

6 Signs You're Headed For A Nervous Breakdown

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By Barbara Brody May 3, 2017

Winona Ryder supposedly had one, as did Mariah Carey, Amanda Bynes, and a slew of other celebrities who spiraled out of control and ended up in the hospital. But what, exactly, was going on with these people—and could you be headed for a similar fate?

The answer is a bit complicated, since "nervous breakdown" isn't a phrase that you'll find written on a contemporary's medical chart. In the past, it was used as a catchall diagnosis that could mean someone had one of any number of psychiatric disorders. The common thread is that whatever was going on rendered them unable to function normally, at least for a period of time.

Modern mental health professionals no longer use the vague phrase "nervous breakdown," and their goal is to identify the specific issue (such as major depression, panic disorder, or schizophrenia, among other possibilities) that caused what they might refer to as an "emotional health crisis," "mental health crisis," or "mental breakdown," says Heather Senior Monroe, MSW, LCSW, a social worker and director of program development at Newport Academy, a mental health treatment center. "Some experts classify a mental breakdown as a type of anxiety disorder," she explains. "What's important to understand is that such a breakdown is usually an indicator of underlying mental health problems that need to be addressed." (If you're a woman, you're more likely to have these 4 mental health issues.)

"A mental breakdown is a period of mental illness during which intense feelings of depression, stress, or anxiety result in an inability to function in daily life," Monroe adds. "The person suffering is emotionally overwhelmed. They might feel that life is hopeless, that they are 'going crazy,' and that they will never be able to get back to normal."

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When you read about the latest celebrity breakdown, it might seem as if it came out of nowhere. Although it's possible for someone's mental health to go from perfect to rock bottom in an instant, it doesn't usually work that way. (Even psychosis tends to have warning signs.) And if you get help when you're just starting to falter, you have a better chance of avoiding a full-on crisis. Here, some indicators that warrant a call for help.

You have a mental health issue that's not being well-managed.

"Anyone can experience a mental health crisis, but it is more likely when underlying mental health disorders are present," says Monroe. So if you already have depression, anxiety, or another problem, take it seriously. See your provider regularly for check-ins, and be sure to raise a flag if you feel like your current treatment isn't working.

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You're abusing alcohol or drugs (perhaps prescription ones).

Substance abuse and mental breakdowns often go hand-in-hand. You'll need professional help to break your addiction and get your mental and physical health back on track. Watch for these 5 warning signs that you have an alcohol problem, and seek out a medical professional if you need help.

Your life has been extra stressful lately.

Maybe you were diagnosed with cancer, are going through a divorce, got fired, or lost a loved one. None of these things necessarily mean that you're headed for a breakdown, but they do raise the risk. If you feel like stress is pushing you to the brink—perhaps you're so worried that you're hardly eating or sleeping—get professional help sooner rather than later. "In these cases, even someone who does not usually suffer from anxiety or depression can become overwhelmed to the point that they experience a mental health crisis," says Monroe.

You're having panic attacks or considering suicide.

"Panic attacks can be a warning sign, especially if they happen frequently within a short period of time. Mental breakdowns are often preceded by ongoing feelings of doom and worry, perhaps even suicidal thoughts, or by what's known as 'hyperarousal,'—feeling tense and overstimulated as a result of the nervous system going into 'fight or flight' mode," says Monroe. (Not sure if what you're experiencing is a panic attack? Here's how you can tell.)

You feel numb.

Some people on the cusp of a breakdown report not feeling much of anything. You might stop caring how you look, lose interest in activities you used to enjoy, and isolate yourself from family and friends. These are all signs of depression and possibly a major mental health crisis.

Normal life feels unmanageable.

"Even small everyday tasks begin to feel like too much to cope with, and social situations seem overwhelming," says Monroe. This feeling can come on suddenly or build up slowly over time, thanks to an "ongoing buildup of worry and stress."

Since most mental breakdowns are stress-related, techniques such as meditation, exercise, and yoga can certainly help. (Plus, you can try these 9 things therapists do when they're totally stressed out.) But if you're truly headed into crisis mode, don't try to fix it yourself or hope it will "just pass," warns Monroe. "A trained mental health professional can help you identify the underlying conditions or the triggering event, and work with you to create an appropriate treatment plan."

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