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Making a good crisis of a nervous breakdown

What happens when you have a nervous breakdown? I was recently made redundant. I can tell you. I got afraid, I lost my confidence, I beat myself up, I felt anxious all the time. It seemed like I'd hit a 'self-destruct' button. I got stuck.

Yet, I knew this sensation. I'd experienced it before. I felt it the last time I was made redundant! Had I learned nothing? Well, I'd learned to recognise this trauma as something that would pass, but could I dodge the bullet this time? No... it was the same pattern. I was hurt. I regressed and felt helpless as a baby. I became self-absorbed. I became mean. I couldn't help myself.

A significant loss

Life changing bad news can kick our legs out from under us. As if in slow motion, we find ourselves sliding down a wall of ice into a dark deep ravine with no obvious way out.

You are in shock. Losing one of your loves is a significant loss. You blame yourself for taking your eye off the ball. Losing a job you love is a form of bereavement. Every moment will now be repeatedly played out, rewound and analysed in all its useless detail. 'What ifs' crowd the mind.

Wired to survive

When your emotions are ratcheted up like this it really is tough to stand back and get perspective. The reason for this has a lot to do with how we are wired to survive as animals.

Think about it ... we're programmed to feed and sleep, make babies, protect our own and metaphorically dodge bullets. Each programme we run holds out the prospect of a reward to keep us motivated and alive. So we constantly strive towards those good feelings, like the satisfaction of a full stomach after hunger, or some other small victory.

Stuck on red alert

Stress in itself is usually easily tolerated by the body. The problem with unrewarded unrelieved nervous tension and stress is that our primeval survival programme gets stuck on red alert. Our mind starts replaying the perceived threat like a scratched record. As neither fight or flight will bring relief from our fears, we get all the adrenaline but little of the restorative rest.

Disrupted sleep

Sleep gets badly disrupted. The busy dream phase of sleep gets



extended as the brain struggles to compartmentalise these worries. And as our brain isn't getting enough down time we feel exhausted when we get up.

The relentless rush of adrenaline and lack of rest has serious physical side effects - dizziness, loss of appetite and sex drive, irritability, insomnia, tension in pit of the stomach. An unpleasant tingling in the flesh appears as if the nerve endings are traumatised. Repetitive ticks, like tooth sucking, become habitual. You might have a private moment of spontaneous flailing arms, juddering, jumping and shouting. It's like you're trying to free yourself from a predators jaws.

Indecisiveness

At work you may be serious. Possibly nobody notices your discomfort. However, inside you'll be agonising and obsessing over details, suffering crippling indecisiveness and an inability to finish tasks. You'll wake up to a sense of general foreboding. At every turn you are taking self-inflicted punches, but the body is resilient. You keep getting back up off the deck. You keep re-emerging after getting beaten down under the waves.

Paranoia

After a month or so, as fear and anxiety gives way to utter exhaustion, you'll be having difficulty getting excited or interested in anything. You've given up hobbies like writing and given up listening to the news. You're hypersensitive. You don't need that shit. You imagine veiled threats and ridicule in a colleague's comment or laughter. It's paranoia. You worry about your childrens' future. You feel vulnerable, perhaps petrified. The predator has you in its teeth. Who's going to rescue you now?

Numb

You'll be feeling low, numb, disorientated. You'll have no alternative but to go to bed early. Then you'll wake up repeatedly in the night, unable to get back to sleep. Life feels royally f**ked up. Almost without hope. You get short tempered with your nearest and dearest. You fly into a rage at the slightest provocation. It's not like you.

You may have given up going out. You may feel socialising is a burden even though you feel better after you've made the effort. You might even think people around you would be better off without you around. You get careless. So you prang your car. Did that speed camera flash me? Its' paranoia. You worry about the possible consequences for days. Your dreams get vividly unpleasant.

Darkest dreams

This is the reality of the stuck 'fight or flight' response. The body is like a coiled spring ready to repond, but you are frozen with fear. You lie down and have the darkest dreams. Your kids are missing. A passenger plane is tumbling to belly flop on the runway. A car is running away without you. Then a chink of light...

I am in a dark alley. A woman cloaked in black emerges and flaps and judders supernaturally in my way. Fear tingles through my

flesh. I'm spun uncontrollably and layers of stress, like dark cloaks, peel off me. It's like multiple selves are levitating. At the core is a fearless soul. Then the layers descend and cloak me with fear again. Can fears literally be shaken off?

My fight

During my own fight I found myself increasing my exercise routine (press ups, squats, dancing, gym). I worked longer hours but I realised that this was hopeless. It would not rescue the situation. I would not escape being made redundant. I applied for a job downstairs and got it fast. But this didn't stop the fight or flight.

I had three weeks at home between jobs. This was not relaxing. I downloaded self-help recordings, studied happiness, practised meditation, wrote down 3 good things a day. But I couldn't follow my breath - I could hardly hear it. I talked to a counsellor. I used a form of affirmation designed to 'give fear nowhere to hide'. I swam, I cycled. I was determined to get 'unstuck'. I joined a yoga evening class. In desperation (as normally an old leg injury wouldn't allow me to) ... I ran. Still every waking hour an anxiety permeates my body.

Now I mean business. I get acupuncture. Talking to the acupuncturist helps. She reminds me that people get anxious about giving presentations and all kinds of things. I remember the pressure points and later will buy needles and self-administer a few times. I learn about acupressure (needle free but similar outcome) and do this twice a day.

I want my 'normal' back

By this time I am ticking all the boxes for clinical depression. I try alternative medicine. I pop Vitamin C and Omega 3 Fish Oil tablet first and last thing. A daily dose of liquid Echinacea to keep colds away; some magnesium salt in the mouth in case that can help. The Valerian sleeping pills I buy keep me even more intensely awake. I bin them. The rhodiola rosea root de-stress tablets help me focus on work but leave me even more tired. I break them into quarters. Then I leave them behind and start on the St John's Wort.

St John's Wort

I've necked the odd St John's Wort tablet in the past for a bit of fun. It made me feel elated. I smiled and danced energetically for a few hours, but I felt a bit hungover the next day. So I am being cautious. Hangovers when you are fit is one thing. Hangovers when you are stressed is quite another. I want my 'normal' back.

I resolve to take 1/4 tablet of St John's Wort morning and night. By now I've got an inkling that the worst is over... I'm 4 months in. Perhaps everything I have thrown at the problem is starting to finally pay off. I continue like this for maybe 4 or 5 weeks... until I forget a few doses of St Johns' Wort and my body tells me it doesn't need this shit anymore. So I stop. This is followed by a worn out weekend with the return of that painful sensation...which subsides. Done and dusted.

Fear Recedes

Finally, thankfully, gratefully, I realise that my fears have receded and my body is actually in pretty good shape. I've lost a fair bit of weight. I am able to look more outwardly again. I take an interest in other people. I make more time for socialising, chatting, taking a walk with a friend, going out for a dance... and all this is helping.

A good crisis

Today I am back to 'normal'. It has taken 6 months to say this with any confidence - 6 months of largely self-inflicted pain before I got back some perspective. But perspective, whilst it's great thing for your sanity, should not get in the way of a good crisis which jolts us out of our comfort zone and yanks us on a new course. This can hurt physically and drive you half-crazy, but once you emerge on the other side you might actually be stronger, wiser and more capable.

Move, agitate, grow

Life is a climb. And sometimes life brings us the most phenomenal rewards and a great sense of achievement. We reach a pinnacle. The clouds clear. We have the perfect view. We're having a great time. We feel in control. We feel loved and respected. We're empowered, connected and in flow. We've climbed another mountain. We put life on cruise control.

But standing still for too long isn't good. That's stagnation. We must move, agitate, grow and experience the odd crisis.

Be patient

In my own case, crisis has tended to open up exciting new vistas and opportunities to shine. So, if you are in this place now, have hope for the future, be patient, you'll come through this. And you'll be glad when you look back and realise some things have changed for the better. You've overcome your fear and can feel justifiably proud of yourself for doing so, because whether the threat was real or imagined it doesn't matter. You put up one hell of a fight.

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Fiona • 4 years ago

This is the clearest description of my behaviour and thoughts when this happens. It has been more than once and things have opened up. However I'm in one this time and I'm not in the place of hope so thank you for reminding me. But it is still very hard :)

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