with IV sh*t sticking out of my arm.

I remember oh yes different time (time is a sickness) I woke at the beach some kids standing over me saying LOOK AT ALL HIS CUTS before I pushed them away and vomited into the sand.

Found some girl some night and tried to show her I could draw by smashing a bottle and carving a face, my face, into a table in a café. I put a beard on it and it looked like Jesus and I f*cking laughed so hard and laughed and laughed.

I stood in the street and hit the wall with my hand until I could actually feel it; I think I broke my wrist not sure it stopped me from being able to play guitar without being drunk for a long time and of course drunk, drunk, drunk I was most of the time anyway.
Ah yes oh, helpful Policemen to whom I would not give my name; I told them I was Zarathustra a Nietzschean reference I don't think he GOT. They chased me down the street and I couldn’t stop laughing until they all crashed me to the ground and I punched one with my broken bleeding hand and spent some time screaming in a cell and throwing myself at the walls.

They let me go somehow and at court I got to plead INSANITY which I also thought was pretty f*cking funny or rather do now as I could not raise rage from my heart, black blackest humour finally swamped by massive doses of anti-psychotics. Broke my guitar and held it like a baby in the street for hours and wept and wept and wept.

So many girls I could never EVER remember they were going to rescue me each one - had all my catch phrases worked out "wake me when the war is over" and something about drowning men and a head full of Shakespeare quotes. I couldn't believe they worked every time but OH YES THEY DID. Sometimes I could not make love to them I was too drunk I think who knows more ritual phrases morning ones were “where am I?” followed by "who are you?" (Insert snarl/grin/panic.)

I started drinking one afternoon was sure I didn’t go out or see anyone but woke up in a pair of dirty women’s underwear. I was at a palatial house with a goddess and threw up in her spa. Don't know her name I don't think I did even then.

Winters were the worst always lost and drunk and cold always wet and so f*cking far to walk in the rain. Crashing twisting in fear and self-loathing, detesting, despising, abhorring leper outcast unclean. And so goddamned SICK pathetically grateful for whichever nutcase girl was looking after me and holding my long dirty blonde hair out of the bucket. “Why do you hate us all Paul? Why do you do this?” “I don’t hate anyone. I have never hated anyone. I am the avatar of dismay. I am the boiling man. I am just too selfish to die.

One of my good friends threw himself from a building and I stayed drunk for weeks. An old and loyal friend fought me in sneering drunken fury, both so full of poison that we could not even form fists. Neither of us spilling heart’s blood whilst we fought, so young and so completely ridiculous. Drowning men.

My ex-girlfriend spat in my face that day. Tried to catch a bus and buy vodka with blood running everywhere again from my own cheap knife the despite boiling inside me, rage a crevasse of pathetic sadness and grief for myself. For Andrew. For all of us feeding from ourselves eating our own venom until it bubbled and frothed in our mouths. I didn't know where I was just f*cked it all up and sullied the memory of a good man. Lost and wandering and crying f*cked up and such a fool, such a fool so damned my scalding hell heated the slippery corners of my eyes. He was the funniest f*cker I have ever met.
Such waste.

SAD SICKNESS.

Fevers of blame and despair. Spreading between us like Andrews' beautiful young body across the cement. I miss him still. No note. His mother's shuddering sobs shall not leave my memory and spilled in echoes over my ruin as I catalysed the manufacture of my own disgust.

Got so used to casualty wards where I would wake up ("seemed euphoric" I read on the chart) with stitches and no idea how I had got there who had taken me. Hit on the nurses, once one reciprocated I couldn't f*cking believe it. More psyche wards again and again I always liked the schizophrenics they were, at least, as mad as me.

Locked wards psychotics everywhere screaming at night. The half hour or hour or whatever the f*ck it was we were allowed to wander around outside our cells, the men all of them except me, every one, ALL hung on the wire fence, heads at odd angles staring out, fingers through the chicken wire. Razor wire at the top.

I remember I had a chance to get out and go to the open wards an interview with three guys running the place. I looked forward to it for a week or something I don't know the haze too thick, chemical dust deep - I do remember the longing it I thought my articulation would save me again. I hoped and hoped waited got visited by three girls had tried to destroy with the holes in my heart, cutting arcing guilt betrayer that I was, liar, storm of pain my touch and words a plague of emotion. They didn't come back I think the number of doors with locks scared them though they all tended to think it was PRETTY F*CKING ROMANTIC.

I was tanked on some hardcore drugs I have no idea what. Varieties of thorazine the zine family yeah, a chemical lobotomy the pain whirling inside, a thrown running power saw spraying meat but no expression nothing connecting, shut out of my own body.

Got to the meeting and I opened my mouth in front of these psychiatrists and I could not SPEAK. Too wasted oh wasted yes but not in the fun way that's for sure. I could SHAKE though and I could drool cuz I couldn't get my facial muscles under any sort of control. So I stayed there for another week or more weeks who the f*ck knows?

Hated being there so I longed for squalor ethanol sex attention. Filled instead with drugs and shakes and sobriety. Polluted with chemicals worse oh f*cking worse oh yes than my own toxic liquid destruction.

I DARE YOU TO FIX ME! They had this thing where some poor lost mad b*stard would stand up and say the THOUGHT FOR THE DAY after our group meetings with people rocking in the corners. They were all so f*cked up most of them could barely speak some not at all others never shut up but they only spoke to people who were not there. I stood up and quoted Shakespeare for ten minutes. Midsummer night's dream I think I thought it was nice and cheery for everyone.

"Lovers and madmen have such seething brains such shaping fantasies that apprehend far more than cool reason ever comprehends. One sees more devils than vast hells can hold, that is the madman…"

Got out and stayed on the drugs like a good boy but kept drinking and kept cutting. All the f*cking useless things did was excise my personality make me impotent make my hair fall out make me fat make me slow and make me HATE. Worst of it was I could not react act my speed acuity lust passion poisoned memory gone awareness gone focused to an angel point into pure hissing SHAME. That I was born in a f*cking PARADISE of love and that I had flared brutally, violently bright. I knew history enough to understand that we live in a utopia of humanism; I knew enough LIFE to know that I had been born raised loved and somehow STILL WAS by the most beautiful minds hearts and hands.

Mother. Father. Sister. Every kindness I had repaid with failure. I deserved every torture I could devise to inflict for betraying them so deep and hard, those who threw everything anything they could find to save me into the pyre of my f*cking excuse for a life.

Shuffle along undead NOT LIFE PAIN but undead don't fall and weep with acid logic with scalpel reason undeniable distress killing my father see his eyes watching me tear myself to pieces. Hooks of my own hurt see it in his shoulders slumped he has given up I hurt him so much he is dying ahhhhhHHH. Raised with passionate care, soft hands, sweet voices singing in the night care and care and care such a beautiful boy oh he is so beautiful the boy the betrayer the monster the liar the drunk.

Guilt an endless sun clawing every sense every thought and it was RIGHT it was TRUE the only thing I had ever done was break the bones in the hands that held me. Eat the life deserve this worse such a coward mouth red and sticky and still Life eater ALIVE I was still ALIVE why was I alive?

Lost six months or a year and a half I don't know managed to stop taking the meds they were killing me faster than the alcohol. Had a mad and stupid psychiatrist on a power trip: here, take some more STELAZINE Paul I can see that you are still vaguely capable of constructing a sentence and your hair hasn't ALL fallen out yet. Better up the f*cking dose. Came off them then withdrawals and hallucinations my best friend told her she was a an evil b*tch as I finally saw it her black heart so putrefied it was pooling behind her eyes. But I had never looked outside myself pity ME I pity YOU b*tch. I was too mad to f*cking SEE that was the f*cking POINT.

Stayed as far from my family as I could I could not look at them the only way of course to keep their lives clean of me.

Tried to fix myself went further and more mad and more mad and further faster it was still better pain beats lifelessness pain beats brain-death. Starved till the weight fell off me, wasn't hard couldn't afford to eat anyway at least my F*CKING HAIR GREW BACK.

Rapid cycling, oh so real after the fugue and it all slid back to me so fast skeletally thin and quicker than the rest… doing stupid stupid things wandering alone and manic. Euphoric drunkenness a cool ocean a delusion of relief honey sweet. Beaten up again and a few more times finally worked out that I could to run away. Did gymnastics drunk on the edge of a cliff; on the roof of someone's house. Took stupid crazy girls to the lifeguard tower at the end of the pier at the edge of the beach in the middle of the night whenever it stormed. I waited I knew I took them whoever whenever it rained and howled at night and I could smell ozone. They liked THAT, I told them it was a full moon each one I told them a f*cking ritual they always said how can you see through the clouds?

I went to clubs broke with no cigarettes and talked women into buying me drinks or just stole them; would walk around the room asking for cigarettes until I had enough to last me

till morning; waking up where? Slept in a bus shelter, at the train station, in a construction site, in the bush on the doorstep of display homes and once in an actual for real DITCH.
I remember a shared rental house where I painted a six-foot self-portrait on the wall in blue and RED. I painted crows for eyes. Four houses in six months ending on the street again. Drank everything I could find oh yeah cooking sherry vanilla essence and f*cking AFTERSHAVE.

Used to love writing NO FIXED ADDRESS at social security called it social obscurity antisocial insecurity told then I had a job interview at a leprosarium. I went there wearing a trench coat in the middle of the day in the middle of summer blood saturating the wool right to the edges sopping wet with it and trying so hard so hard to fill in the forms without it running down out the sleeves with my hands shaking so much I kept knocking the page onto the floor. Must have worked I woke up a few weeks later lost them all; all those weeks were they weeks?

Got a sinus infection; reminder of humanity and mortality had to go to the hospital said hi to the staff in casualty. Remembered the nurse I slept with she turned white when she saw me and would not look again. High as a kite I waved at her and grinned oh such smiles. The infection was in my upper sinuses and about to get to my brain all those long drunk walks in the rain I guess. Was still high even through the pain and told them I liked their x-ray machine because it looked art deco'. They f*cked it up and hit the vegus nerve (the spelling is correct and the pun is clear - did I find that funny subsequently oh what do you think???) and I went and died on the operating table full cardiac and respiratory arrest wish I could remember that but I guess it would have HURT. No light at the end of any tunnels no light anywhere too cynical for a religious experience.

Was so weak had to wait three days before I made it to the bar, was straight out in a f*cking wheelchair to smoke still high flirting with my face all swollen from the surgery like a freak like a lunatic of course. Went back to squalor and starvation.

My best friend finally had enough and hit me and tore the skin from one side of my nose, though I had provided him with so many women after they realized just how f*cking crazy I was and turned to his arms even though, then, he was a speed freak and a pot head and an alcoholic just like me. He is a good man. It took so much to break him from the love and bonds and fierceness ferocity of our friendship. But I found enough. Wasn't even LOOKING. Wartime syndrome before that us fighting the world so hard of course no cause for us. I ended up staying at my other ex-girlfriend's place. Tried so hard and stayed straight for three weeks; I think it was subconscious - conscious I f*cking KNEW that that was what I was doing - preparation for the biggest and ugliest and least sane that I ever was.

Sleeping with my x-girlfriend and my current girlfriend and my ex's flat mate and some girl (girls? lost days before I found my way back still high and getting higher) I found at some club... drank everything in the house and this was the time when I decided actually picked; CHOSE to go as mad as I could. Push it and see what was on the far far side.

I bought a bottle of brandy and hung it upside down in the fish tank the fish's name was Death he was left from my friend who jumped. Painted and drawn figures of me I had done all over her walls I know AT LEAST SHE WAS A FAN. She kept them all around her mirror twisted b*tch she once talked me into cutting my wrists; f*cked all five of the guys I knew. I sure as hell didn't care. What was that to me?

Moving UP the scale wild chattering flitting out of my mouth so many quotes inappropriate walked into a glass door and fell down hurt my damned nose again. Didn’t eat didn’t sleep. Sick by now of punching holes through windows doors and wardrobes drew a lion and a witch on one I wanted more wanted to find the other bits delusions and voices I KNEW were waiting in the back of my mind: Fuseli's The Nightmare I thought he was a genius until I read his prose inadequate and nothing never should have become a part of history. Spitting words snarls and more and more cuts appearing razors eaten. When everyone has hidden everything sharp in the house you can chew through a safety razor and there it is you have your sharpness in your hand; though you WILL cut the hell out of the inside of your mouth while you do it. That's ok though huh? course it is blood covered teeth mean their words more and there are so MANY to say.

Going up and up. Could feel it in the base of my spine. Could feel it in the back of my head and behind the redness of my retinas. A black storm; black as coal black as pitch blacker than the blackest witch. Rapturous fascinating terrifying spinning with immensity and weight and clouding my vision with red. A nightmare of power that I could TASTE.

By the time I was halfway there I was speaking in riddles and rhymes... glossolalia. Told people about the tower of Babel – babble - about the storms in my mind told them again. Told them about how Poe died in the street how that was me how I was already dead how they were fever death dreams. Temporal distortion ooh I loved it soaking each moment into me feeding on the surreality breathing out mind sickness absurdity hell. Things would slow down for me and I could watch others in a different world in a different time. I could lace a sentence with jokes and references and then I would just wait to see who if anyone got what. Movement so free easy lose my hands shaking so much I could hardly hold the bottle slippery from the f*cking fish tank but I was so STRONG. My skin burning hot to the touch could feel myself heating up.

I was careful I drank only enough and not more I wanted to see where it would take me not pass out. I was never as mad when truly drunk it was the day after for me and I held to that state some part of my mind relentless and deliberate. Nursed and cajoled it intoxicating; tempted and caressed felt it shattering over me a glass club smashing inside my head. And it worked. All the things blood-mean and suppurating inside all coming in concert, allegro evaporating like the ground beneath me.

Tactile: Like when the plane hits a hard gasp of oblique and swift air and the whole thing shudders and jerks like the thin and absurd metal that it truly is.

Like the handstand I held and held at the cliff edge while tens of metres below insects stalked across hard, hard stones. Like when my arms shook above them as the ethanol poison sucked my strength from me like age; and I quivered and shrank before the realisation of my deadly wish.

Like the painless smash of a steel toed boot hitting my cheekbone before the nerves fire and the my mind reels and shock stabs across the awful clarity that I feel.

Ocular: Suddenly starred and flared before failing and tricking as a fall into strange dislocated darkness.

Like snapping awake sitting up in terror as my mind sparks and flashes into waking - sickening before the horrors as the nightmare’s steel shod hoofs strike their chords in the streets of my dreams. As my awareness and memory grind into sobriety and I turn my head and see that I have no memory of where I am and that I lie amidst squalor. As my stinging blood-veined eyes tell me that I do not know the woman lying next to me, that she is old beyond her years and that there are bruises across her back that I know I could not have inflicted (could I? Never hit anyone even when they were hitting me.) That her face has been wrecked by an addiction that was perhaps similar to my own and my glance flicks onto a dirty crib next to a broken lamp.

Olfactory: Like the scent of the first girl that I ever wanted jerking and snapping my body in a chill wash of icy lust. Just like this, the impossibility of it. Sliding across and through me a thrilling tear in ancient harmonies that are irresistible, fantastic and alien. The chastity of that moment, eyes squinted shut as I realise that I will be wrenched back to this moment for the rest of my life by the trace of that scent - soap and deodorant, young female sweat. Innocent and potent, devastatingly sexual

Like the stink of drying blood, stale spirits and alcohol sweat as the poison seeps through the sprung steel rigidity of my starved and swollen flesh. The acrid common stench of failure. Pure in the twist and twitch of nausea.

Gustatory: the foulness of my own foetid breath, the 2% of alcohol expelled through respiration regardless of scrubbing my teeth until they bled. The taste of a thousand turns and turns of acquiescence and surrender. Isolated quantified and rarefied, bitter and sick.

Auditory: Like when I was 12 years old and walking through the park with my sweet stupid beagle called Nudge. She helped me as I began the true fall and went mad so quickly after I first left home. She was young and wildly happy to be in grass as only a dog can be. In this simple but intensely real utopia I heard the first soft sibilant voice. And then another over my shoulder breathy in my ear. I knew they were impossible as I stood in the gorgeous spill of deep yellow afternoon sunlight. It lit the floating pollen into pale gold in a slow turning dance. They spoke my name. I was in a wide grassed park, soft and richly green in the blazing colour of a child’s sight.

An ordinary, happy child. A child frayed and decayed and raging, flailing at the edge. Another small corner of my youth kindness, natural and known as breath for me for my own hands before the madness took them. I was loved and I loved and loved. The voices only a small fright. Only a little. Had already inherited my father’s scepticism as he turned the world from a vast mystery into smaller and smaller pieces of information with careful and brilliant clarity for his only son and his only daughter. Pieces a brilliant young girl and a quick strange and solemn boy could understand.

They spoke to me. They told me I was an angel. Had been an atheist since I was ten. Didn’t understand until then completely what that meant, but I knew of God and I knew of my father’s clever careful words. Knew he did not believe in angels. Like boys, mad or sane, across the seething swarming teeming planet, for those with fathers who even began to try to succeed in the immeasurable task of raising a man – a father is a god. In this my father safeguarded me and saved me perhaps from being immediately branded and subsequently tortured by the psychiatric profession. His dispassion – operating on the cat on the kitchen bench “You see these things, Paul, we have them inside us also. They are the machines that make us live.”

Talked to the voices when I was alone, but knew somewhere that they were me. They made little sense. I ignored them. They returned every few years, ringing louder discordant and shouting as I began to drown in the verdant misshapen growths of self-hatred wrapping my heart. Never lent credence to what they say, tactile hallucinations far more distressing than disbelief and rationale reasoning poor in the compulsion of trust in my own touch. Hard to walk when your sense of touch is screaming to you that you knees are bending 90 degrees the wrong way.

Have hallucinated since 12 or 11, most craven raving suffering madmen I have known who have consistent hallucinations have a great deal cringe wish distress with delusion. Paranoia fills every space in their lives crippling fear. My worst experiences in anxiety a nameless and reasonless monster in every sense in the most true most ancient most real f*cking TERRIFYING and inescapable horror. I will choose pain over fear. Always. Never could believe never became paranoid hallucinations pure and not building into unreason I AM NOT IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO BE HUNTED AND OBSERVED.

They whispered in my ears and I listened. They kept me awake and sometimes it would sound exactly as if dogs were barking by my ear, and my name hissed over and over to me as I began to doubt. Never acquiesced never ever gave in and began to believe in the hardness of breathy hallucination only that I was worth nothing a fever of trickery swimming through thick stinking mud holding pain like it’s a gun or a talisman or a glyph.

All of this mass mutilation of reality hit my senses one by one blow upon blow the sh*tty student house I was in was stripped away. Happened quickly, I know that is true, but it felt slow

All this a swamp a stamp a landfall a whirlpool the ground giving way fall the fall the FALL the most real vertigo. The moments all of it blazed branded into my brain. And then black and it just went on and on there was no respite no total separation no coma of numbness the cancer of self hatred eating growing through every break and twist in the real. The dark inside stretching forever into the distance and I was blind with fear I knew that any more and any longer I would never come back. Nothing within that mass swinging tumult could take me away from the pain of the moment that I was in THERE WAS NO RESPITE immolation the only constant pain loathing purified rarefied.

It was mixed state in extremis I could feel it crashing into abjection sobbing before whirling and flying back up and this was where fear began and slowly took over. I accelerated into full mania knew that was where I was going but as I raced into it my memory stopped. Five or ten or twenty minutes later I came falling down and everything in the room in the house was smashed I had no MEMORY from each. New cuts my wrists ripped open blood pouring from them and from the opened veins in my elbows. It KEPT GOING. I couldn’t stop had let Cerberus from the leash and all three heads were nuzzling my brain. Up into a blackout pure and down into despair and desperation and for the first time mortal fear, terror of death at the hands of me as memory-less puppet, the mannequin marionette unknown.

Not my hands, someone and something else another me trying to kill me. This is when I knew terror. I knew that if I did not stop I would do it. Never come down cut my throat but get it RIGHT. I didn’t know what I WAS as I went up into it. A rotation at intervals of twenty minutes fear crossing my heart squirming in my gut white pale with it went to look in the mirror face covered in blood I could see in the broken shards. No memory, just the knowledge that I wanted to die and was capable of doing it. No understanding of whom I was or what I would do. Clarity slipped a tiny splinter but pure and real and I found the phone and went back to hospital. Voluntary and afraid.

That was the last time only in the sense of the completion of its extremity. It took me four more years before I stopped drinking and finally tried in my heart's core in my heart of hearts to heal.

But that was the key. The epiphany. The Answer; that there really was none.

Whatever redemption I have found it is driven by that fear and that terrible knowledge. And by will. By WILL. I will never give up the responsibility of sanity is MINE as much as I can choose I will choose will force it shredding strength as it returns and returns and returns, exhausting inevitable, seasons of pain I will NEVER stop fighting.

At the edge, at the corner of Nietzsche's Abyss, there is only really death.

Post script.

Still here. Sober for eight years. Paint for pain, write for release. Sing for absolution.
To me there is no meaning to life other than that which we give it; that we apply to it. We INVEST meaning into our lives with our time, with our efforts and with our love. And there is no succour in madness.

I have inscribed on my cigarette case "tempus fugit. Memento mori."
"Time flies. Remember you will die."

Janet's Story

My first terrifying experience was when I was three, one Sunday when my dad was encouraging me to eat my dinner. At the same time as he was telling me how I would not grow strong, a voice louder than my dad's was warning me not to eat the food on my plate. This voice told me I was a very bad girl, not to eat, and only to listen to it. It told me my dad was trying to get me fat. It said I didn't need to eat because I was a fat ugly pig.

While my dad was talking and watching me, this voice continuously warned me not to eat. It was difficult to focus on what my dad was saying because the threats from the voice were drowning my dad out. So not knowing what to do I quickly swallowed my food.

As I swallowed the last mouthful the voice informed me since I did not listen and I ate the food, my dad would have to pay by dying the next day on the way to work, while on the bus.

This voice I am describing was not a voice I was familiar with. It was aggressive, loud, abusive, condemning, insensitive, degrading and controlling. It was the complete opposite to me, a man's voice.

After this voice's threats about my dad and the many more that followed my focus was on being nice to every family member no matter what they did or said, in case the voice followed through with his threats and I might never see them again. I also believed I was responsible for every one and for fixing things at home. When I could not fix things, which was frequent because drama was constant in our home, I felt such a failure.

After the emergence of the voice it was difficult to eat therefore I gave my food to my sisters, friends or our pet dog. When I did try to sneak something to eat the voice bluntly told me how fat and ugly I was and how much fatter I would become if I ate the food. On occasions I would beg the voice to let me eat something, for example, an apple and I would run or cycle for an extra 2 hours to make up for it. The voice was not into negotiation therefore the running and the cycling took place without the apple.

What was going on inside my head and heart was a living nightmare. At times I felt as though I had an evil monster inside me. It was extremely difficult trying to keep that monster quiet. There were many times I wanted to release him however I was terrified I would not be able to control him.

I was ten when I began weighing myself excessively and attempted a diet. When I say a diet I was eating little already, so the better description would be starving. I became nauseous, dizzy, experienced fevers, dysentery, plus severe headaches. I went to the doctor, who told me he was there to save people's lives, not watch them die. Being a kid, doctors to me were special people-like the doctor said, they saved lives. This doctor had just told me I was not worth his time, which reinforced the belief I already had of being unworthy.

The voice in my head was extremely angry with me for attempting to get help from the doctor, demanding that I not do this again because I was not worthy of help and I was taking up time meant for sick people.

I left the doctor feeling very unwell, believing I had failed the system with the voice telling me how much of a failure I was. Prior to this experience I honestly believed a doctor's role was to cure and care. After this experience it was evidence to me this was definitely not the case, and as a consequence I lost complete trust and faith in doctors and anorexia remained hidden.

I was frightened of my anger due to the message I received from my environments, stating girls must not show their anger or emotions. I was angry at myself because here I was being told I was basically not allowed to feel and I was letting others down. Because of my age and gentle, hypersensitive, loving nature I could not fight back or take my anger out on others, so I took my anger out on myself.
I didn't know what to do with the anxiety I was experiencing as a result of the doctor's rejection. I loved to exercise. I was very energetic, so I increased my exercise and it wasn't long before I became aware exercising was relieving my anger. What resulted was even better: I could lose weight and finally there was a realization for the first time in my life I was good at something. The more I exercised, the less I ate. The more weight I lost, the louder the voice. At times it was like I was in an abusive relationship; I was the oppressed one with anorexia (the voice) the oppressor. Sadly I listened to him more than anyone else.

I was what you might term the "ideal child, the over achiever, compliant, and the people pleaser." I was an A plus student, and in most sports at school. I was witty, bubbly, bright, sensitive, caring, and believed it was my responsibility to make others happy. While I could easily identify others strengths I could not identify my own.

I was popular with both female and male friends until I withdrew from them because the voice told me I didn't deserve them, and they were better than me. It was extremely difficult trying to listen to other people talking with the voice raving in my head, at times I wished I had a remote control so I could push a button to stop all the chaos.

Because I was turned away from care when I was ten I was never diagnosed with anorexia. I was 20 when I discovered for myself what was happening to me. On the fourth of February 1983 my favourite singer Karen Carpenter who was 32 years young died. After listening to Karen's symptoms it was clear to me I too was experiencing the same illness.

Five years later I began my pathway of recovery. During the time I was suffering and recovering from anorexia there was no family, friend or professional, cheer-squad or golden pathway. Even though I can say now that's the way it was and such was life, reflecting back it was the most confusing, painful, overwhelming and challenging time in my life. I am so fortunate and extremely grateful I survived it.

In 2003 I was asked to share my experience with anorexia to a community of people, I gratefully accepted the challenge. It was a challenge because it was to be the first time I was ever to share my struggles with a soul let alone a community.

I wanted people in the community and professionals to have a tiny glimpse of what it was like for me so that they might try to have compassion as well as empathy for other sufferers and their families. I also wanted to give sufferers hope that they too could recover. I was very aware back then and still today about the huge hurdle for people with anorexia and other people with mental illnesses because of the lack of awareness surrounding them.

I joined a group of professionals who worked with sufferers in this area, in 2003 and I soon discovered that while they had much knowledge and research in the area they did not truly understand the experience.

I have experienced many years as a telephone counsellor, a carer for people with mental illness, I am qualified as a professional counsellor, and have talked at a university for medical students. I discovered in these areas there is also lack of understanding into the real experiences of mental illness.

The need to understand usually occurs for some-one when a mental illness hits closer to home than the girl around the corner, the actress, famous singer, or footballer. When the understanding and acceptance does arise, which seems to feel like forever for some sufferers, does the judging cease. Sadly for some the understanding does not come.

‘’Just eat something.’’ “The voice you’re hearing is just your inner critic like we all have.’’ Your daughter is just going through a stage.” I have met people who have been diagnosed with Schizophrenia instead of anorexia because of the presence of the voice.

I have heard often from many people with mental illness with much sorrow, summed up, ’Why don’t they (loved ones, professionals) get that I didn’t cause it, I can’t control it and I can’t cure it?’’ “Why am I being punished?”

A cut or a broken arm that is visible or a part of the body that lacks health, we can physically patch up or cut away and this is accepted and justified in our society. Illnesses like anorexia, alcoholism, bipolar, schizophrenia, where a part of the brain is not healthy we cannot put a bandage on as its wounds are too deep. It is not from choice, we cannot see it, so it is feared and rejected by our society and sadly sometimes from those closest to us.

Often sufferers are punished and ostracized by those around them for what others see as weird behaviours. People don’t want to be around weird which results in the sufferer becoming isolated. What others don’t understand is the person they see as acting weird or not behaving the way they ‘’should’’ is in fact ill and in much need of unconditional love and acceptance. It is overwhelming when you don’t understand what is happening and cannot control what is happening to you.

There is enough punishment going on inside a person with a mental illness without others doing the same. All punishment does is reinforce their self hatred, and how bad they believe they are.

I don’t believe it is until we have been seriously ill that we can have a genuine awareness of what it is like for some-one else to be ill and we can have that sensitivity in caring for others. This is why I believe it is beneficial to have a team of professionals treating sufferers and at least one person on the team who has suffered and recovered or cared for a loved one with that specific mental illness. I believe it is also important for the other professionals to have experience in assisting sufferers through their healing process. If the people guiding us do not speak our language how do we attempt our first baby step let alone get past it?
The treatment centres who build their foundation on the qualities above have high recovery rates.

We cheer on those who climb mountains just to conquer them, most times to fulfill a dream. We refer to them as heroes. Rarely do we cheer on those who climb mountains like anorexia, alcoholism, bipolar and Schizophrenia which takes much courage and is done purely to survive. They climb, some conquer their mountain too however they're not referred to as heroes instead they're looked upon as lepers

People with mental illnesses have shared how they are very aware of the judgment by our ignorant and intolerant society in regard to their illness; it is understandable why their illness remains secret.

It's all about getting a fair go here in Australia so the media keeps telling us. If this were true then people with mental illness, as well as their families and carers would be given this same fair go that is given to people with physical illness. After all they deserve as much help for their broken spirit as people with broken arms.

These broken spirited people by the way are usually the one's who will take the shirt off their own backs, give their last dollar, time or help to some-one in need. These same kind people are the ones who may become sufferers of violence.

We are in the year 2007 and I have been well from anorexia for the last nineteen years. I wrote my first book in 2005 called "What do you do when the mirror lies?", to share my honest account with my struggle with anorexia. My second book called Stand Strong I wrote for those who have some-one with anorexia however those who have read it tell me it is for all. Both books I hope will create better awareness, and encourage people to talk.

I am so grateful for my life after my battle with anorexia and for my second chance at life. I want people to know as I do, that anorexia is not just about food and weight for they are the smallest part of the illness. To stop eating and excessive exercise are symptoms of a much deeper problem.

I want people to know that I did not suddenly get out of bed one morning when I was three and decide that I was going to stuff up the next 22 years of my life by starving and exercising myself nearly to the point of death just to look like Barbie. I could not control the voice in my head driving me to what would be termed as weird behaviours. I could not control the fact my brain was not healthy, and I was pre-wired for disease. I could not control my environments, people, events or anything in my life. My body and food were the only things I thought I could control. I also could not control that my culture did and still does not encourage females to be accepted for who we are inside instead encourages us to be small, so small as not to be noticed.

We tend to hide something happening to us even when that thing could be fatal, as a way to protect us and others. In 2003 I discovered my secret about suffering, going through and recovering from anorexia was not mine to keep. It needed to be told then, it still does now and not only by me since I am certain there are many people around the world suffering from anorexia and other mental illnesses, who have their stories to share. It needs to be told by loved ones and carers of sufferers of all mental illnesses. It needs to be told by children and it needs to be heard since many times children are the carers of a parent or parents with a mental illness. Whether our stories are told by talking, writing, through paintings or by plays they need to be told.

We cannot sit back and say our culture is ignorant and intolerant about mental illness without deciding to change ourselves. We need the courage to STAND STRONG and keep talking about these illnesses, express truthfully our stories and not be concerned about what others think of us, after all it is none of our business what they think of us.

21y.o. Nathan's Story

Having a mental illness is one of the hardest things a person could ever have to go through in life. It throws a spanner in the works of your life and puts a halt to your ability to move forward as a human being. My experience with mental illness completely destroyed my life for many years. The first symptoms of my illness began when I was an early teen. At that point I did not recognise them as an illness I simply thought they were real. My earliest memory of a symptom was one that would happen on the way home from school. In year seven when I caught the bus home from school I believed that the people sitting in the back section of the bus had machines that could read my mind. The machines I believed in were about the size of a hand and had screens on them to allow the user to see the images I had in my head. They also had speakers that allowed them to hear what I was thinking. I don't know where I got this idea from but it was one of the scariest things I have ever experienced in my life. Every time I heard a roar of laughter come from the back of the bus I believed the people with these machines were laughing at my thoughts. Eventually I began trying to clear my mind so they couldn't intrude on my privacy. Obviously roars of laughter still occurred and I believed this was them mocking my attempt to block their intrusion. Because of this symptom I constantly dreaded the bus trip home which took half an hour and whilst I was on the bus I was constantly miserable.

About a year and a half on I began to become a very dark person. This was the effects of my bipolar beginning to take hold of my mind. I began to focus solely on all the bad things that had happened to me in my life. There are plenty of them because I had a pretty hard childhood. I focused on the hate I had for my father because I had never met him and because he had put my mother through domestic violence. I focused on the hate I had for my step father because of the constant degrading torment he and his friends put me and my mother through. I focused on the fact that my mothers marriage to him was falling apart. Divorce would mean that I wouldn't be able to see my little brothers as much, that once again I would be without a father figure and my mother would be lonely. Before my bipolar set in I had been able to cope with things of this sort, but after the symptoms began I fell into depression. At the age on sixteen I asked my friend to burn the words hard life into my left arm. He did so with a screwdriver and a lighter. This shows were I was at mentally at that point.

Soon enough I began to allow gangster rap and heavy mental to influence me and began to take my anger out on the world through vandalism and petty thievery. At this young age of sixteen and a half I began going into the city on weekend nights with friends. We would head out at about seven and stay out until four in the morning drinking alcohol, smoking weed and cigarettes and getting up to mischief. After about six months of going into Newcastle with this group I began going in with hardened thugs and criminals. What went on was disgusting but my illness made me think otherwise. I thought it was all justified because the world had done wrong by me. Once again I will state that before my illness set in I had nothing to do with these things despite my hard circumstances. In fact I will point out that from the age of fourteen all my friends had been smoking weed and drinking booze around me and I said no every time they offered it to me. I do believe that the majority of the time there are no excuses for taking up drugs, alcohol and crime. However through my experience I have learnt that in some cases, particularly with mental illness you can blame the person's actions on the illness, not life choices. You see when I was suffering severely from my illness it was as if there was a new person inside my head and he had locked me in the basement of my mind. I acted completely different to how I naturally act. I was a completely new person. Now I have recovered I have returned to how I was before my illness. Now that this has occurred I just don't understand how I did the things that I did. I must emphasise again that it is like a new personality has entered your mind and taken control.

At the age of sixteen and a half I was becoming overwhelmed by depression and other symptoms were beginning to set in. For instance I was extremely confused. The best way to describe it was that I was simply wandering in a daze as life passed me by. I would go hours without speaking a word at times. The reason for this was that I became obsessed with daydreaming. I daydreamed about saving the world because I thought I was sent from heaven to do this. I could be around the most rowdy group of people and I would just sit there lost in my own thoughts. However at other times I would slip into extreme highs and because of this I would talk for hours about my plans to save the world. Another symptom that set in was that my thoughts were erratic. At times I could stay focused on one train of thinking for hours and at other times I couldn't concentrate on one thing for more than a minute. Also as my illness got progressively worse my paranoia did. I believed that everyone I knew was talking about me behind my back and that nobody liked me. This played a big part in me feeling depressed. Finally the violent outbursts began. When the violent outbursts began everything fell apart. Arguments began to happen between me and my mother, my brothers became scared of me and eventually I was taken to the psychiatric ward and scheduled. This happened after I threw two chairs through the walls in my mothers rented house. I would like to add that I always had the self control not to hurt another person.

My first time in hospital was horrible. I felt like a caged rat. I felt my freedom had been stripped away from me. More significant to the story is that I felt it was all for no reason as I didn't believe I had an illness. When I was in hospital I was constantly scared. One of the biggest problems with hospitalisation is that you are put in a bedroom with another person who is ill. Because of this you feel as if you are in constant danger and therefore don't sleep well. You feel as if the person in the bed beside you could flip out at any minute and beat you up. If you think about this it is in fact very possible. Some people with mental illness get violent so what's to stop this situation from occurring? I understand the problem of limited funding but there really should be individual rooms. This is not just for safety it is also because if a person does not sleep well because their scared this lessens their chance of recovering. Another problem I encountered was the amount of time the doctors take to diagnose you. They don't take long enough. I was ill but I believe the doctors spend such a short amount of time interviewing patients that they could easily mistake some of the person’s character traits for symptoms. I also believe that doctors forget that some sane people have pretty weird ideas that they have a right to believe. After all I'm a spiritual person who believes in supernatural phenomenon some doctors out there label people as mentally ill for believing in those things but I am no longer ill. I also believe that doctors sometimes mistake a person’s theory for their belief. All this aside, the biggest problem in the psychiatric ward of hospitals is the attitude of the staff. I can tell you from my own experience and the experiences of friends that the majority of staff in these wards are pricks. Now it’s not their fault. After all my understanding is that they generally see a higher failure rate than success and they have to witness very sad occurrences every day at work. Who wouldn't give up hope? However this does not mean that we can allow the bad treatment of patients to continue. If these people aren't going to do their jobs properly they should be fired. There should be a close eye kept on their attitudes towards patients and their jobs in general.

A positive of hospital was the groups that were run to keep the patients entertained and to allow discussion about illness. There should be more of these. They should run all day every day. You have to keep people happy whilst they are in hospital. If people are not happy they slip into depression, rebel against authority and can even get anxious from feeling trapped. The following is an interview I conducted with a friend who had previously been placed in the psychiatric ward.

Question: Tell me about some of the positives of hospital?

Answer: Some of the nurses were really nice they offered reassurance.
The ward provided plenty of cigarettes.
Some of the patients were really nice.

Question: Tell me about the general vibe of hospital?

Answer: The general vibe of hospital was very unsettling this, caused me to be very withdrawn. I had an intense need to get away from the people.

Question: Tell me about some of the negatives of hospital?

Answer: I was left for three days without receiving any information about my illness eg whether it was a psychosis or nervous breakdown. During this period of time no one attempted to comfort me or even make conversation with me. I was left to talk to other patients. The experience of talking to other patients disturbed me greatly. A lot of them had notions that the world was going to end and that everybody had already been judged by some higher power namely god. I came to believe this and it inspired fear. Because of this I was afraid the majority of the time I was in hospital. These fears stayed with me for months after I left hospital. There was very little interaction between doctors, nurses and patients. Generally they would only spend time with you when required. This made me feel isolated from any intellectual comfort or advice.

As you can see there are far more negatives than there are positives. I personally am deeply disturbed by the fact that there is little to no interaction between mental health staff and the patients. I experienced this also. I personally believe that having a conversation with a non ill person can be one of the most beneficial things for an ill person. Mental health staff should be required to socialise with the patients and should be trained in ways to converse with them. There objectives in doing this should be to calm and comfort the patients, to subtly talk through their delusions with them hopefully helping them to think more rationally and to make them feel happy preventing trauma and depression.

When I was first taken to hospital my mother was told that there was nothing wrong with me and that she just needed to put better boundaries in place. After I was released I was put in a refuge. The refuge introduced a whole new group of trouble makers into my life. Whilst in the refuge I began hanging out at the local drop in centre. Junkies, stoners and criminals hung out at the same drop in centre and I was introduced to all of these people. I was fascinated by these people. I thought that they had the right idea. I felt that if you had grown up in an underprivileged neighbourhood riddled with crime and the government hadn't stepped in to help then the world owed you a favour. Because of this I came to the conclusion that it was not only morally right to steal from well off people but that you had a responsibility to do it so they could learn that life was hard. I hoped that if they learnt that life was hard they would sympathise with the underprivileged and begin to support charitable organisations. These days I still believe that the well off have a lot to learn and should do more for the underprivileged but I don't believe stealing from them is the right way to educate them.

Whilst I was in the refuge I continued to smoke weed and drink alcohol and I made friends with a junkie. Since then I have had a falling out with this dangerous person and now I have to watch my back everywhere I go. He has followed me several times screaming abuse at me. Fortunately I have always been in a crowded place. Usually I escape by catching a taxi but I dread the day I am stuck with no money. I only have one complaint about the refuge system and that is that you should be able to stay there for longer. The only way to accomplish this is to build more refuges. Whilst in the refuge I met a nice girl, she was a very hard girl but she was a nice girl. She was very keen to hook up with me and she was very straight forward about it. I thought and still think she is one of the most attractive girls I have ever seen. I would have loved to have hooked up with her and I had plenty of opportunities. Unfortunately because of my illness I was paranoid about catching diseases from every person who came near me and the thought of sex scared the hell out of me for this reason. Also my illness made me very shy and withdrawn I didn't know what to say or what to do and I believed the whole time that she hated me. Oh well this happens. Towards the end of my stay in the refuge it was organised for me to move to a supported accommodation house. Unfortunately I got kicked out of the refuge for not coming back one night. This led to me spending two weeks homeless whilst the supported accommodation was organised. The reason I didn't come back that night was because I was supporting a friend who was having some relationship troubles.

Homelessness leaves a sickly feeling of emptiness in your stomach. When it is drawing towards night time and you haven't found a place to sleep yet you literally feel like throwing up. In that first two weeks of homelessness I was able to spend a few one nighter's at friends houses but the rest of the time I slept on trains because they were warm. I would travel the Maitland to Newcastle line trying to sleep. However I rarely did out of fear of getting mugged. Sometimes I would walk the streets late at night trying to pass the time until the sun came up. I did this because I was more comfortable sleeping through the day because of my paranoia.

My friends did not take well to me asking for a place to stay and this was understandable given they had watched me destroy my life. As we know a great deal of this was the illness but they were unaware of this. The experience of begging your friends for a bed and a good feed is one of the most degrading things you could ever go through but you have to do it. The experience of them telling you that you can’t stay the night is one of the most devastating things possible. Your stomach feels like it has dropped out your ass all your feelings of hope suddenly leave you, you panic because now you are scared of what lays ahead finally you begin to beg some more. All this is very sad so I will share with you a positive experience. When you haven't eaten properly in one and a half weeks and one of your friends lets you stay then cooks a big baked dinner, well unless you have experienced this you have never truly enjoyed or appreciated food. Sometimes when I was homeless I would go around asking people for fifty cents or a dollar. If I got a dollar I would go and by a litre of home brand milk and make it last. Seems pretty pathetic but this is what some people have to go though.

The next year and a half of my life was basically the same thing repeating with different surroundings. I went through three more periods of homelessness (six weeks all up) I lived in three different homes and I smoked weed and drunk alcohol the whole time. During this time I was extremely poor. I didn't eat well as I spent most of my money on drugs. Also I was constantly getting more paranoid. However the good thing was that my mother supported me the whole time giving me money and occasionally food. You see my mother never wanted to kick me out of home she was forced to because I was a risk to my brothers' safety. The thing was that I was told that as soon as I accepted treatment I could live at home again but I simply wouldn't because I didn't believe there was anything wrong with me.

Two and a half years ago I came to the decision that I was sick of my situation and I accepted treatment. At the time I still firmly believed that there was nothing wrong with me and that treatment was unnecessary. I also still suffered paranoid thoughts about what the medication would do to me. The thoughts I experienced are common here is a list of some of them.

I believed that the medication would dramatically alter my personality. The reality of the situation of course was that the medication would give me back the personality I had before I became ill which is ultimately my true personality.

I believed that the medication would make me lethargic for the entirety of the period I was on it. The reality was that it only made me lethargic for around four months and it was totally worth it to be well again.

I believed that the medication produced a certain personality type and therefore everyone who took it had the same personality. Of course this was not true at all.

Despite these beliefs I still accepted treatment because I had simply had enough. My situation at the time when I realised this was that the lease had just run out on the house I was boarding in and I found myself homeless again. The day we all left the house I went to my mother's house and begged her to take me back. She simply said I had to accept treatment and I said I would. The next two and a half years leading up to now have had their ups and downs. The medication made me quite lethargic for the first four months or so and I lacked motivation. Also the fact that my brain was recovering from several psychosis made me very tired. Also I gained about thirty kilo due to the medication. Despite these factors and the fact that it took quite a while to rebuild my relationship with my little brothers there have been a lot more positives over the last few years. The first and biggest positive of my recovery was the friend I made. Me and my best friend were introduced by our parents who met at a carer support group. At first I didn't like him but we ended up going to the same support group and found out that we lived very close to each other. At the time I didn't have any friends so I began hanging out with him. From there on we supported each other through every step of the long hard recovery process. The second most important positive of recovery was regaining my 'sanity' and my love for life.

Over the last two and a half years I have been living a very active normal life here is a list of some of the things I have been involved in.
Amateur theatre acted in one play, backstage work on four.
Writing articles for 'steps' newsletter, five published.
Studying the business of the music industry at T.A.F.E., learning to manage bands.
Public speaking about mental health issues, have given fifteen speeches.
Working at a café.
Learning to ride motorbikes with intention of getting license.
Recording my own music.
Working on three novels.
Writing short stories.
Going out and seeing bands with people and socializing.

On top of this I have just been accepted into a new government initiative created by the Mental Health Council of Australia called the national register for consumer and carer advocates. This will involve numerous opportunities to be trained as a consumer advocate and will also involve me sitting on state and federal level committees helping form new mental health policies. Also I should note that I have a large network of friends and that they are all good honest people,…no thugs and gangsters!
And on top of all of this my relationship with my family has never been better.

However it hasn't been all smooth sailing. Occasionally I will get small bouts of depression and recently I developed a massive anxiety problem but that's all better now. Anyway that's my story thankyou for reading.

Black Swans Story

I guess by the age of five issues were already present with life's trauma's and a disability of hips dysplasia, and family issues that were never spoken of. By school age I was already behind most school entry requirements, also had a speech impediment problem and undiagnosed dyslexia, with communication issues. I came from a strict up bringing and later the eldest of 6 offspring.

I also came from an era of denial, if we chose not to remember it then it never really happened, or if we admit to anything then we adults would be admitting to failure. Children should be seen and not heard, and the adults were always right!

I suppose you could call it the neglect era, in one sense we were looked after well when it came to clothing, schooling and the providing of material things in a middle class to low income family. But no one looked at the mental health side of things; even physical disabilities were disowned, like my father put my not walking down to laziness, in fact most things back then was put down to laziness, but operations later proved different so he disowned me, but that did not stop me from insisting I was a daddy's girl. And we were disciplined and punished when required even though sometimes it was a little on the extreme side.

At one time the education department sent me to a counselor outside of the school and he spoke over my head to my mother as if I was not in the room and then sent me out of the room, he told her I needed more beltings, she thought she was already dishing out enough beltings. At this stage I was diagnosed as a problem child and everything was my fault and issue. My school levels were always poor and I had panic attacks every single day of my life as a child and teenager, often these panic attacks got me into a lot of trouble as nobody understood the trauma I was experiencing and I was unable to communicate with anyone as I did not understand myself and no one had a name for it.

When still young I remember running away from school to my nanas, in the mean time my father turned up at school to find me not there, while he headed to my nanas I had bailed myself up between the shed and fence with a knife threatening to take my own life if I was made to go back to school or to go home, and threatened to kill my aunty if she came near me, I was only 8 at the time.

One time when 15 my attacks were so sever I was taken to a female Indian doctor. In tears I tried to explain what was happening and she wanted to do an internal on me, Say what! As a virgin and never ever had one before I refused and thought what a bunch of bone heads, what does an internal have to do with what I was experiencing, in reality my nerves were shot since before school entry, but no one knew that.

I was given a bottle of blue pills for depression, only weeks later after a family row; I took the whole bottle and went to bed expecting to never wake up. Until morning when I was woken and it was noticed immediately I had taken an overdose, yet still driven to work as groggy as I was, needless to say I lost my job that day.

My parents had broken up when I was 14 and I took that very hard, and still suffered from PTSD after my baby brother was a cot death victim when he was 5 months old and I was 10, we children were not allowed to grieve and was sent to school the next day as if nothing had happened, I remember collapsing in my teachers arms and 5 minutes later schooling continued as if nothing happened. I suppose mum did her best in raising 6 children alone, but she was very stubborn and too proud and very much into her religion. She was a victim of child sex abuse by her stepfather as with most of her siblings after her own father died while she was young, and I often felt she took her frustrations out on me. There was some violence and aggression between my parents with me becoming between them, I thought I was protecting my parents and my siblings and would deeply become traumatized by it, but often ended up the one being punished for my troubles.

I was easy manipulated as a child by authority figures that always sparked a reaction from me, and often got blamed for things even if it was not my doing or there was an explanation, and no one believed anything I said even when it was the truth. I grew up doubting myself, and life was just a dream.

I didn’t get along with my family and the same for school, and grew up mostly a loner, I took comfort in pretending I was like my hero’s, like Suzi Q or Elvis, I often disassociated myself as a female and took on the role as a male. I dressed and acted as a true blue tomboy and loved doing male things. I liked sports and music but was not allowed to take part in these things.

When still 15 I went to live with my father and his new family and shortly later took another overdose, only this time with a cocktail of alcohol. Once again medical attention was denied. We then traveled up north and I along with one of my stepbrothers was in the caravan when it over turned. Not long later I got in a drunken brawl with my father and was smashed to the pulp.

I then came back to Adelaide where soon after my life on the streets began at age 16. I fretted for my siblings and missed them deeply especially the younger ones, but they never knew how much I pined for them and often cried for them, but I could not go back to something that never was.

Even though a loner on the streets, I never really hung out with any gangs; I endured bashings and rape after bashings and rape. Slept on benches in parks and behind shops or on the steps of pubs, and hitched hiked around Australia. There were times I got no centrelink payments or someone would claim for me and then abandon me taking off with the money as back then only one partner would get the money, I would go weeks without a bite to eat or seeing a shower.

I led a life as a zombie, a nomad that roamed the planet and often doctor shop for pills to keep me in the zombie state, anything was better than reality, I continued to play the game of Russian roulette and did not care. By 17 I was full on into the pills and alcohol and smoked a little dope, and even gained a tattoo or two. I portrayed the tough person I was in fact not, I did not take big time drugs as my family and others portrayed of me, in fact I had a phobia to needles and always had due to my younger years experiences.

My first experience of mental health institution was at 17 in one of the first places to close down, which was somewhere in Enfield SA after yet another overdose. I spent some weeks there before being released. Not long later after a drunken episode and another family brawl I found myself facing jail, in reality I hadn’t even committed a crime, I was just out of control and wished I was dead. Now how can that be a crime, my mother kept yelling at me and told me I should have been the one dead instead of my baby brother, so her wish was my command as I reached for a knife from a draw to take my own life, only she struggled with me and the knife and I threatened to kill her if she tried to stop me, as she instructed a sibling to call the police, they all told the same story, I tried to kill my mother and to this day they stick to that story. So I gained my first police record to which is still on record to this very day.

I had my first child a daughter by 18 and soon married a guy from Melbourne and not the father of my child. Once again I endured bashings and rape after bashings and rapes, (I came close to death while carrying my baby as my body did not cope well and the traumas of life was taking its toll), and when my husband could no longer hurt me anymore he then started on my daughter. That only lasted 3 ½ years before I finally got the courage to walk away with the help of a new boy friend.

I divorced my ex and remarried (jumped from the frying pan into the fire) this one was an alcoholic and again I endured many bashings. During my second marriage I ended up back in the mental health system and this time I soon learnt what detained meant as I tried to escape a few times. I went to Hillcrest, to Woodleigh House, to Glenside and even to Noarlunga. My first diagnosis was in my twenties which was manic depressive disorder and I was placed on Lithium.

Over many years I had also endured a number of operations for different reasons. I went from problem child, to delinquent, to drug addict, to manic depressive disorder, to post traumatic disorder, to schizophrenia, to depressive disorder, back to post traumatic disorder, to borderline personality disorder, back to bipolar (formerly manic depressive disorder) and twice through undiagnosed postnatal depression.

I told my husband he would be the death of me, soon my marriage ended and he contributed to the death of his next girlfriend not long after. After my second marriage ended I had died inside, as many times before and this time I reached for the needle forgetting about my fear of injections and ended up on heroin. I did not care once again, and discovered I had at some point in my life come into contact with hepatitis B and only had the antibody, I learnt I was not a carrier and the doctor told me I must have done something right in my life. I did learn it was not through injecting drugs as I had just started at the time, and it could have been through the many rapes or my first ex who I later found out had used needles, but I also was told by the Hepatitis C council it could have even been through blood transfusion as a toddler, I guess we will never know.

My second daughter came a long in the early 90s when my eldest was 10.
By the time my eldest daughter was 13 she had ran away from home over me trying to keep her away from an older boy who had lured her through his music and religion, I tried so hard to get her back home

My family stepped in and took my youngest child away when she was 4 ½. After the investigation by welfare they admitted amongst my many issues I was still a caring mother, and I had plenty of evidence to prove I could still take care of my child, and I was very much involved in both of my girls schooling and got on well with their teachers as I often helped out at the schools. The welfare said I could have my daughter back, only when I went to get her my family had shot through with her.

After I lost my child, both she and I had a broken heart and I had nothing else to lose, nothing left to be taken away from me, all I ever had in life had been stripped from me. So I left the state and hitch hiked around again as I lived on the streets and I climbed the ladder once again as I picked up seasonal work here and there. I went cold turkey from drugs on my own with no help from any one.

I ended up in a psych hospital in NSW somewhere and in another in Mildura, I spent a number of months in Mildura drugged to the eyeball, and went through many tests, to find I had an ulcer, hiatus hernia and endured a hysterectomy and still homeless.

During this time in life I got up the courage to finally teach myself how to drive and gave myself a new found independence I never new I had. And even scored a job on a mine for a while as I bunny hoped around the mine and big trucks in the company car, but my car soon failed me and left me stranded with no choice but to leave town as my transport was also my home.

Back in Adelaide one of my former Psychiatrists from one of the hospitals took an interest in me and tried to make sense of me (gee I couldn't even make sense of me). And he played silly little games to try and get me to open up to him. There were times I was detained, and times transferred to tighter security, at times I was drugged to the eyeballs and times I was kicked out and times I was band from the hospital. Nothing he tried seemed to work, nothing got through to me, until he found out I was on drugs again when he finally gave up and told me to never return as there was no hope for me. I believe he left and now specializes in children mental health and prevention. If only he could see me now and how far I have come all on my own merits.

I tried many times to get my daughter back and even promised her when she begged me, and was told when I got my home I could, but people lie, my family kept manipulating me to think no one would allow it as I was mental, I was weak and I couldn't cope and no one would believe me.

The laws changed and unless I was a criminal I was not entitled to a lawyer, and even though my family only had interim custody they manipulated me, her school and everyone to believe they had full custody. They cut me out of her life so many times, never asked for permission for anything and never involved me in her upbringing, often they spoke for me and thought for me, and jumped to their own conclusions, while putting me down to my children in front of me and behind my back and to anyone who would listen and believe them.

Until they removed her we both had a special bond and were inseparable, when they took her it was like her going to strangers as she hardly knew them.

It is hard for a mother and daughter to be torn out of each others arms with both screaming for mercy, people think they are helping you when in fact their controlling is destroying you inside and out. My daughter is her own person now and in high school with an out of school hour's job and a hell of an attitude like her mother.

In 2002 my youngest brother 26 took his own life, he was a proud man and broke up with me over attempting the very same thing that ended his life, some things in life just do not make sense or add up.

I have climb the ladder once more, off drugs, rarely drink, a student going for my Cert 1V in mental health non clinical, work one day a week for an organization and volunteer for another. I have taught myself all computer skills thanks to the kind heart of a close male friend who has been my savior over the past four years. I have implemented strategies that are being used in the training of other consumers and helped many other consumers to recovery. I am also teaching myself filming and cutting and editing and have already put together two DVDs one of a TheMHS conference and one of a mental health music project of its final performance. I am now working on my biggest project which is still in the making and will involve over 100 people.

I have had Government Mental Health services and their hidden consumer workers breech my privacy in a very bad way including making many phone calls about me with their own versions and no facts to back them up and when caught out they passed the buck and blamed an unwell consumer refusing to apologize and undoing the damage they did.

When I was on probation at 17 I had a lovely probation officer, she took an interest in me and we got along well, she found me honest and cooperative, and worked in with my family. But when my probation ended after only a couple of weeks so did this support and I faded away back into the system and troublesome times, this is when I discovered I was pregnant.

When my eldest child was 5 she accidentally splashed aftershave in her eyes as she was trying to copy my second husband. But a mental health consumer and now former friend was present at the time and in another room, falsely rang the welfare and told them my husband threw it in her eyes, she did not witness this as it did not happen.

The welfare was hell bent on trying to take away my child and called in my mother, a female school principle and an expert child psychologist, and I called in an alcohol counselor who I saw at the time over my husbands drinking. My husband sat in silence while all the women fired questions at me and put me down and gave me the third degree over and over until the male counselor pointed the finger at them and told them to back off and I should not be the one punished over my husband’s alcoholism.

After the meeting another expert child psychologist was called in and guess who it was, my old probation officer, well did she flip her lid and told all the women b*tches to but out of my life and stop playing off me and my child and to stop integrating my child behind my back and putting words into her mouth. She took on the case alone and weeks later told me she was closing the case as at all times I was cooperative and tried out everything she suggested and at all times my home was spotless and she could see her own reflection in my kitchen tiles and my child was well cared for. She also told me she was leaving the system as she did not like the way it was heading. The system lost one of their best workers ever to exist as she moved on.

There were not many good people I came across in my life time, and the very few I did find did not last, all the good workers either left or where moved on to different offices. I never had stable regular support, and there was always some one different, people who did not know you, and people who did not know the real story or the facts, people who lied, people who were judgmental and bias and people who jumped to their own conclusion and made up their own scenario; people who were experts at manipulation and those who played of others and those who passed the buck and pointed fingers and blamed others.

Many times I made phone calls, and many times I begged and many times I jumped up and down crying for support and every time I was ignored.

One good thing that has come out of my training is I now see both sides of things, as a consumer studying other consumers, and as a consumer studying the services and I don’t like it one little bit. Everyone is manipulating everyone and playing of each other and I am not just talking about the consumers, these services that claim to be experienced professionals are professionals alright, professionals at everything I mentioned above!

Realistic support needs to be available, regular support needs to be there, and stick to the same people instead of chopping and changing staff, if staff are appreciated and treated with respect then they may stay on longer. If you get a real bonza of a worker, then recognize it when it comes a long and you may keep your staff longer, do anything in your power to keep them there, and if they are very successful where they are, then leave them there, don't send them else where leaving their clients to fade away back into the system and up sh*t creek without a paddle.

If I had support as a child, or a teen and an adult then I would not have gone through as much as I had, there was no one to talk to, no one who understood, no one to turn to. Sure there were people and family, but only to interfere, to control you and tell you what to do, how to live, and if you did not do their thing their way, then you were no good in their eyes, you were a disappointment, you were evil and bad. But in reality you were none of those things, you were just some fading statistic that spent a life time crying out for help, and no body heard you.

Even though I have been recovering for four years, I at times still cry out for help, but mostly in silence now, because in reality I know that help will never come, not before, not now, and not in this life time.

A year and a half ago I had major surgery and was sent home four days later with 80 stitches from hip to hip, three gaping wounds and in shock, I had to take care of myself and had no visitors and no get well phone calls from any of the services I was involved in as a volunteer, both Non-Government Organisations and government, yep I was abandoned, as good as dead! In four years as a volunteer I was never sent to a volunteer's luncheon by any of them. I felt, exploited, used, chewed up and spat out. They say you get out what you put in; well I just keep giving and giving, so when will I get out of it what I put in?

I have always been on my own, I am still on my own, and I guess I will always be on my own, so when my project is finished then I too will be moving on, I don't want to stay in mental health as a consumer or a worker, because nothing has changed, and I am still one who has slipped through the system. Yeah sure mental health needs me, only my ideas and strategies that they can steal from me and exploit me to make a name for themselves, see they are still manipulating us, but are they there when I need them? Think again!

And they wonder where I get my F***** Attitude from!

I have come to recovery through my own merits and not through the merits of the recovery module. I have one hell of an attitude and trust no body (why should I). I refuse to bow down to the recovery module and its controllers in the system and because I am an independent recovering on my own merits they don't want to know me and even go as far as stealing my own strategies and stripping all credit away from me, where Non-Government Organisations acknowledge me, and ask for my approval to use my work and thank me. I never say no to them and am proud of what I have accomplished and that I am able to assist others. But the government workers just take what they want when they want and then use it to make a name for themselves. To all you government workers who fit this description, let it be known that we know who you are and what your game is and you are also known throughout the community amongst Non-Government Organisations also. If you want a name for yourselves then you will get one, but not the one you expect!

The recovery module is falsely leading consumers to believe they are recovering while those steering the module are really the ones in control not the consumers who mistakenly think they are now in control of their own lives.

People have been manipulating me and controlling me all my life, but no more, the buck stops right here. I am in control of my life now and no one or module is ever going to control me ever again. I am a consumer and I am for the consumers, I am an independent, and have one hell of a determination about me that has some how kept me a live all these years. I have an illness like any other illness; I have different side affects and different reactions and symptoms.

But overall I am me, I am unique and I am original, I am not a fake, and what you see is what you get. I am a struggler, I am a battler, I am not and never have been a criminal (even though with a small record) and I have a bad credit rating even though I owe not a cent to a living sole, I have never been in debt, and never been kicked out of the only two housing trust I have rented.

And I have never told my full story before, my life saddens me and I still cry when I try to write about it and always delete my writing of it, and telling my story also contributes to my becoming unwell, because of this when I do presentations I prefer on tell others how far I have come in four years instead of where I have come from.

My life made me what I am today, a stronger person and a smellier attitude. Some people say we have choices in life, well to those people, some times we don’t have choices in life and some times it is the way the cookie crumbles. If someone tells you they have terminal cancer and are dying, what are you going to say to them, we have choices to live or die?

Michael Nanai's Story

My Name is Michael. I am 39 years of age and come from a New Zealand born Samoan, part Tongan heritage. What I learned about myself was that when I was a child I was more or less an auditory learner, with a 'hands on' approach. When asked to tell my story I leaped at the chance. I have so much too tell! So as a young boy I always day dreamed…a lot. I cherish those feelings and emotions because they were sweet, carefree and innocent, curious and always optimistic. Always wondering what will happen next? This was short lived and stolen from me when I was 8 or 9. I'm not quite sure when but I get confused when I try to pinpoint it in my own mind?

I was the eldest of my siblings and I was forced to give oral sex to an adopted cousin in my Grand Aunt's family. The act itself was completely alien and foreign to me. As a child I thought that this is what was done? I was naïve and gullible at this time because I didn't know any better. I said nothing. After a year went by being forced to do these horrid acts, the secrets I was forced to keep later manifested themselves to be quite retarding in my own emotional and personal growth. I grew to hate this person over the years. I just wanted to kill him and I still do at times! My father and mother were completely unaware what had happened to my brother and I for many years till I finally told them. I have memories of my Grand Aunt ripping my mother's hair and whilst holding my mum's head by a clump of it and then tossing her down 10 flights of stairs.

I remember my mother telling me stories about when her Grandfather, a 7ft Tongan nobleman, migrated to Samoa. Thus centuries of war against each other left relationships between the two islands in a mortal rift with a lot of deep wounds and bad blood, this left a generational apathy which still remains between them both making them weary of each other. In those days when my mother was growing up they were treated very poorly because they were part Tongan/ German. Tongan Dogs they were called and this form of prejudice or ethno centric behaviour grew to change over time as well. My father supported my mother's family financially supplementing their income because they were providing accommodation etc. In our culture it has an element of hierarchal distribution where the chiefs down to the heads of family share or give to those who are needier as a form of respect. This also involved a traditional respecting of elders and older members of your family and bearing gifts, money or food was also a sign of social cohesion.

My abuser was Catholic and my mother seems to think he had it done to him at Boarding School. I attended church every Sunday and was originally an Orthodox Presbyterian. I was comforted having a good experience which added a new found respect for other religions and cultures including my own. I found this to be quite fascinating. When attending Primary School the minister's wife would come along to our classes and sing Christian songs. In this period of Primary School I never knew I was going to be learning lessons about sadistic racist attitudes coupled with riveting and inspiring stories about history!

I used to look after my mother a lot because she was always sick and as of consequence I would be late for class sometimes. My teacher one day just walked up to me and said "Hit me, hit me!" I said nothing. He then exclaimed "I can tie one arm behind my back, blindfold myself and still beat you". He made me sit in class with no one allowed to speak to me and I wasn't allowed to do any school work for a whole year. He also strapped me at his leisure. He was excluding me from learning and he had issues around my ethnicity. I don't know why I didn't tell my father but I knew if I did he would have lopped his head off with a machete! I guess I could have handled it and I knew my father would end up in Prison! I know I was somewhat mature in my response to the manner I was treated and, as a child growing up, my father would keep his father's picture in pride of place on our walls. This was who I was to be measured by, one of the few to be appointed to the bar of judges since gaining our independence from the Commonwealth.

Two unseen forces were impacting on me. The hatred of my own Culture and of Catholics and the ill treatment we received from extended family. Physical discipline was a means of teaching respect for the breadwinners or those who come of age and are expected to lead. The other was the gloomy future after experiencing racism, physical and sexual abuse at a young age. My grandfather belted me and I was arguing with him over what had been arranged prior to him having to looking after me.

I knew my mother was deeply saddened and hurt by her father remarrying and somehow this was transferred to me because my mother would seek my counsel because I was quite rational and logical about domestic disputes concerning our family? I never forgot that beating so one day when he and his new family were asleep, I covered all the gaps in the door and closed all the windows. I then turned on all the gas cookers and took all their empty bottles to the shop so I could get a refund to buy lollies. My brother had no idea what I was doing. After an hour I came back only to find my mother and father were there. My mother had a horrified expression on her face and said "look". People say hatred burns you out shortens your life; for me it was a case of being patient and feeling I had put right a wrong? Revenge for a young man like me at the time was quite inflating for my ego and honourable in the sense I did this for the sake of my mother and myself!

As I was nearing my teens I had to endure the blue collared type of attitudes most kids in my neighborhood endured. Hearing and knowing everyone's personal business. Domestic violence and drunkenness. Wife beatings and kids being beaten. Men worked hard, came home and abused their wives, ate well and drank hard, and if you were lucky you would get into a fight or brawl at the end of the night to consolidate your place amongst your mates; this is what it was to be a man but these were not the best of fathers. I remember a time when all the neighbourhood kids would get together to play long ball or build huts and castles at the local park with scrap materials that would get dumped there. Hunting for eels to smoke and eat. One night my father had his band practice at home and I was the envy of all my friends. All the kids piled into our humble small house to listen to the music.

I use to mediate arguments between my parents and I respected my father for being so modern in allowing us to have input as children when there was a crisis. He was very democratic and forward thinking, whilst at the same time very proud. It was hard growing up always being compared to your cousins who were doing very well. It made me feel I wasn't good enough and inadequate but this I always kept to myself. I just wanted my father to be proud of me. This was the dusk of my childhood before entering my turbulent teens.

The testosterone was raging for most of my rebellious friends, but for me it was a quiet solitude of headspace I was in. As I was in this phase of life I wasn't bothered by anything, disturbed by any inconveniences, mishaps or traumas. I took up Martial Arts (Kempo Karate Bushido Ryu). I was learning self discipline and how to defend myself. When I went from White belt to Yellow belt I had to fight a 1st Dan Black Belt. I knocked him out and on the floor in 5 or 6 seconds. My life seemed empty in this stage of my life and I was developing an interest in the fairer sex.. I was so screwed up because I was struggling with my own sexuality so later on experimented. We were both in our teens and he was about 2 or 3 years younger. It was at that point I knew I was not Gay. I am still friends with my first ever girlfriend who had similar abuse issues to myself.

The Maoris use to call us coconuts or Boongas. Some still do today. Maoris were called Horys by the Anglos and Horys would call the Anglos Honkeys. This was a fact of life! I personally thought of it as a joke! As I got older the more experiences around racism or prejudice and indifference were rife. Our national code to be the best Rugby nation in the world was quite evident when watching the protesters against apartheid at a All Black and South African Match disappointed at our then Liberal Government not intervening to boycott these games. It was good to see that we had people who were passionate about Human Rights abuses but what about the insidious layer in the mainstream character of the country we lived in? I think this “she’ll be right mate “ attitude we had in those days was more a humorous way of making distinctions of how each culture tolerates another.

I was starting to see a generation of New Zealand born Islanders trying desperately to hold on to their culture for fear of losing their identity. The adoption of the Maori culture was quite significant because Samoans are of a Warrior Cast and it was not dissimilar in attitudes and mentalities that Maoris had at the time. Nowadays Islanders are in most of the traditional Maori national gangs in NZ including my youngest brother.

I played professionally in Rugby League and Amateur Rugby before it became professional. Jonah Lomu got his first contract with my club Weymouth RFC straight out of school after I had left. I then met my first wife who didn’t support me much in my sporting career. I chose to sacrifice my career for a future with her. I worked hard and the hard times got harder under the New Zealand equivalent of work choices when it was introduced. No protection anywhere for common workers’ rights and conditions. They were sold down the river for a higher annual pay rise. I had to become more flexible and adaptable so I tried my hand at running a small business where I eventually had 3 courier franchises.

It was at this time in my life where I think I had my first episode of psychosis. I thought it was a breakdown and it was of sorts. I use to smoke cannabis recreationally unlike my friends whose lifestyles incorporated it everyday. The music and culture of reggae was very strong at one point where most Islanders and Maoris use to associate their current hardships with being oppressed by the man and the system.

When my first wife was climbing the corporate ladder her behaviour and attitude changed towards me. I had a gut feeling that something was going on but no matter how much I tried to pleaded with her to talk and try to resolve matters…she remained cold towards me. It was like “I’m too good for you” and it was a kind of defiance that rattled me to my core making me feel like a nobody. My drinking started to increase and I started smoking more cannabis. Our housing trust home had thin walls and I could hear everybody around me. I was feeling I was hurtling out of control! This went on for a few weeks she would go out at night wearing her best casual outfits after losing a lot of weight at her company gym. She would put her face on and all the female wares needed to fulfil her plans for the evening. One night I just confronted her and asked, “are you seeing someone else?” She just gave me the silent treatment. Her mother whom we lived with would tell me nothing, being the bloody gossip bag that she was! All this pressure started to build up in my head. I was frantic about trying to save my marriage.

I could hear the neighbours gossiping and would yell out and swear at them. I was convinced that my neighbours were spying on us. I often use to answer them when rebutting conversations relevant to me. It got really bad to the point where I was arrested and taken to my family home. I could hear voices condemning me. All I could think was what did I do to deserve this. I was overall a good son, brother and husband. She then rang me a week or two later stating she was pregnant and said she wasn't sure whose it was. She wouldn't hear of having a DNA test.

The person she was having the affair with was a Maori guy who was known in the neighbourhood as some cool cat who had women all over him and known for playing guitar with his Slash type hairstyle. I loved her all the same and I was willing to do anything to win her back. When she told me I was weeping for a whole week wishing and praying for his death. I even saw some spiritualist to try and curse him. By the end of the week he died in a car crash. Oh how they mourned. Far be it for me to speak ill of the dead but I thought this would be an opportune time to reconcile.

She moved into her own place right across from his family home. I was a treated like a visitor and everyone was treating her as the last incubator of his last legacy. I felt pathetic like some peasant who was a distant relation. The harassing voices continued. I had approached a mental health service where I thought I could manipulate them so I could reconcile with my wife. This is how I eventually gained entry to her new residence. A lot of my personal friends hated her and were shocked at how she reduced me to a snivelling and grovelling mess. She told me some time later the little girl was mine. For years she said it wasn't mine and then she would change her mind when it suited her or when there was some financial gain from saying yea or nay.

Rumours were all about; about my sexuality, that I was some deviant. I manipulated mental health services in New Zealand so that I could reconcile with my wife and start over. How I went about this was I always self sabotaged myself by ruining anything that would destroy the good image or memories of achievements that I had fulfilled. In this case of my ex-wife I self sabotaged myself once again not for pity but out of desperation to keep my minds eye of a less than perfect life. The Anglos in New Zealand were racist towards me because of this but I was use to it. The on-going rumours and gossip that followed, a letter I wrote mysteriously disappeared.

After exhausting my efforts to get my property back. I was confiding in a so called mentor and friend who happened to be my coach and an ex-copper. He gave it to Mental Health Services and then the on-going gossiping about me continued. It has been almost 12 years since my first episode but I know that if push came to shove I would sue them for every last penny they had! They accept no accountability for the trauma they have caused me nor have they assisted or supported me in recovery of sexual abuse, racism, education discrimination and not to mention the array of human rights abuses. They are insignificant scared little people who have the mentality of sheep. It's interesting how a double Whammy like sexual abuse, other traumas and racism have studies that all prove that it contributes to schizophrenia.

My neighbours and my ex-wife represent the ignorance of white people and how they view people who are dark like myself with culture different from themselves as inferior. Patronizing behaviours and paternalistic even find this to be the case with clinicians who think they know what recovery means! Over the years I have been suicidal over the attempted murder of my Grandfather and sexual abuse. I have reconciled these feelings a long time ago and human nature such as it never seems to surprise me how it will always repeat history. I could write on forever about my laymen theories about sociology, philosophy, etc, but I won't! I would have delusions despite believing them at the time that it was a mix of echolalia and thought broadcasting as the clinicians in mental health would call it. I called it newspeak, a form of communication which gave license to the person who could use it in conjunction with a wide variety of media, be it a single transmitter/ receiver then being relayed to a radio station or television live screening. It was the silent form of communication where thoughts like an ongoing tic that a person has with Tourette's but without the abuse. There is no description for the machinations I use to think especially when I use to do Nasal Palatialing.

In my own mind I had done great things for the world and I was certainly shaped by the experiences of others especially when I was homeless in Brisbane living in and around the red light district of Fortitude Valley. In and out of SRFs, redneck coppers trying to do drug busts. When I arrived in Australia John Howard had just become Prime Minister. Now that he's gone I feel like I'm full circle and I can grow. I travelled around and met a lot people who have made meaningful contributions to what the real people are doing. In the Salvo's homeless shelter I loved playing chess with all these men and everyone was dignified despite their circumstances. They still had standards and they would want you to know it. I was so accustomed to pride that in the end I just had to swallow it. Homeless, Drug Addicts, Mentally ill or possibly one person having a co-morbid condition or situation of all three. These were people with stories and I loved learning from these people who have been stuck in limbo or fallen from grace like the Choir of Hard Knocks. This opened my eyes to better self management. Improving your self-esteem when you feel you are insignificant, seeing yourself with a world view all your own or with others who can help shape it makes good sense to me.

Anyway I don't want to ramble on too much. I met a lovely woman in Queensland and we chatted about mental health amongst other things and from there we've been together ever since. I later became paranoid that someone was going to kill me but I had good grounds for this which landed me in the Witness Protection Program prior to travelling to Queensland. Anyway I held my partner hostage in a verbally threatening way whilst on holidays. I took the car and sped 400 kilometres from Coffin Bay to Whyalla. I had been drinking all night and I finished a bottle of whiskey by the time I had arrived at the beach. I got into a car accident. I checked the occupants then used the nearest household's phone. I rang the Federal Police and was quoting Protocols and procedures of a 1503 or 1508 under the international covenant of political and civil rights. The State Police burst in shouting at me to put down the phone. I told them I was on the phone to the Feds. They threatened to shoot and were gesturing to pull out their guns, I put down the phone and they hand cuffed me. They then booked me for drink driving and took me to the ED.

No one wanted to listen to what I had to say but for me mental health services were the enemy and my nemesis. I was co-operative and I was under the impression I was going to catch a bus home. Yes I was under the influence of alcohol but I certainly wasn't a threat to anyone or myself. They acuphased me twice and the Royal Flying Doctors service flew me to the Royal Adelaide Hospital where I was then transferred to a locked acute in-patient setting called Brentwood at the archaic Glenside Hospital. All I could think was these b*stards finally got me. I felt they were judging me because I was dark and 6ft 2 with a solid build. Despite being compliant and confused.

These days I teach recovery based groups at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. I'm a pro-active consumer. I do a lot. My latest job I do community rehab work in a Community Rehab Centre with a recovery focus. I am currently accepted to study a Grad Dip in Mental Health Sciences. I'm happily married with children. Life has given me the riches of experiences unique only to me. "I know who I am and have always believed that my life is a continuum of experiences that contribute to the better part of me for better or worse. It shapes who I am and this I believe is life!” My life is full and I don’t need much more than to ensure I’m well for my sake and the sake of my family, friends and peers. I’ve been living in the streets when I was in my early teens. I have been homeless. I use to take illicit drugs. I’ve been educationally, culturally discriminated against including with my disability. I’ve been sexually abused. I have been severely beaten on a number of occasions. I have been on the witness protection program. I have been divorced. I have been forcibly drugged. I have been put in seclusion unjustly. My human rights have been trampled since the day I could conceive it wasn’t meant to be this way. I am satisfied with my life now and for all the pain and grief I have been through, its good to know that only I could have endured it! I’m pretty sure there would be other people who would not be so fortunate to survive!

Furthermore whilst I was diagnosed with Paranoid Schizophrenia and have components of anxiety and stress related factors which exacerbate my symptoms. It is an on-going challenge. I self-manage reasonably well and often I find myself questioning whether I need to be taking anti-psychotic medication? This is of course can be complacency on my part to feel as though the need for medication has now ceased because I am feeling as ‘normal’ as everybody else and why bother?

If I was to go down this road of not being compliant with my medication I am lulled in a false sense of security because I start to experience negative symptoms and being a little stubborn about this I would persevere with self managing not really conscious of the fact that I am very close to relapsing and becoming psychotic.

Mental Health Fields are pushing client centred care and recovery oriented principles in care with Consumers but due to this their seems to be a significant proportion of us who are high functioning and can maintain a living standard in which we can be happy with. I guess it’s just good to know that the case management is now changing for the better and consumer focus is the priority of most clinicians who assist us.

Its is a very delicate balance when you are detained in an acute inpatient setting especially if you relapse and become psychotic? The mentality of institution for consumers when detained is still rife. Feeling disempowered and having an “us and them” attitude only represents the actual circumstances they are in due to detention. It is a level of acute care but at the centre of it there is no client focus other that what seems like a patronizing and disrespect of the differential of power between the clinician and the consumer. One would hope that this will change.

I maintain that duty of care is important every assessment of individualized care is important but humanity should be at the core of it all! It is unfortunate the system as it is does nothing to offer autonomy where your simple freedoms are violated i.e. freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom of association…who knows when we will get to a time when the system and its policies aimed at care for consumers addresses the imbalance it so obviously reflects in actual practice?

David Guthrie – My first episode of psychosis

On Easter Tuesday in 1978, I was informed that my friend Sam had been killed in a car crash on Easter Sunday. He had been hitchhiking in Tasmania and had apparently been picked up by a drunken driver. The funeral was in a couple of days. Mick rang me to tell me when and where the funeral was. I put a death notice in the Age – "Like a true nature child, Sam was born, born to be wild". The night before the funeral I went to John's house and smoked joints. Next day John and I drove to the funeral at Maryknoll church near Garfield.

I wore a white jumper, brown corduroy jeans and leather sandals with no socks. We smoked more joints on the way. Most of the other blokes wore dark suits. There was a big crowd at the funeral with many of the people I went to Xavier with and many women. It was a full Catholic requiem mass with Jesuit priests from Xavier. I thought that Sam would have preferred a non-denominational service. I volunteered to be one of the pallbearers. All the others were wearing dark suits. On the way from the church to the graveyard John and I smoked another joint. When we carried the coffin to the hole in the ground, my foot nearly went in.

We went back to the farmhouse for the wake. Andrew told me off for some reason. Peter commented favourably about the death notice. I also talked to Helen about something. We left the wake and I have never seen those people again.

In a month or so I had missed a deadline for an auditing assignment and for that reason failed Auditing at RMIT, which I was doing part-time while doing philosophy full-time at Melbourne Uni. I was preoccupied with Sam's death and the fact he died on Easter Sunday. I was smoking lots of dope and reading occult, parapsychology and mystical books. I was writing short notes and ideas. I came to stay up most of the night smoking dope and reading these books. In early August, I completed a short four-page essay called 'Interactionism, a Theory of Parapsychology.

It had, at its core; a process called 'matching' which made mind interact with other minds and with matter. Matching occurred between structures, which were nearly identical. I thought that the essay was a major philosophical and scientific breakthrough which, when applied, would give all of us magical powers. Another tenet of the theory was that conscious experience lasted forever so all the experiences of everyone who had ever lived were available and could be tapped into and transferred to film or videotape. This was a consolation for Sam's death – the idea that his experiences were still in existence and could be recovered.

So on August the fourth, which was a Friday, I went to Melbourne University and handed copies of the essay to some of the staff I knew in Philosophy and Linguistics departments. I told them to read it and they would understand. That Sunday was August the Sixth, Hiroshima Day. There was a demonstration in the City Square. I gave copies of my essay to a few people and told them to keep it. Then I got the idea that the Catholic Church needed to be informed of my work.

I went up tho the Catholic Offices at the rear of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The door was open but there was nobody there. I saw a picture of the pope on the wall. It was Pope Paul 6th. On an impulse, I pulled the picture off the wall and put it face up on the carpet with a copy of my essay on it marked for "Paulus Sextus". When the picture came off the wall, I felt a great jolt of energy like an earthquake.

I rang John, he came and picked me up, and we went back to his place and smoked joints. That night there was a documentary about the
Vatican on TV, which we watched. I told John that I had made a great philosophical breakthrough; and that the present epoch was finished and that things would be different from now on. I also told him I would win the Nobel Prize for physics and be appointed Pope soon.

Then I went back to Medley Hall and had a normal night's sleep. I woke up next morning and put on the radio news. Paul 6th was dead. So I decided that I had assassinated him by sorcery, pulling his picture off the wall and putting my essay on it. Since I was the victor in a wizard's duel I would, by right of conquest, become the next Pope. The co-incidences of Sam dying on Easter Sunday and the Pope dying, about when I pulled his picture off the wall, had made me floridly psychotic.

I walked around Melbourne City giving people copies of my essay and telling them I was going to be Pope. I told some police and they asked me where I lived and offered to take me home. They looked at my room, which was neat and tidy, and left. Then a bit later the Warden, Graham, asked me what the Police were doing. He called me into his apartment. I started raving about how I had occult and magic powers and how I was about to be appointed Pope. He had a female there who was probably his girlfriend. I put my arm around her waist and paced up and down the room with her while I was talking. At one stage I said I was strong enough to kick the building down. He did not like me touching his girlfriend and was scared by my raving. So he went next door and called the police. Half a dozen uniformed police turned up and took me to the station.

They called my father and tried to get me to talk to him but I refused, saying he would hear the announcement that I was Pope. Then they took me to the Royal Melbourne Hospital. I waited in casualty for a while and then got taken to Ward One North (the psychiatric ward). I was put in a small room and Dr. L.B. appeared with four others, probably all nurses. I raved my rave about being all-powerful and the next Pope and showed her a copy of the essay. She asked me whether I would stay in hospital for a while and I said "yes, but no drugs" Then the five of them jumped on me and gave me an injection in the buttocks.

They then put me in a small room and the side effects of the Haloperidol come on. My shoulders started contracting and my tongue and mouth rolled around and, worst of all I could not sit still (this is called akathisia). This side effect was a form of torture. After about 5 weeks they let me out during the day to attend lectures at Uni. This was especially difficult because of the akathisia.

So I started my career as a psychiatric patient.

Evan Bichara – Recovery Story

Prior to progressing towards recovery I may comment that back in my days there were no Clinics of Mental Health around.....now I might be giving my age away to you...no it was around the 1970's when I was first diagnosed with the illness...nevertheless I might add I did struggle through many hurdles...trying to find consolation through my illness...doctors were also scarce....I only made reference to my family doctor, who knew very little about Mental Illnesses....it was not a popular thing back then as it is now...he referred me to a hospital....a general hospital.. The emergency section which was known as the Casualty department back in those days…. they only had interns back then working....who also were deficient in knowledge in Mental Health (compared to the knowledge they currently know)...we certainly have advanced a lot since those days....I tried to make reference to text books to find a solution to the problem at hand....I was socially unstable...had a lot of inappropriate giggling and other emotional expressions....which did not comply with the standard population’s reality.....after several visits to the hospital...I was admitted to the Psychiatric ward of the General Hospital….and remained their for 3 months (I know it seems rather a long duration but that was the average stay back then).....I stabilised after a while and got out into the world.....to work in many industries of our vast economy. I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia...and have had this since....though my doctors do say I have a very mild case of it.....I am still taking medication for it….though the main treatment is with how people connect with each other in the wider community.....the more interaction with the community whether it be via groups, school or a vocation........this kind of therapy is seen as more important than the medication, though I do consider the two go hand in hand.

I am a Mental Health Consumer Advocate. These words are very important to me because this is something that I never thought to achieve. I have been in retail, sales administration work, worked in the fashion industry, the funeral industry, even done seven years of investigative and clerical work within the Australian Taxation Office and other government departments, worked with Real Estate as well as being a high profiled car salesman in Victoria. Also in the sporting arena became a soccer coach and later promoted to soccer referee for Soccer Australia. You name it, I did it. But always in the back of my mind I wanted to help people help themselves in an advocating role. I would ask myself how can I become this person with very little funds available for me to attend school.

You see folks I come from a country that highly encourages education as well as religion. My Egyptian Greek family – mum and dad with my two lovely sisters and their families have never departed from supporting me in times of difficulty with my struggles of a mental illness.

Getting other relevant support, a good doctor, an understanding working environment and engaging with the local community – has not being an easy process – but the outcome of it all has being well worth it. To say I made it, makes me feel especially able. When people thought I couldn’t or wouldn’t and at times I found myself saying those same words. But I am glad I didn’t listen to some people or to myself. I found that with much prayer and faith in God and myself, I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.

But at the same token it was critical to listen to those that empowered me to achieve what I thought was unachievable. I won’t mention names, but those that were involved with this process know who they are. Thanks mum and dad for your words of wisdom - and for putting up with me in those difficult moments. Thanks to the many kind people – who now I can call friends. Thanks to God for entering my life the way you have. Thanks family.

So what I am really trying to tell you is that all things are possible if you believe constructively and become empowered, motivated and fulfilled with happiness.

I now realize that there are many opportunities for learning and growth. In this Mental Health Consumer Advocate role I have the ability to impact positively on my peers and the consumers and families that I encounter. At the end of each day I know that I have made a difference and that leaves me feeling great.

In making career choices, many individuals are influenced by observing the successes in other’s lives; satisfaction either through their actions or by convincing and coaxing words that direct them towards the best paths to take in life.

Even though I have traveled through a journey of many careers, there has never been one that has being fulfilling as the Mental Health Consumer Advocate. Through this role I have got to meet the finest people from the community. Those that are sensitive to mental health issues. Here I reside to not only include the consumers but the rest of our community members engaged in this work.

In my earlier times when I was diagnosed with my mental illness, it was the family and the wider community that served as a resource to getting quickly better. Even though I was hospitalized 4 times, had been given as many medications known under the sun and had suicidal thinking for a while. – I came through it all because: You may ask why? You may ask how I overcame those barriers I faced? How I was able to get into a positive way of living and thinking? Well let me tell you that the answer to all those questions resides totally in the uniqueness of my character – my persona – my social make up and my thorough willingness to wanting to get better. My drive and ambition in seeking ways to help as many people as I can, though, in doing this I must look after myself first. That was the key that opened the door to the positive psychology of life in general. One must look after number one first.

You see folks my parents did have high expectations of me in my education. They wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer – I did get high marks when I graduated the final year of high school – but chose to enter a Bachelor of Science (B Sc.) degree at Melbourne University. I enjoyed being in that course among some very fine talented students – though it was unfortunate that my illness had to develop which prevailed me from completing my B Sc. degree qualification. During my recovery years though I have done a number of courses – some completed some not so completed.

As a Mental Health Consumer Advocate for the Victorian Transcultural Psychiatry Unit, I was fortunate enough to be further encouraged to complete a Victorian Certificate IV in Disability Work. This in itself allowed me to do my role more professionally and with great ease working around other consumer workers and the remaining community engaged in this line of work.

I have long wanted to marry a Greek girl and when the time was right for me I found her within our Church parish. And may I say for those who have not met her – she is the most caring partner and wife, very understanding and also has a mental condition similar to mine. We share so much together – this commonality bonds us in a unique way – to be able to say we share a happy and enriched life together. Meeting “Tammy” has been my ultimate ambition in life. God has given me this relationship with Tammy as a safeguard and to further strengthen us to help those in need. We constantly attend most Church services, we participate in Church activities, and most recently have taken a leadership role in becoming a Church Committee Member- where I participate in the Church activities more closely.

Besides all mentioned, I have been a determined Community Educator and Trainer in breaking down the Stigma about Mental Health within our community. Hoping one day we eradicate this stigma still attached by some uninformed people. People generate problems when they show stigma and I say it is their problem and not mine if it is directed to me. I think people should think twice before they make any derogatory comments towards people with Mental Illness. It is now a known fact that most of these people (the mentally ill) are the most caring and loveable people of our community.

I am glad I have developed a Mental Illness in some way. It has allowed me to become a more compassionate person, understanding with empathy and can comment with great emotion on how this mental health system should look like. This is a lot different from academics commenting on this topic. The persistence, drive, enthusiasm and commitment to this task has allowed me to excel in this current career of mine to the level of being very multi tasked and talented, a high performer and a quiet achiever. I hold a number of positions currently being on a number of boards. Working closely with consumers, carers, clinicians and academia throughout Australia hoping one day we would reach a level of refined Mental Health System whereby consumers would be seen on an equal plainfield as clinicians and policy makers to address innovative measures in refining this what people sometimes call a fragmented system.

I do happen to run a support / advocacy group called the Spectrum of Cultures Mental Health Consumer group –and through this group can still see how the system needs improvement in some quarters within the service providers .But we have come a long way since those earlier days where people would be just shut down and not given the opportunity to voice their concerns.

You see folks it is the service users who are best informed of the service and are driven by emotion to state ways of improving the services provided. This is quite universal in all services throughout the land.

Besides working my work as a Community Educator and Consumer Advocate, I am also engaged with a research project whereby recently being awarded a Fellowship Research Grant to evaluate the Strengths Model of Case Management run through St Vincent’s Hospital in Melbourne. This will entail setting up a Research Reference Group, a Working Analysis Group, and interviewing a number of consumers to get their feedback of this type of case management. So I am rather excited about this project mainly because I do have a talented supervisor to this task. And I do hope that the final finished product that comes out this research will assist those that follow in this line of field.

In concluding my story I wish to recommend people who engage work in this field; particularly consumers – to consider this vision or mission which has being rather empowering for me to continue this fine work I have been doing for the past 20 years or so. And that is to remember that the highest rewards for a person’s work is not what they get for it – but what they become because of it.

Ingrid Hindell's Story

Some people can't conceive of what it is like to have the policies of politicians who have little concept of living with a disability continually threatening to erode your already meagre standard of living.

Six years ago I fell into a clinical depression partly over this very issue. It was awful! I couldn't laugh, cry or SLEEP for 4 1/2 months!!

Just prior to this time, I had been having a type of energy healing from two of my friends. The word "abandonment" kept coming up – and neither they – nor I – recognized it was what it was – I was feeling abandoned on behalf of other people with disabilities as well as myself. I was O.K. compared to plenty of people who were not. The government had cut funding to numerous little advocacy organizations (14 to be exact!) a month after this government was elected!

Now, a number of us worked voluntarily, long and hard, for these little organizations. What the government had done, in effect, was take away our jobs. (What the government did in this time in office was even worse than this. They cut funding to disability organizations to the tune of $50,000,000 in the second-last year of his office, I was told by one of my carer's. I wonder if the years before were as bad…

I, for one, regard my pension as a social wage, and even though I could wish it took my disability and the extra costs that brings into consideration, I feel privileged to be able to work in the community and not in a sheltered workshop.

Be that as it may, it was around this time, I remember now, that I started, what I now realize, was a "stress cough". I didn't take much notice at the time, and this was where I was very foolish. But I was "enjoying life" - studying, working, taking part – with about eight other people with disabilities - a documentary about sexuality and being a member of the "Friendship Group".

The "Friendship Group" was formed when a group of about 12 people with and without disabilities was approached by a worker doing his Master's thesis on the subject and nature of friendship for people with disabilities. He had been a worker in various positions for one of the major organizations dealing with all aspects of our lives and had observed the lack of friendship and bonding between people with disabilities in the institution for which he worked. He approached a staff member of the organization, who approached a group of people he knew had thrown, or were trying to throw, off the effects of institutionalization and take charge of their lives to the best of their capabilities.

The processes and the cohesion of the group attained brought up a "lot of stuff" for me that I wasn't able to articulate because I didn't know quite how to do so. It made me question the wisdom of my lifestyle up to then – of marrying a "non-disabled" person, for example. My mother used to tell me to tell him to tidy the flat, not in the least realizing that 1) I used to feel distressed that I wasn't doing this; 2) That it was almost impossible to keep a small area tidy, given the fact that neither of us are particularly tidy in the first place, and that the flat used to get untidy because we were involved with many different organizations and had many diverse interests.

This situation was also not helped, I now realize, by us trying to live and run home businesses from my three-roomed accommodation behind my parent's home, without sufficient room or personal support worker hours.

As intimated above, the flat was always cluttered, not conducive to encouraging a feeling of ease in us bringing clients onto the premises. As Robert's massage workload grew, so did our underlying tension, I see now. And when I was starting to counsel other people with disabilities the situation was made worse. The flat could hardly contain one motorized wheelchair, let alone two. And both sets of clients need privacy, a courtesy we couldn't always give them.

When I add to this the fact that my mother had, just prior to this period in our lives, stopped giving us our main meal because we were becoming more and more interested in eating organic and vegetarian food, which we consider as important as a health insurance, I don't wonder we were strained. And all the more so because we didn't recognize the gradual changes in lifestyle were making life very difficult for us, to say the least.
At the same time, listening to other group members' stories made me realize how "undervalued" people with disabilities are in society. I had been brought up in a loving extended family and had not long been "out". In other words, I didn't have any friends outside the family till my late twenties; I hadn't used an electric wheelchair before 1984 - when I was almost 35. (An interesting sidelight of this is that I had already met and slept with three guys, the last being Robert, who I had met through an advertisement in 1984 and who is now my husband of 11 years – before I brought an ice-cream for myself.)

It made me realize how much people with disabilities are constrained by lack of governmental funding for recreational – especially relationship – options – with each other and with able-bodied people. And now the government was trying to close down little advocacy organizations that could keep this issue in the forefront of policy makers' minds. No wonder I was getting close to breaking point!

But, I kept telling myself; we expected cuts, didn't we? We just had to "learn to live with it!" As people can see, I wasn't much of an activist in those days. But I hadn't realized how much I was changing. Working for various organizations I had been learning what concepts like discrimination were about and growing in spirit. But with the tenor of the government at the time, what could one do?

Anyway, when I got really bad, my poor husband almost went mad himself trying to cope with me. I had been the outgoing partner in the relationship for the past 12 years. Now I was getting panic attacks and clinging like poison ivy...

And the Naturopath and Doctor I went to at that stage certainly didn't help. The Naturopath was so expensive she made me much worse. She had told a friend of mine that she would treat me for $30.00 a time. She did not say that she would put me on numerous tablets to complement the colonic irrigation I was having at the time – and we all know what they cost.

What my friend didn't tell me was that she would present me with an ever-increasing bill every time I went - to pay her back when I could! And that her husband, her admin assistant, would keep commenting, in my hearing, that people wouldn't pay their bills on time.

When the amount got to $450.00, I said enough, paid her all my savings, and managed, I don't know how - because she was a very sure-of-herself woman and I was in a very vulnerable state - to quit.

I'm sure, looking back, that this lady and her husband just didn't have any inkling at all that their treatment was not the best thing for me at the time. They were just two fallible people doing the best they could with the knowledge they had. From this distance, looking backward, all I remember is their genuine desire to help and succour.
And they didn't condescend, like so many people that don't have much to do with people with disabilities, do!

However, I now believe she treated me with a totally inappropriate therapy. Under her guidance I undertook the colonic irrigation, which is a therapy meant to clean out all the little folds and pockets of the bowel – only it seems to me that she prescribed the emetic that was the chief medication for this therapy far too long! I had to drink it every day for five weeks! I lost SO much weight at this time that I really believe it was made my mental state worse instead of better. People say that an unquiet mind can stress the body into illness, I believe losing too much weight too fast (and I was about two –two and-a-quarter stone lighter than I am now, in the first place) stressed my mind, instead of other way around. Three or four days at a time on that stuff would have been enough, esp. since I DIDN'T have cancer, AIDS, etc. like a lot of her patients.

I can now admit that I was doing the wrong thing by myself in the first place – keeping on going to someone I really could not afford, agreeing to a treatment that was patently too drastic for myself at that time.

Be that as it may, by this time I wasn't only having panic attacks. I had slipped into, what I recently discovered, was a clinical depression. This brought in it's wake, a terror so real, so all encompassing that I wonder I lived through a day of it – much less four and a half months. (And it was a real panic-terror, which I learnt only this year can be a symptom of clinical depression; fear I can live with: my stomach clenches almost every time I have to go down a steep gutter-ramp in my motorized wheel-chair.) I now realize that the terror was masking anger, an anger so deep and so corrosive I couldn't even acknowledge it. It was at this point that I stopped sleeping altogether – or so it seemed to me.

I also now realize that the anger was in part, coming from a sense of injustice, but, too, I believe I had "picked up" on other people's anger – I am thinking of one worker in particular – and that I was reacting to old "patterns" – the pattern in my psyche which comes straight from the "medical model", which says, alas! that people with disabilities are only fit for pensions, and therefore will be "looked after" by the populace at large. Now the system seemed to have swung the opposite way so completely, it felt, unconsciously, to me, like the culture, or at least its representative, the government, was rejecting us "lock, stock and barrel".

And then the poor doctor tried to pin my problems down to sex, or at least my relationship with Robert. She had got me to list my issues, and I had put "money" at the top.
She didn't hear me when I said, ineptly, it's true - that it was a far greater issue in my life than my relationship at that time. I didn't even think of even mentioning attendant care!
And we didn't even THINK of an advocate...

I know now that if she explored my first issue thoroughly, she would have discovered that it wasn't really money about which I was worried. It was more that I had realized, unconsciously, that my parent's house wasn't really working for us any more and that we needed more help. If I was my client now, I would recommend we see a financial counsellor, the accommodation people at DHS or SCOPE, and so on.

And I would listen, listen and reflect; if more of this had been done I might have been able to discover or uncover what I needed to find the solutions to my "problems"…
I remember distinctly spending night after sleeplessness night at this time calculating, again and again and again, how much money I would need in the bank so that the interest could pay for extra attendant care. The term "user-pays" had become the catch-cry in disability services at the time, you see… I had chosen the wrong therapist for myself again. One who had a deal of compassion, it's true, but no knowledge of the disability field…

Anyway, I got so confused about my relationship with my husband about this time that I didn't sleep with him for over a year. As you can imagine, this did not help matters much. Certainly we had issues, but had other things been equal, we would have been able to work them out together, as we had done in the 11 years previous to my breakdown. When the Doctor kept telling me I was afraid of my power, she was way off-beam. Way off. What I was afraid of was losing the power I already had. And I was afraid of this for other people with disabilities too.

I got so confused at one stage, that in one breath, I used to beg my husband to put me in hospital and the next breath, beg him not to. I had let the Naturopath make me so fearful of allopathic medication; I wasn't taking any drugs at all. No wonder I wasn't sleeping!
I wasn't the only one that was disillusioned, shattered, and heart-broken. I've heard other stories…

Anyway, back to my saga.
As already mentioned, my husband at this stage was so stressed himself that he got angrier and angrier and the angrier he got the worse I got - but we managed - God knows how - to stick it out. I knew our deep down AFFECTION for one another would see us through - when we started meditating together and seeing our Transcendental Meditation doctor six months after I got really sick - but he wasn't so sure...

This doctor not only got me meditating, but also got me on 15 mgs of Valium and 50 mgs. of Sinequan, a very mild antidepressant, a night, so my poor body and mind could rest until the meditation 'kicked in' and stopped my mental monkeys from running amok. (I still take the Sinequan regularly 25 mgs, and 2mgs of Valium about 2 or 3 times a week.)
About this time we felt we had to move to the country for a while just to get away from Melbourne and because the Housing Commission had said they could house us in Wangaratta. I also felt very strongly that I should move from the flat attached to my parent's house where we were living - the government had just brought in the sell-your-home-to-go-to-a-retirement-village and nobody told me this didn't apply to parents of people with disabilities!!!

So we rented a draughty flat for three months - so we thought! - it turned into six - in a tiny town half an hour from Wangaratta. At this stage I had no Television, no radio, no computer BY CHOICE, news made me depressed, songs made me depressed, the ONLY books I could read were the ones written by the Naturalist Gerald Durrell. (When we finally got our TV in Wang. for a long time I could only watch programmes like "Bananas in Pyjamas" and other children's shows!!)

I was now crying at the drop of a look, - literally, anywhere and anytime, which embarrassed my husband no end - but I was healing...

With a lump in my throat I still remember how heart-brokenly I used to sob repeatedly, “Where is the choice, Rob”, “We [people with disabilities] have no choices, Rob”. And it was at this time that I, for the first time in my life, felt envy, envy of people who had their own homes, envy of people who had had a chance to travel overseas. I found this rather bewildering as I had always been genuinely glad of others “doing their thing” before… Now, I have always prided myself on the fact that I had never asked myself “Why me?” in terms of my disability. It suddenly occurred to me recently that this was simply another form of that question. So much for my self-conceit!

Anyway, fortunately for me, our landlord and a couple of the townsfolk were terrific - kept an eye on me when Rob was away in Melbourne working two days a week but didn’t interfere too much with the process of healing that was taking place within me.
This was made more difficult at this time because I had become obsessive while trying to follow Naturopathic injunctions. For over two years I would not touch a food that was meat or was not organically grown. Now, I still say that as obsessions go, this was not a “bad” obsession to have! But, as all obsessive people do, I carried dietary preferences to lengths. I took sandwiches everywhere I went; this must have been a pain for those supporting me, especially Robert, of course. Hats off to him that he never let me go hungry. It must have been a grave temptation sometimes, particularly on those rare occasions we were invited out to dinner!

The healing process was helped by my Transcendental Meditation doctor, who literally saved my life by listening, being empathetic, and meditating with me whenever he could, whenever I did a daily trip by train down to Melbourne to the T.M. seminary, or even over the phone. For some months I rang him every night from the country. I had a horrific phone bill to cope with then, but in the little town I was in, there was nowhere to go to except the Elderly Citizens daily lunches. This wasn’t even as pleasant as I would find it now – because I was obsessively terrified of death by this stage, and it seemed that that was all the people I was associating with could talk about! That and what John Laws had said that morning!

The doctor I saw previously had tried to get me to meditate too, but T.M. was what I needed at this stage, because it doesn’t try to make one blank out all thought. Instead, it uses thought attached to their mantras to release deep-seated stress – without having to talk about, analyse it! Thus, gradually, over the next couple of years, even with the added stress I still had to cope with, my mind gradually calmed down and my thoughts stopped behaving like squirrels caught in a revolving cage and I was able to deal with my life once again.

In my tiny flat, because I had no distractions, except my Gerald Durrell books, I found my T.M. mantra kept coming into my mind all the time and feeling energy surging thru the top of my head. Robert (who has got healer’s hands) could actually feel this energy. He told us that when he first became aware of it, it was “murky”, but became clearer over a period of time; I knew this.

My explanation for this phenomenon is that was the energy coming out of me was the stress of decades (and there’s no doubt we live with stress – just try to get into small “accessible” toilets suitable for a manual chair with a bulky motorized chair and a support worker, for just one example, week in and week out) coming out of my muscles. Non disabled people, if they are wise, play sport to get rid of tension and stress. I, quite literally, “blew my top”! I had a permanent headache for three years during and after my worst times too.

It was interesting that it was only after this process of blowing my top was finishing that my husband found he was able to massage the muscles of my neck. He had noticed that they were like bands of steel for a couple of years prior to my collapse.

My attendant-care agency didn’t realise how badly I needed their support either and this made it more difficult to heal. They had said they couldn't give me more than six months care (I was getting seven hours a week at that stage) in the country, and I was too sick to throw myself on their mercy - I was literally suicidal after not sleeping - partly because "all my Catholic stuff came up and bit me... I remember the sicker I got the more The government’s cuts got to me. This got mixed up with my strict religious background and I ended up feeling guilty, guilty, guilty. As I have intimated I felt I didn’t deserve to be alive! Some people said to apply for more services - but at this stage we kept saying, “We didn't deserve” - there were many more needy people around - I had been very active politically and had heard devastating stories...

So my attendant care ran out - just one week before the Commission said they couldn't house us - because of a reshuffle! All this was NOT conducive to getting over a breakdown - as you can imagine...

By this time my husband and I were so angry and so irrational - with the system - that we refused to come back to Melbourne. Besides, my marriage – my husband! - was already stressed enough and I COULD NOT see myself going back to Melbourne without any extra attendant care at all.

On top of this, about this time, we were interviewed by a Social Worker in Wangaratta, who asked us what we would need to live in the community. She and her offsider took notes and seemed to us to believe that they could do something for us. Our hopes soared only to be dashed again a week later when she said the community could give us – nothing! We were told to go back to Melbourne, point blank, just like that. We were not told where we could lodge an appeal, who we could turn to for any guidance, nothing. Eventually we were housed in a block of units owned by the Baptist church and the understanding doctor there eventually - after I had broken down and wept buckets in his office - secured me 14 hours care a week. That was terrific - but we then discovered I was so homesick!

By this stage I was well enough to want to go home - being Ceylonese I missed my extended family something chronic, but Robert point blank refused to go back to Melbourne. But then HE got depressed - there was nothing much for us to DO in Wang. - but he was hanging on to a dream, one of living in the country - and being a Pieces was loath to let it go...

Then I went over to a neighbour's across the courtyard to borrow some cinnamon for a cake - and got exorcised by a visitor of hers. That I was just getting over a break-down with religious over-tones didn’t help as you may imagine. I can look back and chuckle mightily now however; it was so funny! The more I shook with fear and rage, the more they thought the devil was quitting my body.

I think it was this episode convinced us both that we could not live in a town where if you didn't go to church, didn't play sport, didn't have children, didn't have a job, (and weren't born there, Rob says) there were no social "ins" for the likes of us...

Anyway, we ended up in Geelong, which is great for us both. The people are friendlier; there are many, many more things to do here - a Scrabble club, a Kite flying club, a DRC, plenty of live amateur theatre, beautiful beaches, a farm where I go pluck organically raised chooks, a food co-operative, a organic gardeners club, a herb society... And we managed to buy a house for $56,000!! – with help of family - six and a half years ago. My parents and other family are only about 1 1/2 hours away by car, 2 hours by train... We live 5 mins from a station so Melbourne city is only an hour away... And, partly because we don't smoke, don't gamble, don't go out to dinner or watch videos much, we have already paid off our house. This seems miraculous to both of us – we still feel like pinching ourselves!

And, the government has funded extra attendant care for me! It's wonderful; now I feel I contribute evenly to our marriage, because of my wonderful support workers…
Sorry to have got the computer "runs", but this is the first time I have written about this stuff. It's been too raw...

Now days, when people tell me that political-economic issues don't impact on people's lives I just sigh internally...

Of course there is a lot more – what I've written is just the bare bones of the story. But now I feel ready to talk about it in public, if necessary.

Craig Hamilton - My Story

In September 2000 I was admitted to a Psychiatric Hospital for two weeks after suffering a psychotic episode at Broadmeadow Railway Station in Newcastle.

For three days I was in the maximum security lock down ward after being scheduled under the Mental Health act.

The subsequent diagnosis from the team at the James Fletcher Hospital was Bipolar 1 Disorder.

In the years since that traumatic time and I have had time to reflect on a great deal about the illness and the best way to manage it and stay well.

Bipolar Disorder, like so many other mental illnesses has a stigma associated with it that makes management of the condition even more difficult than it should be.

For many people with Bipolar disorder, managing the illness and coming to terms with the sometimes severe mood swings is something managed in secrecy, away from the prying eyes of even close friends and family.

My experience with the illness in 2000 was so traumatic and debilitating that upon recovery I felt almost duty bound to speak up about Bipolar Disorder and attempt to decrease the level of stigma around this illness.

Today, I am still working for ABC Radio in Newcastle, who were my employers back in 2000 when the world that I knew went pear shaped for over a year.

I am never complacent about this illness because I have seen the devastation Bipolar Disorder can wreak when out of control, so I am constantly aware of the way I live my life.

Meditation , managing stress levels, monitoring sleep patterns, medication, relaxation, moderate alcohol consumption and exercise are all part of a management strategy that I have put in place to make sure that the events of 2000 are never repeated.

This illness effects more people in Australia and around the world than many people realise.

When Bipolar Disorder makes the news, it's usually a bad news story.

In recent times we have seen again the havoc Bipolar Disorder can create with a suicide attempt for those affected with the illness still something like 1 in 5.

In 2004 I published my story in a book called "Broken Open" with friend and journalist Neil Jameson.

The story was more than anything a plea to society to drop the stigma associated with mental illness and make it easier for those that needed help to be able to reach out and get it.

You see, there are two groups of people in Australia:

1. **Those that believe they will never be affected by mental illness**
2. **Those that are in the grip of a mental illness and struggling to deal with it**

I reckon I can speak on behalf of both groups because I have been in both groups.

If you had said to me prior to 2000, who would be the ***LAST*** person in the world who could be so badly depressed that getting out of bed in the morning was impossible and that level of depression would lead to thoughts of suicide, I would have said me.

Yet there I was, in the deepest, blackest, darkest place I have ever been in my life with basically no real hope of getting out of there.

I now know so much more about this thing called depression, this thing called mania, bipolar disorder, chemical imbalance in the brain etc.

Knowledge really is power.

So many people are suffering with a variety of mental illnesses in our community , yet do not receive the help they need because of inadequate Government funding for Mental Health, which translates in to inadequate resources for those in need.

In my experience Bipolar Disorder needs to be managed with self-awareness, medication, yoga, regular exercise and a holistic approach to staying fit and healthy.

My self-awareness is simply more fined tuned today to my stress levels and when I need to pull back, slow down and rest, I do it - it's that simple.

In the area of mental health and public awareness, I simply want to make a difference.

When "Broken Open" was written I hoped the book would not only help to further de-stigmatise mental illness but provide some guidelines for those people and their families who were going to walk the same path that I have.

Today I look back on the book with a great deal of satisfaction. It is helping others but there is still much more to do.

I will continue to tell my story and hopefully change some fundamental attitudes that are long overdue for change.

Craig Hamilton
www.craig-hamilton.com

Yvette Geljon - ME AND BPD

It's hard to know when I first knew that I had a mental illness. Was it when I was full of anxiety at home when I was a teenager and had facial tics that my brother's made fun of me about? Was it when I scratched my arms until they bled and wore bandages on them at school, desperately trying to show my teachers or anyone that would notice, that I wasn't doing ok and needed some help? Or was it when I was a young adult, addicted to Marijuana and Speed and suffering from drug-induced Psychosis? Or maybe it was only two years ago when I had a serious attempt on my life and continued on in a cycle of self-harm and self-destruction.

It really doesn't matter when I was first aware, the fact is that I have a mental illness. They call it Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). I struggled with this title at first. Does that mean I am a 'borderline' human being? My self-esteem was so fragile, that that was exactly how I saw my diagnosis. I was different, I was sub-human, I was crushed.
When I look back and see the signs of mental illness in my life, it's like neon lights pointing it out to me. As a result of having BPD, I struggled making friends or maintaining relationships. I struggled with emotions. I found it difficult telling you if I was happy, sad, scared or angry. I just didn't know. Emotions scare me because I don't understand them or understand exactly how I am feeling sometimes and find it extra difficult to explain my feelings to anyone else. One of the most debilitating aspects of my mental illness is self-harm. This is where I deliberately harm myself by cutting, overdosing or hitting and scratching myself. I first remember doing this when I was 14 years of age. I was angry and didn't know how to express it. So I internalized the anger and hurt myself as a way of releasing it. It worked. This is such a destructive, shameful and humiliating aspect of BPD. How do you explain to friends, family or professionals that self-harming is what makes you cope and feel 'normal' again? It is also difficult where medication is concerned. My Psychiatrist has put me on a number of medications, but has to be careful because I have had periods where I just take the lot. So we have worked out a plan. I used to pick up my medication daily, but that was such a hassle. We have negotiated and I now pick it up weekly. This can be really embarrassing and humiliating sometimes. But I am happy to do it because it is another way of keeping me safe.

So what obstacles does BPD create for me in my life? Maintaining friendships is so difficult for me. As a result, I feel very lonely and afraid around people. This fear has helped create a life of social isolation that makes me feel very empty a lot of the time. Self-harm is also a daily obstacle that I need to overcome. How do I explain to people about my scars? I see people looking and wondering, but they are usually too scared to ask me about them. It is difficult to maintain a job, especially in the summer because I can't wear short sleeves and look stupid in long sleeves in 30 degree heat.

Gratefully though, there is hope. I spent 9 months at Spectrum – The personality Disorder Service of Victoria. This was an amazing experience where I learnt about dealing with distress, coping with emotions, healthy relationships and mindfulness. Now that I am back in my area, I am a privileged participant at Aspire. I attend groups with other participants, which helps me make new friends and increase my self-esteem and confidence. I also work closely with my outreach worker on issues relating to recovery and social, recreational and vocational goals. I also receive a great deal of assistance from my case manager and care team at Psychiatric Services, where we work collaborately on my care and management plans and goals for the future. I am a member of a number of committees where participation as a consumer is sought after and appreciated.

So when I look at living with a mental illness, I need to focus on the positive aspects, the support I have and how recovery can change my life. Acceptance has been a huge part of my recovery. I needed to believe and recognize that I needed help and that it was ok to ask for it. The more I ignored that I had a problem, the worse it got. Life is worth living today. Having a mental illness does not mean I have to suffer. Suffering is optional! Today I choose growth. I am not alone and scared on my journey anymore, my friends and support network is second to none.

Always remember to embrace your inner moonlight. Don't hide the madness.

Sylvia Zuzowska's Story

I always wanted to have my own family. Instead I went mad when I immigrated to Australia. I arrived on the 10th of April 1983. I just don't know how it happened. I was examined in Israel by immigrations doctor, by my Mother's Psychiatrist and I passed my hardest test of sanity. So why something went wrong? Probably the flight I booked was on a wrong route or maybe I was kidnapped, the latest travel fashion.

It ended up in Larundel. I was locked up on and off for four months in a lock up room without light, without windows, no toilets, no bell for help. I was worried about my parents, as I was missing them, missing home, missing my country. Larundel proved to have the best English Ulpan (Hebrew for language school) for everybody who is worried, has no money, no home to go to, no language skills. Volunteers accepted.

If you don't know to say yes please or yes thank you, they will teach you very fast. Injection!! Lock up room!!! For the crime you just committed. Yes please, yes thank you. Injection, injection, injection, good for everything.

A few of the 'men' jumped on me, undressed me in a hurry, I was stripped naked in front of them, injection, thrown on a mattress; injection an answer for everything they think. No dignity they had. I was always proud naked or not. I can do it myself, heeelp, leave me alone I screamed. They didn't listen to my lonely voice. My only weapon; my youth and my beauty they wanted to destroy.

I was stronger, I ran away into my sleep, my madness. Injection, injection and the buzz started, buzz, buzz over my head, I was itching; my olive skin went mad too. Buzz, itching, buzz, itching. Nobody could hear my screams. I was locked up. But I always asked myself, can't they afford a bed for a sick head like mine? Do I have to sleep on mattress in this rich country? And where is my handbag I screamed, where are my beautiful earrings from Jerusalem?? Kick up was the answer, followed by slap on the face and unavoidable lock up in a lock up room. They took away from me the earrings that I loved so much, 'for my own protection'. They were afraid that I may hang myself up on them, instead of hanging the 'system up on them.

The liberation day came when I was nearly four months locked up. It came all of a sudden, without any warning lights. The moment I saw him I knew he came to me, he came to me, he came to me. Rabbi! I screamed, Rabbi! I am from Israel. For all those months I was there they pushed me to go to local minister. They didn't bother themselves for my beliefs. Rabbi I screamed again. He had a short beard, black Jewish eyes and a kipale on his head. He said, 'I am a student doctor' and he introduced himself. How happy I was, how relieved that at long last a Jewish doctor came to me. He came to me I thought, to me, nobody else, just me!! For all those months I screamed that I wanted a Jewish doctor who can understand my Jewish sole and now I had him. Oh, how happy I smiled at him.

Guide to surviving Larundel.

First rule – if you are nearly on the way in a van with few shadows barking at you – don't forget to bring a radio, if you are a music lover. Happily, you arrived in one piece – don't dance in the TV room, they may lock you up for dancing to the wrong music. They may lock you up, you know where, you been there before, behind that iron, government door over the despair cliff. You are frightened?

Rule two – Don't kick the door, don't scream. Nobody can hear you anyhow. You are behind the iron door, behind the other iron government door, behind……. Lay down on a government mattress. No bed? We are in the middle of a recession after all. Lay down, count the fleas or bees, don't scream. Save your young voice for better occasions.

Rule three – Don't wear golden earrings. For the left earring according to hospital policy you will get three kicks, I won't say where, one slap on the left cheek and a lock up room for 2 ½ hours, all to yourself, no drinks or toilet provided.

Rule four – Don't whinge. You don't like the food. Don't whinge. Go kosher. You don't have to be a Jew to enjoy a good meal.

Rule five – Actually it should be the first. You arrived in Larundel, you want to contact your Mother, but where is your money? They already took it from you until next Monday. Don't worry, there is a way. Reverse charges. Your Mum will always accept it.

It is never too late.

When I wake up in the morning I check up on my smiling level. If it is 1 smile per minute I contact my doctor. Sylvia, you are on a high, he says. But when the smiling level is lower, he says I am depressed.

Yesterday I graduated with distinctions from the assertiveness course and in my new assertive voice I said 'doc this pink pill I won't take anymore, it makes me put on weight, the yellow one makes me shake, the combination of those two makes me sleep for two days. Doctor give me something to make me run and jump, to make me laugh'.

Once I know what my smiling level is I check the agenda for the day. If it is my floristry course day, I dream of having my little spot, my little corner full of flowers, full of exotic smells and colours. The computers course will help me to run the place. Roses on one programme, tulips on the other.

All my little stories I will write on word processing in between the clients. Creative writing is of course result of the course.

Anastasia, Anastasia The Cat, and my little radio will come with me to work every day. She will be my only assistance. She might spend all day lying in the window with a pink carnation behind her small ear. Good window decoration.

To achieve all those dreams I am also doing a goal setting course. Half of my dreams I realised already. I have a radio and Anastasia, Anastasia The Cat. The other half, the course on how to achieve your goals will do the trick.

Evenings and weekends I spend taking dancing and swimming lessons. It's not that I can't swim. I can. My style is not a dog and not a frog, it is my own style. It's never too late.

Now I decided to learn to dive and to swim one more way. It's never too late.

My Israeli dancing is good for weight control, meeting people and reducing pills.

I swim, I dance, I study and I shout "life begins after forty!!!" It's never too late.

Lizzie - My Life with Schizoaffective/Bipolar Disorder

I was first diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder in 1986, though it took a little while to decide what the diagnosis was. This is often the case with schizoaffective disorder which at times looks like schizophrenia and at other times bi-polar disorder. It was eventually established that in my case bi-polar seemed to be the stronger thread. This was established both through my symptoms and through the medication I responded to.

After a move of house three years ago my psychotic symptoms became worse and now I take a small dose of antipsychotic medication as well as the mix of anti-depressants and mood stabilisers that I have taken for twenty years.

I was under a lot of stress before I first became ill. A boyfriend of several years, who I was very attached to, had died in a motorbike accident, I had started a teaching career which was stressful for me and my personal relationships had got complicated. In the weeks leading up to the first episode I had come home from overseas with nowhere to live, resigned from teaching, taken up a new job, been asked to leave where I was staying, rented a house alone and got involved in a couple of casual affairs. Although I had never smoked much cannabis previously, I started smoking regularly at this time.
I also overspent, buying $500 worth of records in one day. For someone who hates making mistakes and is very careful with money this provoked enormous embarrassment and shame when I recovered.

In those days there were no CATT teams, so my family and friends had to find their way through my first episode, shocked, afraid and unguided. Fortunately one friend had had some relatives with mental illness and took me to an understanding GP where I was persuaded to admit myself to a Psych unit, in a major hospital, voluntarily.

I had a short hospitalization of two weeks in 1985 and a much longer one in 1986 where I had a long course of ECT. Because of my vulnerability, my family was consulted after I had agreed to it. They agonized about it before giving consent and I agonized about it more, after the event when my sceptical mind started thinking again. In the long term, I think it worked well for me. I was very frightened, isolated and shut down whilst in the hospital and always co-operative with the hospital staff. I did not like my psychiatrist however, who was convinced I was much sicker than I thought and was certain that my diagnosis should be schizophrenia. This freaked my family and myself out further. The diagnosis was not correct but he was right that I was much sicker than I imagined.

I took the most part of a year off from my teaching job but found that being home alone was too depressing and quite unbearable for me. I was eager to resume my former life and did not want to stay with my parents. I filled my time with some volunteer work and returned to teaching the following year. The stimulation of teaching kept me ‘high’ but not psychotic. This was how my friends experienced me as normal. I had been on the manic side all my life. Over time it became clear that I did not have a ‘well’ or neutral position – I was either manic or I was depressed.

During this time I was referred to a psychiatrist in the mental health system. He was the first person who understood me and I trusted him as far as I was able and felt safe with him. Still, learning to feel safe telling the truth about my thoughts and actions was going to take a very long time.

The clinic offered me a number of groups as well. One was a relaxation group that offered a little social interaction and introduced me to Feldenkreis Awareness Through Movement lessons. The Feldenkreis exercises have stayed with me through the last twenty years and are a most effective way of dealing with the extreme imbalances and tensions in my body. I am a person who never relaxes when alone and the Feldenkreis, yoga and Les Mills Body Balance have become a regular part of my self-management.

Around this time I became friends with some consumers who were really at odds with the mental health system and who worked hard to make changes. I felt quite different because I experienced the mental health system more as a saviour than something to fight against. Weekly therapy with a psychiatrist has been my emotional focus over twenty odd years. I have been dependent on my psychiatrist all that time and I have been given a lot of extra support and attention to my needs. As I grow towards independence I have become more accepting of my psychiatrist as a person who makes mistakes, despite his best intentions and of myself as a consumer who can’t always communicate my needs.

My second hospitalization had been such an horrific experience, I was determined to never go back there. This made me very cooperative and compliant with the medication regime that was gradually developed for me. Lithium didn’t do a lot for me by itself, so carbamazepine another mood stabiliser was added as well as an SSRI antidepressant and temazepam for sleeping and reducing anxiety. Recently I have found small doses of an anti-psychotic to suit me better than the temazepam.

I did stay out of hospital with the assistance of a family who cared and could act as a half-way house when the going got too tough. I was living away from home when I became ill and continued to do so even though at times it put too much burden on my friendships some which lasted and some which didn’t.

During the next years I put a lot of energy into finding out as much about the illness as I could, starting to identify triggers, early warning signs and in general ways to take the edge off my mania. An example of an early warning sign is that in the early days, I became obsessed with colours when I was manic. My sister came to know that I was unwell whenever she found me wearing a certain very colourful scarf..

Recognising my first delusion and being prepared to talk about it to my psychiatrist was a major turning point in my recovery. The delusion was about becoming a star, and there was another one where people from various parts of my past were joining together to look out for me. Both of these had something to do with being ‘special’. I discovered that my need to imagine stardom for myself came as a way of avoiding the bottom-line feelings that I was really hopeless and worthless. After a while, I learned to focus on the manic thought and work out the underlying depressed feeling that I was trying to avoid. This could bring my bring my mood down, or flip it from mania to depression.

Some signs of mania were persistent over the years, such as not sleeping and overspending. I used to get around the overspending by going to the $2 shop whenever I had the urge to spend and giving myself permission to buy what I wanted. Often the indicators changed over time. I was attracted to sexual encounters to start with but the need for them dropped away. Other manic indicators might be singing out loud, being constipated, telling people that I am in terrific health (usually the day before I broke down), being overly generous and eager to please, taking on too many activities, feeling overwhelmed by what I have to do, being forgetful, having lots of ideas and creativity. I find that despite my attention to early warning signs, my identification of mania usually comes after the event.

As preventative measures I avoid caffeine and take alcohol with care. I keep a regular routine, lead a quiet life, exercise and go to bed by 11pm.

My history is that I am more often manic than depressed. Depression is easier to identify than mania with its thoughts of being worthless and hopeless. With depression I identify foggy thinking, crying, and unstoppable crying (usually when I am angry). Loneliness has been a longstanding burden. Living alone although good in one way was very difficult in others, especially during the years when I was socially isolated When depressed I can't' cook at all and to avoid the danger of not eating proper meals I began to buy frozen boxes from the supermarket. It's hard to motivate myself when I'm depressed and my body feels very heavy. I'm likely to be very critical of my appearance and weight. The best thing I ever did for my depression was to get a cat, to distract me, to talk to, to cuddle (and to scratch my furniture!)

A major trigger for a mood swing for me is the absence of my psychiatrist. I often feel angry when he goes away despite my rational acceptance of it. Other triggers are arriving home to an empty house, family friction, being yelled at or having anger directed towards me, being judged or criticized, worries about money, work stress, crises, disruptions to my daily routine, moving house or even receiving a letter written in a punitive style. I am extremely sensitive and even a small blow can affect me quite deeply. I work to get over these instances more and more quickly. I can find myself plummeted into depression if I spend too much time alone or make a big mistake.

Paranoia has been by far the most difficult delusion to understand and acknowledge. There is a general paranoia that underlies my thinking and view of the world as well as more outstanding instances that provoke the more 'out of reality' response.

Severe stress and body tension is the precursor of the paranoid response. Then I usually get a fright or shock of some description. This may be being put under pressure or noticing that something out of the ordinary has happened. Things start to move very quickly. It's impossible to be cool and logical in the throes of panic. For example at work I might feel that I am being watched and that several people are planning together about me.

Another factor is the circumstantial nature of things – where I link two events together that have happened side by side, as if they had some purposeful or meaningful relationship – fitting them into the delusion.

Then I notice that every slightly odd event that has happened within memory gets linked together as if they all relate to the single current happening. This whirlwind of frightening thoughts gets bigger and bigger until it is all pervasive.

The more general paranoia involves my relationships with people. I am often quick to notice fault in others and less quick to notice I have those same faults with in myself. It is easy to dwell on someone else's failings, be judgmental and lose sight of the big picture. I remind myself that people are a mix of qualities these days. It has been rewarding to develop a small number of intimate friends who I love and who give me great pleasure.

Everyday communication can be quite stressful still, for example handling and moving through conflict and accepting my mistakes. My anxiety often interferes with my ability to speak up for myself and negotiate effectively.

It has taken me a long time to really believe that I am okay; that my achievements don't make me good and my mistakes don't make me bad. My goal is to keep moving towards more independence and self-management; a little step forward, a hiccough, a fall, get up and move on. I expect it will always be this way and that this, neither my soaring fantasies nor my prolonged depression, is the process of life.

Darren Dorey - My Journey

Where to start?

Do I dare go back to my childhood and look at the triggers that started my journey to mental ill health, or do I leap to the day when I got the toaster out of the cupboard and stared at it blankly, and then at my four children who were waiting for Dad to make their breakfast. The problem was that Dad couldn't work out what he was supposed to do with the bloody silver thing in front of him.

So there I was, four hungry kids looking at me as I burst into tears. Had lost my mind? The fog was just too thick, the confusion was too strong, I knew I was supposed to be there for my kids, but how? If I couldn't work this out how could I do anything else for them?

After many tears and some upset kids I managed to get breaky made, what an effort it was though.

I left for work that morning wondering what the hell was going on with me. Here I was a father of four, holding down my dream job as a Sales Rep, a job that had actually been created for me!

I had worked hard to be the best I could at what I did, I was known for my broad knowledge and ability to make things happen. I had a reputation for sourcing the seemingly unsourcable, as well as my quick whit. I was the person my colleges came to when they had a work related problem, often taking on their problems to ease the pressure on them.

I thrived on pressure at work, the bigger the challenge the happier I was. It gave me the edge, a chance to shine above the others, I HAD to PROVE myself, I HAD to be the BEST.

I didn't know why, I just knew that I had to be seen as the best.

And yet it was getting harder to concentrate on simple tasks, I seemed to be starting lots of little projects and not completing them. It was also getting harder to face customers, [not a good thing in sales]. I would feel nervous approaching a customer, my stomach would be churning, my pulse race, my mind would race trying to work out how I could get through the sale without the customer noticing how much I was struggling, and to keep the toast that had been so hard to cook in my stomach and not all over them.

It was time to get HELP; I couldn't do IT on my own anymore.

I rang my doctor's rooms to make an appointment. No problem, "He can see you in two weeks" was the shattering reply. I hung up the phone and figured "I obviously didn't matter", maybe it would be better if I was DEAD. After all I couldn't look after my kids; all the wife and I did was argue about everything, I wasn't good enough. I seemed to spend all my energy trying to please other people, but didn't seem to be able to meet THEIR expectations. Whether it was the wife, the boss, the kids or my father, it was never good enough.

NO! I needed help and I needed it NOW. I rang the doctor's back and asked to speak to my GP, insisting that I would hold the line until I did. Two minutes later I was on my way in to see him. Strangely enough they suddenly had a cancellation.
I sat down and through many of those things that "real men" don't have, I explained how I had been living in an ever thickening FOG for a long time and that I couldn't function NORMALLY any longer.

He prescribed anti depressants and made another appointment for me in a week's time, but insisted that if I needed to see him before that not to hesitate.

It was strangely relieving; just to have spoken to someone about how I was REALLY feeling, and for someone to have actually listened to me. A weight had started to ease from my shoulders.

Within a couple of days the fog seemed to thin out to a heavy mist and gradually started to lift some more. I was feeling better than I had in a long long time.

Over the next twelve months I felt good [most of the time]. My wife and I didn't seem to argue as much and most days I could handle the boss and the job in general pretty well. I was being more careful about how much work I took on and tried to let others around me use their own minds and work out their own problems.

There was a change in management at work and suddenly I was fired. It seemed that the new manager didn't think that my position was going to suit her ideas as to the direction she thought the business should go.

At the same time the government had changed the work relations rules, and the boss didn't have to have a reason to sack someone.

Suddenly it all came crashing in. My world was torn apart; I couldn't provide for my family, I was a worthless person again, after all, society dictates that we are what we do.

I rang my doctor knowing that I was heading for a big fall. He didn't hesitate and referred me straight to Psych Services.

The next few months were a struggle, financially we were screwed, emotionally we were screwed, there didn't seem to be anyway forward. I was seeing a Clinical Therapist [Psychologist] at Psych Services as well as a Psychiatrist who adjusted my medications. I had started seeing a support worker from Aspire and I seemed to struggle from one day to the next, but I wasn't handling it to well.

Then I happened to bump into a local furniture removalist at the corner shop and asked if he needed any jockey's? I figured that if I could at least do something it had to be better than doing nothing. He told me that what he really needed was a driver to do a daily run to Melbourne in a refrigerated truck to pick up chicken. I informed him that I had my truck license and wanted a job.

A week later I was on my way to Melbourne to pick up chicken for KFC, Safeway and other stores in Warrnambool, Hamilton and Portland.

The money wasn't great but I enjoyed the job, and felt that I was at least doing something I could cope with. I could do it my way and at my pace.

Unfortunately, I am a diabetic and the disease was attacking my eyes. Over the next few months my vision deteriorated almost daily, my mood swings got worse and it was a constant battle emotionally to keep focused mentally.

I finally got in to an eye specialist and was hit with the hardest news I had ever received. My eyes were so badly damaged that I was no longer able to legally drive a heavy vehicle. Again I was out of work but worse than ever I was going blind.

My world caved in. I was sent to Geelong for surgery which was able to slow the progression of vision loss. Over the next few months I endured three more operations, but the damage was too great and at 41 I was declared as being Legally Blind.

Within a couple of weeks I lost my vision, my job, the house we were renting was put on the market, our dog that had been with us for ten years got out and was killed by a car. Life was as bad as I could ever imagine. I WAS useless, I WAS worthless; I couldn’t see properly, I couldn’t do “it” anymore!

I hooked a hose to the exhaust of the car that I could no longer drive and into the window. It was time to go to SLEEP. My thirteen year old son heard the car running and knowing that I could no longer drive came out to see what I was doing. He saw what I was trying to do and pulled the hose out and called his mother, who effectively confirmed just how useless I was, I couldn’t even kill myself properly.

Psych Services and Police were called and I agreed to go to hospital. I was a shell, I couldn’t think, I couldn’t function, I was spent.

It was agreed that it would be best if I was admitted to ward 9. That was it, I was going to the NUT HOUSE, life was over, I was a NUTTER.

I went in and was shown around, but it didn’t matter, I couldn’t take in anything. I just wanted to go to sleep.

The next day the staff were fantastic, they seemed to know when I needed to talk and when I needed to be alone. Gradually I ventured out of my room and discovered that “THE NUT HOUSE” wasn’t as bad as I imagined, I wasn’t treated like a Leper, I wasn’t put in a white jacket with long sleeves, I wasn’t put in a padded cell and the other patients in there weren’t scary at all [Well not all of them anyway].

After a few days I felt strong enough to go home. But my Wife had other ideas, over the next few months our marriage went down hill to a point where it was beyond repair. Another argument fuelled by frustration of not coping with my loss of vision, my inability to provide for my family, I had always worked hard to be the best at what I did, I provided for my family the best I could, I strived to be the best person I could be.

Here I was 41 years old and having to call on the assistance of the Salvation Army to help provide food for my kids. Me! Who had worked hard all my life to provide, me who strived to help others where I could, me who didn’t take handouts.

On top of all this my wife had major surgery to her shoulder to repair damage that had occurred when she was younger and had progressively got worse, this left her unable to do the day to day stuff that is required to keep a family of six running,. The pressure was on me to keep up with the jobs like cooking, cleaning, washing, bathing the kids, helping with home work etc. My now fourteen year old son was a great help, he would jump in and do the dishes or help bath and change his younger siblings. Until I got the phone call from his school saying that he had injured himself playing basketball at lunch time, and that it looked likely that he had broken a knuckle in his hand. There I was at home with my wife incapacitated, neither of us able to drive and ten kilometers away from his school. The only thing I could do was phone my Father-in-law [who I didn't like] and ask him to take my son to hospital. The bone was broken and my helper was out of action.

It was ALL up to me. I tried to do the jobs, but learning to do so many tasks with very little vision left was so hard.

My CT from Psych Services was fantastic she made sure that she caught up with me at least once a week and kept emphasizing that if I needed her help she was only a phone call away.

There were many times when I wanted to ring, but I tried to battle on. [Big Mistake]. In late October 07 it all came to a head. I couldn't do "it" anymore; my wife was frustrated that she couldn't do anything. And I was frustrated because it didn't matter how hard I tried I couldn't make her happy. We had yet another argument and things were said and objects thrown in anger and frustration. I told her if she wasn't happy she should leave, to which she replied that she wasn't going anywhere and in fact it should be me that left because I was the "Psycho" in the house.

I was spent; I agreed that it would be best for everyone if I left. The catch was, she had control of all our money and wasn't prepared to let me have any to facilitate me leaving. With the mindset I was in I knew I had to get out that I couldn't let my children live with the constant turmoil any more. I felt trapped, I wanted out she wanted me out but wouldn't let me leave, I saw only one other way to go.

Realizing where I was heading my wife called Psych Services and told them to "get here fast" Then she and the kids left the house to leave my CT to FIX me. When Sarah arrived she saw the look in my eyes and realized that no matter what she said, I was to far gone to listen. She rang the police; I grabbed a knife and headed outside to be alone in my last minutes. As irrational as my mind space was I didn't want anyone to have to see me do it, how could I expect anyone to live on with the vision of another person taking the most precious thing we have, LIFE!

I was strangely calm with where I was at. If not for the intervention of someone finding me I was on my way to PEACE. Reality bit, the police arrived and I willingly went back to the Psych ward for the help I needed.

My wife threw another spanner in the works by having an AVO served on me while I was in hospital.

So there I was, out of every thing I had in life. If it were not for the support I had from my CT at Psych Services, my psychiatrist and the organizations such as Aspire and Mind I know that I wouldn't have still been here to write this tale.

It's been a long hard journey and it still has a long way to go, but with the help of the wonderful people and the organizations that have been there to help me, I CAN see a future although through poor vision, and hope to work towards helping others who are going through personal crisis.

With continued help from Psych services and the facilities at South West Healthcare, I am learning to see each day as a step forward.

Some days are harder than others but I hope I can look back on my journey and see all the lessons come together to help someone else.

It hasn't been an easy JOURNEY but it IS my JOURNEY.

Each day I take another step into the JOURNEY that will be the rest of my life. I know that I will occasionally take steps down the path that isn't going to be the smoothest, but with the lessons I have learnt, and the skills that have been shown to me by the wonderful people at Psych Services, Aspire, Mind, The Salvation Army Lifeline and Vision Australia, I know that I will eventually find MY path and continue this JOURNEY that is my LIFE.

William Tyler - Surviving Madness

Memories of Mental Hospitals

1954: Weemac Private Hospital, Sydney

The Specialist, when I told him I could hear ‘voices’, politely said there were none. I wondered why he thought I had come to see him! Anyway, he decided to treat me in this, his hospital, in a Sydney suburb, I can not remember just which, though I suspect it was in Annandale. I was 22 and this was my first experience of a mental hospital.

There were some kind and friendly female nurses, with whom I played cards quite often. The doctor generally spent his mornings giving tablets to out-patients. I just remember one other male inmate, though I imagine there must have been more, who kept to themselves. I do remember being allowed to go for a walk to the local shops down the street to buy cigarettes or sweets for myself.

I do, too well, remember the electric therapy, ‘Shock Treatment’. I had to lie down on the bed in my room and the doctor fitted things I thought were sort of ear-phones over my forehead and gave me a rubber bung to bite on. Electric cords from the gadget on my head lead to a small black box with a lever, near the end of the bed. The Psychiatrist then pulled the lever up and plunged it down again. I just had time to think he seemed to be letting off dynamite, when, trembling with shock, I went unconscious. I can not remember being told what the treatment was or what it was expected to achieve at all, strangely.

There was one incident there too, involving my mother. She came to visit me and found me getting around the place all hunched up. This trouble with my back had happened as I came round out of unconsciousness from the electric therapy. I’d never seen Mum so angry. “What”, she demanded, “were they going to do about this?” At first, nothing. Then my mother insisted on ringing the doctor at his Macquarie St address. She had to fight for the phone, but finally prevailed. Rather reluctantly the doctor suggested that I go around the corner for physiotherapy, to be straightened up again.

Later Mum refused to pay the proffered bill for this, saying it was obviously the Doctor’s treatment that was at fault. Perhaps he thought we were country bumpkins who would readily pay, but he soon found that my mother could assert herself.

All told, I spent a couple of months in this hospital, till the Psychiatrist gave up and certified me insane, to be confined in whatever mental hospital would accept me, true to the laws in those days. Not just a mental illness. You were insane.

1955: The Reception Centre, Watt Street, Newcastle

There was a foreboding about this place where , as I knew, Mad people had to go. And here I was, there! A night in a Padded Cell, before being taken to Morisset to a hospital I had heard mentioned only once before and had forgotten. One certainly has his adventures, when mentally ill or mad!

1955 – 1957 and 1959: Morisset Mental Hospital

As we entered the grounds of the hospital, I saw a sign, ‘Morisset Park’. This reminded me of ‘Mansfield Park’, a novel of Jane Austen’s, which I heard of at university, but hadn’t read. I was sane enough for that thinking.

Life History

In between eating, sleeping and more shock treatment, weaving baskets at Occupational Therapy and work helping in the hospital library, time was filled in with a Psychiatrist taking your life history. I thought this would be sure to do some good, but the Doctor didn't worry about details, such as how low honours in my degree had affected me, or the deaths in my honour year of my Sister-In-Law and favourite old Aunty. The Psychiatrists were mainly interested in my date of birth and education in general. They concluded I must have studied to hard for my years; and it was a fact that I had been promoted in primary school, so that I was a year younger than most of my education peers. The Doctors asked was I a virgin, which I was; but nothing about financial difficulties going through university. Nothing about how my parent's pockets had been strained or how I worked in the vacations to get some extra money to add to my Teachers' College Scholarship.

I told how the hallucinations of 'voices' had set in badly once I turned 21, though I didn't remember to tell them at the time of hearing a few voices since 14. Whatever, this giving of life history filled in some time, with which I was pleased, for it at least mad me feel of some interest and importance.

Hospital Pleasure

Shyly, you get permission to leave the ward and walk around the grounds. I have a little money, so head for the kiosk. A Nestle's chocolate, a small packet of Viscount cigarettes and a box of matches soon took all your money. There is a seat near the oval where you could sit, eat and light up. As you are by yourself, you don't have to give any away and so reigister a bit of pleasure. Other times you walk the grounds complete, with an ice-cream cone, or nothing, for money is scarce.

1960's, 70's, 80's Hunter Hospital, Watt Street, Newcastle

Periodic Admissions

If, with marked recurrence of my illness, I had to go back into hospital for a while, for months or weeks over the last 30 years, what did I do there?

After a few days in pyjamas, I am in street wear again and generally get permission to go for a walk down town. I might buy sweets or fruit at a little shop, or in Hunter Street I might have a milk shake or coffee. Perhaps I'll buy presents for giving on birthdays or Christmas. Spending seems to compensate a bit, for my troubles. Then it's back, via the park where I would pause for a smoke, on to the hospital for morning or afternoon cuppa. Through the week, group meetings with quizzes to stimulate the brain, discussion of troubles, exercises, art, relaxation, to music. Perhaps a bar-b-q, picnic or bus trip. In the ward a wireless, TV, record player or piano were available for use in spare time. At night especially, I might write a letter or poem. After a rebalancing of medication, the trouble is somewhat under control again and it's home again, until next time!

Mary

Mary was a nice female patient to whom I couldn't risk saying she was like Sally. She flared up, thinking I was not religious; but when I explained that I was interested in religion, we soon became friends. We often talked of the purpose of religion in life with a mental illness. She has since married a man in sheltered employment is keeping well. Of course, you never know when mental trouble will recur and may therefore like to be single, rather than accepting the responsibility of marriage and a family of your own, perhaps handing on mental illness too.

1977: Prince Henry Hospital, Sydney

Psychiatric Ward

I spent 3 months there, to be adjusted to a lower level of medication, after my father died and I was not well, trying to live alone. The staff were patient and tolerant and meals were very good. There was generally something doing; group meetings, or occupational therapy, games or walks near the sea, or students taking your medical history and, of course, interviews with your Doctor. I was drastically sick for a while, when they took me right off my medication so that they could start me off again on a smaller dosage of tranquilisers, to see if that was all I really needed. As it turned out, I was alright on the new dosage. I remember doing some reading there; but I was very restless for a while. Luckily, I had relatives and friends in Sydney, who would call in to see em. In fact, a niece was a trainee nurse at this hospital and used to call in frequently to see me. I shall never forget the beautiful coastal surrounds of this place, quite like Morisset near Lake Macquarie. These hospitals were in scenic, restful, ideal positions and very many buildings and grounds.

David

I was sitting alone in the common room listening to some music, when David came in and started dancing. He must have been about 15. We didn’t say anything, but I started clapping in time with the music. He like this and came over next to me and sat down. We exchanged a few friendly words and at later times he would often come to me to talk. When his grandmother came from the country to visit him, he introduced me. She said his father gave him everything and he was spoilt. I said he seemed a likeable lad, but that I had heard him screaming out in the middle of the night. The next day he came to my room, put his arm around me and lead me to the car park. He said he had prayed to God for a car and that it would be there. I had to explain that the cars belonged to people, which he didn’t seem to appreciate at all. Was he kidding me? I didn’t get a reply. Perhaps he couldn’t write, though I remember he was good at drawing comic characters. A strange little friend was David. I wonder whether he is still battling on with mental illness.

Barbara Doogue - The Journey So Far!

My journey started in 1994. I was involved in a car accident, I don't know why but I have been told by people that a tragedy like that can trigger off thoughts from the past. After the car accident my head just kept thinking of the past and the abuse I had from some family and other people. My mind couldn't stop thinking about it, so I thought it must be time for me to work through these issues and I arranged to see my local GP who promptly sent me to a psychiatrist.

I was very naive about seeing a psychiatrist, I was working it out, because he didn't bulk bill, how many times I could afford to go as at that time we were having financial difficulties too. So I thought five would be enough. I still laugh at that as I still go even today.

While talking to the psychiatrist he didn't even get into my past that I originally went to see him about, he had decided that I was suffering major depression from my present life, through difficult life events. He wanted to see me every week for the present, but then added he would bulk bill me so that was a relief.

In February 1996 I had to leave work and be full time carer for my husband who suffered from back pain and severe depression, so that in itself was hard going from seeing a lot of people daily to being at home constantly with my husband. In the end, the stress of it all, I went from seeing the psychiatrist once a week to three times a week (It proves even then I could talk.) In September that year the government brought in a rule that if you were being bulked billed you could only see a psychiatrist 52 times a year or once a week. The stress was too much, so in October I was given my first admission into a psychiatric ward. I was there 6 months. The condition of me leaving was that I had to go to marriage counselling and get some advice from them. So I did along with my husband and my 10 year old son.

We went to see the counsellors, and we talked and answered many questions for a long time. They advised us that the marriage was no good for my health and I needed to leave him. I was devastated as this was my second marriage and I already felt a failure as the first ended in divorce. So I said that I wouldn't and believe things can change and we could make it work. I didn't know if I loved him but he was my best friend and he needed me. So I got out of hospital and went home.

Six months later I couldn't take the stress of looking after him anymore and watching him slowly kill himself from his morphine addiction he now had as a result of the back pain.

So I said to him that we needed to separate, but I still wanted to see him. A few days after that, he was in the bathroom being sick (which happened quite often because of the pain and the medication), I went into the bedroom to tidy the bed and found a note under the pillow. It was a suicide note, so then I realised why he was being sick and rang the ambulance.

Shortly after that he moved into his own flat nearby. We saw each other daily but I was home after school so I could have much needed time with my son.

One morning after my appointment with my psychiatrist I caught the bus to his flat and when I opened the door that is when I saw him lying on the floor with a note near by saying he couldn't take it anymore and that I would be better off without him and he was sorry.

So that started my five years of going in and out of hospital. A short stay for me would be a month. All together if you added up the time spent in and out of hospital over the five years, it works out to be 2 and half years. With about 30 ECT (Electro Convulsive Therapy) and a few stays in the lock up ward as they believed I would harm myself. I also overdosed about half a dozen times and self harmed quite regularly.

Through all that time I had a lot of diagnoses from major depression, post traumatic stress disorder, bi-polar, borderline personality disorder and obsessive compulsive order. The only diagnosis they haven't used on me is schizophrenia and that is purely because I don't tell them about the voices in my head.

You know for four years mental health services kept telling me there was nothing I could do it was a chemical imbalance, take your medication. It was hereditary, take your medication. You will be like that the rest of your life, take your medication. You will be in and out of hospital the rest of your life, take your medication. I believed them; I mean why would I not, they are the experts.

So what was the turning point? Firstly I had a psychiatrist who worked out I would be better just with one private psychiatrist (I had lost my original psychiatrist because I self harmed after he had said he would not see me again if I did). So I saw the public ones which meant a new doctor every three months; it was like starting again every three months, repeating my story. So she decided to see my privately and that helped a bit. She decided at one time to refer me to a psychologist even though when I had left Glenside they referred me to one but I was refused as they said it wouldn't help. So she put the forms in and I was referred to the local hospital psychologist and he did his review and it came back to my doctor with a note saying, he wouldn't work with me as he didn't see that it would help me.

Again my psychiatrist was at a loss of what to do for me. She thought she would give it one more try and refer me to a psychologist in the Salisbury mental health office and see what happens. Well, to everyone's amazement, she said yes. I always believed she liked challenges. And that was the day my life turned around.

The first meeting I had with her she said, she will only work with me if I was prepared to do the work as she didn't have time for time wasters. She would do ten sessions with me and then review. I ended up working with her for 2 ½ years until I was discharged from mental health services.

So what did she do? She treated me like a normal person, talked to me like an equal. And from day one she never gave me the idea that I can't do anything about my illness, that I was going to be like this for the rest of my life; she showed me I had options and consequences for my actions and that I could have a productive life if I worked hard enough. That's what I did slowly; and slowly, one step forward and two steps back, then one step forward and one step back until I was moving forward more than back.

I had to learn that it was not my fault my husband killed himself; I did not give him the tablets one by one. I had to learn that yes I am the biggest sook in the world, but there are ways I can learn to communicate my feelings and desire and wants from people that I could manage. I learnt strategies to use when I felt down or suicidal, things to do when I was angry or overwhelmed; it was slow but it happened eventually.

When I first started seeing my psychologist I stayed at home most of the time only coming out to shop and pay bills once a fortnight, or go for any medical appointments. Other than that I lived in my house, my cave as I called it. She likened me to Miss Haversham from great expectations where she lived in her house for 30 years in her wedding dress because she was jilted on her wedding day.

So slowly I took baby steps to get out. My first major outings were I would walk to my local MacDonald’s and read the paper while having breakfast, so I was getting out of the house, just not spending time with people. Then I started op shopping; something I learned and I became to love and still love, then gradually doing a few social things with an organisation called GROW and then soon after attending GROW meetings and then working voluntary with the GROW fieldworker. My psychologist once told me just because I was on the pension didn’t mean I couldn’t work for it.

Since then I have grown an awful lot, when I think there was a stage in my life where my support system was regular visits to the psychologist, regular visits to my psychiatrist, a case worker from mental health, a lot of medication and frequent hospital admissions, to now I work part time, I see a psychiatrist once a month (as I am training her!!!) and very minimal medication, which through to things happening in my family life I have only just gone back on.

As I said at the beginning, this is my journey and it continues; I get stronger each day and learn new things. I appreciate what I have gone through because it has made me the person I am today. I believe a better person than I was.

Richard McLean – An excerpt from his book 'The Shrink'

I remember first walking down a long lino corridor that leads to the psychiatric inpatient unit, when I was lucky enough to have the experience of being a 'consumer consultant' for a time, with a psychiatric service.

Hearing testing, Eye care, the dentist, the doctors, and even the palliative ward where people go to pass over, are all located together in the hospital. However, in a seemingly symbolic way of representing the theme in society, the mental health ward is separate, isolated, distanced.

It's my first day on the job as a Consumer Consultant. My autobiographical book, 'Recovered, Not Cured, a journey through schizophrenia', changed my life, and was the biggest job application I think I'd ever written.

My new peer, M, points out the Electro- Shock therapy rooms as we go through locked door after locked door, to which I now have the key, or more accurately, electronic swipe card. I had assumed that shock therapy had ended around the time of 'One flew over the Cuckoos Nest'. There was a lot to learn.

Walking inside, I felt a pang of guilt I was intruding; I had never been in a psychiatric ward. A lot of the people I met however, did not seem as 'sick' as I remember being.
I spent a lot of time in that place... Yet I'll never forget my first impression.

It's a pleasant warm day, yet I have a long sleeved shirt on, to impress, the kind Mum would refer to when she would always suggest, 'Wear one of your nice shirts', to family functions, instead of the art-school-bleck-pop-punk I usually wore.

The most obvious thing about the psychiatric ward is what was referred to as the 'Fishbowl', or nurses/doctors station. It's a long, central room that is behind locked doors and huge panes of glass.

It's where the computers are, where the doctors and nurse hang out, where the cigarettes are rationed out-one an hour to some- and the place where I painfully witnessed person upon discordant person crave for attention through the thick glass, often in futility.
There are long corridors which lead to tiny rooms, each with a bolted down single bed and a small window. There is no décor or decorations. Just plain walls and place to store some clothes.

Outside in the courtyard, there are a few plastic chairs and two tables. This is where most people sit and endlessly smoke what cigarettes they can muster, (or can afford), and look over the working class suburb in the west of Melbourne, a place itself saturated in stigma. They pendulate between this environment, and the free-of-stimuli (except the TV), lounge that is inside, looking into the fishbowl. Meals were on time, and everyone lined up with plastic plates and utensils. There was an increasing amount of art from arts therapy on the walls, which I thought needed to be budgeted for much more.

Everything is bolted down, secured, or too heavy to pick up, so nothing can be used as a weapon. The carpet is fairly grim, and the chairs tainted with piss, mostly from Slavika, (name changed). I had a soft spot for Slavika, a long-term inpatient.

Here, psychiatric drugs are used to treat the symptoms of ‘mental illness’. They are also used to make the person more manageable.

But oh, the wonderful conversations I had in there. RD Laing’s term ‘acutely empathic’ comes to mind.

Time there for a person varies, yet is supposed to quite short-from 5 days up to two weeks. The people working in the field, from psychiatrists, to clinicians, to social workers, and consumer consultants, worked hard, with limited resources-and the beds were almost always full. It sat ill-at-ease with me though, when I would sit in on staff meetings, and the quantity of in/out people would be recorded and monitored, as if by a machine-like entity. This time in the ward is enough time for the clinicians to drug the person enough that their symptoms recede or disappear. Enough time to place people into a frame of mind, where they will fit into society with more grace and less burden. Drug company reps would regularly visit the staff, with all amount of pens, post it notes, and food discussing the benefits of the latest anti-psychotic from particular drug companies, to the new psychiatrists.

Any epoch of time in that place would make you feel discordant. Sometimes I left there walking up the long lino corridor back to my office with tears in my eyes and anger in my heart, and a feeling of relief I didn’t ever have to endure that environment whilst I was ‘psychotic’.

Despite these ideal time frames, good old Slavika, has lived in the inpatient unit for nearly two years. She has a dual disability I am told-she has a mental illness accompanied by an intellectual disability.

There is simply no-where for her to go. So here she stays, watching the affected and often familiar people come and go over the months, and walking up to the fish bowl, pleading for cigarettes. I wish I had a dollar for every time she asked to see her case manager, or be allowed to walk to the shops.

Seclusion is a room with a mattress. It is supposed to be used in the context of ‘least restriction’, and only when the patient is uncontrollable, actively suicidal, or as the last resort to treatment. It’s a small room, with no clock or chair, just a bed with restraints.
To control Slavika, she is threatened with seclusion. ‘If you don’t behave-you’ll go in there!’ one of the high up workers says. To be honest, the worker is trying to run a ward with limited resources, not enough funding, and also try and look after all the other people in there. She has no choice. Yet it made me sad that the threat of seclusion would make Slavika fall back into line.

So she obeys. She is a solidly built European heritaged woman with huge googly eyes, always fondly calling people ‘Daahling’, and kissing and hugging everyone. I have seen and heard her being dragged to that seclusion room... And does she pack a lungful...an animalistic purge so raw, and powerful, makes you think twice to not pay her the attention she direly needed when she asks to see her case manager.

It seemed her dream to be married, and she was fond of me. Another client whom must have been familiar with her told me to tell her I was married to avoid the flirting and adoration from her-which I did-and she rarely called me ‘Daahling’ again.

I always feel awkward when she asks me to see her case manager-that futile lament-the correct answer is to say: ‘Slavika, the outside world doesn’t care about you-you are forgotten, trying to reach a nurse or your doctor to get you out of here or even take you for a walk to the milk bar is futile. Just accept that you will be locked up forever, because in actual fact Slavika, I am helpless. My hands are tied, you are helpless, and the staff are too.’ The staff did all they could...There were simply not enough resources. But a persons home should not be an inpatient unit.

Validating my own clichéd bigotry for a moment, I think to myself she looks ugly, sounds stupid, looks like this is where she belongs at first glance. I’m angry with myself. But looks and sounds can be deceiving.

One day she appears in the courtyard carrying a Bible and ripping the pages out-I asked her to stop, for destroying books, in my mind, was an abomination. She insists everyone take a page. She is making noises and looking ugly, she invades peoples space violently thrusting them pages.

Then she moulds into something else all together by saying, ‘The people here need to be more spiritual’.

Months after this the most beautiful piano music, a classical piece, emanated from the coffee/art room. ‘Who’s playing that piano?’ was the discussion in that moment. After walking up - there she was, gracefully yet passionately belting out a quite complicated concerto.

This was a person who was part of the character of the ward, I will never, ever forget her. Yet the first person I met on the ward was someone else all together.
I only met him once. I wonder, as I do of a lot of people, where he is now-if he is even alive, and was he ever validated to find contentment?

I walk out onto the grass in the sunshine, and see a young bloke sitting looking out to the landscape, in these western suburbs of Melbourne. It will have been the first psychiatric patient I speak to, the first of thousands in my short lived career in that particular role.
‘Hi!’, I say, ‘Mind if I sit down?’ He looks away after seeing the photo ID around my neck, thinking I am a clinician, in my ‘nice’ shirt.

‘I’m the new consumer Consultant’, I say. He asks what it is, and the moment I tell him I have schizophrenia and am there to listen to him, his rapport and features are instantly welcoming-this is usually the response from clients whom feel they can relate to someone who has experienced similar experiences.

He has negative words tattooed on his arms in an old english font. I’m shocked to see the state of his wrists and under his forearms. They have deep wounds all across them, from years of self harm. I don’t look again.

I am instantly stoic-I can handle anything-and we chat.

We chat about a creme he has heard of that reduces scar tissue, ‘You should see how people look at me on the train’, he says in disdain.

He originally went to the Alfred hospital because he decided, and believed, he was going to kill himself. One look at his violent and unco-operative past however, the staff denied him access to the hospital, literally throwing this meth-amphetamine addicted young man onto the streets.

He retold how he crossed the road, and walked straight to the shops, found the first sharp thing he came across, a fluorescent light, smashed it, and began to slice up his arms. Once more.

With no more money to satisfy his addiction, and years of being in and out of psychiatric inpatient units with no relief, I'd imagine he looks at the deep futile blood clotting wounds up his arms, and curses his bodies durability.

He told me he made his way to a mates place where he takes a whole tray of Zyprexa, the anti-psychotic prescribed to him. His mate finds him when he arrives home some time later, and calls an ambulance. He is un-conscious. The ambos quickly resuscitate him, his stomach is pumped, and he is then taken ironically to the Alfred, where he regains consciousness, is whisked off to the psychiatric ward, and ends up groggily in the morning sitting in the sun next to me, on that devastatingly beautiful day.

'The cops are after me', he says. Ahh, I know this all too well, having been familiar with delusion in the past. I think to myself: I am the perfect candidate for this job. But I ask him why the cops are after him, validating the holistic concern of any delusion he might have, as experience has taught me there is a rhyme and reason to madness.

As it turned out, he was on a Community Treatment Order, (CTO), which meant he was legally bound to take prescribed medication, because he was considered a danger to himself and/or others. He seemed to me blandly at peace, maybe for him it was a relief to be back in the I'm sure familiar ward, back to a safe place, back to being 'off the grid'. Under this CTO, he had to report daily to his psychiatrist, whom then confirmed the police of his whereabouts. After his three day spree of ice, he told me that most likely the psychiatrist had reported him missing to the police. What I incorrectly assumed a delusion, turned out to be totally valid and real.

I tried to think of the most appropriate reaction and a solution.

'Can you give your psychiatrist a call to make sure they know where you are? That way the police wont be looking for you'. He didn't mention any family.
'I cant', he replied.

I could empathise with this bloke, after some of my experiences with psychiatrists, I assumed dis-trust and non-compliance with his doctors. Yet I asked anyway why he couldn't call.

'I haven't got fifty cents.' He continued staring out into the landscape.

I took him inside to ask management for a 50 cent coin to make a phone call. Clients, or 'consumers' as we called them, (as in a 'consumer' of a mental health service), can only make a call from the ward phone, at a charge of fifty cents, and all mobile phones are banned. When you're in the ward, you're 'off the grid'.

I find myself looking for his nurse, or a doctor, or ANYone to help. To no avail. I ask the kitchen lady whom I might speak to. She directs me to a nurse, darting down the corridor, avoiding Slavika's constant pleas. The nurse informs me to look on the whiteboard-every client is given a nurse under the nurses name. Each nurse has the responsibility to address around 6 people during their shift.

I have no idea who this person supposed to be helping him is, and neither does the young man. When I finally locate the nurse, and tell her the problem, I am directed to his doctor. When I find his doctor I am directed to the manager.

When I talk to the manager, and explain the situation, he seems embarrassed, even ashamed, and the young man is whisked off to the fishbowl, given fifty cents, and directed to the blue pay phone on the wall. The exchange was so swift when we get to the phone he realizes he does not know the number.

I feel helpless.

The next day I storm into my bosses office, where I propose writing an article for ‘The Age’, about the appalling state of these poor people, the total lack of understanding and financial resources. She is appreciative of my enthusiasm for the role, yet informs me of the issue of confidentiality. She tells me my job is on the line, and that it be more appropriate I praise or improve the service than bagging it. I found it hard to work under such limitations, the red tape and bureaucracy, and the hierarchies.

As the weeks go by, I am deeply traumatized by what I see and experience, and take these experiences home with me, angry and sad. Sometimes I was overjoyed too, let it not be forgotten to say. I had not learnt to professionally distance myself from my day job. I guess I’m not generally enabled with clinicism, we still need all types of people to contribute to the mental health crisis though.

When I go home, I battle my own illness and have great empathy for those the same as me.

I loved those people, and mostly felt I understood them. It was such a wealth of shared experiences, different to ‘the outside’, the ‘normal hum-drum world’...that opaque and ostracized little paradise of light, dark, struggling, hope, comedy, bravery, tragedy, creativity, and individualism.

Richard McLean is an author, advocate, and artist from Melbourne Australia. He has written three books, including 'The Shrink', from which this writing in 'Glimpses' was loaned; all are available from Richard’s website at http://www.egoandsoul.com.

Russell Miles - My Black Dog Tale

“My car. Where is it?” I said to myself.

Then I remembered I had parked it in the next street when I arrived for work that morning.

“What else I may have forgotten during the day?”

The problem with forgetting is you have no idea what you may have forgotten. I started to create an itemised list of what I had been doing over the day.

“Yelp!” My black dog barks as I walk past my car.

“Keys?” I fumble though pockets, work bag, back though pockets and then back to work bag. They are in the outside zipped pocket. “Obviously.”

I open the door and my dog slips into the passenger seat. I am occupied with placing my bag, starting car, looking over shoulder, pulling out.

Dog sits up, stretches and sits down again as I ease into the flow of traffic and familiar streets. Tiny thoughts emerge in my head; issues at work, unpaid bill, children spending too much time on computer, difficulty with partner, failed investment, petrol prices, etc. It doesn’t seem to matter what I think. I certainly can’t do anything about them while driving the car. Black dog starts growling; regurgitating thoughts takes further hold.

Stop light! Indicator of car in front of me is flashing. Dog rest jowl on paws, settles. I’m fully occupied with driving.

I wonder why it is that my head space starts churning as soon as I get to the car. My work day is usually hectic. I take telephone reports about child abuse. The phone rings, I talk, write notes, consult supervisor, follow up contacts. I use to do field work. I liked getting out of the office. But I found it harder to balance responsibilities as sole parent of two school age children.

“4 calls in queue. Anyone go on line?” the manger calls out. I put aside notes to be typed up later and take another call. Hang up, phone rings straight away. More discussion, writing and looking up addresses of support services.

My colleagues regularly bemoan the pace that we worked at, silly procedures and copious forms to be completed. I never let on that I like it that work fully occupies my head space. I’ve little time to feel down. My black dog sits at my feet during the day; tired but settled.

Traffic lights turn red. I stop. “If I pay part of son’s orthotic bill this month I won’t be short for rent.” Dog growls. Incessant thoughts have remerged. I pull on the collar to get dog back on seat / tug rubber band around my wrist. This is supposed to snap back my stuck thought patterns.

Traffic starts moving. I’m again thinking about work. I can’t keep up the pace consistently. I have my limits. My black dog tugs at me when I get tired. I often skive off for a quiet coffee or to sit alone. Between calls I stroll over to chat with work mates, gossip, tell jokes, and grip about the procedural changes. There are various ways to hide my dog amongst the daily turmoil.

“We need these family violence reports registered today,” a supervisor interrupts as they pass me some ruffled pieces of paper.

“I’ll add them to my pile,” I obliquely answered. I don’t want argue about my workload. I’ve found that depression has a habit of turning assertiveness into defensiveness. I need to pick my battles.

Traffic lights change. I cross the intersection, pick up speed. Sometimes I get stuck in traffic for ages. I occasionally cycle to work. Bike takes a little longer. But exercise helps manage depression. At least the brain has less oxygen with which to fuel mindless thoughts. My dog pants along behind.

I’m approaching a rail crossing, traffic building up, cars creeping forward. Black dog is getting excited, sits up, pokes head out window. My father committed suicide at a rail crossing. My grandfather was manic; aunt domineering and younger sister often has inexplicable illnesses.

“I’ve been born into the ‘House of Usher!’”

I pull on collar again. Traffic starts moving. I watch other car merging. Wave to driver as they pull in. They nod back.

As I pull onto the freeway, I look across at my dog whose dark eyes looking up at me. “You’re bad at communication,” I hear myself say. I shift into 5th gear, cruising along.

“Couldn’t talk with late wife, children, indifferent siblings, shop-assistants.” My head insets various characters in my life. With the flow of traffic, my head has scope to create imagined conversations. The same form of words repeating over and over again.

“This is silly!” I grimace at dog. Snap at rubber band.

“What five things would I most like to do?” A mental game I play to divert my thinking. I get to three; curling up with my partner in bed. The cars in front slow up. I ease up on accelerator.

I had phoned a mother with two infant children; son and daughter. A relative had alleged she was neglecting her children. I asked her about her children and family circumstances. Standard questions include any significant events; bereavement, moving home, ill-health, hospitalisation and so forth.

“I have Bipolar Disorder,” answers the mother.

“Child Protection is not particularly concerned about someone’s mental health than if they have a broken leg,” I advise. “It is only if someone doesn’t seek their leg splinted. Same with mental health problems.”

We talk at length. She is very open. Not annoyed that I have called. Tells me her doctor’s name. I hang up. I need to be mindful not to project my personal feelings onto assessments. I’m tired. I had come into work late after another sleepless night. I look at my notes; the words blurred and don’t made sense. I pick up another file, skimmed the pages but take in nothing. I feel frustrated. Sometimes I make excuse to leave early (eg, child's doctor appointment).

Turn off for home is coming up. Dog is asleep on seat.

"I need to catch up with manager tomorrow," I remind myself. My application to work part-time has not been confirmed. I started working part time some years ago so I could have time to attend to children; dental appointment, parent teacher interviews, picking up prescription, cleaning home. I also use it to pace myself. I can prepare meals without haste, exercise at gym, read, muddle about house.

"Sometimes I'm too slack to bother being depressed!"

Side street, close to home. What have I planned for dinner? Do I need to shop? There is left-over tortellini. Need to organise more balanced meals. Had we finished milk at breakfast? Son had wanted to make butter chicken. Is other son at cricket training? I find planning such things difficult. Rather, I'm inconsistent with planning. I can arrange complex child protection investigations. I once prepared a five course meal for sixteen. But thinking about meals for than a day or two, remembering which flowers my partner likes or if I've paid gas bill. This eludes me.

I pull in the drive way, stop. Dog sits up. Children come out front door; to help with any shopping.
I open door. Dog leaps out and slips through front door and canters off to my bed. He'll be there when I seek sleep later in the evening. I drop work bag, check mail, pick up things.

"What was the best thing today," I ask my sons. As much an affirmation to myself as to them.

Ela Simon's Carer Story

My name is Ela Simon. I have been a carer for my beautiful daughter, Natasha, who suffers from Bipolar disorder, for 25 years. However, my story is also one of being an 'unofficial' carer for my migrant parents. So I am the Kosher Ham in the sandwich.

I am 55 but living with and caring for manic people, who pack a year into a week, makes you old and fuzzy. So, although I don't look a day over 35, I'm actually 115.

I was born in Krakow, Poland in 1953 & named Elzbieta, to traumatised Jewish Holocaust survivors. To avoid anti- Semitism, in 1957 my family moved to Israel, where we lived for 11 years.
My first memory is of walking to the refugee camp on the sand-dunes at night, when the oil lamp we had been given, broke. The four of us then stayed with my uncle and aunt and their huge black dog in a tiny room with a leaking roof. (Little did I know that there would be many more Black Dogs throughout my life). I remember my parents' hardships of obtaining a place to live and jobs, whilst struggling with a new language, only from stories. I also remember the confusion I felt when I didn't understand Hebrew at pre-school and hid behind the teacher's skirt for a year.

For a young child of parents who lost everything and were reliving their horrific experiences of running, hiding in bunkers, being forced to work in labor-camps, frightened and hungry, for six years - every minute of every day, anxiety was rife. My father lost his entire family. His family home was confiscated by the Germans. His dad died in his arms in the Ghetto, having starved to death, refusing to eat non-Kosher food.
The Germans burst into a Jewish hospital and shot all the patients, his mother was one of them. His brother and the rest of the extended family were transported to the gas chambers in the concentration camps.

My mother lost her father and many members of her extended family. They lost their home & a very successful Fine China business. My maternal grandmother survived the Auschwitz Death Camp and my mum's 3 brothers also survived.

My family was always in turmoil, and home life was filled with fear and uncertainty - paranoia, rage, anger, lost jobs and irrational behaviour. Everything discussed at our home had a timeline of 'before the war', 'during the war' or 'after the war'. Hearing my parents' horrific stories over and over caused enormous stress. My older sister and I always considered ourselves 'damaged goods' and still do. We didn't know what was amiss but we knew something wasn't quite right. I didn't understand why, when we were very poor and had very little, all the chairs were smashed against the wall one night. Who knew about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in those days?
I always wished to be 'free' and envied anyone who looked to have a 'normal' life. A life without 'butterflies' in my stomach.

Then, at the age of 14, in 1968, to escape the war in Israel, my family moved again - this time to Australia, where the only 'war' is on the football field. I've lived here for 41 years but can still speak Polish and Hebrew. I love Australia.

When we first migrated to Australia, my parents' English was non-existent and mine was limited to a few sentences. I felt like a tree whose roots had been ripped out. I had lost my foundations -- my friends, my language and with it my dream of becoming a journalist and the comfort and familiarity of my culture. I missed the food, the smells and the colours of Israel. I cried every day for 3 years.

As my English was a little better than my parents, our roles had changed. I became the ‘translator’, calling to connect phones and electricity, calling MBF and Medibank, making appointments and filling in forms. I longed to be just a teenager, whose parents were the protectors. My parents also wanted my sister and me to provide their social network as they had no friends. My father had many car accidents and I always got the phone call to come and translate for him, when the policemen were making fun of his accent and poor English. I was grateful that my parents found a Polish GP, which reduced the number of phone calls I had to make. My father, who had done Engineering and computer work, had to take a job sweeping factory floors and lived in fear of losing that job should he be sick or injured. (This was before the days of OH&S).

Like many migrant kids, my minimal knowledge of English forced me to 'do better' in the sciences at school and university. I completed a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of NSW, majoring in Mathematics and Psychology. I would have preferred to study something more creative but my father insisted on Engineering – I lasted 1 year before changing to Science. He was 1 year short of completing an Engineering degree, when circumstances forced him to quit. This presented a major frustration in his life and he was determined that at least one of his daughters, complete what he hadn’t. As my sister was a graphic artist, I was the ‘chosen’ one for academia.

I managed to learn English and finish university. I later met my wonderful partner, Peter, in the early days of my computer career. We had our first daughter, Michelle when I was 27, in 1981. She cried constantly. Post-natal depression struck me and lingered for 2 years. I couldn’t believe what I had done to myself, given up a great career to change nappies, listen to the crying and not sleep. I wanted to die so badly. It took me 2 years to get better with lots of help from my parents and Peter, staying at home and going to play-group when I returned to part-time work.

Then we had our second daughter, Natasha, – the ‘Cyclone’. From babyhood Natasha suffered from hyper-active, impulsive & uninhibited behaviour. At 5 months, when she started moving around and saw a world full of magic, she turned into a little monkey, who destroyed the house, broke furniture and child-proof locks, climbed bookshelves, swung from hills hoists, drank poisons, and jumped from great heights and into swimming pools. She never crawled in the conventional way. She was a late walker and a very late talker – my ‘Late Bloomer’.

School brought her enormous anxieties - a passing comment that would go in one ear and out the other of a confident and stable child – would send Natasha into sheer panic. She did not have that ‘protective coating’ that most of us do, which deflects others’ hurtful comments or actions. She was ultra-sensitive, overreacted to school teasing or any kind of discipline and often cried hysterically. She remembers very little of Primary school but even now, 20 years later, she still obsesses about being hit on the hand at the age of 5, by a stern teacher for attempting to write with her left hand. He said she ‘was a delinquent’. We moved her to another school.

She was fidgety and restless, flitted from task to task, was accident prone and un-coordinated, she had to touch everything and taste everything. She always interrupted conversations. She found it very difficult to wait for her turn at games and did not like to lose but she was always losing her belongings.

She wanted so desperately to be popular and mix well with her peers but it never worked out. She was ignored in the playground and not invited to parties. She would act inappropriately and awkwardly in a group. She misread social signals and came on too strong. She invaded others' personal space. Most of her days were sad. She was very bossy with others. The other children rejected her pushy behaviour.

Severe learning difficulties resulted in bad and impulsive behaviour, attention seeking, crying, vomiting, being bullied and belittled. Her reading and writing skills were almost non-existent. She was labelled an 'attention-seeking drama queen' by teachers.

Anxiety, obsessions, shopping sprees, irrational thoughts, irresponsible behaviour & panic attacks followed through High School where worse physical and emotional bullying continued. She would always get herself into trouble. She was like a mouse running around faster and faster inside a wheel. Her relationships were always in tatters. I was constantly called to come and collect her from the Sick Bay.

She dropped out of school at 16 and went to Tafe and completed a Chef's Course.

Trying to find a diagnosis for Natasha's erratic behaviour was like 'Ploughing in the dark', stumbling across bits of information here and there, that would eventually lead to the correct diagnosis but not for many years.

I read a book "Driven to Distraction" about ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). To my surprise, it explained so much about my relative, who, although in total denial and undiagnosed, fitted all the criteria. It was a revelation. Could there be a genetic link?

For Natasha, first there was the ADHD diagnosis at the age of 12 and then again at 16. Although we could tick almost all the boxes for ADHD (except for aggression), it still didn't completely explain her behaviour, especially the mood swings.

Our endless search for help went far and wide: Behavioural Optometrists, Clinical Psychologists, SPELD for Dyslexics, even Speech therapists. We dragged the poor girl to countless assessments in search of an answer.

Each specialist made Natasha's illness symptoms fit into their own 'agenda', diagnosis and their potential remedial solution; not one suggested mental illness.

An example was the Behavioural Optometrist. In order to help Natasha's co-ordination, we got up an hour early every day to toss balls into buckets, with the left hand, whilst skipping on one foot and then the right, whilst touching 7 points on a drawn body map, walking a straight line and performing many other crazy feats with our left foot up our nostril.

We went to support groups full of desperate parents, made endless phone calls and attended many lectures. People would give us telephone numbers of parents of children with similar behavioural problems. Each new contact brought new hope, each phone conversation the expectation of finding the magic formula which would solve Natasha's problems. We wanted a quick and easy one. But this was not to be.

She was prescribed Ritalin but refused to take it.

As well as the constant crises, Natasha's multi-tasking was an extremely tiring experience. While the rest of the family sat down to dinner and cut up a simple pie and peas with a knife and fork, ate and discussed our day, Natasha would see an amazing pie, with shivers up her spine she would shove chunks of the pie in her mouth and taste every ingredient, lick her lips whilst changing the song number on the CD player. She would notice the clock on the wall and change the time with sticky fingers. She would finish the delicious pie, licking her fingers, swivel in her gas lift chair to the video recorder and change the tape, set the VCR player to record 'Buffy', call a friend on the mobile and sing out loud. She was 'chatting' on the net, toggling to Photoshop to create a card for a friend, editing a Word document, writing her resume, checking a web page for movie sessions. Oh my God, quick, she would rush to stir the delicious casserole on the stove that she started cooking an hour ago. The kitchen was on fire! Call the Fire Brigade! And now she would have to clean up the mess. Natasha was exhausted. We were exhausted just watching.

The first minor manic/psychotic episode was around the age of 16, another major one when she travelled overseas on her own at 19. These were interspersed with periods of depression.

She attempted suicide twice: once with pills and once by slashing her wrist. She didn't want to die; she just didn't want to live.

Then one day, Michelle came home from university where she was studying Psychology. The students in her class had been shown a video "Mum, I know what Natasha is suffering from – it's Bi-Polar". That was the first time I had heard the word!

Although I had no trouble with English, I may as well have been speaking in a foreign language. The kind of help, mentally ill people, and their carers, need, was <u>totally</u> misunderstood. If this was my experience, what would it be like for people who didn't speak English or were too ashamed to come forward?

So I searched for any information, especially real people's experiences of the illness. I read an article in the Good Weekend about a 1950s swimmer John Konrads. It described his life, his behaviour, the highs and lows, successes and failures. This was Natasha to a "T".

The article recommended that sufferers contact The Bipolar Clinic. But upon calling them I was told that until Natasha was diagnosed with Bipolar, they couldn't help. My GP, who had seen Natasha over the years, in 'full flight', astonishingly insisted that Natasha was simply badly-behaved and possibly suffered from a Borderline Personality Disorder, and definitely not from Bipolar. She would not refer me to a Psychiatrist. The Bipolar Clinic would not recommend a Psychiatrist; "*Sorry, we are not allowed to do that*". "Please, at least provide me with a name of a local Bipolar specialist" I begged. Grudgingly, she gave me a name, only to be told by this psychiatrist's receptionist, that <u>I could not get an appointment for 6 months!</u> A very long time in a Bipolar sufferer's life!

When we finally saw the psychiatrist, so much had happened. We were so hopeful but on that particular day, Natasha was on a 'low', quiet and uncommunicative. The psychiatrist wanted me to "step outside" and was not interested in my experience with Natasha's behaviour. I insisted on staying! The psychiatrist questioned her briefly about her moods and decreed that she did not have Bipolar, his diagnosis was Depression; "But you haven't seen her when she's manic" I pointed out, simultaneously angry and despairing of this token investigation of a problem which had been slowly destroying us all for two decades. But, said the expert, the episodes of mood swings did not last long enough to be Bipolar. He prescribed anti-depressants, which just elevate the mania!!!

We were told to come back in six weeks. SIX weeks!!!

2 weeks later, I had to call him. Due to her manic behaviour, Natasha had lost her job. She was walking the streets at 2 am and was picked up by the police and taken to her local Crisis Centre. She was making large purchases, giving her possessions away, booking overseas holidays, buying medical aids – bandages and walking sticks and having panic attacks. Her room in 'the house of horrors' she shared with 8 people, resembled the one in the movie with a Schizophrenic Russel Crowe 'A beautiful mind', walls scribbled on and knee deep in bits of paper, cigarettes, rotting food and lots of lists.

This same top Bipolar specialist finally agreed that she WAS suffering from Bipolar. The diagnosis was confirmed when she was forcibly admitted to a private clinic, with the help of the Crisis Centre, and observed over a few weeks. She was 20. Unfortunately, it took a total breakdown and hospitalisation to start getting the help we needed.

My parents visited Natasha in the clinic only once and when I showed them around and said I was happy she was there, getting help and that it was a good place, my mother shook her head sadly and said "Happy? Good place? We would only wish it on our enemies, "tfu tfu tfu". Far from being happy, my parents were devastated and ashamed.

I come from a very creative family of film directors, producers and reviewers, photographers, composers and authors. We even have an Oscar nominated cinematographer in Hollywood – who filmed movies like Ghost & Terminator. These people were not always considered 'normal', were expelled from or dropped out of school at a young age. I mention this because Natasha has inherited the creativity, and a creative mind does not work sequentially from A to B to C. Rather it 'swims' in endless ideas and goes off in many directions. Creativity is a 'hunger' that has to be satisfied. Many creative people also remain child-like forever. Combine this with a predisposition for mental illness and it can be a formula for disaster.

Mental illness, however, was never discussed by my family, NEVER! My grandmother (although a progressive business woman), would berate my mum, if she mentioned to her friend that my sister was coughing. "Who would marry her later, if they knew she was a sickly child?"

Only after visiting Natasha at the clinic, did my mum tell me (reluctantly) that Mental Illness had affected members of my family on both sides and one relative spent time in a Psychiatric facility. My cousin later described mum's brother (who lived overseas) as a manic-depressive. But it was something they were so ashamed of and hid from other people and also did not understand. ADHD, mania and depression in early 1920s Poland, "did not exist".

Even today, Natasha is told by family members "If you were more normal, you'd have more friends". Although he listens to Polish radio and I show him pamphlets and information on mental illness, my father still insists that "she will grow out of it" and that she should "stop taking that medication". Total denial. But that was their culture. You didn't air your dirty linen in public.

My father believes my mother, who battled Bladder and Lung cancer for 2 years, was 'killed' by the doctors at the hospital from the medication she took for Arthritis. We were NEVER to say the word 'Cancer'. So, even some physical illnesses were not allowed to be discussed.

OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) is also prevalent in my family. One relative exercises for hours a day – (although exercise is not considered an obsession in our society – riding many kilometres on a bike at 3 am could be). Strange OCD behaviours I have encountered include buying surplus quantities of 'anything that is ON-SPECIAL', endless peeling and shredding of fruit and vegetables, photocopying, baking dozens of cakes and buying so many unnecessary cheap clothes. Each obsession lasts a few months.

It is hard to reason with some of my relatives. They have always refused to talk about their problems as 'they don't have any' – it's always the other person who is to blame for erratic behaviours. Sadly, the shame and denial of mental illness and refusal to seek help, tormented all around them for many years.

For me, sometimes the only way of coping with them, is to walk away for a while.

Unfortunately, there is no happy ending to their stories.

After 3 and ½ weeks in the clinic, Natasha was still manic, irrational and manipulative. The Zyprexa she was prescribed had only made her weight balloon so that she looked pregnant. The Psychiatrist then tried Lamictal (an anti-epileptic) which proved to be a miracle drug for Natasha and she could think clearly for the first time in her life. However, it was not on the PBS for Bipolar, only for Epileptics, which posed a new set of problems such as costing $300 a month. This Psychiatrist, although decreeing that Natasha was unable to work, refused to fill in Centrelink forms required for Natasha to receive the disability Pension, which may have helped us with the medical expenses.

Depression usually follows a manic episode. It is possibly easier to understand than mania. We have all been sad at some stage in our lives, but depression is much more than being sad – it is a prolonged inability to function. Every task seems insurmountable.

Natasha has gone through many severe depressions, where she lies in a dark room with her blindfold on and any attempt to coax her out is met with a "NOT TODAY".

Depression visited me again at the age of 45, probably brought on by Menopause. I couldn't get out of bed, see anyone, couldn't pick up the phone or cook a meal. Getting dressed was out of the question. I still take anti-depressants and have had years of counselling.

Other conditions which sometimes present with Bipolar disorder affected Natasha - Polycystic Ovary Syndrome and severe Insulin intolerance. Also SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder. In October, around Daylight Saving Time - the mania starts. Then it escalates until summer, in December, when she is totally out of control. Hospitalisation or persevering at home until autumn, when Depression sets in (around March). Late autumn and winter she is fairly stable. SAD can also be triggered by travelling between hemispheres or crossing the International Dateline.

During that difficult year Natasha still managed to complete a University Preparation Course in Psychology with a Credit result.

Natasha was still not well. After trying so many avenues, I gave up work for a year and was Natasha's full-time carer. I hoped this may relieve her anxiety by removing the pressures of life from her.

During that year, we wrote our book *The Bi-Polar Express* – our life and death roller-coaster ride of mania and depression. We hoped that the story would give a sense of our day-to-day and lifetime experiences and the impact the condition has on families.

Autumn and winter in 2006 passed. We finished our book. It took us a year to publish.

Then spring waltzed in but we were not dancing as Natasha, again was marching to the beat of a different drum. The mania had returned during a hairdressing course. Her hair was different every day – cut, bleached, coloured, chemically straightened and cut again. She handed out leaflets around the city offering to teach English and conduct scenic tours around the Sydney beaches. She was manic again but we didn't act fast enough to get medical intervention.

Natasha was hospitalised again in January 2007 whilst she was on holidays in the Central Coast. The summer mania was being mismanaged by her psychiatrist, not reducing the anti-depressants and doubling her Seroquel (anti-Psychotic) to dangerous levels.

She was sitting in the street – handing out her belongings to passers by. Her credit card and driver's license were taken. A police warning moved her on. Then she went to a motel her late grandmother used to take her to on holidays and insisted they show her the room they had stayed in (years before) and took many brochures. The owner called the police who took her to Wyong psychiatric ward in a Paddy Wagon. She had to be subdued by 6 nurses and put into isolation in a padded cell. We raced up to Wyong from Sydney. That was the beginning of 8 long and harrowing weeks.

Her psychiatrist became un-contactable. The hospital could not get her records from him. Not answering pleading phone calls, faxes or emails. He just washed his hands of her. What unethical behaviour! They had to rely solely on the information we could provide.

The mania soared. She was totally psychotic – unable to distinguish between reality and non-reality. She insisted that she was deaf and mute & kept signing with her fingers "I can't hear you", she was a minus sign or a plus sign, a square hole and a round peg. She was a chameleon and kept repeating the same thing over and over. She thought she had lost a baby, Melody, or she WAS the baby or she was my mum (who had passed away recently). She didn't really know we were there. She was uninhibited and danced for the other patients. She was reading the bible, converting to Christianity and then to Islam. Natasha was so anxious, ranting, crying, laughing, begging and distraught. Twice she was taken to the emergency room after becoming tachycardic and fainting during a panic attack.

But at least in this hospital, we felt as if mental illness was better understood by the medical staff.

We were told by a mental health worker there, that one way of understanding what Natasha was seeing was as if she was watching 1000 TV screens – Natasha's mind was flickering from one screen to another. She knew one picture was real but didn't know which one.

Seeing her in that state, I felt as if I was barely keeping my head above huge sea waves that kept on hitting. I found it hard to talk to family & friends. As if I opened my mouth to speak, I would drown. I couldn't see how my Natasha would come back to us. Even the manic Natasha. Michelle, who was always so supportive of her sister and loves her so much, kept reassuring me she would and she did.

After 8 weeks in 2 different hospitals, with the enormous efforts of the Psychiatric staff and being prescribed Lithium, Natasha came home relatively stable.

I say relatively as she was still very manipulative.

After a manic episode, the family's recovery is slow. After the Cyclone hits us again, like the people devastated by tornadoes, floods and bush fires, who lose everything and have to rebuild their shattered lives, we lose our structure, sanity and sometimes our jobs. It usually takes us a few months to 'rebuild' and recover. Natasha often doesn't understand our need for some 'hiding from the world' and some 'silence'.

"Mum, can Vincent (from POW Psych ward) come and watch DVDs in our lounge room and stay the night?
"No, darling, please, NO", "but mum…", "NO, where are you?" "Outside the front door – with Vincent".

I had enough – we had to take ACTION or Tough Love (words do not register with an irrational person but actions do).

We let them in, then packed a little bag in our bedroom and 'disappeared' to a motel for 2 days. I switched my mobile off. Natasha was panic stricken and called all my friends to find me. As Natasha wanted to have people over & refused to respect our rules, her only option was to move out. - We called the shelter for the homeless she booked herself into - 'THE LODGE'. She was there for 3 weeks.

When we finally went to pick her up to come home on approach in our car – I saw a very large homeless lady carrying bags outside the lodge. I said to Peter "how sad, that could be Natasha" - Oh my God, it was Natasha. She had put on all the clothes she had taken there over several days, layer upon layer, as she didn't have a suitcase. A very resourceful girl. We always provided unconditional love but the unconditional support had to have conditions, so that we could survive and be around to help her. Action did the trick and she has never brought strangers home since. We do sometimes have to remind her, when she is being unreasonable, that "there is always The Lodge".

Once the Lithium took effect, (it usually takes around 5-6 weeks), things improved. The un-contactable psychiatrist had refused to let Natasha take Lithium as he claimed 'it would change her personality'. Yes – it has, but oh what a change.

What is so wrong with changing from all I've described so far to being rational, cautious, sequential, polite, considerate, responsible and especially independent? Whereas the manic Natasha would preface every other word with 'F*ck', I rarely hear that word now.

The government is finally making progress in helping mentally ill people. The incredible help Natasha was given by the NSW government has enabled her to start living. She was in such a bad state at POW and seeing how desperate, exhausted and financially crippled we were as a family, assigned her a Psychologist, a Social worker, and a Community Worker. They all worked so hard to apply for and receive subsidised accommodation through the HASI program, a disability pension from Centrelink and organise a support worker through NEAMI.

Natasha has moved out of home into her 1 bedroom flat and has a cat, Kyra – her new friend. She seems very settled and happy and is so rational, it's surreal. She even budgets! She has been given a new chance at life.

Natasha is now seeing an excellent Psychiatrist. He provides consistent monitoring. (A diabetic tests their blood sugar level 4 times a day but mentally ill people are often left on a medication without review for weeks or months). The Lithium keeps Natasha stable and the Aropax keeps the severe depressions at bay. This Psychiatrist's advice is never to take on too much, everything part time, with days in between to rest and not be exposed to too much stimulus.

Natasha completed a TAFE course in Children's Services last year and for the first time in her life was able to concentrate and actually enjoy studying. Although she had to take a part-time load as full time was too stressful – she did it - with Distinction! A huge achievement given all the obstacles her illness had presented.

She could now use her talents not hindered by her busy and out-of-control mind: her creativity, her original ideas, her love of children, her whacky sense of humour, her amazing cooking talent, incredible eye for colours, and amusing writing. She also has great compassion & empathy for people, especially the disabled. What a beautiful trait.

When Natasha left home so improved, I fell apart. I had lost my "job". I was very erratic. The Psychiatrist diagnosed me with "a touch of" Bipolar. Just because some days, I was manic, unable to sit down for one minute, doing many things at the same time, talking rapidly & starting a new business? Depressed some days or some moments, unable to sleep? I can't quite accept that yet, but maybe he's right? I am probably a version of the Manic or depressed Natasha but on sedatives. Maybe that is what enables Natasha and me to have such an intimate understanding of each others' feelings.

This year (2009) Natasha was accepted into the University of NSW and in March started studying ARTS/Psychology and Film Studies – Part-time/half load. She was juggling information days, mentors, disability assistance meetings, forms for the Mental Health support people, long queues to Student Services and buying books, assignments, experiments, essays, presentations, public transport, deadlines, results, constant monitoring of the university web site and keeping up with her new friends.
How do I know all this? – I was there with her. I was at Uni AGAIN. But Things were going well…*well….*
Oh, wait, that was SOOOOOOOOOO LAST WEEK! After 7 weeks riddled with severe anxiety and panic attacks, she dropped out of Uni. A relief for us ALL.

Being in an environment where she feels ‘safe’ and can succeed is of ultimate importance for Natasha. TAFE’s smaller, more structured environment and more hands on and less theory approach, suited her well. The big, impersonal, pressure cooker of university didn’t. She also quickly realised that the essays she had to hand in were more ‘Patrick White’ and not at all Kathy Lette.

So, the ride continues but with it the most important element for mentally ill people - learning to manage the illness by recognising limitations. Natasha has to be able to recognise and either avoid stressful situations or withdraw from these before they land her in hospital.

Natasha and I are on the MMHA CALD Speakers Bureau and talk at mental health related functions to promote awareness and reduce the stigma of mental illness.

We admire Natasha for being so brave and talking about her experiences with Bipolar, not years after the worst is over but whilst it’s happening when it could still cause damage to her reputation. She is inspirational.

2 years ago, I couldn’t say we have a happy ending. But at the moment I feel Natasha has triumphed over the main ‘demon’ and I hope it will continue to be under control. Now the battle is with panic and anxiety. Medication is not the whole answer here – yes – Valium can suppress the symptoms of panic and anxiety but Cognitive Behaviour Therapy with a good Psychologist will hopefully help with some of the underlying issues.

Another form of therapy for Natasha is writing. She writes when she is depressed or manic, so she is now writing a few chapters for our second book – ‘Panic Stations’.

There is no simple or single solution to mental illness, no quick fix, but never give up. Maybe we have not won the war but we have certainly won every battle and we will continue to do so.

I wish all the best, for those in similar circumstances and hope this story has helped others. As Natasha says “if … even one sentence can help someone, then that’s good enough for me!” Natasha was recently asked what her biggest achievement has been so far: Her answer… “STAYING ALIVE”.

For those interested in our book “*The Bi-Polar Express*”, you can visit our website www.thebipolarexpress.com.au.

Natasha Simon's Story

I'm Natasha Simon, 25 years old and I suffer from Bipolar disorder, Anxiety disorder and a few other conditions.

All my life I knew I was different, I didn't fit in. I always felt I could do everything – but things never worked out for me, I'd get depressed for no reason or be hyper-active.

I don't remember much of my childhood and only snippets from Primary school. I do remember being hit on the hand with a ruler by a teacher in Kindergarten class, because I was using my left hand and that apparently left was wrong. I also remember being bullied and being called stupid, a moron, a delinquent and a drama queen. I would get anxious at school before I knew how to spell the word, or know its meaning.

I hated Primary school – it's not a place for children. I was very distracted, anxious and totally miserable. I only liked drama and movies, which were unfortunately not a part of the school courses. High school was even worse and I dropped out at 16. I didn't understand that how I was behaving was wrong and caused all the people around me so much stress. When I was manic, I was deliriously happy, everything was so pink and yellow and rainbow.

However, my head was always aching with the millions of thoughts running through it. I started smoking cigarettes at 14 and Marijuana not much later. This blissful haze was the only time when I could just have one thought at a time in my mind and it was heaven. But the consequences were terrible. While smoking, my thoughts stopped and all anxieties were extinguished, but then when the gear was out of my system I was more anxious than before. It's the same with prescribed medication – you must take it regularly but it is a better option than illegal drugs (or is it? Marijuana rots your brain but then Lithium rots your kidneys and anti-depressants affect your liver). What I know from my experience is that you certainly cannot mix the two.

I did so many irresponsible things and damaged my reputation as a human being, not to ignore the physical damage I've caused myself – such as burning large holes in my scalp when at 19, I bleached my hair in Greece to colour it blue. This was during my first full-on manic episode on my long awaited trip overseas.

I would get very depressed but when I am depressed, I am so unhappy. But although my parents are frightened, they are less frazzled than when I am manic. When I'm manic, I'm extremely happy but the people around me are unhappy.

The mania would often start around daylight saving time change in October. I hate bright lights and prefer dark rooms. The depression would always lift after a few months. I attempted suicide a couple of times but it was more of a cry for help!

When I am manic I act like a 12 year old and when I am depressed I feel like a 40 year old. I just want to be 25!!

People often ask me to look back and tell them when I realised I had a serious problem. I always knew I was different and a bit off centre but there were two major break-throughs in my discovery of my illness: the first when the crisis centre team came to take me to the clinic; at this point I knew I had a problem but really had no idea that it was that bad, bad enough to take me away. The second was at the clinic when I saw all the patients and found out that most of them had been in there a number of times, some even up to ten times and beyond, and I realised I didn't want to go back. I wanted a one time, in and out experience there, I knew my illness and would learn the ins and outs so I could stay stable and strong and never look back, more to the point, never go back to *club meds*.

At the clinic I also started keeping a journal, which became a part of our book – *The Bi-Polar Express*. This book comes with its own WARNING, it contains:

- SEX
- DRUGS
- VERY BAD LANGUAGE
- LIFE
- DEATH
- REALITY
  and may contain
- TRACES OF NUTS

During my manic episodes I often get asked this question:

"why do u want to be the centre of attention?"

All my life I have been into acting and role-play. Also I was picked on at school and was only accepted when the kids found out I smoked cigarettes.
I got bullied at school, pushed into cars and down stairs, rumours flew and I ended up dropping out of school.

I went on to do a chef's course, then decided I didn't want to cook the same dish everyday and never get to eat it. So I worked, saved, and worked some more. All I wanted to do was to get away. To Scotland, preferably.

I did a film director's course, but decided that actors are arseholes, so I finished the course but didn't take it any further.

I worked again, this time I was over 18, so pub work was for me. …I had never in my life felt sexy, but when I was behind that bar nothing could stop me; I was a sex goddess. Need a self-esteem boost? Don't call a 1900 number, go work in a bar for a day. After all the "what time do you finish?" and the "so can I have your number?" comments you'll be riding home on a cloud, or in a sexy man's BMW. OK, enough dreaming……

You know what? I'm not saying any more about this…. As you can see I haven't answered the question and my mind went in so many directions…I should have answered "(when I'm manic) – I want to be the centre of attention because it's all about me, me, me, me and me" but I don't know why!

I was diagnosed twice with ADHD but still it wasn't the whole picture. Ritalin wasn't for me – I just knew it!

So why am I so different and why do I make so many mistakes?

What a lot of people don't realize is that self-sabotage is a part of bi-polar.
Self sabotage is where you mess up everything you do, everything you touch turns to sh*t.

When things are going well you f*ck them up. Subconsciously you feel things are going to go sour so you think “if things are going to go away I may as well push them away, at least then I am in control.”

Every time things are going well I f*ck them up in any way possible. I self-sabotage. I turn good things into bad, great things into horrible. Without realizing it, I push my friends away, shout at people for no reason, run around messing up my parents’ house, therefore running the risk of losing my accommodation, I spend all my money in one go so I’m left broke or in debt for a month, and most importantly, the one thing that keeps me together is the stability of work, and I can’t even do that without f*cking it up. Basically I’m a f*ck up, and f*ck ups can only do one thing right; f*ck up.

Why do I do this? I don’t know. Why can’t I stop this? I don’t know. Unfortunately it’s not like depression, it’s not a problem which can be solved with meditation and medication. The only thing which can help is hours and hours, weeks and weeks, years and years of psychotherapy — and that’s not a cure, that’s more like putting a band-aid on a broken leg.

Hopefully I can hold it together. Bi-polar people need balance. We need days off work to recover and exercise and chill out and sleep and be still and calm. But we also need structure. I don’t know, it’s all a little confusing, every question is just another question, and I see no answers, not even suicide is an answer for this problem, but then what is the solution? Well if I knew that I wouldn’t be writing another book about what I’m going to do next.

So if you have the answer please, write me a letter and tell me what to do, or better still, write a book, so others in the same boat can grab a paddle and we can all meet for a drink and talk about how great we are for overcoming self-sabotage and managing bi-polar.

At the end of the day, with the right medication and therapy, and my family and friends, I believe I can live with almost any problem.

My second and worse breakdown was in Jan 2007 and I was hospitalised for 8 weeks in a manic state. I started smoking pot again and playing with my medication. I booked a holiday to the central coast for me and my boyfriend at the time. Within an hour of being there I was running around the streets talking to strangers, jumping into the ocean at 2am, giving away my stuff (which is common in mania) and trashing my hotel room. After 4 days and very little sleep I flipped and the police picked me up and took me to Wyong Psychiatric Ward. I hated it, I went tachycardic and had tubes stuck everywhere.

The patients were pretty scary but they were scared of me, so I must have been much worse, the nurses were really rude and mean, the first night I asked to call my boyfriend and they had 6 nurses and security guards pin me down and jab me in the bum with a tranquiliser. I just didn’t understand why I was here, where I was and why I couldn’t speak to him. Talking about it makes me shiver so I’m gonna move on.

I was there for 3 weeks before I was settled enough to get transferred to POW. The treatment was better and so was the food. There things happened which would start the wheels turning to change my life again. In POW I had a lot of support and many different types of workers helping me; they got me accepted into NEAMI which changed everything for me. After 5 weeks I was released back into the wild.

I still find it hard to revisit my hospital stays. It's too traumatic. I imagine it's like being in prison. But, thanks to medical intervention I was helped to get over those terrible times.

I now see a very supportive and careful psychiatrist and am on the right medication. I was assigned a support worker from Neami, who helped me so much on my journey to wellness and I was given assisted accommodation through HASI – thanks to them I am now on the road to recovery. I have finally been able to move out from my parents' home successfully. No more trashing their place. I have a 1 bedroom flat, my place. I can start to be independent. I have a cat, called Kyra. I'm still not sure what I want to do 'when I grow up'.

I completed a TAFE Childcare course, with a distinction. I love children. I attempted University this year, but after 6 weeks dropped out due to extreme anxiety over every part of uni; the assignments and high expectations, the format yet lack of structure, barely knowing anyone, not fitting in, shocking experiments aimed at inducing anxiety, yeah - like I needed anymore anxiety. Even catching the buses and walking down to uni was nerve wrecking. It wasn't the right place for me, and I had to drop out to stay sane, plus I was running out of valium. Now I am really enjoying speaking with Mum at Mental Health related events about our roller-coaster ride.

MUM — my mother could not be more supportive or caring if you paid her. She would give her right arm to make me happy and she is the only one who really understands. I am on a roller-coaster, and, as I may have mentioned earlier, she has been at the front since day one, riding the ups and downs over and over, around and around, every bump on the rails, every curve and every happy or sad moment.

Dad has been on the ground, making sure that, if we crash, we get back on the track, but when I fall off the track mum is the first one to come to my rescue, every time.
People with problems, whether similar or not, share some understanding of the hardship. But mum understands every little feeling I have, because she has been there for them all. So even though many people hop on and off my roller-coaster, some stay a month, a year, or longer, my mum is the one who has been right up the front the whole time, and I know for sure she will never get off, no matter how bad things get. And that is why I love her and always will. Thanks mum; you really are the best mum I could ever ask for.

I'd really like to finish by saying "and we all lived happily ever after…" but I can't say that. Yes, things are looking ok right now, but with bi-polar things could look down tomorrow and then up the next day and so on and so forth. All I need is my family, a handful of good friends, the correct meds, therapy, and a packet of ciggies to keep me okay for now…

If you get to read my book, you will follow the ups and downs, the twists and turns, the high highs , the low lows, back and forth, faster and faster, my Bi-Polar roller-coaster life. But always keep one thing in mind: you can put the book down and get off my roller-coaster ride….. I can't.

If you would like more information about my book, have a look at www.thebipolarexpress.com.au

Kiri Dickens Story

A couple of months ago I confided in a friend and told him I had anxiety. It was a Saturday and he asked me what I had been up to the night before. I said I went to a bowling bar. This was not untrue. But he knows me and knows I don't like bowling bars. So I told him I had had a panic attack. I had felt I could not possibly gone up another elevator to the movies, and went to what seemed like a safe place, which happened to be the bowling bar, where I stayed for three hours.

'I have an anxiety disorder,' I mumbled, as thought it were an afterthought. There, I'd said it.

He raised an eyebrow and then said, 'What are you anxious about?'

How many times have I been asked that? What answer could I possibly give?

'Nothing in particular… I just have anxiety,' I said, wishing I hadn't told him.

He tried a different tack. 'What is anxiety to you?' he asked.

All my life, no one has ever asked me that. I froze. Not a word came out.

'Everything is normal,' he said, with an urging gesture, 'and then what happens?'

Is anything ever normal for me? It's not only when I have the attacks, the process is going on all the time. I stumbled over explaining some of the symptoms, but felt that I would never be able to explain it. Soon I had lost him; perhaps he saw that I looked uncomfortable, and changed the subject.

The truth was, my husband and I had gone to see a movie upstairs at Melbourne Central, and I had had a panic attack. It was worse than I'd had in a while. We were on the third floor; the movies is up yet another elevator. I was acutely aware of being on the third floor, and even though the railing was three metres away, it seemed far too close and I felt as though I was being sucked towards it where I would fall over. I felt completely out of control. I held onto the walls, anything I could hold on to, with my back to the railing, and felt as though I could not move. It was so unbearable I felt I couldn't be where I was any longer. The closest place was a bowling bar. It was so tacky and awful but I felt I had no choice.

I drank three glasses of wine and waited for the feelings to pass, and felt comforted by the fact I could see the lift and the lift went straight down to the ground floor. There would be no more elevators. I would not look at the railing.

Anxiety. It's a word that's often used to describe something perfectly normal: being nervous before going to the dentist. Not something that can take over your whole life. No wonder it's hard for me to describe a panic attack to someone who hasn't had one, and the psychological processes that are always ticking along. Do I go? Do I do it anyway? What will my plan B be? What are my strategies? Do I know where the exits are? And, the absolute killer, 'Will it happen?' or, 'What if it happens?'

Unfortunately I have learnt that this internal question is the very thing that brings on this intense experience. This question is almost always followed with, ‘Oh my God, it *is* going to happen!’

It begins with an enormous buildup of pressure behind my eyes. I feel dizzy and weak and disorientated, unsteady on my feet. I don’t know what to focus my eyes on and I want to close them. I find it very difficult to take in any sensory information.

Often if I can just be with these early symptoms, the feelings pass. But if I allow my mind to ask the ultimate question again and again, to which there is no right answer, then my anxiety reaches a new stage and becomes panic.

At this stage I find it even more difficult to take in sensory information. I am completely and utterly overwhelmed. A crowded shopping mall is torture. Any artificial light feels as though it’s burning into my brain and I shield my face. I feel my whole body shutting down, as though I could be carried anywhere and I no longer have any control over my physical being. A range of terrifying things seem possible. At this stage it is still possible for me to engage the strategy I have learnt of trying to allow the sensations to pass, knowing nothing bad will actually happen, it is an illusion, and it’s the inner struggle that causes the attacks to build. This is more difficult than at the early stages.

But if I allow my terror to build, the attack reaches a final stage, and this is the most terrifying you could ever experience. I know it is happening when my whole body feels suddenly very, very hot, a stab of electricity which is adrenaline releasing. The dizziness mounts, everything mounts, there is no turning back now. Often at this stage I will shake, sometimes violently, and often I will feel no connection to my physical body; it will be like I am watching myself shaking, in disbelief at what I am seeing. Everything around me has a terrifying feeling of unreality. I often cry or want to.

The only way for that friend to see and understand what that meant would be to be inside my head. Sometimes during an attack I take out a pad and pen and write whatever comes to mind. Perhaps I should have answered with presenting him my scribblings. I’m going to give you an example.

Three days ago I caught a train at Melbourne Central Station, which often triggers at least the beginning of a panic attack; the extent to which it builds varies. That day I didn’t manage as well. But I got angry and decided to write this, which I have copied exactly as it is, the missing words and all:

As I write this I am on the bottom platform of Melbourne Central Station and I am having a panic attack. I will not let the monster win. I feel like crying but I will not. This is me uncensored. I am a very literate person however as I write these words I become almost dyslexic, writing words before others, getting letters the wrong way round.

*It’s not the platform itself, I know this, it’s something it triggers in me. A wave of sickening fear. There is always a moment that goes, ‘So you thought you cope did you? Well you were wrong’ and it starts to rise. It’s the worst feeling in the world for me. But even as it almost takes me over completely, a voice inside me says, ‘No you f*cking don’t.’*

You see I am angry at this thing called panic, for how it has taken over my life in many ways. I refuse to be weak any longer.

I wonder if anyone is looking at me. I don't really care, they'll probably look at me like my family look at me - "Drama queen" – as I hold – I have this involuntary gesture. I hold my temples between thumb and forefinger.

My handwriting here is wonky and huge, almost illegible, whereas most of the time it is very neat. That day I had been very busy getting things done and had not taken any time out. I have learnt to look after myself better, but sometimes I still resist staying still for a while. 'Nervous energy' is exactly what it is. I want to take on the world and am impatient as hell. And the pressure of my thoughts and my frantic activity build and sometimes I don't even realise until later.

I am now twenty-seven years old. At nineteen I was diagnosed with depression, but I had been depressed through my teens. I don't think there was any beginning for me; it was always there in some form.

My first full blown panic attack happened when I was 20. I was in the New Zealand National Youth Choir and we were about to go on stage. What I knew as normal performance anxiety suddenly became so much more. The problem with being a performer was everyone just thought it was performance anxiety and told me to persevere. But it wasn't. My intense fear (which I know as phobia) of being watched on stage transferred itself to other situations in which I may have always felt a little uncomfortable, such as wide open spaces or flying. It had begun to take over my life gradually. I did persevere with performing, though I wasn't at all happy, and my condition got more pronounced, until I finally quit three years later. I tried to explain that I had panic disorder, but no one seemed to understand, and they were disappointed.

For a long time I had trouble with thinking I was weak for quitting. I've always prided myself on taking on challenges. Now I know it was what I had to do at the time, and further, that I wasn't happy with the situation I was in anyway. Since then I've been learning more and more about who I am. My (now) husband saw that I was creative but I never realised. I started writing and singing – for myself, not an institution – and never looked back. Institutions had ruined my relationship with art and I am finally starting to reclaim it for myself, which is great. And through my art I have been able to face some of the pain I was avoiding, which I believe are related to my anxiety.

I have always been extremely sensitive, open to suggestion and with a very vivid imagination. I have always had thoughts that to other people seem very dramatic, intense and extreme. To some extent these are things associated with children. But I did not outgrow these qualities. They are in part related to my being a writer, musician and a deep thinker, and here they have a place. Nothing wrong with those things. But as a result of these same qualities, among other factors, I can see that fear had played far more of a role in my life than it ever deserved. I can see threads, or seeds, in my childhood of what manifested itself as depression and then panic disorder.

I was the eldest of four children, with the stigma of the 'the difficult child.' This frustrated me as I didn't know how I earned it. I was often unhappy. Nothing I did seemed to go right, especially in interacting. I was both furious with, and terrified of, my father, who was quite physical and rough with me. I often preferred to live in a fantasy world. But this fantasy was also just as often invaded by my fears. I had nightmares I never forgot, even to this day. I'd learn about something like tidal waves and have the most terrifying dreams of watching a tidal wave come! But a recurring theme was being sucked away by a force beyond my control (this is the exact same feeling I get today when I panic).

In essence, I haven't changed. I have changed a lot in how I deal with these tendencies. Some days I do better than others. I still don't give up. Fortunately I can be really pigheaded as well.

Panic attacks have been the most difficult thing I've ever had to deal with and manage in my entire life, more so than depression for me. My whole life changed after my first panic attack. Everything became about my panic attacks, how to avoid them, how to deal with them. I think about it less now, but a lot of my decisions are undoubtedly affected by this fear.

I've been told that at a party alcoholics always know where the alcohol is, how much there is, and when they're going to get their next drink and what it's going to be. Well, in a phobic situation I always know how much medication I have with me, where the exits are, exactly how far and how to get away. Which on a plane you can't do, or in a performance. This is very tricky. Planes are possibly the strongest of my phobias, alongside performing. I have three, sometimes four, Xanax, which I'm not really supposed to do. And then a couple of glasses of wine which you're also not meant to do! It's something I haven't quite tackled yet. It's like an ongoing journey;
I'm pretty encouraged by the fact I'm so much better than I used to be four and five years ago. I was barely leaving the house, and I had a panic attack at least every day, and the rest of the time it was like I was right on the edge of one. It was before I went on medication. That helped a lot, but my goal is still to one day not need them. I figure I'm only going to get better so long as I work out my issues. I try to do things that keep me well. I have a list of them. It's like a maintenance thing. I meditate, do yoga, improvise on the piano and with my voice, I keep myself interacting and busy. Maybe one day I'll go on a plane without even thinking about taking my pills, who knows? And look out the window at the thick powdery clouds. And smile.

Anonymous Story

Hi. I am a 37 yr old woman who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder since I was 16. I have had several hospitalisations but thankfully none in the last 9 years. Historically my main problem has been mania more than depression. Most of my hospitalisations have been for mania. In this story I will share with you some information about my illness as well as my life. I believe that the illness is really a small part of who I am.

My illness started with what I believe was a depression at the age of 15. I stopped talking to my friends and became quite withdrawn and my school work began to suffer. I was attending a selective high school, which had its own pressures. I don't really know what it was that triggered off my illness. At the time counselors said I was just suffering from stress at school and didn't give me a formal diagnosis or medication.

Early the next year, when I was 16 I had what was diagnosed as my first manic episode. It really all started on a school excursion to the Adelaide music festival, which involved a 24 hr train trip. I was hardly sleeping at all while I was in Adelaide. I was talking non stop. I was over-excited. I started laughing inappropriately at concerts and I spent all the money I had with me.

When I returned home I was still not well and trips to the GP soon lead to trips to a psychiatrist and my first diagnosis. I tried to keep going to school but I found it very hard. I soon became psychotic which led to some very embarrassing things that I did at school and at school music concerts. I then stopped going to school. I was looked after by my grandmother at home while my mother worked. I was started on several medications.

About the middle of that year I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for the first time. It was a private hospital and there were other girls my age, who mostly had eating disorders. I had a fit while I was at the hospital and I was transferred to another hospital for some tests. It was concluded that I didn't have epilepsy and the fit was medication related. I ended up staying at this hospital for some time, and had treatments including medication and Electroconvulsive treatment (ECT). Later in the year I was transferred to an adolescent unit.

At the adolescent unit I stayed during the week and went home on weekends. It was sort of a good transition from hospital to going back home and back to school. I have read some of my old diaries from around this time and I was really a bit of a mess. However, the adolescent unit did help me recover and get back to school.

I returned to school and repeated year 11 and then did year 12 and my HSC. After my HSC I worked for a year as a sales assistant at a book shop before going to university the following year to study Bachelor of Science (Human Movement Science).

I moved out of home and lived in a University Campus Accommodation for the first year I was studying. I was pretty well during this time. I was taking Lithium to stabilise my mood. I also enjoyed triathlon training and competing.

During my second year of university it was decided by my psychiatrist and myself that I had been well for so long that it was worth a trial off the Lithium. I was pleased as the side effects were I bit hard to handle. I felt it slowed my thinking, and effected my exams and also it caused weight gain, which wasn't too much of a problem as I was training so much.

Anyway, after two or three weeks of being off Lithium I relapsed into what was diagnosed as another manic episode.

Although I was back on medications, I had several relapses after this time, several of them needing hospitalisation. However, none needed as much hospitalisation as I had when I was 16 and 17. So over the years up until I was about 30 I experienced treatment in several public and private hospitals. I had treatment from psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, support groups and GPs while I was out of hospital.

I tried very hard to get on with my life in between episodes. Some times the episodes would last only a couple of weeks and other times it might be 3 months. I did well at University despite my illness. I completed a Bachelor of Science (Human Movement Science) with first class honours. The university was very supportive when I got sick in my honours year and gave me a 6 month extension to make up for the 6 months I was off sick. I represented Australia twice in my age group for triathlon and duathlon.

After, my honours year I started a Masters which I later upgraded to a PhD. I didn’t end up completing this. My bipolar disorder, the medications, and also chronic fatigue syndrome, which I was diagnosed with in my mid twenties all contributed to me changing first to part time study, then missing uni with time off being sick and finally pulling out. There were other, non-medical issues also which greatly influenced my decision to quit after about four years of part-time study.

As I said in my introduction I have been out of hospital now for about 9 years. I still have minor fluctuations in mood and energy and motivation and times when my sleep is affected. I am also affected by anxiety. I take a bucket load of pills: Tegretol (Carbamazepine), Zyprexa (Olanzapine); Zoloft (Sertraline); Norimin-1 28day (without the sugar tablets); Vesicare; and Atacand (candesartan cilexetil). I see a psychiatrist, psychologist and GP for issues to do with my mental health.

I have found I cannot work full time at the moment. Since my mid-twenties I have either been working or studying part time, with some short periods of unemployment. I have worked as a communications officer for a mental health organisation and as a swimming teacher.

Most recently, probably the best thing I have done for my self is to join a Masters Swimming Club. I train three times a week and compete regularly. My times are improving and I have used the carnivals as opportunities to travel. For example, I went to Darwin and Kakadu. I have met a great bunch of people.

I believe I have been relatively lucky to find a combination of medications that seems to keep me relatively stable now. My health professionals also help me greatly. Sometimes I wish there was just one tablet to take to fix everything with no side-effects, and one professional to see, when I needed to. However, I think that is unlikely in the near future.

I have also been lucky to have supportive family and friends, including friends with and without mental illness.

Paul's ECT Diary

18/2/2004
Well, ok, no more real excuses left I suppose I had better write at least something or later rue that I did not.

I have just had my first treatment of ECT - electro-shock therapy. I had it at around 7.30 and it is now 9.

I am wearing purple underwear and multi-coloured socks that do not match and I am typing at my desk in a room at the Perth Clinic.

I feel ok, no worse than usual and better than most as I am not in the depths of the deep blue as I often am. I have a headache and I neglected to mention two of the things I am wearing - a hospital wrist-cuff and some kind of electrically sensitive sticker on my chest.
I was not afraid in the morning that led with stalking inevitability to the procedure (by the way there is a doctor here called "Dr Assumption" - what's the prognosis Dr assumption? Looking GOOD huh? Is this arm broken? Are you SURE? Are you really really SURE?). I have done my f*cking research like I always do and not only that but so have my father, my sister, and my mother read a BOOK about it. And they all agree that the unusual and devastating diagnosis appended to my usual manic-depressive diagnosis seems to leave little choice (an underlying and time deep despair; a manifest and pervading depression.) Shock treatment is the best path, rutted with reasonable fear and speculation though it is. The staff keep trying to explain to me what it does. Sure, they understand it better than I do, but the truth is that I have read experts from on high depict the brain as the final frontier and something about which we know practically nothing. And it has to be thus. If it were simple enough for us to understand, we would be too stupid to understand it… ah, a catch 22, there are so many in life are there not??? I was struggling with a nasty pointy one yesterday myself - you see I could find no reliable account of the memory loss involved in having ECT because the people who have had ECT have got memory loss. So how would they know?

But my fears were assuaged to an extent by the Doctors that I saw subsequently, though I didn't trust the guy with the Monet tie - passionless limp artist he is. I know why I was not afraid, I suppose. My primary fear was that I would lose the depth of my long term memory - what I have worked so hard to remember over so many many years ("our memories are hunting horns whose sound dies on the wind." Guillard Appollinaire. Hah. I guess the quotation facility is intact.) Once I had learned that this was immensely unlikely and all I was going to lose were these moments themselves - around the time of the procedures, the truth came out vomited in my mind that ok f*ck it I do NOT care.

Though memory loss in itself is a very odd thing. The memories are masqued and yet YOU appear in them. And… "Who WAS that masked man?" I am kind of cool with it since I have drunk so much in my life. Not that I wish for it to continue, but hey I mean if it works, if it actually really in real reality works, I will have traded two weeks of a hazy existence for really what amounts to… well perhaps that in itself requires some serious prose.
My head is ok… the headache has abated somewhat and all I have to remind me is the memory and the knowledge that it did in fact happen, since I was under a sense-occluding anesthetic - the two pieces of time before and after I went under. I remember up to the point where the nursey said now you will feel a sharp pain and then a cold sensation up your arm.

I don't remember where I woke up - I infer that it was in my bed though I am certain that I do not know. Now. Hmm. I DID do that a great deal when I was drinking though it was more of a surprise where I went to sleep. Other ends of the loop, catch a timeline by the TALE!!!!

I require nicotine. I must make my way hence. ACH. I have at least begun.

Eek.

Hm. Later it is - the evening of the above day. Wednesday.
For a time I felt quite high and otters commented on the change - I seemed as well as felt brighter on the morn of my carapace's electrocution. Now I do not.
I feel lazy over-full with my own idiocy and BLEH Christ I carry on and on - out out suffering I say and clutch it to my breast like an over-sized cartoon character to an evil little child (or the reverse.)

One of the known and I believe the most typical side effects of ECT is tired-ness…, And I feel tired early in a sick kind of tired a sweaty-sheeted tired a moving through mud and honey though not that sticky sort of tired.
I do tend to manage to put a tick next to every possible common side effect if I take drugs and why should this be any different? Maybe I should attempt to write something interesting instead of this drawing out; this cigarette's call - this hunt for subject just describe how you feel Paul.

Put those metaphors down. You might need them later.
So
And we were…? Was I at the end? I owe you one linear time point.

Feel crappy grr. My room-mate is watching the gnus (news) on TV. F*ck. Hm I am having trouble with my eyelid dropping forth closing considering flicking such a soft so fundamentally soft a thing.

Ok f*ck you conscience-guy I am going to bed and I didn't do ANY f*cking painting today!

MORNING, Thursday, 19/2/2004

The morning was excellent, exquisite and resolute in deep passion and ocean blue. I swam with Lisa under the blooming sky - we swam and sank and I lifted her in the surf, her weight and warmth devastatingly real. I was immersed, hah! A baptism in life.
I said to her that I had found a new goal, I told her that I now sought "Clarity" that all of my thought was going to be tried and tied by its loop.

She said she lived. And I laughed and f*cking laughed because of course that was so much more clear than the seeking of clarity could be, than any of my forms and expressions and bullsh*t lines of thought! Why is it that in seeking the value - in askance of value, I miss and preclude the value itself? Ah but not for these moments.
I held her and held her and told her of the things such things that I have seen and know, her eyes a flaming version of the ocean's aquamarine. I believe there were few wants this morning. Few, yes. A beautiful woman a flawless ocean; the right temperature of day and water, timed by degree. The beach a strip of pure white wire in my mind. What more?
I out-stayed the two hours outside the ward I had been prescribed by Dr Orr by an hour, and no-one had noticed, about which I am perhaps more apathetic than they were.

I am shaky and agitated and I do not really know why at the moment - it is not even the turning of my thoughts I do not think, just some state, some slackening of reins somewhere inside me. My hands are quick over the keys with sudden hesitations and corrections. The words are everywhere, laid open like a messy room or wound.
I feel a little more calm - that may be due to the absorption of my missed morning meds. I hate this; all, hate it so much it makes me feel like I have grown not at all from the vicious teenager with the wounded eyes that I used to be; used to inhabit. I do not care to be in this place any longer. I have too much I need to do. I…
Foolish to go on in that vein. I am here for the next few weeks, however many thousand seconds that may be.

Staying. I have to stay here. It will keep me alive. How strange to even consider that as truth.

Thursday night before Friday's morning treatment.
I wrote half of a song this night. Oddly and alternately elated and tired.
Tiredness is a kind of madness so Dostoevsky says and am I to argue?
The man with whom I share a room at night is watching sport television and hiccupping. He must be killed.

20th/2/2004, morning after the second treatment.
I did not sleep last night, though that in itself is not particularly surprising in consideration of the solid sleep I ascertained the night before and not unlike me or even possibly unlike others if the stress were shared out. The details of the lead up to the general anesthetic are very clear to me, as are the details of the one previous. Perhaps I will be further affected after more treatments, I really don't know.

I feel fried. It is a sensation that I think may well be outside my previous experience. It is not completely unpleasant, though mostly so. Certainly it is preferable to many of the states and sensations that the illness (the f*cking curse) of bipolar subjects me to with pendulous swinging clubbing force.

I have a headache I suppose and my usual restless wandering prickling and speeding thoughts, made worse by the headache and the lack of my music to listen to. I HATE going without a sound track. I suppose I should begin counting down the days.

I know I will be having six treatments, one every two days. So it should take twelve days as the lunatic flies, but may not as the specialists involved seem unlikely to work weekends. This would be the third day. Fu-uck. And I hate this place so well already. That would leave me here for another 9 days. My teeth hurt from being clenched so hard so desperately life-bleedingly hard in seizure. I can not of course remember it but it is akin to waking from a drinking binge to find that I had been in a fight. I feel a similar kind of shame.

21/2/2004
I managed to leave my keyboard and mouse at home and could not get them till this evening - this being an ancient piece of crap laptop I have only begun to write and it is

7.35 in the evening.
No memory loss that I can (can I? would I even know? How can anyone ask themselves questions like this?) perceive. I seem to be able to see through my mind like a piece of plate glass being made on boiling tin. I feel… I feel a deep, a bone deep despair.
I am constantly hyper-conscious of my actions; of my words. I cannot imagine being

otherwise. It is unpleasant and the way I have felt in my lifetime's gathered sense. Arc them and reel them in under a long deep grass scythe and that is with f*cking brutal clarity the answer that I get.
I suspect that I feel things in some star-bright way… no wait, ill chosen metaphor.

I suspect that I feel things raw; as if the skin had been taken from my eyes, my hands, my ears, mouth and throat. Each sense, I believe, is tuned in some way to over-provide me with stimuli and I have too much. Too much! My hands are f*cking full it runs out between my fingers too f*cking much.

I have felt this day little different than I have felt on any other day. I feel tired, I want to go to sleep, I want it all to stop hurting me just for a little while. Am I working myself up to this? Is this what I do? OK few alternatives no recourse to escape never ever, I think I will go and get some more meds and have a cigarette.

Find me something else, ever. ….I dare you.

Hm well I have done those two things and I think I do feel slightly better, strange (so close that word, to strangle!) as it is for me to admit. I also had tea. A nice hot cup of tea, some godamned biscuits and some psychiatric medication and we have A NEW PAUL.

22/2/2004

KEENING IN THE NAME OF…
Hm. It seems I have got NPD as a diagnosis appendable to bipolar affective disorder. I passed a pregnant woman in the coffee room who had lizards' eyes, untouched by her polite smile. Of course, I believe she was here to see her husband. No wonder he cannot cope or hope at home. I think I saw straight through to her soul and it was very cold there. NPD translates to narcissistic personality disorder. More homework - I have to find out exactly what that means. I don't qualify for many parts of it as I am not actively malicious, and will not sabotage anyone but myself (with deliberation that is). It is the attention that I crave. F*cking footlights that I crave. Even in writing this I am writing to a vast silent audience, even an older version of myself. Not so I can record my thoughts and later pore over them and what they might mean - fresh from the mental ward - no; more so I can read later and be reassured after sudden chill of reality that I am still something unusual even in here amidst the lunatics and Nietzsche's abortive saints. And of course, I am. Though if this is an advantage to me I do not know.

I am restless today as ever. I have already worked for hours this day and paced the beautifully carpeted halls, smoked my strong cigarettes and cleaned and reloaded my memory. I am a little better than I was though. The intensity of BEING seems to have abated to the point where I only have to squint and not close my eyes and cut. I am on very light meds. Who knows if it is them or the 2 sessions of electro-convulsion that I have experienced that have improved my existence. Or if it is just me and I turn slightly away from my own searing light, from my own blistering, inward, f*cked up, sun. I need more cigarettes, must smoke I need to hold my head in my hands since there are no other hands to hold it for me.

It IS better to die on your feet than live on your knees.
I have done pushups sit ups and dips, lots of each. I am trying pretty hard not to let the medication make me fat this time. It is so strange to have all these people on the inside of

these walls - and they do seem more sane than the generic freaks that I may meet were I to paint in public for a few hours.

I miss my car. I feel so trapped here. I won't go ANYWHERE normally without an easy escape in case I am anxious and feel trapped, not even for a few hours. And this is for weeks. WEEKS! Argh!

I have at least another week and a half TO GO. F*ck THAT. Man… I mean… sure I have a lot of my stuff here and can still work but not as much as I could were I at home and I don't have my computer, I miss my friends and I need sex pretty bad. I miss my cat also. I wonder if they have a policy on that. I am sure they have planned for such contingencies with a hearty rejection.

No Paul you cannot have sex or bring your cat or even your computer with you. This is a hospital after all. Perhaps I could charm an administrator into it but I would have to find the RIGHT administrator to charm, ok giving up on that whole train of thought; derailed now.
It would probably be the pregnant woman with the lizard eyes or someone like her. It seems that she is here visiting her mother. I imagine that seeing those flat grey lifeless eyes peering over the edge of a bassinet, cot or nipple would be enough to drive most women insane.

There must be some kind of ratio between those of us who are artists and those who can wander around appreciating art and telling the artists that they are cool. I wonder what it is and how it grew, skewed amidst our bizarre archeology; skewed even then. What else have we to describe but ourselves; what better describes us? I suppose this is the point.

Though I hardly paint anything in my life that I can actually SEE ALREADY.
Some other thing, some other truth maybe.

I know that it correlates with something others see out there in the wind in the night. If they cannot see any of what I saw in my work I don't think they would buy it: It is not just the buying there must be some special thing about owning original art some different kind of appreciation, some once-ness. I just know that I have no choice and must MUST keep going.

Lots of credit in the real world gets you HIGH.

And the sky was made of amethyst.
I am restless tonight, my god the understatement say is the universe big? Shall I eat? Shall I spend a great deal of time ruminating on eating and even f*cking WRITE ABOUT IT???

Ach, yes, hey what the f*ck? Did I get electricity passed through my BRAIN (or as I like to sometimes call it my Brian) this very morning? I believe that I did. There are many things that indicate that I did…

This morning Lisa came to visit me ("come up and see me, make me smi-ile") and we walked under thick green leaves and talked softly. We soak each other up, I feed from her her eyes and skin water for my soul.

This morning… deep rapturous moments, long languorous and full - wandering around in her eyes, her eyes oh.

I have to learn from her. I think I learn from her. She is so alive - she does not even attempt the things that I do to assure her that she is alive that she is real. That the things that she sees, that touch her, that move her soft pretty heart are verifiable in all of our senses. She does not to do this. She does not need to; it is my trap and if I can pry it from her sweet fingers then I will, I might. I wonder…

We walked together and kissed on the grass in the bright summer sunlight. I cannot let go of her she holds my attention better than I do. I hold her body, her hands. I take her radial pulse, her carotids, once, twice. I am in the sweet scented pollen of her, on the grass stretched and ragged against her. Ah… something there, something lifelong, unfoolish and like a splinter of life.

I had more ECT this very morn. I felt, in an analogy deeply inconsistent for me - a SPORTS analogy, like I had been belted, hard, with a cricket bat.

There is some kind of time dilation there also. The morning seems in hindsight to be split more than in two by one event. The pain is real, and consistent, but hardly unbearable. I will bear it - I will bear that the least of my considerations the f*cking LEAST and LAST the pain??? F*ck the pain I know pain and this is just a physical pain not a soul pain! I am losing time away from my work, this causes me to suffer, yes, trade it, time you must f*cking trade it there is always some kind of f*cking deal to be had.

And this is it people... often i was too tired to stand up so i lay down a great deal. OF course now it is 6 am and I have insomnia, the reverse but still hardly pleasant. i feel ashamed that i did not write more whilst hospitalized. I did not sleep with anyone THE WHOLE TIME i was in hospital, though this was certainly not from lack of opportunity. How unusually responsible of me.

My neck heals. I have always healed very quickly I am a little like wolverine in that regard - also I am short. I believe the similarities end there - I cannot even grow proper sideburns.

There were many so many swiftly powerful moments in there - so much human truth and suffering... even mine. Dawn draws its fingers across the room so slowly it seems that it could never be bright here.

I have wounded my arm by doing heavy weights too soon after my atrophied stay. I am terrified of gaining weight from new meds - neulactil anyone?

It is a treatment antipsychotic in nature and design used for schizophrenia to stop voices i admit I have sometimes heard. It frightens me. Much frightens me.

I did some work of a new ilk during my stay but I cannot post it on my webpage because I loaned my camera to someone... I shall soon.

My typing seems so slow and my touch so sensitive on these keys - I hear them so loudly in the morning CHILL. In the morning SILENCE re-sounding in my head.

This is not enough when is there ever enough for me? How much must I paint and write to not feel like the fool that I know I am in my heart? Even this question is laced with heaviness for me because so many others have asked before in all that I have read, sure, yes, trapped in the human experience that cannot be undone cannot ever be original because of the billions who have died before me and the billions, the BILLIONS who yet live.

Narcissist, me? And WHY THE F*CK NOT? How else to live? How else to ever consider self and seething mind and bullsh*t? Yes I am in the prime of my life and yes I am beautiful to my own eyes and yes I have a soft kind touch and yes oh yes I have a mind that would be considered genius in any society and yes I overdosed and cut my own throat not five weeks burned into the past because none of these things has ever been enough for me! AM I MANIC? Is this f*cking classifiable insanity? What else in existence could I want?

How much will I hate when my body breaks beneath age when my sharp eyes dull and my hands fail me?

I despise rhetoric I slip in it like sh*t there is such passion in me such raging life and of course this is insane anyone under such a sun must burn my own hypocrisy hurts me and I hate myself for having the courage to ask the questions that hurt me so much for feeling the impossibility of answers so bloody and keen.

At least I have the courage to ask and live and cut.

To ask, most of ALL, that is the key, stabbed into my eyes.

Vicki's Story

What is depression? Is it foe? Some people can relate, some can't. The word by some people is an old description.

She'll get over it, you know it's just the baby blues, you know they all go through it. Weill how many times have you heard that? I mean really, we all have feelings and when we hear things like this, it is a feeling of being pushed aside and bundled to the side like a stack of old newspaper. Like who wants to listen, instead of push come to shove, shove come to push?

Time to dig your heels in, stand tall. Be seen and know that your voice can be heard. Describing depression is like going for the last bit of gold; you're digging deep into the abbey, it's hollow, empty, very, very black, dirty, smelly, like the core of the earth is rotten, eating away inside your head, leaking into your veins, running the length of your frame. Your eyes start to swell, you begin to shake a little, then a lot; you can't control it, someone has taken over your body, like a poison. It doesn't belong to you anymore. So what to do? Well just got to go with it.

I'm not able to read, nothing makes sens anymore, I'm confused, it's so noisy here, the light is brighter than normal, it's hurting my eyes, my pounding head throbs, water floods out of my eye sockets, my clothes are seeping wet. I need to hide, be safe, quiet, I curl up in my bed, wrap my body up in the foetal position, put my doona on, and cover my body inside.

Noise has minimised, tears still run and run, to where they be and where they go, who knows. My body has become weak, I liken this to a rag doll, and my body is not listening to me. It's in a deep dark, dark, ugly place, where venom expels.

I want to get up but I can't. I try, I'm limp, soggy; I feel like I could be rung out. Time and time again I feel not much, sense my legs, arms, but the oozing is still happening in my eyes. Light is all around, hard to know why this has happened, what day is it, the hour it's pasted. Light, dark, who only knows and really who cares.

Depression has it's own evil and omens to those of us who have survived it, sometimes, it can seep back slowly. Need to keep a check on the day to day things, need to turn the negative thoughts into positive thoughts, 'keep on keeping on' tell yourself; find a friend, get an animal. If not, then go to an animal shop, write a letter, read a book.

In recovery from mental illness, depression, loneliness, it is a thing we do learn to live with. I'm sure we all have a wish list, no matter what in life happens there is always someone worse off than ourselves. Learn to be thankful for what we have. Make yourself feel good by lending a helping hand. I hope whoever is reading this can understand.

Samantha J's Story

If there were a button you could push to be cured of Bipolar, I would push it with only a second's hesitation. Not only is it difficult to live with it at times, it is invisible to the naked eye, there is no plaster cast to see, peak flow or blood sugar test to measure. It is that reason that I am writing this, to give a glimpse inside my head and life, to make mental illness visible. Although now more and more so, society is kinder but it can be impatient with some of the aspects of a person with mental illness and may treat us unfairly. I also want to show that there is a way through with a light at the end of the tunnel as my journey brings me a radiance which many others who have not had the chance to experience cannot appreciate. Through this story I do joke sometimes which is not to be confused with flippancy or minimisation but the way that I deal with things, I have had enough times of fretting over my lot. I am by nature a practical woman and of a logical predisposition with no hope of natural artistic ability.

I am nervous about writing down my story; it has been a 'secret' usually non- issue. What will happen if someone I know reads this? What would it do to that relationship? It may be nothing, admiration, avoidance of me in fear of the unknown or discomfort, or worse patronisation or pity? Would word spread, would friends distance themselves? Would everyone talk about me behind my back? Affect my vocation and social activities? Such are the fears of those in the cupboard so to speak. What if????

My first experience with problems with my mood started in my late teens, in hindsight I was acting out of character for a time but well, teenagers tend to do that. I started to have panic attacks triggered by open spaces, generally sports fields but it escalated and when very depressed crossing a road became a nightmare, the ground seemed to disappear away from a great vast sky. This phobia has continued with me to some extent or another since, now usually only when driving through farmland with very wide fields either side panicking me to one extent or another. Once however when very depressed this worsened to one day crossing a road with traffic coming and in the middle of the road I could not get to the other side. It took all my will not to run in front of the cars to get to the other side. The only way to manage this I have found is to slowly expose myself to the situations I fear, especially during and after a bad patch and they became easier to overcome, but avoiding or pushing it too far or fast makes it worse.

When I was in my late teens came the first period of time in my life when my world was suddenly turned upside down. I was becoming more isolated from my family with my erratic behaviour and my isolation worsened my situation. I felt lost, scared and unsure of what was happening, "this is not me", I was entering a black hole I could see no way out of until I thought I had found what seemed the only solution, all the medications I could find. I went to bed waiting to drift off wherever one does but ended up freaking out, wandering around seeing visual hallucinations of evil monkey men, people convulsing on the ground. I again went to bed but the next morning I woke up. I did not consider at all at that stage it might be part of a mental illness, in fact I did not know what that was. I looked back at that time as the worst six months of my life, lost my job, lost my self-respect.

A few months after the suicide attempt I became pregnant, and now there was not just me to consider. Although I was a single teen mother (not very socially acceptable) I enjoyed providing a good home for my son and did do so for three or four years. I decided to further educate myself, having missed on tertiary education having a small child so I started to train as a nurse.

I was 24 yrs old and in my final year of nursing training; my son was 6yrs old. From being a model student with excellent marks, I began to fail my subjects, couldn't concentrate on practical placements. At home I was up at night not able to sleep, I didn't eat often but when I did it was high sugar, fatty foods. Worst though was the state of my mind. It was the inability to concentrate or problem solve and the inability to think at all in my head cotton wool. My thoughts were so intense but with much the same content. I was constantly in defence mode, me against the world, just wanting to finish my studies. The tutors were not very helpful, with no support I often felt I was expected to sink or swim and maybe finish my studies early. Confused I did not initially know where to go for help. “What is happening to me?”

I went to my doctor and he put me on an antidepressant and then I went to the polytechnic counsellor who was helpful. After one month of antidepressant I was fine, couldn't be better, stopped the antidepressant and counselling and I breezed through the remainder of my studies. Looking back I think the anti- depressant had sent me into a bit of a high or jolted me back into place but I loved the state I was in, and I was confident and had so much energy.

During this time I was living with the greatest guy, who was ever so patient and caring. I loved him, but what was going on in my head meant that I was not able to be a part of a couple, at times isolating in my own depressed world which I did not know how to verbalise or once in a while being an elevated, moody, unpredictable b*tch. We would break up annually, part of my mood cycle of the time I reflect. Then once we just stopped getting back together again, this and how I treated him is one of the biggest regrets of my life.

I moved to another city for a Nursing Internship in mental health. I had enjoyed my mental health placement feeling privileged to work with people in often their most vulnerable times of their lives. After a year or so I found myself inexplicably drinking more and more heavily. I would spend my days off drunk or hung over. I felt miserable. My son didn't like it when I drank, so I would drink only at night, so my mission was to get him into bed. I saw my problem as the alcohol, so on advice and to stay away from any sort of Mental Health service I started attending AA. I did the “steps” as best I could,, attended many meetings, but after 18 months, people who had started going to AA at the same time as me were getting better and settling down, but not me. I was frustrated with myself I would go along really well for a while then something would take control of me and I would do things that I would never dream of doing normally. Sometimes it was like I shut down but other times it was like when I got drunk and lost my inhibitions, but I was not even drinking. “What the hell is going on? This is not me!”

I sometimes would act out on a wanderlust leaving my poor son at home asleep. One time he woke up and I wasn't there. I had smashed a radio in a rage about something. He thought I had been kidnapped and went to the neighbours who were also my landlords. On my return I found a terse note on the door saying to go to bed and pick up my son in the morning. I am so grateful they didn't report me. That was when I really got the message then though and decided to get help.

People at AA were getting frustrated with me, but one suggested that I try an residential rehab, so desperate I did. So mid 1997 I took some time off work and got a referral. I was diagnosed as depressed; I wasn't aware, maybe I had been miserable for so long it had become normal. Life had become the basics, work, feed my son, meetings, sleep and as for housework well I'll do it tomorrow. While I was at the rehab I had my first experience hearing voices; I didn't tell anyone. I was “alcohol and substance dependent” [turns out I’m not, self-medicated with alcohol and dope but I haven't been dependant on it] and “depressed” but hearing voices opened a whole new can of worms I was not interested in. They would give me a hell of a fright because I would hear someone talking to me from over one of my shoulders, there was someone talking, I thought I was alone (well I was) and then I am fortunate that they are very rare, and not too overly distressing.

Misdiagnosed with Unipolar depression I started on an antidepressant which made me agitated and jumpy so I was started on another. Things quickly (I am finding a pattern here) picked up; I got my dream job and started spending time with my son and felt CONTENT, a wonderful feeling. Then in December all hell broke lose. I had a mixed episode, energy but with a low mood and black thoughts my brain not in shut down and this depressed thinking took on a life of its own. I was taken off the antidepressant and started seeing a psychologist who assessed me as having avoidant traits and saw a psychiatrist for the first time. I took a month off work, it was the first real holiday I had had since I started my studies. I had not wanted to stop work before; I had been too scared that if I stopped I would never get back. Things settled down, I know now it was because once again the antidepressant had sent me into an episode of altered mood and without it I stabilised. Unipolar or Major Depression is a common misdiagnosis that people with Bipolar disorder are offered in the journey for correct diagnosis enabling correct treatment. I have had several deferential diagnoses along with depression including paranoid Delusional disorder/ Schizophrenia and alcohol dependence and substance abuse.

A few months after the antidepressant was stopped however I entered a very dark period of my life, entering the bleakest depression. Struggling but with acceptable functioning at work my days consisted of no energy, sitting or lying around with heavy, painful thoughts in contrast to the lack of being able to think at all when I am usually depressed. These bleak thoughts consisted of how there was no hope anymore, everything was wrong and there was only one way out. I thought I had too many things wrong that could not be made right. I thought I was such a bad person I didn't deserve anything. At the time I was barely able to think rationally to challenge these false thoughts, now I know that to have been my depression talking. The things that kept me going at that time was writing in my journal to get my head around things and for a while at least turning each negative thought around, but after about a month I had lost the energy and ability to do that.

Things came to a head and I gave up and took a large overdose of all the medication I had on hand. It was then I had my first admission to hospital, I ended up being a patient in a different part of the same mental health service that I worked in. It was embarrassing and conflicting as I knew many of the staff, but I was so desperate I just wanted help. I was in for one week, then three weeks later for another week.
It was then that I started another antidepressant, which can make you a bit sedated but it didn't send me into a high apparently. I also took an antipsychotic as I was experiencing paranoid thoughts again. I felt people were talking about me and could hear my name in conversations around me and they wished for something bad to happen to me. I also developed a skill to explode the sun with my watch if I aimed the reflection at it. More than a few super evil villains would like that one. The anti psychotic kicked in and pretty soon I was back on my feet, my thinking returned to normal and the sun was safe. I returned to work which I got my enthusiasm back for and a few months later I stopped seeing the mental health services and started seeing a counsellor who was unhelpful.

Seeing a counsellor did also mean that I was not receiving enough assistance from Mental Health services.

Warning: When things are going alright don't mess with it (will I ever learn that? I will tell you when I do). If a health professional is under disability, one is ‘supported’ by one’s professional body i.e. Nursing Council and I had to get a report for the disability committee to see that I was continuing to practice safely. I saw a psychiatrist for a review and he suggested a medication review and to go on another antidepressant as the current one was a bit sedating. Well to cut this already long story shorter (Antidepressant and antipsychotic changes) -> Mixed episode +messy depression +chaos +hospital= my psychiatrist won't let me back to work as "now what has changed?”

I had attended a Nursing Council directed Alcohol and Drug counselling which mostly had involved me confirming I was hardly drinking and not smoking dope then discussion on local matters. Long ago I had learnt to be aware of how, when and where I was drinking. Along with stability of my mood, I was hardly drinking and not drugging at all but I decided that another rehab would be a good idea, which would give me a chance to assess where I am at in my life and what is causing me problems, and to get the shrink to let me back to work whilst I still had a job to go to!

I did not get much out of this second rehab being the “keep the naughty druggies busy” and talk about the use of towels for one hour rather than talk about our feelings about the towels, not my cup of tea. As psychiatric medications are considered by some uninformed as all “mind altering substances” they were seen as best not to be taken, so the antipsychotic I was taking was withdrawn, equally keenly by myself. I saw a psychiatrist for a 15 minute consultation and tapered off over the next few days. I finally gave up on staying at the facility when I was experiencing restlessness due to a side effect making my leg tap up and down. I was asked to write a letter to my knee, I think in the hope it would amend its wicked ways. I persevered but left a week early.

Following this, despite the early homecoming I returned to work which provided me with structure, a feeling of being of value and of use and of course finances. With consensus by all this was initially not to be community based but within a ward team for a period of time so I could be in a supportive team environment until as expected by myself at least, all went well. They kept an eye on me for a while until they discovered that I was competent and able to do my job to a good standard but were not prepared to let me back into the job I had striven for and loved. I missed my old job but I enjoyed the new team I was working with and the caring for people in a different setting in a different way. I was pleased to be working and even though it was less stressful my mood had still not settled down and overall my life and that of my son was still chaotic and I had little overall enjoyment.

Bipolar disorder is one of those mental illnesses that respond well to medications and whilst they do not cure me, they have let me manage my mood disorder. As at the Alcohol and Drug rehab I had gone off the antipsychotic that I had been taking (and happened to be acting as a mood stabiliser) a few months later the inevitable happened. I experienced the best and worst and the best things, I had an episode of pure, classic, meet all the criteria, mania. Best, because I felt wonderful for a while. I was not just happy I was overcome with the joys of life, I had so much energy, knew everything, I had so many plans and not enough time to do them because I just kept on coming up with newer and better plans and schemes and theories. People had to be told and I told them even if it was in the middle of the night. I couldn't wait, I couldn't stop moving and fidgeting. My thoughts were racing at a million miles per hour, so fast that sometimes my mouth couldn't keep up. I spent quite some time at the local Buddhist monastery as I held a belief I was a Bodhisattva or enlightened being who had remained on earth to enlighten others (very thoughtful on my behalf). The monks were very patient. The worst, because after awhile it wasn't so fun anymore, people started to annoy me, I got irritable and nasty and after a couple of weeks or so I became suspicious of people, that they were trying to get to me to hold me back.

Then one morning my mood seemed to drop, I was devastated I didn't want to go through another depression. It was a catastrophe and thought myself better off dead. By now I had learnt that when my thinking is like this it is a major alert and I need to get help. That afternoon I was in hospital, by that night my mood had switched to a glorious high, so I discharged myself against medical advice, after all I knew much more than the doctor. Next morning I was back not depressed, but I knew things weren't right and something needed to be done.

Then the best thing again in that I was able to be treated correctly for my mood disorder, I knew my history well so it was not a shock but there was a quick revision of diagnosis and Bipolar took centre stage. It takes an average of ten years before a correct diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder is made from first onset of symptoms, meaning being misdiagnosed and incorrectly treated, which causes unnecessary harm, that can occur until it is correctly treated and recovery effectively starts. I could and have felt in the past a bit hard done by and bitter about it all, but I don’t tend to dwell on these things anymore as being angry with people or circumstances does not help, just me sitting being miserable about it, and stopping me enjoying and living in today.
I had an increase to what is technically known as a huge whack, of a medication that I had been taking since I was a child at a low dose as an anti-convulsant to a level that is therapeutic as a mood stabiliser for mood disorders and got better.

A couple of months later I was back again. Like the proverbial Phoenix from the flames reborn. Over the next year, although I did eat and sleep more due to the medications, I felt better than I had in years. I was able to start making up to my son, giving the security he needed after the time that I had not been there for him and scared him with out of control Bipolar incidents. My biggest ever regret has been the neglect of him over that time, practically and emotionally.

After six years away I decided to return to my home town with my son to be with family and have a break from nursing to do some undergraduate studies of interest. I enjoy learning and relished the idea of being a student so I signed up and started attending the lectures and tutorials. Unfortunately the change in city and lack of routine were not of help to my stability and now away from the specialist mental health services I was seeing a non-specialist Doctor for medications. I figured I knew better and decided to try something out; the elevated mood in the past had been triggered by antidepressants so if I stopped them I could reduce my mood stabiliser.
Apparently it does not work like that and things started to unravel, firstly for the better with energy and zippier thinking (okay a bit worrying there), discovering my fashion sense (floral skirt, bright green shawl and bare feet, one would think would be suitable dress for a university, I looked up-to-the-minute cool). I thought I was delighting the lecturers by answering every question put out after all I did understand this all to a Masters level (in my universe). Well, in fact I knew more than the lecturers, what they did not know was what I had figured out was Chicago School of Economics and the Druids were the centre of a world conspiracy, running the World Bank and controlling the countries of the world through the World Monetary Fund. I was going to identify the agents out there patrolling the populous and sort that lot out one by one. My mood was less escalating, less off to the moon, more on a comet to the star Betelgeuse.

Maybe surprisingly I was getting very good marks for my essays which were not helping my getting enough sleep staying up all night. I had some self-awareness and knew things were going wrong but not enough to do enough about it. I went and saw the University GP service and was given a script for a medication to help sleep but promptly did not take it as I had work to do. I was then referred to the 'Mental Health Emergency service' whom I saw daily but still did not do the things I should have and knew I should have done as by then it had gone too far for me to put a halt to the ascent into the cosmos.

One night I was surfing on the net, watching TV and listening to the radio at the same time and keeping up with them all too. I had had a glass or two of wine which I had been avoiding as I am aware of its effect on me at these times. When my mood and behaviour is elevated I prefer dope which I had not had despite its calming effects then there are a whole load of other issues come with that. I was used to the middle of the night/ early morning by then, profoundly boring, monotonous in that I would discover each morning, woops I have done it again been busy, busy doing this, busy doing that all at the same time, when the birds start (5am everyday apparently to let their other wee birdie friends know they had survived the night) and another plan for going to bed and getting some sleep was out the window.

In the end it just takes one event that gets you in bother and I found it. This was an ill thought out phone call which brought the police around to my home in the middle of the night/ early morning. Now I like 'Men In Uniform'.... a lot, on so many levels, they are lovely and I have a deep appreciation for them, in so many ways (all except parking wardens who are evil) and this was my downfall. Normally I would have hurried them away, "sorry Officer McHunky I do not know why I did it, I really should be in bed" but then normally I would not be up all at that time and get myself into a situation where they would be there in the first place.

Instead I invited my new friends in throwing my bright green shawl over my shoulder in an alluring way with a bit of a wink. One was married and one was not... the unmarried Officer McDreamy's name was actually Fingers. We had a lovely time until he told me to put my hands on my head and I decided then I did not want them in my house anymore and loudly let them know. They decided to just leave handcuffs off and I decided to forgive them and let them stay and again fell in lust with Officer McDreamy. A call was made to a shocked Mother to come and pick up my son. She has never come across this at all, as I had been in another city when all this had gone down previously and the sight of her daughter flirting with a policeman came as a surprise. She took my sleepy, upset but accustomed child to her home (thank goodness for family support, moving back to my home town was not such a bad idea).

I then headed off with Officer McDreamy and the other one to the Emergency Department where I was to be seen by the 'Mental Health Emergency service' staff. I was placed in a room with a couch and a couple of chairs and sadly Officer McDreamy and the other one left after making sure all was well. I was left to have a sleep, await the wine to get out of my system and push the duress alarm bell a few times to let them know I was still there and bored. A Psychiatric Registrar came to talk and he asked in the end if I would consider a stay (for a few days, yeah right) in the hospital. Apparently the 'Mental Health Emergency service' had placed in my plan for low threshold for admission. That sent a chill down my spine but with enough self-awareness to know that I was not going to get back on track under my own steam and things were getting out of control. Also I would have done anything for this Registrar, Officer McDreamy was gone now so he was my new focus of attention. Elevated mood can cause high libido, but I prefer just to flirt, it is fun (funny for others probably). So then with a reassurance an admission would not affect my chances of entry into the Mental Health service as an employee, I went along.

I will give excerpts of my six weeks in the acute ward due to poor memory and raw feelings even now. My perspective and that of others is not necessarily the same, and it is not just mine that was wrong. A lot of anger, at not being allowed to leave the ward, about feeling treated like a child, about having just come from working in an acute ward in another city and now being there 24/7 with no hourly rate. Anger at being jumped on and restrained for reasons I am not clear on and fear that they may happen again not knowing what I had done. Further anger at the amount of time that it took to start a new medication and at being under the Mental Health Act and the judge with discriminatory ideas who did not know a thing about mental health making significant decisions about people’s human rights.

I felt fear at being locked into the locked area where instead of deescalating, I felt like a tiger in a cage and acute fear that I would be locked in a room in seclusion for reasons I might not be sure what I had done. The intensive care areas are less ‘low stimulus environments’ feeling more like jail cells. It is well known that a stay in an acute unit can in fact cause Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and this occurred with me. The first time I went back to that ward in my role of Staff Nurse from another ward I shook and could not talk. Acute Inpatients wards are not safe paces to be for women and will not help anyone stay clean as there is a huge amount of dope going around, which I found to supplement my adjusting mood stabilisers for a time, in the meantime making me very paranoid and messing my brain around something nasty.
I do however feel gratitude for the all the staff for their care, patience and safety. Patience for putting up with my critique of their practice against my (perfect) own, they displayed patience for this manic woman who shouted and said the F*** word a lot and acted like Pratgirl and B*tchwoman. I imagine there were times they would “just nod and smile, nod and smile”. I have gratitude for the other patients who were non-judgmental and with whom I spent many enjoyable and supportive hours. It has been other people with Bipolar who have been the most support and provided their non-judgmental acceptance especially through support groups which provided guidance, comradeship, humour and information.

I am grateful to my family for supporting me whilst in the ward and for learning as much as they could to help me out later on. Gratitude especially to the doctor who took me off the Mental Health Act and gave me my keys back, I had been asking (demanding) them for some time.

I am surprised at the amount of emotion I am feeling about this admission even now after eight years. I have been there to see my own clients and somewhat desensitised these feelings, maybe it is the fact that it has had a profound effect on my career, partly to do with the Bipolar but the discrimination internalised and external. I do now have a good reputation there, as a skilled, knowledgeable competent nurse. That time was also the start of my real recovery.

I was initially wary of Psychiatrists due to previous experience I was reluctant to move past medication prescribing due to my fear of past experiences which did not work, such as a focus on “so your parents were divorced” or “Are you smoking dope... how is your housework... etc etc... blah... blah?” Same thing every time, with no follow up to help me to manage any of this, no plans, just judgement and cannot go to work. “Bad woman”, “bad mother”.

On discharge I was allocated a consultant psychiatrist and a case manager who was initially a psychologist. The case manager helped with everyday stressors and to get back on track again. He was the one I would see if I were concerned with arising issues in my life or my mood. I might then be referred for an extra appointment with the psychiatrist.

Psychiatrists who have come my way have their own strengths, philosophies and models of care, but this new Consultant Psychiatrist had what I needed. He was skilled at assessment of my mood state even when I was not sure what was going on and panicking I was getting depressed or “elevated in mood”, was it Bipolar, stressful time or PMS, what is Bipolar and what is normal emotion which is all very complicated and hard learnt. He was patient when I was raging at the unfairness of the world but pragmatic and put things into perspective and generally took the wind out of my sails whilst being empathetic.

I was allowed to make my own decisions which helped to make me take responsibility and take my power back, but given suggestions and “strong suggestions” when safety was an issue. There were learning opportunities which allowed me to develop my own insights and take them on as my own and when I could not figure out which way to go or bogged down he always seemed to have an answer usually obvious in your face common sense that I needed. I have certainly learnt to communicate better and actually ask for help when I need it and not by the time it is too late. I am grateful for his non-judgemental care and support over six years, my life is so much better for it. It is partially to him that I dedicate this story.

After awhile it became a case of ironing things out with mood problems reducing and my being better able to identify early warning signs and get to my action plan which includes getting help soon as I am not able to manage it myself. There has been only one serious time when I became severely depressed with a delusional idea which was distressing and as it was of a sensitive nature, I will not get into it, but I was very agitated, upset and in psychological pain and the closest I had been to hospital for years.

I have had several case managers which include nurses and social workers who have offered their expertise and care over time working with me to monitor and manage my moods, be supportive and reassuring with an ear to listen to my joys and sorrows. I prefer not to have a nurse as case manager due to professional boundaries, that there is a potential for role confusion for both parties. There are far fewer issues working with social workers as that is not a problem but just about working within the wider mental health service. I have met many caring, skilled clinicians of all disciplines over the years in both of my roles as clinician and patient with a small minority stupid and/or arseholes.

After six years under the care of the specialist Mental Health service I now see my GP as case manager who is caring and who prescribes for me and helps me greatly when things are not going well. I had a change in medication which I have a love/hate relationship with. I love the stability but hate the side effects and have recently had a change that caused insomnia a huge trigger for mania. I got on to it and have worked out a plan with my GP to manage this (mental note, follow the plan). Elevated mood has occurred but I have the tools and the willingness to return to status quo. I must say I have learnt that an appointment does not offer the full story, just a snapshot.

With depression I tend to try not to isolate myself especially staying in bed, worse comes to the worse I go sit or lay on the couch under a duvet or to get out and even to be around other people like at the art gallery or other public place. Putting washing into the washing machine and turning it on is easy and a good way of feeling better about myself. I have learnt that my practice before all this and then afterwards was parallel as that of a Childcare nurse who once she had her first baby wondered what the hell she had been on about teaching child raising to innocent new mothers.

That old question; what to call us “People with experience of Mental Illness”? I do not agree with that phrase as I am not ‘experiencing’ Mental Illness most of the time; ‘Client” too formal and ‘service user’ and ’consumer’ firstly implies everyone is in fact receiving care from a Mental Health service whereas many are treated by their family doctor, it moves further from care to a business and they say nothing about the person or illness. ‘Patient’ is potentially putting people in a passive role as the health professional does all the work and is better suited for a hospital. A New Zealand Maori term “Tangata Whai Ora” meaning “Person seeking Wellness” is what I consider the best as the other names are constructs placed on us with assumption recovery only happens within and by health services being a remnant of the past. Arguments have been had and debate held with various idealistic frameworks put forward. There are as many views on this as there are people and call it mere semantics but language is a powerful force.

No story for me at least, of Bipolar can be complete without mention of medications, they keep me sane. Epilim was the first mood stabiliser for me then a change to Lamotrigine which was excellent for depression. I have not had depression so bad ever since. Then the original mood stabiliser Lithium came onboard when Lamotrigine was not enough to hold things. Then when I was very depressed or manic and had delusional ideas antipsychotics came on board also helping with the crappy concentration, memory and attention. They act well as mood stabilisers. Antidepressants are useful for a short time but I remain wary of them and it is sign I am feeling really crap if I take a course. I generally take what is prescribed unless I have a better idea which usually does not work as I am not objective enough. I rattle at times look for a mix which is 1) working to keep my mood in check and manageable and that has 2) side effects I can tolerate and 3) what self-awareness I have as to having Bipolar. If I do not think I have it, i.e. “it is all a mistake” happens after a long time and I have forgotten what it is like to have the experience of an episode or what happens when I do reduce or stop a medication. I have a Love/Hate/Resentful/Appreciative relationship with the medications.

I do not however wish to have ECT, my memory is bad enough, it is not a permanent solution and despite assurances that it causes only some short term memory loss, anecdotal evidence says that long term memory is affected. It does have a good response rate, and some swear by it and but many others do not. Despite the reassurance of anaesthetic and muscle relaxant I find the risks out ways the benefits. I have put it in my Advance Directive.

Unfortunately having a mental illness does not give one artistic ability, I am a useless musician, okay artist having taken art classes and am pleased with my work; at least they are able to be recognisable but a truly awful poet. Having Bipolar may augment artistic brilliance, but if it isn’t there don’t count on a career as a violin virtuoso. As a logical, intellectual type I can enjoy the nuance of music, write some humorous poetry and have picked up the techniques for art but cannot naturally bring artistic brilliance with the feeling of an artist. I tend more for discovering the Fourth dimension and hidden meaning including the meaning of the universe and enlightenment. It has not stopped me attempting artistic pursuits to express the emotion and meaning in life. I am not much good at it but I am very enthusiastic.

I have a spiritual side of me I do not know if I had to an extent before, I have a strong belief of God, and if I am in need of comfort, guidance or forgiveness I know where to seek it. This is consistent, no matter how I am, I do get angry with God at times for the injustice of having Bipolar (others suffer with worse in life) and for abandoning me at times of need. I do not regularly attend church as services are in the morning and when I am depressed I am not able to attend at that time due to my circadian rhythm and I sometimes get frustrated with organised religion anyway.

The choices I have now I would once have never dreamed in the midst of it all. It is not to say Bipolar is out of my life but it is now 10% instead of 90% where once it was other way around, once upon a time in the full force of chaos . I do still have periods of time that my mood fluctuates but I hope it never gets to anywhere near 90% again.

All the rest now is rather boring Bipolar wise, well I have a job I like, my son has moved out of home and I have done some travelling to Europe and thereabouts. I have “reconnected” with my family. I do not know what I will do next; keep renovating my new house or do more travelling or both. I continue with work where I have responsibility, some autonomy and a great bunch to work with.

First and foremost it is to my son that I dedicate this story, who has followed me (dragged behind me) on the rollercoaster, been scared silly by the rollercoaster and turned out a wonderful, good person despite it all.

*If you get up one more time than you fall, you will make it through” – Chinese proverb

Greg Battin's Story

I think I started experiencing a mental illness (Bipolar) when I was in my teens. I thought I was shy, but in reality I was mildly depressed. I eventually forced myself to talk to people. I was very good at school and in sport and this was being slightly high.

In high school I was creative and still good at school work. In maths I was top of the class and in 3rd year I finished the tech book in 6 months, so the teacher gave me the 4th year tech book. I had to leave school in 3rd year because my parents weren't well off. In the maths exam you had to put your hand up if you were leaving and my maths teacher, who was handing the papers out, saw me with my hand up and tossed the paper at me. I failed the exam and I don't think it helped my mental illness.

When I was home with my family I used to get put down and teased.

I use to think I wasn't good looking, so I didn't try to chase girls. Eventually I would force myself to talk to them, but this was small talk, so it took a while to get a girlfriend. In the end I had many girlfriends and my male friends would ask me how I did that, they thought I was not good looking and they were.

Because I was good at maths, I eventually did an accountants course. I worked in large, mainly manufacturing companies, as a cost clerk and when qualified worked as a manufacturing accountant. The first position was with Dunlops. I was married after leaving Dunlops in 1979. At the first accountant position (Pirelli Cables) I was continually stressed and had a very red face. After leaving Pirelli Cables I was pretty stable, even though I had a nagging wife.

When I was working with Crown Lift Trucks (1980s) I started as a Manufacturing Accountant until I was promoted to Divisional Accountant. I was working long stressful hours, which included doing professional hours with an accountant's body. I was chairing the accountants meetings and set up a computer users group for them. I was high doing this and at one of the meetings said we would 'stick it up' another accountants body. I fell out of favour with the accountant's body.

When I was retrenched from Crown Lift Trucks, after 3 years there, I became severely depressed. My wife didn't help by continually telling me I was lazy. I ended up in and out of jobs, either high or depressed. Eventually in 1992 a friend of my wife told her of a doctor to see, I was high when I went there and reluctantly went. After asking a lot of questions he said I had Manic Depression and offered me medication; I refused, being high and he did not try to put me in hospital.

I eventually left my wife in 1994 and being high left a good computer position to set up a computer and accounting company with no money. I was spending on credit and small amounts of money given to me from the Balmain Tigers Major Sponsor, who was my only customer. He went bad and I went down, I lost my car and owed for rent, that started the depression again.

I am still with The Protective Commissioner over my debts with my company. I also owe Balmain Tigers for the sponsorship I took up with them. They have not chased me for it.

In 1995 I made a comeback to A grad soccer, I was 44 years old. I was high, I was very fit, however I was not as fast as I was when I was younger. I suffered a bad leg injury in a rough tackle that put me out of the team for 4 weeks.

In 1996 and 1997 I danced the City to Surf (14kms) non stop and I was high. The fitter I got, the higher I got.

Also in 1995 I got another accountant position, but due to the bipolar, I ended up leaving the company. In 1996 I tried sales for Bartercard but did not stay. In 1997 I was still able to get another accounting position, but being high I upset a manager and was sacked. This caused me to fall behind in my rent and struggle to pay another car off.

After the 'City to Surf' I came home and the locks were changed and my possessions were left out the front. I found my key still worked in the garage, so I moved every thing in there. I stayed there for a couple of nights until they caught me and asked me to vacate. I managed to talk some people into helping me move to an old vacated chemist shop, where I lived in bad conditions and when I had my car repossessed, I again slipped into a depression. I got out of depression, reading all 66 books of the bible. I had to leave after falling behind in rent and that started 2 years of continual in and outs of rental properties, being high and low.

In December 1998 I was homeless and living in a hired car. I hired the car to sell karate classes. I rang my sister who lived at La Peruse and she took me in, but eventually realised there was something wrong with me mentally; so she rang the crisis team. They convinced me to go to P.O.W. Eurora ward.

After being diagnosed as high with bipolar, I was admitted to the acute ward. I stayed there 3 days then was transferred to the general ward. Not long after going to the general ward the medication I was on made me delusional. Because the ward was not locked I went to Hurstville to try and find my son. I was caught looking into cars by security of a shopping centre. I told them I was looking for my son and eventually told them I was still admitted to the P.O.W. mental ward. They called the police who took me back to hospital. The doctor changed my medication.

I enjoyed hospital because I was high, nothing worried me. I ended up staying there for 3 months. Every time I saw the magistrate he said I was still high. I did not think so. I think they kept me there so long because I was homeless. My sister did not want me back. While I was in the general ward, a lady from the Consumer Network saw me and told me about the Saturday groups near Bondi beach and gave me a brochure; I kept it. I kept myself busy while in the hospital. I played pool, did art and talked a lot to other patients. I had 2 girlfriends while in hospital and with one of them we would go for walks around the hospital grounds. With the other one we would go on leave to the city. I was caught holding hands with one of them but did not get into trouble, she did. Not many days after that, I was transferred to the Villa for long term patients; I thought it was because we were holding hands.

In late February 1999 a social worker told me I had my finances transferred to The Protective Commissioner and they would look after me. He also told me that I was now on the Disability Support Pension. The same social worker, a couple of days later, said they had found me somewhere to live, the trouble was I did not know they were looking. It all made sense that was why they kept me in so long. In early March 1999, I was released and taken by the social worker to a bedroom sitter unit in Lalor Park, near Blacktown.

The same day my brother and sister came to see me and brought me things for the unit, including a single bed. A couple of days later a case worker came to see me and she told me about a cottage for consumers in Blacktown. I went there and in early October 1999 I met my future wife, a Romanian lady named Cristina. She gave me a birthday present on the 20th of October and we were together for 2 years before we got married. We got a Housing Commission 2 bedroom home not long after getting married and still live there. For about a year I got paid for driving consumers for outings.

Also in early October 1999 I went to the Saturday Groups near Bondi Beach. After 1 year and doing well I was offered casual work running the groups. The groups were art, music, creative writing and drama. After another year I was given permanent part time work in the Consumer Network, where I still work today.

I kept taking my medications, Lithium and Zyprexa for 5 years. I suffered side effects, hand shakes, toilet problems and mild sexual problems. The doctors I was seeing at Blacktown hospital were residents and changed every 6 months; I was seeing them every 3 months. I told one doctor I wanted to change Lithium and he put me on Epilum, which fixed most of the side effects, so I still take it.

About 2 years ago I tried not taking my medications and became high and started my old ways of spending what I could not afford and upsetting people. I was admitted to Blacktown mental health hospital for 1 month. I was enjoying hospital again and singing and dancing. The resident told me to stop the singing and dancing if I wanted to get out. I stopped and got out. I won’t go off my medications again.

My recovery plan is to always take my medications, I know that now. I was recovered for a long time until I tried going off my medications, however it was something I had to try.

Cristina, my wife, watches out for me. She knows my history and has seen what happened when I went off my medications. Friends at my church also watch out for me. We have a good home with rent taken out of our Centerlink payments. The rest of my Centerlink payments goes to The Protective Commissioner and they still give me 2 allowances a week. My wage from the consumer network gets paid direct to me; I only work 8 hours a week. We are paying off a car, but still manage ok. I am also out of stress at home and at work. Overall I don’t think I could do better in my current situation.

BlueSkyLady's Story

I really had wanted to sit and to start to write my 'story' of mental illness earlier than this. I tried very hard to, but something stopped me each time from engaging in a first person narrative. I just couldn't do it. It was frustrating me- why now, why not!

I've been sitting with this task for a while thinking that my struggle was with self honesty or resistance to a vulnerability that I supposed telling my tale would bring. All of a sudden though, I realized that it was much simpler than that. The problem I was having, was that “its” all already been said. Every story in Glimpses *is* a story about me...at least, to a fashion. Glimpses is like that, a 'me too' kind of thing....so with everything you've already read...just add 'me too!' and you will know where I have been! What’s left to say? My story is already out there. It's been written in every other Glimpses story I've been privileged to read by far more articulate people better able to keep it simple..keep it real.

When I understood this, that my story was intrinsically about real and unreal, I was able to let go of the struggle. I then decided that instead of telling a story of what was, I would simply talk..to 'you' the reader as if I were talking to you face to face.

This being the case, I wondered what I could possibly add to those story's that would aid someone involved in research or study or what I could give to those who are simply and openly engaged in their own curiosity.

As is the hallmark of my way, I awaited the answer and in that listening, I imagined someone reading this, silently peeking through the window, from the world of the so called 'sane' to the world of the so called 'insane' and I wondered who they might be, what they are like and what it is they would be really looking for.

Through this process of determining what and who to put fingers to keyboard for, I've realized and decided, that if I could or should share anything about what I have been through, then all I would or could reasonably share with any honesty is that for me, becoming 'mentally ill' was an experience with the sudden onset of an experience of “acute sanity”. It was the outward eruption of the voice of sanity that I carried all my life. That takes some time explaining...but at root it is as simple and as difficult as that.

I became 'insane' when I could no longer comfortably justify or tolerate the insanity of the world around me. When through the voice of sanity within myself, I could no longer deny I was human and sane...and living in an utterly inhuman and insane world.

My experience of 'insanity' was a literal one, an experience of being *at* one with the terrible and beautiful force that is Sanity itself. It was Acute Sanity, so acute as to drive one mad. At the peak of it, I had no control whatever over my mind thoughts or actions...it was that holistic.

In my experience I went very abruptly from living as one of the projected - a person existing and surviving relatively comfortably within the projection of everyday comprehensions of normalcy and sanity – the fantasy- to somehow slipping behind or beneath an unseen screen or curtain, becoming for a brief moment, part of the projector itself. In that sense, mental illness for me was nothing less or more than a direct confrontation with sanity-the-energy, or if you like, the deity of Sanity.

That is exactly what is has been like for me to be 'mentally ill'. It's been a journey through the veil and into a different form of 'saneness'.

Within this space and time, and instead of sane/sanity being just a concept, a marker of rationality reason or a philosophy, sane had become Sanity, an entity, a force, a presence, stemming from the Absolute itself. This experience with Sane as 'the absolute entity of sanity', was the defining one of my 'ill health',

When, by society's standards I became 'ill' and insane it was no small irony that within myself, I was for the first time...becoming 'well' and sane.

There was a brief moment when I suddenly understood the paradox, and essentially, I went into a state of shock. The mental paralysis was deafening.

Breakdown for me was the point when I could no longer accept 'sanity' by society's definitions as anything more than the false projection it was, yet I was compelled to utterly succumb to sanity as the world knew it in order to stay alive at all. It's a terrible thing to experience alone, but is also something today I feel can only be experienced and survived, from within that state of radical isolation.

You can analyze that brief description of my 'short period' psychosis all you like. You can re describe it to yourself, label it, analyze it, it define and demarcate the lines within it and supply those lines with colorful attributes and labels. Frankly...you can do whatever you want with that little revelation and understanding. It's not a new one. It was what it was and that said, I hope one day it will not need to matter too greatly to you either. My hope is that you won't dismiss it though. That you will simply be able to listen to what it is and is not saying, without passing judgment.

I should leave it there...as there really isn't anything more to add that isn't ego centered and would only serve to re inform you of what you must already know by rote by now. Everything else in my life it seems either led up to that point or has stemmed from that one moment.

Everything else that has happened since then, has been a result of my own and your own (collectively speaking of the professional body) misinterpretations of what happened...the by products of our mutual fearing of it...or our utter misunderstanding of it. Such is the nature of my dis-ease though, that once I start, I cant stop writing until it all has been said...that is the way of my newly undisciplined self...and so, unwilling to interrupt the flow of it.. I will continue.

I suppose at least I could tell you about the In's and Outs of that 'everything else'...the usual delusions masked as destiny, the entrapments, the lies of ego. I could speak with you about fumbling fearful medico's, the disease of indifference, diagnosis in the absence of diagnosticians.

I could even talk to you of inhuman treatments; best guess pharmacology, the confusing but beautiful momentary distractions provided by the compassionate few and tell you inspiring stories of the precious and few attentive caring individuals that left me blown away by their commitment and grace. But I won't.

I could describe as others already have before me, the soul destroying numbness of drug therapies, and other judgments posing as medications, the nightly terror of hallucinations, the ongoing wars of delusion between Gods, human conscience's and men. Of the sheer human terror of loosing what little grip I possessed on mind. I could share cognitions of future, tell of the bright spaces and the empty darkness (that's not so empty after all). I could report to you the hours and months spent crying...of mourning and ancient sorrow. I could tell you about the pain of forfeiting the fight, the bloodiness and the shame of self deceit and repentance and walk you through the horrible isolation of being unable to explain the inexplicable, not even to myself…of simply not knowing. But I won't.

And worse, I could speak to you of watching all this from within, the story of a trapped consciousness, of being wide awake and yet utterly powerless as it all, in humiliating slow motion, 'goes down'. I could tell you tales of my own well being usurped by forces unseen and of being overtaken by unseen faces of my life and of life beyond human personality, give you an explanation of the puppetry that is human experience. I could speak of being left adrift and abandoned, alone in dangerous places. I could ensnare you with secrets of the sudden cessations, sorties of faux control. Talk of the nature of truths, of the fatal finality of rejection and the too transparent desire of and for the Nothingness and I could whisper to you about the expulsion of spirit, the fall from Grace and the not knowing, the Knowing, and terrible, terrible fear. But I won't.

I could describe in detail the moments of lucidity marked by 'what the hell just happened', of an intensity of clarity and latent individualism that leaves you breathless in the momentary possession of Unity and the unbearable responsibility of freedom and speak to you of the self hate that follows the loss of self control. I could tarry with you about Gods laughing...religious obsession and the assumption of the absence of intuition and intelligence by those who should, but are too arrogant to know better.

I could cry about the devastating results of discrimination to my soul and pride and self defeated Self. I could speak of the raw emotion of having your heart touch the ground…of having it ripped from you...of having it put back, squeezed, bloody and empty. I could try to explain to you the paradox of dying to save yourself and I could culminate all that with the story of ongoing awakening, of the revelation of the lie of acceptableness, and draw you to the current conclusion – that of a too soon and ultimately innocent and untimely discovery of the illusory nature of All...of the precarious insanity of sociology and my ignorant but ever present fear of the collective kick in the ass, that I know now is not only coming but violently inevitable. But I won't.

I could do all that...or I could just say what really matters....try ease you back from the distractions of winding words and beg you with everything I have to focus on everything that really matters...implore you to see and to hear what really counts to anyone out there who is in or under your sphere of healing or care...try to plead and point you back to what should count and matter to anyone who genuinely wants to Know *what it is really like*...to anyone who wants, like so many of us, to "Help".

And that is;

It hurts.

It really, really hurts to be 'in sane'.

Even for a second.

It hurts more than anything has ever, ever, ever hurt before or ever, ever will.

It is the most confusing utterly terrifying thing in the whole wide world.

Without an ounce of ingratitude I can say now, that despite all the well intended interventions, the drugs, the labels, the intimations and intimidations, the negotiations and negations. Despite the 'counseling' and the correction, the rhetoric and the reconditioning....the sadness....all I ever really needed was a safe place, respect and time.

Simple, no?

Even now and even though that experience of the Sane was one that took less time than a blinking of an eye, the reality of the experience has lingered and continues to do so. The gates that fell inside me when I unwittingly stepped through that veil between worlds- when I passed through the gate that lies between projections and projector -the innocence gone and illusions lost to me, the pain of separation experienced in my body, mind and spirit, the catalytic non consensual awakening it propelled, the pain and tearing…and yes, even the excruciating joy and ultimately, the survivorship of just that, make these experiences mine alone......in truth, they are ineffable.

Nothing I could ever write will explain to you the intensity of that one moment.

I could not ever truly explain what has happened to me in a manner that would truly affect you or mean something to you beyond the end of this story - even if I wanted to. In that way, these experiences, for all their horror, are of the divine...they are Sacred.

I don't know any more than you ever will, why it all happened...what for...what truly propelled it or why it didn't happen even sooner or later. I could spend every minute of my life from here on in, in contemplation of what I have seen and experienced without ever once approaching a resolution, let alone aid you in a code of treatment or plan of action...or even a request for correct assistance.

And I tried to do that...thinking that was the way to do it…to recover. I tried so valiantly to contemplate it all…to re-sort and re-organize it...to adjust to it, to move on from it. But I can't.

I found it impossible and I am constantly compelled back to focusing on simple survival, with a need for that simplicity, as real and as great as any cave mans necessity.

Today, by consequence not choice, I just am…I just live. I don't try to control my perception of it or anything....I find myself unable to assert even that base control. I'm not sure even if that were possible that I would want to...and unlike many I don't feel the urge or want any longer to run out there in the world and 'help' others like me either. I choose not to assume in that manner today. I accept I do not know what I do not know.

I do genuinely think that the best thing I can do as a person is to just be here, maybe just to applaud as others go past and most importantly, to simply notice them – notice those who are experiencing 'this' touch of Sanity in an insane world...or whatever it is...to simply recognize them as they pass and be respectful of the need for silence from 'us'. The aware human peanut gallery.

There is an essential necessity in 'this', that we do not add to the burden or confusion, that we explain what we must explain, simply...clearly...and intelligently, in Loving trust and with the acceptance and grace that only humility provides, that we must never *presume to know* for another, *how it really is.*

And it is in that respect for the experience and its uniqueness, for both what it is and what it isn't, that I am silent today. I choose to let those who are experiencing this be...as I am now let be. To simply Love, to Love us who are capable of accepting that we do *and* don't understand and instead I choose to collaborate with the like minded, not through examining the minutia of a shared and inexplicable experience, as much as value and enjoy the simple camaraderie in the shared state of being, a near macabre but ultimately joyous celebration of that which we are...and we are...at least according to this worlds definition......the “Mentally Ill”.

After all....when you take away the window dressing labels and packages, what really matters is..

that *it hurts*, it hurts more than anything has ever, ever hurt before

and all that is needed from you, from us, or anyone is simply a safe place, respect, and Time.

Bevan Sallaway's Story

My experience with mental illness began in 1962 with several admissions to hospital over the years. Researchers tell us some mental illness is hereditary, whereas some is reactionary, in other words we overreact to the situation and have to unlearn learned behaviour. My first diagnosis in 1967 was said to be acute anxiety, with treatment at Wahroonga Sanatorium, as it was called then.

I had consultations with psychiatrists, hydrotherapy, massage and medication. Following treatment I returned to work.

Mental illness means different things to different people because we are affected in so many ways, with the symptoms of the particular strain of the illness and its affect on our life. In many cases a debilitating illness that robs the sufferer of what might have otherwise been a successful life of great admiration, to merely surviving, totally affected or merely with episodes that come and go and are easy to deal with. Some are lucky to have a single episode, whereas others have an ongoing battle against the affect of the illness on their life.

I guess every person that is given a diagnosis of this or that, wonders 'why me oh lord'?

We know with mental illnesses there are several particular diagnosis's, but they are not easy to correctly diagnose and in many cases sufferers will have treatment which is later found to be incorrect or some will on another occasion be lucky enough to be given a multiple diagnosis such as paranoid schizophrenic, a double whammy.

Young otherwise healthy adults may have the misfortune of being diagnosed with early onset of schizophrenia.

I knew of two brothers with paranoid schizophrenia, one committed suicide. A young lady who happened to have two motor car crashes, attended by the same police officer who twigged something was wrong, was finally diagnosed with having minimal epilepsy causing the crashes.

Sadly, some of my friends have terminated their own life.

I know how low one gets when suicidal, because one of my major admittances to hospital was when in a very low state. I was looking for a suitable tree to smash into when I presented myself to the doctor. I had dropped the kids at school and my wife had gone to work and because although mentally ill, we can smoke screen, they were not aware of my thoughts and were shocked to get the phone call I was in hospital. I was admitted on that occasion to the famous Chelmsford Hospital at Pennant Hills, diagnosed as depressed. A doctor approached me saying "son I think we have to give you ECT".

My reply was "I don't care what you do, for Christs sake make me feel better".

So followed a course of ECT. Off to sleep, wake up dopy with a bit of a headache, a cuppa tea and sandwich, then a day or two later another one (ECT).

Tucker was not too bad, company was ok, Matron a dragon. Been in Belsen, I think we would sit and smoke and play '500' all hours of the night and occasionally one of the poor devils in a deep sleep, would be bought out just alive.

I got into trouble with one of the shrinks for looking after Brian, an alcoholic, who used to sneak off to the pub.

Well that was the turning point in my fairly successful career in the Life Insurance business, given an indoor job with less pressure (??). With a scrambled brain after ECT and short term memory loss, I carried on in a sort of a way in various capacities, but looked down on by many. Nothing said, but a lot implied. Some of my nearest friends knew I had lost the plot.

While I was in hospital, not one of my so called work friends ever visited me, only my wife and a very good mate took the trouble to visit.

Literally I have put the cart before the horse. You see after leaving school at 15, I worked in the building trade as a carpenter/joiner/shop fitter, all high quality work. In 1961 I was foreman in a joinery works, working hard, coming home covered in dust and glue, when the penny clicked that I could do better.

I had interviews for other jobs, but was laughed at until I had the offer to work selling Life Insurance. It was then that my anxieties began, although I was not aware of what it was affecting me. Although I was doing fairly well, I could not understand the funny empty tiredness and struggle to keep going. Most days I would have to go home and flop on the bed to recharge, then after dinner with the family, I would take off for sales at night.

Soon after I was promoted, which brought more stress and anxiety and to make matters worse, I was naive enough to be elected as a union representative, which caused direct conflict with senior management. As if that was not enough, I returned to the scout association becoming a scoutmaster delegate to this and that.

At one time I had seven irons in the fire and never stopped until I was diagnosed with a thyroid condition, which in my opinion was a major cause of my demise. A major operation to remove part of my thyroid followed.

Due to a variety of reasons I took optional retirement at age 55, unable to work because of my mental state with depression and mood swings.

In 1985 my Father died from cancer, which in reality was a blessing for him due to long suffering. My mother told us to go away on a trip around Australia in 1986; the next night when we had reach Port Macquarie we received a phone call, Mum had had a second stroke and died. We went back to Parramatta for her funeral, then we took off on our trip again. Fortunately we managed to drive around Australia without incident, but at times I became anxious due to the distances we drove.

On return in November, 2 days before my 55th birthday, we received a phone call, our daughter had cancer; it felt like just one thing after the other. So stressed and upset that with what we had to cope with, my wife had become an alcoholic, which caused more stress. The illness of our daughter was the catalyst for retirement, so we moved to the central coast to be joined later by my brother and his wife.

I improved and for a time we had the good life, until in late 1990 my brother died suddenly from cancer. I felt empty after losing both parents and my brother, I was the only survivor.

Soon after I broke down, completely out of touch with reality, into hospital again for 10 weeks, more ECT, psychotherapy, drugs and group meetings with the other patients at Northside Clinic.

I became infatuated with a young patient, even planned to live with her. I used to write her and phone her frequently. One night whilst speaking to her I realised all was not well, so rang 000. The ambulance attended and found her on the floor, she had overdosed. The next day I visited her in hospital.

Soon after I joined the ‘Grow’ group at the central coast. I later became organiser, trying to help others. We had people with all sorts of problems, sadly some committed suicide, but the worst was a woman who self mutilated herself a lot, scaring others so much. I retired from the group after about 10 years, during which time I learnt a lot about mental illness and the affect various illnesses had on sufferers.

Just a few years ago while in hospital for medical attention, I was certified and placed in a ward with 4 young men. I was terrified they might attack me, a senior citizen in with them. My psychiatrist wanted to keep me in another 14 days to increase my epilim level, but I was able to convince the magistrate I was alright and I was released.

My wife suffered a major stroke and was admitted to a nursing home and I went into a retirement village, from which I escaped and relocated to Port Stevens, recently moving my wife to a new village. When your partner of 55 years suffers a stroke and needs full time care, the grieving goes on each time you visit as opposed to a death that brings closure. One finds oneself alone; shopping, driving, sleeping and other things.

I still have care from the Aged Care Mental Health team and currently am as low as I have been for years. I wonder why?

Anon's Thoughts on Mental Illness

I won't let myself be defined by my depression – I am still very much an individual, and I refuse to be told how I am supposed to react because of my illness, I am fed up with being exploited in that way.

I am not a victim just a person with a mental illness. Depression can be managed and treated. I as individual have actively tried to educate myself on what works for me as an individual over a very long period of time, over a lifetime in fact, and being a long time survivor of depression one thing of the many I have learnt is that each of us who have the illness have very different needs – we cannot all be placed under the same umbrella. Type casting is something I personally believe should be avoided by health workers and members of the general community.

During my life I have had a number of health workers try to convince me that my illness could be cured with the appropriate treatment. By taking medication, researching the illness, discussing the illness, attending groups and utilizing Clinical Practitioner. And I guess I have done all of the above and I still have frequent bouts of depression.

I am not saying that these various treatments don't work for all people who have mental illness. I would say that I would probably be in the minority rather than the majority, but I would like all health workers who work for Mental Health to understand that for a percentage of us who have the illness we cannot be cured, and it is important to have that acknowledged by the mental health authorities, especially for those of us who have had depression since childhood or who are genetically predisposed.

The various treatments are certainly helpful for us in learning to manage our illness more effectively. It is also true that those of us who cannot be cured are often left feeling inadequate, guilty (that we are not getting better when we are supposed to be) and worthless, often leading to suicidal thoughts. I am speaking from personal experience, when I say this.

It would also be helpful for us if health workers could understand that full-time and even part-time work is just not an option for those of us who have an anxiety based illness, as we tend to react badly when under pressure or stress, sometimes even leading to angry, emotional outbursts at our place for work or towards our fellow work mates. These situations have happened to me in the past, when I have being placed under pressure and was feeling vulnerable. The longest I have ever being able to hold a job for is three months, before extreme anxiety has caused me to lose my job, which eventually led me to be being placed on the disability support pension, fore which I am grateful to have, but which has it's own drawbacks.

Some people in our society have tended to look down on D.S.P's – I myself have been called a drain on the system, a dole blunder, and even stupid because I receive a pension for being mentally ill.

It is difficult enough for us who are ill just to cope on a day to day basis and to try and manage our illness without having what little self-esteem we possess, attacked by those who appear to have little idea of what depression is all about, and in some cases how debilitating it can actually be.

The general community is slowly becoming more supportive and less judgmental, aiding some of us who have this illness to become more productive, healthy members of society in general.

Jan Hackney's Story

I grew up in Kew then moved to Fitzroy. My Father began building a house for us in West Preston. I have two brothers younger than me. I used to walk from Fitzroy to Preston with a pram filled with building materials. I would have been six years old sometimes I got a ride in the pram sitting on the building materials.

I was in grade three when I moved up there with my brothers, the house was half finished. I was very close to my father. I went to Preston West State School then Reservoir High School. My father always said I had no brains and put me in Stotts Business College. I excelled in business courses, shorthand and typing. I always had to excel myself at everything; sport, tennis, elocution, gym and swimming.

He wanted me to be the best, to show my brothers how good I was. I always wanted to be a nurse but he always said I didn't have the brains for it. He was a well educated man and expected perfection.

I became pregnant at 16 years old. I married my husband. It was hopeless. I had two more children. I worked as a nurse assistant for ten years while they were growing up. Mum minded my three boys. I went to Panch (Preston and Northcote Community Hospital) to obtain my nursing degree.

At this time my father was sent overseas for his job as an aircraft planner for the Commonwealth Aircraft and was sent to Paris. He was very lonely and couldn't understand the language consequently he couldn't cope and had a nervous breakdown. He was sent to the Priory in London; he was there for nine months then came home.

He was never the same. He was suicidal and took hydraulic acid. It took him two weeks to die. I used to go visit him, he couldn't talk and used to write on paper to speak to me. The one thing I'll always regret and that is he never knew I was studying to get my nursing degree and passed (he always said I didn't have brains).

I stayed at Panch for twenty five years in the Outpatients section. During this time I divorced my husband because he had two affairs and I lost all respect for him. I met another man, Clive, he was 15 years younger than me and we married. I was very happy for a while.

Until one night he was very angry and told me he was seeing someone at work. I had only been married three months! I got such a shock and I remember running around the house crying refusing to accept his announcement. I asked to go to my Mothers and he drove me there. I stayed with Mum overnight and rang him the next day to come and get me. I felt better after staying with my Mother and wanted to talk to him about it.

We talked all day and night and he told me he wanted to leave me. I couldn't accept this so the next day I went to a Psychologist who wasn't very helpful so I asked to see a Psychiatrist. I was referred to one in Eltham. I was feeling very suicidal and he talked to me for two hours. I started seeing him on a daily basis. I was in deep depression and he prescribed me medication. Clive left the house and went to live in a flat.

He regularly rang me or sent me love letters and giving me hope all the time because he felt guilty for what he had done.

I took leave from PANCH and continued to see my Psychiatrist everyday. My Mother came to live with me because I was a total wreck. I went to my best friend Fay's house one afternoon after seeing the Doctor. I was having a cup of tea when suddenly I couldn't breathe. I ran outside my heart was arrhythmic and I couldn't breathe. Her friend took me to the local doctor. I had an ECG and because they couldn't get a reading they rang the Mica ambulance. I was sent to the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit. After a while my heart slowed down and was more normal. I was monitored all night.

The next day I had a visitor and for no reason my heart started palpitating again. The nurses came in and had me breathing into a paper bag. Within a half an hour my heart was back to normal. (A Psychiatrist came in to see me he didn't tell me who he was and started talking about my marriage breakdown). I again had another attack because I had to bring up all the past occurrences again. I was in ICU for three days and was discharged to my Psychiatrist. He told me I was suffering from Panic Anxiety attacks brought on by stress.

This continued to happen to me up to three times daily. I went to my local doctor who prescribed Rivitrol three times a day. The Rivitrol calmed my brain down and the attacks became more bearable. I was still having panic attacks and the depression wouldn't lift even with the medication.

My husband still rang me out of guilt and this would cause more panic attacks. After six months of this I decided to apply for a divorce. I went back to Panch but wasn't the happy Jan I used to be. I still continued to have attacks but felt working was better than being at home.

It was at this time I started drinking alcohol. It slowed my heart rate down and I could get through the nights. Everyone at work was nice to me but I felt different. I continued with my medication but nothing was the same. It became difficult leaving the house and getting the bus to work because I was fearful of getting panic attacks. I would have to leave the bus and work through it. My Doctor said I was agoraphobic and that it was a 'fight/flight' response.

I became house bound and would get my friends to drive me to work and to bring me home. All these things happened in September 1988. I was hospitalised many times, had medication changes and participated in group therapy. You name it, I've tried it! I went to Northpark hospital where my Psychiatrist saw me everyday. The staff were wonderful and the day was full of lectures (on psychiatric disorders) so you were totally involved. I did a course on cognitive behaviour for 8 weeks. There was activities everyday. I was finally discharged and went home.

I was able to go back to work which I found very hard at first. I never felt the same taking so much medication. I was still able to do my Nursing duties and my colleagues were very considerate.

Mental illness to me means taking medication all the time. I only discuss my illness with close friends. It doesn't worry me seeing my Psychiatrist now. My friend Horrie supported me through this time. I think Horrie is the one I turn to for help and understanding through my illness.

Ben's Recovery from Anorexia

Background

I am a 30 year old male. I am professionally employed and degree qualified. I have also been suffering from anorexia for the past 3 years. During this time it has taken a devastating toll on my physical and emotional health, and my professional and personal life. This is my story.
I had always had a problem with my self-image. Having been overweight (although far from obese) for most of my life, I always dreamed about being fit, toned, muscular, and attractive. In my late teens I made a conscious effort to lose weight, and simultaneously hit the gym, ate healthily and in moderation.

I was proud of my efforts to reach a healthy weight, but was increasingly concerned about putting weight back on. Some unorthodox eating habits crept into my lifestyle and eventually I started to make myself vomit after some meals if I felt that I had overdone it. This behaviour didn't last long, fortunately, and any unhealthy eating habits that I had temporarily taken up were gone and forgotten for many years.

The lead up

By the age of 27, I was making a lot of progress in my career, had bought my own apartment, had a wide circle of friends, and was in a steady relationship. However, I was still not happy in my body. Like many males my age, I didn't have a great deal of time or interest in preparing healthy food, and added to this I regularly enjoyed good food and plenty of drinks on the weekend. My weight had crept up gradually over the years. Standing at 1.78 metres, I was certainly above my most comfortable weight.

Around this time, several things happened which negatively impacted my life. My grandpa, with whom I was very close, died a slow, horrible death. My mum attempted suicide a few times, which affected me greatly. My relationship fell apart, as my girlfriend explicitly told me that she was no longer attracted to me due to my weight. My house got robbed. A drunk driver crashed into my parked car and wrote it off. I could have dealt with these incidents in isolation, however all these things happened over the space of a few months.

Falling into it

It seems strange to think about it now, but food actually became less of an issue for a while in the lead up to anorexia. I was far too busy dealing with the problems listed above, but found myself gradually eating less of the unhealthy foods, and less volume of food. Every couple of months I might weigh myself and found that I was losing a reasonable amount of weight. It was a bonus more than anything. When I had lost a number of kilograms I decided to take it a bit more seriously and started exercising.

I then bought some scales, and started weighing myself regularly. In hindsight, this was the beginning of the end.

From there, my life degenerated extremely rapidly. Food started dominating my thoughts and feelings. Losing weight became an obsession, a very dangerous one. I restricted my food intake, eating very little throughout the day. Within a few months, my life consisted of a severely restricted food intake, compulsive exercise after the few meals I actually had, and weighing myself many times per day.

Life had become a set routine. I never had to think about what my next activity was, it was all planned out for me. I knew what I was going to eat, when I was going to eat it, when I would exercise, and when I would weigh myself.

Nothing was left to chance. After several months my weight had dropped further. I was so focussed on my weight loss that I didn't even realise how my life was falling apart. Being overweight was all that I had known, and having now lost a large number of kilograms, I would literally do anything to jealously protect the weight loss I had achieved.

The effects professionally

Eating now dominated every part of my life. Almost every waking moment bore some relationship to eating. I had to eat on my own, and couldn't stand eating with people. Considering that I had breakfast and lunch at work, and that a lot of 'working lunches' were required as part of my job, this was highly stressful. Also, as I felt the need to compulsively exercise after mealtimes, I would never schedule meetings around the times that I ate. If someone else scheduled a meeting, I would be very restless.

Once or twice a day, I would leave the office and walk next door to the building which adjoined my workplace and run from the basement to the top. I would sometimes do this twice in one session.
Work trips away were par for the course, but I actively avoided them for several reasons. It was difficult to take my scales with me, I would have less control over what I was eating (as food was arranged at the conference/hotel), and my compulsive routine would be broken.

I was chronically fatigued due to my lack of energy, and whilst putting in as much as I could, it was severely hampering my efforts at work. Also, although it took around 18 months to take effect, my immune system finally gave up on me and I would get sick frequently and have to take days off work. My lack of energy meant that I was intolerant of other people's issues and problems. It was a less than ideal situation.

The effects personally

My social life dissipated very quickly when anorexia took hold. My routine didn't allow me to vary my food or drink consumption outside of my set plan, so I refused almost every social invitation that was extended to me. Even if I did attend a social outing or function, it would be to 'make an appearance' for an hour, and then to retreat back to my secure comfort zone which I knew so well. Friends, after making several attempts at getting in touch with me, understandably started to drift away. I would take the phone off the hook to avoid having to speak to people. I was unable to visit my dad on Father's Day as it would have interrupted my routine. I was a slave to the routine.
My love life withered during this time. From a physiological perspective, I can look back now and understand why.

Meeting people, loving people, becoming aroused, and all other parts of relationships take energy and effort. When you starve your body, it retreats into survival mode. The very little energy that you actually introduce into your body is used just to keep your heart pumping and your major organs working, and there is none left for other parts of your life which you would usually require energy, such as your love life and social life. Basically, your body recognises how little energy you are receiving and devotes all this energy into keeping you alive, meaning there is no energy or motivation for any other part of your life.

Then, anxiety hit me. I can honestly say that I had never known fear like this before. I would not wish it upon my worst enemy. One day, as usual, I had parked about 10 minutes away from work so that I could burn up some energy before driving home. Upon reaching my car, I was struggling for breath. I panicked, and started hyperventilating. I thought I was having a heart attack or stroke, and literally believed I was going to die. This was my first experience of a panic attack.

After that, although I learned to control them to some extent, the panic attacks have been a daily occurrence for the past two years. Fear is now a standard part of my day. You cannot imagine the impact that this has had on my quality of life.

Health

I almost died from anorexia. Some of the physical effects of anorexia include when your body has been starved for so long that your major organs such as your heart or liver basically give up on you as they become so weak. My heart became severely weakened by the years of starvation. I started seeing the doctor on a monthly basis as I was so scared by the consequences of what I was doing, but could not bring myself out of the habits, which perpetuated the health dangers.

Several times my blood pressure was dangerously low, which was indicative of how little energy I had and how weakened my body was.

I could hardly drag myself out of bed in the morning, yet exercised compulsively throughout each day. Life had become an absolute nightmare.

My mental health suffered immeasurably during this time. Apart from the constant fear and anxiety, I was lonely and depressed. On many occasions, I had to ask myself whether I was dead or alive due to the fact that I was numbed to any thoughts or feelings. I gained no joy out of life. Due to my health concerns, the prospect of losing more weight terrified me.

The prospect of putting on weight also terrified me. Maintaining my weight meant that nothing would change and that my life would continue in such an unhealthy state, being constantly ill, lonely, scared, depressed and anxious.

Recovery

As I felt powerless to do anything about my situation, such was my fear of putting on weight or interrupting my routine, I was unable to be proactive in making changes to my life. Instead, I would only make changes when I felt that I had no other option. Examples of this would be when my body would regularly ache and be in so much pain that all I could do was lie on my bed and cry. I would be so sick that I felt I had to change or I would die.

Health professionals have since told me that it was sheer luck that I didn’t succumb to the disease. Gradually, I learned to trust other people, particularly my doctor and my psychologist who were there to help me in my journey to recover. I could not trust my own thoughts and feelings, as instinctively my default reaction to any situation would be to avoid food, or to avoid the prospect of putting on weight.

Over time, my quality of life had deteriorated to the extent that I felt I had no choice but to recover. I increased my food intake, slowly at first, and then realised that putting on weight is actually hard to do. I have now put on a few kilograms and reached my first milestone in terms of weight gain, which is at the lower end of the healthy body mass index range.

My social life has improved considerably in conjunction with my weight gain. I have more energy than before, and more interest in going out and socialising. I am catching up with people I have literally not seen for years. My productivity at work is increasing. I am more flexible with my eating patterns. I am getting back into the dating scene. Life is improving, and I look better, feel better, and have hope for the future where previously there was none.

I still have a long way to go before I can consider myself recovered. Every day is still a huge struggle, filled with anxiety about my eating habits, putting on weight, and health concerns. In hindsight I wish I had been more proactive about making changes to my life. I only made changes when I felt that things were so bad that I had no choice but to amend the way I do things. If I had been brave enough to take more risks, I could have saved myself so much physical illness and mental anguish.

As I've mentioned, I would not wish this condition on my worst enemy. Anorexia is an extremely debilitating, distressing, and above all, life threatening illness. It will take away any quality of life that you have, and consume every waking moment of your life. If you recognise any of the symptoms that I have described, please arm yourself with a strong support network of health professionals, family and close friends. Without the assistance of these people, I am unsure if I would be writing this story today.

Courtney's Story

As I was growing up I saw myself as different from every other kid. For some reason I just felt and thought I was different. The very first scary thought I had was at an early age of five, as my mum left me at preschool, I thought she would never come back and she was going to die in a car crash. I can remember that quite vividly because it was a horrible thought to have. I was frightened and scared and have had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder ever since and probably even before that.

As I grew up, my mum always said I wasn't an easy kid to deal with. From when I was very little I would not talk a lot to people and I was very shy, the person I trusted and was always with was my mother. I would have severe problems with getting dressed each morning, I would have to take my shoes and socks of up to 10 times before mum could finally put them on and they would stay on. I had to wear certain clothes otherwise I would not wear anything, and would have massive tantrums that no one could deal with. The weird thing I noticed once was when I was walking in a shopping centre and I would have to run back to each certain spot to tap the wall or item, just so I could feel safe inside, meanwhile getting into trouble because I wasn't with the family. I was very scared my mum would leave me and die and then never come back.

I had a solution for this, I would stick by her where ever she was and then she would be fine. This started in about year 3, and I would go to school and then pretend I was sick to come home an hour later. This got so bad that I was pretending to twist my wrist and be very ill also pretending I had very bad eye sight. My school life was ruined from this point on, I would attend school in little bits sometimes not for weeks at a time.

When I was nine years old, we moved to another town. I was very excited and thought I would become a normal kid and have a new start. Once we got there it was worse than ever, all of a sudden everything went into a deep black hole. At the age of 10 years, I got these thoughts that were the most horrifying thoughts that I could ever have or even imagined. They were thoughts of myself hurting my family and hurting or killing my mother, there were feelings to go with these thoughts to like urges and guilt, it was like I felt I had to not speak so I wouldn't do what the thoughts were. Another thought was that I was a lesbian and I really did love girls and was sexually attracted to girls and even girls in my family. This horrified me so I ended up not becoming friends with other girls at school because I was too afraid that I would become a lesbian for sure. I started to get so terrified and then the thoughts got worse, I started to think I was a murderer because I had these thoughts. I started to get 'what if' thoughts where you think the thought and think it could be true but then have doubt about the thoughts because you really know they aren't real thoughts and it's not reality. These thoughts were disabling. I would have a shower and think 'what if' the water is blood and not really water, I would scream to mum to check the water and then I would be okay for a bit. These thoughts would be going none stop every minute of the day and they truly traumatised me, it was like being in the worst horror movie you can think of. I would tell my mum and she would say they were just normal thoughts and there is nothing to worry about. She assumed they were just once off thoughts that everyone gets now and then and not in tense or horrible as they really were, seeing that I didn't tell her in detail about the really bad ones.

I lost a lot of friends through this time and had made family members resent me for how I was, I got very frustrated and angry with myself and thought I was making all of this happen deliberately to just get attention. I started to feel severe amounts of guilt, which made me unable to move and not walk. The guilt made me think I had to tell everything to my mum of what happened in a day for me, like how many pens I used of hers to write with or if I spoke to someone or if I took my shoes off at school. Each time I would tell her I assumed I was going to be severely punished because I thought I had committed sins and disappointed my mum. So I started to write letters to her instead of just telling her because the guilt made me stop talking. I started to pray repeatedly each night to protect my family otherwise if they died or got hurt I would assume it was my fault because I was a murderer and an evil person.

Around the family there was a lot of talk about religion and demons. One time I was told that demons were after me by a friend of the family. I was terrified, I didn't know what to do. Then another time I was told if you are awake at midnight you are in the satins minute and he could get you if you are not careful. And things such as ghosts and spirits could take over your body without you knowing, I began to wonder if all this was true. All of this I was told at the ripe age of 11, I didn't know what to believe because actual adults were telling me this stuff. Like demons can disguise themselves as humans. I started to question myself with 'what ifs' what if someone I knew was really a demon and not human. I felt really alone and I didn't know what to believe.

I began to wash myself as a relief of frustration from all these 'what ifs' in my mind. I would spend a lot of time cleaning myself and cleaning my room, I would have to wear socks everywhere because the germs could get me and make me bad. I would wear socks even in the swimming pool to swim and on wet days in the mud at friend's places I still would have my socks on. I couldn't touch animals or people I thought had germs on them. If I even got one dirty thing on me I would have to go have a shower and get clean clothes on. I didn't like going outside anymore because there was too much dirt and the animals were out there. I then became consumed with the thought that I had to go to the toilet for bowel movements until everything was absolutely out and it was all cleaned out. This gave me medical problems with that area and it was very painful which at times I couldn't cope with just how painful it all was. Then I went to extremes to make germs come off of my skin and I had 12% peroxide and put it on my skin till it burnt it off, at the time I was doing this I didn't realise what damage I was doing to myself but once it happens you start to realise.

At times I thought the horrible mind games had gone but surely enough a day later they would all be back, a new one came along where I thought I was going to kill my cat or drown it in the pool and also that I was sexually attracted to animals. Every time I would close my eyes I would have images of myself killing the cat in a very horrific way. I couldn't stand this anymore the thoughts and what ifs had gone on for too long. I started to punch myself in the head and make myself be in a lot of pain in a way of punishing myself. This worked for about 30 seconds and then I would have to hurt myself again.

I started to get suicidal at a very young age and wished every night that God would take me away, in other words kill me. Though really deep down I just wanted to be happy and normal and not die. I began to get amazingly distraught images in my head of very evil things, things you can't imagine unless you were told. These images were there all the time when I was talking to family members or friends, I would get distracted by the images in my mind which made me not be able to watch any violent television shows otherwise I would use bad images of shows for the images in my head. No matter how hard I tried to get rid of these you could not. I didn't sleep through the night because I thought if someone came into the house and hurt my family I would be responsible, so I would stay up all night and then go to sleep when it was 7 am till 4 pm every day. I began to really believe I was a very bad person.

All my life I would get obsessed with something or pretend I was a character out of a movie just to keep my mind off my real self, for about a month this would happen and then move onto the next thing, this helped me with trying not to focus on what was going on in my mind. At times my focus would be to get mum to buy me something from the shop, having tantrums till I would finally get it. Other times it would be a hobby, like acting or sport or ballet, or even a country kept my mind off things.

At age 13, someone told me these thoughts are like voices that aren't real and everyone gets them, from this information I started to call these thoughts voices. It was easier to comprehend them because then it sounded like they weren't really my thoughts they were just voices. At age 14, I told my teacher at school about the thoughts, and used the word voices. My mum found out and took me to a doctor, she asked me different questions and then referred me to a child and mental health youth centre. About 2-3 months later we were there in an interview.

The day of the appointment I had a plan I would pretend to do anything to make sure they (the doctors) knew how much pain I was in. I even thought I would make up stuff that wasn't true because I was too embarrassed to tell the truth about these thoughts and what was happening to me. When I went in I said I had voices, they immediately assumed these voices were schizophrenia voices, I didn't correct them and at that time I said to myself 'what if they are?' I was scared by the worried looks on everyone's faces, I tried to tell them about how I have this voice about hurting people, and again they assumed that I had a real voice in my head telling me to kill people.

They started to ask me yes and no questions, things like do you see things that no one else can see? I didn't understand what they meant so I just nodded because I was just agreeing with them all, and they kept asking very strange questions, my mum was sitting next to me and looking at me funny as if that's not true. I just kept nodding to the questions, somehow I felt they were happy with me because I was nodding and I felt like I was needed in some way. Then they asked me a very frightening question, 'Do I have a plan of how to kill my parents?" I started to get into a panic I couldn't speak, and I was thinking to myself 'I CANNOT ANSWER YES TO THIS ONE!' So I said no I don't, I thought this was a very inappropriate question to ask someone that was so scared of their parents dying. I felt ill after this question, thinking how could they even think I wanted to kill anyone I was scared even too hurt a fly.

They let mum and me have a break and then brought us back into the doctor's room, they said I was diagnosed with schizophrenia, though it wasn't a set diagnosis. I didn't know what to do I couldn't explain what really was going on, that there was no voices and that I couldn't really see people, and all these crazy stories I made up were just from television shows. I had remembered a movie called the beautiful mind and used some of that story line to tell the doctors what was happening to me, and also used some stories from the TV series called charmed. Once I had started pretending and lying about what was really happening I couldn't stop. People were so interested in what I had to say, I never had that before so I kept pretending.

With the questions it was because they asked me and I had to say yes, agreeing with people was one way I would get people to like me. They the doctors decided to give me medication to start on that was for schizophrenics. I didn't realise it then that if you don't have the illness you are getting treated for, the medication can do allot of damage to your body.

I took home a pamphlet and studied how people acted who had schizophrenia, and followed the basic symptoms. Over the next month or so, I got extremely anxious and zombie like. I kept pretending to be schizophrenic in every way I thought possible. It was easier for me to think I was schizophrenic then to know and accept I was the one actually having bad thoughts and crazy doubts and that I was a bad person. There was allot of guilt followed by pretending all of this but the tablet they put me on were extremely strong, and I had other worries at that time. Such as coping with the amount of anxiety I had.

I started to have this one particular thought that 'what if' life is really nothing that there is no use to life at all! This anxious thought was there every second of every minute. I couldn't sleep I would cry none stop. I was so exhausted and tired that I couldn't live properly. My mum had to take care of me physically and emotionally. One morning I had truly had enough of the anxiety, and I tried to kill myself to get rid of the horrible feeling inside me. I stood up on a chair and went straight flat onto the tiles on my face and my whole body. I broke my nose and I fractured my elbow, I was unconscious for a little bit while my mum came running to my aid. My family took me to the hospital and I was admitted to a mental hospital with adults.

As I was only fourteen, I had a nurse watching over me all the time. I hated it, and I was still extremely anxious and would only let mum be by my side or my sister who was there allot of the time with me too. Finally the doctors realised it was all a side effect of the tablets I was on. I was amazingly thankful that they took my off the drugs even though they still had not figured out I was pretending about the diagnosis that got me onto these tablets. I tried to let go subtle hints to one particular doctor that I was pretending and I needed to tell the truth about my real problems, though I was too scared to ever tell her and she never picked up on it.

I went home and I didn't ever speak of the lie I was living about the diagnosis, I still kept pretending and they put me on other tablets that had the side effect of putting on extreme amounts of weight. I put on over 40kg in a year. And still I kept the most frightening secret to myself, until one day a year and a half later I wrote a note to tell my mum I was pretending all along. I was very scared of her response, though surprisingly she said she had a huge feeling I was pretending about the schizophrenic symptoms. Though she still knew I had problems I needed sorting out. She decided to take me to the new psychiatrist that was one my case.

I was deeply scared, I was never a talker and could never tell the truth about what I was feeling and thinking to anyone except a bit to my mum. I promised to myself before I went in to the appointment I would tell the truth for my own sake. I didn't want a misdiagnosis again and have horrible side effects to what I had done again.

I went in and told the whole story, I admitted to pretending and I admitted to all the horrible thoughts in my head, and even admitted about the very embarrassing symptoms I had, such as thinking I was in love (sexually) with people I truly did not love in that way. He listened very carefully and made me feel at ease, I felt I had done nothing wrong for admitting everything that was going on inside of me and what I had done about lying.

He diagnosed me with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, I didn't believe I had it in the beginning but then again I didn't understand what it actually was. He allowed me to go off the other tablets and put me onto tablets that were suitable for obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). I finally felt a lot of weight off my shoulders. I didn't have to pretend anymore and I could finally tell the truth about the horror before the misdiagnosis.

I began to feel better after about 2 months, and I started to exercise and eat properly. Which allowed me to lose over 35kg to make me back to the weight I was. I was turning 17 years old and for the very first time in my life I could do a hobby of my own without my mum by my side. I played soccer 3 times a week for over 3 years and made the North Queensland team.

I still have many horrific and traumatising symptoms of OCD and have received new ones, and there is a whole other story for the life time between age 17 and 21. Though still all the time it will get worse at certain times of the year, at least now I can tell someone about it. Though I am 21 years old now, I have learnt allot through my childhood and teenage years. One very important lesson throughout all of this is that I tell the truth now and I am honest to myself about everything that is going on in my life. Another is that with people you can never truly know everything about them, you do not know what is going on for them or why they do certain things that may seem weird to you or why they are upset. I have also learnt that after all this I see that OCD is not that crazy and different once you really look at it and see what it is about.

I am now studying a bachelor of psychology, something I have always wanted to do was help little kids that felt different and now I finally have the opportunity too. I am also taking ballet classes and working toward exams for it, I have finally found that I can be the ballet dancer I have always wanted to be with a bit of passion and determination.

Christopher.J.Pescud's Story
A World of thought and Psychosis

JUST ANOTHER DAY BEING SCHITZO!

It's a rainy today , and I'm not feeling good at all , I'm so damn tired and I have a pain in my head ,I'm at work I just need to put one foot in front of the other It's just not right , I have to drive home when I did, something felt like it hit in me in the head.

"oh I have to get home"," I can't see very well indeed" , I made it home , I walked in the door and just fell on the bed I slept and slept then I awoke, I couldn't talk, I forgotten words how do I speak ,I'll watch telly although nothing made sense I couldn't understand what was said and the pictures are confusing , oh what's wrong with me I cant focus, everything's confusing no ones talking properly, where's the thoughts coming from are they thinking at me, why don't they leave me alone , are they feeding me drugs, There all trying to kill me, I won't talk, I'll just stay still and watch what they do, Their thinking at me again and I'm always being watched always all the time ,

I can't think they'll know what I'm thinking, what I have I done wrong , I 'm trying to work out what I have done wrong, Damn head it wont come good , "what's that" , I said to myself," on the wall" ," It's there" the voice said , I thought I won't look at it and it will go away and the thought said again" look at it"" it's on the wall"

So I looked, is it a demon or is it not real what is it, it's a face what's it looking at me for, I wont look at it and it will go away, is it real or is it the drugs, what's wrong with me man, I cant get my head right, I know I'll think at them I'll confuse their head, my father said" he needs to be committed" , oh, I need sleep and it will go away , and , they'll kill me if I go to sleep , "who'll kill you" the voice said , I said they will and the voice said "who will "and I said I don't know they will who ever ," they can't be trusted" the voice said , I can't work out who's doing it ",what's that , where" I said and the voice said" out there" , I said" I don't know" and the voice said" go have a look" , so I peered out the blinds and there was nothing , I looked at myself why am I rocking, I stopped myself , the voice said" idiot ,stupid idiot" , I ran my hand over my forehead sweat heaps of sweat what's wrong with me man , I feel sick , and the voice said "idiot" "your demented" I looked down I'm rocking again , so I stopped myself.

I need sleep and I'll wake up better ",look up there" , the voice said I said" where" it said" up there" I looked" Its in the sky" , the voice said" look at it" , so I looked the clouds took formation ," is that the devil" I said , I wont look I'm frightened , I thought they must be feeding me LSD or something I'm hallucinating , I yelled at them who's feeding me drugs they looked , they were quite I got a stick and I slammed it on the bench , which one of you is feeding me drugs , they were quite , I turned and took off to my room.
I sat on the bed in the corner the voice said " their lying " I thought "shut up ,shut the hell up " and the voice said "why" I thought I'll stop the thoughts I won't think, Is it me or is it someone else" who is it" I thought , forcing myself not to think , sweating and shaking "I thought there's a spirit in here , it's trying to make me do bad things 'the voice said "prove it" ,"what's that" the voice said I looked it's a shape I thought it's a spirit , I won't look
I'm frightened the telly was on what are they saying are they talking to me , there talking to me , I better shut up and not think , hang on is this my mind It's falling apart at that stage fighting it oh ,I'm rocking again I need to compose myself I stopped , I need sleep ,I'll just lie down ,so damn tired and I need sleep ,

And another day went by more visions more thoughts and more rocking , I thought when is this going to stop 3 months later after all the garbage I thought it would better I managed to get some work and work I did I did very well for 12 months and then It started again the thoughts got worse, mind you they were always there I just managed them better ,well I thought I did by this stage I had moved away from home and in a relationship with a woman and we managed 2 dogs and a cat , anyway as I was saying 12 months went by and the psychotic symptoms came back this time worse than ever before , I was in a car accident then I lost my job , it got to the stage where I just couldn't think I was always in a daze , my girlfriends parents and relatives called me parasite and life was hell , I couldn't fill the forms out for unemployment benefits ,I tried to tell everyone what was happening to me they all tried to tell me things that didn't make sense ,when they spoke their words had no meaning and then I thought I was haunted by spirits , I told my girlfriend what I was seeing , she would reply you're f#@king crazy , she called me a reject boyfriend and I was trying to fight it , I started to believe that my girlfriend was drugging me and that once again they were thinking at me again, As I now know now paranoid schizophrenia although this time I didn't go catatonic , I was in a real mess couldn't remember to shower couldn't remember to eat I couldn't think what time it was and when I did I looked at the clock time meant nothing my girlfriend tried to help but in the end she just gave up trying so her father kicked me out eventually, this was 4 years after my initial breakdown , I was just this body that woke up and then went to bed , the thoughts and the visions were from hell I was petrified of what I saw and heard but I couldn't tell anyone about them , actually I haven't to this day story told anyone about what happened , I'm hoping that this will give some insight into what goes on inside a person's mind while going through a psychosis , It was as if I had been permanently drugged and hallucinating you don't know what's happening or who's doing it to you and the thoughts you don't know if your being controlled by some other force from another dimension, To this day I still wonder if what I went through was from the other side although now I just believe it was my illness , anyway I got kicked out and my father housed me , I said to my mother who also has an illness , " mum I'm unwell and I can't think properly can you get me help she looked and I said " I'm serious mum I need help " she then rang the services up that she knew and they sent the CAT team out , They are trained in this sort of thing , my father however didn't believe that psychiatric disorders existed he believed it was an attitude problem however thank god he was prepared to listen , the crisis team immediately, put me on tablets and organised some help through the mental health services , I remember the side effects I rocked in my sleep it was soothing to the mind it helped the pain in my head , although it wasn't a pain like breaking a bone or cutting oneself it was different and I had a real bad time with anger I felt angry all the time really angry , I'm just thankful I didn't act on what some of the voices said or I would have killed people , I refused to act , I fought the voices the internal demon inside I fought him all the way , I refused to act ,when I saw the head psychiatrist they had to release my anger slowly so I sat in group therapy , I remember some of the clients saying" listen to that guy he's pshyco"

But eventually they managed to release my anger slowly without me doing harm to anyone or myself, nowadays though I have learnt to not take in other peoples problems nor take on their snide remarks as I think they have the problem and it's not me like before I used to take it on board until anger built so much that it made my mind crazy.
As I look back I realize the hurt and the anguish that being bullied and mocked and just plain being misunderstood really hurt me inside , it seem to come from all directions at that stage , anyway I've had many psychotic episodes and I've been on various medications that work for a while and then don't work after a period of time and this leads to more psychotic episodes , however I haven't had an dramatic episode for nearly five years now only sometimes I will have symptoms , with each change in medication things are getting

better , the last change in medication I have had I've been put on a new one and all the psychotic symptoms have gone away , I'm hoping this time things will be better it's just a matter of wait and see

Well I've lived with this illness now for some 24 years and I've seen what people go through with it I have made friends within the psych system and I've also lost a lot of friends through their conditions, I've been in the situation where life doesn't matter and death seems so peaceful that I would rather not be, I've gone to the stage where I've tried to take my life and I've been through the stage where I just didn't wish to be.

The last 11 years of my life have been alright I have a young son and daughter now that I cherish and I wish to see them grow up so I hang around for them even though life seems so damn hard, and the dizzy head comes back every now and then

I had a turn about 2 months ago where I just felt so damn tired and so damn bored being alive I just wanted to go sleep and never wake up, now I just hang on and I watch my children grow

I've come to the conclusion that I'll never have a decent relationship again not with my condition anyway

I've taken on further studies which gives me something to look forward to

But to me life is just, well I exist and that's it,

So to that the question. Is it, to be or not to be?

And my answer is I exist!

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

The story I told was a period in my life to today, now though After being put on medication for some 20 odd years and have been on various medications I have my good days and my bad , in and out of psychosis up and down around and around some medications make you rock some medications don't seem to work at all it's a trial and error thing and then you wonder if at all it is worth it , I get tired , I'm sick of being ill it makes me depressed but It's just a matter of making the most of what we have and being thankful to god that we are who we are and learning to accept what we are, and that we go through this, it's part of our make up , I think because I have this illness I need to take extra special care of myself and cherish everyone and everything around me , as I say to myself there are people who are in worse situations then I have been in, it has taught me not to be so selfish and to think about other people , I believe I am like this I have experienced things that not too many people would have experienced in life , not to mention my dyslexia as a child I found school work very hard I had to learn differently , each and every individual on this planet has some form of disability and some form of gift , it is said that dyslexia is a gift , it teaches us to excel in area's where the norm can't go , and the same applies to my illness , the voices have taught me certain things that the norm could not have experienced , I think I have experienced another form of realities , with each psychosis and I have had plenty, I learn different things about myself about the world and about other people , and when I'm able to I can apply that learning to my life situations.

I have managed to take on various studies some I have been well enough to finish others I haven't finished and others have just been to overwhelming, but what I have learnt is that I must try, I must be the best person I can possibly be, and I will not make the illness an excuse to just sit back and do nothing,

At present I am coping well with the aid of new medication the new medications are far better than the old ones they have less side effects and they are easier to use as technological advancements happen they are getting better and better. What I have learnt though is that some people seem to think the Illness is just attitude after surfing the net and talking to the doctors and actually experiencing the different medications it is far more than attitude it is a serious problem with the mind here is a link www.brainexplorer.org for you to have a look at or www.schitzoprenia.com

There is a great deal of research and information online about the conditions I am also diagnosed with clinical depression and I am taking anti depressants, from the research I have done in the past one cannot self medicate nor can they, even if they wanted to deal with this themselves, It does have to do with chemicals in the mind and electrical and chemical impulses that can only be dealt with by the right treatment
There is no cure but there is a control and personally I'd rather be in control than to be hay wire.

DH's Story

I AM …… I AM NOT MY ILLNESS

WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR BRAIN? I think I am not the only one who has spent more than half of her life thinking that mental health problems happen to "other people" I ignored the signs of genetics, heredity, predisposition,. My uncle was an alcoholic who killed himself. A cousin, a young man, killed himself when the love of his life left him. Both my grandfathers were alcoholics, and so was my mother, and she too spent some time in a mental hospital and was for ever taking some medication or other. And yet, absorbed with my own survival issues, I paid very little attention to all this. Looking back, I can see us all like puppets on the strings, playing our roles in life the best we can, with our brain being the director, the conductor. "How little we all know about what happens in our brain".

I was born in 1949, in a small country in Europe to a young girl who was not ready for marriage or motherhood! She just got pregnant and in those years this meant she had to marry! My mum, who was always on some tablets, and suffered from alcohol addiction, left me and my father when I was only 6 years old. Later, she returned a few times, (with my younger sister,). In fact, she was always coming and leaving. Our family was very dysfunctional. I brought myself up alone; I knew very little about discipline, trust, respect. My father went to the factory every day, I went to school, and I have very few memories of this period. I remember that at one stage, my mum and sister came back "home"; mum found my personal diary in which I wrote all my intimate feelings, my love for a teacher, as well as my hatred for my mother. She showed my diary to my father. In rage and shame and despair, at 13, I attempted to kill myself for the first time. I guess I may have suffered from depression even then. However, I was saved at the local hospital and life went on. In order to leave the unhappy home, where my parents abused each other all the time, I accepted a scholarship at an agriculture college (even though agriculture had no appeal for me), and I left home at 15, to go to a boarding college. Life became a bit nicer then! It was the beginning of a life full of travelling, studies, friendships, and reasonable success on professional as well as emotional level, and I knew at all times THAT I WAS ALONE, AND HAD ONLY TO RELY ON MYSELF. I kept in touch with my family and visited them often. They missed me, by then I also had a little brother. My sister and brother continued to live in a horribly abusive home, and I felt so sad for them.

In my life of 61 years, I have been a migrant in many different countries. I am sure that this factor has a lot of importance in everything that happened in my life, I believe that each time we "uproot" ourselves; we may add some stress to our life. Each time we start afresh, and have to find ways to assimilate, be accepted, and prosper , the emotional strain on our brain cells is great. Each time we feel lost because we can't speak the language of our new country; each time we make furniture out of cardboard boxes in our new little room…I remember crying alone on Christmas day at a cemetery in Paris, I remember having terrible nightmares for a while: I was dreaming of travelling home to an address that did not exist and putting a key in the wrong door. Looking back, I know that I must have changed houses hundreds of times…

In my late twenties, in Paris, I married a beautifully warm, kind man. I was not aware, and I was not told by him or his family, that he was ill with schizophrenia and was on medication. Only later, when we migrated to Australia, and his illness got worse and he stopped taking his medication, he confined in me. He told me that his parents had placed him in mental hospitals in France, where he had been given repeated electric shock treatments when he was 14 years old. He was terrified of ECT and so in Sydney, I did not allow this kind of therapy. He also told me that he was a homosexual who was too terrified of his parents to ever live like one. He was in and out of hospital, as I often tried to help him while keeping him at home with me, however, at times, due to his hallucinations, I feared for my own life. I also feared that he did not cope well with being a migrant, especially as he had had to accept a job that was way below his qualifications and people had difficulty understanding him due to his strong French accent. Maybe all this added horrible stress to his life? We finally decided it was better for him to return to France, where his family could help him, while I would keep paying our mortgage and hope he would soon get better. SO DURING ALL THIS TIME, I WAS A CARER STRUGGLING TO COME TO TERMS WITH ALL THE LIES , HIS MENTAL ILLNESS, OUR DEAD MARRIAGE AND MY OWN MENTAL FRAGILITY. During this time, my father back home had a terrible car accident and so I went to stay with him; after 9 days of coma, he miraculously recovered. I had been diagnosed with cancer and had to have an operation. My brain , my dear poor brain, was falling apart under all this .

Not long after I took my husband back to France, I received the horrible news from his parents that he had committed suicide. He escaped from the hospital and threw himself under a train.

During the last 6 months of our life together in Sydney, I was diagnosed with panic attacks and anxiety and was put on tranquillisers. Maybe this is the real beginning of my mental illness, or maybe in my genes, the illness was sleeping and had my life been less difficult, it would have kept on sleeping. How on earth could I have not gotten ill with all that was happening? I often think that “happy” people don’t suffer from addiction and mental illness…

However, being on medication, having panic attacks, fits of crying, did not prevent me from continuing with my life, my career, I just pushed myself harder. During this time too, my first book, a poetry collection , was published.

I pushed myself; I demanded a lot of myself. The little girl who was abandoned by her mother at the age of 6, needed love and approval and so with my career, with writing, with love affairs, it was never enough . In order to cope, the dose of tranquillisers was increased many times during the years that followed. After my husband’s suicide, I was feeling terrible guilt and shame, as if I had failed my husband completely, as if I was responsible for his death. HOWEVER, NO DOCTOR EVER MENTIONED DEPRESSION OR COUNSELLING, THEY JUST GAVE ME SEDATIVES.

I continued with my successful career in Human resource management, with my writing and publishing, and relied – for everything - on my tranquillisers. Looking back, I am sure I was suffering from depression, but no one alluded to it and I knew nothing about it.

I moved from Sydney to Melbourne. In 1987 I married a man who told me he was an alcoholic; I did not really understand what this meant for him. While he was drinking, he was mellow and gentle; yet when he stopped drinking, once he became a “dry drunk”, (an expression used to describe people who no longer drink but may use unacceptable behaviour such as anger/rage, pessimistic criticism, manipulation, abusive behaviour etc.) our life together became a nightmare.

During this marriage, I stopped taking tranquillisers; I did not see a doctor, I did not know how dangerous it was to go from high doses of 50 mg or more to zero!

I had terrible withdrawal symptoms and I used alcohol and food to calm myself. During the years that followed, I was finally diagnosed with depression, and I was drinking a lot in the evenings and I was on and off anti-depressants. I went through a difficult menopause; even though I was a successful business woman, and I had a second book published, I was slowly dying, totally exhausted and alone. Strangely , I felt responsible for my depression; it was all my fault if I was not coping, I was weak, stupid, and my husband told me that again and again.

As if I did not have enough on my plate, my frail, aged parents arrived from overseas and asked me to take care of them. My life was turned upside down. Amazingly, their abusive marriage survived and here we were, in Tasmania, reunited. Somehow I convinced myself that my GOD wanted me to help my parents find some happiness and peace. So I put all of me into being a good daughter, a good carer. My marriage, which was already an unhappy one, became horrible, with my partner detesting my parents, family, friends, and at the end, hating me too. Emotionally, I died. My husband asked me to choose, I chose my parents.

Remembering it all, I can see that at that time, I was suffering both from alcohol addiction and depression. However, I was still capable of running a business and going through another broken marriage and being a full time carer. Until, totally exhausted and depressed, I tried to take my life. But the thought of my parents finding me dead in the morning was too much and so I called the ambulance before it was too late. When I was recovering in the hospital, I told my family I was fed up being everybody's MILKING COW! In one of the books I read some time ago, there was talk of "being a victim, allowing people to hurt you"; I started to feel that I was totally fed up with being a victim.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE BRAIN?

More sadness in life followed. Much of it I will not even mention here, in order to remain brief. However, I went through a painfully abusive divorce and property settlement, lost my home, lost my father (after I nursed him at home for many months).

My mother and I moved to a bigger town, but our relationship was a difficult one; she was beginning to suffer from dementia, she was angry and selfish and the antidepressants she was on were not really helping. I still had my own anger in me for her abandoning me as a child, but also, I desperately wanted her to love me, at least once before we both die. But looking after her 24 hours a day was killing me. Even at night there was no peace; she was hungry at midnight, she would put rubbish into the toilet, not remembering , and I was for ever cooking and cleaning and washing.

I started , for the first time in my life, to seek serious counselling, I bought self-help books, went to stay in monasteries, Buddhism retreats, and allowed the little girl inside me to cry. The torrents of tears that needed to come out of me! My mother became very ill with dementia and I finally had her admitted into a nursing home. It was better to cope with my shame and guilt, for not looking after her, than looking after her.
I WAS NOW ON MY OWN: NO LONGER A CARER, NO LONGER A WIFE, NO BUSINESS TO RUN, UNEMPLOYED, FINANCIALLY INSECURE, AND VERY ILL : I travelled through a total identity crisis. Antidepressants and alcohol have also added about 20 Kilos to my body, which I detested.

My faith that God continued to love me and that I deserved better health, and my loving friends and family, helped me decide that my life did matter. My path to recovery, to help myself heal continued.. I wrote poetry, my brain and my guts were freely examined through songs of love and loss, madness and dementia, fear of life, love of life. My brother and sister have their own demons to fight, and maybe it is harder for them, because they cannot “cleanse” through writing. I have always found my writing a terrific remedy.

I went to Petrea King Quest for Life centre in Bundanoon, Armidale retreat, Chenrezig Buddhism retreat in Queensland, South Pacific Hospital in Sydney, Mindfulness studies, Vipashna meditations retreat I attended AA meetings and wrote stories and poems.

Finally, I accepted that for me, a frail mind is no different to my frail bones (it looks like I “inherited” osteoporosis from my grandmother). So, I treat both with loving gentle care. I never feel
A victim to whom things happen; I learned to take responsibility for my own health, and learnt to protect myself better. Just like I did when I was a young girl. Boots and all!

Today I can say it has been a beautiful 5 years with no alcohol or antidepressants in my life. Every day is a PRESENT.

I keep working on my overall health. To live with depression is a career! I accept that my mental health is very fragile, just like my bones are, with osteoporosis. I accept that I can manage my physical, spiritual and mental health with healthy lifestyle, and acceptance plays a big part. High blood pressure, cholesterol, depression, are guests in my house and I treat them as such.

I am very active in helping others in the society, in Aged care, Disability, Mental Health. I work part time, I look after my mother part time. My mother and I now have a beautiful loving relationship where only the beauty of the tenderness of the present moment matters ! It is amazing how gentle and loving my mum is; but it is possible that she sees in me only unconditional love that I am now able to give her, and so all our battles are long forgotten. And that is another thing I have learn: to be mentally at peace, I need to have humility, to accept, tolerate, and not fight all the time . It does not matter to be Right, it matters to be at Peace inside.

I treasure every day. No matter WHAT disasters may happen in my day, I end it with a prayer:

“Thank you God for this day of my life”.

I study, anything from health, to faith, to nutrition, hormones, addictions, moon cycles, you name it, I am interested. It is hard work, the door to despair or tears, or feeling of exhaustion remains semi open most of the time. Often, I have some counselling, when I get stuck with an issue (especially my body , my weight, my fear of getting dementia, my fear of men.)

Lots of peace comes from my love of nature, bush walks, swims in the ocean, trips overseas, being with loved ones, family and friends. I no longer need others to love me and approve of me, I am good enough just for me!
Confucius wrote: quote
“Our greatest glory is not in the never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”…unquote
My reality today is: just like in nature, in my body and mind and soul, there is rain and thunder and sunshine, there is tsunami but also moon light. All worth living.

And every minute of my life is treasured, and respected including moments of extreme sadness, or grief or confusion.
** WHAT HAPPENS IN THE BRAIN continues to be a very important question for me, and so I continue to study, read, and research. Books like THE FABRIC OF MIND (Bergland) fascinate me. I believe that “Every encounter, in person or in book, is a learning opportunity” unquote.

I don’t believe that doctors are Gods, who can miraculously cure us. My overall wellbeing is in my own hands and with the help of God and doctors, I may just stay well and happy.
From my book WHISPER:
I wish you a face with no mask, the healthy smile of a clown, and the tears of an innocent pain. I wish you peace, with no cannons in your brain.”

A Mother's Journey through Her Son's Anorexia

My husband and I have been married for 18 years and we have two beautiful children - a boy
(15) and a girl (13) - we consider ourselves to be a pretty normal family. This is our story.

It was May 2004 when we realised our son's desire to be 'healthy' had gone beyond whatever normal is and that we needed help. He was a very sad young boy - aged 11 at the time. When we first visited our family GP it was mostly because he seemed a bit down, as well as his dieting.

He broke down at the appointment, and then cried most of the way home as well; clearly something was wrong. I had thought someone just needed to explain to him that it was ok for him to eat sweet things sometimes - I never suspected an eating disorder - I didn't really know anything much about them. It was at a later appointment with a specialist paediatrician that the word 'anorexia' was first mentioned. It was quite a shock - didn't that happen to teenage girls?

I was totally ignorant that it could happen to young children (or to males) and that it was a serious mental illness and not a lifestyle choice.

MALES

Yes, males can get eating disorders. The illness picks on certain personality types and when my information pack arrived from the EDFV I remember reading it and thinking oh yes, that's true, that's true, that's true. Many of the factors that can contribute to developing an eating disorder applied to our son – we just didn't know it.

- His self-esteem was low, he was not a very assertive person, he would put others needs before his own.
- He had been the easiest child to parent - in hindsight too easy.
- He was particular about collecting certain books/toys, sorting things, keeping his room tidy, etc.

He was showing some classic signs of an eating disorder:

- He had become increasingly interested in food preparation - but not necessarily the eating of it! And I thought he was being helpful by making his own lunch!
- He was exercising obsessively - running laps around the school, after running to school. A sudden interest in trying to do well in the school cross-country.
- His shower had turned into an aerobics workout.

He was not really obsessed with weighing himself but judged his appearance by looking in the mirror - how his tummy looked became his yardstick - and it was checked continually, especially before and after showering and toileting - I came to curse the lovely big mirror in the bathroom.

READING

I found reading all I could lay my hands on helpful and at times I couldn't get enough – I wanted answers. Back then I didn't have ready access to the web, but I found the local library and EDFV literature helpful. Reading stories of recovery and hope were encouraging as we began our journey. Not everything we read was relevant to us (I found that a lot of information was about female sufferers) but I think the thoughts and feelings felt by the sufferers are similar as the illness doesn't know your gender or your age.

RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE

My hope is to reassure families that recovery is possible. It took some time to get to see the right people but it did happen. The doctor who eventually treated our son for his anorexia said to him at our first appointment that: "Yes, he was very sick now, but that he would get better, it may take 6 or 12 months but that he would get better". It was said with such calm conviction that I believed him. It was July and we were about to start our weekly outpatient visits; and these would continue until he was well enough not to need them. A life dictated to by appointments and a meal plan was about to begin.

Recovery is a different journey for everyone and everyone arrives at their own special place. This place will fluctuate over time. However, anywhere beyond the acute phase of the illness is a pretty good thing. I also acknowledge that there may always be some issues with food and body image for our son, and there will be some negative thoughts running around in his head but I believe his desire not to go back will help him to beat them. As was pointed out to me recently, it takes a strong person to deny themselves food, and it is that strength which can help a person fight the illness too.

TRIGGERS

Developing an eating disorder is not a choice, it does not have one simple cause, nor does it happen overnight. There is also no single factor or simple path to recovery. I believe there were many incidents and personality factors that contributed to our son's anorexia:

- He has obsessive tendencies, things that seemed quirky parts of his personality when younger, which actually meant that when he decided to cut certain foods from his diet - he was very good at it.
- He was worried about going into the upper school the following year and afraid of being one of the 'big' kids.
- He was having difficulty choosing which group of friends to play with at school and he hated the thought of hurting anyone's feelings.
- He was weighed and measured during a math's activity at school (a practice I would ban from schools if I could). A comment was made by another child about how

> much heavier our son was. Although their heights were also taken, our 10 year old did not understand the implications of him being significantly taller than the other child. Our son thought that his being heavier was a bad thing and he remembered this. He didn‘t mention any of this at the time and it was actually months later before he starting cutting out ‘treats‘ from his diet.

We live in a society where we are bombarded with comments and images about the importance of our body’s size/shape/weight. This information, combined with the factors in his life meant that our son had worked out what was wrong in his life and how he could make himself feel better - or so the illness had him believe.

GET HELP QUICKLY

I strongly, strongly believe that early intervention contributed significantly to our son’s recovery. Being young meant that the majority of his eating was done in the family home, so when he became quite restrictive we were aware of it. However his thinking and behaviours had been changed long enough for the illnesses’ claws to be well and truly in him before we reacted. We soon realised that we couldn’t help him change on our own. Strangely, the fact that he was young helped our cause. I have always felt that because he was pre-pubescent this prompted the medical people we saw to monitor him very closely (there was a fear of him missing a growth spurt if he wasn’t eating sufficiently). Consequently, he was hospitalised in the August, the first week his weight dropped. I encourage anyone who has suspicions about the normality or otherwise of a loved one’s eating/exercise behaviours to seek help. It would be much better to be incorrect than to miss the opportunity of getting help quickly.

APPOINTMENTS

Due to our son’s age, his counsellor was the only person he saw on his own. He was always accompanied by us for his appointments with the paediatrician and dietician. We found that having two sets of ears at the appointments was helpful. When something new is being explained to you there is a lot to take in. Often it is easy to forget to ask all the questions you had too. We were lucky enough that my husband could arrange to be at all of our appointments during the acute phase of the illness. I feel this really helped our son to know that both his parents were very concerned about him. This also saved only one of us being ‘blamed’ for all the appointments he was attending. At times there was a very angry young passenger in the car.

HOSPITAL

I don’t wish to dwell on the inpatient experience (which was three week‘s confined to bed with a naso-gastric feeding tube). I think it was certainly the lowest point of his life to date. That being the case, he had no desire to go back to hospital and in the early days this helped motivate him to stick to his meal plan. It was no picnic for us either.

I felt some pretty mixed emotions at the time. There were feelings of relief (guilty relief) that someone else was going to care for him. Relief that we would get a break from the two-hour meal sagas that had become the norm at our house. There were feelings of major inadequacy - that we couldn't make our son well and thus avoid him going to hospital. There were feelings of frustration at not being able to see him other than between the hours of 4pm and 8pm. There were often other visitors at this time and so there were sometimes feelings of jealousy. The grief of saying goodnight each day - occasionally the staff would have to peel him off us to let us go - it was awful. He was only 11 and wanted to be home with his family. We will never forget it.

All that aside, the difficulties were worth it in the end as he, unusually, only had that one admission. I can't imagine what it must be like to go through multiple admissions.

DIETICIAN / MEAL PLAN

Living with a meal plan is quite a strange experience. It is the enemy of the sufferer and the crutch of the carers. The dietician we saw was just lovely and played a significant role in the recovery process. She was someone we all trusted, believed and liked – especially our son – and I believe she was pivotal to his recovery.

WHAT WORKED FOR US

Our family was referred to a child and adolescent mental health service and after his admission to hospital we were assessed for 'treatment'. We had no idea what to expect. Initially we imagined our son seeing 'someone' to help him with his thoughts and behaviours and that would be it. There was much more to it than that. The assessment process took time and his first appointment with his own counsellor didn't occur until October - these appointments then continued for the next 15 months.

I was surprised that my husband and I were offered our own counsellor as well; however we found this an enormous help. The illness can present itself in many different ways during recovery and as the behaviours changed it was good to be able to talk these through with someone - there aren't any magic answers and the sessions can be challenging but I would encourage anyone else to give it a go. You discover more about your own personality and behaviours along the way and learn that there may be things that can be done or said in a different way to help the sufferer.

We also accepted the offer of family sessions (these were monthly for a little while). These sessions were the most challenging aspect of the treatment for our family and there were days when the kids complained the whole way there in the car. The family sessions showed our son that we all wanted him to get better.

Another benefit was that the sessions validated our daughter's role in the family and the fact that her life was turned upside down by this illness too. She will still mention being picked up from school each day and going to visit her brother for those three weeks - and that the three of us had to eat our dinner in the parents' room each night. She was only nine at the time and I often wonder what effect the experience of her brother's illness will have had on her now she is in her vulnerable teenage years. These sessions also highlighted that although one family member may have the illness - the whole family lives with an eating disorder.

SEPARATE ILLNESS AND SUFFERER

At its peak the illness takes over the sufferer's life completely. The person you know and love will be buried deep below the strange behaviours you observe. We found it helpful to refer to the 'evil voice' causing him to do, think or say something. He even drew a picture of this voice - it was a fierce, nasty looking creature - no wonder he was scared of disobeying it! No matter how bad things seem - your loved one is still inside there somewhere.

LOVE

My early reading of recovery stories had a common thread - the sufferers were supported by the knowledge that they were loved unconditionally. During the illness we often told our son how much we loved him - and he would respond that he loved us. For a long time 'I love you' was still said daily to each other (it's not so cool now when you're 15!) however, I still remind him these days. We need to tell them that we love them because the illness would have them believe otherwise.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

I was tempted to give up my part time work for a while (especially in the acute phase of the illness). In hindsight I'm glad I didn't, it meant that some part of my life remained 'normal'. (We were lucky that our son was able to continue going to school through most of his illness). I was also doing yoga classes for the first time that year and found it beneficial to continue those as well. They are still close to my favourite 90 minutes each week. I was aware of a TAFE college providing affordable student massages and I had these weekly for a while. You need your own nurturing while caring for someone with an eating disorder. Eating disorders become very demanding of your whole family - particularly when you are challenging it daily on behalf of your loved one – make sure you look after yourself.

MY JOURNAL

I found keeping a journal was useful. In the beginning it was mainly to record the advice given and appointments made. It became my close friend during the darkest stages of the illness. At the end of each day, when our son had finally succumbed to sleep (flat on his back because that way your tummy doesn't stick out) I would write about the day's events. I recorded the life our family was living and the strange behaviours of our son. I often couldn't make sense of what had happened and some days I couldn't quite believe the things the illness made him say and do. I stopped journaling after he had successfully started his secondary schooling and we had no more appointments – happily there was no longer a need.

ME NOW

I have been left with a number of legacies as a result of our son’s illness.

I am extremely uncomfortable when hearing comments made about a person’s body shape (either positive or negative), their weight gain or their weight loss. Telling someone they have lost weight is not a compliment. I just don’t think we have the right to comment on a person’s appearance - particularly as it has absolutely no bearing on what the person is like on the inside - and these comments may have far reaching consequences – you just don’t know.

I cringe at what passes as entertainment on television and in other media and the effect this is having on the young people in our society. We hope our own teens are learning to question the validity of these shows/articles.

I am also frustrated with comments on food being ‘bad’ or ‘good’ or hearing ‘I shouldn‘t eat this’ or ‘I shouldn’t eat that‘.

I have every confidence in writing a note to school when I don’t feel comfortable with the content of the Health and Phys Ed homework – and have excused both our children at different times from completing certain tasks.

I still attend ‘Support Group’ meetings. There is a true camaraderie with other carers – we have all been there. I try to give hope that recovery is possible to carers who are in the midst of it all.

I’m still learning about the illness. Now as our son is showing an interest in trying to ‘do really well’ at school, I know to try and temper that desire in him, to try and help him to keep his life balanced and his expectations reasonable.

I have a desire to ‘give back’ and have spoken publicly on a couple of occasions of our family’s experience. I am part of a group of carers who attend meetings with service providers who are trying to improve the care that is available to sufferers and their families. It is satisfying to be heard and to observe change being embraced.

I feel that helping our son fight his illness and to beat it, for him to be in recovery, has been our greatest achievement as parents. Never give up hope.

Jean Winter's Story
The Getting of Wisdom

Valeria was sitting in the waiting room of the emergency department. Her daughter was not well and had just been summoned in, to talk with the doctor.

Valerie was concerned, as her daughter displayed symptoms and illness of a type of mental condition. It seemed obvious that joy, her daughter, was in distress. Eventually the doctor and Joy came out of the office. It was imperative that Joy should go to hospital. Valerie took Joy home and with John, Joy's father, took her to a public psychiatric hospital.

"I am not well mum", Joy said. "I know Joy and we are going to get help for you". Her mother said. Joy was confused and frightened; not only of herself and the change in her mental condition/state, but the thought of going in to a 'loony bin' was frightening. Joy thought she might be told that her mind was insane or mad.

Joy packed her clothes and her mother helped her with the necessities of clothing and such. When it was time to leave, Joy's parents said their goodbyes. Joy was in such a state that she thought then they were leaving her, never to return. Joy looked back partially to the life she had left, before her illness came upon her. Her resentment, at being in an institution was paramount and more to the point, all the friends she had made, previously, had now deserted her. The shame and guilt Joy felt was constant. It was like going through shock, as if all life had now ended, and only left standing was a shell of a human being.

It came to mind, many years later, that Joy had this illness for quite some time, and the abuse of drugs and alcohol that Joy turned to, was to escape the torment of mental anguish. The moods of despair and the opposite, with life being excitable. Many would say that is just a part of growing up, but to Joy those concerns of drug abuse, did eventually put her in hospital.

I don't know who I am. Am I crazy? Joy said to the nurse. The nurse didn't say anything, he just wrote down the notes that were needed for admission.

In the hospital, there were facilities to play games and listen to music. Joy was often seen just sitting and staring into space. Her family, her siblings would visit her, and all Joy could do was cry. It even came to the point whereupon the social worker said to Joy's family that they should not visit. Of course Joy's family refused. They wanted to see their girl; Joy didn't realise then that her mental condition was disturbing and upsetting for her family too. They felt like their hands were tied, and there was nothing they could do.

Joy rang every night from the red phone in the day room. Ringing her mother asking and pleading to pick her up and take her home. Valerie could only say no and that Joy needed to be where she was for the moment.

Joy had different kinds of treatment. The Electric Convulsive Therapy didn't work and neither were the tablets. Joy didn't eat and after being in the hospital for six months, they hospital staff asked if Joy could be taken home; there was no more that they could do. Joy's mother was pleased to a point, because if the hospital couldn't help, she was certainly going to try to do all that she could.

Joy came back to her childhood home. Joy slept most of the time, day and night. Her anxiety, panic attacks were so uncomfortable that her fear would make her angry and her abuse, verbally, towards her parents made her feel so guilty and ashamed. Joy's parents understood to an extent. Joy's failure to understand the world in which she lived. Joy felt it was all her fault. She perpetually apologised for everything she said or did; but being ashamed with the stigma, was hurting Joy more, keeping her feeling and blaming herself for something that wasn't her fault. Valerie tried to help Joy and Valerie was Joy's saviour. Joy's mother made sense of Joy's illness; she supported her daughter to the extent that when all was hopeless and everything seemed overwhelming, both Valerie and Joy went to a church service. The church and the people attending the church became Joy's saviours. Joy was helped by the people that believed in Christ. It gave Joy hope and the understanding that Christ did indeed suffer and he did know the suffering and condition that Joy was in. It was said by her favour friend, that when we look at a tapestry the other way, we see pieces of threads all mixed up, but on the other side is a beautiful picture.

Joy's friend Gaynor believed that life was like that, a picture that was immeasurably wonderful, but at times hard and sad. Joy knew what hardship was, as her mental condition proved. Her chance to be given hope and a belief to be loved and be given friendship that was constant, made Joy's life so much better.

Twenty years later, Joy is in hospital, her condition has changed over the years. There have been times when she has been very ill with depression, manic and had psychotic episodes. The times in hospital have proved worthwhile as she did eventually get better with the help and understanding specialists. Joy has not accepted that she has an illness. It has taken the better part of her life to do it, accept the problem for what it is. She has no shame now, about talking of her illness and she now views the public and her family as understanding. Many very frightening, but the good that comes from people helping people has made the illness a tragic event, but also and enlightening one.

After seven years or so, from first being diagnosed with Bipolar, Joy found herself addicted to sleeping tablets. She eventually couldn't go to sleep and no matter what tablet she took, she couldn't sleep; it was then that she stopped taking her medication; and for eighteen nights Joy did not sleep. It was only a matter of time before she became floridly psychotic and very, very manic.

On one night Joy hallucinated that her brother was talking to her from above her wardrobe. He said come to my place, I will help you. Joy then walked from the home, without shoes on and went at least fifteen kilometres to her brother's home. During the walk she thought a star in the sky was directing her. Joy called on taxi's, which took her a bit further, but she jumped out before paying. She even entered a coffee house and sat down and talked to the patrons.

Joy eventually reached her brother's house. Her brother Roger rang her parents and joy was taken to the public psychiatric hospital. The hospitalisation was difficult, to say the least. Hoy felt overwhelming happiness when they gave her something to go to sleep. It was only a short hospitalisation, whereupon Joy received treatment and could go home.

Mental illness as a general term, covers a wide range of disorders. To understand what illness is can be very complex and even to accept the association between the symptoms and the name given to the disorder is difficult too. To make sense of your thoughts in your mind, to realise what is real or not real; to be in terror with disturbed thoughts and images. It is no wonder that the general public don't understand, or find it hard to. But medication is given and the 'mental condition' is treatable and therefore it is a legitimate illness. It was said to Joy that her disorder 'Bipolar' was like diabetes, there was no cure for it, but it could be managed. This really does not bring solace to the person at the time going through anxiety and distress, but it does give hope that the crushing trauma of depression or mania can be treated, given time.

When the title tells of the 'wisdom one learns' it is understandable that compassion and facing the facts, are predominantly part of the chain of events, like a jigsaw, putting pieces together that makes for learning and understanding ourselves.

Joy did not really believe she had a problem. It was too hard to accept that she was not like everyone else. This type of resentment made the illness worse in her mind; thinking others couldn't understand or accept her. Of course if she couldn't accept herself as she was, how or why could anyone else understand or accept her either? The reality was that denying her illness, she also became paranoid of the mental health system. Joy wanted to be independent, she didn't want to be labelled; she didn't want to be stigmatised. Joy never even considered that people did understand what she was going through.

The black hole of depression comes and goes. 'The getting of wisdom' is the truth one learns about oneself. Joy ultimately learned in the process of having an illness, that indeed she was special and worthwhile. It did take years for Joy to become confident in herself, to emerge from the black hole into a light, which was more profoundly different and brighter. To be able to learn and to have an interest in helping others are the concerns that Joy discovered. There was a reason for her illness; only that she could be at peace with herself and with others and to learn that above all, history's questions and life's meanings, that love for one another was the key to the doorway to heaven.

Life continued for Joy, the challenges and difficulties, the success and failures in life kept Joy perpetually in motion, some would say that having a thought or psychological disorder would be the most cruellest and difficult of all known illnesses. What most people take for granted, Joy had to fight for, meaning and understanding the complexities of depression and manic episodes left Joy confused, irrational and very, very frightened. There was a time, when Joy was well, developing a stronger personality and the consideration of accepting herself, meant also that she could laugh at herself.

Joy loved to laugh, and she found friends in hospital that laughed with her. ‘Laughter is the best medicine’ and humour helped the constant bombardment of lethargy and despair. ‘There was always hope….never lose sight of this’. Joy tried to keep that thought, but how can one se the ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ when in a condition of depression, you could only see blackness.

On day Joy met a man, and she discovered that her emotions were not as dead as she first thought. The idea of her life, a relationship with another person, made the world brighter. Joy had problems with her self-esteem and the relationship, the consideration and admiration of another person towards herself; made Joy very happy. She felt wanted, and for the first time life had another meaning.

The reckless behaviour of Joy and her ‘new’ man was not observed at first. The alcohol and the drinking for hours on end seemed to be a natural occurrence. It was fun at first for Joy and it also helped her discover that life was indeed good. The alcohol masked ‘the mental state’. Joy was freed from torment, she didn’t; have to work hard at making life understandable and peaceful. The drink made everything magical. That was the beginning of the downward spiral, the wonderment of having a ‘real’ relationship and the future seeming so joyful, Joy thought of getting a house, making a home. What she had always wanted, what she had always dreamt of.

The alcohol was a drug, it made a rosy picture of life, when pain and torment were so to speak ‘drowned’; life became easy and when life was hard, the alcohol soothed the pain. Joy and her new ‘friend’ drank from first thing in the morning until late at night. Joy never considered the dangers involved in becoming addicted, or that her psychiatric medication would make her body sick.

The relationship started to decline. The verbal abuse, the fighting, was now a common element in their shared life together. Joy was in a world of drug abuse, aggression, recklessness and arguments with verbal abuse being a common thread. There was a world that once looked bright and happy; Joy tried to everything to keep that world together. The relationship, the struggle for Joy, to eliminate the pain. The years of being ill, the grief, the sadness, were things that Joy wanted so much to let go of. The destruction of her soul and body with the continued drinking, the mania that had now become everyday life. The credit card was the meaning behind Joy’s life now. She could spend thousands and not have the clarity of mind to realise the increasing debt. At this time the life that joy tried to live, was a hallucination or desire for things better. She so wanted the world to be a wonderful place for her.

To all who knew Joy and her close family, saw the slow destruction and deterioration of her mind. It seemed that there was nothing they could do. They could only wait until she came to her senses or be hospitalised, given medication that could help.

The relationship eventually ended, the fairy tale for Joy had turned into a horror story of epic proportions, and her addiction for drugs had now left their scares. Joy wanted so much, the fairy tale that was imaginary, to keep on going. To destroy the pain that the relationship had created, to ignore the torment of desolation and destruction. The mania of self-delusion.

As the tragic circumstances kept going, so did the confusion and excessive outbursts continue. Eventually though, like a river drying up in the summer sun without rain, so did the relationship end. Joy was left disturbed by the continual changes of mood, the perplexity of Bipolar. Her reactions and behaviour that seemed rational to her then, now in hindsight, a few years later were a mass of misunderstandings and a struggle for sanity.

Life came back to Joy, a life that was not complete in a happy sense, but she recognised that the illness was treatable; her sense of wanting happiness in a relationship was and is a common and not unusual request. Her accepting the lose wires of her mind during the period of the relationship, was a truth that set her free. No longer drinking, no longer drunk, no longer always abusing drugs, Joy continued to struggle life’s pathways. The learning was difficult; the failure of a fairy tale and the recognition of reality doomed from the start.

We never stop learning and Joy wanted desperately to get off the roundabout; but there are other roundabouts and there are other roads, doorways to see and enter. Joy felt then that her life was to all purposes a failure. She even felt that not only her life was worthless, that her life had made others’ lives hard, to say the least.

Today Joy sits with her mother at the kitchen table. Joy is trying to forgive herself, and the ideology of blame was an issue she found difficult. In the end, was there anyone to blame? Joy had left home as a late teenager, destroying herself with drink and drugs. She came back to her childhood home, very sick, very fragile, very sad and very mixed up. Her mother and father welcomed her with open arms. If Joy was to say now that her life was doomed from the start or that her life’s mission was absurd, she would really wonder if it was true. The past did have its reasons and life was a combination of circumstances and Joy’s personal issues, her personality. The medical condition, caused by what; who really knows?

Life had a blessing and that blessing for Joy was the compassion she found in a world of hate, greed and the fighting for power. Joy’s mother looked across at Joy and Joy’s mother said…..’I love you very much Joy and I am so proud of your courage’. Joy felt tears on her face and the tears were a release to begin a new journey, to start on a new path. ‘The getting of wisdom’ had occurred.

Julie D's Story
Post Traumatic Growth

I'm now a forty-something Mother, Partner, Counsellor, Community Services Worker, Volunteer, Family Member, Friend and Life Explorer.

Mine has been an interesting and intense kind of life that has smoothed out to a cruisier ride lately (thank goodness), largely due to all the hard work I've done and how I've learned to handle life.
From a mental health perspective I started out shy which developed after an incident of child sexual abuse at the age of 9, into social anxiety disorder, very low self-esteem, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, although only self-diagnosed as counselling/therapy wasn't the accessible or accepted avenue back in the 1970'/80's especially in my family.

My family believed back then that if things weren't talked about, then they might go away and not cause problems. Which left me feeling confused and emotionally abandoned and with no idea how to handle what was going on in my psyche. But perhaps the upside of not being given a diagnosis, is that I wasn't medically labelled, and 'judged' accordingly, so these 'labels' didn't stick, but were states that I passed through.

However the night the abuse happened, I was able to tell my mother, who believed me and we no longer visited the family member who perpetrated it. This, I believe, was paramount in minimising more possible psychological damage, as firstly, I was able to hold onto my truth (so many victims are not believed or even blamed which can lead to them questioning their truth, and can also lead to problems in personality development and sense of self/worth); and secondly I was not exposed to further sexual abuse (so my psyche didn't have to develop any more coping mechanisms like 'splitting' or 'dissociating', etc.)

But that one incident was still hugely impactful and left me disempowered, distrustful, disconnected, ashamed, alienated, suffering triggers, nightmares and daily intrusive memories, and charged with a range of intense unprocessed untamed feelings, that later developed into depression and suicidality.

I'm sure teachers at primary school took pity on me and stopped asking me to talk in front of the class - with my beetroot-red face, watery eyes and mind going blank. I found it hard to keep eye contact with people (which is something I still have to work on) and talk even in small social groups and certainly not to boys. I often hung around with my younger sister and her friends at school, finding it hard to fit in with my peers. I heard at university you had to present talks and so resolved that I wouldn't be going there. Back then I would have called it 'painfully shy'; the new terminology is 'social anxiety'. I particularly found primary school peer connections difficult and felt disconnected from everyone else.

So I struggled in silence with my array of intense emotional states, feeling different, often shamed, desperate and sometimes suicidal. As a teen I started to come out of my shell with some good friendships forming but still battled silent demons. I had a few incidences of bullying in high school from other girls and was quite scared of the boys. I scraped away at my wrists with a pocket knife and tried to smother myself at night but wasn't gutsy enough to go through with a more serious suicide attempt. I prayed for death instead. I had outbursts of emotion at 'triggers' which left my parents dumbfounded and with no idea how to help me. I was just considered 'over-sensitive', which was belittling, frustrating and in no way helped me process the mess that was going on inside.

At 15 I met my future husband, with whom I shared my pain and for the first time felt heard. I was needing a saviour and although our path was rocky, he held me and I grieved. Having very low self-esteem I had previously experienced problematic dealings with the opposite sex. At 20 I was married. In hindsight, with a different background perhaps I would not have made this choice of life partner - we had different values and he had anger management issues which became abusive over the years.

At 25 after giving birth I developed what could have been called post-natal depression (also not diagnosed), which was probably more to do with my unchecked abuse issues and deteriorating marriage. Soon after, I reached out for professional help for the first time by calling Lifeline. However I received no joy from the coutured response which seemed scripted and impersonal and devoid of any hope for the retribution I was seeking over the abuse, since it had 'happened so long ago'. I struggled on into the next year in depression until Christmas time (which was a particularly difficult time of year due to family get-togethers and consequent exposure to my perpetrator). While driving home from work one day, with a tear-stained face I had the strong urge to just smash into a tree and end it all.

My young child was a good reason to choose another option. Instead I drove to my local GP and asked for a referral to a psychiatrist. My doctor was used to seeing me for regular conjunctivitis and throat infections, and enquired as to the nature and source of my depression. Upon hearing I was still upset over the abuse that had occurred so long ago, she off-handedly (and ignorantly) dismissed my pain and suffering by stating that Christmas was 'a time for forgiving'. I had tried for many years to forgive and forget but to no avail. The doctor obviously had no understanding of the deep impact of abuse and her approach I found most frustrating and unhelpful (and affected the trust and relationship I had with her after that). I pressed for the referral and started treatment.

A side comment about the persistent conjunctivitis and throat infections - I later came across the work of Louise Hay, a metaphysical counsellor and author who cured herself from diagnosed terminal cancer. In her book 'You Can Heal Your Life' she looks at the mind-body connection - belief systems that can be at the root of physical disease. She says that 'anger and frustration at what you are looking at in life' is behind conjunctivitis. Also that the throat represents our ability to 'speak up' for ourselves and problems with the throat can mean we feel inadequate to stand up for ourselves. Sore throats mean anger and if a cold is also involved there is mental confusion too. These meanings certainly had a lot of relevance for me at that time. Later as I resolved my childhood issues, the years of conjunctivitis and throat infections ended. I never get either of these physical ailments now...

I chose a bulk billing psychiatrist so that the fee could be covered by Medicare; one because I had low income; and two because I don't think victims of child/sexual abuse should pay for their therapy. The perpetrators should, or at least the society who refuses to appropriately acknowledge and provide adequate justice (rarely charging or extracting compensation from perpetrating criminals - only 1% of paedophiles are ever convicted).

The psychiatrist offered counselling for both my husband and myself and it was a great relief to find that I wasn't the only one with problems; my husband had some issues too. It was helpful to reduce the scapegoating that can so easily happen when one person in a family system gets lumbered with the responsibility for all the problems. I was offered anti-depressants but wasn't keen on going down the medication road so the psychiatrist used hypnosis to talk through some issues, which I found helpful. However he always avoided my abuse issues. Which I'm grateful for in retrospect, as if he didn't know how to properly work with these issues I preferred him to avoid them, rather than possibly do more damage. However it would have been helpful for him to refer me to someone who did deal with trauma. After a few months I felt I had progressed as far as I could go with the psychiatrist and ended our sessions.

A year or so down the track, and I was feeling desperate again. I sought counselling through Anglicare and was blessed to find a fantastic counsellor this time who worked with both my husband and I but had experience in trauma, and perceptively asked in the first session if anything had happened when I was young. This was such a huge relief to finally be asked, to be 'seen', and for someone to be interested. I was able to unload my complex pain finally. Together we went through the process of me confronting my abuser, (by letter - which was still terrifying), and this was a major milestone in my healing journey, and in reclaiming some of my power.

After this, interestingly, my nightmares changed - instead of being chased and disempowered in my dreams, I challenged and fought back which I feel was a huge shift in my psyche. Eventually my nightmares dwindled away. I still have the occasional nightmare, with abuse themes, but usually after some kind of trigger the day before and they are not so impactful or intrusive in my life.

However, due to consequent family fallout with mixed loyalties and inability of family members to deal with these difficult issues (families so rarely get appropriate assistance at this time), this confrontation was another traumatic time in my life. My parents suddenly withdrew all support and became hostile and judgmental. I felt a stabbing betrayal, shock and loneliness. I was resentful at how they had dealt (or rather not dealt) with the abuse, and felt they had never handled the issue appropriately. Now in my hour of need, they could not even offer me a morsel of understanding which was all that I was asking of them. It took more therapy after this to work through the fractured relationships with my parents and thankfully I had the support of one sister.

Despite all this I don't regret taking this healing step of speaking out and confronting. The perpetrator was finally in some small way, held accountable for what he had done and all the pain he had caused and I had reclaimed an important part of myself and my empowerment. This helped both with my post-traumatic stress and with my social anxiety. I learned to stand up for myself, and to not always put everyone else's needs first. I learned to let go of my need to be liked and accepted by others, in favour of speaking my truth and standing in my authenticity. I learned to sit with my feelings rather than run from them. I learned that I could make it on my own. I cut the apron strings and started a new adult relationship with my family that involved honesty - honesty of words and feelings, expectations and limitations. I learned to let go of expectations of what I could never have from my family and learned about their and my own limitations. This letting go of them was excruciating, but then surprisingly relieving. The charge or sting dissolved over time.

Unfortunately my counsellor moved on to another role and despite his offer to refer me on, since I felt I needed time to regroup after all this, my sessions ended.

However all the issues were not resolved and some were still bubbling away. A major indicator of this came to my notice when I was in the city on a rainy day and felt a strong urge to bash every male in the street with my umbrella. I was feeling hateful at all the perpetrators that were getting away with their crimes of sexual abuse and domestic violence and all the other men who stood by and did nothing. So I went on another search and a few months later I found a wonderful self-help book "The Courage To Heal" - By Laura Davis & Ellen Bass, and it was a revelation to me. It was helpful to read others' similar stories of child abuse and engage in some more self-awareness and self-help processes. There was a workbook which helped me to outwardly process my feelings and beliefs. I went to libraries and second hand book shops and read all I could find on healing from child/sexual abuse. These books I found enormously helpful.

I also re-entered counselling with the Centre Against Sexual Assault. I rang them one day after feeling desperate again but the centre in my area was fully booked for a year! (They are grossly underfunded!) I told them I might be dead in a year so they referred me to a centre in another area, who were kind enough to squeeze me in although I was out of their area. There was still a 3 month wait, however in the meantime I could go along to their art and dance therapy groups for survivors of child sexual abuse. These were amazing - it was so validating to meet others with a similar experience and share and feel witnessed and be truly understood and normalised. I also found art and movement therapy helpful for self-connecting and expressing/processing the trauma. I heard about support groups and after a fruitless search I decided to start one up myself with the ongoing support of my counsellor.

A year later I found ASCA, (Adults Surviving Child Abuse - formerly Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse), and attended their support and action groups. Turning my anger into action for positive change was a good outlet. I attended their facilitator training and opened up a self-help support group which I co-facilitated for nearly a decade.

After unpacking, focussing on, acknowledging and honouring my trauma, funnily enough, I could start to let it go. It no longer was tapping at my shoulder for attention. I had more energy and brain space for the other aspects of my being and my life.

Meanwhile my working experiences helped me to address my social anxiety issues as I engaged in what was like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy addressing unhelpful thought patterns and 'exposure therapy' exposing myself to my intense anxiety states and pushing through them in order to speak in public and face my fears, with the assistance of a wonderfully supportive (but rather tough) business coach. I also achieved success at work which built my confidence and self-worth. I was encouraged to attend personal development seminars and workshops and read self-help books.

Peers in the support groups suggested different therapies I had never heard of before like reiki, shiatsu and kinesiology and these I found helpful. As abuse seems to affect people on many different levels I now believe that healing usually will need to occur at different levels too - including not only the mind and thinking, but also bodywork, emotional processing, energetic/spiritual work and sense of meaning. I attended a wonderful healing week at a place called Mayumarri (in NSW) for 'survivors', (aptly named as many who are abused unfortunately do commit suicide). This introduced me to inner child work which I found to be wonderful for resolving the inner 'hurt child' and for re-parenting after feeling emotionally abandoned by my own parents. A number of 'Insight Seminars', which are heart-based group retreats were probably the most impactful of all the therapies I'd experienced... intense cathartic programs incorporating many different modalities and philosophies, which included the cognitive, emotional and spiritual aspects. All this was tremendously helpful for my recovery.

In my thirties I sought to solidify my learning and passion in this area and completed Diplomas in Youth Work and Holistic Counselling.

After 18 years my relationship eventually ended. Single-parenting has been extremely challenging (and heartbreaking) and I believe has also affected the emotional well-being of our son (and myself). Losing the say in 50% of his parenting has affected his psychological and emotional safety and I would not agree to equal share-care arrangements if given my time over. Although we never went to court, I think the current family court system is very disempowering to mothers who have more intuition when it comes to raising their own children, and this is to the detriment of children's safety and wellbeing. The lack of a male parent model for my son in my house since our divorce has also been detrimental. He pushes boundaries and behaves far worse than when his father and I were together. Then there are the adjustment times when he comes back after being with his father and then again as he 'toughens up' before going again.

I was on my own for 5 years before finding my current partner of 6 years, who is much better suited to me and not abusive at all. Through my own healing, empowerment and self-realisation I am now making more conscious and considered decisions in my life. I have learned new ways of thinking, relating, processing and being that are working for me.

Now in my forties I believe that I have transmuted my previous mental states into a newly defined state known as Post Traumatic Growth. Reports of growth experiences from dealing with the aftermath of trauma have been found in people who have experienced bereavement, cancer, heart attacks, house fires, sexual assault, combat, and refugee experiences, etc (Tedeschi and Calhoun, in press). Such positive changes include improved relationships, new possibilities for one's life, a greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength and spiritual development (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996)

People who might meet me for the first time now, would never believe I was once shy and broken.
My journey to recovery never included medication, although I know that for many medication is very helpful as a safety net to assist through intense periods or to take the edge off so that other therapeutic interventions can be engaged more successfully. But I do not believe that medication is a standalone treatment option and I do believe it is far too frequently administered without the appropriate inclusion of other therapeutic interventions.

My sister, who now has schizophrenia has been given this 'medication-only intervention' (which has unfortunately included some stints in psychiatric hospitals) and she is worse than ever - in seven years she has gone from having friends, a job, a share-house, savings towards home ownership, dreams, and a social life, to becoming unemployable, friend-less, substance addicted (self-medicating to deal with medication side-effects), agoraphobic, unable to shop or cook for herself, almost completely dysfunctional, physically sick, penniless, suicidal and homeless. The mental health system is so underfunded that her psychiatric hospital stays are shared with males (one was found in her bed) and more recently becoming homeless she did anything she could to organise shared accommodation with other psychotic men from her ward. Her inpatient psychiatrists never got to know her well enough to truly understand where she was at, and discharged her from hospital while still psychotic. The last time she came out of hospital an ex-boyfriend took her in, who also suffers from schizophrenia.

I truly believe a more holistic approach addressing her core beliefs, emotions, physical health, values, traumas, life issues, spirituality, etc could have led to a more hopeful outcome. There is a more holistic version of psychosis that coins it as spiritual emergency. In my sister's case perhaps this is true. She went into her first psychosis completely atheist and is now extremely spiritual. It has indeed been a spiritual emergence for her. Decades ago in the U.S. there were healing houses set up for people with psychosis, assisting them through the (usually 6 week long) process and apparently these were very successful. I have heard that if a first psychosis can be managed carefully by guiding the client through it without them over-identifying with the delusions and getting lost in it, then often it doesn't develop into schizophrenia. However due to lack of funding these healing centres were closed down. Despite the current medicalised system being disastrous for many (there are high rates of suicide for schizophrenics and many on medication are marginalised in society), there is no funding for alternative options like these healing centres. I can't express enough my deep dismay over our blinkered and narrow medicalised mental health system that is not working for so many and stressful and frustrating for the professionals working within it.

I believe from my experience (and the many experiences I have been blessed to know about through years of connecting with people in support groups), that effective healing needs to incorporate a holistic model of dealing with mind/thinking; body/physical health; feelings/emotions; and spirit/beliefs. It also should address old traumas, emotional pain and physical, social, cultural and familial aspects of the person. My most helpful therapists used a range of tools and were open to complementary therapies.

It is narrow and tragic to think that one single approach will suffice... Like the medication model for schizophrenics or like the current CBT model that is the one-size-fits-all approach of the government supported mental-health-care-plan-scheme. A simple medication treatment looks only at the 'brain chemistry' and denies and ignores the thinking, emotional, physical, spiritual, social and cultural aspects of the person. A simple CBT treatment looks only at the 'wrong thinking' and denies and ignores the emotional, physical, social and spiritual aspects of the person.

For me either would have left me high and dry. I needed a variety of different therapeutic approaches and peer support.

I am eternally grateful for the myriad of therapists, practitioners, coaches, authors and peers who have assisted along my journey and I hope my story brings some insight and hope to others and some inspiration for change within our current medical practices."

Kelly Dunn's Story

Rain tinkles on the roof as I sit and smoke yet another illicit cigarette. My thoughts have great clarity at four a.m. After finding my car alight from wayward cigarette ash four days ago, you'd expect that I'd learn my lesson. But no, here I sit smoking and contemplating my navel. It's been eighteen months since my ragged induction into the Victorian mental health system and my life is still in disarray. Spells on different anti-depressant medication, sleeping tablets to get me through the night, and a newly-acquired nicotine habit.

I sit on my veranda in my grubby, terry-towelling dressing gown pondering the sad fate of my car. It was the tool for my suicide attempt and now it's bearing the brunt of my novice cigarette smoking. The back seat is burnt out, the seat belts scorched and the buckles melted blobs of plastic. The fire was over the fuel tank so I was lucky the whole car didn't go up. I'm also lucky that my sister rescued me from the same toxin-filled car last year.

Life goes on. I make the same stupid mistakes as before and throw a few new ones into the cauldron. But I'm not the only one, not by a long shot. Our society, too, keeps making gross errors of judgement. In many ways the care of the mentally ill is as barbaric as it was in the nineteenth century. Time has moved on but in many ways it's stood still. Sometimes, even with good intentions, time grinds backwards. To me my days on the psychiatric ward are like yesterday, burnt into a mind already trembling on the edge.

I'd been gassing myself for two hours by the time emergency services were alerted. My rescue necessitates the arrival of two police cars, two fire engines and an ambulance. There's nothing like a discrete suicide. They peel open my garage door, smash the driver's window and drag me out of the car by my wrists. I'm close to death. My stomach is awash with sleeping pills; my blood is charged with noxious gases.

But the physical rescue is the easy part. Afterwards I'm left to lie in a general ward for three days. The first night I try to hang myself in the bathroom with a conveniently-placed plastic chair and an electrical cord from my bed. The second night I try to suffocate myself with a large plastic bag that's in my bedside table. The nurses don't notice. They only need to check my vitals every four hours and once overnight.

Nick's parents sit with him in Emergency till the early hours. Hardworking immigrants, they are mystified by their youngest son's partying and drug-taking ways. They sacrificed their lives to give him the best of everything. They feel wounded. Confused. Worried. At 2am a nurse advises them to go home.

'Will Nick be okay? Shouldn't he be tied down?' His mother hated saying the words.

'No, no. He'll be fine. We'll take care of him. You get some sleep.'

Nick wakes some time later. He gets out of bed and wanders through the Emergency Department. He is struck by the sight of a father asleep at his son's bedside holding his son's small hand.

Nick's parents are woken at 5am by the police. Is Nick at home? No? Apparently he walked out of the busy Emergency Department without staff noticing.

Nick wades through local creeks trying to throw authorities off his scent. When he reaches Coburg, he starts handing out business cards to the local shop owners. He tries *impressing upon them the brilliance of his six-point business plan. His clothes are soiled and muddied. Police pick him up that afternoon and return him to the hospital.*

I've been waiting to see a psychiatrist for three days. I'm starting to get worried that I'm going to be discharged and left to my own desperate devices. I ask the nurses when I'll see a doctor, any doctor. They give me excuses and homespun clichés:

'You should be thankful that you're alive and healthy. There are so many people on organ waiting lists.' (I say, 'They're welcome to all of mine.')

'It's a beautiful day. God made us such a beautiful world to live in.'

'In my country everyone would be happy with what you've got.'

The psychiatrist arrives on the afternoon of the third day. After I've answered his questions, I hand him the blue plastic bag. 'Please take this with you. I tried to kill myself with it.' He sits down again and looks at me seriously.

Ross has split up with his pregnant girlfriend. He didn't see a problem with having a few quiet drinks after work each night. Now he's sleeping on a mate's couch. Then one night the police pick him up hiding in his ex's backyard. He only wanted to see her, God damn it. Did they think he was friggin' dangerous? Dumped off at the Emergency Department, Ross eventually wanders outside for a smoke. He sees the security guards eyeing him. He wants to see how far he can push them. When they lose interest, Ross walks off into the night. He's amazed how easy it is. He walks down to the local pokies and spends the last of his cash.

The sitter nurse, Glenn, has arrived to sit with me. For my own safety. Apparently the ward nurses don't have enough time to keep an eye on me. Glenn starts by checking over the room and ensuite, removing anything potentially dangerous. He knows his stuff. In no time he's whipped off the curtains, removed the plastic chair and all electrical cords.

Glenn sits by my bedside all afternoon. We sit and chat. When I go to the toilet and have a shower, I have to leave the door open. It's kinda embarrassing but I'm glad he's there.

When Glenn goes on a break, he gets one of the ward nurses to sit with me. She's not happy about it. None of the nurses seem to like Glenn encroaching on their territory and telling them what to do.

I ask Glenn what it's like in a psychiatric ward. I'm worried about what the other patients will be like. Whether I'll be safe.

He tries to reassure me. 'From what I've heard that's one of the best psychiatric wards in Melbourne. And I'll come with you in the ambulance and help you settle in.'

Then ten minutes before I'm picked up, the charge nurse comes to see Glenn. 'Your shift finishes when the patient is picked up.'

'That's not the normal procedure.' He frowns. 'I always accompany the patients to the psychiatric ward, help them settle in and then return to my car by taxi.'

She returns after checking procedures with the doctor. Apparently the hospital budget won't stretch to an extra hour's pay and a taxi ride. And their psychiatric ward is full. So I'm being shipped out.

I sit on the trolley in tears. Glenn has become my lifeline. He's being ripped off me just when I need him the most. I'm wheeled out of the ward. A horrifying introduction to a psychiatric ward awaits me.

Billie was subdued with capsicum spray after putting a knife to her own throat. Now she's lying in the Emergency Department with her arms strapped to the trolley. Her eyes sting and her skin crawls. When she complains, the nurse says, 'It's your own fault.' And leaves her there.

Later on Billie's allowed to have a shower under the unsmiling gaze of a burly security man. It's just another humiliation for Billie who's had a male to female sex change. She turns towards the security guard and says, 'Have a good look, mate.' That's as far as her bravery goes. If she makes an official complaint, the media will have a field day. She doesn't want to be a circus act.

The trolley is pushed backwards into the ambulance. I'm dragged backwards through the local suburbs in the insipid afternoon sun. Past my workplace. Past streets, houses and shops that I've seen many times before. The buildings grow out of the stale ground. Familiar yet sterile. Rank. Pointless. I put my head back and close my eyes.

The stench of urine is the first thing that strikes me in the psych ward. My nostrils flare and my stomach clenches. I can imagine the patients peeing on the walls and in dark corners of the hallway.

The ambos wheel the trolley smartly into a lounge area. I'm hit by a barrage of colour and sound and activity. Patients mill around, walking nowhere in particular with the measured tread of those with too much time on their hands. Heated discussions are taking place; others are muttering to themselves, yelling or demanding something from someone. A few people are visible passed out on the faux leather couch. Everyone, it seems, is wearing street clothes.

The trolley is lowered. My seatbelt unbuckled. I'm left standing exposed in my striped flannelette pyjamas, clutching a bunch of droopy flowers. I hear the mocking serenade of 'Bananas in Pyjamas' from amongst the group. I flush. I didn't know there was a dress code.

A nurse leads me into an adjoining bedroom. 'This is where you'll sleep,' she says. 'And this is Mary. Your roommate.' My eyes widen when I see the twin beds covered with white blankets. As I turn to face Mary, I have to stop myself flinching.

Mary's stooped shoulders are clothed in a navy-blue pinstripe suit. I'll discover later that this well-worn suit is her only outfit. Her sandals don't hide her thickened, crusty toenails which grow vertically off her toes. Mary's salt-and-pepper hair spins out from her head in a wild afro. She is dithering at her bedside, shuffling to and fro, folding and refolding the bedcovers. She lifts her hangdog eyes towards her visitors but says not a word. Her eyes are large and brown; black rings are etched in the folds of loose skin underneath.

'Here you go,' the nurse says to me. 'Pop your bag in here.' She holds the cupboard door open invitingly. 'And I'll take care of your flowers while you go talk to Doctor Singh.'

I walk closely behind the slightly-built doctor through the lounge area. I try to shrink my frame down, using the doctor as a human shield. My eyes slide over the patients in the lounge chairs. A young man is asleep with his hand down the front of his pants. He has a large wet stain on his T-shirt, like a baby who hasn't worn his bib.

The seats in the interview room are all stained with unknown substances. I find the least offensive-looking stain to sit upon. The doctor looks at me. 'So. Tell me how you came to be admitted to hospital.' She has a facial tic. Her face keeps going into spasm; her eyes close tightly and her nose twitches. I wonder if insanity rubs off.

She insists upon hearing the whole spiel: the day with no hope, the vial of sleeping tablets, my car, the hose, the locked garage and the car radio playing sweetly. My voice is a monotone. It's something that happened to someone else. Fantastic. Unreal.

I ask the doctor for some water. My mouth's so dry that my lips are sticking to my teeth. She returns with a white plastic cup, stale tap water only covering half the ridges on the side.

She asks about my childhood. My parents. My siblings. Any relevant family history. And she asks if I still feel like harming myself. And how do I feel today. These will become catchphrases.

I'm delivered back to the lounge area. The smell of old piss is suffocating. I notice that the staff are kept safe behind lock and key. Their staff station is protected with double-glazing and card access.

A nurse emerges from the inner sanctum. 'Let's take you on a tour of the ward.' She points out the features like we're at a three-star motel. 'This is the TV room.' 'And here's the craft room.' 'The courtyard.'

Panic bubbles up through my chest. I ruin the mood by gabbling, 'I can't stay here!' I try appealing to her better side. Try creating a closeness that doesn't exist. She ignores me.

The nurse is finding it hard to keep up the banter. A patient keeps interrupting, asking insistently for clean pyjama pants. 'Not now, Renata! I'll be with you in a minute.' The nurse is getting irritated. Renata stands close by, wearing green hospital-issue pyjamas covered by a leopard-print dressing gown. She plucks at her bottom anxiously. She hovers around us, trying her luck every few minutes, revealing a mouthful of missing and rotten teeth.

The nurse capitulates. I'm left sitting outside the staff station. I sit as non-offensively as possible, staring straight ahead.

An old man with flowing white hair staggers past. He's topped his green pyjama pants with boardshorts. He raps on the glass. The staff ignore him. He shuffles side to side. They don't pause in their conversations. Some keep their heads firmly down, apparently absorbed in their paperwork.

The man raps louder. Two staff members amble away into a back office. The man starts yelling, his words incomprehensible. A burly nurse raises his head and gives the patient a measured look. The nurse slowly stands up and walks to the door.

'Yes, Sid.' Making him leave his chair is clearly an insult.

'I wanna smoke.' The door clips shut in Sid's face. The nurse saunters over to a filing cabinet. He eventually returns with a single cigarette. Sid snatches it and breaks into a half-run heading towards the courtyard, clutching the string of his pyjama pants to stop them falling.

The nurse who took me on the aborted tour returns. I plead with her, explaining that I can’t possibly stay. Sweat trickles down my back. There are rings of wet flannelette under my arms.

The burly nurse leaves the fishbowl. He comes over. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘Please! I can’t stay here! I don’t feel safe.’

He crosses his arms. ‘Yes, yes, I can see that.’ He sounds sympathetic. I dart behind his massive frame, using him as protection from the great unknown. ‘You’ve made it perfectly clear. No one could miss it.’ I realise too late that he’s mocking me. He doesn’t care either.

I hound the female nurse. She agrees to talk to the nurse manager. I follow her and stand hunched and distressed against the glass door, trying to make myself as small and innocuous as possible. Staff walk in and out, swiping their identity cards and letting the door click shut in my face.

When the nurse manager opens the door, I push my way into the office. She struggles against me. ‘You’re not allowed in here!’

I stand my ground. ‘How come you get to lock yourself away where it’s safe and I have to stay out here?’

‘The door’s locked because we have medication and confidential documents in here. It’s got nothing to do with safety.’ She pushes me back out the door.

‘Please! I can’t stay here!’ My eyes beseech her. ‘This is my worst nightmare.’

‘This is where your doctor has sent you for treatment.’ Her tone is matter of fact.

‘I can’t stay here! It’s a freak show!’ In my desperation I’ve become reckless. I hear angry mutterings from the patients behind me. ‘Please! Send me back to the other hospital.’

She shakes her head. ‘I can’t do that. It’s not up to me to decide.’

I keep talking, clutching at straws. ‘I can’t sleep in there.’ I cast a thumb towards my twin share accommodation. ‘I can’t share a room. How can I possibly sleep in an unlocked room? With a complete stranger?’

She looks unconcerned. ‘There are no other rooms available.’

I try using logic as a weapon. ‘How’s this supposed to make me better? I’m so scared. So stressed. How can I get better feeling like this?’

She remains unmoved. ‘Look. You’ll just have to make the best of it tonight. You might be able to get a single room tomorrow. If someone’s discharged.’

‘I want to talk to the doctor.’

Dr Singh looks up from her notes. She listens to the nurse while looking at me. She makes me wait a few minutes before she comes out.

‘You have to stay here tonight. I’ll see if I can sort it out in the morning.’

‘Aren’t I a voluntary patient? ‘I’m pulling out the big guns in desperation.

‘Yes.’ Twitch.

‘Well, no one asked me if I wanted to come here. And I don’t give my permission. You can’t keep me here against my will.’

She doesn’t baulk although her eyelid tics. ‘If you don’t agree to stay then I’ll have to certify you. Make you an involuntary patient.’

My world falls away. I remember all the old movies about being locked away in mental institutions. Surely that doesn’t happen in this day and age? I stay flattened against the door for minute after minute. Staff walk past like I’m invisible. Click, click, click. The door keeps shutting in my face.

I can see someone out of the corner of my eye. It’s Renata. She appears fascinated by me. She moves side to side trying to get a look at my face. She has an intent look in her eye. I shrink further into the door. Soon the door and I will become one.

A young man wanders over. He’s doing the sleep shuffle, his arms swinging loosely at his sides, his eyelids nearly completely closed. He knocks on the glass for attention.

‘Yes, James.’ It’s the male nurse.

‘Is Mark working tonight?’ His words are slurred.

‘No, he’s not.’

‘He’s a criminal.’

The nurse pretends to take offence. ‘We don’t talk about each other like that, James!’ he bellows. ‘Mark isn’t a criminal. So don’t even bother saying it.’

James wanders off. ‘What’s your name? I’m James.’ It’s a mantra he repeats to anyone who’ll listen.

I notice a woman in a sloppy tracksuit sitting at the top of the lounge. Her toothless mouth and loose lips belie her girlish pigtails. She’s positioned herself strategically at the crossroads of three main thoroughfares, ready to abuse anyone who goes past.

‘Look at that b*tch.’ The taunts are directed towards a nurse passing up the corridor. ‘She’s a lazy b*tch. Look how fat her arse is.’ She raises her voice as the nurse moves further away. ‘Up your arse!’

‘What are you looking at, Princess?’ She’s noticed me. ‘Too good for the rest of us? Think you’re something special, do ya?’

I sidestep around the staff station, edging closer to the doctor sitting at the desk filling in the forms to have me certified. Only glass separates us. I sink down onto the floor, my back against the wall, and my knees against my chest. I feel safer with my back covered. I think I could possibly manage to sleep like this.

Renata is still staking me out. I turn my head sideways, letting my hair fall lankly over my face, staring blindly. Her leopard-print gown and pink thongs pass in and out my line of vision. When she walks, her right thong slaps against her foot but her left is silent. Step, slap, step, slap, step, slap. The sound chafes against my nerves.

The glut of patients seems to be clearing. I make the mistake of looking up and catching Renata's eye. She bears down upon me with an outstretched hand. 'Hello, I'm Renata Cerbasi.'

My head snaps towards her. 'Can you leave me alone, please?'

Hostility seems to do the trick. 'I'm sorry.' She backs away. 'I'm sorry.' She walks away down the corridor.

A foreign-looking man in sandals and shorts wanders past. His eyes look at me piercingly, like I'm a desirable woman instead of a sweaty, dishevelled character crouched on the floor. I hug my arms tighter around my knees and look away.

Someone's slept through dinner. He knocks on the glass and asks for sandwiches. 'Are you all right, love?' he asks as he walks back empty-handed. I hang my head further to the side, greasy hair covering everything but the tip of my nose. As soon as he's gone I feel like calling him back. The way he called me 'love' reminds me of another world.

I can hear him talking to someone out of sight. 'Yeah, she'll be right. I was like that when I first come in. I was freakin' out, mate.'

It finally dawns on me. The doctors and nurses see me as just another psychiatric patient who has freaked out on arrival in the ward. Everything I've said and done is seen through the perspective of me being mentally ill. As a human being I am less. They don't see me: the university graduate, the mother, the professional worker. My heartfelt pleas are old hat. My terror is routine.

I've been difficult. I haven't gone along with their rules. And if I don't play right, then they will strip me of all my rights. I'll lose my freedom indefinitely. I'll be locked up at their discretion.

I have to play or pay.

Like an old woman, I rise to my feet and hobble over to the engine room.

Dr Singh opens the door a crack. 'Yes?'

'Dr Singh- I'll stay tonight. But can I please have my own room?' I can't let go of my fears. Getting knifed in my sleep being one of them.

She looks over her shoulder. 'Oscar. Did you move Mary to another room?'

'Yeah.' Oscar looks at me unsmilingly. 'I moved her ages ago.'

The bowl is full of yellow piss. A puddle spreads across the engrained floor tiles. I've found the source of the smell. It reminds me of the toilets that used to hide under the busy city streets, and my mother leading me down past the ornate railings into the depths of the city.

I straddle the seat with my thighs spread. My toes claw the tiles to keep clear of the mess. One hand clutches my pyjama pants, trying to prevent them dipping in the piss; the other arm is outstretched, ready to slam the door shut. Its lock spins uselessly upon itself.

I manage to perform eventually. Then I wash my hands with relief. It feels like a major achievement. I scuttle back to my room. Its door is heavy, and the air-conditioning sucks back against me. I lean my shoulder into it.

I sit on the bed looking out the thin venetians. They are entombed in a glass case, living their life in a vacuum, neither in this world nor that. Clearly venetian cords are dangerous and must live in isolation. Set at half-mast, the blinds let in languid, yellow street lighting. A dark bush obscures my view and throws leaf shadows on my white hospital blanket.

I think of my kids, my little house, my garden. They seem so good now. This sh*t-hole makes me want to get better. Perhaps they deliberately designed it that way. They've convinced me. My face stings from the smack back to reality. I want my kids. I want my life. I want to spend my whole weekend gardening alone. I'm so sorry.

'God, give it back and I'll be happy with it.'

I hide myself in bed, tucking the blankets in close around my neck and back. I face the door. It's hard to relax and maintain a vigil at the same time.

I wake early, still in the sentry position. My sleep was torn by the clanging of doors on the three-hourly rounds. Click. Clang! Click. Clang! Coming down the hallway. Then my turn to be in the spotlight.

I venture out. Strain back against the suction of the door. Only one body is visible on the couch, wrapped in white and sleeping. I turn left and find a toilet with a working lock. Another victory. I sit and will my body to function. Do it now before the others awake.

I've been reduced to my sum elements. Waste products. So have all the other patients in here. We are all piss, sh*t, sweat and tears.

Then I notice it - like a confirmation. A face-washer is balled up on the hand basin. It's covered in sh*t. I stand and flush. I can barely look at it but can't leave it there to goad me another time. I haul out handfuls of paper towel and toss it into the bin. I look at the taps. The germs are almost visible crawling across their steely surface. And so begins the ritual.

I haul out handfuls of protective paper towel. Tap on. Throw paper in bin. Pump soap. Wash. More fistfuls of paper. Tap off. Bin them. I dry my hands on more. Open the door with them. Block the door with my foot and lob the rubbish in the bin.

It will be like this for all of my stay. The paranoia. The obsessive-compulsive disorder that I never knew I had.

I return to my room and firmly shut the door. I sit on my bed with my back to the ward. I unpack my bag to find what's left of myself. Two pairs of pyjamas. A pair of big undies that should've been thrown out. A comb. Toothbrush and toothpaste. Two bananas. A packet of salt and vinegar chips. A bottle of lemonade. A book from my sister. But there are no socks or shoes of any kind. My feet are hanging in mid-air, creeping with bacteria. I know that I have to abandon them. I have to leave them to their fate.

I slowly refold my clothes. I hide my bag under the free edge of the blanket. I hope it isn't visible from the door. It's all that I have of my life. I crawl under the covers, cold and weary. The ceiling has been repainted but only halfway across. Beige over off-white. Rough roller marks. There are two single beds and two white cupboards. No hanging points anywhere. No mirrors. No sharp corners. Entombed venetians. It makes me feel secure. Maybe they care.

My lips are sticking to my teeth. My throat is hot and dry. I reach for the last of the lemonade. I could reuse it as a water bottle. I keep it. I eat one banana but save the chips. My mouth is still mucky.

I venture out. There are too many people in the common room now. I refill my lemonade bottle with dank tap water and retreat. I've been reduced to my base urges: thirst, hunger and fear.

I lie still. Try to warm myself. Keep my back to the door, blocking them out.

'Morning! Breakfast's ready!' I don't respond. 'You coming for breakfast?' I shake my head. 'A cup of tea?' I shake again. She doesn't understand that I can't go near those people, those loonies. 'Okay then.' The door sucks closed.

I lie still. Thoughts crawl through my mind. I lie looking numbly at the bush, the venetians, the ceiling. I spy my flowers sitting in a plastic jug high on the cupboard. They hold the only colour in the room.

She comes back again. 'How about a nice, warm shower?' It's tempting. Without powder and deodorant I've discovered smells that I never knew my body made.

She escorts me to a bathroom that only the women use. Supposedly it's cleaner than those I've encountered so far. After she leaves I see that someone has shat all over the toilet seat. I can't ignore it when it's right next to the shower.

I slink back to the bathroom of the sh*tty washer fame. I wash with a matchbox-sized piece of soap. The soap also improvises as hair shampoo. A sample bottle of hand lotion doubles as deodorant. I tuck both away in my bag. Everything is valuable, nothing wasted.

It's amazing how long you can lie doing nothing. Time ticks over. Eventually I sit up and re-examine the contents of my bag. Stroke my pyjamas. I can hear someone yelling in the lounge. 'Aaaargh! Aaargh!' And murmurs of conversation. Doors clang. I pull the book out of my bag.

Anne of Green Gables seems like an old friend. I run my fingers over the hard cover and open the book reverently. My sister must've bought it second-hand. The pages are yellow. Someone's written her name in old cursive script on the first page. I read through the publication details like they might be able to tell me something. I need something to go on. I raise the book and smell another world. Eighty years of living. Children growing. Youthful hopes and dreams. Pleasure. Pain. Life. Death. It's a pattern, a connection. I cling to it with both hands. Others have come before me. They, too, have been in places like this. They have felt the same despair. They are here for me. I'm not alone.

I open to the first chapter. The life of an orphan girl has never felt so real. I feel her loneliness. I suffer her suffering. I grab at her courage. And I submerge myself into her world.

'Lunchtime!' Little Miss Sunshine pokes her head in the door.

'Okay.'

The door clicks shut. I inhale the pages again. I'm no longer waste products. I'm no longer base urges. There are words, and while there are words there is company, there is history, there is comfort and there is hope.

I hide the book under my pillow and head out for lunch.

You're discharged from the psych ward after five days of wandering the corridors. Despite the group classes listed on the notice board, you've only scored two art classes run by a volunteer. Occasionally your assigned nurse comes to have a chat with you. Other days you don't even get to meet her. The doctors take three days to start you on anti-depressants. You leave with enough tablets for five days, instructions to visit your local doctor for a script, and a list of internet sites so you can find yourself a support group.

Dom had a great future ahead of him. He breezed through uni and snagged a great job at a top firm. But then he'd become obsessed about an ex-girlfriend. She was all he could think about. It's been three years since they split up but he can't get her off his mind. Even the letters in her name gave him secret messages. He's been in the psych ward for months, his brilliant career down the gurgler. He spends his days playing his guitar, kicking around a soccer ball and doing tai chi.

Dom's aggravated because he wants to go home. Some days he takes his frustration out on his fellow patients verbally. Another day a tree in the courtyard takes the brunt of his anger. Luckily Dom's hand isn't broken. Another night he makes a break for freedom after his family leaves for home. He charges the locked doors of the psych ward and forces his way through. His parents and an elderly aunt turn and bar his way, their arms outstretched like an Elderly Citizens soccer team. Then the psych nurses jump Dom from behind. They don't take him gently. He's lead away for a booster dose of tranquilisers and another night wandering the corridors.

You didn't know that life could get any worse but it has. Your teenage daughter is furious about your suicide attempt. She goes to live with your mother. Suddenly you find yourself ditched by your family. You're not invited to family get-togethers. You're not allowed inside your mother's house. Your brother doesn't invite you to his wedding. As if life wasn't hard enough as a single mother, now you're a single mother with no family. You overdose a second time.

When you wake with heart palpitations, you call triple zero. Suddenly you're scared of dying. When the ambulance officers arrive, they seem to find your overdose unimpressive. They treat you with disdain, making jokes at your expense. They think you're putting on an act. You hear the ambos passing on their opinion of you to the Emergency doctor as you lie in a stupor on a trolley.

The next morning the Emergency nurses leave you to your own devices. You don't have any pressing medical needs that they can measure, monitor and record on charts. They have real patients to attend to.

Billie's been in the psychiatric ward for two weeks. She goes out with the social worker to look at share accommodation. The house is squalid. As they sit in the car outside, Billie sees a drug deal in action. But the social worker has no other options. Due to the housing shortage, local caravan parks are full, and rental properties are as rare as hen's teeth.

Billie decides to go back home. She's happy to see her housemate Susie again but is wary of Susie's abusive, violent boyfriend. Karl has been staying over so often, he's virtually taken up residence. And he's got the spare room set up growing a crop. He's got an unpredictable temper and sometimes knocks Billie and Susie around. The tension and stress totally mess with Billie's mind but what else can she do? Live on the streets?

You've been lying alone for several hours. The nurses' station is right outside your cubicle and you can see the staff bustling around. Finally a nurse comes in. She flips through your hospital file and reads about your recent overdose. 'What's a Dry Strongbow?' she asks the others. They all laugh. You feel your insides shrivel. No one bothers to read about your first admission to the hospital three months previously.

You notice that your pillow is covered with a plastic cover. You get out of bed and swish your curtain shut. You place the plastic bag over your head, bunch it around your neck and cover yourself with the blanket. You lie there for twenty minutes. Reflex guttural noises from your throat finally alert a nurse. She rips the bag off your head. Your head falls out, sweaty and semi-conscious.

'What are you doing?' she yells. She sounds like she's talking to a naughty child.

Nick is one of the lucky ones; he's got loving parents to go home to. He tries to go straight for a while. Finding a job. Going to bed when his parents tell him. And taking his tablets like a good boy. But he doesn't like the side effects from his medication. No twenty-four year old man wants to be turned into Mister Floppy. Soon he starts flushing his tablets down the toilet. Then he begins dabbling in recreational drugs again. Before he knows it, his hobby lands him right back in the psychiatric ward.

When you come to, you're surprised to find that you're alone. Your curtain's open and the staff outside are talking as if nothing's happened. Did you imagine suffocating yourself? Then you see the plastic bag. It's just been thrown on the chair in your cubicle.

You retrieve it and bag yourself up again. The nurse returns after five minutes. She's getting really annoyed with you now. She puts up the side on your bed. 'That'll stop you,' she says. Then she leaves, taking the bag with her.
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You notice that there are two bins in your cubicle. You let down the side on your bed. You tip the rubbish onto the floor and bag yourself up with a bright yellow Hazardous Waste bag. A different nurse finds you. She puts an oxygen mask and a heart monitor on you. When you keep removing them, she leaves in disgust. It's the end of her shift. You watch her depart with her handbag.

David's used up his father's good will; he's not welcome at the family home anymore. At the age of forty-three David has to finally fend for himself. The problem is, David can't afford share accommodation. Not when all his money goes on the love of his life, marijuana. So as soon as he's released from hospital, David loads up his car and takes off for Nimbin. He reckons he'll be happy there. And crossing the state border means he can't be rounded up by the CAT team and returned to hospital. It's a win-win situation.

You notice a young nurse watching you from across the ward. Your heart lights up. She comes over to you. 'I'm just going to borrow this,' she says, and wheels away your monitor stand. She takes it back to her own patient. She doesn't seem to notice your IV line and needle hanging off the machine. You pulled those out earlier.

You lie flat, becoming one with the mattress. You count for nothing.

Your nurse replaces your bin liner while talking to staff at the nurses' station. She places the bin back in your cubicle, laughs and then places it just outside. They treat you like you're a joke.

A psychiatric nurse comes to visit you in the afternoon. Her friendliness is a shock. You open up to her and tell her what's been happening at home. She knows the right things to say; she reassures you and soothes your anxieties. You tell her how your cubicle wasn't safety checked and how the nurses have been treating you.

She smiles grimly. 'The nurses have labelled you an attention seeker.'

You wonder what that means.

Marco was lucky enough to snare some share accommodation after his discharge from hospital. But now he's returned to his old stomping ground: the psychiatric ward. The local police gave him a no-frills economy ride back in the divvy van.
Marco reckons that one of his housemates was pinching stuff from his room. When he got jack of it, Marco started a fire in the culprit's room using a cigarette lighter. He wasn't planning on burning the whole house down like the police suggested. It was just one of those mistakes.

You've finally made it to the psychiatric ward. You never thought you'd say it but 'Thank God!' You settle in quickly to your share room. It's reasonably clean, and your roommate looks human. There's even an ensuite. You feel safe.

Your mother visits that evening with a supply of desperately needed toiletries and clean clothes. She walks into your room and hugs you. It's so good to see her, you have trouble letting go. She sits on the edge of your bed. 'I had to wait ten minutes while the nurse checked what was in the bag I brought you,' your Mum says. 'But I don't think she took anything out.'

Your Mum picks up the bag from the floor, and places it on your bed.

It's a plastic bag.

Jane Doe meets Joe Blow

You venture into the television room for the first time. A man comes in sporting a small red goatee and green hospital-issue pyjamas. You watch TV together and chat about the show. 'Hi, I'm Phil.' He leans across to shake your hand. You become friends. Whenever he finds you crying he says, 'Come on, mate. Don't cry. You'll be right.' He gives you hugs like the brother you never had.

Phillip's parents died when he was young. He does seasonal work on farms. Recently he decided to make a new start in Queensland. The police picked him up at the airport after he made a scene about his ticket. He'd also been stalking an ex-girlfriend after she snubbed him at a pub. He was brought to the facility with the clothes he stood up in. He washes them every other day. They're his only possessions.

You spend the afternoon cutting up Chinese characters with an artist's scalpel. You like the way that the art teacher trusts you with it. When Robert sees 'Peace, Prosperity and Good Will' stuck on his door, he kisses your hand with a flourish. You throw your arms around him in a big hug.

Robert is an only child, the hope of his elderly parents' dreams. His father travelled to Australia so Robert could study engineering. His father speaks no English; Robert has no practical skills. They need each other. Robert will be in hospital for seven weeks. It is his first episode.

Sid turns up at the table when you've got a visitor. He shoves a plastic cup at you. 'Hi, Sid.' You tip lemonade into his cup. He throws it down the hatch. He shoves the cup at your sister. She laughs nervously and pours him some coke. Sid disappears in a half-shuffle run. You resume your conversation like nothing's happened.

Sid played in bands for thirty years and is well-known on the streets of St Kilda. The only remnants of his past life are black sunglasses and long hair. Now his days revolve around snaring another fag. He'd play music for everyone but the guitar on the ward has broken strings.

You're lying on the couch watching Shawshank Redemption. You feel something in your hair. You look back in the darkness.

'You've got beautiful hair.' It's Markus. 'Can I play with your hair?'

'Okay.' In here inhibitions shrivel. It feels nice to have someone touch you again.

He reaches for your hand and holds it tight. 'I'm lonely.' The words come from his soul.

Markus is a refugee from Iraq. The police brought him in after he set a boarding house alight. Markus's childhood consisted of war and refugee camps. He remembers standing on the roof and watching the planes fly in while his family hid in the basement. They have nothing to do with him now. They've been burnt by his illness.

You're making a Valentine's Day card for your kids. Steph sits across from you making one for her partner Sue. Steph's having a bad day and isn't as talkative as normal. She concentrates hard on her card. As you walk back to your rooms, you ask her about the scars on her arm. There are no secrets in here.

'I cut myself with a razor, she says. 'I was trying to prove that there's a robot inside me.'

Steph's life has been sliced and diced by her paranoid schizophrenia. She lives quietly on a pension and finds peace in Buddhist meditation. Her home is like a shrine to Buddha. Wind chimes fill her tranquil garden. She's been in and out of psychiatric wards for twenty years.

Renata's wandering around in her leopard print dressing gown. She appears lost. Her eyes are filled with tears. They beseech you: 'Help me.'

'Are you okay, Renata?'

She shakes her head wordlessly. She had ECT this morning and it always makes her feel sad. You rub her back and then enfold her in a hug. By the time her husband and son arrive that evening, all Renata has is a dull headache. She manages to sit and make conversation.

Renata's depression hasn't been responding to regular medication. So now the doctors have brought in the big guns. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are the dreaded ECT days. It knocks out short-term memory. Renata wanders around the ward introducing herself repeatedly to anyone she meets. 'Hello, I'm Renata. What's your name?'

Maureen’s abusing the patient at the top of the lunch queue. ‘Up your bum, you stupid cow.’ She’s second in line and trying to pull rank. Her repertoire consists of bum, bloody and b*tch. We’re sick of it. Eventually the patient bites back. A nurse steps in and gets Maureen’s lunch ‘to go’. We shuffle forward with appreciation.

You see Maureen three months later at your local health centre. She doesn’t remember you. You almost don’t recognise her. She has her teeth in. And she seems like the sweetest old lady. Polite, gentle, well-bred.

You notice Kim mothering the other patients. ‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ ‘How are you today?’ ‘Make sure you come to the craft class this afternoon.’ When Kim comes back from day leave she leaves thoughtful gifts outside the other patients’ doors. A pot plant. A deodorant. A soccer ball. When she isn’t giving away her love, she sits crying in the lounge. Or the TV room. In the garden. Wiping away tears wordlessly.

It’s not Kim’s first suicide attempt. Her wrists are purpled black and blue. She blends back into regular society upon discharge. Holds down a job. Services her mortgage. Raises her kids. Volunteers at the school. If she revealed her other side people would say things like, ‘But you always looked so happy.’

Zoe is abusing her ex-boyfriend on the phone. ‘It’s your fault that I’m in here, you f*ckin’ b*stard! You’ve been speaking to my Mum and Dad.’

You don’t like Zoe. She stands around looking at everyone with a nasty look on her face. Scheming and planning to stir the pot. Causing mischief with her lies.

Zoe’s mum has pinned down a nurse outside the station. ‘She’s been in here for a month and she hasn’t improved at all. No one ever returns my calls. No one tells us what’s going on. Who do I have to speak to here?’

The nurse holds out her hands. ‘I’ve just started my shift. But I’ll see if the doctor’s available.’

Zoe’s mum hitches her grandson further up her hip. He’s been smacked by Grandpa and is snotty and screaming. ‘I know it’s not your fault. But I just need some answers...’

‘Yes, yes...I’ll see what I can do.’ The nurse disappears into the cone of silence.

Mary won’t stop talking. She tells convoluted stories in her thick accent. The stutter and obsessive rehashing of details add to your discomfort. When your eyes start to wander, she hits you on the upper arm. ‘Listen! Listen! I’m talking to you.’ She wants you to be her friend.

In the 1960s Mary travelled to Australia by herself. She held down a factory job until she wed Hugo. After their marriage broke down, Mary was left holding the baby in a foreign land. Her erratic behaviour estranged her from her only relatives. Today Mary lives with her adult daughter who also has schizophrenia. She is Mary’s life. Mary is hers.

Fatma arrives in the dining room to serve us our morning portion of abuse. ‘If you don’t believe in Allah, you’re lost. You’re stupid!’ She collects her tray in a flurry of fabric and disappears into her room. She eats alone, every meal, every day. She won’t talk to male patients. She tries to convert the females. Her isolation is biting.

Fatma was picked up by the police in Thomastown. She’d been trying to convert people on the street but couldn’t resist throwing in an insult or two. The social worker is trying to find her a new place to live. Her brother and sister-in-law won’t put up with her anymore.

You come back to visit Steph two weeks after your release. She gobbles up the Easter eggs that you brought in. You chat about everything and nothing. When your time is up Steph says, ‘Thanks for coming. Thanks for the sanity.’

You laugh. ‘Thanks for the insanity.’ You mean it. The honesty. The lack of pretence. The warmth. You miss it. You miss them. Their insanity feels more comfortable, more stable, more real, than the sanity masquerading on the streets of Melbourne.

Sex and the Sh*tty

You meet Barry when you arrive in the psychiatric ward’s high dependency unit. You’re wearing a hospital gown and you’re wrapped in a blanket. He’s onto you in a flash. The HD unit offers him slim pickings and limited opportunities. He chats you up in the presence of the attendant nurse. You try to fob him off in a non-offensive way. It’s a wise move. Big Barry has a nasty temper.

Barry rejoices when he’s released from HD. He likes talking to all the female patients. He regales them with the same old stories and corners them physically, if not intellectually. He gives out his address and telephone number freely. He just won’t leave them alone. When you’ve had enough, you make a complaint to one of the nurses. Barry turns nasty. He knows that it was you. You try to act innocent. Luckily after a few hours he’s forgotten about it.

You’re sitting on the bed with your mum. She’s finally arrived with some proper clothes and toiletries. They’re like gifts from heaven.

A nurse appears in the doorway. ‘No visitors in the bedrooms.’

‘It’s my mother.’

‘I’m sorry but rules are rules.’

You’re puzzled but you and your mother rise to your feet. You move to the door with stained cheeks.

The nurse smiles apologetically. ‘I worked at another facility. Years ago. One of the mothers used to visit her son on the ward. And have sex with him in his room. That was how she mothered him.’

Taryn appears at breakfast wearing a skimpy top and short skirt. She routinely wears a wig. Today she’s a blonde. When the nurse arrives to count heads, her head reels round when she catches a glimpse of Taryn’s outfit.

‘Those clothes are totally inappropriate,’ she says in a loud voice.

Taryn tries protesting.

‘Go back to your room right now. Get yourself changed.’

The pscyh ward is charged with sexual tension. You discover this on your first night when you’re sitting sweaty and scared in your pyjamas, and you notice Marcus checking you over. You’re not comfortable staying in a unisex ward. You feel vulnerable sharing toilets, bathrooms and common rooms with men. Especially psychiatric patients. Once your mother brings your clothes, you feel more protected. Maybe you even enjoy looking good.

Marko has been playing with your hair while you watch TV in the dark. One of the female patients glares at you from the doorway. When Marko goes out for a smoke, Phil tells you that Marko has been fooling around with a few women on the ward.

When Marko comes back, he whispers in your ear. ‘I want to come visit you in your room.’

‘I’m sharing with Mary.’ It’s a good enough excuse.

‘That’s okay. I’m sharing with Paul. He can sleep in your bed.’

‘No! Mary would freak out!’ You’re freaking out.

‘Well. Go to the bathroom. Don’t lock the door. Then I’ll come in…’

‘We can’t do that!’ You’d thought he was lonely, romantic even.

‘Why not?’

The thought of having sex against the hand basin, with the foul-smelling toilet close at hand, was enough to turn your stomach. ‘We’ll be in huge trouble if we get caught.’ You can’t believe he’s so brazen.

You avoid Marko for the remainder of your stay. It doesn’t matter anyway; he acts like you don’t exist now you’re not on his menu. He lies around in the TV room in a drug-induced stupor.

There’s been a scandal on the ward. Mehmet has been caught having sex with a patient in her room. He’s been placed in the High Dependency Unit as punishment. No official mention is made of his absence but the patients in nearby rooms are talking. You can see Mehmet through the glass while you stroll the corridors.

Mehmet is frustrated. Sexually and otherwise. He’d finally been released from High Dependency after five weeks. He’d been able to mingle with the other patients. Walk around the yard. Have a smoke. Watch TV. Check out the women. He relished the freedom. Now he’s blown it.

Sandra is heavily pregnant. Her husband and two young daughters come to visit her in the ward. The girls look like little blonde angels. The husband is attentive. They look like the perfect family. They could be on a picnic. A trip to the beach. Going shopping. Except they’re not. They’re sitting in a psychiatric ward. The girls make their fun by running up and down the corridor.

Sandra’s marriage is rocky. Her psychiatric illness puts a big strain on the relationship. Sandra and her husband split up for a few months last year. When she was admitted to the psych ward, she became friendly with one of the male patients. Their friendship blossomed once they were discharged. Now she is pregnant with his child. Her husband knows the truth but he’s standing by her. He says he can accept the baby.

Andrew has been a good friend. He seems normal most of the time. His manic personality appeals to your depressive one. He’s fun. He’s happy. He’s warm. He says that he’s engaged but his fiancée never visits him. You wonder if she’s real. When he returns from a day visit, he says that it’s all over with his fiancée. She was freaked out by his psychotic episode and just wants to be friends. He snuggles up to you on your bed and tells you that he likes older women. They’re so much more interesting than those young ones.

Andrew asks you to visit him after the last ward round. You say okay but fall asleep after your medication. You wake up when a dark figure appears in your doorway. 'You said you'd come down to my room!' You know what he wants and it seems like anything goes in here. You feel so lost. You've been a model citizen for your whole life and where has it got you? Depressed and locked up in a psychiatric ward. You like the fact that Andrew is fifteen years younger than you. You sneak down the corridor and tap on his door. It's open.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly Drugs

David finds it difficult to leave his room. He sits on his bed with hunched shoulders and a wasted frame. He wants to get out of here so he can go back to his one true love: marijuana. He doesn't like having to take his medication. His thoughts are his. The doctors have no right to tell him that his thoughts are wrong. What about all the millions of people who believe in a God that they have never seen? Why aren't they locked up? David enjoys philosophical debates but they get him nowhere.

David's ideal world is one in which marijuana is free and legal. He makes no link between his heavy dope smoking and his paranoid schizophrenia. Dope is his only friend. He lives at home with his elderly parents. He didn't mean to push his father over in a fit of rage. And he didn't mean to yell at his mum's friend. Or smash his mum's framed family photos when he wasn't invited to his nephew's birthday party. David is 43.

Jelena is wailing again. Her cries echo up and down the hallways. Morning, noon and night. Everyone's fed up with the noise and histrionics. They just want to eat in peace. Today she's wailing about how fat she is. 'I used to weigh seven stone! Seven f*cking stone. Now look at me! These f*cking meds! They're messing with my body. I'm f*cking fat, man.'

You find it hard to imagine Jelena weighing seven stone. You think she's just being melodramatic. A bloody whinger. But after a year on your anti-depressants, you put on seven kilos in the blink of an eye. Maybe Jelena wasn't exaggerating after all.

Andrew is so happy to be out of HD. He talks a mile a minute to his fellow patients. He's like a chipmunk. Chitter, chitter, chatter. He hugs you if you say something he likes.

Andrew loves his rave parties. He knows how to handle his drugs. Those people who overdose don't understand their drugs properly. He has the knowledge. He does admit that he overdid it when he didn't eat, drink or sleep for 48 hours. But he still believes that his 8 point business plan will make him a millionaire within a year. He writes down the plan for you and makes you promise to hide it in your room.

After he's discharged, Andrew stops taking his medication. First it's the one that affects his sexual drive. No young man wants to be Mr Floppy. Next he stops taking his anti-psychotics. Andrew doesn't like the way they dampen his mood. He doesn't feel like himself when he takes them. He's got a naturally high personality. He enjoys it.

After a few months Andrew is back on the rave scene. He's got his supply of E for his party nights. And he's got weed hidden in his bedroom where his parents won't find it.

Of Meds and Men

‘These are my thoughts to have. I’m not hurting anyone,’ David tells you. ‘So many people in history could be considered crazy. What about all the people who believe in God when they can’t even see him?’

David spends his days in the same loose track pants and a T-shirt. His bad breath fills the hospital room. Occasionally he plucks on the lifeless strings of his electric guitar. Most of the time he just sits, his shoulders hunched and his buttocks wasted from years of inactivity. His life consists of weed. Smoking it and getting more. He has no other aspirations. He resents being locked away merely for going off his meds. He had a push and shove with his Dad and then the police turned up. It’s clearly unjust. He can argue the point for hours. He loves philosophising. Occasionally he bails up a nurse, arguing why he should be released. Why he shouldn’t be forced to take meds. Why he should be left alone. He’s not hurting anyone.

‘I don’t feel like myself anymore. That’s my personality. Having ideas. Talking fast. Being the life of the party. Now that’s gone.’

No more party drugs for Steve. He’s locked up in a psychiatric ward at the age of 24. The official terminology is a ‘drug-induced psychosis’. He had grand plans to conquer the business world with his ten step plan. He writes it out for you on a scrap of paper. ‘Don’t show anyone,’ he says. ‘I’m trusting you with this.’

‘I’m going off my meds. They’ve turned me into Mr Floppy. I’m only 24 for God’s sake.’

Suzi’s wailing and crying again, the echoes reverberating down the corridors. It’s hard to feel sympathetic. Everything’s a drama to her. She’s still carrying on at lunchtime. ‘I used to weigh seven stone.’ It’s hard to imagine. ‘All these drugs have made me fat. I’m sick of it!’ So were we.

Antidepressants that don’t do enough.

Meds never completely stopping psychotic thoughts.

‘I sleep all the time.’

Raija's Recovery Journey

I believe I first became mentally unstable at age 11. It was at this age I was sent to boarding school and became very depressed because I didn't fit in there. The majority of students who boarded were from rich families who owned large properties and Hereford studs etc. They had Country road brand name clothes, while there I was a chubby 11 year old wearing hand me downs from my brother and father.

I was teased so much about my appearance, I had no-one to talk to and my parent's said I would have to complete the year before they would even consider letting me come home.

A year later my parent's let me come home but the emotional trauma I had received from both boarding school and being a survivor of childhood sexual assault would leave an imprint in my life that would later come back to haunt me.

I started at Bateman's Bay high school where I had many friends and I began to feel a whole lot better.

At age 13 my best friend passed away due to unknown causes and my depression began to return. I acted out, having risky behaviours and smoking marijuana. I felt scared to get close to, any-one in fear they too may die and leave me all alone again. Words cannot describe the intense sadness that I felt. Pot and sexual relations were the only things that made me feel whole again.

When I was 14 I woke up one night with three guys in my bedroom (I slept downstairs in the granny flat) they told me that a guy that I was madly infatuated with was waiting to talk to me outside. Being young and naive and trusting these people I went outside and there he was. He asked me to get in their car and go for a drive with them. So I did, we ended up at a place out in the stick's called Grandfather's Gully, there they undressed me and sexually assaulted me. Then they threw me in the car naked and chucked me out the front of my house while the car was still moving; they threw my clothes at me and drove off laughing.

Something inside of me died that night ,and trusting men was very hard for me. To make matter's worse the main leader of this assault was my friends brother so I had to keep it to myself as I didn't know what her reaction would be if I told her.

At age 15 my parent's and I weren't getting on that well my mother despised me and could not understand what was happening to me. I don't blame her in one way as I couldn't understand why I was doing the things I was doing either. My parent's moved to Sydney I decided to leave home and stay with friends in Bateman's Bay.

Staying with my friend did not work out; we had no space to ourselves as we shared a room. There was me, Bianca, Bernice and Gary all in the one room. So I left there and moved to Sydney back in with my parent's and enrolled in Merrylands High school. My grades at this school were fantastic, but once again I had no close friends, I was living in an ethnic community and was considered a slut because I had blonde hair. The girls at this school hated me so much that they would drive past and egg my house, yelling out ”slut”.

Once again I was in an isolated situation. My parents could see what it was doing to me and they helped set me up in a unit in Bateman's Bay so I could complete my schooling with people I had known since kinder. I had a great time; life was one big party in fact it's the only year in my teenage life that I could say I was truly happy.

I completed my year 12 HSC in 1994 and moved back to Sydney with my fiancé to find work. At age 18 my illness really flared up I became psychotic with feelings of great morbidity, I was so ill I dug a grave in my own back yard and lay in it naked, imagining I was dead. I also became very dissociative.

One day I was washing the dishes when a glass broke, it cut my hand and I didn't even feel it, I just continued to wash the dishes as the sink water turned red. After showering I would wrap the towel tightly around my neck and watch my face turn blue.

I tried to hide my weird and intense feeling's from my fiancé and cousin who lived with me but in the end I begged for them to get me some help. My partner just told me I was having a bad day and not to worry too much about it, I knew there was more to it than this and confided in my mother. My mother arranged an appointment with a psychiatrist, he took some blood tests and found out I was pregnant; my depression/psychosis was labelled as post-pre natal depression. My life was heading on a downward spiral.

After I gave birth to my daughter I began to see and hear things that no one else could see. I had homicidal images of killing my family and I was so frightened by what I saw and heard that I began to hide in my cupboard and chant different prayers and words in hope to make the visions and voices disappear. Nothing helped I was so scared and I could find no way out of this terrible life so I tried to hang myself. After this suicide attempt I was put into Liverpool Hospital and labelled schizophrenic.

I was so scared in hospital, I was only 19 years old and I was surrounded by people who seemed so unpredictable. I was sharing a room with four other patients' and I felt frightened that they would attack me or do something to me while I was sleeping. I wanted to die and I began pretending to take my medication but I was really saving it all up so I could take it all at once and hopefully leave this terrible world. I started to have flashbacks about being sexually abused but did not know if it was real or not as my world seemed so surreal and intangible.

I began seeing a psychologist when I got out of hospital. He made me realise that the relationship I was in was very detrimental to my mental health. My partner did not love me, he wanted to own me. He was happy I was ill as I wouldn't leave the house and that way he had more control over me. Something needed to change in order for me to begin my recovery journey.

After seeing my psychologist and my new psychiatrist I built up the strength to leave my emotionally abusive husband.

I moved to Wollongong with my daughter and I slowly began to get well with the help and support from family and friends and medication. At times I still cried a lot but the images and voices began to die down and for the first time in years I felt hope. Hope that I could beat this problem.

My daughter gave me a sense of meaning and purpose in my life, something to live for; my daughter was my angel of hope and inspiration.

Slowly I reduced the medication and I was deep into my recovery journey when I gave birth to my son in 1999, he was so cute and perfect, he was my source of strength and determination.

I remarried in 2001 my life seemed to be moving forward. My new husband and I were both working, so financially we were secure. It wasn't till we were married he began to beat me whenever he drank alcohol; living in a domestically violent situation was the beginning of my demise. I started to feel the ground under my feet slowly slipping away but I tried to stay strong for my children.

People often ask why I didn't leave him; but I loved him and he was nice to me when he was sober.

Eventually I fell pregnant to him, I thought that having a baby would somehow change the person he was, but as the saying goes "a leopard never changes his spots".

During this pregnancy I began to get unwell again I started to self-harm. I would shut myself in the pantry and slice my arms with a razor blade. I was rapidly sinking into a deep, dark hole of despair.

At 39 weeks of my pregnancy I felt something wasn't quite right. When I laid down I could feel the baby just flopping around inside me, I panicked and told my mother who said to move my check-up date. So the next day I went for my check-up and they discovered that my child had no heartbeat, she was dead. I couldn't believe what was happening and I suffered a nervous breakdown and was so distraught I could barely speak; I was taken to Shellharbour psychiatric unit where I stayed for 3 months after another suicide attempt.

My husband left me as he couldn't understand my illness. I was in deep despair losing my child and my husband and used the self-harming as a way of releasing emotional pain. During this time my children lived with my parent's, not having my children in my care was another setback, I felt I had lost everything that I loved.

I suffered for quite some time, the medication made me feel blunt and tired but I loved my children so much I fought like hell to get them back in my care.

In hospital I met a man called Rob he and I became great friends, he helped me to rebuild my identity and he also added meaning and purpose to my life. I was no longer to be seen as some-one with schizo-affective disorder and dissociative identity disorder or schizophrenia, I was me and I was worth something.

Slowly I began to rebuild my life, I had many set-backs and many visits back and forth to hospital, but I kept on hoping and dreaming of a better life.

I began to take responsibility for my illness and have an active part in my recovery. Rob linked me up with a really great psychiatrist, he helped me not only by listening to me but by also being patient while we tried different medications until we found something that worked.

I'd let the Doctor know how I felt and what was and wasn't working for me in the way of medications I began to be more assertive and have a voice.

I felt empowered like I had found myself all over again and started applying for jobs. When I was told about the job as a consumer rehabilitation assistant in mental health I knew it was the job for me, so I applied and was lucky enough to fill the position. So not only am I feeling a whole lot better but I am able to help others with their journey to recovery.

The team I work with is so very supportive and we always work collaboratively with our clients.
We teach our consumers the recovery theme's such as finding hope, redefining identity, finding meaning and purpose in life and taking responsibility for your illness.

Life is still at times up and down for me as my journey continues. You can never stop growing and working on yourself, trying to make life better. I currently attend the affect regulation group and still have one on one appointments with a psychologist.

I hope by sharing my recovery journey with other consumer's it will help them to feel that they are not alone and that clinician's in this field and members of our community can see just how bad life can get for us and how courageous you need to be to recover from the harsh realities of mental illness.

A mother tells us about her daughter's battle with anorexia

No one ever expects to have their lives turned upside down but that is exactly what happened to our family in 2002.

We regarded ourselves as a relatively normal busy household, ferrying our daughters to their respective after school activities. Our older daughters, Jane and Louise were heavily involved in their rowing, training twice a week for local regattas on weekends. We saw lots of the Victorian countryside as we travelled to various country rowing regattas. Anne, our youngest, was also ensconced in running training four times week with Little Athletics every Saturday. Tickling the ivory keys (piano) with their music teacher on a weekly basis topped off a very busy week for everyone.

Jane and Louise were also dedicated to Air Cadets which took up every Thursday evening.
Jane and Louise had a real passion for this and enjoyed the challenge of matching and at times beating the boys with their skills in both the classroom and on the parade ground. Our front door was like a revolving door which seldom had any rest. Alan and I would occasionally comment that we should put the brakes on and make everyone slow down as 'family life' was suffering. People were not communicating properly and at times tempers got the better of a stressful moment.

The brakes were applied quite unexpectedly when our youngest daughter, Anne, was diagnosed with anorexia on 17 December 2001. Although we had heard of the illness and its impact on young girls we did not understand the impact of the illness on Anne or the rest of the family.

We had spent the last 17 years raising our daughters in the belief that a balanced person needed opportunities to meet and make friends through wholesome activities they enjoyed, ultimately assisting in the development of capable, happy and well-rounded young adults.

All our beliefs, boundary setting, support and guidance were suddenly tested with Anne's illness. This insidious illness appears to have started in May 2001 when Anne, then aged 12, mentioned she wanted to lose a little weight to help improve her running. I was not concerned as the change in diet was cutting back on sweets and biscuits.

Anne started to demonstrate the 'normal' adolescent behaviour of spending more time in her own room in the evenings. Again we didn't worry as our other daughters had done the same and we believed it was par for the course - a need for their own space.

Chewing large quantities of gum, a change in her moods and minimal engagement or speaking with her parents didn't ring alarm bells either. As it turns out, we should have been very concerned and taking steps – what sort, who knows – to derail the vehicle she had boarded.

These were some of the signs posts marking the very rocky dirty track Anne's vehicle was taking her, and unknowingly, her family.

Anorexia Nervosa was diagnosed on 17 December 2001. Anne's condition deteriorated over the next month with the development of fine hair over her body and fluctuations in her blood pressure indicating she was 'medically unstable'.

Anne was admitted to hospital on 29 January 2002. I have a very vivid memory of accompanying Anne into a smallish room, hearing Anne cough as two nurses inserted a nasogastric tube. I felt sick, shocked, I didn't know what to do or how I should feel when I looked at Anne's face. I really wanted to cry out 'stop' but knew I couldn't.

Over the next month I would travel from work to the hospital. Alan would go home get a meal for himself, Jane and Louise and then, most nights, they would all come into the hospital. Jane and Louise would regale their day's activities, endeavour to make their sister laugh or at least smile. Anne became very keen to play a game of chess or checkers when we visited. She spent her days on bed rest, embroidering and trying to read. Both of these activities declined the longer she was in hospital.

As if our plate wasn't full enough my father, aged 86, died on 22 January 2002. Anne was discharged on 29 January 2002 and insisted on attending her grandfather's funeral. With Anne's discharge from hospital there was no 'discharge plan', appointments were made for her to visit the dietician and psychiatrist two weeks later. We had no idea of what was ahead of us, no instructions were provided as to the 'do's and don'ts' in dealing with the illness at home. We were set adrift!

As I look back on my journal I'm struck by the detail and how my memory of this scary period in our lives has faded. I would like to share a few extracts with you, they may resonate with you, perhaps help you to understand the journey.

"February 2002
Extreme anxiety in situations such as:
Eating
Being fat
Mum leaving her
The idea of trying another food
Whether she should put on another top to keep warm
In crowds of people - people coming close to her
Too much noise

During these episodes her breathing rate increases, she speaks quicker, her eyelids will flutter as she does not wish to look at anything. When condemning herself she will screw up her face and mutter to herself. Self-loathing, no concern for herself, displayed by such comments as:
"I'm a bad girl"
"I'm not considerate of others"

"I should be thinking about you (mum), Jane, Louise and Dad"
"I'm so fat" (at which time she pinches her thighs and buttocks)
"Why am I here" (making light of it I responded by saying "because mum and dad made you")
"I'm so mean, I don't think of anyone except what Anne wants"
"I can't cope with this anymore, I can't eat anymore"
I just want to ….." (Anne doesn't finish this sentence)
Her two minds confuse her because her bad mind tells her things like you don't need to eat, you're fat etc."

Trying to return to school created high anxiety, even though it was only for two periods a day. Her dad would collect her from school and bring her to my workplace. The more days she attended school the higher her anxiety. On the last two days she was unable to contain her anxiety. She hid under my desk or shut herself in the female toilets.

My diary entry details the comments:
"you don't care"
"you don't understand"
"you don't love me, nobody does"
"go away and leave me alone"
"I don't know why"
"I'm afraid mum"
"you all hate me"

I did not go away but persevered with trying to comfort her, cuddle her and offer supporting words like "I do love you", "nobody hates you", "can you tell me why you're afraid?" etc. Eventually on both occasions she was talked round and this was followed by much apology on her part."

By early March 2002 Anne's physical and mental condition had deteriorated. We had attended two sessions with the Psychiatry Department attached to the hospital, they were less than useful. As a mother I felt useless, frustrated, and angry and I just wanted to find the right help for Anne. The feeling of hopelessness was highlighted by Anne's comment "I want to sleep forever, then I don't have to think" and "I can't do this anymore".

Anne then asked me to provide her with reassurance and support when she was eating. I had no idea what I was doing but if talking my child through a meal meant she was going to finish the food, stay alive and out of hospital I was up for the task. I could not have foreseen how this was going to develop.

The verbal support and distractions with books, newspapers, pictures and puzzles were initially successful however the meal times blew out, with a cheese sandwich for lunch taking up to two hours and a cereal size bowl of pasta taking up to four hours. This increase in the length of time to eat her meals was unacceptable but I didn't know how to change it. The eating disorder had control!

Time ticked on; we were desperately trying to find professionals who would help our disappearing young daughter. Finally we found a young female psychologist who was prepared to treat a person under the age of 16 years and come to our home. We were now unable to coax Anne out of the house. The psychologist visited our house twice a week for a month. We could see little progress. Anne's psychological condition was deteriorating again. With minimal speech or eye contact and a constant need to hang on to my arm, life was pretty grim for Anne.

We were endeavouring to provide a level of normality for Jane and Louise when it came to their activities, mealtimes and having 'respite' with different relatives and friends. Mealtimes were often strained as the person providing verbal support to Anne as she ate was constantly talking. This was not normal; it created a level of frustration and anger for Jane and Louise.

Since Anne's discharge from hospital it had been impossible for her to be left alone, she was unable to return to school and by March home was the only place she felt safe. My husband took some of his long service leave to stay home with Anne, this enabled me to remain at a job I had just commenced in November 2001 (we needed the income now).

Alan tried to manage the day shift and I would take over in the evenings after cooking dinner. We took it in turns to provide meal support to Anne at dinner time depending on what or where the other girls had to be.

By the end of March Anne had become 'voluntary mute', not speaking to anyone, just using gestures. We were feeling desperate, would anyone be able help Anne recover from this devastating illness?

Friends told us of a television documentary on a private treatment clinic in Melbourne for people with eating disorders. What a relief, this might be the answer. Waiting until Monday to make the call was very stressful. Contact was made, an appointment for assessment and meeting with as many family members as possible was booked.

The 6th of May 2002 is etched in my memory; this was our appointment with the private clinic. In addition to Anne's immediate family, her grandma, auntie and uncle attended. After providing a brief background on Anne's condition to the Director, the Director knelt down beside Anne (who had not looked up once) and told Anne what she thought was probably going on in Anne's head at that moment. Anne raised her head and nodded. I burst into tears (even today this memory brings me to tears).

Our journey back home was quiet. I asked Anne if she felt the people at the clinic could help her, she nodded. That was it, no matter what the dollar cost or time the clinic was 'the one'!

Alan and I talked at length about how we were going to manage financially but never really covered the emotional aspect for ourselves when it came to Anne's illness. Our focus was solely to see Anne break free of this life-threatening illness.

It was impossible for Anne to return to school even on an occasional basis. How do you cope when you have high anxiety, mood swings and are non-verbal? With the assistance of the local high school we arranged for Anne to be registered for distance education. We had high hopes that reinstating a level of normalcy and providing an activity to occupy her mind would prove beneficial for her. However, Anne's illness had too much control over her. Distance education would not be possible until year nine.

The 'three musketeers' (Anne, Alan and myself) were initially occupied on a daily basis with visits to a private clinic for either counselling sessions or dietetic sessions. Our journeys back and forth to the clinic took an hour each way. Window shopping at Chadstone shopping centre, visiting parks to feed the ducks, buying detailed 1000 piece jigsaw puzzles to occupy our evenings and the ultimate purchase; a puppy of her very own, kept us busy.

Anne's two sisters found the disruption to their life, increase in noise in the house generated by Anne's outbursts, and the rituals around meal times hard to handle. Thank goodness for family and friends! Jane and Louise were able to have 'respite' by staying with their aunts and uncles or having sleepovers at a friend's house. It worried us they would feel as though they were being sent away, their home was no longer a place they could relax and enjoy. It was a balancing act - trying to reduce their stress and remain a family.

Anne's verbal outbursts in the early stages could extend to two hours. Perplexing isn't it that a non-verbal person has verbal outbursts! The voice was not Anne's. It was an eerie high pitched screeching, like a torched animal in severe pain. Sometimes she would say "you can't help me", "you don't know what to do" other times you could only make out the occasional word. At these times I used to think that Anne was losing her mind and would never overcome this 'thing'!

Unwittingly we, mainly Alan and I, had played into the hands of the eating disorder supporting its control over Anne. In our novice phase, we thought that contesting Anne's needs would be detrimental to her. We gave into her expressed need to use the same bowl, plate, cutlery and glass and to sit on the same chair in the same location at the table at every meal.

Six weeks after Anne started treatment, we had managed to reduce breakfast to 45 minutes, and lunch and dinner were now in the two plus hour range (down from sometimes four hours). The anxiety driven responses during mealtimes had also reduced. Anne would now seldom leave the table screaming and appearing completely agitated by something which had or hadn't occurred. She may leave the table but with a speck of reasoning, a dollop of firmness and a bucket of love, she would return to the table and continue her meal. Mind you, consistency in her response could not be depended upon.

An entry in my diary at this time was:

9 June 2002

Other little changes in her behaviour / responses in the last 6 weeks:

- *I can now stroke / rub her back or arms without her pulling away*
- *Anne now looking and wanting to buy books but not letting me – taking an interest in what she used to like*
- *Prepared to leave my side for short periods to ie: put clothes in her room, wash her hands; hang washing on the clothes line outside;*
- *Appears to be more relaxed when visitors come to the house (providing she is not eating) and will acknowledge them.*
- *Can have the radio on low during her meal time providing the music is not to up tempo"*

As minor as these changes may seem, they meant so much to us. Anne, and her family, still had a long way to go. Achieving reasonable meal times, reducing agitation due to noise, challenging her inability to watch or listen to television (some might say that was a blessing!)

Each little improvement brought more hope to us that Anne was slowly walking the rocky track with its peaks and troughs to recovery. Reducing the time to eat her lunch and dinner seemed relatively easy, from my perspective, compared to her acceptance of the smell of food, people cooking and her inability to look at food being prepared.

30 June 2002 CIRCUS NEWS

A family outing, including my mother, to the circus on Saturday. Anne was somewhat nervous at the idea and the cost but once the show started I think some of that was forgotten. She really enjoyed it. The acts were great, she even applauded a few times and laughed quite a lot. There were a lot of other families there, food and drink were all around. Anne hid her face and displayed the usual anxiety around food but she enjoyed it nonetheless.

These two and a half hours of pleasure would not have been possible if her own meal times had not been reduced to the hour."

Valda (the name given to the voice of Anne's eating disorder) was constantly being challenged by the counsellor and dietician. The result was often heightened anxiety for Anne which sometimes lasted up to 48 hours. Being aware of the brewing storm we tried to brace ourselves, especially emotionally, after every treatment session for the next outburst. Boy that was exhausting especially as Anne saw the counsellor three times a week and the dieticians weekly.

This negative mind – Valda – had such control over Anne it would dictate what to wear, condemn her for being a 'bad girl', prevent her from walking the dogs on windy days as her hair had to be 'perfect', everything has to be done in exactly the same way with no variation in time or process, which was very hard to comply with. Little did we know that we were, again, being compliant with the illness.

There were times when Anne/Valda became physically aggressive with me. Lashing out, slapping me if I got within range during a high anxiety moment or a screeching session. I learnt to keep my distance from her, refusing to allow Valda to make Anne feel guilty at hitting her mum. I would also verbally berate Valda for being such a bully. I'm sure if anyone came to the house and saw my conversation with one person yet using two names they'd have thought I should be committed!

24 September 2003

Hi All, I just have to share some good news about Anne.
There are lots of little things to indicate progress:
1. More gesturing and offering suggestions on different topics
2. Smiling more
3. Seems to be starting the separation between her negative mind and her true self i.e. the one person that would not be happy with her vest showing below her top was not a real person – thus it must have been 'Valda' her negative mind set.
4. SHE SPOKE one word to me on Saturday and Sunday - "Hi" and "Hello". I was rapt but had to keep it low key, just a hug and a thank you.
5. Her preparedness to meet with the dietician and the counsellors on her own now.
6. Walking around the shopping centres with her head up and looking at things.
7. Writing in her journal every day, not a lot but it's happening.
8. Has written two "thank you" cards to people - one of them being Denny who made Anne's dog
Tao the cushion she had spoken of to Anne when she was coming into the office. That sort of thing is important.

Anne is now having three counselling and one dietician sessions a week. She is seeing two different counsellors, one of them is an ex-sufferer and a wonderful person. I feel as though we are making "real" progress now. Still a long way to go but we are on the right dual highway now - the acknowledgement/recovery road."

Anne managed to wish my mother happy birthday in October which, as you can imagine, brought tears to my mum's eyes.

January 2004 heralded the last counselling and dietician sessions for Anne. It was a happy time for everyone. Anne was again the bright, jovial, chatty person she had been before the eating disorder. Periodically she would make contact with her counsellor. In July 2004 Anne needed to return to regular counselling sessions fortnightly, then monthly.

She struggled to work out why she was here on earth and what her purpose was. Anne completed years 10 and 11, was doing well, however still experiencing bouts of depression. Mid 2005 (year 11) she had started a part time job in a local bakery, so in 2006 Anne asked the owner if she could work full time. She needed thinking, living and self-discovery time.

Self-discovery included finding ‘friends’ who led Anne into alcohol, drugs and further depression, culminating in Anne’s employer dismissing her in October 2006. The next year was very hard for
Anne as she slipped further into depression.

Alan and I encouraged her to speak with a counsellor, see the GP for medication and keep busy.
It was a hard slog!! With our support and acceptance Anne searched to understand what was happening and emerged from a dark tunnel with significant insight into herself. She still questioned what she would do with her life but accepted that she didn’t have to have all the answers now.

She applied for several jobs in bakeries as she had really enjoyed this work and started a new job in September 2007, where she is still working today.

During this time Anne has read a diverse range of books on personal development, other peoples’ journeys and been reflecting on her life. Alan and I are extremely proud of Anne! She perceived. She searched. She never gave up hope.

Anne enrolled last week to complete year 12. She doesn’t know what she wants to do in the future. We have discussed this at length and suggested that is not important as she will probably discover this during her studies.

As parents we wish only the best for our children, encourage them to achieve and do their best but what exactly does this mean? For some, “encouragement” and “doing their best” equals pressure - pressure often applied by themselves as they believe they must succeed and failure is not an option. But who can say what ‘failure’ is? After all it is the perspective of an individual.

A future, there is one for Anne!

Carmen's Story

From the Brink of Hell

My name is Carmen. I am 44 years old. I want to encourage people to read my story so they can better understand mental illness.

From the Brink of Hell is a harrowing account of my life living with a mental illness. From a troubled childhood punctuated with grief to a diagnosis of severe paranoid schizophrenia. The trials and tribulations of trying to combat this paralysing disease, including events that precipitated this condition to a sense of hope from different support groups helping me manage my illness. I don't give up easily because I can sense a ray of hope. I'm a survivor. I have written my story to convey hope and inspiration so others can relate and understand and to squash the myths surrounding this disease.

I can't get up. I can't get up. The waves are crashing down on me. I can hear my father laughing. He has thrown me in the ocean again. He thinks it's funny. He gets great pleasure out of hurting me physically and emotionally. This is one of my first memories of my father. I was only 3 or 4 years old. He also used to twist my arms and legs till they hurt and I would cry out in pain.

I was terrified of the dark and had constant nightmares involving water. My great auntie, Lilly who was born from an incestuous relationship, scared me from a young age. She was born deaf and could not look after herself so my Nana did. In my nightmare about water I would always die. The nightmare involving Aunty Lilly was terrifying because she would try and get me and try to kill me. I had these nightmares from a very young age and told no one. I could not turn the bedroom light off before going to bed until I was 16. In the dark I thought I could see people and sometimes spoke to them. When I was about 4 or 5 I had to stay with my Nana and Aunty Lilly for a time. My mother was having an operation on her back. Behind my Nana's house was this creepy place with a chimney. Someone told me that people who were in there would get their arms and legs chopped off and then their bodies were burnt. A siren would sound at noon and when I heard it I would run and hide somewhere because I thought I would lose my limbs.

When I was approximately 4 or 5 I sometimes used to do some form of meditation in the back yard where I would summon up all my energy inside me then release it. After doing so I would feel dead inside. I knew what it felt like to not exist. I used to do this a lot. We had lots of pets and I took great pleasure out of playing with them. When I was 11, I got a diary for Xmas. My diary was full of pets that had passed away. I lost many. It was like a book of death and I still have it to this day. My mother was very strict with me and my sister. We copped many hidings for doing something wrong.

When my youngest sister and brother were born mum had softened a lot. We lived like paupers. Dad had a high paying job but would blow the lot spending money on whatever he wanted. We wore hand me down clothes and barely had enough money left over for rent and food. Apart from spending money, dad would drive like a maniac. He also had numerous affairs with different women. Mum was last to find out. She was shattered. She had just given birth to my brother while he was busy feeding his libido. When I was young, mum and dad were in their bedroom and mum was yelling out. He was raping her and did so often. Mum would come out crying down the hallway. When dad was in his forties he was diagnosed with Bipolar. He had to resign from work. Throughout my father's life he had exhibited classic symptoms associated with Bipolar. Now I know why he acted like he did. I have grown to forgive him. Apart from an incident where when I was in my 20's he used to watch me shower at night. He was outside looking through the bathroom window. I did not confront him about this but I felt dirty and creepy at the thought of it.

I started school at the age of 4. I had a lot of trouble listening and comprehending. The teacher would make me sit under her table as punishment or I was kept in class during morning tea. I spent many a day under her desk. I felt like I was dumb. In grade 4 my teacher used to hit me around the head and grade 7 my teacher didn't like me. I would get migraine headaches all the time because of her treatment toward me. My grades were average to below average till about grade 6 where they picked up a bit. I had lots of friends at primary school. From a very young age I used to draw. I would sketch pictures from Xmas, birthday cards or books. My ability was not picked up until my final year at high school. My art teacher kept a painting I did to show other classes. She didn't want me to leave school and neither did my athletics coach. I excelled in sport, particularly the long jump where I could almost jump 5 metres at the age of 13. I broke two school records. I hadn't been taught how to do the hitch kick at that time so I was still perfecting the long jump. When I was in grades 9 and 10 I submitted some short stories in a competition. All the schools in Ipswich participated. I came second 2 years running.

I also enjoyed poetry. I didn't read much though so I don't know why I had a good vocabulary. When I started high school I became segregated from all my friends that I had at primary school. I had low self-esteem and could not make any friends. I didn't know how to. I sat by myself in most of my classes. Because I was mainly alone I was a sitting duck with the school bullies. They would tease and threaten me. I was often kicked. I was also threatened to be bashed if I didn't let a girl in my class copy my test paper and at one stage she tried to force me to smoke a cigarette. After approximately two years I reported these girls to the headmaster then they left me alone. I was very frightened to report them because I thought things would get worse. I don't know how I managed to do my work with all this going on. My grades suffered but somehow I got straight A's in my final year at school.

Mum suggested I start looking for work so I did. I applied for a job in the public service and got one. In February 1981 aged just 14 I started work there. I was so scared and once again didn't know how to make friends. So I was a loner again. My supervisor found my work very satisfactory and she trusted me to work on different sections. I used a manual typewriter and passed my 60 and 70 typing tests. The office itself became a sort of haven. I would not venture anywhere outside the building. I used to be very shy with low self-esteem and no confidence. That started to change at age 16 when I started drinking. I came out of my shell but then another problem posed itself – and that was when drinking I could become violent and at times promiscuous. The older I got the more I drank, sometimes completely out of control. My moods were disastrous, I started feeling very depressed and had suicidal thoughts. I also had acne which made me feel worse. It was found at the age of 25 that I had a hormone imbalance. I was put on the contraceptive pill and it later went away. I suffered acne for 10 years. At approximately the age of 17 I started on the drug Serapax for my depression. I saw a doctor and he prescribed it for me. It didn't help. One day at work some of the girls asked me how much I weighed. I told them that I weighed 55kg and they seemed shocked. I took this as meaning I was too heavy, so I began starving myself. Eventually my weight dropped to 45kg. Then someone at work started calling me 'Anna-anorexic'. I was in my early 20's when I tried to commit suicide. It didn't matter how much I ate I couldn't put the weight back on. My GP suggested I do weights to build up muscle. It took me 2 – 3 years of hard work. Finally I reached 55kg again. I had transformed my body. I looked muscular and started getting compliments. My self-esteem at this point was very good.

At 17 I had a bad accident. I had a tube of super glue and it was blocked at the nozzle so I cut the end off it without realizing I had it pointing straight at my face. The glue went everywhere. All in my eyes and face, up the mirror and the scissors were stuck on my hand. I shook the scissors off my hand and then ran screaming to the kitchen sink where I began throwing water in my face. Mum would not drive me to the doctor. I pleaded with her but to no avail so dad took me. I knew he would do something sadistic. I got into the car with a bucket of water but after only 5 minutes, I ran out of water. Dad usually drove fast but on this occasion he drove slowly and would not stop anywhere to fill the bucket. Arriving at the doctors he examined my eyes and said they were all scratched. I was taken to the hospital, suffering from shock. They put bandages on my eyes. That's all they could do. I stayed in the hospital overnight. At home being 'blind' I could do most things for myself. Eventually after a couple of weeks my sight returned to normal. I believe that if I hadn't got to the tap so quickly the damage would have become permanent.

Having a cigarette before work one day I was aware of a sense of fear. I didn't know what I was scared of though. Not knowing then that this would ultimately fester into a lifelong condition called Fear Psychosis.

In the year 1992 when I was 26, everybody had to re-apply for their jobs or apply for a promotion. I applied for 3 jobs including my own. The interview went well or so I thought. I asked the panel if anyone would lose their jobs. They did not answer me. Some weeks later some of the workers, me included, were told there was a meeting. I went in the room and knew something was wrong. My best friend was there too. I couldn't believe it. We had lost our jobs. I felt extremely angry, betrayed and sick to the stomach. When I approached those who interviewed me they said that my interview had gone well. I felt like it was a set-up. I used to work my guts out and could do two people's jobs at the same time. I enjoyed high stressful work. Sometime later my best friend and I became re-instated as permanent workers on a project. But the damage was already done. I did not trust anyone anymore. I still felt second rate. Subsequently my work performance was not as it had been before. I had been segregated and that was that.

By the end of 1994 I was bursting into tears at work, hiding in toilets and my nerves were stretched to the limit. I was taking tranquilizers during the day to calm myself. These tablets gave me little relief. I did not know what was happening to me and I was terrified. I began to hate myself more and more because I was faltering badly at my work and I felt like an incompetent idiot. By this time I was an outpatient in hospital and was diagnosed with illogical thinking patterns and severe depression. My speech was very slow at times and I was having delusions. I

in January of 1995 I began seeing a psychiatrist. I was gradually feeling worse. I was confused and felt fearful. I kept forgetting my computer passwords, people's names at work and often did not know what day it was or even what year. I began feeling nauseous on the way to work and when I got there I was shaking. I was no longer social at work and had enormous difficulty relating to people, even my best friend. I could not eat and my sleeping patterns were in a shambles. I felt totally consumed with hate and anger and was becoming violent. I started hallucinating, seeing faces in the dark and occasionally hearing voices. I made two serious attempts at suicide and was hospitalized in the intensive care unit. I was very angry at not succeeding. My supervisor found this out and recommended I see a government social worker but she could find no solution to my problems. During the last days at work I was constantly afraid of losing control, either harming myself or others. I found I could not talk or look at people without crying. I felt compelled to punish myself so I began cutting myself at work with a razor blade. After cutting my forearm I washed the blood away, wrapped my arm with toilet paper, pulled my sleeve down then resumed work. But eventually that was not enough so I contemplated jumping off the roof. I rang my psychiatrist and he told me to “get the hell out of there” and as far as I can recollect that was my last day at work. After retiring from work I thought I would feel much better but thoughts of death and self-mutilation torment my every day. I feel driven to self-destruction and I’m constantly afraid. I don’t know who I am anymore. My weight is now down to 49kg. I hate the sight of myself. One day I wrote in blood on the bathroom mirror the words “I hate you”. That’s how much I thought of myself. I’m terrified of people and panic if I have to go somewhere alone. I need someone I can trust with me. Sometimes I am so depressed I can barely speak or walk and do things for myself.

It is a terrible thing to be afraid every wakeful moment of every day. I feel there is an evil force which has taken control of me and condemned me to a life of hell. If I could see or watch myself being the demented animal I am, creeping along on all fours, rocking or lying on the floor, pulling at my hair, scratching myself dribbling and drooling, sobbing and making inhumane noises I would shoot myself to put myself out of misery.

I started writing a diary in 1994 about how I was feeling.

NOVEMBER 1994

This is not easy for me to write as I am in the early stages of treatment. I am a very confused person at the moment and easily bought to severe mood changes and erratic behaviour There is a medical term for my ‘disability’ which has recently come to my attention. I always knew I had a problem but no one would help me. They would say it’s in your head, think positive. I’ve tried desperately, it doesn’t work. Alternative methods are yet to be explored. One thing for certain though is that this ‘disability’ has sparked a chain reaction of mental and physical conditions I find now totally and utterly out of my control. It has made such an indelible impression on my life, I cannot deal with it alone. I don’t want pity. I want understanding and support. I’m afraid of myself and what I have become. Is what I suffer an illness. Was I born like this? Was I evil in a past life? And is this life my punishment? The feeling I have of being watched or the sense of another person close by indicates to me that I am being monitored. If it sees that I am content or feeling some enjoyment, it will then proceed to cause events which severely disrupt and destroy my dreams. My sleeping pattern is worsening. Tonight I sleep for 2 or 3 hours before awakening. I stay awake 1 to 2 hours, asleep for 1 hour, awake ½ hour, and asleep 1 to 2 hours then get up. I feel nauseous, I don’t want to eat. I’m tired and weak. My heart is racing and I feel extreme panic then after a while it subsides slightly. If I go somewhere the panic will increase. When I find myself in a place or situation alien to me I experience panic so bad that I begin to shake, speech is affected, my heart races like I’m having an asthma attack. Feel a numbness wash over me and I sweat profusely. I think animals are spying on me. They look at me knowingly. The evil force which rules my life knows I love animals and is using them to trap me.

DECEMBER 8 1994

Could not sleep much. I awaken and can't get back to sleep. Feel rat sh*t, really tired. After a couple of hours I am feeling energetic. I go to the gym and say to a worker there that I could go everyday now. I have got the energy but can't stand it when I sweat. Did a workout for 30 minutes then went home. My weight has escalated from 49kg to 83kg now. The drug responsible for my weight gain is called Zyprexa.

DECEMBER 9 1994

Not much sleep as usual. Get up and feel wasted. Go to volunteer work. Feel tired and extremely paranoid. I don't want any strangers to look at me, speak to me, touch me or come anywhere near me. Get to work. Almost all paranoia has disappeared and I'm friendly and social. I am volunteering at the Schizophrenia fellowship. I do heaps of typing but tell the supervisor that I'm scared I'm not good enough to work there. I tell her that my standard of how I used to work in my paid job was much better than I'm doing now. People there tell me how much work I do and how fast I do it. I leave to get the train home. I walk down the road and a man looks at me and I know he wants something. He asks for a smoke so I give him one because I feel sorry for him. Then I notice a blind lady and take her to where she wants to go. Another lady sees what I have done and tells me that it was good of me to help her. I said that's okay, I love helping people. As I walked further I became paranoid again. People were looking at me. Then I noticed a police car in the mall which made me feel even worse. The police always scare me because I think they are after me. I was chain smoking and I wanted to find a seat to sit on so I could have another smoke before getting my train. I saw a seat with a man at one end so I went up and sat right at the other end. I asked him if the cops were always in the mall, and he said they were most of the time. It seems to me that I don't like people approaching me. I will only approach them of my own accord. I have noticed that I have trouble constructing sentences or I will forget what I am talking about. Thoughts of a vendetta and plots of being killed, thinking people and animals can read my mind, constant feeling of dread and/or fear. It feels like if I let my guard down I'm dead.

DECEMBER 21 1994

There are spirits and forces which have patterned my life. I believe in past lives. I was bad. I have committed unspeakable sins. The present life I live is my punishment. No-one can tell me otherwise. I have to pay my dues and learn many lessons. This life is hell. Occasionally, I sense a spirit close by, only when I'm alone though. It watches and studies my behaviour then reports its findings to the 'Supreme Force'. I want to get better and feel happy again. Life's not worth living this way, but I'm afraid. If the 'Supreme Force' notes my progress in life is becoming more comfortable, it will put into action a far more terrible punishment, for example the loss of a limb or the finding of cancer.

END DECEMBER 1994

A foul smell bothered me for a number of days. Smells like excrement, can't locate source or origin. I am noticing that when a person talks to me directly, I acknowledge what they say but remember or understand very little of the conversation.

JANUARY 8 1995

I want to make a will. All avenues of recovery must be explored. When everything has been tried, tested, analysed and evaluated with no substantial improvement, I will terminate my life, but with careful financial provision to those I leave behind.

JANUARY 10 1995

I am waking again during the night several times. I am able to get back to sleep but it is a restless troubled night. I awaken feeling like I need sleep, but am unable to. I feel heavy, dopey and disturbed. Flashes of dreams flitter about during the day. All the dreams are in colour. The medication I'm taking is not helping my depression or anxiety in any way, nor my mood swings.

12:00am

Saw the new psychologist today. I didn't like her. I can tell she is not very experienced. She told me she can't help me after reading some of my notes. She made me feel like a lost cause and inferior. I felt like I was being mocked. I felt the visit to be a complete waste of time. I go home from the visit feeling extremely depressed. Thoughts of cutting myself dominate my mind. I get a razor blade. I hate myself so much. I cut my forearm at first not very deep. The cuts aren't good enough so I slash deeper. Blood starts dripping and running down my arm. I like it. I like looking at it. I can smell the blood. As I make deeper cuts, it feels like my self-hatred is diminishing a great deal. I want to do more but I go and lie down on the bed with a towel wrapped around my arm.

12:00pm

I want to cut myself again. I'm depressed and suicidal. I want my mother. I feel like a child. I want someone to look after me. I ring my mother and tell her what I've done to myself. She is aghast and tells me of my cousin doing the same thing some time past. I tell mum of the visit with the psychologist and what effect she had on me. My mother says that my case is out of the psychologist's depth. That is why she cannot help me. From information I've related to my mother regarding sessions with the psychologist my mother finds faults with her line of questioning. She can see how my behaviour would deteriorate after such a visit. She insists I ring a crisis number straight away. I ring lifeline. A man answers. He is soft spoken and calm. I pour out my problems. His is a very different approach. I tell him how I feel about something. He says "that's not very nice is it?", or "how does that make you feel?" He asks me lots of questions about how I feel about certain things. I'm too scared to ask his name and he doesn't ask for mine. I speak to him for about 1 ½ hours. Thoughts of suicide have diminished.

1:00am

I'm not going to work. I don't feel up to it. I'm weak and tired and my arm would surely attract attention. Later I start to do some gardening. Inevitably my mind turns toward a darker side. Eventually my thoughts are constantly dominated by wanting or needing to cut myself again. I want to see and smell more blood. I think about cutting my other arm then maybe my legs but I'm very tired and have a lay down. I awaken about 2 hrs later and don't feel the need to cut myself.

JANUARY 18 1995

I rang the hospital to see if my new psychiatrist has arrived yet. I want to speak to someone qualified. Because I'm afraid, confused and lost. The psychiatrist has not as yet begun work at the hospital. The woman I am speaking to agrees I need a re-evaluation and re-assessment of my condition. Wow I know this. I've been telling these people my medication is not working. She gives me a number to ring if I find that I'm in an emergency. I'm thinking 'well I'm in that state now your stupid woman'. We end our conversation. As usual I sense an even more overwhelming urge of unworthiness and hopelessness.

10:00-11:30 pm

I proceed to swallow 500mg of Merreril. I remember thinking I should try and vomit to be rid of the tablets. I decide to ride it out. I know the amount I've taken won't kill me. During the course of the night I awaken. I have to go to the toilet. On the first visit I stagger. The second is worse. It is taking me longer. I feel weak. The third visit is literally a living nightmare. It seems that maybe a 1/2hr passed before I reached the toilet. On the way back to bed, I am swaying, staggering and disorientated. Finally outside my bedroom I collapse on the floor, face first. After what seemed like forever I made it to my bed.

JANUARY 19 1995

I sleep all day. My pupils are very constricted. I go off all my medication. The sh*t doesn't work anyway.

JANUARY 20 1995

Can't remember much, still groggy. Can't see properly.

JANUARY 21 1995

Can walk around now but still unsteady. Pupils still constricted. I have hurt my ear, my upper eyelid is bruised and I have a cut near my nose.

My sister and I had a falling out for 10 years until reluctantly I told her about my illness. She thought initially that I was trying to seek attention. This wasn't so. I said to her that if I told her what was wrong with me she would hate me even more. She told me she didn't hate me and so our relationship blossomed. She has been an overwhelming support to me. She understands me now, and I can always turn to her if I am in need for advice.

Approximately 1996 I had a manic episode. I started developing feelings of happiness and euphoria. I remember doing housework and gardening. I was doing things fast and was in a good mood. I started becoming obsessive about anything that was dirty, dusty or out of place. Everything had to be perfect in and outside the house. I was feeling the best I had in 2 years. This is how I felt most of the time I was working before my failed interview. Soon afterwards it got to the stage where I was trying to do three things at once. I was becoming angry because I wanted to do everything at once and I couldn't. I was swearing and working frantically. Then I think I was in the garden. I was admiring my garden and I thought this is great.

My energy and happiness grew stronger. Then I remember sitting on my stool outside and I had a million thoughts racing through my brain. I had so much energy inside me it was electrifying. Then I started to feel euphoric. I was getting higher and higher very, very fast. I felt like a rocket about to launch into space. Suddenly I had the compulsion to run around the streets naked. I thought I was god and had created the planet. I knew then that something was wrong. I thought I was manic. I rang the hospital and spoke to a nurse. He said my speech was racing. I told him I felt like I was losing control. He told me to come in for an assessment but I refused because he couldn't give me a guarantee that I wouldn't be locked up. After much deliberation I announced that I hated that hospital because the patients and staff there treat me like sh*t.

During 1997 I completed two modules at 'PARU'. Those being "How to manage your illness" and "Time management". Throughout the latter module I ceased my medication again. I was 83kg and wanted to lose the weight which had escalated from taking Zyprexa. My mental health subsequently took a turn for the worse. The staff at PARU were unaware of what I had done. They had also offered me counselling which was to take place that year. When I found out PARU was to become obsolete I was completely shattered and started crying. Within a matter of days I was back in hospital. I am starting TAFE soon and don't know now if I will be able to cope without the wonderful support I received. They gave me encouragement and advice and more importantly, they listened. I met a kindly man at PARU called Tony. He has been a godsend to me. We have grown into best friends. He suffers from depression. We have known each other now for 12 years. His mother who is 100 years old has also been my rock. Her name is Jane.

1998

I have been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. I begin my TAFE studies in horticulture. I weigh 64kg now. I'm still not taking my medication. I begin to feel high again. I find the work easy. I love it. I recognize in myself that when I feel high my IQ is higher. I don't know why. One day I ring my psychiatrist and the receptionist answers. I tell her to cancel all my appointments. She asks "Feeling much better are we?" and I respond with "I never feel better" and hang up. So now I have no psychiatrist and taking no medication. Inevitably I fall from my high and dive back into depression. At TAFE now I find everything confusing and I cannot cope any longer. Somehow I attained my Certificate II in horticulture but commencing the next semester in Certificate III, I drop out.

I have a new enemy – 'The devil'. He hovers above me and tries to steal my body. He invades and manipulates my thoughts by sending me messages in my head. One day at my grandmother's place he wanted to me to stab her to death. The urge and thoughts were so distressing I ran outside crying. Another time he wanted me to do the same to my dear cat. The devil is trying to manipulate me. He doesn't want me to have anyone or anything to love. One day he was trying to invade my body so I tried a laundry basket to my back. I looked like a f*cking turtle. Then one day I was listening on my CD player to 'suicide blonde' by INXS and Michael Hutchence was telling me to commit suicide. I was completely transfixed. I contemplated what my headstone would say. 'GONE TO HELL – SEE YA' or 'HERE LIES A F#%KING WEIRDO'.

1999

I have a new psychiatrist. He is a nice man. I am back on medication. One day I show up very distressed. The receptionist asks me what is wrong. I tell her the devil wants me to kill the doctor. She ushers me to a room and makes a drink for me. I tell her I want another person in the room when I see the doctor. After a while I am called in to see him but there is only him and me in the room. I manage to contain myself. My friend Jane tells me to say to the devil 'get lost, you are not welcome here'. So whenever he comes I tell him to piss off. Eventually he goes away but if I think of him I know he will come back.

2000

My cousin Kellie hung herself after a long battle with depression. She lived in Perth for most of her 25 years. I felt so sorry for her and wished I could have been there for her.

I try and gas myself after an overdose taken with alcohol. It doesn't work. I fantasize about hanging myself like Kellie did. Surely that would work.

2001

I begin seeing a great psychiatrist. One who listens to me. Dr Patrick Wong. On my first visit I take notes with me so I could explain how I was feeling. He admitted me straight away. This time to Toowong Private Hospital. It is much better than the public system. No-one wants to know you there. I think in this admission I had shock treatment. Because of this shock treatment my memory is very poor now. I find that shock treatment helps me with depression quite well. I've started taking Clozaril along with other medication.

2005

I have been trying to get hold of my father. I ring him for a number of days to no avail. I am very worried about him. I ring my younger sister and brother and they arrive at my place around 9:00 at night. They find my father dead and decomposed. She rings me and gives me the bad news. I drive to dad's place. The police are there. No-one is allowed to go in. I venture towards the window and can see my father. There is an overwhelming stench in the air. My other sister and her husband Graham show up. My father's body is taken away. I was a pall-bearer at the funeral. I felt so sorry about his demise and the life he lived suffering from Bipolar. He was only 62.

2006

In the year of 2006 I ran out of Clozaril. I was without it for 10 days or so I thought when I found another box. But it was too late. I started hallucinating, hearing voices and was extremely confused. I didn't know what I was doing. I rang a cab to take me to my card game (hoy) which is played on a Monday morning. A cab pulled up and I was talking to the driver. After a while he just vanished before my eyes. I thought this is great. Now I have to ring another cab not realizing at the time that I was hallucinating. Then another cab pulled up and I got in. When I arrived at Hoy I sat outside in the sun. I was hearing voices and I was talking back to them in gibberish. I went inside to my grandmother who also plays. At some stage I couldn't deal the cards anymore. I couldn't understand what was going on. I couldn't even use the public telephone. I was admitted to Toowong Private and spent 9 months of that year in there.

DECEMBER 17 2008

My beloved dog 'Monty' had to be put down today. I can't believe it. I feel suicidal and I want to cut my arms. I go to the hospital a few days later. I am discharged on 15 January 2009.

I am with Blue Care now. A lovely lady named Gay sees me every fortnight. She is such a nice person. She is attentive and encouraging giving me strength to carry on.

2009

I have been accepted into an organization called “open minds’. All the people that go there have a mental illness. A lady called Alyssa is my mentor. She offers great support for me. We have outings every week such as fishing and going to the movies. I enjoy fishing but haven’t caught one as yet. I have lost 20kg in weight and hope to lose as much as I can. But I will not go off my medication again to lose weight. Dr Wong has told me that if I stop my Clozaril I will hear voices constantly and suffer great confusion. I am terrified when hallucinating. It’s like living on the edge of reality. My mother has been a godsend. When in hospital she looks after my cat Tuffy and handles my mail. She has cleaned my house up for me, even going to the extent of washing the curtains and walls which Monty had dirtied. Mum has a new boyfriend. I haven’t met him yet but I can tell that he is a real gentleman.

After many admissions and shock treatment my condition has improved somewhat. I also have what is called psychotic fear. This means I am constantly on guard and in fear of my surroundings and situations. I fear for my life as well. My mental health on a scale of 1-10 is usually about 5-6. Six being the best I can manage. The devil has gone now. Dr Wong persisted with me till he had me on some sort of stable ground. He has never given up on me and since seeing him I have not cut myself or made a suicide attempt. Every day is a battle for me, struggling with this horrible fear. Sometimes I think about giving up but then I start to fight back. I hope that I can inspire others to fight their debilitating illness like I have. Regarding shock treatment, the only downside is memory loss. I have lost almost all of 2006 and other pieces scattered over the years. It is very frustrating. My current diagnosis is severe paranoid schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder and fear psychosis. I haven’t had a manic episode now for years. I live for my cat Tuffy who turns 17 on the 23rd of December 2009 and also for my friends and family. I have to make a life for myself. I’m getting there now. I have a lot of support, and I thank these people wholeheartedly. I’m a survivor.

Geoff Allen's Story

This is a tale of metamorphosis. If it wasn't all true there is NO way I could invent it!

How to summarise over 20 years of being psychotic? Big task!

Let's start at the beginning. My current lifetime began in 1958. At the age of 25, I was diagnosed as having paranoid schizophrenia. This came as quite a shock. I didn't know my experiences had a name and I wasn't aware that this had ever happened to anyone else in human history!

It was a rude awakening to find the police in my bedroom early one morning and that they could just whisk me away to the loony bin. My parents had threatened to do so but I always thought they were bluffing. I had become very aloof and my behaviour was what most would call "weird". Looking back now, I see they only did what they thought was best. So absolutely, no hard feelings.

The shocks kept coming as I discovered that along with the diagnosis came medication. Even today I cannot hear the word Haloperidol without it sending a shiver up my spine. The medication was supposed to help me. Instead, I experienced the WORST side-effects imaginable. I was restless but that word is so inadequate to describe the trauma! I was constantly pacing and could not settle down for more than a minute or two let alone read one single page of a book.

I honestly don't know how I survived it all. I must have had a guardian angel looking out for me! That whole experience showed me that the cure was worse than the illness. So, for the next 19 or so years I had to rely on my instincts and my wits to survive.

To summarise what those years were like - I suppose the simple description is that I had good and bad days. It was like being Jekyll & Hyde. On the bad days, I experienced volcanic anger or mind-numbing depression. I was very generous with my anger - I included nearly everybody. I was angry at most people for being spineless enough to settle for normality. I had many cynical thoughts. I'm not sure we need to go into too much gory detail but here are a couple:

"If human beings started being honest, the suicide rate would skyrocket!"

"Most of the human race are unfit to be parents but nobody is stopping them."

"This world will never change because the ONLY people who reproduce are VERY good at lying to themselves."

"If god really wants to punish me, he should send me to Heaven. The thought of spending eternity with god and all his fawning sycophants is much more than I can stomach!"

You catch the drift - needless to say, I was very frustrated because there wasn't much I could do about such anger and cynicism except blow my brains out or go totally crazy. I came VERY close to doing both. Again, I think someone was watching out for me.

I should have said that one of my symptoms was that I felt like I was in telepathic communication with someone or something. Possibly aliens. Tell THAT to a shrink and schizophrenia is an automatic diagnosis, just in case you were wondering - even if there really are aliens :)

Anyway, the good days were mind-blowing! The content of my thoughts would be very poetic - I wrote nearly 200 poems and they all felt as if they were being "dictated" to me by the aliens or whoever was putting thoughts into my skull. You can see a selection of these poems at my old website -

http://member.melbpc.org.au/~grjallen/writing.html

Let me see ... where were we ... I lived this roller-coaster for over a decade. Almost seems like someone else's life now that I look back on it!

There came a time when my dark side became the dominant experience and I was off to see the shrinks again. This time they put me on a treatment order which basically means I was compelled to take Olanzapine, which is a newer drug than I had experienced such traumatic side-effects on. I was very apprehensive about taking it but I have been pleasantly surprised as the side-effects are not at all distressing.

So, now to the metamorphosis part ...

Again, I take little or no credit for this change. It seemed to come from a higher power, some might call it God. Not quite what a cynical atheist would expect! The meds may have helped too to some extent.

The old anger has gone completely. It is really a miracle but I can't explain it to myself let alone anyone else! I suppose the only thing left for me to do is spell out what I have learned ...

For most of my adult life I was an angry, cynical atheist. If you had told me that I would get right into meditation and reading books like "Conversations with God" and treating everyone with compassion, I would have absolutely LAUGHED in your face! So, I have learned to expect the unexpected!

I have learned that suffering can do two things to you. It can make you bitter and twisted or it can make you more compassionate. I have experienced both extremes. I have FAR more peace of mind now that I practice unconditional compassion.

I have learned that meditation is NOT about making your mind go blank and I would urge everyone to try it. It can transform your life in ways you can't even imagine. In the words of David Michie:

If meditation was available in capsule form, it would be the biggest selling drug of all time. It has been scientifically proven to deliver highly effective stress relief, boost our immune systems and dramatically slow the ageing process. It has also been shown to make us much happier and more effective thinkers. Given all the physical and psychological benefits, why aren't more of us doing it?

From "Hurry Up & Meditate"

For more myths about meditation try this link -

http://www.wildmind.org/blogs/on-practice/the-top-ten-myths-about-meditation

I have learned that thoughts are VERY powerful. The best advice that sums this up is as follows:

A Native American elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner: "Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time." When asked which dog wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, "The one I feed the most."

The following is probably just another way of stating the previous idea. To me, wisdom means that you recognise that your peace of mind depends on the kind of thoughts you entertain. Especially thoughts about other people. The thoughts that lead to a tranquil mind are forgiveness, compassion and gratitude

I have learned that unconditional love can transform your life. First you have to learn to love yourself before you can love others. Here are a couple of links on this important matter:

http://lawofattractionsecrets.com/blog/louise-hays-12-commandments-how-to-love-yourself/

http://www.kalimunro.com/tips_self-love.html

http://www.abundancetapestry.com/how-to-love-yourself-in-17-ways/

http://www.gems4friends.com/affirmations/articles/attract-love.html

I have learned that forgiveness is crucial to your happiness. It needs to be a permanent attitude.

"To forgive is the highest, most beautiful form of love. In return, you will receive untold peace and happiness."
~ Robert Muller

I have learned to be grateful. Here's a list from my notebook - I read it often to remind myself NOT to take ANYTHING for granted:

- the gift of life itself

- the fact I can eat healthy food and the many beings responsible for growing and transporting it and the cashiers at the supermarket etc.

- the sun that helps all plants to grow and ultimately feeds us all

- knowledge of how to be healthy physically, emotionally and spiritually

- the skills of authors and poets and musicians and singers and sportsmen and I'm probably leaving a few out :)

- wisdom contained in so many books I have read over the past ten years. I will list several of them at the end of this piece

- the beauty of nature and the photographers and documentary makers that capture it

- my own imagination as well as that of many writers and composers throughout history

- laws of nature that make this universe exquisitely tuned to support intelligent life like some humans. See this page:

http://member.melbpc.org.au/~grjallen/universe.htm

- I am grateful that Olanzapine has FAR less side-effects than Haloperidol

- How could I leave love out of my list of "things" to be grateful for ... in ALL its forms

I have learned that there are many CHEAP things can lift my mood such as going for a brisk walk; doing yoga; eating healthy food; chanting and meditation. Plus a good laugh on a regular basis. reading a good book can also be uplifting. Watching a nature doco when I can't actually be out in nature. Surfing the web is also a mood enhancer - if you seek out the good stuff that is out there in cyberspace. Obviously a lot of overlap between the things I am grateful for and things that lift my mood!

I have learned to take wisdom from all the various religions I once dismissed as nonsense:

"Like the bee gathering honey from the different flowers, the wise person accepts the essence of the different scriptures and sees only the good in all religions."

~ Gandhi

I have learned to focus my mind on the present moment rather than worrying about the future or regretting the past. For MUCH more on this subject, try these books:

"The Power of Now" and "A New Earth" both by Eckhart Tolle

I have learned that it is possible to learn from everyone who crosses your path.

I have learned that the Dalai Lama is a wonderful teacher. Here's some of his advice:

Spend 5 minutes at the beginning of each day remembering we all want the same things (to be happy and be loved) and we are all connected to one another.

Spend 5 minutes -- breathing in -- cherishing yourself; and, breathing out cherishing others. If you think about people you have difficulty cherishing, extend your cherishing to them anyway.

During the day extend that attitude to everyone you meet.

Practice cherishing the "simplest" person (clerks, attendants, etc.) or people you dislike.

Continue this practice no matter what happens or what anyone does to you.

These thoughts are very simple, inspiring and helpful.

The practice of cherishing can be taken very deeply if done wordlessly, allowing yourself to feel the love and appreciation that already exists in your heart.

I have learned that peace of mind is experienced when you don't feel inferior to anyone and you don't feel superior to anyone. You are unique and so is everyone else.

I have learned that every experience I have is an opportunity for greater growth

I have learned that we do tend to reserve our fondest thoughts for those who agree with us and who are most like us. I have found that spiritual practices can help us generate kind thoughts for all beings.

I have learned to not allow myself to become so hypnotised by the content of my mind that I lose the essential mystery of my own existence.

So, there you have it. I really do wish I had a better way of describing step-by-step how this metamorphosis happened to me. Then you'd have a do-it-yourself guide to transforming all your negative emotions. The metamorphosis still puzzles me greatly to this day. I am incredibly grateful naturally. I still have no IDEA why some people suffer and are

NOT transformed by their experience. Just one of MANY questions I'd like to ask God. I guess there are unanswered questions no matter what you believe.

I hope I've given you more than just a far-fetched story. Here are some books I highly recommend:

"Conversations with God" by Neale Donald Walsch and his other books which includes "Home with God"
"Awakening the Buddha Within" by Lama Surya Das
"Emissary of Light" by James Twyman
"The Dalai Lama's Little Book of Wisdom"
"The Art of Happiness" by the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler
"When Things Fall Apart" by Pema Chodron
"1001 Smartest Things Ever Said"
"The Lost Art of Compassion" by Lorne Ladner
"Mastery of Love" by Don Miguel Ruiz
"God, Actually" by Roy Williams
"The Meditation Bible" by Madonna Gauding
"The Everyday Meditator" by Osho
"Siddhartha" by Herman Hesse
"The Monk who sold his Ferrari" by Robin Sharma
"Soul Food" by Kate Kippenberger
"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" by Douglas Adams
"Thoughts without a Thinker" by Mark Epstein
"The Book of Love" by Kathleen McGowan
"The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho and other books by this author
"The Three Christs of Ypsilanti" by Milton Rokeach
"Native Wisdom for White Minds" by Anne Wilson Schaef

If that's not enough 4 you - drop me a line and I can give you more books and sites.
grjallen@hotmail.com

R. J. P.W.'s Story

My mental illness where it began

I was twenty five when I first had a problem with mental illness. It cost me more than $3000 on a credit card because I was running around in rent-a-cars all over New South Wales and parts of South Australia. I also spent the money I had accumulated in my bank account, money that I had been saving to put down as a deposit on the house my parents were buying. We had been there for six years and it was my hope to purchase the home (the first we would ever own) and finish paying it off. However, my father had other ideas and decided to sell while I was in Castlemaine working for a man who did not even pay me in the end.

My father went his way and my mother and I were left to find our own way. We first went to live with a friend of the family in the local area and later we stayed with another friend of the family who lived in an inner suburb of Melbourne. It was from here that I took off looking for greener pastures only to get myself into more trouble than Moses. Including a stay in prison for a couple of months after having been caught with a match box of marijuana. I was in court in Wagga Wagga NSW where the judge said he thought I was a drug dealer, which I was not! The only thing that I was is a pot smoker.

But this was after I had been to Newcastle in a rent-a-car and upon returning to Sydney and being asked by the service station manager to wait while he did the paperwork; in fact he went out the back and rang the police. After taking me to the police station one of the officers reached over not even looking into my bag but just putting his hand in and immediately pulling out the match box. Upon being asked I told them I did not even have a match box in my bag let alone drugs. During this time I never saw a psychiatrist even although a judge said I should be seen by one.

Too much happened during that time to go into detail about here but if you would like to find out a few snippets about the things that happened Impact Support Services (59 Warrigal Road, Oakleigh VIC 3166) is putting out a book called, 'Rainbow Rhymes and Writings,' and some of my stories are in it. This was the first time that I ever had any trouble with a mental illness, but as my life went on I was to experience many other times after 1989/90 that were outside of my mental ability to control. Between 1980 and 1989 I married, had a family, (the first was a miscarriage followed by two boys) and was separated through my own wrong doing.

While I was in Queensland I was getting counselling by a pastor who had a specific ministry, specific that is, to my problem. I was in Brisbane for about 20 months and during that time I would go every Tuesday to my counsellors home where I would do some filing for him then later on in the evening they would put on a barbeque for a number of those who went to him and his wife for guidance and counselling for their particular problems. So I was attending these counselling sessions for most of the time that I lived in Brisbane. When I was sent from Bundaberg to Toowoomba this man came down there one time and brought with him my bag which had been left at his place. Once he knew I was there he arranged for me to be picked up to go to a local church. We are still friends and in contact from time to time.

During 1992 I had another period of three months in a prison followed by five months in the prison mental health wards, both in Queensland. I left there on only one tablet and for the next 20 months I was still only on one tablet. Then someone from my past turned up in

1995 and I had to leave Brisbane and moved up to Maryborough where I stayed in a men's' hostel, then later I was able to get into a bungalow belonging to a strange family. This was in 1995 and I was there for two months until I became very fearful for my life as I had had a contract put out on my life in 1990. Now there had been two men turn up who I was fearful of and who made it clear what they were there for. One in Brisbane and the other in Maryborough.

Thankfully I was able to get away in both cases. However, the second time it was because of fear that I had a breakdown and was taken up to Bundaberg hospital by the manager of the men's hostel. I can remember waking up one day not really knowing what was going on around me. The next thing I know, I was being dragged between two men to a waiting car then I must have passed out. I had been drugged or to put it a little more genteel, sedated. This all happened in 1995. Little did I know that this was to be the start of what I can only describe as the beginning of a nightmare.

The drive to Toowoomba took some 4 hours and I was totally unaware for the whole time until we were passing the township of Toowoomba. I was taken to the Bailey Henderson Hospital where I was placed in what one could only class as prison ward which had barrels over the cyclone wire fences. In the centre of the complex there was an open space, that is to say there was no roof; it was here that we had to smoke if it wasn't raining. When it was raining we had to smoke in a really small room with a view into the courtyard.

For my first two weeks I was put out onto the back verandah and because I was under heavy sedation, whenever I stood up I would fall forward and the nurse who was with me the whole time would have to grab me to stop me from falling over; this went on for at least a week. Add to this that I was placed in a cell with two locked doors and the light on night and day. There was no blankets or sheets just a canvas covered doona; if you could call it a doona. Having the light on all the time only added to my troubles, seeing that I could not sleep with the light on all night.

When I first arrived they did not try to re-diagnose me, instead they just took the diagnoses that had been given in 1992 by the psychiatrists at the prison hospital. This presented many problems for me during the cause of me internment, oh sorry, I meant admission. Once I had been put into the mainstream population after the first two weeks, although I was able to catch up on some much needed sleep, I found that they were changing my medications about every two months because they were treating me for the wrong illness or a wrong diagnoses had been the real reason for this constant change in medication.

After two month I was released or should I say removed from this prison, sorry, ward into another less secure ward called Clouston or something like that. Here is where thing seemed to get worse. To start with I was not ringing my family; in fact they did not even know where I was. It wasn't until someone there told me that there was a call for me on the pay phone that contact was once again established. Even then I still was not ringing my mother or sister also I had no contact with my own family.

There was at least one good thing that happened; it was during a time when the weather was somewhat cold and rainy. We all had to walk some distance to the massive dining room for our meals but for some unexplained reason I was made to stay back with only a few people to have my meals in the ward. It rained for quite some time so I was glad I could stay in the ward, others were not so lucky.

There was a time when a guy from prison came to that ward, but he did not want to be there. One day he ripped a door off one of the showers. This man put the fear of God into me and even although he was sent back to prison I could not go anywhere near the showers for some considerable time. I had a lump on the back of my neck and wanted to have it checked out by a doctor, so they arranged for me to be taken to the local hospital. However once I arrived there they had no idea what I was there for and they began to do tests on me; hooking me up to a heart diagnostic machine and other test saw me having to remove my pants; the smell must have been bad as they recoiled backward away from me. They never did get to the real reason why I was there in the first place. Upon returning to the hospital ward I had to have a shower but I was still somewhat scared while in a shower.

The months rolled by a total of 10 months plus the two months in the prison and that without ever having done anything wrong. I remember one time when they had a young new nurse on duty; she had her certificate for handling medicines. One night she was on handing out medicines and when she came to give me my medication she just grabbed drugs from the shelf without ever looking at what she had grabbed. I told her that these were not the same drugs as I had been given the night before but she said they were. The next night the same thing happened so I refused to take them and made her mistake known to the other nurses on duty. A mixture of the wrong drugs issued in this manner can have fatal consequences; her incompetents could have caused the death of any one of those she issued drugs to. From that time on I never saw her again.

After twelve months my time there was coming to a close but they would not let me return to Melbourne my home city. Instead they wanted me to spend time in a boarding house to see how I would cope in the community. While I was in the boarding house I tried to strike up a conversation with some of the people without much glory. There were not too many people who could hold an intellectual conversation or even small talk for that matter. As a result of this I spent most of my time during the day laying on my bed only coming out for cups of tea or meals and listening to Christian music on my tape player. Apart from that there was the occasional stroll down to the township to do some shoplifting, oh no, I mean window shopping.

There was a time when I decided to take a trip to Melbourne; so I went to the local travel agents and booked my plane and bus fare. Catching a cab to the bus depot and then the hour or so trip to Brisbane. From Roma Street bus terminal to the airport then the plane which took 70 minutes to reach Tullamarine airport in Melbourne. A feeling of great relief came over me at being back in my home town some 40 kilometres east of the C.B.D. While there I stayed at my mothers, however, I became very paranoid even although I was with my mother. I was meeting my family more or less on a daily basis in the city but this turned out to be a very hard exercise in the state I was in. I was in Melbourne for one week and spent the whole six nights at my mothers.

Upon leaving my mothers I was very paranoid about the exercise ahead of me. That is getting to the airport and making my connection with the plane. Once there I found that my plane had been delayed for about an hour, this made me even more paranoid because I thought I would miss my bus connection back to Toowoomba. As I was walking down through the terminal I looked to my left as I was passing one of the loading bays and to my surprise there was the wife of my counsellor from Brisbane. Thank God she was able to stay with me once we reached the bus terminal at Roma Street to make sure I got the next bus. Arriving back in Toowoomba later in the evening I got a cab back to the boarding house and went straight to bed.

The very next morning I told the owner that I would have to return to the hospital and he was not the least bit concerned that I left all my belongings and returned by taxi. Later that day one of the nurses from the hospital went and packed all my things into plastic bags and brought them to me. I was in the hospital for two weeks before being discharged. Only this time I was allowed to return to my home city. The people who I had come to know gave me a fond farewell and in a way I was somewhat saddened at having to say good bye to them. However, once I reached my sisters, where I would stay for only two weeks, all the thoughts and feeling of the past year and two and a half months of my incarceration seemed to vanish.

Prior to leaving Toowoomba they had made contact with the Mental Health Service in Frankston, Victoria. This meant that I would have to go to the MHS as soon as I arrived back in Melbourne and from then on I would have to report there to see a psychiatrist on an ongoing basis for as long as I was in the area. Once I left my sisters I was able to get a flat at the back of a house that was being occupied by some drinkers. I was there for six years and during that time I had many admissions to the Frankston Hospital. However, in all that time no one ever suggested that I should have ECT electroconvulsive therapy, better known as shock treatment.

One occasion I can remember I had been in hospital and been discharged, for some reason I felt I was not able to cope. I went to my sister’s place where my mother was staying and I spent the night there. The next day I walked out before anyone else was up; all I had on were my pants and socks. I walked from my sisters all the way to my place where I was greeted by the man from the front house who said, “Get away from here, we don’t want you around here.” So I went and sat at the bus stop just around the corner. Before too long my niece turned up in her car and amazingly saw me sitting there, she took me back to my sisters and my case manager was contacted. This was just before I moved into a transitional housing flat in Frankston.

There was another time that I can remember well but am unable to tell why I did what I did. I had been placed in Acacia Lodge for one night not long after I had been in hospital. During the night I walked out and went through Frankston all the way to the other side of the township where there are bends in the road, then I walked onto the beach and while it was still dark I walked into the water fully clothed.

A couple of times I could hear the voices of people I knew calling me to swim saying they would hold me up. Thankfully I did not do so but rather I came out of the water by which time it was getting light and people were coming down to the beach walking their dogs. I continued on down the beach until I came to Seaford, where I left the beach to enter the side streets still heading in the direction of my flat. Later I found myself walking in the tee tree along the railway line. Then for no apparent reason I turned back toward Frankston. I was on the Beach Road when a man who I knew stopped and picked me up and took me to Impact in Douglas Grove, Frankston. Later I walked to the hospital where they said, “Why are you here you were only discharged the other day.” Once they contacted my case manager they found out that I was to have been admitted to the psych ward.

One thing I can say about Frankston hospital is that at least everyone had their own locked cupboard to put their clothes in. I cannot remember how many times I was admitted into Frankston hospitals psych ward, but I do know there were a lot of them during the course of the six years that I was living in Chelsea. Once I moved into the transitional housing flat in Frankston I did not have another admission to the hospital for the whole twelve months that I was there. At the end of that time I had made my way up to the top of the list for permanent accommodation and seeing I had turned 55 I was given a place in a retirement village.

While I had the option of either taking or leaving the offer, in reality if I had said no I would have gone back down the list and would have had to wait longer to get into another place. After having been taken down to look at my new abode with my new case manager and having seen some of my future neighbours I began to become depressed. By the time I got to my new address I was already in a state of depression. It wasn't long before I had to be admitted to the Monash Medical Centre's P block. (P for psychiatric.) Never had anyone suggested to me that I needed shock treatment but here in this God forsaken hospital, where I was incarcerated, I was told that I would need ECT (electroconvulsive therapy) a fancy way of saying shock treatment.

Shock treatment is an archaic means of introducing electricity into the brain which is supposed to stimulate the brain and make the recipient better, ha, ha. The only thing is that they tell you that you will experience some short term memory loss. However, there is just one problem, in fact you lose all or most of your memory for the entire time that you are in hospital and it does not return within two months. It never returns at all.

For some time I would not give my permission, as forms had to be signed by me before anything could be done. One of the nurses assured me that there was only a small amount of voltage used and that I would not experience any bad effects. Had I been told the truth that in fact there would be as many as 400 volts but a small wattage, I would never have consented to the procedure. The truth is that I never did get my memory back, although, when I returned latter to that ward I could recall some of the staff, but not my stay there.

I was in that hospital from the 25th of May until the 7th of July 2004 and upon being discharged I returned to my new flat. Unfortunately my case manager from Southern Community Mental Health Service did not introduce me to a mental health day program in Oakleigh, Victoria. Instead I found myself with more time on my hands and nothing to do with it except to go to places like Southland Shopping Centre or to my sister's place. As to the latter I would find myself turning up there late at night, in fact one night it was about 10pm. Then on the 30th of July I got into some trouble, I went to me doctor that same night, thankfully he saw me around 7pm that night. The next day he rang the CATT team and soon they were at my door and taking me back to the hospital.

My mind was still not functioning all that well but I was able to give some details of what had happened to one of the CATT team members while in the car on the way to the hospital. He asked me if he could tell the police what I had told him and I agreed. Needless to say I was in hospital until early August. Once I returned home I had the worry of not knowing when the police would knock on my door. There was one good thing that happened and that was that my case manager took me to Oakleigh where I was introduced to one of the workers. I started there and have been going there for more than six years. I had enrolled in the art group and am still with that group except for a short time during the winter months and while I had to attend court. I was also in the writing group which has been most enlightening and there has been much encouragement both from the leaders and group members.

I can give the people from Impact Support Services the best recommendations as they have worked wonders for my recovery as well as those of others who attend there on a regular basis. While I was doing work in the writing group, I was told, I suggested we put a book together of all our works as well as the writings of other members of the Options program, and we did. Because it was my idea I put many hours into typing up peoples work on my home computer, taking up to an hour to copy out one page. However, I felt somewhat deflated in spirit when I found that no one wanted to do anything with the book the next year. Thankfully, the following two years saw more work going into the book and finally the book going to the printer.

During the following months I met my current partner who is an amazing person and very understanding who has the ability to receive messages from the universe (or God, call it what you will) but these predictions come to pass more often than not. He has stood by me while others were closing me out. I went into hospital on two other occasions during our relationship and to spite the fact I went astray by seeking greener pastures, I was taken back. Only thing is that I lost the trust of all of his family and friends. But then I think they would be asking why he was still with me and why on earth he had not left me and find someone better?

On one of these admissions I was treated with the utmost contempt by some of the nursing staff in the psych ward at Monash Medical Centre. On one occasion I was allowed to go only to my own flat and nowhere else, I was told I would have to be back by 4pm and it was mid-winter. We were held up at the railway crossing for twelve minutes and as a result we did not get back until 4.15pm. Upon returning to the ward there was one of the most objectionable nurses I have ever had the displeasure of knowing. She would not listen to my friends reasoning as to why we were held up and said she was going to say I was half an hour late in her report.

There were many other things that happened upon my admissions into that place of terror. I say terror because I can still recall the time when they brought out the dead body of a woman who died when she was given shock treatment and her body was wheeled into the passage outside of the room where these tortures are carried out.

Another time I remember I had admitted myself into the emergency department at that hospital and without my knowledge they made me involuntary so that when I got to the ward I learned of my involuntary status and became angry but not dangerous. Without my knowing the nurses called for security, who came to me and treated me as if I were the most dangerous person there. They manhandled me into a cell with only a rubber bed, removed, by force, my shoelaces, belt, watch and even my handkerchief all while forcing me down onto the bed.

This then made me even more upset, understandably so, so I tried to punch out the glass window only to find out it was not glass. The end result of this was that I broke the bone in my hand. The next day I knew my hand was swollen but was unaware the bone was broken. Once I became aware of it I told them but they did not put on a full cast only a half cast which was wrapped to my arm with a loose bandage, as a result my hand was not healing properly, in the end I had to take off the cast and let my hand heal without it. If I had not done that my bone would have set on an angle.

The one thing I can never understand is why the visiting hours for the main part of the hospital are from 8am to 8pm while the visiting hours for the psych ward are from 4pm to 8pm. For the life of me I can't work out why this is so. Are we to dangerous to have visitors all day or is it because they don't want anyone to see what they do in the morning with those who are having shock treatment? If anyone can tell me why this is necessary, by all means do so! Are we second class citizens? And why are we locked in when some of us

are able to cope in the community, why are we not allowed to go out for the day alone or even to make our way home for some time out and return in the evening?
Another thing I was not happy with is that there are no locks on the cupboards where we keep our clothing, so many items go missing. I lost two mobile phones in that ward and they only ever replaced one of them. I had handed my phone to one of the night nurses late one evening asking him to put it in the safe. When I went to get it the next day it was gone. It had never even been put in the book that I had handed it in, plus, I was told the safe was locked at night so why didn’t he tell me to keep it until morning.

Another thing is why are people in the main part of the hospital allowed to keep their mobile phones with them while we have to hand ours in. Plus if our mobile has a camera we are not allowed to keep them on us during the day. As if we are going to go around taking pictures of people in the ward. This is not the case in the medical wards the only thing they have to do is turn off their phones after 8pm. While we are not allowed to keep our phones overnight. Another thing that puts me out is every time I have an admission the psychiatrist Dr Camelleri takes me off all my usual medications and puts me on a whole new drug regime, that include a drug that has been involved in a law suite in the USA at that time. This drug has been responsible for people in the USA committing spontaneous murder, violent acts and suicide. That drug is Effexor XR and he had me on what can only be classed as an overdose at 475mg.

Each time I was discharged I had to go through the process of getting back onto my usual medications and this often took some time. Then there were the injections which I had to endure because in time past when I would become unwell I would forget to take my medication and the end result would be that I would end up missing or not taking my medication at all. This then gave then the idea I was noncompliant regarding my medication, when in fact I may just have been too ill to remember to take them. Mental illness is a terrible thing to suffer with because you do not appear to be sick and people just think you are putting it on. But just think one day you may be affected by a mental illness even although you have lead a normal life up until you become depressed or maybe even manic, then all of a sudden your whole life is turned upside-down.

I am afraid of psychiatrists because of the power they have to have you committed into a hospital psych ward. It used to take four ordinary people to have a person committed or otherwise the police would have to take you to the hospital and wait until you were admitted; but it only takes one psychiatrist to have a person committed or two members of the CATT team will come to your home and tell you to pack a bag and they will wait and watch while you do so, then they take you directly to the psych ward via a rear entry. Once in the hospital ward you are completely at the mercy of the psychiatrist who can give you any drug he sees’ fit to give you and you have no say in the matter. I was told I am not to go off my medications ever, yet once in a psych ward I am taken off all my medication.

Joanna's Story

Fragmented Cuts

I have been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder traits and have written the following passages that depict the way I feel during particular emotionally challenging moments in my life.

Obsessions

Why is it that I must always have an obsession? Without one my internal world feels like a flat desert shroud by grey sand looked down upon by grey sky, not a cloud in sight because even that would add character, something to grab hold of. Both sand and sky occupy my eye's vision, never changing, never asking if there is anything else out there.

The obsession with obsession began as early as I can remember. As a very little girl I wanted people to like me - other pupils, my parents' friends, my few friends' parents, but most of all I wanted my parents to like me, my mum. It was my obsession to be as important to her as my brother was. He didn't even have to try. Unfortunately he was born having one sickness after another. We had been given this small bird with long spindly arms and legs and a beak that never closed, not to take in food but to scream; a bird with a domino effect of illnesses. Well of course my mum didn't have any place in her life or heart for me anymore. The time and love I was given seemed pretend, like something she had to do because it was the right thing. It was like a mother burying her child's pet and having a mini funeral because 'it's the right thing to do'. So from the droplets of nurturing and real love I managed to squeeze out of my mum when the little bird wasn't around, I encountered the obsession of willing my mum to like me. I would try to do everything my parents wanted - do well at school, go to Sunday School, keep my clothes clean and my socks pulled up, my shoes shiny, and eat those putrescent brussel sprouts with my roasts and shepherds pies. Even though I tried to be the perfect daughter because I really did think I was so lucky to be born with the most perfect parents in the world (they even had perfect Mum and Dad names) I don't think they saw me as the perfect child. With all these thoughts and idealisations it is no wonder my poor little head was tormented by interludes of unhealthy images and afflictions. I became obsessed with people vomiting or not vomiting, and never wanting to vomit myself, although I would worry myself so much into it I actually would vomit. I had routines. Forty scrubs each time I had a bath; three times to check my bedroom everywhere for ants and spiders; counting my teeth three times so I would never have to wear braces (it actually worked and my teeth are now surprisingly straight). These routines were my obsessions, my key to opening the stiff door to satisfaction.

And then my obsession was wanting to do well at school. I wanted to make my parents happy and I thought that as I was quite the opposite of popular and had bullies instead of friends, I would focus on being a good student. That idea spiralled though. I was the kitten that scratched and climbed the fly-screens that grew into a placid, quiet and good-natured cat, in reverse. When I went to university I did as my dad wanted me to even though I knew I didn't want it myself. My brain became overwhelmed, not with obsessions but with words, methods, phrases I couldn't understand. How could anyone? And then came my next obsession. How was I going to tell my parents I couldn't do it anymore and that I had more than just hating uni as my deep dark and sordid secret? These obsessions ate away at me, at my mind like a toothless lizard slowly gnawing away at the insides of my brain. I couldn't tame the lizard any more than I could tame the revolting flavour of brussel sprouts. In a borderline rage I tried to do the apparent unthinkable even though I don't think it really is unthinkable at all, not when you enter the realms of the subconscious; that dungeon area of the brain I think all borderlines are blessed with; the dungeon where you transform into an entirely other being and hit, thrash, punch, pierce, kill. It's not a pretty dungeon at all, rather ugly in fact. Something pulled me away from that window on the twelfth floor but I never actually managed to meet the force that did, or at least I didn't get to know it well enough to name it.

It was then that my next obsession popped up like the berserk head of a Jack in the box. It was not something new entering my life but something I needed to explore with full vigour, full verve, to mollify an intense need in me that was draining me to my last drop of normality. I questioned myself constantly. Was I or wasn't I? It was a question that burned incessantly in my mind, branded its copyright on the grey matter of my brain. So I researched in secret. No-one knew of the alternative newspapers I kept hidden under my bed, the 'abnormal' books I read but my obsession was finding out more about the world I desperately wanted to be a part of, the world I knew I belonged to, the world I knew I didn't belong to. It was something I had to find out though, whether I belonged there or not, or whether the constant empty feeling of abnormal was purely because I was different to other human beings. I was convinced I was an outsider, from another planet even though I don't believe in aliens. I looked human, the rejected human, but I was still human. I had to find out if I was gay or not.

Emotions

You crave emotion; you crave feeling, anything to take you away from the realm of numbness, the realm of being frozen within your own mind - your neurotransmitters at a standstill in your brain, at red traffic lights that refuse to turn to green. You are in a world not of sadness, not of anger, not of happiness but one with no words to describe the boredom of bleakness.

Then when something enters your world to turn those traffic lights green it does with such force, such vigour that the neurotransmitters accelerate with speed and avidity. And that emotion you craved is so powerful you are sure you never experienced it before. You want nothing, no-one to take it away from you, the emotion that burns a flame inside of you, a flame ablaze with passion, intensity and happiness. The flame takes over your body, encapsulates your mind and captures your soul. It kneads away at your stomach, glows through your heavy pumping heart.

But it takes just one tiny trigger to erupt that flame, a trigger not noticeable to anyone but you, something anyone else would miss but which you seize and squeeze, mould into all obnoxious proportions. And the flame is on its journey to explosion. Your heart glows furiously, your stomach kneads rapidly, your head pounds with obsessive phrases replaying over and over in your mind - 'how could you?' 'you're pathetic' 'you should be dead'. How could you have let it get out of control? How could you have felt too much? Why are you so stupid for allowing the flame to ignite in the first place? You are so fu**ing stupid!

You know you have come too far. Your emotion is quickly entering the realm of the unrestrained. It will jump swiftly over that wall and take you to a world you know only too well but where you know you shouldn't be. A world where you don't care what you do to yourself, a world where you want to hurt yourself, a world where there is no turning back once you are there. And once you are in that world and abide by its rules you are taken back to civilisation. It is the only way you can turn that green light off, the red light on indefinitely. It is the only way you can tame that rampant flame, and for a moment that world is your comfort, your saviour, a place only you can enter, a world just for you.

You ask yourself if it is better to live with the traffic light at red or the traffic light at green. The red is safe but you crave more, you crave that intensity. Your mind is boring at red. The green is electrifying but can spiral out of control. All or nothing. Everything and nothing.

I write this as you rather than me because it is difficult ascribing emotions to myself right now but I write instead of entering the forbidden world.

Boredom.

For want of a better word, what do we call this? Is it boredom? Anxiety? Restlessness? How do I describe this feeling of wanting, needing to be still when the fidget takes over my being, possession of my body? The fidget touches my mind, tenaciously caresses my thoughts and inveigles its way in, only to intertwine the thoughts and send them into disarray. My body frets, is uneasy as the thoughts protrude in all directions - no pattern, no order. How can the body, the mind cope without order, without organisation?

The thoughts rapidly change from one to another. Boredom with repetitious tasks.

Same repetitious keystrokes.
Same repetitious mouse clicks.
Tedium.
Boredom.

My heart tempts the fidget and watches in awe as it struggles through restless agitated veins. Veins, arteries, capillaries filled with nervous blood staggering to required destinations. My heart clobbers against the wall of my chest, each beat sending chemical angst to the cells of my blood. My throbbing heart sends angry pulses armed with flurries of trepidation to all areas of my body and drums an all too familiar beat in my ears.

Move in my chair.
Restlessness.
Grind my teeth.
Restlessness.
Flick my pen.
Restlessness.

To my stomach the fidget spurs, sending an occupation of lively butterflies. They flutter blindly into each other, into the walls of my stomach, directing waves of nausea throughout.

Check my phone.
Boredom.
Grind my teeth.
Anxiety.

And down to my legs the fidget travels, spiralling out of control. Pins and needles stab my muscles from the inside out. My legs demand movement, a haven far from calm.

Move my legs.
Turn my ring.
Boredom.
Fatigue.

What is this fidget? It is me.

Loneliness.

Again, for want of a better word I don't know what to call this feeling of being completely deviated from the norm, an anomaly in a world where most others have their place. I often feel like everyone is their own piece to a huge puzzle and all match, merge nicely. Then there's me, I am the piece that has nowhere to go. My edges are broken and uneven, and I am just all black and burnt. I am picked up, sneered at and tossed under the rug.

I have felt this way for as long as I can remember. Since the days I was called football head at school. I was the tall girl with big feet whose head covered the TV screen when we watched a history drama 'How We Used To Live'. I only sat in the front row because all the other seats had been taken by imaginary friends or friends that were never going to sit there anyway.

It was being pushed over into the muddy slush that made me realise how hopeless it was telling my mum about the kids who not only didn't want to be my friend but who also thought it was fun to go through my school bag and throw my lunches in the bin. When I told my mum it was a boy in the final year who pushed me to the ground and made all my clothes muddy she insisted I had done it deliberately and told her friends how naughty I was for getting my tights and skirt dirty.

I could handle the kids throwing my usual lunch of cheese and pickle sandwiches in the bin, but when it was my nan who had made my lunch all specially for me, it really upset me. Seeing that brown bag with the sandwich delicately cut and the Mars bar that my nan knew I loved so much in the bin broke my heart. Not only were they throwing out my lunch, they were throwing out my nan's too. They only did it because they knew I hated school dinners and wanted to watch me squirm and cry while sitting on the teacher's lap as she tried to force the mash and meat into my mouth. They sat opposite with their own packed lunches and laughed.

The taunting didn't end in primary school. It extended to secondary school where I had one good friend who was also teased endlessly and another who thought nothing of putting her hand around my neck until I did or said something she wanted. There was a time when I was playing with a friend's hamster at her party and her protective dog leapt at my face only to give me a nosebleed and cuts. I didn't want anything to happen to the dog. It was only protecting the hamster, but the kids at school the next day called me a murderer and ganged up on me because the parents were talking of having the dog put down. Of course that was not what I wanted.

Then there was the time in Germany when the boys covered my best friend with tissues and tied him to the bed. I had to sleep in the same bed with the friend who put her hand around my neck on that trip.

And it didn't end there either. The teasing and ridiculing lingered steadily through high school in Melbourne. I thought I could have parted ways with the bullying by leaving the UK but no such luck. No longer was I called football head. I was honoured with names like 'makeup face' and 'Coke can fringe', and asked if I did my makeup on the jolty bus. Kids said they would need a shovel to take the makeup off and a truck to carry it all away.

Only once did I cry at high school though. It was when one girl, who knew I was gullible, told me to turn my Maths paper over in an exam before commencement time. Quite stupidly I did it only to be told off by the teacher and to have the same girl tell the teacher I was cheating. My next class was English. I sat at the front of the class as I always did, and the teacher said I looked beautiful with my hair down. I usually wore it up. It was her kindness that made me cry.

In these taunting times I felt like an anomaly, an alien or outcast who was trespassing. Now, I am always this anomaly or peculiar object that once tried to fit into the puzzle but who has since given up. I am resigned to being different, being that tall creature that watches other people laugh, joke and play, not knowing how I could ever intercept those conversations with my own dull and boring presence. I would sooner stand on my own, watch from a distance.

Yet that weird creature that is me doesn't know who she truly is. She knows what her passions are. She knows her weaknesses. But she doesn't know what is at the core of her being. She doesn't know how to interpret what she feels and how to act on those feelings. She knows anger but is it truly anger that she feels? Or something else that takes her to that forbidden world? That world where only she belongs, where she can placate intensity by self-harm to induce satisfaction.

As she cannot interpret and understand the being of her core, she blindly acclimatises herself to the personalities of those surrounding her. Not always, but often when it means she has to make decisions, or having her boundaries overstepped. The questions, the deliberations, the unknowing invoke a foreboding ball of fear internally. A dark raven ball that resides deep in the hollow of her stomach and chokes her when the questions and unknowing overflow and thrash her mind. She would sooner die than feel this black void.

Who is she? She is I.

Validation.

You never feel truly validated. Not when praised or given phrases of affection, endearment. Why do these words, these phrases not travel towards your heart and penetrate it like the painful words do? Why do they not seep into your heart, pump in harmony with your blood, force your mind to feel them, believe them, embrace them?

They are words not of an uncommon language, a language frozen to the heart, numb to the soul. The ears hear them but they drift easily into the nearby air, into the nearby aura.

Without belief in these words, faith in this love, your heart travels from paralysis to pain. From pain to obsession. From obsession to rage. From rage back to pain.

The obsessive questions emerge and your mind scratches away furiously at the answer it wants you to believe - no, they don't really care.

How do you allow these words of love to grasp your heart?

Abandonment.

Abandonment. Thought to be the epitome of BPD, a trait I never thought I possessed but undeniably I do. A trait I wish I didn't possess but which when it comes into loom it possesses me.

When abandonment first emerged I can't be sure but there are glimpses of memories of childhood.

Like the time when I pretended the couches were my parents, and I sat on their wide laps while they wrapped their big brown arms around me.

Like the time when I cried in front of my mum telling her about the bullies at school and all she said was that I needed to make more friends and not cry for myself.

And then there were the times at school that infuse me with such guilt, saturate my mind with self-blame, fiery fingers bleeding through the skin on my face. I had no friends to call my own and there were times I tried to take possession of others. Once, I was the first to be asked to pick a partner for the boat trip the next day because I had scored the highest in my class for spelling. I chose the most popular girl in the class, or rather the most intriguing, because she was the new little Japanese girl who owned Hello Kitty stationery. The hatred in her eyes when I asked if she would pair with me I will never forget. Why should she be paired off with the tall, quiet, picked on, unpopular kid? The Japanese kids were only ever paired off with the popular girls. I wanted to take it all back when I saw that relentless frown, that insulted stare. Who or what gave me the privilege of asking this girl?

On the trip she left my side as soon as she could and stayed with one of the popular girls. I was alone again.

Now, the fear of abandonment evokes feelings so excruciating it is difficult to know what to do with them, how to accept them and live with them.

Abandonment is like I am thrusting a knife into my stomach, penetrating the flesh, turning, and cultivating a deep dark hole in preparation for emptiness, the forgotten.

Unbearable neglect like the child no-one wanted to play with or even partner on a school trip.

The rejected child whose mum couldn't care less about the bullies at school.

The pathetic imbecile teenager who believed the person who told her a rumour at school was genuine, only to find out it was a rumour spread throughout the whole year about her, the pathetic fool – the rumour that she was apparently wearing holey underwear, so completely untrue.

When the kids hated her so much, spread untrue rumours about her, picked on her best friend too, when her mother did nothing, didn't listen and told her she was selfish for crying, how could there really be anyone in the world who truly loved her? Who deep down understood her? Who wanted her as theirs? There couldn't be.
She was the abandoned anomaly who would stay abandoned forever.

Kate's story: Schizoaffective Bipolar

I had a mostly happy childhood; however during secondary school I would fluctuate between being subdued and quite melancholy to being outspoken and zany. As a result I never really got close to anyone. My marks were ok; in year 12 I didn't really know what to do so I enrolled in an Arts degree.

First year Arts saw the onset of a major depression: I slept a lot, started missing classes (not that there were many to attend) and felt even more lost. My previous love of literature was scrubbed at Uni: I hated having to write about The Feminist Marxist viewpoint of a text and not just discuss the text itself like we had in year 12. I loathed what I saw as the pretentious side of privileged university life, so at the end of 2nd year I deferred and went to work full time in a bank as a teller.

I already was experiencing mood swings at this stage but put it down to the complexities of being unsure as a young adult and where I stood in the world. Aged 20 I had a minor psychosis for a couple of weeks where sequences of 'amazing' occurrences happened, such as going to the pool hall off Chapel St with a friend and playing quite a few games where I would hit incredibly good shots, way above my normal ability. At one stage an Asian guy slipped by me and lifted a fifty dollar note in and out of his shirt pocket very quickly and subtly; I saw this as him wanting to surreptitiously have a wager with me. I didn't take up the bet, but felt like I had super-human abilities.

After a year or so I switched courses to being enrolled in a business degree specialising in marketing; I'd been watching the ads on telly and thought to myself 'there must be a science behind getting people to want to buy brand X over brand Y', and that fascinated me. I tried working at the bank during the day and studying at night, but fell to the pressure and ended up quitting full time work for casual as a deli chick. Meanwhile I had been living in share houses for a few years and had some happy party times with my housemates. I supported myself financially throughout studying and on several occasions felt the strain of being able to afford food, rent and other expenses. This along with expecting myself to get top marks and have a rip-roaring social life. The pressure cooker was building.

By 1992 (second year into my course) I was starting to develop chronic insomnia; I went back and forth to my GP for help. Try walking an hour a day, he said: I did this, and it helped with anxiety, but I still struggled to sleep. When warm milk, no caffeine, lavender baths and soothing music failed to make inroads, my GP simply looked at me one day and said: "I think you need to see a psychiatrist".

My first psychiatrist diagnosed me as clinically depressed and put me on Prozac. Suddenly I had oodles of energy. I was powering towards the end of my degree, getting mostly credits. In 1995 I did my last exam, and finally passed. Within a few weeks I had secured a position with a major market research firm in the city. I looked set. Then it happened.

In the week before I was to commence the job, I'd been getting irritable and irrational with my housemates. I had a car accident (my fault). I thought I had fallen in love. So much was going on, and I ended up face-first in the hallway carpet at home sobbing hysterically. My housemate called my sister who drove me to an emergency appointment with the psychiatrist; I wore dark glasses because I thought I was famous and the paparazzi were following me. The doctor hastily changed his diagnosis to Bipolar and put me on Stellazine, Cogentin, Epilim and Prothiaden.

Stellazine was an awful, awful drug (an older anti-psychotic): one night I was watching telly and my head started to turn to the right; it kept twisting like I was Linda Blair from the Exorcist. The only way I could get it to ease up was to adopt a yoga pose, haunched over on my knees with my head atop my fists. It was not a nice experience. I felt relieved when my doctor put me on Risperdal instead (a newer anti-psychotic).

Fast forward a couple of years: living in a share house in Nunawading, working part time as a deli chick, on a part disability pension, hardly socialising, drinking a six-pack of beer a day along with copious pizza and fish ‘n chips, ballooning from 65 to 85 kilos within months: in short very depressed with suicidal thoughts not eventuating to actions. I would spin out drunk on my bed each night wishing never to wake again. My housemates banned me from smoking indoors so I would smoke in my room, staring at the window sometimes imagining a pair of red glowing eyes staring back; daring myself to smash my fist through the glass.

I was complying with medication; by this stage I was seeing a new psychiatrist who had revised my diagnosis to being schizoaffective bipolar with mostly depressive features. I had tried to resurrect my market research career without success; the only job I could get part time was that of a casual phone interviewer (those pesky survey people). I felt a massive failure. I could never use my degree. So I escaped my less-than-happy reality through drinking each night, which made things worse.

My mum and sister were particularly concerned with my deterioration, thus they organised for me to go to rehab. I completed a 28 day stay at Warburton in Oct 2000, where they championed the need to attend AA meetings regularly (ie: at least 3 times a week). I struggled with this, particularly when I compared my drinking efforts to the majority I heard (ie: a six-pack versus a bottle of spirits per day). What I failed to take into account was that my medication made me a cheap drunk, intermixing and causing me to fall asleep.

For the next two years I remained depressed and struggled to stay sober for long, going in and out of rehab. I decided that being a deli chick wasn’t for me and started doing domestic cleaning for an agency instead. I started out doing 20 hours a week; within a year it was down to 2, with me calling in sick (hungover) too often. My lack of employment meant I couldn’t afford to pay rent or support myself, but my parents were adamant that I wasn’t welcome at home. I ended up in supported housing, such as the Salvation Army, and shared with some eye-opening people. I witnessed a suicide attempt one night and had to call the ambulance; one of my housemates had taken an overdose combined with alcohol. The thing that got me was seeing her elderly parents come by the next week to pick up her belongings: “We had really hoped she wouldn’t do this again” her Mum said, shaking her head and wiping her tears.

I was back in rehab in 2002 when my new psychiatrist decided that, although he thought I was schizoaffective that I might be overmedicated, so he began tapering my off my antipsychotic (Risperdal)and mood stabilser (Epilim) and just had me on an anti-depressant (Avanza). My mood had begun to alter but I was totally unaware of the warning signs; I started getting phobias. When I walked home from Chirnside park shopping centre one day along Manchester Road I had to pass a paddock which had long grass; one day I discovered a black snakeskin at the edge of the paddock. I feared walking past lest a snake come out and bite me. One day my housemate was driving me home from a party we'd been at; I looked down at my shoulder only to see a huge hairy huntsman there. I shrieked and flicked it, whereabouts it scuttled into the centre console. I kept flicking at imaginary spiders on my bare legs when I would try to fall asleep during the hot summer nights; I Baygoned my room so much that the fumes were extreme.

One day, I went to a women's AA meeting and was asked to share. I rambled on about being sorry for my appearance and that I knew everybody hated me and aped the sayings of various other members' speeches I had heard- it was really jumbled. After the meeting, a woman came up to me and told me off for sharing inappropriately. I bounced from person to person, yapping away at the top of my voice. When I got home, I quietly sat down. I realized I had an overwhelming impulse to go out, get back in my car, and drive it at high speed into a brick wall or pole. I took my car keys and gave them to my housemate, telling her not to give them to me because I wanted to kill myself. Then I rang Maroondah Psych Triage, asking for the CAT team to see me. They told me to come in and see them, so my housemates drove me out to Maroondah.
We sat in the triage section for about two or three hours; every now and again I would lean over and hiss "snakes and spiders", giggling to myself.

Finally I saw the duty nurse; he sat me down in a room and asked me a few questions; I rattled off all sorts of stories about my history and family; some were true, some weren't. He ended up giving me a couple of plastic sample bottles which contained medication. "Take the green ones at night; the white ones every few hours. Then ring your doctor Monday morning." With this we drove home.

By this stage I had begun to demonise my parents, so I stayed with my uncle for a couple of days. I went to see my Psychiatrist and he looked shocked; I had reams and reams of writing to show him about all my various conspiracy theories. Eventually Mum let me stay with her and Dad; within 48 hours I had attacked her, they called the cops twice (I have no recollection of this) and I ended up in St Vincents as an involuntary patient for 6 weeks. This was around the time that "the War on Terror" had been announced and Australia was at war with Iraq. It seemed like some sort of Apocalypse was happening, as always is the case when I become psychotic: the lens I view world events through becomes magnified and distorted. The only two other times I have since developed significant psychosis (Jan & June 2009) I have viewed world events as 'amazing', like the world recession and the death of Michael Jackson. I guess the best way I can described my fully-blown psychosis is that it involves Reading Significance into things that have no significance.

Once I stopped feeling like I was going to get bashed up any second when I was in St Vincents (I believed that everyone in there could read my mind and that I was an evil person who deserved to be punished), I did get a lot out of the occupational therapy sessions, like art, walking, gardening, mind limbering sessions (eg: who can spot the article in this paper); it helped pass the time and make me feel more at ease. That and the Largactil shotties I would get. Upon discharge I lived in a couple of boarding houses which were very expensive and somewhat frightening for someone still with the lingering edges of psychosis. The psychosis didn't fully go away for several weeks; I found my co-ordination was hampered by the heavy meds and me being spaced out; things like being fast enough with your hands to pay for items at the cash register of a supermarket was hard, or being co-ordinated enough to pull the tram cord and navigate your way to the door without falling over. I used to have fears that I wasn't welcome places, even at a café where I had paid for a coffee, I would be in and out within five minutes, lest someone come out and bellow at me for overstaying my welcome.

I gained solace from sitting on park benches, or on the grass, having a precious smoke (I'd had to ration them to 15 a day due to the high cost of the boarding houses) and a bottle of water. I knew better than to smoke at the boarding house, where the ongoing requests of 'Gotta smoke? Gotta light? Gotta Smoke" were incessant (as at hospital).

The other places I felt welcome were the PDRS's (like Neami, Terra Firma etc) where talented staff would engage me in rebuilding my life. A housing outreach worker got me to put my name down for my own flat via a community housing scheme. I also got relaxation though drama and art projects, along with being taken to various interesting places like CERES, The Ian Potter Gallery and Lawn Bowling. It helped me put my consciousness back together, as well as giving me something to look forward to for a gold coin donation.

I eventually got my own affordable community flat; by this stage the psychosis had subsided (3 months later), unfortunately the post-psychotic depression hit like a Mack truck. The best way I can describe it is like having sh#t-covered filters across your eyes while trying to wade out of emotional quicksand: bloody horrible. Unsurprisingly, I drank daily again.

With the help of some amazing support workers I got out of the quicksand and into a return-to-work program doing filing for my local council. I put the cork back in the bottle and attended (reluctantly) AA again. At work an opportunity came up to join the department doing document management (scanning, registering mail using a database program), and I was successful in getting the job. I stayed there for over 3 years, no relapse in either mental health or drinking. I switched councils in 2008, where I currently work, doing the same type of tasks. It's not a dream job but they were very understanding when I became unwell in 2009, allowing me a return to work program which I appreciated.

Having work means I have structure in my week which is good for me; I also feel good on days when I know I have gotten though a lot of registering. Overwhelmingly, the thought that I am needed there helps me. Part of me misses going to drop-in and having outings to interesting places for next to nothing. I still get help from support workers; an employment consultant (helps me turn up to and stay working), a psychologist, a drug & alcohol counsellor and my psychiatrist.
I've learned that my mental health is fluid and largely dependant upon my self-management, such as;
-taking meds (Lithium, Epilim, Zyprexa & Cymbalta) on time; these days I use a dosette so as not to miss or double a dose accidentally;
-trying to eat healthily in spite of hunger pangs from the meds; I never lost those evil pizza kilos plus have found that my metabolism has slowed as I age along with the Zyprexa slowing it more;
- walking as frequently as possible (better than any anti-depressant)'
- monitoring my caffeine levels (this can act like speed for me if I overdo it; it's a type of self-sabotage I have to fight against inducing mania);
- keeping a daily mood monitor in a Word table to track how I'm going and to report this to my doctor;
- being mindful of a "Traffic lights' list I have on my pantry door: Green means signs I am doing well; Yellow lists signs that I am becoming unwell and what to do; Red means I am unwell…shows a list of signs…and lists emergency steps to take; eg: ring Eastern Psych Triage; ring my doctor, if I have to go to hospital arrange for neighbours to take in the mail etc;

- trying to be sensible about bedtimes (aim for in bed 10.30pm, asleep 11pm, awake 8.30am…however this rarely happens…more like in bed 11.30pm, asleep 1am, awake 10.30am);
- trying to stay abstinent from drinking; I have made a leap of faith away from the AA juggernaut which places so much importance on unbroken sobriety; over the past 11 years of attempted recovery I estimate I've been sober around 9 ½ to 10 years, just not all in a row; I've had many one-off 'busts' (AA term for getting drunk again), which is viewed dimly by most in AA. I'm not going to beat myself up if I have a few Jack Daniels & Cokes every 4-5 weeks, it could be worse.

Can I just add that I am rather anti-social, tending towards being alone more often than not. My phone rarely rings, I'm lucky if I meet up with a friend more than a few times a year…basically I live a pretty solitary existence. Even when I'm in hospital I tend to isolate. My doctor mentions this as a concern, but I'm tending to think this is just me, and that it's not the end of the world. There are worse things than being a hermit of sorts, as long as you can distract yourself with things to do, which I generally can. Things like writing, reading, watching DVD's, doing some housework, gardening, listening to the radio (I love 3AW which may sound tragic but it's a comfortable chatter in the background) and walking.

Part of me wishes I wasn't born with a chemical imbalance in my brain which requires medication to counter certain moods and thoughts occurring. That's what I've learned schizoaffective bipolar is: a combination of a mood and thought disorder. I'm lucky I've only become really unwell a few times; it's certainly taken me to places that seemed quite nightmarish at the time; like in Salvo's houses and boarding houses.

Then again had I not been born this way I might have just taken my middle-class life for granted and all that goes with it.

Bob Perry's story

The most amazing I had ever experienced was the first time I heard a voice inside my mind that was not mine. I was fascinated. I was 27 years old. "What's this", I asked myself. I was with my girlfriend and it was her voice I heard though she never actually spoke. We were at the 1969 Sydney Royal Easter Show. I thought it was great. Belinda was telepathic. I answered by sending a telepathic message back. It never dawned on me that other people might be telepathic also. Belinda answered and said in my mind, "What do you want"? I looked around and there were people all around me who had strange looks on their faces. "Could these people have over-heard my telepathy"? I thought to myself. The look on their faces told me they had. All these were telepathy too. This was amazing. What shall I do? "Hi", I said telepathically to the crowd. The crowd was getting bigger by the minute. I felt I had to get out of there. I took Belinda out of the Pavilion onto the footpath thoroughfare. Belinda said she was hungry so we went to a hot dog wagon and she asked for a hot dog. The young man in the wagon grinned at her.

"Well", I thought to myself, he is the hot dog. He is going to have some sort of sex with her. I felt I must protect Belinda. I tried to get her away. She was laughing and obviously enjoying it all. "How dare he do that to Belinda? How dare Belinda be unfaithful to me? How dare they do something like this in public"? I looked at the huge crowd around me and nearby. They were telepathic too. The penny dropped: everyone is telepathic and I have just discovered it. "God have mercy on me". I thought.

Belinda ate the hot dog and said, "That was yummy", and asked the hot dog seller for another. "Twice" I thought. "Has she no shame? All these people about, looking on". They looked happy and were enjoying themselves.

"What was happening to me"? I thought. Have I gone insane? Is everyone in the World telepathic and I've just discovered it? I felt most embarrassed and very alone. Belinda didn't seem to care one way or the other. When I thought something telepathically it seemed to draw attention to myself. I felt that this was not good. Get away from here. I told Belinda I was going and that she had better come home with me. She said, "OK".

Her six-year-old daughter, who was with us, wanted a ride on a merry-go-round before we left. So off we went to a merry-go-round. The child got on a merry-go-round horse and Belinda paid for the ride. I thought it shouldn't take long. I was feeling odd and somehow it was linked to the ride. At last the ride ended and the child told Belinda that she wanted to ride again. The merry-go-round operator winked at Belinda and said that she could have a couple of free rides. I felt like this was a disaster. Something was happening to me. I held out for as long as I could. On the third turn around I felt as though the entire show crowd was invading my mind. Somehow I fought back. I stopped it though it had had a strange effect on me mentally. The next thing that I was aware of was Belinda with her daughter hand-in-hand and I was walking out of the show grounds to my car. I couldn't handle all this. I needed 'time out'.

"OK" I thought, "Everybody is telepathic". I am 27 years old and just discovered it. Has there been a conspiracy by the world against me? If so, why?

This was my first taste of mental illness. I had become schizophrenic. I still am, some 39 years on.

My reason for telling this is for my reader to have an insight into the sort of things that goes on in the mind of a schizophrenic person. We are not the crazy lot that people think we are. We are people who are different and society calls us 'insane'.

A Psychiatrist once told me that I had experienced what is called an ‘audio hallucination’.

The voices in my head used to drive me crazy until I realised that they come from people, mostly nearby in my community, who have an ability to extend their influence telepathetically into my mind or into the minds of other people who are susceptible to this phenomenon. They will do anything and everything within their power to cause their victims to respond in any way at all as long as they get some sort of reaction with which to focus on to establish a target. They feed of their victims emotions. It matters not what the emotions are though I feel they prefer strong, negative emotions.

I have spent many years in psychiatric hospitals, both within Australia and overseas, and I have heard many stories regarding the so-called ‘voices’ otherwise known as audio hallucinations and even visual hallucinations. Whey their targeted victim very firstly experiences voices within their minds they are not sure how to respond. The voices are very deceitful and can often cause their victims to believe all sorts of lies and deceit, as long as they get a response, any sort of response. They often convince their victim that they are God and that their victim is ‘the chosen one’ the ‘second coming of Christ’. Some women have told me that they are pregnant with the second coming of Christ to save the world’. There are literally as many types of deceit as there are ways of inventing them.

The best ways to defeat ‘the voices’ is not to give them a target to focus onto; i.e. do not respond in any way nor react to their provocative stimuli, in this way if they cannot hear you or detect your response they do not know where to attack.

Some of the hallucinations I have experienced started by hearing the ‘voices’ and taking them seriously which led to my getting ‘messages’ from the radio and over the TV. The one experience that comes to mind occurred in London, U.K. when I was driving I was getting messages over the car radio that eventually led to the appearance of a couple of beings, pale green coloured beings above me that it seemed I had to somehow attack or over power them to become more powerful than they were. I felt a shaft of energy spiral out of my mind upwards towards them, when my ‘beam of energy’ reached them it all disappeared and I found myself back in reality driving my car.

I experienced these ‘green people who it seemed were made of a pale green light substance’ in Perth WA and in Eastern Germany in 1973. The event in Perth was very similar to the London experience though was much more realistically; it had a stronger substance to it. The ‘appearance in Eastern Germany occurred when I went over the Berlin Wall and had got a 24 hour visa. Near the end of my roaming around East Berlin, I noticed the green-light people who were high up in the sky over the city where it seemed that they were ‘keeping an eye’ over the city. It impressed me that the people of East Berlin were intimidated by these beings and I thought that if I attacked the green people and destroyed them I would be doing a good thing for the ordinary people. I shot a shaft of white energy out from me towards them and suddenly, some very strong and very urgent voices warned me not to do it. I immediately ceased my ‘attack’ and my shaft of white energy stopped. The green people disappeared and the voices disappeared and everything continued as normal as though nothing had happened.

As I sit here in my bedroom at 11:45PM on a Saturday night, I try to keep the voices out of my head; I try very hard to ignore them. They are so very persistent. They are coming two houses away from me. These mental predators live in one of those units. They have tried to attack and invade my mind since I’ve been living at my new address. I know that should I let them into my head they will trouble me deeply and eventually, they will cause me to interact with them and I’ll never be able to sleep; I’d even end up in hospital again. If I even swear at them they will eventually win control. I MUST not respond to them. I must not answer them. Years ago they convinced me I was a God, even higher than God. I really believed this. Lately they have been hinting that I'm an Angel. They will try anything to win control of my mind. If they win I'll go mad again and surely end up in hospital again. They are listening to my mind as I type this open letter. They are always lurking there in the background waiting to strike; to control me... Their range is limited but once I'm out of their range of influence new voices take over whey the old ones faded away.

I could have been one of them when I was tested; I guess I failed the test though in retrospect I don't really want to be one of them knowing now how evil they are. They prey on and attack innocent minds to feed off the misery they cause in the minds of their victims.

I always thought that psychiatric medication was the only way to block them. One of the medications I took caused me to eat and eat until I became morbidly obese. I developed diabetes which caused me to haemorrhage in my left eye and I now have distorted vision. I also developed coronary artery diseases causing me to have a three-way heart by-pass then I developed a 7.5centremeter aneurism in my aorta and ileac arteries and had to have several experimental stints put into my aorta and ileac arteries. I am an alcoholic though had been sober for 22 years but I bust a couple of days ago and a very dear friend took me to Alcoholics anonymous where there are many other people like me there who just sit down over a coffee and chat and help each other. I'm going to give them a go, or more likely they are giving me a chance to sort my head out, I hope I can rise up to this new challenge.

Kristy Mounsey's story

This is my story. I am in the process of opening my own business, I recently got my heart broken, and life is good surrounded by family and friends. Where a story starts I am not sure, and where the story becomes mine I am not sure. I really don't want to expose other peoples secrets by telling my truth but I will not be silenced either, because this leads to stigma and shame. I am not ashamed of who I am, bipolar and all.

My biological parent's marriage broke up close to the time I entered the world, something I now believe was a wonderful thing. My biological father was not a bad man, but he was an alcoholic who would eventually drink himself to an early death. My mother had an illness too. I had a fairly blessed childhood in many regards because although me and mum were on our own and money was tight until she met my "Dad" when I was six, we were never on our own we were surrounded by a loving family. I cried in Kindergarden because I wasn't allowed to make to Father's Day cards (one for my Granddad, one for my Uncle Neil.) I have seven wonderful aunties, but was especially close to my maternal Grandparents and Aunty Lynn and Uncle Neil. When I was born my Aunty Beverly was in the room. She would never forgive me if I left that out, my 'father' left the room because of the blood. My biological father's best gift to me was his sisters and mother but I wasn't as close to them as a young child as they were busy raising families of their own as, I am now a woman I have to say I like them as women and love them as Aunties. My (maternal) Grandma would make me clothes, and my Granddad would take me on long walks where we would talk and pick flowers. It was a peaceful time before school where I only knew love. My grandparents are very special to me and my Grandma is still alive at 95yrs old and still living independently. My Grandfather is with me everyday in the woman I am, but he passed away when I was fourteen

The miracle of my life happened at a time I wasn't even there. My Mum met my Dad at a singles dance. He said to her "I can't take you out on Saturday night because it is my sister's birthday, but could I take you and your daughter on a picnic on Sunday". It was love at first sight, but I am not talking about my parents. I loved my Dad from the first moment I met him. I was not yet six. I would also gain a wonderful Aunty, Uncle and five great cousins. My family was made whole when my parents got married on the 22nd of April 1989. This year my parents celebrated twenty two years of marriage, and the road for us as a family hasn't all been easy (the three of us all had to face demons at various times) but my Dad told the Doctor recently if he knew then what he knew know he would do it all again. I love my parents more than anyone else in the world.

Growing up I had an awful time at school. I was bullied at least daily for eleven of thirteen years, and my parents made many sacrifices to send me to "good" catholic schools. In hindsight I was always just a little different. I got on better with my teachers than my peers (in part due to being an only child) and was a 'sensitive' child. Children have this radar for difference and I was so sweet I never stuck up for myself, as I wouldn't want to hurt the bullies' feelings, but that meant repeated harassment for me. Due to my gender I was never physically assaulted something I am grateful for, but I resent it when people say about children being bullied "if it doesn't kill them it will make them stronger". What about the children it does kill? What about teenagers who commit suicide or children who have' no accident - accidental deaths'?

Looking back I realise I could have told my parents about the bullying they would have stopped it, but my mother was unwell and I believed it would upset her and like many victims of crime I blamed myself (I believed I was ugly and that was why the other kids hated me). Primary school also failed me on a scholarly level by diagnosing me with unidentifiable learning disability (which I believe is dyslexia) allowing them to pass the buck in relation to teaching me, but due to a literacy program ran by the "mother of Mt.Druitt" Mrs McLean I learned to read despite my schooling.

When I was a student doing my Masters of Teaching (2007) I was appalled at how little teachers were taught about bulling and how to prevent it, and primary school teachers are still given no training in mental illnesses at all meaning children suffering a variety of common mental illnesses including depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder go without support or teachers picking up sign for children to be assessed as studies prove early diagnosis leads to better outcomes. I believe the teachers knew I was being bullied but choose to turn a blind eye. They might not know how much I was suffering, but they violated their duty of care towards me, everyday. At school I usually had one or two friends who due to their own loneliness would brave the bullying associated with being my friend. I would latch on hard to their friendship but some were very bossy.

I need to make a quick passing reference to all my cousins who have unbeknownst to them been like brothers and sisters as I am an only child, but mention by name Michael and Shannon. I tell you both all the time how much I love you but I never have the words to express how dear you are to me. I have known you since you were born and I admire the adults you are both becoming and how you have both faced life's inevitable challenges. I always remember the day Michael was born (I was eight) and the first time I held Shannon (I was eleven).

My experiences at St.Agnes High School represented the worst time in my life (although some of the teachers were great teachers in every other way) I had reactive depression due to bullying, and was being ostracized and tormented, but due to a fantastic family life I was happy every moment I wasn't at school. One counselor tried to say this caused the bipolar, I don't believe it caused it but I do believe it contributed to it. At St.Agnes fear led me to retreat into the world of books, which had the side effect of making me more 'bulliable' and yet reading is still one of my greatest loves.

I loved my last two years at Loyola College. The Jesuits didn't directly intervene to my knowledge to stop me being bullied but they fostered an atmosphere where bullying was unacceptable and I was happy. A school councilor Mrs Matthews also mentored me and told me I was intelligent something I never knew until then. She helped me get into university too.

Life got even better when I got to university (which might be why I love learning so much). Being told at school not to be so opinionated (especially when my opinions were sometimes slightly out there), the intellectual freedom I felt at university still makes me so excited. Also finally I could choose who I wanted to hang out with and choose women who usually older than me taught me so much. Although most staff I have had taught me so much I need to record the name of two lecturers Dr Hill and Dr Camden-Pratt as having such a positive impact.

I first noticed late 2002 I felt "too happy". I diagnosed myself successfully as having bipolar, but there was nowhere to go. I didn't want to tell anyone in my family because I didn't want to upset anyone, I thought I could handle it. In January 2003 I found a psychiatrist who took Medicare. I made the first available appointment that was for three months time. I slowly got more manic until I knew I wasn't sick at all, just a genius. I cancelled the appointment the week before I ended up at Mount Druitt Emergency

Department. I was under a lot of pressure had two subjects to go to finish my undergraduate degree, my parents were going overseas without me on holiday for the first time, I was working lot of hours in a temp job preparing for the next election, I was worried about troops going into Iraq and I snapped. The word for it now I know is having a psychotic break. My Aunty and Uncle Therese and Brian came to the rescue, my extended family gathered around and my parents came home on the next flight. I ended up in Blacktown psychiatric hospital (Bungarrabbie House) for seven weeks.

Inside the hospital I was misdiagnosed and put on medication that made me worse. I was hallucinating, overall quite happy and I couldn't understand why they wouldn't let me go home, save the world-kill Saddam Hussein and settle down in a nice housing commission house raising my (future) children and creating art (some of those dreams are still mine ironically). I was manic. In hospital I was given valium at night and during the day I was punished, because valium takes away my inhibitions causing me to act out. One example is someone had written on the wall 'fear God' I got the crayons and I wrote "or your psychiatrist who only thinks he is God" and I made passes at a male nurse too. Another nurse kept preaching to me about God (I am not Christian; this was a public hospital and my choice of religion was not respected). Another thing that upset me in hospital was although I have never taken an illegal drug in my life I was drug tested up to four times a day, because staff could not believe I could be this crazy naturally (I can). My mother fought to take me home and eventually I was released into her and my Dad's care. Dad and Mum visited me every day while I was in hospital and my extended family was more frequent than the hospital liked. My families love bombed the joint. I was never alone. What I didn't know was that I would get depression two weeks later that would last over a year. Under the influence of anti-depressants I took two overdoses (one in six hundred people kill themselves on anti-depressants, which over wise wouldn't kill themselves. Although I wanted to be at the very depth of my grief, it was love for my parents that stopped me as I didn't want them to lose their only beloved daughter. I personally have a reaction to SRI's that makes me suicidal, ironic for depression meds, lol). Due to my mother I was not reemitted to hospital, something I will be forever grateful for. Hospital is very unpleasant because the boredom of the place can make you more unwell.

I got the shits (excuse my language) after the cocktail of assorted tablets made me incontinent. One of the worst moments of my life was pissing myself next to a ladies toilet because my ATM card was in the machine. I was inside a service station, I couldn't leave, as about $300 was about to be dispensed, and after that I rarely left the house for months. I stopped medication against doctor's advice and slowly much to everyone's amazement I started getting better. At this point I knew inside I had to do something, didn't care what, but they wanted to put me on Lithium (and I knew this is a miracle for some people with bipolar but if it goes wrong you can end up in a wheelchair). My parents were frightened by my decision but they allowed me the right to make it. If my parents had not supported me, then the doctors could take way all my rights. Now I know that anti-psychotic medication is as harmful to your physical health as smoking (because these drugs have less testing done on them than other medications because they do not create lots of profit for multinational pharmaceutical companies). Overall my experiences with the mental health system where not positive. I am not advocating against medication for many people. as it can save their life, but I do believe in informed consent.

The hospital psychologist wanted me, an already depressed woman, to log my mood on a scale of one to ten every half hour then predict what my mood would be like in the next half hour, all day while I was awake (if I hadn't been depressed before, the homework alone would make me feel that way). I've repeatedly seen psychologists at hard times and they will only treat me using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy which I know doesn't work for me, but they are not funded for other treatment or more holistic therapies.

Due to repeated problems with the mental health system I now manage my bipolar with my GP (Dr Barrett) who treats me with respect and doesn't undermine my intelligence as many people in mental health system have done. The love of my family healed me and made me whole again. At the moment I am living my life unmedicated, because I plan to have children in the next few years, and my favorite medication (Epillium which does slightly mellow me and is a great mood stabaliser) causes birth defects. There have been times I've requested to go back on Epillium for short periods and one day when I hit menopause I will probably stay on it blissfully till death.

Despite my Bachelor of Arts (Social Ecology) I have a not fantastic work history and was never given a good job, partly because I have to explain gaps in work history. I've worked in an outcall telesales role, at a nursing home without training for the role, and in a job where I had to commute over two hours each way and when I stopped doing two hours unpaid overtime per day as well, I was let go. After that experience I went back to university to become a primary school teacher. I failed although great at the theory side, I couldn't control the class and this caused me to hallucinate about head lice, making me too nervous to do the job. I was very controlled, none of my precious six year olds or the teachers would ever know I was having psychotic episodes in the middle of teaching. It didn't help that I got head lice off the kids as well. I have a phobia about them. Often I couldn't tell if I had head lice or I was hallucinating about them. After leaving teaching I complete a certificate IV in Mental Health and took on a variety of volunteer work while I looked for paid employment.

I had experiences with a variety of employment agencies, one psychologist made a significant impact on my life Ms McLennon. I am extremely grateful she treated me with love and respect. She would later leave this type of work due to her own frustrations with the system. At the latest employment agency many of their consultants have had less training in community services than me, and it is a community services role. On my first day there I was interviewed for a role with them but I believe I didn't get it because I had too much compassion for clients and therefore wasn't viewed as hard enough. Once a consultant I do respect, violated the disability standards towards me, although I made an official complaint I had to drop it because I was going to Adelaide on holiday and while I was away my father went to hospital with heart problems. This has put a lot of pressure on me and I think more investigation is needed on the role of Job network agencies and their effects on mental health of people in their services. The system needs to be changed drastically with minimum standards and qualifications put in place for staff. Despite problems I am determined to make a future for myself. My family brought me a car, in part so I would get a real job, but they let me keep it when I made it clear I was going to go into business anyway, and I am trying to learn to drive. It's been delayed a lot because of my chest infection of late and I expect it will take me a year or so to get my P's but being brave enough to try has been a real challenge. I know that not having a license has limited my ability to get work in community services.

Some people at the employment agency give up and allow depression to overtake their lives, rotting in the agency for a number of years where their self-esteem is decreased. Many at the employment agency have been good to me, but frustration causes me to still have a love/hate relationship with the service. In a capitalist society any system where the clients are accountable to staff, and the clients have little to no power to leave, paid by a third party (Centrelink both clients and service providers) that doesn't access the service as a consumer, is open to corruption.

I met a great guy on EHarmony in 2009 who I hoped loved me once and we were together nearly two years. I will always love him, and yet some things are not meant to be and I am learning to accept that. I think I am hard to deal with in relationships, as everything is an intense experience for me whether positive or negative, and while my relationship did not explode due to my illness maybe I could have been less obsessive about the problem if I didn't have bipolar. I believe that someone was malicious in their meddling of our affairs and I would not be silenced on the matter. It is also sad how when you break up with someone, families are caught in the crossfire and you lose more than one person you love. I will miss five wonderful females and one cute boy and their dog as well. I am very lucky in friendships I have so many friends who love me and have been there to support me during my relationship breakdown, and my recent severe chest infections, as well as starting my own business and at other times throughout my life. I would like to record their first names just to thank them for their love and friendship in no particular order. Jocelyn, Jodi, Tom, Astarte, Andrew, Melissa, Belle, Molly, Peter, Bea, Nelly, Nina and many more I will feel guilty for leaving out when I am feeling better.

I recently gained a Certificate IV in Small Business through Penrith Business Enterprise Centre, and have been in the process of founding my own company these last six months. During the course I have also made some new lovely friends. I am on the verge of the official start now and will be on New Enterprise Initiative Scheme shortly. I've worked really hard in spite being ill (chest infection for two months), and also qualified last Thursday for a business credit card at 5.99% fixed interest as a Microenterprise loan totally unsecured to hire a shop, and start my own business. I am taking a big risk, my family is scared to death, but all along I have focused on the words of a George Benson song "If I fail, if I succeed, at least I've lived as I believe." This business I believe can grant me economic freedom, and maybe the most important thing to me the ability to afford to have a child. Not just IF Mr Right comes along, but on my own if need be. I am still hopeful that I will find a man to share my life with, but I will not make it a prerequisite to a meaningful life or becoming a Mum. I also dream of buying a home in the next few years, and helping my father who needs to transition into retirement. My business Access Crafts Studio started because I wanted to run a scrapbooking classes through the clubs, but there was only one club willing to rent me a room and they wanted $550 per day hire. Ironically now I am planning to rent a shop for considerably less than that in Penrith to run my classes in, sell arts and crafts on a consignment basis and hire out to other teachers. The most exciting part of my business though is drawing on my community services training to provide a meaningful, for profit community centre. Access Crafts Studio is founded on four main principles Creativity, Community, Inclusiveness and Social Justice. With high start up costs I will struggle to make a profit in the first year, but that only makes it more special, in the long run most things that give us most joy in our lives are bloody hard work. I am grateful for the opportunity, the support I have, but if no one is going to give me the job I wanted, I would simply make it myself.

Bipolar certainly made sure the journey has never been dull, and if I could rewrite my life I would not make many edits. I would not change the plot lines but I am realizing it is up to me to frame my experiences, and I would still have bipolar, it gives a whole new way of experiencing the world. I have bipolar but I am more than bipolar, I am a daughter, niece, student, friend, cousin, artist, lover, and an amazing woman.

Gloria Stienum a woman I admire so much, who also had a lived experience of mental illness as her mother had schizophrenia, said about something else “The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off”. I believe breaking silences hold great power for social change, and we have the right to be pissed off.

Caro's story

I am a self-harmer…

I am not a habitual self-harmer. I don't feel the need to harm myself every day, or all the time, only when I become extremely stressed or when I am extremely angry and want to 'let it out' or sometimes just to 'feel something' when I am feeling no emotion at all.

I can only remember one incident of a feeble attempt at self-harm when I was in my teens. I think that my anger started when I went through puberty, and then reached its peak and I started to self-harm.

It was not until about 6 years ago (41 years old) when I was arguing with my husband after a family tea, and I became so angry that I broke a glass and cut both my arms. I went to Emergency at Sunshine Hospital where they treated me and put me in to the psychiatric ward for three days. I saw a psychiatrist on one occasion and that was it. When I was released I had no back up and came home and cut myself the next day.

I have cut out of frustration, and gone to seek medical help straight away because I am in need of help, not so much physically but mentally. In a way I suppose that is attention, but not 'poor me' attention, it is more like a 'HELP ME!!!!' attention.

I am usually a very patient person but I get very angry and do not know how to deal with this. I am not very good verbally and so I cannot argue back and I become extremely frustrated and take it out on myself.

I was diagnosed with Bipolar when I was in my thirties and then when I reached my forties I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder after my one and only appointment with a new psychiatrist. After a lot of research on the subject, I decided that THIS diagnosis fitted me a lot more than Bipolar. My moods would change so many times throughout the day and I was having a lot of anger outbursts. I was endangering myself by walking down the road in the middle of the night, and pulling up in my car in the middle of roundabouts, which these things also endangered other people and was not a good thing.

My husband, is a big trigger towards these outbursts, and because when I am already so uptight and moody, the way in which he reacts towards me, or his binge drinking sends me over the top, and I self-harm. I do not want to hurt anyone physically, and so I hurt myself. Other times I just become so depressed or empty and if I cut myself it 'feels better' because it either takes the emphasis of the depression for a short time, or is a relief because I actually 'feel' something.

Christmases, Birthdays and other special occasions is another big trigger. I feel so out of control and overwhelmed and self-harm is something that brings me back to reality and calms me down.

I have spent hours upon hours sitting in the Sunshine Emergency Department in the hope that they would put me in to the psychiatric ward where I could feel safe from myself, only to be told to see my psychiatrist/counsellor and sent home to my angry husband and two worried children. On some of those occasions I had taken a lot of pills, cut myself, and even had consumed alcohol….and had to drive home again, when I really wanted…NEEDED to be kept safe from myself, and to spare my family the drama of it all.

Only twice in a period of about 4 years did I get put into the Sunshine psychiatric ward, and I was told that after 3 days both times I had to go home. I had nothing done as far as talking to anyone about my outbursts or self-harm and I had no back up when I returned home and self-harmed the next day.

At one stage I was seeing a psychiatrist who would only renew my prescriptions that the GP had originally started me on, and was no help at all to me and I was so angry at him when I finished my appointment I went into the waiting room and took a handful of valium. I was taken to the hospital by ambulance, and then sent home after a few hours.

I self-harm mainly by cutting, but have also injured myself by-burning my arm with the cigarette lighter in the car, pouring boiling water over my hands, slamming my hands in car doors etc. Sometimes I am in control of how I am doing it, but other times when I am so out of control, I just grab a knife and slice!!! Afterwards I feel a great sense of relief. I don't feel guilty for doing it, and am not embarrassed by my scars or talking about it. This is who I am and how I cope. I don't agree with what I do or have done, but this is me.

Christmas Eve 2009, I cut myself out of anger and cut way too deep, and had to rush to the medical clinic. The doctor called an ambulance to take me to hospital. I did actually become scared. I thought that I was going to bleed to death and I was shocked that I had actually gone so far. The staff at the hospital were fantastic, and I think that would have put me into the psych ward but I said that I wanted to go home to be with my family for Christmas. They let me go though, even though there was no one to collect me and I wandered around the hospital with no shoes on, in a blood soaked t-shirt and pants at midnight until I called a taxi to come and collect me.

I have not done it since then as seriously, but have done it. I have been trying different things to try to calm myself down before I reach the point of no return. Doing word puzzles and jigsaw puzzles seems to work, or reading a book takes my mind off 'me', but I still worry that if I start to get stressed or angry that it may completely take me over. When it happens it is like I am just 'taken over' by evil and it scares me. I am just concerned that if I hold off too long, I may go too far. I feel like doing it in 'small doses' to prevent a major 'accident'.

Sometimes just attending Emergency at the hospital after a minor self-harm will place my focus on something else and I will calm down, but other times it can escalate it if I am treated like an inconvenience. Sometimes the staff will be extremely nice and caring, and try to help me calm down. The Catt Team has spoken to me on numerous occasions, but does very little.

My concerns are always for my children. My husband hates it when I cut myself and refuses to talk about it. His attitude makes me angry and I just want to harm myself more. I know it is hard for people who don't do it to understand but it is like anything that people have a difference of opinion about except a lot of people just won't even try to understand how it works. I have friends that I can talk to who don't judge me, but talk about it with me instead of lecturing me.

A few people over the years have told me try using a rubber band around my wrist and flicking it when I feel the need to cut. This may work for some but does nothing for me!!

I have been seeing a counsellor for quite a few years, which has been one of my main sources of help. Because I spend an hour with her at a time she knows me better than any other mental health worker, and offers helpful advice. Even just talking to her makes me feel like I can survive for another fortnight until I see her again. I think it is good to have a good relationship with the person who is helping you with your mental status whether it is a GP, Psychiatrist, or any other caregiver; otherwise you are kidding yourself from the start and will not improve at all.

I am currently in an inpatient at the Melbourne Clinic in Richmond. I came in here because a Psychiatrist who I saw regarding my hormones and my moods suggested a changed in my medication that I had been on for many years. I had taken out private health cover a couple of years ago as I did NOT ever want to deal with a public hospital again so I got a referral from my GP and came here. I have been here for nearly five weeks, and could not fault the hospital or the staff. I have had two occasions when I felt like self-harming but I talked to a member of staff who was more than willing to sit down with me and listen to what I had to say, and waited until some medication I had been given started to work. I felt much better the following day and I was taken seriously and treated with the utmost respect.

I am leaving here in two days and I am taking home a lot of what I have learned…through groups etc. and am feeling comfortable enough that I will not feel the need to self-harm. Having said that, we never know what can happen, I will take it day by day, but I do know that I can ALWAYS be admitted back here if I do start to feel unsafe and want to self-harm, so that in itself is a preventative.

Also I have my counsellor and will start to put a lot of things into place when I get home in case of a setback, but I am hopeful that I am ready to deal with what life throws at me and be able to think before I react.

Yvonne's story

Tales of the Town Madwoman:
Yvonne Smith's story as told by her son, Andrew Dickinson.

Yvonne was born in the year war broke out, and is therefore a contemporary of former PM John Howard and broadcaster Phillip Adams. Her father went off to war before she turned two and returned four years later. One of her earliest memories was wondering; who was that strange man sleeping in her mother's bed?

No-one could ever say for sure just where that seething and lifelong hatred towards her father came from, but it probably dated from that time and strengthened from that memory. Yvonne was a dark and moody child. A photo taken when she was three or four clearly shows this. She is seated, legs wide apart, squarely facing the camera with a look of the most sullen rage.

Yvonne was a very bright schoolgirl and a raven-haired beauty. A school photo taken when she was fourteen shows just why she won a local beauty contest at the time. She felt boxed in and crushed by small-town life in the 1950s. She demonstrated flair and skill by taking and developing endless reels of black and white photographs. Books were Yvonne's escape, indulgence and great pleasure. Perhaps along with movies, they gave her a view of the wider world out there.

Soon after leaving school, she started as a nursing assistant at the local hospital, which was to be her pathway to greater things. But she left a baby unattended one day, for which the penalty was summary dismissal.

Evidently swallowing some pride, she then worked as a switchboard operator at the local telephone exchange. Hard to imagine such a job in these days of mobile telephony, but many young women made a living by asking people to whom they wished to speak, then manually plugged cables into sockets to connect the calls. Naturally, this meant they could listen in on calls, which meant that they found out all the gossip first.

Though it wasn't in anyone's plan, Yvonne's life course was set by the arrival in town of a handsome and easygoing footballer, Eddie. Wild and rebellious, Yvonne allowed herself to be sweet-talked by Eddie onto her parents' lounge room carpet. Three months later and having not kept in contact, Yvonne nervously approached Eddie at the pictures to say that she was pregnant.

The wedding was hastily arranged. The honeymoon was a sea cruise (Adelaide to Perth), which Eddie enjoyed hugely but Yvonne only sullenly endured. Yvonne knew it was a mistake, and had decided to stay in Perth while Eddie returned to the town to coach the footy team. But it was not to be. Yvonne's parents convinced her to return home.

Eddie doted on his son, telling anyone who would listen that he was going to be a footy player like his Dad. Andrew (that's me!) gave his parents a huge shock by contracting double pneumonia and almost dying at fifteen months. Yvonne reacted by becoming extremely protective of the sickly child. Unhappy in the marriage, Yvonne focused much of her energy onto Andrew. Not long after, around age three, Andrew's dazzling intelligence clearly evident, he began drifting away from his father. Too sick to play any sport, his father found little in common with the son he'd so previously fawned over.

Andrew's reaction to his new baby sister was less than encouraging. When asked what should be done with her, he said "throw her down the stairs". Yvonne became more and more depressed. Had it started as the then-poorly-understood post-natal depression?

Andrew's problems were Yvonne's problems. Yvonne thrived on these challenges. Campaigns energized her. Standing against the world was great. None could stand in her way. Sometime in the late 1970s, when her children were in high school, Yvonne had a breakdown and was committed to the state mental asylum.

This was the time when Yvonne's frustrations boiled to the surface. She began talking publicly about getting a divorce. Eddie would later claim that the breakdown was the start of such thoughts. Things may not have been great before, but they were getting by. Yvonne's daughter (name withheld) was stunned. Despite the obvious simmering tension, always present, she had thought family life was happy.

Yvonne's diagnosis was Manic Depression. She was prescribed Lithium, which she loathed. She had several rounds of shock treatment, which had no measurable effect, neither positive nor negative. Manic episodes followed in quick succession. When high, Yvonne spent over the limit on her credit card, buying things for people in her favour, often without them having to ask. Remember, in the early 1980s, credit cards were still fairly new in Australia, and few people went over their limits. After coming down, Yvonne went to court, claiming the bank was negligent to extend her credit while manic. She won the case.

A great campaigner, Yvonne was fearless and unopposable when manic. She turned against the church in 1977, convincing her serious and thoughtful son to become an atheist. This horrified her devout parents, and may have been calculated to do so. Yvonne campaigned against the church, her father and her husband. She campaigned on behalf of the downtrodden in the town, took trips to Adelaide where she stayed in women's refuges, read widely and caused chaos and did good works, though more the former than the latter.

Yvonne's daughter, always Daddy's girl, rebelled in every possible way, moving out of the town at the earliest opportunity and starting on a string of ill-advised relationships with ill-advised men.

During one of her confinements, Yvonne asked her son, then at University, to speak for her at a Mental Health Review hearing. Andrew, though well versed in his mother's sometimes exasperating and contradictory behavior, was nevertheless stunned by the position she took at the hearing. Having briefed him to plead that she had improved; she changed course mid-hearing and said she wasn't quite ready to leave just yet.

But Andrew's surprise was greater still as, for the first time, he read her file. The records covering the late 1970s and early 1980s were known. But the first entry was in 1968. Yvonne had consulted an eminent shrink about suicidal thoughts. Andrew confronted his mother with this revelation. She said that the only things which stopped her from taking a bottle of sleeping tablets were him and his sister, then aged six and four.

When depressed, Yvonne often discussed with her children ways to end her life. She made a number of unsuccessful attempts. Divorce proceedings were long and very drawn out, largely due to Yvonne's hysterical antics and frequent contradictory demands. She adamantly refused a 50-50 split, always wanting a bit more, yet the length of the settlement negotiations cost both parties far more than if they had settled for less earlier. Yvonne set about destroying the family business, in which her parents were partners.

She raged against members of every church in town, though some who did good works were spared her considerable wrath. After the divorce, she moved into a Trust house. Meant to receive a divorcee's pension, she instead was put on the widow's pension, a mistake she gleefully accepted and never bothered to correct. Her love of books exploded. She bought them by the box at garage sales. Her small Trust house was stacked floor to ceiling with books. She gave away stacks of books to the local council and school libraries, until they reached capacity and banned her from further donations.

Yvonne's manic episodes tapered off as the 80s wore on, and her depressive episodes grew longer. Her daughter returned home with a young daughter, and took on the burden of caring for her mother. Yvonne doted on her eldest granddaughter. When not depressed, the two were often seen riding on her bike together.

Husband now gone, Yvonne's shouting matches with her father grew in intensity and frequency. She weaved paranoid fantasies about his evil schemes. An irritable old bugger with a fearsome temper, Yvonne's father engaged in these arguments with a mixture of enthusiasm and bewilderment.

Her depressive episodes grew still longer. Apart from obsessing about suicide, the worst aspect of depression was fading concentration. Yvonne was unable to read, deprived from her great pleasure. Surrounded by thousands of books, all she could read was a paragraph of something light or switch on some drab TV program.

Andrew stayed in Adelaide to work and to stay away from his difficult mother, and spoke with his sister at more or less regular intervals about mum's condition. News was always the same. While on good terms with the eldest daughter, mum was driving the newer granddaughters away, with her constant depressing talk of ending it all.

Yvonne and her daughter had never gotten along well, but the strain was starting to show. Yvonne was banned for months at a time from visiting.

For no apparent reason, Yvonne perked up a bit in the late 1990s. She decided to catch up on the schooling she'd missed as a teenager. So she went back to school. Literally. Her favourite granddaughter cringed as grandma sat in the same class! But it didn't last. Soon Yvonne was off her food again, getting no sleep, alternating between losing and gaining weight.

Andrew moved to Sydney, where mum would be no longer able to drop in unannounced and generally unwelcomed. He had kidded her that she was crowding his love life (which was generally pretty woeful). His sister reported that mum went downhill faster after that.

Yet the end, when it came, was a surprise. When Yvonne's daughter phoned to report her death, it wasn't suicide. Yvonne was found collapsed on the floor. She had died in pain, and may have taken 12 hours to slip away. It was a time of much angst. The coroner returned an open verdict.

Andrew and his sister had opposing views about the best course of action. Andrew was philosophical. Mum had long wished to end it all. Death was her often-expressed and sincere wish. His sister was torn. She wanted to get to the truth. No matter how forlorn, she had always hoped for a cure or at least some improvement. The coroner's finding contained a strong inference that a mistake in the dosage of Yvonne's latest medication may have contributed to the untimely death. This explanation made sense, and the sister could not understand why this was not the finding. She pursued the case for two years. She started smoking again. Even though mum drove her round the bend, she didn't deserve such an ignominious end.

Yvonne's daughter eventually came to accept that nothing more could be done, and that the case was hopeless. Her great fear, that she too would become like Yvonne, has recently been magnified.

As her favoured son, I hope that telling her story and working as a Peer Support Worker can, in some small way, help those who struggle with the daily reality of living with Bipolar.

Andrew's story

The benefits of having a controlled nervous breakdown:
Andrew Dickinson's story, Part One

I am a Bipolar Consumer, and a Peer Support Worker at The Benevolent Society.

My mother and her mother both had severe manic depression resulting in regular institutionalization. I was a moody and intense child, and very much a mummy's boy. I remember being given Valium at the age of 12. Fascinated by the workings of the human mind, I majored in Psychology, which continues to be a lifetime hobby and strong interest. Suffering from concentration lapses and disturbed sleep while at University, I tried hypnotherapy and Serapax to relax.

Apparently at random, though I suspected stress as a cause, I was walloped by bouts of depression and chronic insomnia. Suffering rejection by a particularly screwed-up and massively oversexed woman, I cautiously requested and took the legendary sleeping tablets, Mogadon, which worked a treat.

Through a sequence of events I still cannot fully explain, I began taking the tranquilizer Ativan (Lorazepam) for symptomatic treatment of eye strain, and continued to effectively self-medicate with it for a number of years. With some trepidation, I requested the medication from a sequence of doctors. As I am well-spoken, well-informed and confident, this request was never queried.

My deepest, darkest fear was that I was touched by my mother's depression.

The strains which contributed to my CNB (Controlled Nervous Breakdown) are a whole other story, which may well be contained in Part Two (stay tuned for the next exciting episode !). For the moment, suffice to say there was a clearly plotted path, when viewed in hindsight, leading to the CNB, which led quickly to my Diagnosis (with a capital D).

Despite all of the above – clear road signs pointing in perhaps just one direction - The Diagnosis of Bipolar Type II was still a shock.

By this time, I had been prepared to accept Depression as a diagnosis. It was clear that I had had episodes severe enough to be considered clinical. But Bipolar?

Consider the contrary evidence which, previously, I had thought to be proof positive. Only the women in my family had Bipolar. I had never had a psychotic episode (and still haven't). Highly educated and self-aware to an obsessive level, something so massive could not possibly have escaped my attention. No-one in my family suspected. I had a number of health problems, some of which either did or could explain most of what was wrong.

I cannot say for sure when I first became unmistakably symptomatic. For certain I had some symptoms as a teenager, and may have as a child. But if I did have it then, it was less of a problem due to my being very physically ill. As a chronic childhood asthmatic, mood swings often didn't rate a mention. Never afraid of hospitals or doctors due to familiarity, I missed months of school due to being ill in bed. Nine confirmed confinements due to pneumonia, including twice when I didn't even feel sick. At the age of twelve, my saviour medication was Ventolin.

Without doubt, I have been fully symptomatic since my early twenties, but went through many false, misleading and partly-true diagnoses.

I have always been short-sighted, and began wearing glasses during adolescence. Shortly after entering the workforce, eye strain presented as a problem. Was it due to incorrect prescription? Am I becoming more long-sighted with age? Did I need a second set for screen work? Am I especially sensitive to bright light? Why was eye strain an acute and not a chronic issue? Was it related to stress? Do eye exercises help? By happenstance, I found that taking absurdly low doses of Ativan sometimes helped. 1mg Ativan is one of the smallest tablets on the market. I bought a pill splitter and used it to painstakingly prepare quarter doses (about 2mm wide) for daily use when needed.

It turned out that most of these symptoms actually belong to Bipolar and Anxiety.

I had been tested for legions of potential allergies and been through half a dozen elimination diets. In the end, it was simply everything and nothing that set me off. Around the same time, I got a referral to a gastroenterologist, who diagnosed and medicated me for chronic gastric reflux. Until then, I had assumed the issue was psychosomatic, and therefore feared it was a giveaway for underlying depression.

Anger has always been a problem for me. Repression of anger seemed to cover a lot of my troubles. My mother’s raging and righteous anger, the bosom buddy of depression, was a fearful and powerful force. A lifetime habit of thumping badly-behaved physical objects was one sign. Being a long-term victim of school bullying gave me much to be angry about. Brooding and irritability are frequent companions of the physically weak.

Opinions and experience played their part. Seeing my mother and grandmother knocked around by various treatments, medications and confinements almost certainly contributed a strong degree of denial. Also, and combined with being a Psychology graduate, the idea that Psychiatry belonged to the Dark Arts is something I had long taken as gospel. Psychology Good, Psychiatry Bad, is a mantra that rang true for decades. Like many Psychology graduates, I strongly believed that enquiry and therapy, along with a number of other treatments which did not involve psychoactive drugs, were the way to go for all but the most extreme cases of madness.

As an example, clinical depression could best be dealt with by talking therapies, regression, analysis and suchlike. Depression is repressed anger, which stems from deeply-buried subconscious fear. Hunt it down, bring it to the surface, subject it to analysis. Then, if it doesn’t kill you, it has a good chance of being resolved.

Fine in theory and, for some people, works in practice. But at the age of 43, I finally had to admit that it simply did not work for me, and that I had a condition that can only be held in check by chemical rebalancing from prescribed psychoactive drugs.

To put it briefly, I was mugged by reality. Here’s what happened …

July 2005, aged 43. I talked to my doctor about seriously disturbed sleep. Since around my mid-30s, and especially since getting married at 37, I had been sleeping fairly well and considered myself a former insomniac. My doctor, alerted by disturbed sleep as an indicator, prescribed me a mild sleeping tablet, with a half-joking remark to consider a psychiatric assessment if things didn’t improve. The tablets being as effective as a glass of water, I asked for stronger tablets. The doctor prescribed Stilnox with some strong warnings and a serious recommendation to see a psychiatrist.

Stilnox worked for one or two nights, but my anxiety level and pulse increased sharply, which kept me awake all night after. I discussed stronger options. With the gravest of reservations, the doctor said the next step was Normisin, with an assurance it would knock me out but with serious side-effects including short-term memory loss.

That did it. Seeing a shrink was less scary than losing even a few memories. I was fortunate to have a particularly astute GP who'd had experience in Psych hospitals, but I also was the unknowing beneficiary of a particular government health reform.

The Better Outcomes In Mental Health Care Program rolled out items 2721 and 2725 in November 2002, which allowed patients 6 free referrals to psychologists or psychiatrists (and some others), with the stated aim to "to provide an incentive for GPs to deliver Focused Psychological Strategies". For more information, visit www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/coag-mental-q&a.htm

The vital intervention provided by this doctor due to this measure stands in distinct contrast to what happened ten years earlier. I presented with essentially the same symptoms in 1994 and was prescribed Mogadon, which had then been popular and widely used for decades. No mention of Moggies in 2005. As I was to discover later, there is now much greater concern about the addictiveness of barbiturates, and therefore they are only rarely prescribed, and almost never for sleep.

The doctor explained that Bipolar has two frequent companions: Anxiety and OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). I scored moderate for both. All considered, this made The Diagnosis frighteningly accurate. It made sense of so much of my life.

And it got me worried. If this guy, very sharp though he is could spot it, how many other people could see it, or may have already worked it out? As a Grade-A control freak, I am very concerned about others finding out stuff about me before I do.

The doctor started me on Aropax, and strongly recommended I give up Ativan. I had told him about my long-term use, and we worked out then that I had been self-medicating and using Ativan as a tranquilizer. His concern was potential addiction, as Ativan is a barbiturate. I knew I wasn't addicted, and that I could stop as soon as my anxiety levels dropped. Aropax has a latency of about two weeks. That is, I needed to take it for two weeks for the effects to start. I had to keep taking Ativan during this time, because I was simply too anxious to function otherwise.

The two week latency period is what I like to think of as a Controlled Nervous Breakdown. Fortunately I was unemployed, and it is the only time when I considered it fortunate to be jobless. I had just been sacked from a job, and that was probably the final straw. It was a horror fortnight. I was anxious nearly all the time. I wanted to run away but had no safe place to go. Always a scanner, I was on heightened alert … about nothing. Danger was neither clear nor present. I went on panicked morning walks, something I had never done before.

Finally I could wait no longer. The psychiatrist appointment was weeks away, but I was a sobbing wreck. So I turned up at Outpatients and managed to see a visiting psychiatrist. With an opinion on the lines of 'this may help. Give it a try', he handed me a starting dose of Zyprexa, a very powerful psychoactive drug with spectacular side-effects, and I started on 10mg per day. I now consider this a high dose, though my regular shrink thinks it moderate. The immediate beneficial effect was that I could sleep again, and get regular sleep while waiting for the Aropax to start working. I recall dropping Ativan soon after, though that may have been following the two week period. A couple of weeks later, I was able to lower the dose of Zyprexa and find a comfortable level.

And I've been stable ever since.

If I were religious, I may just consider it a miracle. Not that all of my problems have been solved. Life has been highly stressful these past six years, mainly due to unstable or no work. Yet despite this, I have never felt so peaceful.

My life has changed incredibly since the Diagnosis and successful treatment regime. One great happening was connecting with a support group. If you are in NSW and have or know someone with Bipolar, get onto the Ryde Bipolar Support Group. For the first year post-Diagnosis, this group was a revelation to me. I heard stories of hope and horror. People who, like me, had taken decades to reach a proper or useful diagnosis. People who, unlike me, were trying or considering changing medication or dosages because they weren't functioning or the side-effects were unbearable.

Support groups have their place. They work for some and not for others. Check them out.

Useful Contacts

Youth

http://kidsinmind.org.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=6881
Youth links - These links help you find more info on issues important to young people

http://www.itsallright.org/
SANE Australia's Youth website

http://www.orygen.org.au/
ORYGEN Youth Health

http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=5
Beyondblue's Youth Link

http://www.kidshelp.com.au/
Online counselling and fact sheets.

http://makeanoise.org.au/
A project for young people, run by young people.

http://home.vicnet.net.au/~nnaami/
We are a group of people who have experienced life with a mentally ill parent.

http://www.youthmentalhealth.org/
Promoting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Victoria.

http://www.headroom.net.au/
Promoting positive mental and emotional health for kids and the adults in their life.

www.cabf.org
Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation

www.reachout.com.au
Reachout is a service that uses the internet to help young carers through tough times

www.headspace.org.au
Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation.

www.copmi.net.au
COPMI - Children Of Parents with a Mental Illness

www.realitycheck.net.au
Information about mental illness and where young people can go for help in the ACT.

Useful Contacts

Consumers

SANE Australia
Address: PO Box 226
South Melbourne Vic 3205
Email: info@sane.org
Phone: +61 3 9682 5933
Fax: +61 3 9682 5944
Web: www.sane.org
Information: **SANE Helpline**
Telephone: 1800 18 SANE
Email: helpline@sane.org

Mental Illness Fellowship
Address: PO Box 359
Clifton Hill Victoria 3068
Phone: 03 8486 4200
Fax: 03 8486 4265
Email: enquiries@mifellowship.org
Web: www.mifellowship.org

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA)
Address PO Box 844
Marleston SA 5033
Email webmaster@schizophrenia.org.au
Fax (08) 8221 5159
Web www.schizophrenia.org.au

Victorian Mental Illness Council of Australia (VMIAC)
Address: The VMIAC
23 Weston Street
Brunswick Vic 3056
Web: www.vmiac.com.au
Email: info@vmiac.com.au
Phone: 03 9387 8317
Fax: 03 9388 1445

Australasian Society of Bipolar Disorders (ASBD)
Address: Level 8, Aikenhead Building
St Vincents Hospital
27 Victoria Parade
Fitzroy Vic 3065
Phone: 03 9417 5468
Web: www.bipolardisorders.com.au

Lifeline's Just Ask - Lifeline's rural mental health information service, providing information and referral for people with mental health problems, and to friends, relatives and others who want to know how to help. Provides information about relevant local services, as well as books and web sites. www.justask.org.au

Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association Ltd (AICAFMHA)

Address: PO Box 387
STEPNEY SA 5069
Phone: 08 8132 0786
Fax: 08 8132 0787
Email: secretary@aicafmha.net.au
Web: www.aicafmha.net.au

Black Dog Institute

Address: Hospital Road
Prince of Wales Hospital
Randwick NSW 2031
Phone: 02 9382 4523
Fax: 02 9382 8208
Email: blackdog@unsw.edu.au
Website: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

depressioNet

Address: PO Box 2375
Richmond Vic 3121
Phone: 1300 13 55 42
Email: team@depressioNet.com.au
Web: www.depressionet.com.au

Post and Antenatal Depression Association (PANDA)

Is a self-help organization that was formed in 1985 to provide confidential information, support and referral to anyone affected by post and antenatal mood disorders, including partners and extended family members. PANDA also produces and distributes accurate information about post and antenatal mood disorders to health professionals and the wider community.

Address: 810 Nicholson Street
North Fitzroy Vic 3068
Phone: 1300 726 306
Fax: (03) 9482 6210
Email: info@panda.org.au
Web: www.panda.org.au

Multicultural Mental Health Australia (MMHA)

Address: Locked Bag 7118
Parramatta BC NSW 2150
Phone: 02 9840 3333
Fax: 02 9840 3388
Email: admin@mmha.org.au
Web: www.mmha.org.au

www.beatbipolar.com **Author Madeleine Kelly – Life on a Roller-coaster**

Life on a Roller-coaster was the best book I (Nicci) read on Bipolar, giving insight into the manifestations of bipolar in layman's terms. An electronic 2nd edition called 'Bipolar and the Art of Roller-coaster Riding' is available ($25 US dollars) on line.

Reconnexion for people experiencing anxiety disorders or depression

Address: 222 Burke Road
Glen Iris Vic 3146
Phone: 03 9886 9400
Fax: 03 9886 0650
E-mail: info@reconnexion.org.au
Web: www.reconnexion.org.au

Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria, Inc. (ADAVIC)

Our aim is to assist people that suffer from Panic Disorder, Social Phobia, Agoraphobia, General Anxiety, Depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Self-Esteem issues.

Address: ADAVIC
PO Box 625
Kew Vic 3101
Phone: 03 9853 8089
E-mail: adavic@adavic.org.au
Web: www.adavic.org

Australian Mental Health Consumer Network

Address: PO Box 3317
South Brisbane BC QLD 4101
Phone: 07 3844 3009
Fax: 07 3844 2609
E-mail: secretariat@amhcn.org.au
Web: www.amhcn.org.au

Fyreniyce – Australian Bipolar Website

For all those touched by Bipolar the information on this site is straight forward and in layman’s terms. There is an online support group for each, Bipolar Consumer and Significant Other. http://members.iinet.net.au/~fractal1/

MOOD Swings

Is a free online intervention aide/self help tool for Bipolar Disorder.
www.moodswings.net.au

Julie Fast

Julie's work specializes in helping real people manage all aspects of their daily lives and despite the complications that bipolar disorder and depression creates. Learn how to how to personalize a plan to help yourself or a loved one find and create stability that ensures the quality of life that we all deserve, visit: http://www.bipolarhappens.com

BluePages Depression Information Website

The BluePages Depression Information Website is a comprehensive online source of information about depression. It provides information about the symptoms of depression and how it is diagnosed, summarises which medical, psychological and alternative treatments work for depression (and which don’t) and contains an extensive list of people, organisations, books, websites, and other resources that may be helpful to people who are depressed. http://bluepages.anu.edu.au/

Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc
Address: Building 36
Old Gladesville Hospital
Victoria Road Gladesville

Locked Bag 5014
Gladesville NSW 1675

Ph: 02-9879-2600
Fax: 02-9879-2699
Email: admin@sfnsw.org.au
Web: www.sfnsw.org.au

Equilibrium - The Bipolar Foundation
An independent, international, non-governmental organisation dedicated to improving treatment and understanding of the causes and effects of bipolar disorder ('manic-depression'). www.bipolar-foundation.org

Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria Inc (EDFV)
Address: 1513 High Street
Glen Iris Vic 3146

Ph: 1300 550 236
Fax: 03 9885 1153
Email: edfv@eatingdisorders.org.au
Web: www.eatingdisorders.org.au

Borderline Personality Support – www.borderlinepersonalitysupport.com

Suicide Call Back Service - www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au
The Suicide Call Back Service is a free, nationwide telephone service that offers short to medium term support for people at risk of suicide, their carers, and those bereaved by suicide.

The Benevolent Society - Personal Helpers and Mentors Program
Address: Suite One, Floor One
215 Beardy Street
Armidale NSW 2350

Ph: 02 6772 1455
Fax: 02 6772 9144
Email: helenw@bensoc.org.au
Web: www.bensoc.org.au

Psychiatric Rehabilitation Australia (NSW service)
Address: Level 11, 1 Lawson Square,
Redfern, NSW, 2016

Ph: 02 9690 8900
Fax: 02 9699 5188
Email: info@pra.org.au
Web: www.par.org.au

Bring Change 2 Mind - www.bringchange2mind.org

1 in 6 adults and almost **1 in 10** children suffer from a diagnosable mental illness. Yet, for many, the **stigma** associated with the illness, can be as great a challenge as the disease itself. This is where the **misconceptions** stop. This is where **bias** comes to an end. This is where we **change lives**. Because this is where we **Bring Change 2 Mind**.

Consumers: GROW (Victoria)
GROW mutual support self help groups for people experiencing emotional & mental health issues. Meetings are held weekly in metropolitan & regional areas, are free, confidential & no referral is required.

Address: 707 Glenhuntly Road,
Caulfield South VIC 3162

Ph: 03 9528 2977 / 1800 558 268
Fax: 03 9523 6877
Email: vic@grow.net.au
Web: www.grow.net.au

Carers

Association: **Carers Victoria**
Website: www.carersvic.org.au
Address: Level 1, 37 Albert Street
Footscray 3011
Postal: PO Box 2204
Footscray 3011
Freecall: 1800 242 636 within Victoria only
Phone: 03 9396 9500
Fax: 03 9396 9555
Email: reception@carersvic.org.au

Association: **Carers ACT**
Website: www.carersact.asn.au
Address: Suite 5, Ground Floor
Churches Centre
54 Benjamin Way
Belconnen 2617
Freecall: 1800 242 636 within the ACT only
Phone: 02 6296 9900
Fax: 02 6296 9999
Email: carers@carersact.asn.au

Association: **Carers NSW**
Website: www.carersnsw.asn.au
Address: Roden Cutler House,
Level 18, 24 Campbell St, Sydney, 2000
PO Box 20156, World Square, NSW 2002
Freecall: 1800 242 636 within NSW only
Phone: 02 9280 4744
Fax: 02 9280 4755
Email: contact@carersnsw.asn.au

Association: **NT Carers Association**
Website: www.ntcarers.asn.au
Address: Units 4 & 5, 1 Caryota Court
Coconut Grove 0810
Postal: GPO Box 1861
Darwin 0801
Freecall: 1800 242 636 within the NT only
Phone: 08 8948 4877
Fax: 08 8948 5288
Email: carersnt@ntcarers.asn.au

Young Carers
www.youngcarers.net.au

Association: **Carers Queensland**
Website: www.carersqld.asn.au
Address: 972 Logan Rd
Holland Park 4121
Postal: PO Box 179
Holland Park 4121
Freecall: 1800 242 636 within Queensland only
Phone: 07 3421 5900
Fax: 07 3324 1281
Email: infosupport@carersqld.asn.au

Association: **Carers Association of SA**
Website: www.carers-sa.asn.au
Address: 58 King William Road
Goodwood 5034
Postal: PO Box 410
Unley 5061
Freecall: 1800 242 636 within South Australia only
Phone: 08 8271 6288
Fax: 08 8271 6388
Email: info@carers-sa.asn.au

Association: **Carers Tasmania**
Website: www.carerstas.org
Address: 64 Burnett Street
North Hobart TAS 7002
Freecall: 1800 242 636 within Tasmania only
Phone: 03 6231 5507
Fax: 03 6236 9236
Email: catinc@carerstas.org

Association: **Carers WA**
Website: www.carerswa.asn.au
Address: 182 Lord Street
Perth WA 6000
Freecall: 1300 227 377 within WA only
Phone: 08 9228 7436
Fax: 08 9228 7488
Email: info@carerswa.asn.au

Support after Suicide - www.supportaftersuicide.org.au
The experience of bereavement following a suicide can be intense and overwhelming. There may be a wide range of feelings and thoughts which are difficult to understand and to manage. This website aims to assist you with this experience.

Children of Mentally Ill Consumers (COMIC)

Address: COMIC
Mental Health Resource Centre
PO Box 310
Marleston SA 5033

Phone: 08 8221 5160

Fax: 08 8221 5159

Email: comic.admin@bigpond.com
Web: www.howstat.com/comic

Carers : 'GROW - Better Together'
'GROW – Better Together' is about Carers of people with a mental health issue meeting together regularly to share experiences, gain support, & to increase their coping skills through the use of the GROW program. Meetings are free, confidential, and no referral is required.

Address: 707 Glenhuntly Road,
Caulfield South VIC 3162
Ph: 03 9528 2977 / 1800 558 268
Fax: 03 9523 6877
Email: louisep@grow.net.au
Web: www.grow.net.au

Bipolar Happens
Julie's work specializes in helping real people manage all aspects of their daily lives and despite the complications that bipolar disorder creates. Learn how to how to personalize a plan to help yourself or a loved one find and create stability that ensures the quality of life that we all deserve, visit: http://www.bipolarhappens.com

Fyreniyce – Australian Bipolar Website
For all those touched by Bipolar the information on this site is straight forward and in layman's terms. There is an online support group for each, Bipolar Consumer and Significant Other. http://members.iinet.net.au/~fractal1/

Suicide Call Back Service - www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au
The Suicide Call Back Service is a free, nationwide telephone service that offers short to medium term support for people at risk of suicide, their carers, and those bereaved by suicide.