Ep #93: A Simple Tool for Sticking to Your Habits

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Strong as a Working Mom, a podcast with Carrie Holland, MD, CPT

Ep #93: A Simple Tool for Sticking to Your Habits

You are listening to the *Strong as a Working Mom* podcast, Episode #93. How do you find a habit that makes your other habits easier? Let's talk about it.

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, we are going to talk about habits today. I'm going to introduce you to a concept that I've been working through with a number of clients in order to make their lives easier. That concept is your keystone habit. We're going to get into what that is, what it means, how you find it, and then how you make it non-negotiable so that it makes your eating and moving just a little easier.

If you've been around here at all, you know that I really, really love to talk about habits, because so much of our lives are made up of them. So, if I can help you take advantage of your habits to make them work better for you, and keep you on track towards your goals, then I'm doing what I came here to do.

But before I get into that, I want to share a message that I got from a listener recently, because it was so cool and it totally made my day when I read it. This listener said,

“I wanted to share a few of your tips that I used this weekend and how they helped me. I went out of town for a weekend with my girlfriends after a few weeks of consistent weight loss and really intentional eating. I was really nervous about how much this weekend would throw me off. I listened to your podcast for a few hours on my drive to help me get in the mindset of keeping wellness a priority, even during a fun weekend.”

“I loved your tip of thinking, ‘What do I want to feel like at the end of this weekend?’ It helped me limit my mindless snacking. I also ordered broccoli

instead of fries for my side with dinner, which is a small thing but not my norm. So, thank you for the small but practical tips for not letting a weekend totally derail me."

And, thank you for sharing this message with me. I really, really appreciate it. I would simply point out that that last piece about ordering broccoli instead of fries, so while, yes, in the moment it may be a small thing, it all adds up. Each of those seemingly small decisions add up to big changes.

So, what if you took the same approach this listener did and simply choose veggies instead of french fries, the next time you're out? It's not a huge thing, right? This is broccoli. And if you don't like broccoli, find a different veggie or salad.

But more importantly, what happens when you do this? What happens when you have the broccoli or a salad instead of the fries? Okay, well, so first, you'll probably take in a lot less calories, which is helpful. But second, and more importantly, you will realize that it's not a big deal. You'll see that it's really not a big deal to have veggies instead of fries.

So, your meal comes and you eat it, you have fun being with your friends, you ate food, and it was no big ordeal to have broccoli instead of fries. And you live to tell about it. Okay? I'm overdramatizing here, but you get the idea. If you're someone who's used to always ordering the fries, and you change it up and start getting a veggie instead, you'll see that it's just fine. You are fine without the fries.

And then what happens from there, you do it again. The next time you're out you remember how awesome it felt to make a decision that was more in line with your goals and you repeat it, so you order veggies again. You see, once again, that it's no big deal.

It's that whole action-results motivation cycle. Meaning you take action and order the veggies. You notice a difference in how you feel. And quite possibly, over time, the number on the scale. And those results motivate you to keep doing what you're doing. It's a really cool cycle. When you take

action, you see results. And those results are motivating. That motivation perpetuates the cycle, so you keep it up.

While it may seem like something small, it actually isn't. It could very well be the start of a new habit for you. It could become how you do. When I go to a restaurant, I don't order fries, I get a veggie as my side dish. And the more you do it, the more it becomes second nature, and the less brain energy you have to use to make that decision.

So, all of this is to say, “Way to go.” Thank you for using some of the tools I've offered on the podcast. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to highlight how something as small and seemingly insignificant as a side of broccoli can actually be the start of a habit.

And so, speaking of habits, let's get to the heart of the show today. As I said earlier, I want to offer you a tool that you can use to make your habits a little easier, and that is your keystone habit. Let's talk about what exactly that means. Let's think about what a keystone is, for just a second.

I went to middle school and high school in St. Louis, Missouri. And when I think of a keystone, I think of the St. Louis Arch. I went there for field trips on more than one occasion, and most definitely have seen the video about its construction a number of times. The “keystone” is that top wedge-shaped piece that essentially locks all the other pieces of the arch into position. This is what allows the arch to bear weight. It's an essential piece in the construction of the arch.

Or if any of you are into zoology or ecology, you may be familiar with the term “keystone species”. Keystone species is one on which other species in an ecosystem depend. They have a disproportionately large role in shaping their environment. Elephants are good examples. Elephants eat loads of small trees and shrubs that would otherwise grow into a forest.

The elephants help keep sunny, open spaces where grasses can live, and those grasses support other animals like antelopes and zebras. By clearing out those trees and shrubs, elephants also create warm soil for smaller

animals, like mice, to burrow. And elephant poop spreads seeds, so plants can germinate and grow far and wide. What this all adds up to, is that the presence of the elephant helps hold its habitat together. It's a keystone species. Okay?

Now that we've got a little architecture and a little zoology under our belts here, let's bring it back to habit. Your keystone habit is essentially what initiates a series of other habits to happen. It's a behavior that, when you execute it, leads to a cascade of positive changes or other habits.

You can think of the keystone habit as a catalyst. It sets off a chain reaction of other habits that when added up combine to improve your life, improve your health and fitness, or improve your overall wellbeing. I think of the keystone habit as the umbrella under which all of your other good habits fall.

So, if we can identify what that keystone habit is for you, then we can create a plan to make sure that habit happens regularly, so that all of the other good habits that come as a result become more automatic. The concept of the “keystone habit” was described by Charles Duhigg, and his fabulous book *The Power of Habit*.

He talks about it largely in relation to organizational culture, but I'm going to take it and run with it, and extrapolate, so that we can relate it to your habits like nutrition and exercise. But if you want to learn more about this as it relates to organizational culture, check out his book.

Now that we've talked about what a keystone habit is, let's talk about why it matters. I know that we've talked about it before on the podcast, but I'll reiterate it here, so much of our lives are made up of habits. There are estimates, and I have no idea how anyone determined this, but all the same, there are estimates that anywhere from 40-50% or more of your actions in a day are habits.

That means up to half of the behaviors you perform in a day are running on autopilot. You're not really thinking about them, you're just doing them.

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Remember that habits are your brain's way of conserving energy. And not only does your brain want to conserve energy, it also wants to feel good. And this goes back to your brain's motivational triad.

Your brain's three main desires are to seek pleasure, avoid pain, and expend the least amount of energy possible. Those are your brain's main objectives. And habits are a neat and tidy way to do exactly that. When your brain recognizes a pattern that connects something you do with pleasure or satisfaction, that information gets stored in your brain for future reference.

For example, when you eat chocolate to buffer your terrible day, your brain remembers that eating chocolate equates to relief from stress. And then the next time you have a stressful day, your brain reminds you, “Hey, remember the last time you were super stressed, and you had that chocolate and you felt better? Well, why don't we do that again?” And the next thing you know, you're in the pantry pulling up mini Snickers bars.

Over time, with repetition, it becomes a habit. Here's the thing, just as you're capable of developing habits that hurt you, like buffering your negative emotions with chocolate, you can also develop habits that help you. Things like exercise, or eating healthy, or getting eight hours of sleep every night. Those habits can become automatic and go on autopilot, just like eating chocolate at the end of a stressful day can.

That's where a keystone habit can really help you. When you find, and when you develop, a keystone habit that moves you closer to your goals you can use it to your advantage to initiate an entire series of habits that add up to better health and fitness.

Let's talk about why keystone habits work and what makes them so useful. This is where it gets pretty cool. So, keystone habits are designed on the concept of ‘the small win’. When you find a habit, or you find a behavior that helps you, and you do it and you see success, that's a win. Granted, it may be a small win but it counts, and it's enough to propel you forward.

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Think about the listener I was talking about at the very beginning of the episode. She chose broccoli, no big deal, right? But that's a small win. What happens with that small win? You see a result, you feel better. When you feel better, that tells your brain, “Hey, I like that. Maybe we should do that again.”

When you repeat the behavior, and you continue getting the broccoli instead of french fries, not only do you start to feel better but you may also start to lose weight. That result of feeling better and weight loss will fuel motivation, which in turn can fuel other small wins. And, it's all of those small wins that add up to big results.

You can think of it this way, success breeds more success. When you have a small victory, like getting up at 5am without hitting the snooze button. Or when you start food journaling and actually stick to it. Or when you actually go to bed at 9:30 instead of midnight, that small victory can often be enough to fuel another victory. It’s a snowball effect. All right?

The second way that keystone habits are so impactful is that they create a setting for other habits to thrive. As an example, when you make getting up at 5am a habit, you've given yourself more time in the morning. And then, by creating more time for yourself in the morning, you take on the task of preparing your lunch for work.

And this is instead of going to a fast-food restaurant or getting takeout because you were racing through the morning and didn't have time to pack your food. So, not only are you getting up earlier and giving yourself more time to take care of tasks in the morning, now you've also made space for the habit of packing your lunch, which will keep you from eating fast food or restaurant food that doesn't align with your health and fitness goals.

One habit, getting up early, led you to another habit of making your lunch, and there's another small win. There's a compounding effect. All right?

The third way that keystone habits work, is that over time they contribute to your identity. Because your actions and your habits reflect who you are

becoming. Your behaviors reflect who you are. It becomes ingrained within you.

If your keystone habit is a morning workout, to give you another example, something happens. That behavior of being a consistent morning exerciser reinforces to your brain, “Hey, this is who I am. I am someone who gets her exercise in. I am someone who works out in the morning.” And when that happens consistently, by getting your morning workout done, that identity starts to operate in the background.

You don't have to think so hard about it. It becomes easier and easier to execute your workouts, because at the heart of it, you have the underlying belief that you are someone who exercises. So, it only makes sense that when the alarm goes off, of course you get up and get your workout in. You don't have to think so hard about it, you just do it. That habit reinforces your identity.

As I'm saying this, I realize that so much of what I talk about on this podcast comes back to two things, habit and identity. I really had no idea just how intertwined these two concepts are. But the more I read, the more I coach and get coached myself, and the more I learn about humans, I realize that habits and identity really do go so closely together.

Because whatever you believe about yourself, you will prove correct. And most often, you will prove that correct through your actions, through your behaviors, through your habits. And your habits, in turn, reinforce your identity. It's a cycle. So if you're with me on this, and you accept the connection between habits and identity, let's make the most of it. Take advantage of this concept, and choose habits that set you up for success.

Now that we've talked about what keystone habits are, why they matter, and how they work, let's talk through some examples. I'll give you examples from my own life and also from the lives of my clients, so you can see the impact that one habit can have, depending on the person and the setting.

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For me, my keystone habit is exercise. I know I've said it before, but I am most definitely a morning exerciser. I get up at the crack of dawn, and I get my workout done before I do anything else. And because I do that, I've done a few things: I've given myself more time in the day to get things done.

I don't have to interrupt my day, or cut anything short in the afternoon, in order to get to the gym or get my workout done. The rest of the day is open, and no matter what happens it's okay, because I've already checked the box and taken care of myself.

From there, that exercise is a small win that propels other habits. So, after I'm done exercising, I generally don't feel like eating waffles and pastries for breakfast. Once I'm done working out, I'm more inclined to choose something healthy like bean protein and whole grain carbs to fuel my muscles and aid in the recovery process. And french fries are not going to do that.

Beyond that, when I get my morning workout in, I find that I'm way more awake, more alert, and more productive. I can turn out work much more efficiently than if I were to skip my workout.

And you may notice this, too. You may notice that on days when you don't get your workout done you feel a little off. You might feel a little sluggish. Maybe you're dragging through your workday and not getting as much done as you'd like. And you may notice that you're more inclined to eat things that are less healthy. I have most definitely experienced this, and I've had clients who've also noticed this for themselves.

The last thing that morning exercise does for me, is that it results in me going to bed early. I have a pretty consistent bedtime of nine o'clock, so that I can get up early and get my workout done. I know if I go to bed much later than that, I'm going to feel it the next day. So, I make it a point to get to bed by nine o'clock on most nights. I know that may be ridiculously early, but it works for me.

I'm also thankful that Adam also operates on a similar schedule, and we're both morning people so this works for us. The point here is that just one habit, morning exercise, has been impactful enough that I've created an entire system around it. I've built a lifestyle around it. That lifestyle is a collection of habits that add up to keep me healthy and strong.

So, exercise is a keystone habit for me. It's the umbrella under which many of my other habits, like eating healthy, being productive, and going to bed early, fall. That's my system.

Alright, here's another example of a keystone habit. One of my clients discovered that meal planning is her keystone habit. When I first start working with a client on weight loss or changing her diet, I will send her a handout with optional worksheets, and it'll help her plan out her nutrition.

And so, this client uses the weekly planner within the packet, and she uses it regularly. She sits down one day a week and works through what her entire week of meals is going to look like, and she writes it out in the planner. That's her keystone habit.

From there, getting that meal plan done sets off a chain reaction of other habits. Once she has her week planned out, she creates a grocery list, and she'll either go shopping or have the groceries delivered. Then, once she's got those groceries, she preps them and gets a few meals ready to go for the week. And then, most importantly, she eats the meals. She's eating the meals that she has planned for herself at home, and these are meals that she feels good about.

This is a major change for her, because before we started working together she was eating out with her family multiple days a week. And on the days she was eating at home, it was largely ultra-processed meals that she didn't feel were helping her reach her health or weight goals. So, this client is experiencing a series of wins that began with a small win of writing out a meal plan.

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Writing out her meals resulted in other habits, like grocery shopping, meal prepping, and eating at home. Now, what's even more interesting, is that when she started doing this, she also started exercising more. It was so interesting. She tends to do her workouts in the afternoon, and she realized that when she didn't have her meals planned out, she would get to the end of the day and waste a lot of time and energy trying to decide what to do for dinner.

But now that she's meal planning, she doesn't have to do that and she can use that time in the afternoon to exercise and come home to eat a meal she's planned out in advance. That’s so cool.

Alright, one more example I want to share, that has helped a number of my clients, is self-monitoring. Again, as a reminder, self-monitoring can take on a few different formats. It could be using a tracking app like MyFitnessPal or My Macros+. Or it could be using a food journal and writing out what you eat; no amounts or measurements necessary. It's simply a way for you to know what you're actually eating.

So either way, whether with an app or with pen and paper journaling, I've had clients succeed and realize that self-monitoring was their keystone habit. I can think of one client in particular, she liked pen and paper, and she got in the habit of writing out all of her meals the day before. The more she did this, and went back and reviewed, the more she realized that her nutrition was not where she wanted it to be.

She saw that most of her food was ultra-processed stuff that was calorically dense, but without much else. She wasn't getting much nutrition from her food. So, that led her to change up the way she grocery shopped. She stopped buying packaged snacks and started buying more fruit and veggies.

She also started doing some meal prep to get lean protein ready before her week started. And she made it a point to eat the foods that she bought from the grocery store so she wasn't throwing away hundreds of dollars in groceries at the end of the week, like she'd been doing previously.

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In this case, self-monitoring, or food journaling, was this client's keystone habit. Journaling set up a system for her to identify areas of improvement in her nutrition, and then she put it in motion. She shopped differently. She cooked differently, and she cooked in advance. And, she saw the results. By doing this consistently, for months, she was able to tweak her nutrition enough and eat in a way that resulted in her losing weight.

Beyond that result, and more importantly, she proved to herself that she is someone who follows her meal plan. She proved that she honors the commitment she makes to herself and eats what she plans. That was huge for her, and it all started with a pen and paper. It was a small win.

Okay, so now let's talk about your keystone habits. More specifically, if you're asking, how do you find your keystone habit related to eating and moving, let's talk through this. Here's how I would suggest you go about it.

First, think about your current patterns. Think about what your routines are, that will give you loads of information about your habits. Do you tend to come home from work, eat, and sit on the couch and not move much until bedtime?

Do you tend to snooze your alarm over and over until you reach the tipping point and have to race to get out the door on time, leaving you feeling rushed all day? What does that do for the rest of your day? Do you wing it with meals, which leads you to buy fast food or restaurant food on the way home from work?

When you do this, and when you examine your habits in this way, you may find certain habits that have a significant impact on your life. Like, over sleeping, or sitting in front of the television, or winging it for dinner, or having a glass of wine at a certain time every night. You may notice that those individual habits lead to other habits that aren't helping you.

The point here is twofold. First, when you examine your current habits you'll find areas for improvement. You'll most likely find habits that are not moving you forward. And second, you may be able to identify places in your life

where inserting a new, different habit can lead to a cascade of other habits that changes things entirely. This is all cause and effect right here.

As an example, imagine if your current pattern is to come home from work and have a glass of wine every night. That glass of wine leads you to feel disinhibited, which leads you to order takeout, which leads you to sit in front of the TV watching Netflix until way past your bedtime. So, that glass of wine is triggering an entire series of habits that's keeping you from reaching your goals.

Now, instead, imagine what it would be like if you inserted a different habit to replace your nightly glass of wine when you got home from work. So, something like putting on your walking shoes when you walk in the door, what is the effect of that? What chain reaction of events could transpire when you put on your walking shoes instead of pouring a glass of wine?

Do you go outside for a walk? Does that walk wake you up and invigorate you, so you make a salad for dinner instead of ordering takeout? What happens from there? The only way you're going to find out what that cause-and-effect relationship is here, is by experimenting and experiencing some trial and error.

This is where, after you look at your patterns and see the cause-and-effect relationship of your behaviors, you choose something and try it out. That means you set out your walking shoes, have them waiting for you, easily visible, when you walk in from work. And then, you go for a walk instead of immediately pouring yourself a glass of wine, and you see how that impacts the rest of your evening. You test it out.

Or if you find that snoozing through your alarm and skipping your morning workout is your area for improvement, imagine what happens if you set an alarm, get up early, and do your workout. Even though it's hard to get up early, you do it anyway. And then, you monitor what the windfall is from that.

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What happens when you commit and make your morning workout a habit? How does that one habit impact the other areas of your life? Keep experimenting with habits until you find something that you can clearly identify as having an impact on the other behaviors in your life.

Notice what changes when you wake up early, as an example. What, if anything, improves? What is the cascade of events that happens when you make waking up early a priority? Let me just point out here, that while I want you to be willing to experiment, I also encourage you to commit to consistency.

Pick something, like waking up early, and put in a true, consistent effort over time to see what the impact is. Remember, establishing a habit is not about how long it takes but how consistent you are. It may take weeks of trying to get up, consistently, before you know what the impact is for you.

But again, it's not 21 days and then it's a habit, it's consistency. It's the behavior, it’s repetition, and it’s frequency; that's the formula for consistency. You're not going to know what the true impact is of any one habit change unless you do it consistently. Okay?

Alright, after you've experimented and chosen a habit that you feel might be the keystone habit, and then you've been consistent about putting it into practice, turn around and evaluate it. What does that one habit do for you? What results do you notice when you put that habit into practice? Has your habit made it easier for you to maintain other positive habits in your life? Has it made your life better in some way that you weren't expecting?

Remember the example that I gave earlier, for some of you adopting the habit of morning exercise changes your life. I know that sounds dramatic, but I know it's true for some of you and it was true for me. Or is it that making a meal plan for yourself over the weekend results in you eating healthy meals at home, grocery shopping, and cutting way back on calorie dense restaurant meals?

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Does a walk after work change the entire trajectory of your evening? Take a wide-lens view and look at the impact your potential keystone habit has on the rest of your habits. And if you want to keep it really, really simple, you can ask yourself this question: Does this habit make my life better? And then, answer it.

Alright, here's one other idea to consider. You may not realize what your keystone habit is until you skip it. It may not be until you have a bad week and skip out on your meal planning that you realize how essential it is for you to have that meal plan written out for yourself. Because you may see that without your meal plan you don't grocery shop, you don't do any meal prep, and you buy takeout on your way home from work.

So, it may not be until after the fact, and after you've skipped the habit, that you realize how important it is for you. Again, that's all information. It's information that tells you, "Having my meal plan written out is what keeps my week together, from a food standpoint."

It's having that meal plan ironed out that results and all of the other habits coming to fruition. And that tells you, you've got a keystone habit. And the point here is, do not be afraid to mess up, and do not aim for perfection. Because it's the mess ups that have the potential to give you lots of helpful information. Okay?

Once you find your keystone habit, the next step is to make it non negotiable. Or really, more importantly, you're making every effort to ensure that habit happens as often as possible. What this means is creating an ideal plan *and* a failure plan for yourself.

I say this all the time because it's true, it's easy when it's easy, right? Meaning, if creating your meal plan is your keystone habit, it's easier to get those meals planned when you have time to do it on a Saturday or Sunday. When you can sit down, think through your schedule, think through your life, and come up with a plan for meals that makes sense for your family.

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It is not as easy to create that meal plan when you're racing from soccer game to swim meet to birthday party all weekend, with zero time to think. It is not as easy when you're at a conference all weekend, and come home late Sunday night, only to roll in the work week Monday morning.

Similarly, it's easier to get your morning exercise in when you go to bed at a reasonable time and have seven to eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. It is not as easy to get it in when you stay up until midnight watching Netflix. Or you have a sick kid or pet. Or you get paged in the middle of the night multiple times.

It's easy when it's easy. But when it's not, when it's not so easy to get your habit in, you need a failure plan. Because that failure plan is designed specifically to keep your habit alive. It may mean that you have a pre-written meal plan of go-to meals for weeks that didn't start out right. That may include some frozen meals, or a combination of ready-made meals and salads. It's your go-to meal plan.

Or you write out the meal plan on the plane or in the car, and place a grocery order to meet you at the door. There are loads of ways to go about this, and they all end in the same way, you keep up your keystone habit, even if it's not perfect.

The same is true for your exercise. If you're up late, or if you're up on and off all night, make a decision in advance what your go-to plan for exercise is. Does that mean you sleep an hour later and exercise for 15 minutes, instead of your usual 45-minute routine? Or does that mean you do your workout when you get home from work in the evening?

Does it mean you get up at your usual time and do a very low impact workout, instead of something higher intensity that you might do if you were better rested? Again, there are loads of backup options here, and I would encourage you to choose what it's going to be for you. Decide it in advance, and be prepared to execute it when needed. Okay?

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The whole idea, as I said, is to keep the habit alive. Remember that your habit stays alive through repetition. But repetition does not equal perfection. We're not looking for perfection here. We're looking for you to keep up behaviors that remind your brain, “This is how it is around here. I get my exercise done in the morning. I write my meal plan out on the weekend.”

So, even if the habit is not executed perfectly, the message still gets sent to your brain that this is how you roll. If you know that your keystone habit is exercise, because it leads you to eat healthy and go to bed at a reasonable hour, then I would argue that it is well worth your time and energy to think through how you can make that keystone habit happen no matter what.

Have a plan for both what you can do on your best day, but also what you can do on your worst day. When I talk with anyone about habits we will always talk about what you can do on your worst day. Here's why.

When you prove to yourself that you could keep up your habit, even on the hardest days, that says something. That reinforces self-efficacy. It builds trust, and it creates a rock-solid system that allows you to take the best care of yourself no matter what else is going on around you.

So, find your keystone habit, plan for it, have a backup plan for it, and see how awesome it feels to know you've got yourself covered. Right? And if you want help with this, let's talk.

When you coach with me, we'll find your keystone habit. Then we'll put systems in place to ensure that habit happens no matter what is going on in your life. Check out my website. Send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact. Tell me what habits you want to create, and let's get to work. All right?

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. 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.

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.