

What is a Nervous Breakdown?

By John M. Grohol, Psy.D.

A *nervous breakdown* refers to a mainstream and often-used term to generically describe someone who experiences a bout of mental illness that is so severe, it directly impacts their ability to function in everyday life. The specific mental illness can be anything — depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or something else. But the reference to a “nervous breakdown” usually refers to the fact that the person has basically stopped their daily routines — going to work, interacting with loved ones or friends, even just getting out of bed to eat or shower.

A nervous breakdown can be seen as a sign that one’s ability to cope with life or a mental illness has been overwhelmed by stress, life events, work or relationship issues. By disconnecting from their regular responsibilities and routines, an individual’s nervous breakdown may allow them to try and regroup their coping skills and temporarily relieve the stress in their life.

Someone with a nervous breakdown may be seen as having “checked out” from society temporarily. They no longer maintain their social relationships with others, and find it difficult or impossible to go to work and may call in sick multiple days in a row. People with a nervous breakdown often don’t even have the coping resources available to take care of themselves, or do much more than rudimentary self-care and maintaining. They may over-eat (if it provides them comfort) or simply fail to eat altogether, not feeling the need or energy to do so.

Since a nervous breakdown is not a clinical or scientific term, it’s meaning can also vary in terms of its length and severity, as well as outcomes. Many people who suffer from a nervous breakdown usually seek out treatment (or have treatment sought out on their behalf by a loved one), and treatment is usually on the serious end of the spectrum of all the interventions available. Inpatient hospitalization for a serious nervous breakdown would not be unusual, to help a person become stabilized and find an effective treatment strategy for the mental disorder they’re affected by.

People who suffer from a nervous breakdown and seek out treatment for it will usually recover from the most extreme depths of the “breakdown” within a few weeks’ time (which may be quickened with inpatient psychiatric treatment). Longer-term recovery usually takes months of ongoing outpatient treatment with mental health specialists, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist.

http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2009/10/19/what-is-a-nervous-breakdown/#at_pco=tst-1.0&at_si=562fa67f8ecfa19f&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=1&at_tot=2

A nervous breakdown is not a condition to be afraid of, as it is simply an indication of overwhelming stress and mental illness in a person's life. Loved ones and friends of someone who is suffering from a nervous breakdown should be supportive of the individual's efforts in seeking help for it.



Want to learn more about mental illness?

Read about [the 10 myths of mental illness](#) or review [the list of common mental disorders](#) for more about specific symptoms.

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