

Seven signs you're stuck on autopilot

Have you ever driven or walked somewhere only to realise you can't remember a single part of the journey? Or driven or cycled to the wrong destination and wondered what you're doing there?

When life is stressful, when you are juggling too much, when 'busy-ness' is your catchword, autopilot becomes your default setting. It's a survival mode where you relinquish control. But what else do you relinquish?

1. You overlook maintenance

Autopilot mode: You keep pushing the machine: you go through warning lights, ignore low fuel gauges and pass rest stops until the car breaks down or veers off the road.

Pilot mode: Self-care is essential. It's not a life skill we are taught – we take more care of our cars or boilers than we do our own bodies. Self-care is more of a challenge in lockdown, as you must find ways of caring for yourself without the usual levels of outside help. Schedule some white space in your diary and put yourself first for once.

2. You avoid the slow lane

Autopilot mode: Your foot is permanently hovering over the accelerator. You floor it at the first opportunity, overtaking anything in your way, sometimes dangerously. You're a speed junkie.

Pilot mode: If multitasking at high speed at work and home is your norm, try slowing down and 'uni-tasking'. Try to cultivate present-moment awareness and to complete a task more efficiently. The focus helps to worry less about other obligations and tasks – they can wait their 'uni-tasking' turn.

3. You get stuck in neutral

Autopilot mode: In neutral you are going nowhere. You can rev as hard as you like, the engine screams, but you won't budge until you put the car in gear.

Pilot mode: Decision-making is a skill that grows with practice. It is undermined by fear, over analysis, and constant procrastination. Identify one thing in your life that is screaming for a new direction, map a route, then slip into first gear by taking a small initial decision.

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4. You are unaware of your passengers

Autopilot mode: Your passengers are clamouring for a pit stop, a change of music or more air. Their requests fall on deaf ears as you speed along, disengaged from those around you.

Pilot mode: We are profoundly social creatures and by not connecting to those around us – family, friends, fellow workers – we are harming both sides of the relationship. Seek out authentic connections with others. This will satiate both

of your needs to belong, to be loved, and to be accepted.

5. You favour cruise control

Autopilot mode: The ultimate autopilot setting. You have your foot off the pedal and are steering with one finger.

Pilot mode: Your body is designed to breathe (unconsciously) to sustain life – it's a type of inner cruise control. However, our breath is the only part of the autonomic nervous system that is under both our conscious and unconscious control. Because of this, we can use breathing to restore balance to the body. Breathing consciously – or voluntarily – and deeply for just a few minutes a day breaks the stress response and calms the nervous system.

6. You no longer read the map

Autopilot mode: You don't know where you are going or how to get there. So you get lost, double back on yourself or veer totally off course.

Pilot mode: Every now and then you need to zoom out to check where you are on the map. There's nothing wrong with circuitous routes. They often lead to discoveries and opportunities. Knowing your purpose in life helps you plot a course and cope with any deviations. So stop and take a look at the map. Can you see yourself?

7. You only make pit stops

Autopilot mode: You never stop for long enough to give the driver a proper break. The tension builds in your lower back and shoulders but you don't release it. You are fuelled by caffeine, junk food and sweets.

Pilot mode: Rest is often considered indulgent. Sleep – the rest your body craves the most – is hampered by a combination of modern life's constant pull on your time and a build-up of stress. Schedule a rest day where you not only allow your body to release stress but also fill it with nourishing food, before tumbling into bed for an early night.

The lockdowns have forced people to learn a new way of working – a new way

of being. For some, survival mode has been the only way forward. And that's fine.

As you prepare to exit this second lockdown, consider whether you've somehow got stuck in autopilot in certain areas of your life. Recognising this, and understanding how to fix it, will allow you to take conscious, positive decisions as you set out on the road to 2021 and beyond.

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