My brother and I were mystified and pained as we watched our mother’s paranoia increase. He was given a chemistry set by our father, and soon afterward several bottles of chemicals were missing. She had removed ones that could possibly have poisoned her. That Easter, a large ham was purchased that included the customary FDA purple inspection stamp. In her mind, the blueish purple dye was evidence that poison had been applied, namely bluestone that was kept in the house to control the algae in our pond. The ham was thrown out, and replaced with hot dogs. It would have been funny, if it wasn’t so tragic. She had told us of the persecutions during Nazi times, causing us to wonder if her unexplainable distrust might have also stemmed from the horrors of the past.

At an early age, I learned to detach from an unhappy life, and later as I realized I was not responsible for others’ behavior. Because of this, I managed, most of the time, to not let circumstances take over. Mom had tried to do the best that she was capable of doing. Yet children of a dysfunctional home, like mine, will never be completely spared from side effects. In my case, I still suffer from insomnia that started during the scary nights when my mother’s anxieties got the best of her. Still, I was fortunate I was not denied a career despite all that had happened.

Those affected by mental illness, as well as those around them, tragically suffer. Mental illness is like any other disease, in that both require medication. What is lost through the years, without professional help, is difficult to recover. Though my mother never made apologies, I know she suffered. I often wonder if my dad’s life was cut short due to grief and heartache. Divorce is a devastating time for everyone, especially children. Estrangement from a parent almost always is heartbreaking. I hope that my story shows the tragic consequences when issues go unresolved.