



Are you emotionally overwhelmed?

7 Signs Not to Ignore

The term “nervous breakdown” is not a medical diagnosis and has fallen out of favor with mental health professionals. Symptoms we have historically associated with a nervous breakdown, however, can be an indication of an underlying mental health problem, such as depression, anxiety or stress. Understanding these symptoms and addressing them before they overwhelm you can help head off more serious mental and physical health issues down the line.

Seven signs to keep in mind:

1. Lack of Concentration

Stress is the body’s natural reaction to physical or mental demands. As such, it can be a positive, increasing concentration, memory and awareness. However, over time, the body’s continued response to regular stress can lead to an increase in blood pressure and heart rate, heightened anxiety and an overall strain on the system. As unrelieved tension builds up, it provokes an array of unhealthy symptoms. Among these are feelings of anxiety, fatigue, depression and distraction. Physical effects can include high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

2. Irregular Heartbeat

Strong emotional stress or anger can contribute to cardiac arrhythmia, or an irregular heartbeat. Arrhythmia is a problem with the rate or rhythm of the heartbeat. During an arrhythmia, the heart can beat too fast, too slow or irregularly. Most arrhythmias are harmless, but some can be serious or even life threatening. Panic attacks and similar disorders, which often are at the root of once was considered a nervous breakdown, can mimic cardiac arrhythmia. Parallel symptoms include feeling the heart pounding against the chest, increased heart rate and excessive sweating.

3. Stomach Upset

Stress and anxiety often manifest as gastrointestinal issues, including chronic heartburn, ulcers, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Stress and depression also tend to be present in those who suffer from irritable bowel syndrome, which can be triggered by an immune system response to stress. Symptoms of IBS include frequent cramping, bloating, gas, constipation and diarrhea.

4. Muscle-contraction Headaches

Muscle-contraction, or tension, headache is named not only for the role of stress in triggering the pain, but also for the contraction of neck, face and scalp muscles brought on by stressful events. Ninety percent of all headaches are classified as tension/muscle contraction headaches. Occasionally, muscle-contraction headaches will be accompanied by nausea, vomiting and blurred vision, but there is no pre-headache syndrome as with a migraine. Research has shown that for many people, chronic muscle-contraction headaches are caused by depression and anxiety. Certain physical postures that tense head and neck muscles (such as holding one’s chin down while reading) can lead to head and neck pain.

5. Sleep Problems

Experts cite stress as the No. 1 cause of short-term sleeping difficulties. Worries related to work, school, marriage, relationships and recent life events can interfere with the ability to fall or remain asleep, or to achieve a restful state of healthy sleep. People who suffer from clinical or short-term depression also can have difficulty sleeping. Others with these conditions actually sleep too much. While stress and depression can interfere with sleep, the inability to sleep, known as insomnia, can trigger or intensify stress and depression symptoms.

6. Depression

Everybody feels sad now and then. But an extended period of sadness could indicate depression. Symptoms of depression, including feelings of guilt, sadness and hopelessness, lack of enjoyment in life, inability to concentrate, irritation, sleep issues and others, were long associated with nervous breakdowns. Depression remains a serious illness, but these days it can be treated. Among the treatment options are counseling, antidepressant medications and lifestyle changes, including improvements to diet and exercise routines. Untreated bouts of depression can lead to serious mental and physical health problems.

7. Anxiety

People with generalized anxiety disorder suffer from constant worry that is much more severe than normal, day-to-day anxiety. Sufferers experience chronic, exaggerated worry and tension that does not seem to have a specific cause. People with the disorder regularly anticipate disaster and often worry excessively about health, money, family or work. They even can feel extreme worry for a cause that is hard to pinpoint or even nonexistent. This makes it extremely difficult to relax. These worries can be accompanied by trembling, twitching, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, sweating and hot flashes. Sufferers may also feel lightheaded, out of breath and nauseated. Severe anxiety can be very debilitating, making it difficult to carry out ordinary daily activities.

Coping Strategies

Many of the symptoms historically associated with a nervous breakdown can be managed, treated and cured. Here are some suggestions:

- **Seek support.** Do not wait until you reach your breaking point. Talk to a physician, therapist or your Employee Assistance Program for help.
- **Try to identify the causes of stress.** By recognizing the real reasons behind your tension, you can learn to feel more in control and change the source of the stress.
- **Get enough rest.** Doctors recommend at least eight hours of sleep a night for adults.
- **Exercise regularly.** Swimming, running, brisk walking, aerobic exercises and other repetitive fitness activities are especially beneficial. Experts recommend exercising at least 20 to 30 minutes three to five times a week.
- **Engage in fulfilling activities.** Take a little time each day for something you like to do: a hobby, a walk with your partner, an hour with a good book, a home-improvement project, etc.
- **Avoid caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants.** These common drugs actually can induce stress and anxiety.
- **Avoid alcohol, tranquilizers and recreational drugs.** These may contribute to anxiety and depression and an increased sense of loss of control.

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