

Ep #36: Want to Be Less Busy? Say No.



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Carrie Holland, MD, CPT

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Ep #36: Want to Be Less Busy? Say No.

You are listening to the *Strong as a Working Mom* podcast, Episode # 36. If you're too busy, let's talk about saying no. If that makes you cringe, I got you covered.

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? What's good here, we are going to talk about saying no, today. So, there are a number of reasons that we need to dive into this topic. I just recently gave a talk about priorities, and it was so much fun. I got the chance to talk with a number of amazing women about managing career, family, wellness, self-care, all the things.

And while each one of us had a different story, we shared the common thread of being busy and wanting to prioritize in order to fit in the things that really matter, and then feel less stretched. So as a reminder, if you want specific details about priorities and how to get really clear on yours, and then taking the next step of living into your priorities, check out Episode 9, where I talk about managing career, family, wellness, and establishing priorities.

One of the things we went over during the talk was that a byproduct of being too busy is that it often results in having too much on your plate. There are just too many things to do, and not enough time to do them all. And this often results in a combination of both inadequacy and frustration.

So, I don't know if you can relate, but there are days where I just don't get everything checked off my to-do list. And I end the day feeling pretty bad about myself. I feel like I'm not enough. I'm not doing enough. I'm not checking off enough boxes; it is not a great feeling.

At the same time, it gets jumbled together with frustration at the length of

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the to-do list, and how I've created so much overwhelm by having so many things to check off in the first place. So, this was especially true when I was still practicing full-time clinical medicine. And it is much less so, now that I've done the work and have changed my career entirely.

It just feels awful to have too much work to do. It feels like an endless race and the checkboxes never end. It's no good. But there is a way out of that. I shared, during this talk I gave, that after a lot of work on myself, I made wellness my first and top priority. And admittedly, at first, I was really nervous about even declaring that publicly. It was a little worrisome to me at first to say that I put my wellness above all else because I was afraid that I was being selfish.

And so, when I say wellness, here's what I mean. I mean eating, moving, and thinking in a way that results in me feeling strong, both physically and mentally. Specifically, it means I exercise regularly, I eat whole foods, and I manage my brain. I feel my feelings, and I take responsibility for myself so I feel balanced.

For me, that's what my priority of wellness is about. And from that space, when I have prioritized my wellness and have taken care of myself, then I can go and take care of the other priorities in my life, like my husband, my kids, my career, my family and community.

And if any of you are thinking that it's selfish of me to put my wellness first, above everything else, I totally hear you. I used to think the same thing. I used to get really confused and irritated by women who put themselves first because I just couldn't understand it. I even resented it.

I used to think that in order to be winning at adulting, you had to be running ragged. And that's just the way it was supposed to be. That was until I got totally burnt out and fried by trying to juggle my family medicine career, a real relationship with my husband, being present for my kids, and having friends. I was doing exactly none of these things very well. And basically, it was a straight-up mess.

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So finally, when I did the real work, including reflection and looking inward, along with some therapy and a lot of coaching, I realized that if I was going to turn things around and not feel frazzled and exhausted anymore, I was going to have to start taking better care of my brain and my body.

That meant making some tough decisions like stepping back from clinical medicine, changing up my schedule, constraining relationships, and being subjected to loads of opinions. But in that process, I became a better version of me.

To be clear, it is still very much a work in progress. But this never would have happened if I kept grinding. There is no way that things would have miraculously just gotten better if I kept up the status quo and kept running on the hamster wheel.

I share all of this to say, being too busy comes with a cost and you probably get that already. And I will make a guess that some of you have sacrificed your sleep, your exercise, your nutrition, and your overall satisfaction in order to keep up with your busyness.

But there is a way out. There is a way to be less overstretched and less overcommitted, and it involves saying 'no'. My goal is to make 'no' less of a foreign language to you, and instead, make it a word you feel comfortable saying when the situation applies. Alright?

Here's why: Think about these questions for just a second. Are you too busy? Do you have too much on your plate? Do you feel overstretched? Do you say 'yes' to things you really don't want to? Are you doing too many things in your life that just don't add value or purpose to your days?

If you answered 'yes' to any or maybe even all of these questions, then it might be time to start saying 'no'. And if that idea sounds painful, keep listening. I'm going to make saying 'no' just a little easier for you. And here's why this matters. So many of you have told me that you don't feel awesome. You've told me you work full time, and you work long hours.

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Then after work, it's a whirlwind of kids and after-school activities, or family.

And then, when it's finally done and everyone is in bed, you have got no gas left in the tank. You're tired, but you haven't managed any of your own needs. You want to exercise, but it's 10 o'clock at night and the longer you stay up, the more tired you'll be the next day. So, you have to rush off to bed only to rinse and repeat the cycle; it can totally wear you down.

It's in that grind that your wellness goes out the window. You end up eating takeout multiple nights a week when you'd rather be eating a dinner that you cooked at home. You're not exercising because there's no time in the evenings between shuttling kids to activities.

And you generally have little to no time to slow down and really think, because someone or something always needs your attention. For some of you, even your dogs keep you from taking care of your needs. It's just no good.

So, here's what I want to offer you. It is only when you start speaking your truth and actually living in alignment with your priorities, that wellness is really possible. If you want to feel better, and in order to eat, move, and think in the way you want to, it may mean that you have to make some tough decisions. You may have to make some hard choices. And I want you to feel comfortable saying 'no'.

Now, I don't mean being all crabby about it or being mean about it. But instead, I want you to comfortably say 'no' from a clean place. And when I say a clean place, here's what I mean:

You've done your work, and you know what matters most to you. You're living in alignment with your priorities. And here's the kicker, you are prepared for whatever comes your way when you speak and act in a way that is true and in integrity for you. That is a clean place.

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And when you've done the work to get there, it will be a lot easier to say 'no'. Now, I know I said to be comfortable with it, and maybe that's a stretch, okay? It probably won't feel comfortable to say 'no', at least at the outset, and that's okay.

I'm asking you to sit with that discomfort of saying 'no' because on the other side of that discomfort is confidence and peace. Because you're being true to yourself. And that feels so different from saying 'yes' through gritted teeth, with steam coming out of your ears because you feel obligated to do something you don't want to do. There's a huge difference here.

I want to cover some of the main roadblocks that you may run into when you want to say 'no'. And to be clear, I am talking about saying 'no' to things that people are asking of you that you just don't want to do because it is not a priority for you. You know what I'm talking about.

When someone asks you if you can just do this one little thing, or come over for just a short bit, or make this quick trip, or just take on this one little task. Because it's generally never "little", right?

So, I'm going to cover why for some of us, it's hard to say 'no'. And I'm going to offer you some insight and perspective and ideas that may make 'no' roll off your tongue just a little bit easier. Alright?

Let's go. One of the first reasons it can be really hard to say 'no' is when you've got competing demands. So, as an example, this is what I see all the time. I will be coaching with someone who is exhausted and not taking care of herself and she really wants to start exercising.

But then, when we get into the nitty-gritty, she finds that if she exercises at night, she's taking time away from her kids or time away from her partner, or someone else who really matters to her. And that invokes an enormous amount of guilt.

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Maybe this is true for you. Maybe you really want to exercise but you also recognize there's limited time to hang out with your family. So, what do you do? Okay, so what do you do? In my experience, you've got a couple options.

First, and my favorite option, is to think in terms of possibility. So often, when we start to get stressed or feel that we are faced with competing demands, it can become a very stark, very black-and-white situation, but it does not have to be. In the case of wanting to exercise but wanting to hang out with your family, where is the compromise?

This is where I challenge you to get creative and think outside the box, instead of laying the blanket statement of, "I'm just too busy to exercise." It is so much more empowering to think about what might be possible, versus immediately cataloging all the reasons that exercise is just flat out impossible for you.

It feels really good to think in terms of possibility. I run into this one so frequently; the demand of wanting to exercise but not wanting to take time from family. And there are a number of alternatives I've hashed out with clients over the years.

So, one, get up early. Okay, so I know that this may not be possible for some of you. Maybe you have a baby who was up all night. Or, maybe you work overnight shifts and waking up early is just not possible. And please hear me, my goal is not to turn you into a morning person, if that is totally against your nature.

However, if you really want to exercise and it is a top priority for you, and the only time you can reliably get it in is in the morning so that it doesn't get in the way of the time you'd spend with your kids, then you've got a choice to make. There is that option.

And I would argue, that if morning is the only time you have to exercise but you choose not to do it, then maybe exercise just isn't a priority for you.

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And that's okay. But I think it's important to distinguish that for yourself. Do you want it badly enough that you're willing to get up at the only consistent time you're able to fit in exercise? That's one possibility.

Alright, so, two, exercise with your kids. You're combining your wants here. Now, that may not be possible depending on how old they are. But if they are older kids and are able to follow directions and listen, then you may very well have found yourself an exercise partner.

I personally cannot wait until the day that I can lift weights with my sons. Currently, it is not cool enough for them. But I keep holding my candle that someday they will want to strength train for me. So, my point here is, is there a way to combine them and exercise with your kids?

Three, if they are in various sports or activities, can you get your workout in while they're there at those activities? I had one client who would bring her tubes and loops with her to her kid's cheerleading practice. She would run the track or run around the parking lot, and then she'd pull out those tubes and loops. She got her workout done while her kid was practicing so that when she got home, she could hang out with her family instead of worrying about getting her workout in. I love this plan; so good.

Four, you do the workout, and you have a little less time with your kids. You do both. You exercise and feel the feelings that you're taking some time away from your kids. And you allow that ping of guilt to sit there with you for as long as it takes to dissipate. And in the process, you realize that you are okay, and you are worth the 30 or 60 or however many minutes it takes for you to move your body. And that feels awesome.

When you're all done, you are ready and available and present for your kids. So, you're doing both. Sometimes it is hard to see that other side. It's hard to imagine doing the workout and then feeling better, because you've done something nice for yourself.

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But so many of you tell me, and I feel it too, that you feel so much better after you've taken that short slice of time to take care of yourself and exercise. And then, you can be present for your family. So again, here's a case where it's not one or the other; it's both.

These are just some of the solutions I've come up with alongside my clients. I'm sure there are many others. I bring this up because even when you've done your work and you're clear on your priorities, there may be times when you run into competing demands.

Maybe, as another example, you were just offered a really great project or role or position at work, and you would love to take it. And maybe it means more money, more prestige or what have you. But it also means more hours, more responsibility, and potentially more time away from your family.

Then you have a decision to make because you've got competing demands. You want to have a meaningful career that gives you purpose and challenges you, but you also want to be present with your family. So, you have a choice to make. And again, my answer to this will be to think in terms of possibility.

We are often so quick to go to, "There's no way I could do both. There's no way I could uplevel my career and be the kind of mom I want to be. There's no way I can get up in the morning and exercise." Right? Do you see what I'm saying?

Our human brain loves to default to all the reasons why things might not work or might not be possible. And this is especially true when we're talking about big change. Because your brain doesn't like big changes, remember? But when you think in terms of possibility, instead of why things might not be possible, then you're opening up doors for yourself, and it feels better. It feels lighter. You're not stopping yourself before you've even tried. Instead, you're getting creative.

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I want to put a caveat here. So, managing competing demands and thinking in terms of possibility, as I've just explained, this applies to when there are two things that you want to do. You want to exercise *and* you want to be with your kids. You want to advance your career *and* you want to be present with your family. You want to eat healthy food *and* you want to see your friends when they go out to dinner.

Do you see? When there are competing demands, and you want to do both, we're looking for the "and" instead of either/or. We're looking for ways that you don't have to say 'no' if you don't want to. We're looking at compromise. But this only works if you want to compromise and you truly don't want to say 'no'.

When you're being forced to compromise, whether that's self-imposed or from external pressure, that feels different. There is a big difference between really wanting two things, versus wanting one thing, but feeling forced to do another. That's where I think competing demands can be sneaky.

And where I think it's important to get very clear, when you're faced with a decision, if it really is an either/or situation. If you really don't want to say 'no', then you have the opportunity to get creative and come up with an alternative solution. So, that you get the best of both worlds whenever that's possible.

It's not easy, and it often means compromise. But if you want it badly enough, you can most definitely have it. If you want to exercise and see your kids, it is 100% possible. And you can do it without guilt, for real.

Okay, so now we're going to flip the script. Let's say you want to say 'no'. Let's say you're being asked to take on another project at work, and this is something you are not interested in. It doesn't make use of your strengths and your talents. And worse, it will take more time away from your family. It is just not something you want to do. So, then what?

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Or, maybe your kid's school is asking for more of your time than you're able to give. I have a client who does a lot of work for her kids at school already. She does really great work and the school knows this. As a result, they keep asking her for more and more of her time. And she wants to be helpful, but she knows that when she volunteers this time, it takes away time from her own business, or it takes time away that she could be spending with her daughter. So, then what?

Then you say 'no'. But it's not that easy. So, why? As I was preparing for this podcast and digging into the literature, I have boiled it down to two things, and these two reasons are most definitely interrelated. But I think it's important to talk through each of them. First, we have a hard time saying 'no' because, for hundreds of years, women have been bred to do the exact opposite. Women are not conditioned to say 'no', we just aren't.

But I'm here to shout from the rooftops that it is 2023. And it is time to give up this very, very archaic way of thinking. Let's talk about societal norms and conditioning. Because whether you realize it or not, conditioning has an enormous role in a woman's fear of, and an ability to, say 'no'.

So, let's start by one of the first and more sneaky expectations: Women have been socialized into understanding and even believing that the most important thing is to be liked, or to be agreeable, because that is how you get approval. The "feminine" thing to do is put everyone else's needs before your own. And that applies to work, partnership, kids, family, friends, your toilets, your kitchen, pretty much in most any situation you can imagine.

Women are perceived as and often fulfill the role of caretaker, whether they want it or not. And this is both at home and in the workplace. It's not just a badge of honor for a woman to ignore her needs for the sake of everyone else's, it is essentially a requirement or an expectation.

What's crazy is that over time, there has been an unwritten rule scribbled into our brains that the approval of other people matters more than our own self approval. And that approval comes by doing what is expected of us;

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saying, yes, not speaking up for ourselves, not ruffling any feathers, politely doing things that we don't want to do so as not to rock the boat.

It makes my stomach turn to even say that because it is so old fashioned and it's just plain tired. And that, in my opinion, is where we still have a lot of work to do. There is a fear of conflict, of creating a stir. There's fear of rejection, and even fear of abandon that plays into this.

It's often this fear that drives us to do the right thing and stand down and ultimately say 'yes', when we want to say 'no'. But that's not getting you anywhere. And so much of this has been reinforced by our upbringing. We are socialized and taught from early on to be a good girl and serve, to be the caretaker, that we are here in service to other people.

And what's worse, is that part of this teaching is that we can only have, we can only receive, once we've given enough. Think about it. It's okay to take care of you, but you better make sure that everyone else is settled in first. But what the heck is enough here? When has a woman given enough so that she's earned the opportunity to care for herself? And who in the world is setting the standard?

The problem with a standard is that we are constantly left feeling inadequate and not good enough. It is a losing battle. What's even more funny, is that even women will bash other women when they start to deviate from this, and you know what I'm talking about. I have seen it, I have felt it, I still feel it. I am a working mom. I prioritize my wellness. I want and I have a career. I don't cook meals from scratch. I am not and will never be a housewife.

I don't let my children run my life. Yes, I said it. I love my boys fiercely, and I will be there for them. I will teach them, and I will expose them to as many different opportunities as I can, to help them decide who they want to be. But I won't let them run my life. And, here's why.

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If I am always putting my needs last, I am teaching my sons that their future wives' needs won't matter either. And that is not a lesson I want my kids to learn from me. If we are ever going to move away from the patriarchal society that we live in, it has to start somewhere. And for me, it starts in my home.

So, if I can teach my kids that it is more than okay, in fact, it is essential that mom takes care of herself so that she can turn around and take care of them, then I think I'm winning. However, I acknowledge that not everyone feels this way. And some men and some women may not approve of my approach. I have felt it. It comes out in subtle or not so subtle ways, from friends and family.

And I'm okay with that. I own it because I've done my work. I don't share this to sound cold or heartless or selfish. I say it because we need to stop bashing the women who speak up for themselves. We need to stop thinking nasty things about women who have boundaries and say 'no'. We need to stop looking down on women who have it figured out and have managed work-life alignment by saying 'no'.

We can stop passing judgment about women who have a life outside their home and their kids, and choose not to fry themselves just so that a dinner made from scratch is probably on the table by 6pm. In fact, we need to start taking notes from these women. It is time to move into the future.

I am so very grateful that I have a partner who supports this. I recognize that it would be a lot harder if my husband was not okay with my approach. But then, I realized there was no way we would be together if he thought he was marrying a housewife. I think he mostly knew what he was getting when we chose each other.

But this societal conditioning does not stop at home. It is most definitely pervasive at work. Women who say 'no' in the workplace, they are seen as more aggressive, less likable, less of a team player, and get themselves all

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kinds of labels; many of which I cannot utter here because then it would be an explicit episode.

While men who say 'no', are seen as more authoritative and competent. And all I can say to this is, hell no! There are so many layers to this. And that's for an entirely separate podcast. But all this is to say, I get it. It is not easy to say 'no' at home, and especially at work. There are real, true social implications to this, and it is not easy.

But the more we talk about this, and the more we bring this into the open, the more we shed light on the double standard that exists for women, the more we can continue this conversation and make it less of a taboo for a woman to say 'no' and establish a boundary for herself. We have to keep this dialogue going.

Okay, so to piggy back off of societal conditioning, the other main reason I have found that women have such a difficult time saying 'no', is the fear of what other people will think of them when they do. And this is a big, big deal. So, I talked about this before, in Episode 11, where I get into all the details about other people's opinions of you.

But I want to go over it again here in the context of saying 'no'. Whether you say 'yes' or you say 'no', there will be opinions of you; you know that. There will be opinions of you. It may be that if you say 'yes', people think that you're sweet and agreeable and doing the right thing. If you say 'no', there may be unfavorable opinions of you. People may think you're selfish or uncaring, or you're not a good mom, which is one of the worst slaps in the face, in my opinion.

But here's the thing, you cannot control those opinions of you. You cannot make people think a certain way about you whether you agree to something or you say 'no' to something, and that is totally okay. Remember, other people's opinions of you are none of your business. And I really, really want you to start letting that sink into your bones and then believe it to be true for you. Okay?

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Where this gets hard, is that we have been taught that the approval of other people is what matters. When you are a good girl and you nod yes and smile and go with the flow and say yes, and you rock it at work and come home and nail parenting. And then, you show up to dinners out with your friends or partner looking like you just stepped out of a salon. Then you win approval and that's supposed to be what we're aiming for.

So, it only makes sense that there is a deep reaction and resistance to going against all of that and saying 'no'. Of course, it's going to feel icky to even entertain the thought of saying 'no'. Here's how I'm going to offer you, whose opinion matters most? And you know what I'm going to say here. Your opinion of yourself is the one that matters most. Yours.

Here's where this comes to play. If you can say 'no', and be prepared for whatever opinions of you may follow, whether they are expressed outwardly to you or not. And you know that you will take care of yourself and be kind to yourself, and not beat yourself up for speaking your truth and living in alignment with your priorities, then you're onto something.

When what you say aligns with what you feel in your bones, and when everything is firing together, that is one of the highest forms of empowerment I can think of. It feels good to be honest. To speak what is true for you, even if other people do not agree. It is okay to say 'no' to another family birthday party, when you haven't seen your husband one-on-one in weeks because of work and life and kid's sports.

It is okay to say 'no' to dinner with your friends because you want to sit in your pajamas on the couch after a terrible week of work. It's okay to say 'no' to volunteering at your kid's school parent organization to stay home and play Yahtzee with them instead. And someone is going to have an opinion about your choice; that I can guarantee. But the opinion that matters most is your own, always.

Because here's something that I coach women on commonly, and maybe something like this has come up for you in the past. Maybe you were asked

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to go to a work dinner. Maybe a number of your colleagues are going out, and they asked if you want to join, and you don't want to go. But then, either your colleagues give you a hard time for it, or you feel pressure that you won't look like a team player if you say 'no', so you agreed.

But then the whole time you're there, you're there with a storm cloud over your head and gritted teeth, forcing a smile, because deep down you just did not want to be there. And there are loads of other situations where this happens. Maybe skipping a workout because you feel you'd have to be with your kids, going to family dinners because your in-laws want you there.

There are loads of situations where your answer was 'yes' when you really wanted to say 'no'. But think of how it feels when you're there and you don't want to be. It doesn't feel good. It feels really heavy and tense and pressure filled.

For me, it feels like a heavy weight on my shoulders. It is very hard for me to shake it. It is even harder for me to fake it. And it takes a lot more energy to be there because I just don't want to be.

But now, turn around and imagine what it would feel like to speak your truth. Say, "No, I won't be there," and be done with it. Imagine what it would feel like to be honest with yourself. To be honest with the people asking something of you, and ultimately taking care of your own needs.

That feels different, doesn't it? It feels freeing. It feels lighter. It feels good to act in alignment with your beliefs and your needs. And there is zero apologies for this, okay? Here's the thing I want to get back to, and it always comes back to this, right?

In my example, where you're asked to go to a work dinner and you don't want to and you say 'no', what is the worst that happens? I'll tell you; someone has an opinion of you. Someone thinks something about you. Maybe they say it out loud. Maybe they don't. Either way, someone has a thought about you.

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And then, you can ask yourself one of my favorite questions: And, then what? What happens if someone has an opinion of you if you say 'no'? What happens if your coworkers or your in-laws or your own parents or your husband or your friends, what is the worst that happens if those people have a negative opinion about you?

You have a feeling. You feel something. You feel something. Maybe it's guilt, maybe it's inadequacy. Those are the two that come up most commonly for me, personally. Maybe for you it's sad, maybe shame or rejection, whatever the emotion is, you feel it.

And if you can feel whatever feelings come up for you, and know that you acted in line with what is true for you, and that you're going to take care of yourself and not beat yourself up for being honest and saying 'no', there it is. That's the work. That's how you do this. If you want to get better at saying 'no', you have to practice saying 'no', and feeling all of the feelings that come with it.

Because here's the cool thing that happens when you do this. Well, actually, there's a few cool things that start to happen. First, the people who benefited from you saying 'yes' all the time, they have the most to lose by you saying 'no'. And the more you do this, the less they may want to be around you.

And that's okay. Because the people who love you and respect you and want the best for you, they will still be standing by you and they will respect your 'no'. And they won't hold it against you that you're taking care of yourself.

The other cool thing that happens, is that you feel better when you are so bold as to take care of your own needs and you say 'no', in order to honor what feels real and true for you, you will feel better, really. And you know what happens when you feel better because you prioritize yourself? Then you can go and take care of all the other people and things that need you. Like your partner, your kids, your family, your career.

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It's that whole pouring from an empty cup thing. When you fill yourself up, you can give to other people. And you can do it from a place of love and kindness because you've shown yourself love and kindness. Remember, what you focus on you create more of.

So finally, I'm gonna leave you with this: You do not need my permission to say 'no'. Instead, I am asking you to give yourself permission to say 'no'. You do not have an endless supply of time or energy. It'd be awesome if we did. But since we don't, remember, no is not a dirty word. Okay? In fact, no can be a very clean word if you do your work upfront.

When you treat yourself with kindness by saying 'no' and establishing boundaries, you are teaching people how to treat you. When you are clear on your priorities and what matters to you, and then you act on them, that is one of the kinds of things you can do both for yourself and the people around you.

Remember, when you take care of yourself, everyone around you wins, including you. Alright?

Thank you again for hanging out with me. And I'll catch you again next week.

If you like what you've been hearing, please review the show. I would love to get your feedback and ideas. Your suggestions have inspired episodes and will help me make the show better for you. And share this podcast with a friend, text a show link, share a screenshot, or post a link to the show on your social media. 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.

[Strong as a Working Mom](#), a podcast with Carrie Holland, MD, CPT

Ep #36: Want to Be Less Busy? Say No.

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.