

Sanity / Stress

Sanity as a system is designed to represent the mental fortitude and struggles of a hero as they encounter stressful, disturbing, and alien things that wear them down or challenge their views of the world. For the purposes of this document, Sanity can also be repurposed as Stress for games that lean less on horror or Eldritch elements.

Content Note: *For many players, mental health can be a sensitive topic. Additionally, using a system like this can impact a player's feeling of agency over their character. For these reasons, before using a system like this consider if your players are mature enough and comfortable approaching topics such as this. I have had tables the system has been very successful at and tables that I would never consider using it with. Finally, I recommend leaving the exact amount of sanity damage a character takes in any situation as well as any flaws a character accumulates when taking stress damage up to the player. This system is intended to be a role playing aid more than a secondary HP bar, though it can also be used the latter way.*

A character's maximum Sanity is determined by the sum of their Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma scores (30-50 for most characters). If these stats increase, so does that character's maximum Sanity. Upon character introduction, subtract any lingering events that have defined that character from that character's maximum score. Such events can include any of the listed below, though the most common are Learning Exotic Languages or Forbidden Lore, being violently orphaned, or suffering a similar tragedy. This new score becomes the character's Modified Maximum Sanity.

I've typically subtracted 3 points per Good / Evil / Alien language learned and 0-10 for backstory events, generally leaving characters in a range from 25-35 max Sanity. Some may start below 20 (RIP Barbarians), though much lower than that is rare (Only Great Old One Warlocks fittingly enough).

This score may be decreased by witnessing or experiencing traumatic events. These might include things such as:

- Witnessing or being involved in the death of a loved one
- Witnessing or being involved in a great tragedy
- Experiencing great personal pain or loss
- Exposure to hostile or Evil magic
- Exposure to hostile or Evil telepaths
- Learning an Evil language (Infernal or Abyssal)
- Learning a Good language (Celestial)
- Learning an Alien language (Deep Speech)
- Learning knowledge or forbidden lore that damages one's belief system or worldview
- Exposure to events outside one's understanding of the world (Abnormal physics or geometry, untethering from reality)
- Death and Resurrection

These events will generally decrease scores by the following amounts. A Wisdom Saving throw at the time of the event is allowed to halve or fully negate sanity loss depending on the situation:

- Unsettling or alien event: 1-3 Points
- Tragic or deeply upsetting event: 4-6 Points
- Highly Traumatic event: 7-10 points
- Mentally sundering event: 11-30 points

An event that impacts the character long term may decrease that character's modified Maximum Sanity score. Consult with the player regarding if such an effect would severely impact them in this way.

When a player's sanity falls below one of the following thresholds, they suffer an unfortunate effect:

- 20 Points: Mild Flaw / Neurosis
- 15 Point: Additional or Worsened Flaw
- 10 Points: Extreme Flaw / Psychosis
- 0 Point: Nonfunctional

Typically, I leave the development of flaws up to players. Mandating a flaw has the potential to strip player agency in a grating way. Some players may opt out of developing such flaws entirely. There isn't anything wrong with that.

What does "Nonfunctional" mean? That the character is no longer capable of functioning as an adventurer. This can mean suffering from extreme stress and anxiety, developing crippling phobias, or other events that prevent them from continuing onwards until they recover Sanity.

A lower sanity score may allow a character to perceive the world in a more flexible way, potentially granting them greater insights into the hidden workings of the world. This is *especially* true in campaigns making use of Eldritch Horror elements. Many magicians and sages struggle to strike such a balance between insight and madness.

A player's sanity may be restored by the following means, though some losses to sanity may never be truly recovered:

- Time
- Positive interactions / Relationships
- Therapy
- Magical intervention
- Adaptation of worldview
- Great triumphs (Leveling Up)

I typically allow the recovery of 1 point per Long Rest with a DC 13 WIS save, 1 no Save per day off, Prof score immediately healed on leveling up, then maybe some extra if the party has a bard. Find what works for you. If characters never take time off adventuring, they'll be hurting pretty badly pretty fast.