WHEN YOU'RE WAITING FOR SOMETHING SCARY TO HAPPEN

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YOUR BRAIN CAN BE LIKE A SMOKE ALARM

A smoke alarm has an important job. It warns you when there might be danger.

But sometimes a smoke alarm goes off when there isn't a fire – maybe someone has just burned the toast.

Your brain's alarm can do something similar.

You might start thinking:

- "What if something goes wrong?"
- "What if something bad happens?"
- "What if I can't cope?"

Your body might join in too. Your heart may beat faster, your tummy might feel strange, or you might feel restless or tense.

AN ALARM IS A WARNING, NOT PROOF

When your brain is expecting something scary, a "what if" can start to feel like something that is definitely going to happen.

Ask yourself:

- "What is actually happening right now?"
- "Am I safe right now?"

If you're not safe or you're not sure, tell a trusted adult.

If you are safe, ask:

- "Is there something useful I can do about what I'm worried about?"

YES? Do what you can – ask for help, find out what you need to know, prepare, or make a simple plan.

NO? You don't need to keep checking, predicting or preparing for every possibility.

COME BACK TO RIGHT NOW

Notice where you are and what is happening around you.

Then choose one thing to do next – finish what you were doing, talk to someone, play, read, draw, get ready, or start your next task.

If your mind jumps into the future again, try:

"That's my alarm warning me about something that might happen. It isn't happening right now."

Then bring your attention back to what you're doing.

REMEMBER

You don't have to solve something that hasn't happened.

Check what's happening now, do what is useful, then let the "what if" be a "what if."

You can handle right now.

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When You’re Waiting for Something Scary to Happen

When You’re Waiting for Something Scary to Happen is a one-page anxiety coping poster for children, young people and teenagers who become overwhelmed by “what if” thoughts. Using a smoke alarm and burnt-toast analogy, it explains that an internal warning can signal possible danger without proving that danger is present.

Parents, carers, teachers, school pastoral staff and therapists can use the printable poster to support a brief check-in during worry, panic, anticipatory anxiety or uncertainty. It prompts a child to assess present safety, decide whether practical action is needed, and return attention to one manageable next step rather than repeatedly predicting problems.