WORKSHEET 133 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# My smoke detector

Recognising the false alarms of my protection system

**AIM**

Explain the “smoke detector principle” (Nesse) and help the person distinguish true alarms from false ones, without blaming themselves for their reactions.

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Anxiety, panic attacks, hypervigilance, people who judge themselves “too sensitive”.

**DURATION**

15-20 min, then to fill in over a week

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. Introduce the image of the smoke detector: it goes off for burnt toast, because missing a real fire would cost far more.
2. The person notes the moments when their alarm went off and what set it off.
3. For each moment, they assess afterwards whether there was real danger and how serious it was.
4. Identify the frequent triggers of false alarms, which can then be worked on (exposure, reappraisal).

## POINTS TO WATCH

> Don’t dismiss justified alarms: in some situations (violence, real insecurity), the alarm protects and must be taken seriously.

## REFERENCES

Nesse, R. M. (2005). Natural selection and the regulation of defenses: A signal detection analysis of the smoke detector principle. Evolution and Human Behavior, 26(1), 88-105.

Nesse, R. M. & Ellsworth, P. C. (2009). Evolution, emotions, and emotional disorders. American Psychologist, 64(2), 129-139.

## PSYCHOLOGIST’S NOTES

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WORKSHEET 133 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

# My smoke detector

Your alarm system works like a smoke detector: it would rather go off for burnt toast than miss a real fire. That was useful for survival, but it produces many false alarms. Recognising them helps you judge yourself less.

1. Note each time your alarm goes off (fear, racing heart, tension).
2. Write what set it off and what your body did.
3. Later, calmly, ask yourself: was there real danger? Rate it from 0 to 10.
4. Write what you could tell yourself next time.

| The trigger | What my body did | Real danger (0-10) | What I can tell myself |
|---|---|---|---|
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**The false alarms that come up most often for me:**

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WORKSHEET 134 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# My two speeds

The body's fast reaction and the cortex's slower view

**AIM**

Distinguish the automatic survival reaction (fast, approximate) from the slower, more nuanced analysis that follows, to normalise bodily reactions and practise reappraisal.

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Anxiety, explosive anger, reactions experienced as "incomprehensible" or "out of proportion".

**DURATION**

15 min

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. Explain the two speeds: the fast alarm prepares the body even before we understand; the cortex analyses afterwards and can confirm or put the brakes on the alarm.
2. The person describes a recent situation: their immediate reaction (body, gesture) and what they thought a few minutes later.
3. Compare the two: what did the second look add?
4. Look for what helps the second look arrive sooner (breathing, naming, asking oneself a question).

## POINTS TO WATCH

> Survival circuits and conscious experience are two different levels (LeDoux): the aim is not to prevent the fast reaction, but to leave time for the second look to arrive.

## REFERENCES

LeDoux, J. E. & Pine, D. S. (2016). Using neuroscience to help understand fear and anxiety: A two-system framework. American Journal of Psychiatry, 173(11), 1083-1093.

Buhle, J. T., Silvers, J. A., Wager, T. D., Lopez, R., Onyemekwu, C., Kober, H., Weber, J. & Ochsner, K. N. (2014). Cognitive reappraisal of emotion: A meta-analysis of human neuroimaging studies. Cerebral Cortex, 24(11), 2981-2990.

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WORKSHEET 134 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

# My two speeds

Your brain reacts at two speeds. First, a fast alarm that prepares your body in a fraction of a second. Then a slower look that analyses and can say: “actually, it wasn’t such a big deal”. Both are useful.

1. Choose a recent situation in which you reacted strongly.
2. Note your first reaction, your body’s (within a few seconds).
3. Note what you thought afterwards, with some distance.
4. Write what the second look taught you.

| The situation | First speed: my body | Second speed: my view afterwards | What I take from it |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
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**What helps my second look arrive sooner:**

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WORKSHEET 135 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# When the alarm takes over

My plan for coming back when I “lose it”

**AIM**

Build a personal step-by-step plan for moments when the alarm dominates and the prefrontal cortex works less well: first the body, then words, finally reflection.

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Panic attacks, anger, arguments that get out of hand, emotional overwhelm, parents who “explode”.

**DURATION**

20 min to prepare; to use when needed

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. Explain that intense stress reduces the functioning of the prefrontal cortex (Arnsten): reasoning in the middle of the storm works poorly; the body needs calming first.
2. The person identifies their early signs (body, thoughts, behaviours).
3. For each step they choose a concrete, realistic action.
4. The plan is written briefly, kept on the phone or in the wallet and tried out in a low-intensity situation.

## POINTS TO WATCH

> If there is violence towards oneself or others, this plan isn’t enough: also build a safety plan (worksheet 89).

## REFERENCES

Arnsten, A. F. T. (2009). Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function. Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 10(6), 410-422.

Lieberman, M. D., Eisenberger, N. I., Crockett, M. J., Tom, S. M., Pfeifer, J. H. & Way, B. M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. Psychological Science, 18(5), 421-428.

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WORKSHEET 135 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

# When the alarm takes over

Under very strong stress, the part of your brain that reflects works less well: that is normal, and it explains why “reasoning” doesn’t work at that moment. This plan follows the order that helps: first the body, then words and finally reflection.

1. For each step in the table, write a concrete action that works for you.
2. Choose easy actions that you can do anywhere.
3. Keep this plan on your phone or in your wallet.
4. Try it out first in a low-intensity situation.

| Step | What I do, concretely |
|---|---|
| | |
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**The sentence I tell myself when I notice the alarm rising:**

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WORKSHEET 136 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# My two questions in the face of stress

What is at stake? What can I do?

**AIM**

Make explicit the two appraisals of Lazarus and Folkman's model (what is at stake: loss, threat or challenge; available resources) in a stressful situation, and identify forgotten resources.

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Stress at work or in studies, transitions, situations that seem "too much".

**DURATION**

15-20 min

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. Introduce the two questions: "What is at stake for me?" and "What can I do, with what resources?".
2. The person classifies what is at stake: loss, threat or challenge (several answers are possible).
3. They list their resources (personal, social, material, time, information), including those they forget.
4. They rate their stress before and after going through their resources.

## POINTS TO WATCH

> Don't minimise what is really at stake: the aim is to assess more fairly, not to force things into perspective.

## REFERENCES

Lazarus, R. S. & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. Springer.

Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Dunkel-Schetter, C., DeLongis, A. & Gruen, R. J. (1986). Dynamics of a stressful encounter: Cognitive appraisal, coping, and encounter outcomes. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50(5), 992-1003.

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WORKSHEET 136 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

# My two questions in the face of stress

According to the psychologists Lazarus and Folkman, we feel stress when what a situation demands seems to exceed what we have. Without realising it, we ask ourselves two questions: “What is at stake for me?” and “What can I do?”. Writing them down helps you see more clearly.

1. Describe the situation that is stressing you.
2. Write what is at stake for you, and whether it is more of a loss, a threat or a challenge.
3. List your resources: qualities, people, time, money, information, experience.
4. Rate your stress from 0 to 10 before and after making the list.

| The situation | What is at stake (loss, threat, challenge) | My resources | Stress before / after (0-10) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| | | | |
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**A resource I had forgotten:**

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WORKSHEET 137 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# Problem or emotion?

Separating what I can change from what I can't

**AIM**

Break a stressful situation down into aspects, assess for each one whether it can be changed and choose accordingly a problem-focused or emotion-focused strategy (fitting the strategy to controllability).

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Chronic stress, worries, complex situations (illness, conflict, work), people who wear themselves out trying to solve everything or who endure everything.

**DURATION**

20 min

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. Remind them that how effective a strategy is depends on what is controllable (Folkman, 1984).
2. The person lists 3 to 5 aspects of the situation.
3. For each one: changeable, partly, or not at all.
4. Changeable: a concrete action (worksheet 65). Not changeable: a way of looking after the emotion (accepting, calming down, seeking support).

## POINTS TO WATCH

> Anxious people often overestimate what depends on them, and people with depression underestimate it: help them assess it realistically.

## REFERENCES

Folkman, S. (1984). Personal control and stress and coping processes: A theoretical analysis. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46(4), 839-852.

Cheng, C., Lau, H.-P. B. & Chan, M.-P. S. (2014). Coping flexibility and psychological adjustment to stressful life changes: A meta-analytic review. Psychological Bulletin, 140(6), 1582-1607.

Lazarus, R. S. & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. Springer.

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WORKSHEET 137 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

# Problem or emotion?

Faced with stress, you can act on the problem or look after what you feel. Neither is better in general: it depends on what can change. Often the same situation has a part that can be changed and a part that can't.

1. Break your situation down into 3 to 5 aspects.
2. For each one, ask yourself: can I change it? Yes, partly or no.
3. If yes or partly: write a concrete action.
4. If no: write a way of looking after what you feel.

| One aspect of the situation | Can I change it? | Acting on the problem | Looking after the emotion |
|---|---|---|---|
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**What I stop trying to change, and what I start doing:**

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WORKSHEET 138 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# My coping toolbox

What I already do in the face of stress, and what it costs me

**AIM**

Take an inventory of the person's usual ways of coping (solving, calming the emotion, seeking support, finding meaning, avoiding), of their short- and long-term effects, and broaden the repertoire.

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Chronic stress, avoidance, using substances to "keep going", people who always use the same strategy.

**DURATION**

20 min

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. Introduce the five main families, without judging: each can be useful depending on the situation.
2. The person notes what they already do in each family.
3. For each way of acting: short- and long-term effect.
4. Choose a strategy to try from a little-used family.

## POINTS TO WATCH

> Avoidance and some emotion-focused strategies (blaming oneself, wishing it would go away) are associated with poorer health (Penley et al., 2002); address them without blaming, looking for what they provide.

## REFERENCES

Penley, J. A., Tomaka, J. & Wiebe, J. S. (2002). The association of coping to physical and psychological health outcomes: A meta-analytic review. Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 25(6), 551-603.

Cheng, C., Lau, H.-P. B. & Chan, M.-P. S. (2014). Coping flexibility and psychological adjustment to stressful life changes: A meta-analytic review. Psychological Bulletin, 140(6), 1582-1607.

Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Dunkel-Schetter, C., DeLongis, A. & Gruen, R. J. (1986). Dynamics of a stressful encounter: Cognitive appraisal, coping, and encounter outcomes. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50(5), 992-1003.

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WORKSHEET 138 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

# My coping toolbox

Everyone has their own ways of coping with stress. Some help in the moment and in the long run; others bring relief today but cost you tomorrow. Taking an inventory helps you keep what works and add tools.

1. For each family in the table, note what you already do.
2. Write the effect in the moment.
3. Write the effect a few days or weeks later.
4. Choose a tool to try from a family you use little.

| Family | What I already do | Effect in the moment | Long-term effect |
|---|---|---|---|
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**The tool I am adding to my box this week:**

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WORKSHEET 139 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# Threat or challenge?

Looking at the same situation from another angle

**AIM**

Practise reappraising a situation experienced as a threat towards a more balanced reading that includes the challenge (what is possible, what can be learnt), drawing on real resources.

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Performance anxiety (exams, interviews, public speaking), career changes, life abroad.

**DURATION**

15 min

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. Introduce Lazarus and Folkman's distinction: the same situation can be seen as a threat (what I may lose) or as a challenge (what I may gain or learn).
2. The person describes the situation as they experience it as a threat.
3. Then they look for what would also make it a challenge, and the resources to draw on.
4. Compare the stress felt with the two readings.

## POINTS TO WATCH

> It isn't about denying the risks or forcing a positive view: both readings can coexist. Avoid it in situations of recent loss (bereavement), which first need to be acknowledged.

## REFERENCES

Lazarus, R. S. & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. Springer.

Lazarus, R. S. & Folkman, S. (1987). Transactional theory and research on emotions and coping. European Journal of Personality, 1(3), 141-169.

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# Threat or challenge?

The same situation can be experienced as a threat (“I might fail”) or as a challenge (“it’s difficult, but I can learn or gain something”). Both views can exist at the same time. The second usually leaves more room to act.

1. Describe the situation as you experience it.
2. Write what makes it a threat for you.
3. Write what could also make it a challenge: what you can gain, learn, show.
4. Note the resources that help you experience it as a challenge.

| The situation | Seen as a threat | Also seen as a challenge | My resources |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
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**What I feel when I hold both views at once:**

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WORKSHEET 140 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

# Finding meaning in a difficult situation

When I can’t change the situation

**AIM**

Support meaning-focused coping (Folkman) in a lasting, unchangeable situation: drawing on one’s values, revising goals, noticing the positive moments that remain.

**WHO IT IS FOR**

Illness (one’s own or a loved one’s), carers, bereavement, a blocked work or administrative situation, exile.

**DURATION**

20 min, then a few minutes each evening

## HOW TO RUN IT

1. First validate the difficulty and the pain: finding meaning doesn’t mean seeing the situation as “positive”.
2. The person notes what still matters to them in this situation (values).
3. They revise a goal that has become impossible to turn it into an achievable one.
4. Each evening, they note a small positive or meaningful moment, however minimal.

## POINTS TO WATCH

> Don’t offer it too soon after a blow or a loss, or as an obligation (“you have to look on the bright side”). Positive emotions coexist with suffering; they don’t replace it.

## REFERENCES

Folkman, S. (1997). Positive psychological states and coping with severe stress. Social Science & Medicine, 45(8), 1207-1221.

Folkman, S. & Moskowitz, J. T. (2004). Coping: Pitfalls and promise. Annual Review of Psychology, 55, 745-774.

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WORKSHEET 140 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

# Finding meaning in a difficult situation

Some situations can't be changed, at least for now. The psychologist Susan Folkman observed that, even in very hard situations, leaning on what matters, revising goals and noticing small positive moments helps people keep going. It doesn't take the pain away: it keeps it company.

1. Write what still matters to you, despite the situation.
2. Think of a goal that has become impossible and turn it into an achievable one.
3. Each evening of the week, note a small positive moment or a moment that had meaning.
4. At the end of the week, reread your notes.

| Day | A small positive or meaningful moment | What matters to me about that moment |
|---|---|---|
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**My revised goal, achievable today:**

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