

Ep #42: Why Self-Compassion Is Not Letting Yourself Off The Hook



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 #42. What's the difference between being kind to yourself versus letting yourself off the hook? Tune in and find out.

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 is that we are going to talk about the difference between letting yourself off easy and practicing self-compassion. This is an episode that I have been wanting to write for a while. It came up with a client again a few weeks ago, and after her coaching session, I decided it was time to put this into words.

This client was in the process of training for a road race, and we had spent a couple of sessions talking about her training plan. Things were moving along well, until a number of hiccups happened. A family member was sick. One of her kids started having issues at school. Her partner started having more evening work meetings. She found less and less time to get her runs in.

She ultimately decided to do a shorter race, but not before having resistance and self-doubt around the idea of scaling back her goal because of her circumstances. She said it best, "It's like a blurred line between relaxing and putting pressure on myself." And I agree. Sometimes it can be really hard to decipher if in particular moments we should step on the gas, or if we should ease up a little to give ourselves a release.

This concept is something I've honestly been scratching my head about for years. And the more women I coach around this, the more I see we need to dig into this. I want to help you determine if you're giving yourself some grace and being compassionate versus letting yourself off the hook.

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This comes into play in multiple scenarios. Here are some of the most common ones I have seen. So, like my client I was just talking about, say you had a plan to exercise. Maybe you decided that you were going to run after work three days a week. On two of those three days, you didn't get it done. Maybe work went a little longer than you anticipated one of the days, and the other day you came home were so hungry and so tired from your day that you skipped it all together.

And then, as you look back on your week, you realize you got one of your planned three workouts in, and you get really down on yourself. You make those two missed workouts mean you're a failure, and there's no way you could call yourself a runner. You're never going to be able to run a road race at this rate. And this could go on and on.

Or, in relation to your nutrition, you go out to dinner with your friends. And you made a decision ahead of time that you're going to stick with veggies and fish, and you do that. And then your friends order one of every dessert to be shared by the table. And you eat multiple forkfuls of each and every one of them.

Just like the missed workouts, you make those desserts mean all kinds of negative things about you. You decide that it is impossible for you to lose weight, and you will always be stuck at your current weight. And it's just hopeless.

Do you see what I'm talking about? These are both very common situations I have seen my clients go through. I want to offer you this, being compassionate towards yourself is not letting yourself off the hook. It's not giving yourself an easy out.

Being kind towards yourself is not going to make you complacent. In fact, sometimes self-compassion takes the form of tough love, in that you take on something hard or uncomfortable knowing that it may be challenging in the moment, but it will be good for you in the long run.

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So, all of this is to say, being kind to yourself is not going to make you lazy. In fact, it's quite the opposite. I want to make that very clear. Because some of you have told me outright, that you're afraid if you're nice to yourself, you're going to become lazy. And that is not going to happen.

Too many of you are beating yourself up over your missteps and we need to turn that around. You know what I'm going to say, because I say it all the time, you cannot beat yourself up into a better version, right? Change does not work that way. So, instead of getting super self-critical when you make a mistake, or when you don't follow through on a plan you make for yourself, I want you to get really honest about how you treat yourself.

Then I want you to be able to decide for yourself if you're being self-compassionate, or if you're letting yourself off the hook. So, with all that in mind, here's what we're going to talk about today. We're going to talk about what self-compassion is, so that we're all on the same page from the get-go.

Then we're going to talk about some common misconceptions about offering yourself compassion. And then we're going to talk about how to know if you are truly being self-compassionate versus letting yourself off easy. All right? So, let's go.

First, I think it's important to understand what exactly self-compassion is. It's kind of a big, kind of fuzzy sounding word and I want to make sure we're all operating under the same definition. I'm referencing Kristin Neff, a very famous psychologist who is essentially the mother of self-compassion. She defined the term self-compassion.

If you have not read her fabulous book, appropriately titled *Self-Compassion*, please check it out. It is such a good read; it is very insightful and will make this concept even more tangible to you. I'm paraphrasing here, but self-compassion is made up of three components that are shown during times of pain or failure. What I love about the way

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she defines these constructs, is that she calls in the presence of one thing and the absence of another, it's really interesting.

So, here's what I mean. The first concept is that you are kind and understanding toward yourself instead of criticizing yourself. So, plain English; you're nice to yourself.

The second component is that you see your failure as part of the shared human experience, instead of using it as a means of isolating yourself. Quite simply, you see that failing is human and it happens to everyone.

And the third element to self-compassion is being mindfully aware of your negative emotion, instead of avoiding it or over-identifying with it. Again, in simpler terms, it means you process your negative emotion. It means you're not avoiding your negative emotions. And you're also not getting carried away and swept up by them either. You process your emotions in a balanced, mindful way.

I love this because this is what I get to help clients do. I call it “walking through it”. You're not avoiding the pain of failure, and you're not putting a spotlight on it either. You're allowing those emotions to be with you for as long as they need to be there until they dissipate. You are walking through it.

Self-compassion is being kind to yourself, not self-critical. It is recognizing that making mistakes is human, and we are all human. And it's processing your emotion in a balanced way.

Alright, so now let's talk about where you might get tripped up when you're giving yourself compassion. Let's talk about some of the most common misconceptions about self-compassion. Alright, so first, self-compassion is not the same as wallowing. It is not throwing a pity party for yourself, at all. Okay?

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When you are showing yourself compassion, you recognize that you are not alone in your experience, and that other people have felt failure too. You don't cast a spotlight on yourself and convince yourself that you are the only person who has ever skipped a workout. Instead, it's the exact opposite. You recognize that you are not alone. You see that other people experience failure, other people miss their workouts, and it's normal, and you are okay.

The key here is that you keep the drama out of it; you know what I'm talking about. Don't let yourself get carried away and make a missed workout or a weekend of eating nothing but fast food mean that all hope is lost. Self-compassion does not look like that. We're not wallowing here. Instead, you're recognizing that you're human, and screwing up is part of the deal. Don't confuse self-compassion with pity. Okay?

All right. Second, don't confuse self-compassion with self-worth. So, I think of self-worth as how you regard yourself or how much you like yourself, self-esteem. The catch with self-worth is that it often gets muddled by evaluating yourself in relation to other people, and the desire to be better than above average. That's when the comparisons start. That is no good.

The key thing to know here, is that self-compassion is not based on your own self appraisal. When you give yourself compassion, you're not evaluating if you are good enough or better than, in relation to someone else. Self-compassion is not assessing yourself. There's no judgment involved. This is essential to understand.

So, you are not telling yourself it's okay that you missed your workout because you know your coworker, who you are secretly in competition with, missed her workout and she ate four pieces of pizza at the lunch meeting today, and you are somehow better off than she is. Okay? That is not how this works.

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Instead, when you show yourself compassion, you do it because you realize that you are human and that you are no more and no less worthy than any other human. You understand that all humans warrant compassion, and it is not dependent upon being the best or better than someone else.

Do not get confused into thinking that you have to feel better than someone in order to feel good about yourself. You simply recognize that you merit self-kindness for no other reason than you are here on this earth.

All right, next, and this one is so important. Do not get trapped into thinking that self-compassion is the same as self-indulgence. I hear this one so commonly. So many of you have told me that you're afraid to be kind to yourself because you're worried that you'll get all lax and let yourself off the hook and let all your progress go down the toilet. No, again, that is not how self-compassion works.

Think about it. Many of you listening are here because you want to feel better, right? Maybe you want to feel better in your body by exercising more regularly. Or maybe you want to feel better about the food choices you make, and you want to change the way you eat. You want to feel good, to feel healthy.

That goal does not change because you're being kind to yourself. In fact, when you show yourself compassion, it's often the opposite of indulgence. To illustrate this, let's go back to nutrition. Imagine you're an emotional eater and you're working really hard to stop up eating as a way to numb your negative emotions. And then, you've had a really rough day, work stunk, the kids were a disaster, everything that could possibly go wrong does.

And once everyone is finally snoring, you entertain the thought of a bag of chips. It's been a rough day, and you've earned it, right? So here is a great place to illustrate the difference between self-compassion and

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self-indulgence. If you're operating under self-indulgence, you use that stinky day as a justification and go rip into the bag and eat the chips. You're giving yourself immediate pleasure, you're indulging yourself.

But the long-term effect of this is not kind toward yourself. It's not honoring the commitment you made to stop emotionally eating. So now, instead, if you are actively practicing self-compassion, you would recognize that the kindest thing you can do for yourself in that moment, is to not eat chips. You recognize that the immediate short-term instant gratification is not worth the long-term satisfaction of upholding your commitment to yourself, and you walk away with no chips in hand. Do you see the difference here? It's huge. Sometimes the kindest thing you can do for yourself, is to show yourself some tough love. I don't know how else to put it, so I'm going to put it that way.

And when I say tough love, what I mean is that you don't give in to your numbing behaviors. You choose the discomfort. You choose the short-term discomfort of going without the chips, in exchange for the comfort of taking care of yourself in the long run. You might see it as tough love, you might see it as holding yourself accountable. Whatever semantics you want to use, I don't care. I see it as being self-compassionate.

Here's another critical concept about self-compassion I want you to understand. When you're practicing self-compassion, you practice seeing yourself for who you are, in all of your human messiness. Okay? That means feeling kindness towards yourself, when normally you would be very mean towards yourself.

For my perfectionists out there, please listen up. This is a really important point I want to hammer home. When you are practicing self-compassion, you are opening yourself up to being kind in a place where normally you would be very mean to yourself. This is huge. For so many of you, the knee-jerk response when you make a mistake is to get very down on yourself and criticize yourself and rip yourself apart.

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I can attest to this; I did this for years. Because I thought that's what I had to do in order to succeed. This is a classic example of trying to beat yourself up and do better. It did not work. It wasn't until I realized that being overly self-critical was getting me nowhere that I tried a different approach. I remember very clearly one evening, a few years ago, when I was going through a particularly difficult time in my life.

I was in the kitchen alone, the kids were asleep, husband was at work, and I was eating spoonful after a spoonful of raw cookie dough. It was monster cookie dough; with every type of candy you can think of and pretzels. I kept eating it to cope with a very bad day I was having. And this was a day in a very bad stretch of my life. And after all was said and done, instead of swearing at myself and making it mean I was a total disaster, I told myself that I was okay.

I was standing in that kitchen all by myself, having finally put the cookie dough away, thinking, "All right, Carrie, you are a human being who makes mistakes. This is a hard time. And it's okay, you are okay." The key here was that I believed myself. I knew I wasn't guessing myself, like I had tried to do so many times in the past. I wasn't swearing at myself and telling myself I was doomed to be a mess for eternity. I was actually nice to myself.

That night was a huge shift for me. I saw how this felt different, and from there, I made a deal with myself to keep trying that approach. And the more I practiced treating myself kindly after mistakes, and there have been many, the more I realized I was safe. I was creating a safe space for myself. And that's huge, when you know that you can make mistakes without being mean to yourself on the other end. That is life changing.

Here's the other thing I want to add here. If you're worried that it will feel weird to show yourself compassion because that's not what you're used to, I hear you. I grew up in a family where compassion was not present. I grew up in a home where if you cried, you'd better pull it together before anyone

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saw you. The response, in my home, to tears, or really any negative emotion for that matter, but especially tears, was, “What is your problem?” In that tone. And in that voice I can still hear it today, and it makes me cringe.

So, I learned very early on that having feelings and experiencing emotion was not acceptable. And in fact, it got me in trouble. As a result of this, I learned to be really mean to myself and to say all kinds of nasty things to myself to go numb and pull myself together so I could fly under the radar at home.

That did not serve me so well in adulthood when I had my own life, for my own partner and my own family. Which is why I got to work unlearning some of these thought habits and patterns. This took a lot of unlearning, I'm still unlearning it, to be fully transparent.

All of this is to say, if the concept of showing yourself compassion is hard for you, if it feels totally unnatural, or if it feels very awkward and scary, I got you. If compassion is not what you've known, I understand that this can be a challenge. And I will attest with every fiber of my being that it is absolutely worth practicing self-compassion and trying a different approach.

Okay, so now let's talk about the difference between being kind to yourself, or being self-compassionate, versus letting yourself off easy. What's the difference? Unlike letting yourself off the hook, when you're being kind to yourself you're not shirking responsibility for your actions.

You still accept that you missed your workout three days in a row. You still accept responsibility that you ate the cupcake when you planned to skip dessert. At the same time, you also don't let those missteps be a reason to say forget it and give up and forego all responsibility.

When you're being self-compassionate, you own your actions; the good and the bad. That's also part of being an adult, you own your actions; all of them. And here's why this matters. When you are kind to yourself, even

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after a failure, you're creating a safe space, you're building trust with yourself. And that is the most important relationship to have trust in. When you've created this safe space for yourself, it allows you to see yourself more clearly.

So, think about it. If you know you're going to beat yourself up for making a mistake, that doesn't feel good. And it may lead you to avoid facing your mistakes head on, because you know how you're going to treat yourself when you do. Then you're losing out on the opportunity to learn and grow from your experiences.

Often, we don't want to look at who we really are and admit our faults or our mistakes and our failures. Because we're afraid. We're afraid of what we'll see and we're afraid of how we'll respond. Because we most often respond with self-criticism and just straight up meanness; no good.

So instead, imagine what it would be like to have built trust with yourself to know that you will both accept and be kind to yourself after a mistake. Imagine what it would feel like to see yourself in all of your messiness and be nice to yourself anyway. It feels lighter, it feels good, it feels straight-up freeing.

When you own your actions and own that you are a human being who is prone to making mistakes, as we all are, you are creating a space of acceptance. You see yourself for who you are, a human. There is no need to beat yourself up anymore. There's no need to blame or deny or play the victim. Because even though you failed at something, you know in your core that you are not a failure.

Alright, so next. When you take responsibility for your missteps, you're simply stepping into adulthood. You're not beating yourself up about it. Instead, you own your mistake, and learn from it so that the outcome is better next time. Unlike letting yourself off easy, self-compassion is not

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about avoiding accountability. Let me shout that one from the rooftops: It is not avoiding accountability, okay?

Instead, having self-compassion strengthens your accountability. By treating yourself with compassion, you're choosing to be supportive of yourself instead of punishing yourself. And the more you do this, the easier it gets. And the more you will be willing to try again after a failure because you've built trust in yourself. And you know that you won't criticize yourself if you make a mistake. It's very basic, but it makes sense.

When you're mean to yourself, the more mean to yourself you'll be. The more compassionate you are toward yourself, the more compassion you'll have for yourself. And maybe that's stating the obvious, but I encourage you to really think about that.

Here's something else that's really cool, and there's even literature to back this one up. If you are concerned that by being compassionate towards yourself you will let yourself off easy, rest assured that the opposite is true. Being self-compassionate actually leads you to take on more, not less, responsibility for your actions. So cool. Please, do not trap yourself into thinking that by being self-compassionate, you will lose all motivation to try again and challenge yourself to do better; it's the opposite.

Self-compassion is so much more effective than self-criticism at producing motivation. Again, it's creating a space of safety for you to try, make mistakes, learn, and try again. The other cool thing, research shows that people who have self-compassion are more likely to experience guilt instead of shame about their past mistakes. So, this is huge.

Remember the difference between guilt and shame? This is straight from Brené Brown, who is the shame expert. Guilt means, "I did something bad." Shame means, "I am bad." So, guilt is more productive and removes the judgment of you as a person. Meanwhile, shame is a place of negative self-worth.

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Shame is when you let a failure or misstep mean that you are a bad person. It's when you let the fact that you ate your weight in cookie dough mean you are a horrible person. Instead of recognizing that you made a mistake, and the action you took was a mistake. There is a difference between who you are as a person and the actions that you take.

And people who are self-compassionate, are able to make that separation and realize that their mistakes are not reflective of their person. When you are kind to yourself in the face of mistakes, you are more likely to feel the associated natural guilt and leave shame out of the picture. It's separating you as a person from your mistakes. This is so essential. And having self-compassion allows for this separation. So cool.

Alright, so now, on the flip side, let's talk about what it looks like when you're letting yourself off easy or letting yourself off the hook, and what does that look like. To keep it very simple, it looks like the opposite of self-compassion.

But let me explain. First, we went over how self-compassion means you accept responsibility for yourself, and you own your actions, right? So, when you let yourself off easy, it's the opposite. And when you're letting yourself off the hook when you make a mistake, it will often start with, "That's just the way I am."

I hear this a lot in relation to exercise. You'll tell me that if you can't get your 30 minutes of exercise in, you just won't do it at all. So, you get no exercise done. And then you leave it to, "Well, that's just how I am. It's either the whole thing, or I'm not going to do it at all. That's how I am."

Here's the problem with 'that's just how I am'. That's using your fault as a way to let you off the hook, do you see that? It's almost like taking yourself outside the picture, as if your choice not to do any workout, because you can't get in a full 30 minutes, is outside of your control. But that's not true.

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Remember, your actions and your behavior, both of those are within your control. I'm encouraging you to ask for more from yourself. When you respond to your mistakes and failures with, "That's just the way I am," this is a way of avoiding responsibility. It's a way of letting yourself off easy, and it's causing you to miss an opportunity to ask for better of yourself.

Alright, so another way to know that you are letting yourself off the hook is when you look for justifications for your behavior. For example, when you've had a terrible day at work, and you eat your emotions instead of feeling them. And you tell yourself, "I've earned this," as you keep eating your ice cream, you justified your behavior by telling yourself, "It's been a day."

Or when you sleep through your workouts repeatedly, and tell yourself, "I am too tired," instead of working the process backwards and solving for why you aren't getting enough sleep. When you look for justifications, it keeps you from solving for the true issue at hand. Whether that's how to deal with stress at the end of a crazy day without emotionally eating or looking for the reasons you're not getting to bed earlier, and solving for those.

So instead, I see justifications as throwing your hands up in the air and absolving yourself of responsibility, and that is very disempowering. When you are looking outside yourself for reasons to justify and explain your behavior, that is letting yourself off the hook. Again, remember that self-compassion means recognizing that we are all humans capable of making mistakes, we are all capable of failing.

In order to be self-compassionate, you own your choices, and you accept your actions as yours and yours alone. You don't look for outside circumstances or people to explain away your choices. Instead, you recognize that your actions are your choice, and you're responsible for the choices you make, even the ones that you're not proud of.

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And what I want you to notice is this, in both of these examples, whether you explain your choices by saying, "That's just how I am," or you look for justification, what this really comes down to is that you aren't taking responsibility for yourself. Do you see that you're taking your actions and putting them outside yourself, and not taking control over behavior that is within your control? That's a really important distinction to make.

When you're letting yourself off easy, you're often just not accepting responsibility for your choice. You're not owning your actions, and that's not going to feel good. So instead, if you want to practice self-compassion, look inside, and own that your behaviors, even if they're ones you're not proud of in that moment, are yours. When you do that, it allows you to claim authority over yourself, and that is how growth happens.

Alright, next. You might be letting yourself off easy if you find yourself frequently going for instant gratification instead of prioritizing your long-term goal. I see this often in relation to food and especially when you're going out to eat for meals. I have a number of clients who are working to improve their nutrition. And for one in particular, she eats the majority of her meals from fast food takeout or restaurants. We've talked about this, and about how she wants to lose weight so she isn't so out of breath playing with her kids; that's another one of her big goals.

But when she goes out or gets takeout, she often gets food that she's not happy about later. Like, loads of fried foods or desserts or more alcohol than she planned. So even though it may feel good in the moment to eat the french fries or have the cheesecake, in the long run, it's not getting her any closer to any of her goals. Letting yourself off the hook can look like choosing instant gratification instead of making a choice that you will be proud of later.

A super important part of self-compassion is understanding that what feels good in the heat of the moment may not be best for you in the long term. You make a choice that is in alignment with your goal. Self-compassion

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may mean setting certain limits and guidelines for yourself when necessary, and then following them. So, that's discipline.

And remember, discipline does not take away your freedom at all. It's the opposite. Making your decisions ahead of time, setting guidelines for yourself, that's discipline, and it frees up your brain, it gives you freedom.

Another way you might be letting yourself off easy is if you're staying too comfortable. You know that growth happens when you stretch yourself. Take a risk and try something new or different.

If you want to finally stop emotional eating but you never tried to sit through the urge of wanting to eat and you never tried to process your feelings, one, you aren't getting out of your comfort zone. And two, you're going to have a hard time moving away from emotional eating.

You may think you're protecting yourself from the discomfort of feeling the urge to eat. Or you may think that you're protecting yourself from the negative emotions you're trying to numb. But really, what you're doing is staying miserably comfortable in the habit of emotional eating. And as a result, nothing changes.

So, while it might at first seem like protecting yourself is the compassionate thing to do, it's actually holding you back and keeping you from growing. If you're not taking risks and pursuing a goal that really matters to you, it may be that you're acting more out of fear of failure than self-compassion. And as a result, you've let yourself off easy.

I see this all the time when I coach someone who wants to start writing, but she doesn't because she thinks her work isn't good enough. Or she wants to start an exercise routine, but she doesn't because she's afraid she won't measure up to the same level of fitness she was in high school.

Or she wants to change up the way she eats, but she repeatedly doesn't follow through on her plan, because she doesn't think it will make a

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difference. All of these are letting yourself off the hook by not stretching out of your comfort zone.

And last, I want to offer you one other way to know if you're letting yourself off easy. If you find yourself making a decision under the guise of, I'm being nice to myself, but then you're suffering for it later, you're likely letting yourself off the hook. So, this one is a tricky tool that you may end up using.

In hindsight, you may not know until after the decision is made if you've let yourself off easy, or if you were truly offering yourself compassion. And the only way to know is to ask yourself how you feel. Meaning, take stock of how you feel afterward, and ask yourself how you feel about your decision. If you truly feel better for it, then you know you're on the right track, and practicing self-compassion.

So, going back to my client who decided to run the shorter race after all the things going on in her life. When I asked her how she felt about her decision, she said, "It feels like a weight lifted." We were able to determine that this was being self-compassionate, and that is so powerful. This is a woman who typically does not go easy on herself. She has very high expectations of herself.

But it was so awesome to see that in this situation, she still maintained high expectations, while recognizing she is a human and needs to take care of herself. And looking back on her decision and the subsequent changes to her training plan, she felt at peace with it, she felt better. That is the key to self-compassion. So good.

All right, there it is. I hope this gives you some ideas to consider when you're wondering whether or not you're letting yourself off easy or if you're practicing self-compassion. There's a lot to consider here. And ultimately, what I landed on is that you have to ask yourself the question, you have to ask yourself if you're being kind towards yourself, or if you're letting yourself off the hook.

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If you feel good about your decision, and it's coming from a clean place, then you are likely practicing self-compassion. But it can, admittedly, be hard to do this if you're not used to being kind to yourself. It can be a challenge. I found that there is a sweet spot of holding yourself to a standard versus giving yourself grace. And only you can know what that space is for you, and if you're living in it.

But let me make it abundantly clear, it is absolutely worth practicing compassion towards yourself. It will not make you lazy. Instead, it will allow you to grow and stretch in the best way possible. And if you want help with this, let's talk. This is another one of the key concepts we work on through life coaching.

If you have trouble reaching your goals and you aren't being kind to yourself, let's fix that. Let's work on practicing self-compassion while you pursue changes in your eating, moving, and thinking. Go to my website www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact. Send me a message, and let's get started.

All right, thank you again for hanging out with me. I will 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 #42: Why Self-Compassion Is Not Letting Yourself Off The Hook

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.