

# Generation burnt out?

They seem to HAVE IT ALL, but many high-flying 20-somethings are on the verge of MELTDOWN – not just celebrities BY CATHERINE GRAY

When Lana Del Rey tweeted recently that she was cancelling tour dates due to exhaustion, it sparked fears that, at just 25, she was the latest celeb teetering on the edge of a breakdown. Just two weeks earlier, Rihanna, 24, tweeted pictures of herself hooked up to a vitamin drip after another reported bender at the Met Ball in New York. Insiders said that she was suffering from “exhaustion and dehydration”, leading fans to frantically tweet their fears, with one writing “she has gotten out of control”.

Meanwhile, *X Factor USA* judge Demi Lovato, 19, told *Fabulous* how the pressures of fame and the party lifestyle that came with it led to a public meltdown in November 2010.

Even singer Katie Melua, 27, dropped out of the industry for a few months and checked herself into rehab after a breakdown. Yet stars like this are poster girls for living the dream – successful careers, stunning looks and millions in the bank. So what’s going wrong?

Recent statistics say one in three of us feels constantly drained chasing the “work hard, play hard” dream\*. And more of us are turning to drink as a way to cope. Addiction charity Norcas says the average number of days a month women binge drink has risen from 8.5 to 20 days over the last three years – and it’s successful career girls most at risk.

Emma Mansfield, 37, ended up

being hospitalised after buckling under the pressure of her demanding TV job. In her early 20s, she thought she had it all – her dream career as a producer, a good salary and a packed social life. But by the age of 25 she was struggling to cope with the stress of her job.

“It was very intense and I had a career-centred mentality,” says Emma. “Over the years, I found myself working crazy hours, unable to switch off.”

The first sign that it was becoming a problem was when Emma grew increasingly absent-minded. “My head was constantly filled with work and everyday things started to slip. I was rising rapidly through the ranks, but on a personal level I’d almost stopped functioning. I’d do silly things like forgetting I’d turned the bath tap on, nearly flooding my flat. My diet was awful – my skin looked grey – and exercise had gone out the window.”

According to psychotherapist Marisa Peer, Emma’s story is all too common. “We’ve developed an ‘I must be able to have it all’ mentality which has led to us having breakdowns younger and younger,” she says.

“We look at celebs like Victoria Beckham – a mum with a husband and incredible career – and beat ourselves up for not being like her, yet we don’t think about the fact she probably has eight staff to help!”

Like so many women, Emma didn’t want to admit that she was on the verge





Top to bottom: Rihanna, Lana Del Rey and Katie Melua have all battled with exhaustion

of a breakdown. "To me, cracking up was a sign of weakness," she says. "But eventually my body gave in. For days I struggled to eat because of stress and I hadn't slept properly for around a week. I felt like I was losing my mind.

"Then one morning in 2001, I was getting ready to go to work and my heart was pounding. It was so intense – I realised I was having a panic attack. I had to get help, so I rang an ambulance, which took me to the local mental health unit where I was given sleeping pills."

### Bubble BURSTS

**E**mma had received a shocking wake-up call. "It happened in a bit of a blur. The ambulance staff realised I was having a psychotic episode and I was put on anti-psychotic drugs. I slept for two days solidly. When I came round, the psychiatrist told me I was suffering from nervous exhaustion, and I was diagnosed with psychosis. After being released, I knew my life had to change. The stress had just built up over the past few months. I moved back in with my parents, quit work and started therapy."

But while Emma hit rock-bottom and got treatment, many women are ignoring their problems and using alcohol to try and

manage stress. Dr Ian Drever, consultant psychiatrist from The Priory Hospital Woking, says: "I've seen women spiral into drug use, gambling and casual sex. But the irony is that many of us push ourselves harder when we're frazzled, which can be even more dangerous."

### Gaining CONTROL

**A**nne Thay, 29, began drinking at the same time as her career in advertising took off, but within a couple of years it had spiralled out of control.

"Working in advertising sales, there was constant pressure to hit targets. On top of that were boozy client parties. I was terrified of losing my job so I played the game to keep ahead – I went out for work three nights a week, saw mates three nights a week and allowed myself one night off when I'd conk out at 9pm."

Eventually, her lifestyle became too much. "Sometimes I was drinking three bottles of wine a day. I started to notice a slight tremor in my hands and couldn't always focus my eyes at work. I felt anxious, but pretended I was having fun."

"This hamster wheel of work-hard-play-hard cripples our bodies," says Marisa. "Sleep repairs us physically and mentally. You need at least two eight-hour sleeps during the working week or your memory starts to suffer."

Most women's breaking point comes when they least expect. For Anne, from Brighton, it was getting caught in the ash cloud in 2010.

"I'd been on a girlie weekend in New York and was gearing myself up for another stressful week in the office. But the ash cloud meant I couldn't fly home for a week. I went to stay with my friend's uncle on a ranch in Virginia and it was like checking into rehab. I rode horses, didn't drink for seven days and suddenly realised I hated my job."

Anne came home, quit work and used her savings to go travelling for 18 months. Now she's back, feeling relaxed living with friends and looking for a less stressful job in marketing.

But making the transition to a simpler life isn't always easy. "Letting go of the edge of that cliff you've worked so hard to climb can be terrifying," says Emma. "But I had to adjust my attitude. Why was I saying



Emma suffered from nervous exhaustion



Anne quit her job and went travelling

yes to everything? Why wasn't I putting myself first?"

When she felt strong enough, Emma found a new career as an arts administrator with the Eden Project, taking a massive pay cut and moving to sleepy Bodmin in Cornwall. Her family were relieved she'd finally addressed her problems. Over the next two years she had therapy and wrote a book called *The Little Book Of The Mind*, which attempts to smash the stigmas around mental breakdowns like the one she suffered.

"Changing my life has been worth it. I have less money and a less impressive career, but I'm happier and freer. Many burnouts are self-inflicted like mine was, so listen to your body and take the plunge to change if you're not happy. I just wish I'd done it sooner." **L**

### SLOW DOWN - BURNOUT AHEAD

Use our checklist to spot the warning signs

- \*Withdrawing from social occasions you used to love.
- \*Becoming absent-minded.
- \*Feeling emotionless or numb.
- \*Leaving food half-finished or totally over indulging.
- \*Finding it hard to drop off at night or waking unexpectedly.

#### Beat the breakdown

- \*If you find yourself panicking about your workload, make lists and prioritise what needs doing first.
- \*Tell someone how you're feeling. Sharing is the first step to halting it.
- \*Practise relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation.
- \*Don't self medicate. If you feel depressed, anxious or panicky, visit your GP.