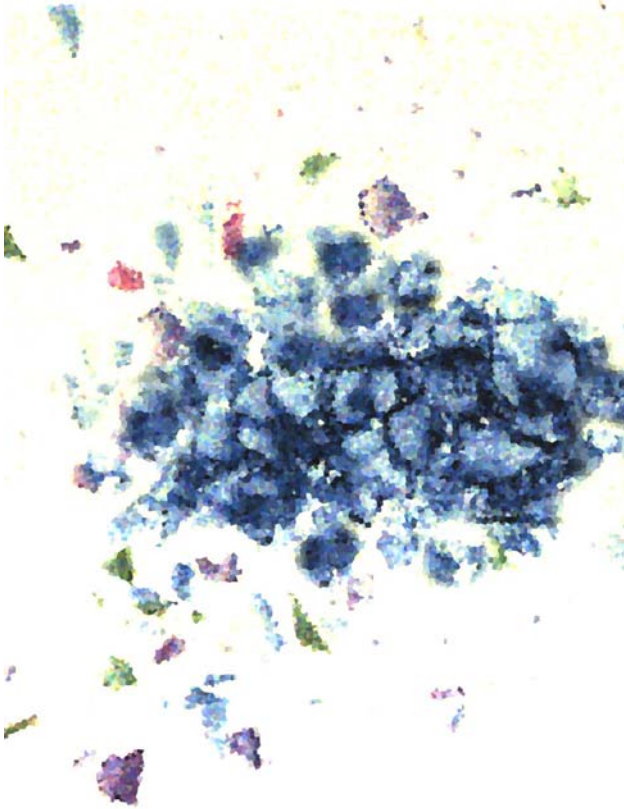


# *Out of Joint*

Depression, My family, and Me



Maureen Allen

**Maureen Allen**

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This book is dedicated to my parents,

Louise Monica Courtney

and David Vincent Meredith,

Without whom I would not be.

# Depression

*Hating the morning she rises from her bed.  
Sitting upon the side she holds her head.  
The clock ticks. The clock ticks.  
Meaning is smoke. Meaning is smoke.*

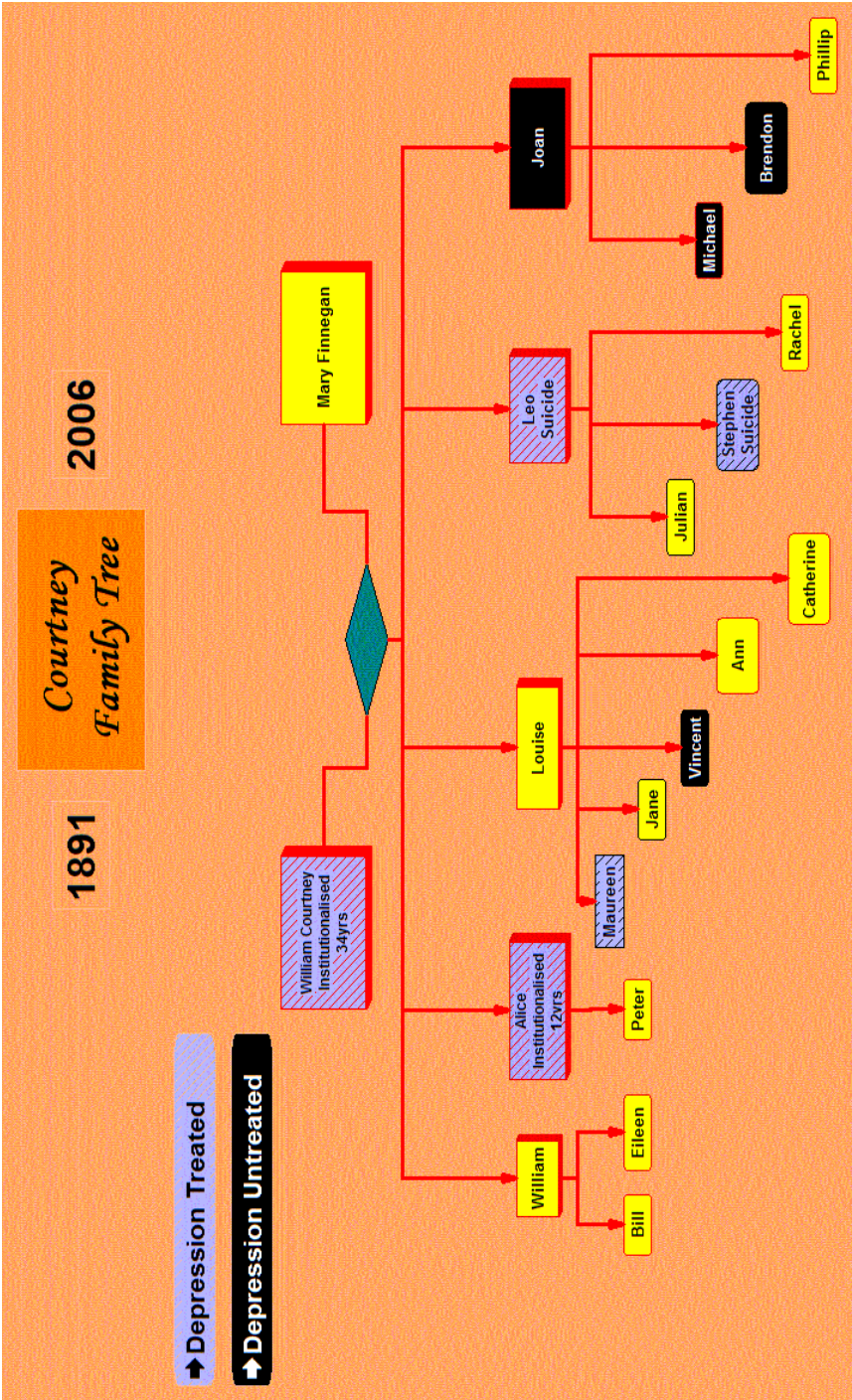
*Bent low she weeps amidst consuming sorrows.  
Sad and angry, no joy in her tomorrows.  
The clock ticks. The clock ticks.  
Meaning is smoke. Meaning is smoke.*

*Dust furrows, dead ants tangle in her hair,  
She should comb them out but doesn't really care.  
Pastel dawns and lover's kiss illusions,  
But she must pretend and suffer his delusions.*

*While mornings indict her days, and days her nights,  
She's dying inside and still must be polite.  
There is no justice is why she hates the dawn.  
It will never end until her ending comes.*

*Hating the morning she rises from her bed,  
Sitting upon the side she holds her head.  
The clock ticks. The clock ticks.  
The clock ticks. The clock ticks.*

*Ronald Allen*



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# Forward

**The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!**

*Hamlet IV*

**In my years as a mental illness professional, social stigma and family shame have never made effective treatments for mental illness. Maureen's story is common and in her experience many members of her family and her friends, couldn't believe that she, of all people, was mentally ill. On an emotional level, they resented her for playing what appeared to them, a cruel hoax.**

**The expression that 'people don't choose to be mentally ill' is almost a cliché today. Yet, long after the shock of learning about a person's illness, it is not uncommon for relatives and friends to still reject the reality of mental illness. Studies by the South Carolina Department of Mental Health concluded that stigma and shame remain a harsh reality and the greatest obstacles to recovery. Thus, for fear of further alienating families, the story of family stigma and shame is rarely told.**

**Publishing reflections of one's life in the context of family is a daunting and sometimes anxiety ridden experience especially while recovering from a severe mental illness. Under the best of circumstances, autobiographies take families out of their comfort zones. Unresolved issues, family conflicts, and tragedy may make memoirs interesting to others, but painful to family members who believe silence is best. In 2004 the World Health Organisation reported that suicide is the number one killer in the world. In my professional experience, for persons with mental illness, silence about relationships and events are triggers to depressive episodes and can be a death warrant.**

**In these pages, Maureen Allen chooses to be open and very vocal about her life and her illness because silence was killing her. But the focus of this life is not so much illness and attempts at suicide, though these things are met head on; but the quality of life Maureen has lived in spite of this life-long disease while overcoming resistant critical relations.**

**The reader will come away from Maureen's story with a realistic account of what it means to be mentally ill. Maureen's bipolar depression is one of dozens of mental disorders and all require from family members support, kindness, and understanding during the recovery process. Patients receiving this support generally have a better chance of recovery.**

**It's essential that all family members use mental illness as an opportunity because mental illness isn't an indictment against the family. When viewed from the healthiest of perspectives, it provides opportunities for communicating and healing within the family.**

***Out of Joint* is Maureen's 'act of hope' that relatives of persons with mental illness will, after reading her story, set aside their differences and basically love and care for the family member suffering from an illness they never asked for.**

Romano M. Bonett, MA (London), BSc  
Mental Illness Professional for City of Ealing, UK

# Introduction

**It doesn't, in our contemporary world, so much matter where you begin the examination of a subject, so long as you keep on till you get round again to your starting point.**

*Ezra Pound. The ABC of Reading*



I never thought about writing a memoir before being diagnosed with a mental illness. I didn't think I'd had a particularly interesting life and certainly not one that would attract general interest. But after extensively researching the genealogy of my family, things have changed. Mental illness has affected more than a third of my family during the last 100 years but few in my family have spoken of it. Grandfather was institutionalized in an asylum for the last 30 years of his life but everyone in the family has said he was hospitalised for alcoholism or suffered poison gas from the First World War.

But this book wasn't inspired by genealogy alone. It was my children, rather, their reaction to what I had been learning. At first they said, "Don't go there Mum." Eventually, they abandoned me altogether. Just as it was with my Grandfather and Uncle Leo, who committed suicide, my daughters don't speak of my illness and have insisted that I not continue looking into family closets. When they learned that I was writing a book, their reaction was palpable. Lisa called me a drama queen, disregarded mental illness and said she would never read the book, which she said, "...is a pack of lies."

Even today, after years of public service announcements and thousands of books written about mental illness, families still experience shame and stigma. They frequently blame the mentally ill members of the family for being weak or self-serving. They don't support those among them whose minds are sick. They push

them out as I have been pushed out. But I have met their strength of will to stop this book with a passion and love for my family and those who suffer mental illness whose family and friends have abandoned them.

Therefore, I'm writing this book for two reasons. First I want to leave a historical legacy to my children and grandchildren who would otherwise know very little about their heritage.

Second, I'm writing this book for anyone suffering from a mental illness, or who has been touched or harmed from bipolar depression, or whose lives have been devastated by a mental illness of all sorts. I offer hope and encouragement. Through effective medical care and professional counselling I agreed to cooperate with my medical team to beat this illness rather than denying it and myself. Acceptance may sound like a cliché, but it's true. Today, I accept that I'm mentally ill and am grateful for my life the vast majority of time. Many healthy people can't honestly say that. But I don't want to forget the months and years in which my life was like a ship wreck in the middle of an ocean storm. It wasn't worth living, so I thought. It's during these darkest two years of my life that I wrote *Out of Joint: Depression My Family and Me*. It's been a beacon of hope for me ever since; a lifeline when troubled waters threatened to overwhelm and drown me. I believe this little book will touch you as well with hope and a vision for your future. This book can be a beacon in the middle of an ocean storm.

When stigma, misunderstanding, and anger compel loved ones to pull away and ultimately reject a mentally ill person, recovery for that person is challenging beyond endurance. But I did it and continue recovering. Am I boasting? You bet I am! I'm a survivor and I'm damned proud of it.

The life you see unfolding throughout this book is real flesh and real blood of my flesh and my blood, of my mother's flesh and my mother's blood, of my deceased mentally ill granddad's flesh and his blood, and of the flesh and blood of children and my

grandchildren. Mental illness is in the blood. Living well in spite of depression is to be celebrated because most people with depression feel guilty and shame and living well remains out of reach. They isolate themselves and fail to recover because of it. But I refuse to ever again deny my illness or reduce myself to an inaccurate unmanageable illness paradigm. Bipolar depression is a chemically linked neurological brain anomaly, not a character gone bad. But when mental illness strikes too close to home those closest to it often refuse to understand. They just want out, which, ironically, is a major symptom of depression the thing from which we all wish to escape.

During a depression episode, patients experience a frantic need to escape which they can't help because they're ill. But friends and family have a choice and are presumably healthy enough to follow their choices. But it isn't like that in most homes dealing with one member's depression. Everyone feels helpless and even more helpless to talk about it. Family and friends are angry, defiant, and perhaps affected by the same set of genes which made me ill in the first place. The fact is familial disenfranchisement leaves permanent scars on both the patients and those who care for them. There is no malicious intent on anyone's part; of this I'm certain. When an illness is allowed to tear relationships apart it's just tragic.

Talking about abandonment and stigma here may seem like I'm judging, but I don't point fingers in this book. I go out of my way 'not' to point fingers in this book. I don't blame anyone, really. I tell a simple story in which mental illness is an important but not the central character. Living is the central character!



There's a lot of talk about the resources for the mentally ill, but not so much talk about how these people are treated by the very people who supposedly love them and frequently receive financial

allowances for them. I'm talking about families. Keeping a mentally handicapped, or depressed mother, or child, or whoever it is, out of the public eye is preferable to standing up for them in public and confronting the most pernicious enemy—social stigma. It's social stigma that keeps me from my grandchildren, though the healthy minds among my brood have spent clever years proving otherwise.

I would dearly like my children to read this story in the hope that they will understand not only me better, but better understand themselves. Social stigma, no me and not them, has developed in them revulsion, a dislike, a disrespect and even a hatred of me that's very hard for me to live with. My ill mind has embraced their contempt and willed me to kill myself, which I resisted and resist. I know my recovery is my responsibility, but I can't deny that their rejection of my being mentally ill has slowed my recovery. Perhaps my grandchildren will read this instead.

My story is told from my impressions and experiences at the time. But before beginning, allow me talk a little about myself. I was the first grandchild in a large extended family in Manchester, England. I was my family's golden child with golden curls and blue eyes. They had high hopes for me. I'm talented as an artist, quick witted, intelligent, and received high marks in school. I defend my values, sometimes to the detriment of my health. I'm also caring and empathic. I can be charming, witty, funny, generous, sensitive, am a good listener and storyteller.

I was born in Manchester on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1945... But no, that's not the start. As I am an artist, I will begin from a colour black. Because black is ignorance, puzzlement in the dark, and I don't know where I start. Because black is colourless, as it absorbs all light, just as my mind has absorbed all colours. To tell the story of my life, I must let some light in the black hole. But where the light may fall, I cannot tell.

Was the start a hundred years ago when Grandad had his first breakdown? When his brother James sat for years at an open

fireside, blubbering and muttering to himself? Or was it in 1947 when Grandad was committed to Prestwich Mental Asylum until he died in 1970? Or is my generation the start? One look at my family tree suggests it is not my generation.

## Mothers' Day 2004

*...I don't know why I'm shouting. I'm not even sure it's me who's screaming. But there's a loud noise coming from my mouth. In my mind I'm making great plans for my life, starting now, today! The dark cloud that has oppressed me for days has lifted. Now I feel fine; fine, but angry. I don't want to be reminded of my depressions; any of them — my depression within a depression, my depression following a depression. My mind's racing wildly but I'm not afraid. The last thing I want to happen is to crash back into that black devil-filled pit, knowing that next time there may be no clambering out.*

*And so my mind refuses to stop or to even slow down. I'm on a wild ride and my brain is behind the wheel. I can do anything! I can run into the street screaming and everyone will smile and understand and wave and maybe join me. I can climb onto the roof and swing from the TV antenna. I can run along Sunderland Bay Road and fly off the cliff into Bass Strait and nothing will happen to me. I'm elated. I'm giddy. I'm blissful. But the anger is also running with me. I'm angry at my children who have hurt and abused me with their foul insults and degrading judgements. In their callous denigrating voices echoes from distant family voices remind me of what my grandfather suffered when he was restrained, tortured, and lobotomized. Everything's old: I'll teach them. They'll learn when grief and sorrow eats alive as they have eaten me.*

*But I do none of these things. I know that nature is not kind and this high will go as quickly as it came. So instead I sing "Miss American Pie - This will be the day that I die." I'll do it my way.*

*I'm on the bed. My husband's pulling me back, pleading with me to lie down, to remain still. He won't let me get. He's a feign. He's cruel. He refuses to allow me the kitchen knives, my favourite. But it doesn't matter. My nails are long and strong and I use my right hand to rip at the thin skin of my left wrist.*

*He doesn't see. He's a fool; an absolute fool. It feels cool. My skin is dead. I'm dead, but it's alive inside. I deserve the pain but there is no pain. Where's justice. Then he sees but can't hold me, but dives for the phone instead. And an ambulance is here in minutes to take me to the hospital.*

*There, in the cool hands of Casualty staff, I begin to see what I am — a pathetic hollow thing. I am transferred to Delmont Psychiatric Hospital, and admitted to a one-windowed room and am clumsily giving a urine sample. I'm awkwardly blotting the cuts I made on my arm. No one cares but I know they see. I can hear noises from people who are like me, but I'm numb inside as they are numb inside. I don't feel anything because I'm coming out of a sweet overdose of Xanax and Ativan. Did I come here at the end or the beginning of my story? I don't remember; but how fortunate, I think wryly, that I'm already in my pyjamas.*



There  
must  
be more  
room  
in this overcrowded overtired  
over  
whelmed  
head  
than this weary dying woman