Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Strong Is a Mindset, a podcast with Carrie Holland, MD, CPT

Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, Episode #108. What do you do when your diet isn't working? Let's talk about it.

This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, where you'll learn how to build both a strong body and a strong mind by eating, moving, and thinking. I'm your host Physician, Personal Trainer, Certified Health Coach and Certified Life Coach, Carrie Holland.

Hey, how are you? What's new, what's good? So, what's good here, we are going to talk about what to do when your diet isn't working. I'm going to give you some questions and thoughts to consider about your diet if you're worried that it's not getting you the results you want. This comes up all the time and I think this is an important question to dissect.

I've had numerous clients come to coaching sessions and tell me their diet isn't working, and I've worked through this with enough clients that I've found some recurring themes and patterns. So, that's where we're going. Today, I'm going to talk about a number of different things to consider when your diet isn't working. I'm going to look at this from two different angles.

I'm going to give you some thoughts to consider about the diet itself, and I'm also giving you some things to ask of you yourself. That may be oversimplifying, but at the end of the day, you know I like to keep things simple, and I really do think about this as two pieces. There's the diet, which I also think of very simply as your way of eating, and then there is you, the person carrying out the diet.

And if your diet is not working, I would argue that somewhere there is a disconnect between those two pieces. Something is not connecting, or something's amiss, and we've got to figure out what that is and solve for that. Of course, before I go any further, I want to make this clear. This is assuming that you have no medical issues that are keeping you from losing weight. Okay? I want to make that clear from the outset.

Alright, so let's talk about this. Let's talk about what to consider if your diet is not working, and what you can do about it. Let's go. First, let's talk about your diet, this would be the natural first place to start, right? If you've

chosen a diet and it's not working, we need to look and see what and how you're actually eating, and see if there is an issue there. Most often, when I do this with a client we'll find a number of different potential reasons that your diet is not working.

First, the most obvious issue here would be that you think you're eating enough to lose weight. Meaning, you think you're eating in a calorie deficit, but you're actually not. Again, barring any medical issues, based on what we know from science, if you are not losing weight, you are not eating in a caloric deficit. I will stand on this hill until science tells me otherwise.

But I don't know a single person who lost weight eating more calories than she needed. Okay? So, if your diet isn't working, I would first wonder if you're actually in a caloric deficit. But let's go beyond that. I think I've talked about being in a caloric deficit enough times and there is more to it than that. We need to get to the root cause.

I think stopping at calorie deficit is missing the bigger picture. So beyond simply not being in a calorie deficit, the next question would be, why? Why are you not in a calorie deficit? And here's what I've come up with. Here's what I've seen happen over and over again for so many of my clients.

The first reason you may not be in a calorie deficit is because you chose a diet that is too extreme; that it becomes really difficult to follow. I would say that of all the things that impede your progress, it's that you chose a diet that is too extreme, too low in calories, and just not enough food. And you find yourself trying to stick it out as long as you possibly can, until it becomes too hard and you can't keep up with it anymore.

And this is why, I will argue over and over again, not to cut your caloric intake, or not cut your calories too low from the outset, or ever, for that matter. If you try to cut your calories too low from the get-go, one, you're going to be miserable, because you won't be eating enough food. And two, you won't be able to keep that up for the haul. And three, your body will rebound and fight you tooth and nail by slowing down its metabolism to counteract the extreme caloric deficit that you've created. Okay?

Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

I have seen this pattern so many times with my clients. They will tell me over and over again, the only way they can lose weight is by eating 1,100 calories. And you think I may be exaggerating, but anecdotally, I would say this is the number that comes up most often, 1,100. It's fascinating.

But here's the thing. There are not many people who can function well or thrive on 1,100 calories. First, you're setting yourself up for vitamin and mineral deficiencies by eating that low of a caloric load. And second, you will be miserable. Most people are just not going to be able to sustain eating at a level of calories that low.

But some of you have sworn up and down that this is what you've got to do in order to lose weight. And I have examples of this from people who weighed over 250lbs. all the way down to 135 lbs. I'm not even kidding. But this is not sustainable for most people. The important takeaway here is this. Your diet may not be working because it is too extreme. Your body will revolt, it will sound the alarm, it will send out hunger hormones, it will slow down your metabolism, and it will make you feel like garbage.

That's because your body is telling you something. Your body is trying to tell you, “Hey, this is not enough food. The diet you've chosen is not working. This is too extreme.” Okay, so that is one reason your diet may not be working.

Another reason your diet may not be working is that it is too restrictive. So yes, this is similar but somewhat different from being too extreme. And I want to describe this separately, so go with me on this for a minute. For me, when I think of “diets”, I think of too extreme as too little calories. It's how much, or really, how little you're eating. I think of your total caloric intake.

Now, when I think of “overly restrictive”, I think of what and when you're eating. There's no science behind this, okay? This is simply how I think of diets. There is certainly overlap here, but this is how I've got it organized in my brain.

So, when your diet is too restrictive, it may be that you've limited certain foods so much that you've taken out too many of the foods that you enjoy

eating. This is where you swear off certain foods like candy or chocolate, or you decide that carbs are out, or no more dessert, or no more pizza or ice cream. Or name your favorite food, whatever it is for you.

You restrict yourself and cut out so many of the foods that you enjoy, you're only eating a narrow range of foods. But that ultimately leads you to revolt and rebound. Or on the flip side, you try to restrict the times that you eat. You swear that intermittent fasting is the answer, because all your friends are doing it and they've had success. So, surely it must work for you too.

So, then you decide on the 11am-7pm eating window. But you find yourself repeatedly hungry by 9:30, because you get up at 6:00. Eventually you give it up because the eating window just does not fit with your lifestyle. There are loads of other examples here, but these are the big ones that come up all the time.

And the underlying theme here is that you take on an overly restrictive approach by cutting out foods you enjoy, or cutting down the time you allow yourself to eat, so that it just does not fit with your life. The takeaway here is, however you slice it, most diets do not work because they are either too extreme or too restrictive; really, both.

You're either cutting your calories way too low, or cutting out too many of your favorite foods, or cutting out meals, or the amount of time that you have to eat, or a combination of these. The end result is that it gets hard, and then it gets too hard. And you ultimately say, “Enough is enough.” So, this approach does not work. Okay?

I want to shout that out. I want to make it loud and clear that this approach does not work. Extreme or restrictive diets, they don't work. But you keep coming back to it. Why? And if you're wondering why I'm maybe sounding like a broken record right about now, let me explain why I'm making such a big deal out of this.

So, despite the fact that you may be nodding your head in agreement, or that you may have experienced this very phenomenon for yourself and you know firsthand that overly extreme, overly restrictive diets do not work.

Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

Despite you understanding this from an intellectual or even from a medical standpoint, you may still find yourself turning to an extreme, overly restrictive approach to weight loss.

And this is when recycled diets become a problem. This leads me to another reason that your diet may not be working, and that is because you're recycling it. It may be that you're coming back to a diet you have tried in the past. It worked for a short while, or maybe even a little longer, like a few months, but then it didn't. Your diet stopped working, and you regained the weight.

Then, when you get frustrated enough and you feel like you've got to do something, you may be inclined to come back to that diet, even though it ultimately did not work for you. But it worked for a little bit, so why shouldn't it work again, right?

Well, let's get into this. So many of my clients come to work with me after trying multiple diets. I will ask them during our initial consultation what diets she has tried in the past. And some of my clients have tried them all; Keto, low fat, intermittent fasting, Paleo, Weight Watchers, Whole 30; you name it. Some of them have cycled through the same diet multiple times.

And they will almost always say the same thing, “When I did Keto, it worked. When I did intermittent fasting, it worked.” My follow up to that will always be, “Yes, it worked until it didn't.” And that right there is the problem. That's it. It works for a while and then it doesn't.

And this makes sense. It makes sense that you would want to come back to a diet that worked, even if it worked for a short while before it didn't. If you saw some weight loss, or if you saw a lot of weight loss because it was extreme or restrictive, then you could argue that the diet worked. I can see that side of the argument.

But while I can see that, I would also argue this. If you have to keep restarting your diet after stopping it, then the diet did not work. Okay? I really believe this to my core. Stopping and starting the same diet over and

over again, that is a sign, it means something is not working. So, do you see how all of these things go together?

Let me make this connection for you. This is a pattern I see all too commonly, and I want to help you break it. The pattern is this: You want to lose weight, like today. So, you find an overly extreme, low-calorie diet, or you find an overly restrictive diet that cuts out all of your favorite foods, or you find a diet that combines these. Then you follow the diet, you stick it out for a few weeks, or maybe a few months, and you lose weight.

And while you are thrilled that you've lost weight, you've done it in a way that is not sustainable. It gets hard, it gets old, it gets exhausting, so then you stop. And once you stop your body rebounds, and you find yourself overeating to compensate for that restriction. And the weight comes back on.

This goes on for a while until you get frustrated and decide you need to do something today, and the cycle repeats itself. You find yourself considering going back to that same diet. You may even tell yourself, “Well, this worked before, I can do it again.” You may be tempted to recycle that diet because you have evidence that it worked, even though you also have evidence that it ultimately did not work. But never mind that, right? You just want to get the weight off.

No. Let me make something loud and clear. If you cannot make your diet a lifestyle, keyword “life”, then it is not going to work for the long haul and it's not going to work for you.

If you are going to go to all the trouble of doing this... If you want to lose weight… If you want to eat healthier… If you want to change your habits… If you want to change your life, how about we find you behaviors, and we find you a way of eating and moving that you can actually make into a lifestyle? Instead of something you stop and start over and over again. No recycling necessary.

I cannot stress enough how essential this is to understand. And if you've ever stopped and started the same diet over and over again, then you may

know what I'm talking about. So, I know that it may be tempting to do it again, to go back to the extreme low calories, or to go back to a super restrictive way of eating.

That may be enticing because you know you can hack it for at least a little bit to get the weight off. And you may even tell yourself, “Well, I'll just do it for a little bit because I know it will work. I just need to get this weight off.” But the question to ask, once you start bargaining with yourself about recycling a diet is this, “And then, what?” And then, what? Go the extra mile and answer the question of, “And then, what?”

Meaning, you restrict yourself and go the extreme route, and you lose the weight, and then what? What happens next? Do you keep it up with the restriction? Because that's what you'll need to do to maintain your lower rate. Or do you rebound and regain the weight? What happens next?

And here's why I think this is such an important question to answer. It is really, really easy to get distracted by the outcome of weight loss. It's easy to get so overly focused on bringing down your weight, that you may be tempted to go to any lengths to do it; you go overly extreme, you restrict all to stink, you take on a sense of urgency, you push super hard. Because you just want that number to go down.

But sometimes you get so distracted by that, that you don't look any further. And then you have to decide what you're going to do once you do lose the weight. You have to decide if you can keep up whatever behaviors got you to that weight loss in the first place. It’s a place of urgency and impatience. Where you're in a space of ‘I just need to hurry up and get this weight off.’

It's natural. It's not uncommon, and it's totally keeping you running in circles. And it's when you're in that mentality of urgency and impatience that you might feel compelled to start an extreme restrictive diet. Again, that's when you get wooed by the promise of diets that promise fast weight loss by extreme or restrictive measures. But you know where those diets lead you. You know where you land.

Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

In that process, that process of feeling urgency to lose weight, then starting an extreme or restrictive diet, white knuckling it for as long as you can stand, and ultimately rebounding, only to regain some or all of the weight that you've lost, in that process you may get so caught up that you lose sight of the reason your diet isn't working.

And the reason your diet isn't working goes back to two key factors, sustainability and consistency. And that part comes back to you. Okay? Let's talk about this, because here is another big takeaway. Your diet will work if you follow it. So, I know if you have been around here at all, what I just said may sound crazy. Because what I say on almost every other podcast is the exact opposite.

And it's true, diets don't work, but they do. So, what do I mean by this? Let me explain, because two things are true here. The first truth is that most diets will actually work. Choose your diet. I mentioned many of them at the outset; Keto, low carb, low fat, Paleo, vegan, intermittent fasting, macro counting, Mediterranean; choose any one of them. If you follow that diet consistently, it will work and you will lose weight.

Because each of those diets will ultimately land you in a caloric deficit, whether that's by eliminating or significantly reducing certain foods or food groups, or restricting the time you eat. However you slice it, the outcome is the same. Whatever diet you follow, it will lead you to lose weight by creating a caloric deficit, if you follow it consistently.

And that leads me to the second truth, which is that diets don't work. And that is because of what I just said. You have to follow the diet consistently in order for it to work. And what makes a diet something that you can follow consistently? Sustainability. And that's where you run into trouble. That's why diets don't work.

Do you see the connection? Do you see the cycle here? In order for your diet to actually work three conditions have to be present. 1. It has to result in a caloric deficit. 2. You've got to be able to follow the diet consistently. 3. In order to follow that diet consistently, it has to be sustainable. That's it. It's those three things that need to come together in order for your diet to

actually work. If you don't have those three conditions, then your diet is not going to work.

So, this is where it all collides. You are looking for a way of eating that results in a calorie deficit that is sustainable, so that you can follow it consistently. Do you see this connection here? I know this is not calculus, but I think it is so essential to understand it. I'm going to say it again. You are looking for a way of eating that results in a calorie deficit that is sustainable, so that you can follow it consistently. Okay?

Now, let's talk about what may be going on for you that your diet is not working. We've already talked about why the diet may not be working. But let's talk about what might be happening for you. So, one of the most common things I find when I dive into this with clients is that we'll find you're in a calorie deficit some days, and then eating at or above maintenance on other days.

Far and away, this would be the most common reason your diet doesn't work. It's often because you eat in a caloric deficit a few days a week, but then the rest of the week you're eating more than you planned. Or you're eating a few bites of this, a few sips of this, a few extra of that. And before you know it, any caloric deficit you created has been essentially negated.

And the hard part about this is that it's subtle. It may be that you're on point, for the most part. It may be that you're sticking with your plan, for the most part. But then you have a few mini candy bars from your office break room, you grab a soda and a bag of chips while you're checking out your groceries, you finish the last few bites of chicken nuggets from your kids' plates.

None of these, in isolation, are a big deal, right? It's not like you just loaded yourself with a gallon of ice cream in one sitting. It's usually much more subtle than that. But at the same time, it's just enough to keep you from losing weight. It's just enough to keep you right at maintenance. And it's interesting how often my clients will be surprised at how just these small things added up over the course of a week. It can be just enough to keep you totally stuck.

Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

When they really start to look, they see the cumulative impact of all the little things. It's all those little, seemingly no big deal decisions, those all add up. Okay?

Another reason your diet may not be working is because you've got unrealistic expectations of your progress. So, I call this the “Show Me the Money” phenomenon. As an example, you've been following your diet more or less for two, maybe three or four weeks, and you're ready for it. You are waiting for it. You want the results, and you want them now. And when you don't see results fast enough, or you don't lose whatever you deem is enough in that timeframe, you decide that the diet is not working.

That's when it gets hard. That's when you lose sight of the habits versus the outcome. When you have unrealistic expectations of yourself, or even of your diet, you're not going to be satisfied. It will never be fast enough. It will never be enough, period. And that's when you'll want to push harder and harder and make your diet more and more extreme. And that's leading you down a road that will ultimately cause you to rebound.

So, we know that conventional diet wisdom says that you should lose a pound per week when you cut your calories by 500/day. That is what convention says. Unfortunately, I think that piece of information has shot us in the foot more than we know. So many people have this expectation that if you just cut out 500 calories/day, every day for a week, you will lose a pound.

That idea was propagated by science, and even the medical community, and even by me until I learned more. And now I know better, so I can own up to it. I can see how it has ruined our perception of what the typical course of a diet should look like. For so many people, the typical perception is cut and restrict your calories however you need, and you will lose weight; about a pound per week.

But I've said it before, I'll say it again, your body and your metabolism do not care about that math. Okay? Your body doesn't care, so that math does you no good. On top of that, restricting yourself even harder when that math doesn't add up, and getting down to 1,100 calories, or whatever super

low number of calories you think you need to eat in order to lose weight, that's not going to help you. That is going to cause your body to revolt and put on the brakes even more.

Instead, what if you got very real and honest with yourself and created realistic expectations? What if, instead of getting super down on yourself after not losing weight for two weeks, you look at what habits you've put in place? You look at how sustainable those habits are? You look at your consistency, and get super honest with yourself about how consistent you've been? And focus on your habits and getting really good at those?

Because here's the other thing, part of the reason your diet may not be working is because you're not all in. You're not in it. In *You Are a Badass* Jen Sincero calls it “trying light”. Meaning, you'll try the diet you've committed to until it gets hard until you have a choice to make about the breakroom cupcakes, or until your coworkers are getting takeout Thai food, but you brought a salad. Then it gets hard, and you have a decision to make.

So, take a look at your level of commitment. Often, we say we're committed, but what we're really saying is that we'll try until it gets hard; we're trying light. And trying light, especially when it comes to your diet, is going to be super frustrating. It will lead you to stop your diet as soon as it gets hard.

You have to decide how committed you are to your habits and the diet that you choose. And it will be much, much easier to stay committed to your diet if you've chosen something that is sustainable. Okay?

Another key reason that your diet may not be working is your lack of self-belief. Even though it sounds like a word you would read in a self-help book… And it is. One I have definitely come across… please know that self-belief is essential, but it often gets overlooked.

Today, I'm going to make a big hairy deal out of this for just one second, okay? So, if you do not believe in yourself, it is going to be very hard for you to accomplish your goals. And this goes far, far beyond weight loss or

habit change, by the way. You have to have at least some small shred of belief that change is possible for you. And when I say “self-belief”, I mean your belief and your ability to do what you set out to do.

I've also referred to this as “self-efficacy”. There has got to be some belief in your ability to change. I cannot give that to you. A self-help book cannot give that to you. Your partners, your family, your coworkers; none of these people can give it to you. Okay? There's a reason it's called self-belief. It comes from you. It comes from within.

The next logical question is, if you don't have much, or if you don't have any self-belief, how do you get it? And the answer is you get it by doing something. You get self-belief by taking action, even when you don't want to. Even if it feels hard, even if you mess up, you take action. You do something small like decide, “Hey, instead of getting french fries with my dinner, like I normally do, instead I'm going to order a salad.” That's it.

You make the decision that this is what you're going to do, and then you go and do it. Even if it's hard. And if you mess up, you keep going. You talk nicely to yourself instead of ripping yourself to shreds, and you keep trying. And the idea here is that your self-belief can be built over time by accumulating small wins. It will also be built over time by being kind to yourself when you mess up, so that you go and try again.

That's all you need. Okay? You do not need to solve for world peace, or cure any diseases, or do anything huge to create self-belief. Instead, it's through small wins, backed up by self-kindness, that you create for yourself. Over time, they compound. They add up and they will lead you to bigger wins.

And the more you do this, the more you take action, even in the face of failure, the more you will develop a self-belief and the more you will succeed. You will prove yourself to yourself through a series of small wins. You let those small wins be enough. You decide that you are enough. That what you have done is enough. You let those small wins be proof that you follow through, and you get done what you say you're going to get done.

Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

Please, don't underestimate this. So many of you have asked me what the secret is to losing weight. You've asked what to do when your diet is not working. And I will tell you, that it is not the diet, okay? It's not what diet you choose. The diet does not matter, as long as you choose something that puts you in a calorie deficit, is sustainable, and that you can follow consistently. If those conditions are met, you've got a winner.

But what really matters is you. What matters is that you believe in your ability to make positive changes in your life. What matters is that you commit and you go all in on your change, instead of going in it halfheartedly. What matters is that you have realistic expectations of yourself, and your rate of weight loss, if that's your goal.

What matters is that you believe in yourself and do not give up. That, honestly, matters more than anything. When your diet is not working, what matters is you, okay?

And if you want help with this, let's go. When you coach with me, we'll find a way of eating for you that becomes your lifestyle. We will not only troubleshoot your diet, but we'll troubleshoot your thinking so that you make changes that are sustainable.

Check out my website. Head to www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact to schedule a consultation, and let's talk about how coaching works. Alright?

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

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Ep #108: When Your Diet Isn't Working

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