

Ep #16: How to Create More Discipline, Willpower, and Motivation in Your Life



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Carrie Holland, MD, CPT

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You are listening to the *Strong as a Working Mom* podcast, Episode #16. If you've ever thought you need more willpower, I've got an alternative for you.

Welcome to the *Strong as a Working Mom* podcast. If you're balancing career, family, wellness, and some days sanity, you are in the right place. This is where high achieving, busy working moms get the tools they need to eat, move, and think. I'm your host, physician, personal trainer, and Certified Life Coach Carrie Holland. Let's do this.

Hey, how are you? What's new? What's good? So, what's good here is that we are going to talk about discipline. And while it may sound kind of crazy, I absolutely love to talk about discipline. I have coached a number of women around this, and what I have found through these conversations, is that there are some straight-up misconceptions about discipline that I aim to clear up for you today.

The other thing we're going to talk about, is the connection between discipline, willpower, and motivation, because they are very much connected. And I think it's important to understand their differences, and how to manage each one to make positive changes in your life.

So, if you have ever heard yourself saying any of these: I need to be more disciplined. I need motivation. I don't have any willpower. Then, please, keep listening, because we are going to dissect this and get to the bottom of all of these, because they are most definitely related.

And by the time we're done today, you're going to have an idea of how to create discipline for yourself. And, you'll see why I keep harping on discipline over the other two in just a couple minutes. All right, so let's go.

If you go to Google, you will find that discipline is defined as; showing a controlled form of behavior or thinking; controlled behavior or thinking. So, while that sounds okay, let me take it just a little further. The more you get

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to know me, and if you work with me, you will learn that I'm all about planning ahead.

And as a reminder, the three things that you must have to make any major change, whether it's changing how you eat; starting exercise, changing your job, starting a business, a creative endeavor, whatever it is. You need; a plan, consistency, and patience; PCP, remember?

Okay, so the first step here, after you've defined your goal, is to make a plan. As an example, if you want to start exercising, because you want to feel better in your body, you make a decision ahead of time that you will get up at 5:30 and go for a 20-minute walk, before you get ready for work on both Tuesdays and Thursdays.

You decide ahead of time, you made a plan, and you got super specific; you're getting up at 5:30, Tuesday and Thursday morning, to do a 20-minute walk, and then you're gonna get ready for work. Boom, done. So now, fast forward to Tuesday at 5:30. That alarm goes off, and you are tired, it is cold outside. Maybe you didn't have the best night of sleep for whatever reason.

What do you do? When you boil it down, you've got two options: First, you can turn off your alarm, roll over, stay warm in your sheets, and snooze for another hour. Or, you can remember that you decided your plan ahead of time, remind yourself that you made this commitment because you want to feel better in your body. And you slog yourself out of bed, even though you don't want to.

Okay, so those last few words, those last words right there, those are key; even though you don't want to. Here is the key point, the whole idea behind discipline is this; you make a decision ahead of time, and you commit to it in advance. Knowing full well that when the time comes to do the thing you plan to do, you are not going to want to do it. But you do it anyway.

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This is precisely why you decided ahead of time, for that exact moment when you're telling yourself; I don't want to, or I don't feel like it. You made the decision planning for this exact moment. Do you see how this works? I absolutely love this.

So, think of another example. Think of when you pack your food for work. Then, your coworkers get pizza for lunch and ask you to join them. So, you could most definitely eat the pizza instead of eating the food you planned out in advance. And now, you have an offer to consider, and you're faced with a choice.

You have to decide if the instant gratification, of having pizza with your coworkers, right here and now, is worth the delayed gratification of making your plan, like eating your salad that you pack for yourself, and sticking to it. Let me be clear, it is not about the pizza; it really is not about the pizza.

Instead, it is about making a plan, committing to it, and then seeing it through even when you don't want to. This is why I really love the concept of discipline. It is about honoring the commitment you make to yourself. It's about keeping your word with yourself. So often, the decision you make to change is an internal one. You're likely not wearing a t-shirt that says, 'I'm trying to lose weight'.

You made that decision on your own and as a result, you made a plan. You decided your lunch in advance, and you brought your salad. You committed to yourself to eat the salad, that you packed for yourself. And often, you don't broadcast this to anyone, you just made the plan.

And if you decide to have pizza with your coworkers instead, no one will know that you broke that commitment you made to yourself, except you. No one knows it. But think about what it feels like to go back on the word that you made to yourself. It feels icky. To be clear, again, this is not about the pizza. It's the bigger picture here.

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It is about making a commitment and then seeing it through. It is honoring the promise that you made to yourself. Okay, so let's get into this just a little more. When you are creating and practicing discipline, you are making a plan. That is using the evolved part of your brain, the prefrontal cortex, okay?

That is the part of our brain that understands planning and delayed gratification. So, this is in contrast to the less evolved, more primitive part of your brain, largely the basal ganglia, where habits are stored. And the ventral striatum where reward is interpreted. That tells us to go seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Know this, your brain has three main goals; seek pleasure, avoid pain, and exert the least amount of energy as possible. That is what your primitive brain tells you to do. And as I was researching and preparing for this episode, and digging into literature, I came across a sentence that I wanted to share from one of the authors, because he said it so simply. He just said, "Deep down we're lizards."

And honestly, it made me laugh out loud, because I've never seen it explained that way before. But it makes sense. Our primitive brains, like the brains of a lizard, are what have helped us survive when we had to hunt, and trap, and brave the elements, and our survival was at risk.

But now, we live in a very advanced, developed world with so many conveniences. And unfortunately, our brains have not caught up with this, and we often go back to our primitive urges. And that, often, results in us binge watching Netflix® with a pint of ice cream after a yucky day at work.

Your primitive brain can very easily take over and direct you to seek pleasure, in the form of ice cream, avoid the pain of dealing with your emotions, and exert as little energy as possible by sitting on the couch in front of Netflix.

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On the flip side, when we're talking about discipline, it means using your evolved planning brain, the prefrontal cortex, to decide ahead of time that you do not eat to buffer your emotions. The planning brain is what considers the outcome if you do that. If you experience the short-term discomfort of managing your feelings, instead of eating them, you walk away stronger.

You walk away without emotional eating, and you reinforce discipline. And that is a self-perpetuating cycle. But doing this, let me be clear, it takes practice; it's like strength training. You have to put in your reps. It does not just happen, and it requires that you be very intentional.

Okay, so let's talk, for just a second, about the benefits of creating discipline. And there are loads of benefits to it, let me tell you. But one of the things that I run into often, when coaching clients around this, is the fear that by making decisions ahead of time, you are taking away your freedom.

So, I will work with someone, and she'll worry that she's taking away the fun and being too regimented by being disciplined. But it is most definitely the opposite. Let me explain why. Alright, so take a second and think of an area in your life where you would consider yourself disciplined. Okay, so maybe it's your work habits, sleep, exercise, nutrition, whatever it is, think of an area where you would consider yourself disciplined.

And then, think about what it took to establish discipline in that area of your life. So, as an example, if you feel disciplined about your finances, how do you think about them? How do you feel about your finances? Do you feel anxiety when you look at your checkbook? Do you get nervous when you have to make a decision about spending? Do you have to spend a lot of energy deciding how to manage your money? How do you feel about that area of your life?

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And my hope is this; my hope is that when you think about the disciplined areas of your life, you find them easy. That you are not crazy stressed, or overthinking your finances, because you've already decided ahead of time, how you spend and manage your money. And the takeaway here, is that having discipline in your life, makes tasks and decisions less difficult, and more effortless, so you don't have to think so hard about them.

When you create discipline for yourself, in whatever parts of your life you choose, you are essentially establishing guidelines for yourself. And then, most importantly, you honor them. And when you do this consistently, here's that consistency piece again, when you do this consistently, you reach a place where those areas of your life don't require so much intense thinking and energy, it simply becomes habit. It's smooth. It's effortless, it's automatic, it's the default.

To take it a step further, consider this. Ask yourself; how do you generally feel about the disciplined parts of your life? So, going back to our example, if you were disciplined with your finances, how do you feel about your financial situation? Or, in the case of exercise.

If you were disciplined about exercise, how do you feel about your level of physical fitness? How do you feel about your workouts? Do you worry about getting them done? Do you spend a lot of time and mental energy thinking about exercise. In the areas of your life where you have established discipline, do you feel happy, worried, stuck, empowered, confident?

And, the reason I'm sharing this is clear. For most of us, for the areas of our lives where we feel disciplined, we generally don't have to think so hard about them. You don't have to take up valuable brain space or energy with that part of your life. So, by creating discipline, you've removed the need for negotiating with yourself, because you've already made your decision ahead of time.

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You take out the tension of wrestling with something because there is no hemming and hawing. There is no should I or shouldn't I. You have eliminated useless back and forth brain chatter and drama because you've already committed to your plan. And that is so awesome, because the ultimate result of discipline is that you can use that valuable brain space and energy for more important and meaningful decisions.

You can think about creative projects, instead of wrestling back and forth about whether or not to have pizza with your coworkers. So, do you see the benefit here? It is huge. And, there's more. When you decide that you want to change, and you make a commitment to yourself, and you honor it, no matter what, you ultimately improve your relationship with yourself.

This is about having your own back. It's about self-efficacy. Here it is, again, self-efficacy. Meaning, if you believe that you are capable of change, if you believe that you can stop emotional eating, that you can avoid buffering with shopping, Netflix, or social media, that you can get up early for a morning workout before you go to work.

If you believe that you are capable of doing these things, you can create feelings of discipline for yourself, and you will go and do the thing; you will prove yourself correct. So, I know that I talk about self-efficacy a lot. But I harp on it because it is essential to getting anything done. And so many of you do not have enough of it.

I'm going to keep repeating it so you can practice it. You are proving to yourself that when you make a decision, it's as good as done because you honor your own word. You're showing yourself respect, and you're building your confidence by following through. And, that builds self-efficacy.

And then, you can apply that self-efficacy to other areas of your life; it's a self-fulfilling cycle. When you hold yourself accountable, and you follow through regularly, you can start asking more of yourself, because you know, you're gonna deliver.

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And then, that's when things get awesome, and you can really see what you're capable of. And, that is how you evolve into the best damn version of yourself. This is powerful stuff. To summarize, discipline is using the evolved part of your brain to make a decision ahead of time. Knowing that in the precise moment, when push comes to shove, you're not going to want to do what you planned, but you do it anyway.

It is consciously choosing delayed gratification, doing the thing you set out to do, and ultimately proving your own self-efficacy. Discipline is what gives you freedom, and saves your valuable brain energy for other important decisions in your life.

All right, so now, if you're asking; what about willpower? All right, let's

talk about it. If you look it up, you will find willpower defined as; the ability to manage your actions, emotions, and urges. It is a control that you exert to restrain impulses. So, even more simple. When I think of willpower, I think of resisting, I think of strong arming.

Remember that your brain, while it is insanely powerful, it is also inherently lazy. Okay, so your brain prefers the path of least resistance, in order to get instant pleasure and instant gratification. As an example, imagine, after a nasty day of work, you're venting to a friend or colleague and her answer is, "Let's go get some ice cream."

If you are a habitual emotional eater, your brain will most definitely see that as comfort. If you have not decided in advance that you do not emotionally eat, then you're facing a hard decision. If you rely on willpower alone, you may not be happy with your outcome, because your primitive brain will most definitely take control and urge you to eat ice cream, to seek out pleasure, and avoid pain.

And the result of this, is then you're stuck with both a stinky day at work, and you just downed some ice cream. This is a lose-lose situation. Okay. On the flip side, when you practice discipline, and you've made a decision

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ahead of time that you do not eat junk food to cope with your emotions, you decline. You decline your friend's offer for ice cream.

And while your day at work may have totally stunk, you walk away with the pride knowing that you did not eat to deal with your emotions. You have shown yourself that you follow through on your commitments. And, that is a huge win.

To put this even more simply, I like to pare it down, and I often think of it this way; discipline is making your decision ahead of time. Willpower is making your decision in the heat of the moment. And, we know how that typically goes.

This is not to say that you don't need willpower at all. Of course, you will need some willpower. But whenever a client tells me, "I just need more willpower. I just need to resist the urge to eat Cheetos™ before I get ready for bed," I know we've got some work to do. And we need to work on creating discipline, first.

Here's why. Acting out of willpower requires a much larger amount of your brain energy than acting out of discipline. And remember, your brain is lazy, and willpower is not reliable. So, couple that with decision fatigue, that often hits by the end of the day, and you have a setup for decisions that do not serve you. Your go-to should be discipline, first; always, always always.

Okay, so think of it another way. Imagine that your brain is a house. Your house, your brain, is powered by electricity. That electricity is discipline. The electricity keeps your home running so smoothly, you don't even recognize it's there. You don't even spend a lot of time thinking about it, because it is running everything so smoothly in the background.

That is what it's like when you've established discipline. It's quiet, it's strong, it's running in the background, and it keeps your life running smoothly. You don't even think about it.

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Okay, imagine a nasty storm comes through and knocks out that electricity. Now, you have a generator that you can hook up to your appliances for when this happens. That generator is willpower. So, let's think about that generator; generally cost inefficient, noisy as heck, and will work as long as you give gas to fuel it. And you will most definitely know that it's there because it's noisy, and it's kind of stinky.

So, which do you choose? How do you prefer to power your home? How are you going to power your brain? Here's the other thing to know about willpower and discipline. Willpower is a byproduct of discipline. Think about it. As you practice discipline, and get really good at making your decisions ahead of time and following through, your discipline strengthens.

The more disciplined you are, the more you know that when the decision is made, it's as good as done. Because you honor yourself, you honor the agreement you made, and you follow through. And the more you do this, the more it becomes habit. Remember, you get good at what you practice.

And, the cool thing that happens is this: as your discipline strengthens so does your willpower. The more you plan in advance and execute, the easier it becomes to do it again. And the easier it is to avoid distractions that will keep you from having discipline.

So, not only does your willpower become more durable, you will rely on it less when you're met with surprises. You won't even need it as much as you used to. Meaning, your primary tool, your discipline, becomes so strong that your need for backup, in the form of willpower decreases.

When you create discipline for yourself, you are managing your mind in the most efficient way possible. And, the need for willpower is lessened. And, there's absolutely nothing boring about that. There is zero freedom lost here, I promise. All right.

So, let's go back and summarize again. Discipline means that you follow guidelines that you've established for yourself. It requires that you be

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proactive. And it's reliable because you've made your decision ahead of time. And, it can be learned and practiced.

Willpower implies that you resist urges and temptations. It requires that you be reactive instead of proactive. It's most definitely unreliable, especially when you've reached decision fatigue, but it can also be learned and practiced.

Okay, so last, let's talk about motivation. If you look it up, motivation is the general willingness or desire to do something. It is also defined as the reasons you have for acting or behaving a certain way. And if you dig even deeper, you'll find the Latin root for motivation is *motivus*, or a moving cause. When you boil it down, I think of motivation as your 'why'.

So, if you go back to the books, there are two major types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is any reason outside yourself to get something done. Things like an upcoming event, like a wedding or reunion. And maybe you want to look a certain way or fit into a certain dress. Or, an illness or life changing diagnosis, an athletic event, or a competition, or a challenge like 75 Hard.

Extrinsic motivators can be good for short-term goals, but they can actually backfire for long-term goals, and decrease your motivation. So, I'm gonna throw it back to our kids, as an example. Take your kids, there are studies that have shown that when kids are paid for high performance at athletic events, not only will their performance decrease over time, but their interest will also decline. This is no good.

Okay, another example, think about challenges. They can be good to light a fire under your booty, no doubt. But ask yourself my very favorite question; when it comes to a 30-day challenge, or your 60-day detox, or 75 Hard, and then what? Meaning, what happens on day 76?

In my experience, coaching people around these sorts of challenges, I find the motivation is extremely high at the beginning, and then it fades over the

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course of the challenge. And then, when it's over if there is no plan, it is a setup to backfire. And again, this is just another place where you have to have a plan. Otherwise, once the extrinsic motivation runs out, you may very well be lost.

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is the drive that comes from within. It's doing something for your own personal satisfaction and reward. Running because you'd love to be outside. Eating a certain way because you desire to feel healthy. Learning a new skill for the joy of challenging yourself; intrinsic motivation, it's personal. It's fueled by your own innate desire to do something.

When it comes to motivation, whether it's intrinsic or extrinsic, it's good for getting you started. There's the flip of the calendar for January one; the start of a new school year, Monday morning after a week-long vacation when you went off the chain, a new book, a new class. These are all motivating.

It's a psychological reset or do over, your clean slate, page one. There's enthusiasm and the push to keep going because you're just getting started. And, that is exactly it. Motivation is good to get you started. The problem is, motivation, it will eventually leave you hanging, it is unreliable, it is fickle. And, there is no person on this earth who is always motivated.

So, when it comes to making change, and sticking with new habits, it's a risk to put all your faith on motivation, because it will not always be available to you. And when the feeling of motivation is not there, you're going to need something else to do the thing you set out to do.

And this is where discipline matters, a lot. You need discipline to pick up where motivation leaves off. Once again, I'm coming back to discipline. And here's another key distinction between motivation and discipline. With motivation, you generally need to feel a certain way, in order to do whatever you set out to do.

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Certain conditions need to be met, first. Meaning it's fun, it's new, it's a novelty, there's a deadline approaching, there's a fine or a fee, or a consequence, if you don't do the thing. There are conditions that are compelling enough to get you going. Like the gym you join on January 1st. This is the condition of a new year, a new calendar, a clean slate, right in front of you. It's new, it's exciting. So, you get yourself to the gym.

Let's contrast that with a discipline. There are no conditions required because those conditions don't matter. You don't have to feel a certain way to show up. It doesn't matter if it's January one or March 15. The conditions may not be ideal, and you may not feel like showing up. But here it is, you do it anyway. And you feel good, after you get it done.

Meaning, mid-March, when the newness of your gym has long faded, you keep showing up, even on the days when you don't want to. Because you know you'll feel awesome when your workout is done, no matter how you feel before you drive yourself to the gym.

Okay, so let me connect all of these for you, because this is where it gets really cool. Motivation is important to get you started. It's the desire, it's the 'why' behind your change. Once you get started, you practice creating feelings of discipline, take action, and then you see results.

When you see results, you reinforce self-efficacy. Having self-efficacy strengthens your belief in yourself, and fuels you to continue on your pathway to change. And in that process, as you keep going and the more discipline you practice, the stronger your willpower becomes in the process. So very cool. So cool.

Okay, last but not least, how in the world do you practice discipline? Okay, so you know where I'm going here. It starts in your thoughts, always. It always comes back to your thoughts. Remember, a thought is a sentence you say to yourself. When you say it over and over again, it becomes a belief.

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If you choose to think; I am capable of getting through my bad day without emotionally eating. And you practice thinking and believing this sentence, and you truly believe it, you will take action, in the form of avoiding emotional eating, to prove yourself correct. In order to feel discipline, you have to think thoughts that results in feeling committed and empowered to execute your plan.

So, choose your thought, write it down; you memorize and repeat it. And yeah, it's gonna feel awkward at first. But the more you practice thinking on purpose, the easier it gets. Thinking on purpose, this is being intentional. First in your thoughts, and then with your actions. And you're gonna know that you believe what you're thinking, because you have the actions and results to back it up.

Remember your thoughts create your feelings, which lead to your actions that produce your results. There's your order of operations, here. So, this is the work, this here, this is how you use your mind and purposely choose your thoughts to create your results. Try this out. Practice this and see how you can make your brain work for you.

When you practice thinking thoughts that make you feel disciplined, and you show up for yourself, even when you don't want to, you will see how very free, and it can be. This is it. This is discipline, right here.

Alright, I hope you find this helpful. Please go and practice thinking thoughts that make you feel disciplined. Try this out. Have an awesome week. Thank you again for hanging out with me and I'll catch you again next Wednesday.

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your social media. And, be sure to tag me @CarrieHollandMD on either Instagram or Facebook, so I can follow along and engage with you.

This is how we get the word out to other working moms who want to feel strong, inside, and out. If you know someone who wants to feel better, or eat and move differently, but she is too tired or too busy, it is time to change things up. And you know, making that change starts with how you think. And that, is what we do here on the *Strong as a Working Mom* podcast. I'll see you next week.

Thanks for listening to *Strong as a Working Mom*. If you want more information on how to eat, move, and think, so you can live in the body you want, with the mind to match, visit me at CarrieHollandMD.com