

HOW TO DEFEAT NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

INTRODUCTION

This article is written for anyone who wishes to avoid or overcome nervous breakdown. Although it is intended for anyone, its message is likely to be more easily understood by those whose background lies in those major faiths - and the more contemplative forms of Christianity - which place a high premium on inner stillness. However the essential principles taught will be the same for those without a faith as with one.

It is intended to be followed alongside any assistance you may need from the medical, psychiatric or counselling (psychotherapeutic) professions.

THE NATURE OF NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

Nervous breakdown (not actually a medical term) as we know it seems to be to a large extent a modern phenomenon comprising the collapse of the sufferer's inner world - what our ancestors called the 'soul'. Today's generation does not in the main recognise this term, which is one reason why we are so prone to breakdown. If we did recognise the soul, and took some steps to preserve it, we would many of us be in a far healthier position than we are now.

It needs to be said that breakdown - or breakthrough as some term it - challenges most of our deepest held beliefs. After all, we could ask ourselves, if all our beliefs were true, surely we would not have reached breakdown at all? There is a partial truth in this. At any rate if we were not conscious of our 'soul' before crisis, we may well expect to be so after it. A hurting soul can be very painful. ("Mind" will do if the term offends.)

I step here into line with the psychologist Carl Jung, who without possessing a traditional Christian faith saw a part of his mission as being to restore to today's hurting generation the knowledge of its own soul. He describes the process in books like "Modern Man in Search of a Soul".

Many breakdowns today are due to the contemporary disease of trying to live too fast. We are a generation in a hurry. Like our expanding universe, we seem to run away from the centre of ourselves at speeds which are ever increasing. There is a clash between the pace at which we are trying to live and that at which our minds and bodies were created and intended to live. We can't meet our commitments. This is something that not even the strongest constitutions can endure for ever. Sooner or later something has to give. If we have not taken steps to safeguard our soul, we could be in difficulties.

DECELERATION

Nervous breakdown is often a process of adjustment from the rapid pace at which many of us live our lives to the much slower one at which we were created to live. Happy are those who are capable of making that adjustment! The new life I shall call "decelerated". A happy few are born decelerated. Some - often country-dwellers - grow that way. For others in the rat race it can take a kind of crisis akin to but not usually the same as religious conversion.

The decelerated life is characterised by

- simplicity
- unhurriedness
- having time for other people - giving out
- taking time to be by oneself - drinking in

It is decelerated folk who will have the most to offer you in your hour of need. They will shoulder your burdens, listen to your cries and dry your tears. They will love and not condemn. If necessary they may even open their home to you.

Perhaps the best preparation you can make for yourself is to seek out a place of quiet among decelerated folk to which you can retreat and where you can rest when one day the storms pass over you. I myself would recommend you discover a convent, monastery or similar house of retreat which takes in guests and which appeals to you. In such a place you will not be required to pretend to a faith you do not possess, and

you will not be forced to attend any services you do not wish to. But you will find there an atmosphere of peace, love and tranquillity to a depth rarely equalled outside. Should you feel in need of help with your 'soul' (as defined above), you will be in the company of experts.

So take time while you are well to unearth such a place - and go and stay there. Make yourself known and at home. Get to know the folk who live there. If one day crisis erupts, they will understand your problem and will carry you for as long as you need. Better still, they may even be able to help you pre-empt such a crisis.

Our ancestors would have had no difficulty in understanding this advice. For them the concept of a once-in-a-lifetime visit to a holy place for the good of one's soul was a very familiar one. They called it 'pilgrimage'. Inner and outer pilgrimage were both held to be good for the soul :

"Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage." (Psalm 84:5)

Another kind of decelerated person is (ideally) the psychotherapist. A skilled psychotherapist can do masses to help you confront your own terrifying inner darkness as you rearrange the pieces of your life.

RE-KINDLING

Somewhere in the centre of your wounded, damaged soul there is something that responds to Life. This "something" is in Christian theology traditionally termed the "spirit". The Life to which it responds is - again in Christian terms - the Holy Spirit of God. So it was said of Jesus that

"In him was Life, and that Life was the light of men".
(St John 1:4)

What we are trying to do in defeating nervous breakdown is to find something - as much as possible - which our spirit can recognise and respond to when the life of the soul has all but been extinguished. When we succeed, the Life that we find restores life to the soul and the crisis passes.

For instance when King Saul's psychiatric problem threatened to take him over he had the boy David play to him on his harp until he was himself again. (1 Samuel 16:14-23)

So we need when healthy to open up as many channels as possible through which we can respond to the Life of God. This entails developing all our five senses as well as our thought life and (if we recognise it) the life of the spirit which is cultivated through specifically "religious" channels such as prayer, bible reading, fasting, meditation and so forth.

"Whatever is true, whatever is noble,
whatever is right, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -
think about such things."
(St Paul, Philippians 4:8)

"FAVOURITE THINGS"

Make a list of favourite things that appeal to your five senses and make you feel good. Share it with those who care for you and who will be tasked with coddling you in a crisis. For instance :

Touch :	Massage, hugs, pet, teddy bear
Taste :	Favourite food, drink or confectionery
Smell :	Flowers, favourite food, perfume
Hearing :	Favourite music, bird song
Sight :	The countryside, art, particular films

Some branches of the Christian Church have deliberately exploited the five senses in ways that can stimulate the spirit :

Touch :	Baptism; "Passing the peace" or what the New Testament calls a "holy kiss"; the rosary; footwashing
Taste :	The Eucharist
Smell :	Incense
Hearing :	Music (choral / instrumental / organ), bells
Sight :	Crucifix, stained glass windows, icons, candles, architecture

Most churches employ some of these; few, none at all. Not all appeal to everyone.

By developing such faculties when our world is stable we provide ourselves with anchors and channels of healing when it threatens to fall apart.

You may find it helpful to construct a routine from your "favourite things" or combinations of them. For instance particular drinks may be enjoyed at particular times of day. If you live near the country you may like to take a regular walk in the afternoon terminating in a friendly tea shop.

What we are trying to do is to reconstruct your life on solid foundations that will not wash away.

When you have discovered an abiding structure which supports your life you may find it helpful to write it down point by point, thereby crystallising it into what used to be termed a "Rule of Life".

HOW TO WARD OFF NERVOUS BREAKDOWN IN ADVANCE

1. Steer clear of things that will tend to speed up the pace of your life. Choose options that will tend to slow you down. Even a long hot bath is a start!
2. Put your life in order as though you have only three months to live. Tie up your loose ends. Make a will. Put right the things that are wrong. Do the things that you should have done long ago but have been delaying. This will reduce the tension between the current faster pace of your life and the natural slower pace of creation, and so lessen the pain of any crisis that may arise. Organise yourself so that you can drop anything or everything at a moment's notice. In the spirit of the hymn writer Bishop T. Ken,

"Redeem thy mis-spent time that's past,
And live this day as if thy last."

3. Repair any broken friendships, especially with family and neighbours. Set about strengthening your good ones.
4. Begin trying to live according to the Sermon on the Mount, which you will find in St Matthew's Gospel chapters five to seven. This passage constitutes what many have felt to be the highest ethical teaching ever given to man. You can set about practising it without any preconceived notions about the speaker and without making any prior commitment to the Christian religion. My reason for including this advice is to be found at the end :

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundations on the rock."
(St Matthew 7:24-25)

This has to be good news for anyone in fear of inner collapse!

5. Learn to practise inner stillness ("prayer", "meditation" or any other name you care to give it; the point is that it takes time every day and you *do* very little). Find someone experienced in this who can teach you. Such a person is often termed a spiritual guide or director and you should be able to find someone competent at your house of retreat. There is a wealth of good books on the subject, a few of which I have suggested below. Contemplative prayer is the most effective means of slowing down the pace of your life,

but should not be attempted without putting into practice the other lessons of this article, or without a good spiritual director.

6. Make out a Rule of Life as described above whose structure and routine will carry you when all else fails.
7. Set aside at least one day a week when you can relax and do something (gardening ?) other than your usual occupation. Allow others to do the same.
8. Take time to read as widely as possible.
9. Watch less television, and especially less news programmes.

HOW TO RECOVER FROM NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

1. See a doctor whom you trust in order to establish whether the problem is what you think it is. Make sure you are listened to and not just handed out short term palliatives. Discuss perhaps whether or not sleeping tablets may be of some use.
2. You will need to offload as many of your responsibilities as you can until the storm is passed. If your doctor offers to take you off work, or put you on part time sick leave, accept and inform your employer.
3. Don't worry about deadlines. It regularly happens that the most important deadlines can be met in spite of breakdown. Priorities always look different on the far side of a crisis.
4. Seek out the company of decelerated people you can talk to who can shoulder your load.
5. If you have a religious faith expect it to be tested. Ultimately it will probably emerge stronger, albeit refined. Those parts of it which let you down will fall away; those which helped will grow.
6. If you have a minister who can come to your home and pray with you or even anoint you while you are laid up, make the most of it. Either can be of enormous benefit.
7. Coddle yourself with as many of your "favourite things" as you can get hold of. Have a warm bath and relax in bed for as long as you feel like it.
8. Do *not* be ashamed of your condition. Discuss it freely with anyone who needs to know - family, friends, colleagues.
9. When you are ready see if you can obtain a room for a few days at your house of retreat. Tell them when booking how you are so that they can know in advance what to expect.
10. When beginning to return to circulation do so SLOWLY. Give yourself plenty of time and space and at all costs avoid pushing yourself too hard.
11. Every morning, as you begin to recover, make a short list of little, non-threatening things you would like to do today and feel you have the inner strength for. Then during the day move from one such to the next, crossing each one off the list as you go, with breaks as you need. This will help take some of the pressure off you and assist you in bringing back a flow of fresh, life-giving thoughts into your mind.
12. Many people find help outside the Church in psychotherapy. If you feel that your problems run deep or go back a long way or if you cannot even identify them, a psychotherapist or counsellor may well be able to help you unscramble them in a way that brings genuine healing.

FOR FURTHER READING ON PRAYER

Andrew Murray, *Waiting on God* (c.1900, more recently published by Ambassador).

C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer* (Bles, 1964), republished as *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (Fount, 1977).

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *School for Prayer* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970).

Mark Gibbard, *Prayer and Contemplation* (Mowbrays, 1976).

Delia Smith, *A Journey into God* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1988).

John Pritchard, *How to Pray: A Practical Handbook* (SPCK, 2002).

RETREAT HOUSES

Details of some 200 Christian retreat houses all over Britain, together with information on accommodation, availability, programmes offered and so forth are published annually in the magazine *Retreats* by The National Retreat Association, The Central Hall, 256 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3UJ (Tel: 020 7357 7736; Fax: 020 7357 7724; Internet: www.retreats.org.uk; e-mail: info@retreats.org.uk).

Bible quotations are from the New International Version (Hodder and Stoughton, 1979).

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