



How to Help – Breakdown

These notes are taken from the course notes for 'Understanding How to Help'. Click for further details of the [Understanding Yourself](#) courses.

What is a nervous breakdown?

From the Mayo clinic:

The term "nervous breakdown" is sometimes used by people to describe a stressful situation in which they're temporarily unable to function normally in day-to-day life. It's commonly understood to occur when life's demands become physically and emotionally overwhelming. The term was frequently used in the past to cover a variety of mental disorders, but it's no longer used by mental health professionals today.

Nervous breakdown isn't a medical term, nor does it indicate a specific mental illness. But that doesn't mean it's a normal or a healthy response to stress. What some people call a nervous breakdown may indicate an underlying mental health problem that needs attention, such as depression or anxiety.

Signs of a so-called nervous breakdown vary from person to person and depend on the underlying cause. Exactly what constitutes a nervous breakdown also varies from one culture to another. Generally, it's understood to mean that a person is no longer able to function normally. For example, he or she may:

- Call in sick to work for days or longer
- Avoid social engagements and miss appointments
- Have trouble following healthy patterns of eating, sleeping and hygiene

(Taken from: Hall-Flavin, D.K. What does it mean to have a nervous breakdown? (online) Available at <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/expert-answers/nervous-breakdown/faq-20057830>. Accessed 24/02/2017).

How to help

1. Understanding breakdown

As we have seen, the concept of breakdown is not treated as a separate medical issue. Understanding the interaction between the extrovert and introvert will enable us to help someone experiencing a breakdown.

If this person lives predominantly in his extrovert, it is highly unlikely that the emotions he feels in his introvert will ever be adequately processed. The Melancholic may well be depressed or the Phlegmatic experiencing severe anxiety, but if that depression or anxiety can be kept in the basement, well at least he can soldier on. What if that depression or anxiety pushes up through the floorboards like smoke? The smoke gets thicker and thicker until you collapse. That is a breakdown.

Sometimes the breakdown is even more sudden. This person appeared to have his act together. Everyone saw him as dependable and strong. Suddenly, he is off work, not able to go out, sitting at home. What has happened? The volcano has blown, the pressure has built to such a point that it

cannot be contained any longer. The Choleric temperament is associated with repression, so any combination with this temperament can experience this sudden eruption. The Choleric represses even his own emotions. Any sign of introvert emotions getting near the surface will get the same treatment. He can effectively distance himself from his introvert by pushing it deep within. This means that whatever goes on within the introvert remains unprocessed – fears, anxieties, low self-worth, unresolved conflicts and pain. These unresolved emotions create pressure within the introvert – rather like the compression within the magma chamber of a volcano – until it eventually erupts and spreads lava over a wide area. The trigger that finally allows the lava to break out varies from person to person. It might be having a child, moving house, bereavement or redundancy.



When the volcano erupts, lava spills out and completely alters the landscape. It is a nightmare of emotions – an erupting force that is unstoppable – and a fear that life will never be the same again. It is this change of landscape that is so unsettling. All the familiar landmarks have gone. Emotions are running riot that he never knew existed – and they all feel completely out of control.

2. What about medication?

If it is possible to engage the person in rational conversation, then it is better in the long term to avoid medication, but sometimes the force of emotions and disorientation are so severe that medication becomes necessary to ‘buy time.’

3. Heading for a breakdown?

What can you do in those situations where the signs are all pointing to an impending breakdown? Walk with that person, helping him to get in touch with, and process, what he is feeling in his introvert. It may take daily conversations to help him stand back and begin to understand what is happening to him. The more objective you can help him become, the more he will find he can make good choices.

4. Handling breakdown

Initially, it may be a case of just being there and not saying too much. Eventually, you will bring him an understanding of what has happened to him. Then offer to walk with him on the journey of discovering his introvert. This will take time and patience as you teach him to handle his emotional life. Much of what has been written about handling depression and anxiety is relevant here. Family dynamics in his childhood, past emotions, expectations, and present pressures, will all be discussed as you give him a thorough working knowledge of himself and equip him to handle himself properly.

It will be important to walk with this person beyond the crisis. He needs to understand why it happened in the first place, what emotions were involved, and how to come to a place of healing and then to consolidate the ground gained.