

From Automatic Pilot to Conscious Choice

Purpose:

This exercise is designed to help you understand how repeated thoughts and behaviors become automatic habits, including the automatic use of substances to regulate your mood. This exercise helps you learn to slow down, identify automatic thoughts, and interrupt habit loops. The purpose is to increase awareness, restore conscious choices, and support the development of healthier, value-aligned coping responses through intentional practice and conscious nervous system regulation.

Part 1: How Automation Happens

Think about the first time you drove on the highway. Your hands were probably tight on the wheel. You checked mirrors every five seconds. Your heart rate was up. You were hyper-aware of everything.

Now?

You can drive, adjust the radio, rehearse an argument in your head, and inhale a cheeseburger at 70 mph. You might even miss your exit because you were on autopilot.

What changed? Repetition.

Neural pathways strengthened. The brain automated the behavior to conserve energy. Once something becomes automatic, it requires very little conscious thought. That's what a habit is: a behavior your brain can run without supervision.

Substance use works the same way.

At first:

- You think about it.
- You debate whether or not to do it.
- You notice its effects clearly.

Over time:

- Feeling → Use.
- Stress → Use.
- Loneliness → Use.
- Celebration → Use.

As substance use becomes automatic, it becomes a habit. Not a conscious decision, just automatic execution.

The brain loves efficiency. It does not care if the outcome wrecks your life. Automatic processes become automated because it's your brain doing what it does best: finding the path of least resistance.

To change the outcome, the first step is to slow down the automatic process and notice it bit by bit until you find the part where things got off-track.

Part 2: Substance Use as an Automatic Mood Regulator

When mood discomfort appears, your brain may have learned:

Uncomfortable feeling = Use substance = Temporary relief

If this sequence repeats enough times, it becomes reflexive. It becomes a habit. You may not even notice the thought that happens between feeling and behavior. That invisible thought is where your power lives.

Part 3: Slowing the Process with the ABC Model

The ABC model helps you interrupt autopilot. It does this by forcing you to slow down and look at what happens before you use your substance(s) of choice. It consists of three elements:

A – Activating Event

What happened? (External event or internal feeling)

B – Beliefs / Automatic Thoughts

What went through your mind?

C – Consequences

What did you feel? What did you do?

Example (Substance Use Pattern)

A: An argument with your partner.

B: “I can’t deal with this. I need to take the edge off.”

C: Anxiety drops briefly → Use substance → Later regret, shame, conflict escalates.

Notice how fast B happens. It can feel like there was no thought at all, as if your brain and behaviors went into automatic pilot mode. That’s automation.

Part 4: Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy Reset

Before filling out your own ABC, take this outside if possible.

1. Stand or sit in contact with the ground.
2. Feel your feet.
3. Notice temperature, wind, sounds, light.
4. Take 5 slow breaths.

You are interrupting autopilot simply by noticing.

Nature does not rush. It also does not numb itself when uncomfortable. Storms move through. Seasons change. Systems rebalance. It’s all part of the natural cycle. Your emotions are a natural cycle too. Your nervous system can relearn this rhythm. This exercise is a way to start.

Part 5: Your ABC Map

Think of a recent moment when you felt the urge to use.

A – Activating Event

What happened? (Be specific. For example, don't say, "I was frustrated." Write down why you were frustrated, and what external events triggered your frustration.)

What was happening in your body?

What was happening with your emotions?

B – Beliefs / Automatic Thoughts

What flashed through your mind? What did you tell yourself or what did you believe about the situation (the activating circumstance)?

If you slow it down, was there a prediction? A rule? A fear? What was it?

C – Consequences

What was the immediate emotion you experienced prior to using?

What behavior did you experience as a consequence of the activating circumstance and the automatic belief that followed?

Behavior:

Short-term result (example: hangover, feeling sick, no money):

Long-term result (example: damaged relationships, problems at work):

Part 6: Disrupting the Habit Loop

Now we insert awareness between A and C.

Return to a mindful stance. Feel the ground again. Slow your breathing. Notice the moment.

Leave doing mode and enter being mode.

Now ask yourself:

- Is this feeling dangerous, or just uncomfortable?
- What would happen if I let this urge rise and fall like a wave (urge surfing)?
- What action would align with my core values instead of my autopilot?

Write one alternative response that supports recovery:

Part 7: Ecological Rewiring

Habits are like trails in a forest. The more you walk them, the clearer they become. The more traffic you send down them, the wider they become. If you stop walking one trail and begin walking another, eventually the old path withers away. Meanwhile, the new path gets stronger and clearer with every journey.

That's how you rewire your brain to overcome automatic thought and behavior processes that lead to substance use.

Each time you:

- Pause,
- Notice the automatic thought,
- Choose differently,

You are clearing a new trail.

This is not about perfection. It is about repetition. You didn't develop a problem with substance use overnight. Allow yourself the time and the practice to create a new habit and a new automatic process.

Automation built the habit. Automation can also build recovery.

Your brain learned to drive on autopilot. It can learn to regulate how it responds to your emotions without substance use. But unlike missing a highway exit, this habit matters.

Slow down. Notice. Choose.

That's how you take back the wheel.