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

The false alarms that come up most often for me:

These exercises do not replace therapy. If you are in distress or having suicidal thoughts: 112 (European Union), 3114 (France) or the emergency number of the country where you live.

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