Ep #123: Overachieving and Negative Body Image: Unpacking the Link

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Carrie Holland, MD, CPT

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

Ep #123: Overachieving and Negative Body Image: Unpacking the Link

This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, Episode #123.

If you're an overachiever and you struggle with body image, 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 the connection between overachieving and body image today.

I think this is long overdue, and I'm going to rectify that. We need to talk about overachieving and how it might be getting in the way of your health and fitness goals. And how overachieving is impacting your body image and self-acceptance.

So here is where this is coming from. Most every client that I work with identifies as an overachiever. So I work with women who have not taken the easy route. They are physicians, lawyers, judges, educators, business people, entrepreneurs and stay-at-home parents.

And most, if not all, of my clients did not get to where they are today by going easy. Quite the opposite, in fact. Many of the women I work with have pushed themselves super insanely hard to obtain the careers and the lives that they have currently. And that is true for the work that they do both in or out of their homes.

I also identify as an overachiever. I pride myself on doing a task and doing it at the highest level. I do not like half-baked effort. I don't like average. I like excellent. I have been that way for decades. And it may have been ingrained in me, in part, because I felt like the only time I mattered at home was when I brought home all A's on my report card. Fine.

So, as you might imagine, that contributed to the very warped view that I had of success. But whatever the reason is it doesn't really matter, because whatever the mechanism is that brought on the pattern and behavior of overachieving, it's there.

And depending on what circles you run in, overachieving may very well be worn as a badge of honor and applauded; like medicine, getting into medical school, getting into residency, all of it. It is a game set up to reward overachievers, and that's just one industry. I can imagine that overachieving is rewarded and revered in other industries too.

But we need to turn that on its head, because overachieving is burning you out. It most certainly burned me out. And beyond the burnout, which is a separate podcast on its own, there is something else that goes along with overachieving that I see all the time.

That is the struggle that many overachievers face with their own body image. The more I coach, the more this becomes apparent. There is a very real connection between overachieving and body image. And to be clear, this can impact women who are overweight, normal weight, and underweight. Okay?

So we need to pull this apart, and that is where we are going today. We're going to talk about how overachieving and body image intersect. We're going to dissect the many reasons why it might be hard for you to accept your body as it is if you are an overachiever.

And then I want to give you some ideas for what to do about this. I want to help you stop being an overachiever and focus on being a high achiever instead. We'll most definitely talk about that difference in just a minute.

Most importantly, I want to help you disconnect overachieving and your body. Maybe that sounds like a lofty goal, but I want to make this practical and actionable, and lay the foundation for you to start thinking about yourself a little differently, okay?

And as a spoiler alert, the answer is not to push harder. I want to make that clear from the outset. Because for any of you listening who are overachievers, that is often your knee-jerk response, to push harder.

At least it was for me. Whenever anything in my life wasn't working, my answer was push harder, stay up later working, spend just a little more time at work to get ahead, write one more piece of content, get a few more boxes checked off the to-do list. It didn't matter what it was, the answer was always to put my foot on the gas just a little harder.

But hear me now, that is not the answer. I'm going to offer you some alternatives to pushing harder that I think you might like more. But be forewarned, they are going to be harder to do.

Okay, some of the solutions I'm going to offer you are going to sound foreign to you if you're an overachiever, and I want you to be ready for that. And just a quick disclaimer before we get into this. I recognize that there is a true and real connection between overachieving and eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, and that is not where we're going today.

I will say this from the get go, if you're concerned that you do have an eating disorder, please see your physician for proper diagnosis and treatment. Okay?

With that being said, let's go. First, let's talk about what being an overachiever actually means. Let's get clear on that. And I think the best way to do this is to compare overachieving with high achieving. Overachieving is, at its most basic level, when you achieve success over and above the standard or beyond what is expected.

You are performing and achieving at a higher level than most. Which, at first go, that sounds like a good thing. But overachieving is when your achieving becomes less of a tool and more of a weapon. It's when the achieving has gone too far. So often overachievers reach their accomplishments at the expense of other parts of their lives.

A good way to look out for this is to note when the drive to overachieve negatively impacts other important parts of your life. That is when you have taken it too far.

Overachieving, it can be tricky, though, because the success that comes from it is often applauded. So when you push yourself to your limit, or really past your limit, and you succeed, that success is often rewarded. And then you get a dopamine hit from both achieving the goal and the reward or praise that you get as a result.

Over time, you learn to associate overachieving with success, and in turn, with pleasure. And then your brain will want more of it. It becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. You push yourself super hard, you succeed, you get praised, and that drives you to keep pushing and succeeding. It's a pathway that gets locked in over time and with repetition.

So now let's contrast that to high achieving. Which means you work hard, you set and reach your goals, and you are realistic with yourself. The key distinction between high achieving and overachieving is realistic versus unrealistic expectations.

High achievers are motivated to succeed, and they have realistic expectations of themselves and the work they produce. High achievers also practice sufficiency. They practice letting their best be enough. This is a key feature of high achievers right here.

Overachievers, on the other hand, as you can imagine, tend to have unrealistic goals. They have unrealistic expectations of themselves and what they should accomplish. Often, overachievers are in pursuit of an impossible ideal of perfection, which is endless because perfect doesn't exist.

But that overachievement comes masked as the pursuit of a goal, which leads the overachiever to be in a constant place of chasing something and the overachiever is generally never satisfied. What they do, what they accomplish, they never see it as enough.

The other big difference here is that high achievers have a strong sense of self independent of their achievements. This is huge. High achievers value their hard work and they value reaching their goals, but they do not over identify with their achievements. They do not let their identity get wrapped up in what they have accomplished. A high achiever's achievements are part of who they are, but they do not define them as a person.

And that is likely why you've never heard anyone describe themselves as a "high achiever" to you. But how many times have you had someone tell you that she is an overachiever? It makes sense. This is because, often, overachievers tend to get more wrapped up in their sense of self as it relates to their work and accomplishments.

They tend to over identify with their accomplishments, and they may see their value more in the things they do than who they are as a human being. They may even pride themselves on being an overachiever. I know I used to and now I'm trying to undo that.

Another key takeaway here is that overachieving and high achieving often look similar on the outside. To a bystander, overachievers and high achievers are hard to distinguish because both set and reach their goals. Both are high producers, hard workers, they get things done and they succeed.

On the outside, they often look the same. But the difference is what's going on inside. High achievers, like I said, practice sufficiency and realistic expectations of themselves. While overachievers tend to have unrealistic expectations leading to perfectionism. And overachievers are generally never satisfied with what they do. It is never enough.

Now that we're clear on the difference between overachievers and high achievers, it might start to become clear to you why overachievers might struggle with their body image. But let me make it super apparent and make this connection for you, because there are a number of factors that play into this.

First, most of the overachievers I work with are perfectionists. The two qualities tend to go hand in hand. Many of the women I work with were overachievers in high school and academics and they were used to getting good grades. They did not get where they are by getting C+, okay?

But the perfectionism that got you the grades, that got you into graduate school, or that got you the award, that perfectionism can totally shoot you in the foot when it comes to your body. When you're an overachiever and you're used to getting A+ and you're used to being lauded for a job well done, it can feel like an enormous blow when you don't have the physique that you want.

When on the outside you have checked every box and accomplished all the things and excelled at everything you've done, it can be really difficult to accept a body that isn't what you consider to be ideal. Beyond that, it can be a huge challenge to accept or even address that managing yourself around food is hard.

It can be very painful to admit that sticking to an exercise routine is hard for you. And it makes total sense why these things would be hard. You are used to succeeding. You're used to nailing it and getting it just right for things like grades and work and titles and promotions. You are used to being excellent at most everything you do.

So when you have trouble maintaining a healthy weight, or when you have a hard time fitting exercise in, or when you struggle to obtain what you consider as an ideal body composition, it can feel like you are totally failing.

Overachievers have an idealized concept of what their body should look like. And if you're an overachiever and you're not meeting this ideal, then you may think you're failing and you think you're not meeting expectations. This is how I see this play out over and over again for so many of my clients.

She will compare herself to what she weighed in high school or college or med school or grad school. She will tell me what her body looked like

before she had kids. What her body, life, and schedule were all like before she was working and taking care of a family. And she will have a very, very hard time getting past that she no longer has that body anymore.

Beyond that, she will use what her body used to be like as a weapon against herself. She will use that as her standard, and if she cannot hit it, then she is failing. And what this leads to is a constant dissatisfaction with her body because it is impossible for her to replicate the same conditions as 25 years ago.

This will also happen when I have clients who use extreme, restrictive, unsustainable measures to get super lean. Inevitably, they cannot keep it up and they gain the weight back. They will use that super thin phase as a weapon against themselves. I cannot tell you how many of my clients have shared pictures of themselves during a previous diet when they got super thin and they tell me that is what they want.

And do you know what I ask every time I get sent one of those pictures? I will ask her, “How were you feeling then?” And do you know what the answer is, that I have gotten every single time I have asked this question? “I was miserable. I was thin, but I was miserable.”

And despite this, despite them being miserable, but they were thin, despite being miserable, those same women are reconsidering going back to the restriction that brought them there in the first place. They are chasing an ideal that does not exist, and it's not realistic.

Remember that one of the hallmarks of overachievers is that they have unrealistic expectations, and this is especially true when it comes to success at weight loss or changing your physique. Overachievers get trapped by their own unrealistic expectations. All right?

Along with perfectionism, overachievers tend to have an all-or-nothing view about their diets, and that's because overachievers often operate in extremes. So an overachiever is either totally on and very much watching

her nutrition and exercise and is on point, or she is totally off and goes off the rails. It's a predictable pattern and I see it over and over again.

When an overachiever starts working with me, she will often come to her sessions early in our coaching and she will be proud to report that she's hitting all of her goals. She's not missing a single workout. She's eating 1,300 calories, even though that may be way too few calories for her. But she decided to be even more restrictive and eat way too little because she didn't think that taking a slow and steady approach would be enough.

She's not eating any fun foods at all. She's eating totally clean and she's essentially getting a 100% on everything. She is overachieving. And then, inevitably, this same client, when we meet a few sessions later, she will be off the rails. She won't be following any kind of plan. She's eating whatever, whenever. She's not planning her meals. Meal prep has stopped entirely, and in some cases, exercise has gone out the window too.

So sure, I have seen subtle variations of this, but this is a pattern I have seen repeatedly with many of my overachieving clients. It's totally strict, 100% super tight, followed by going totally off the chain. And it's predictable, because even overachievers are human.

If you go at 100% and hold yourself to the impossible standard of 100%, eventually you will burn out. Eventually 100% gets too hard to sustain, no matter how much of an overachiever you are. But because you take an all-or-nothing approach, you often decide that if you cannot do it exactly right and do it perfectly, then you go in the complete opposite direction and go off the rails with your food and exercise. It is very much all or nothing.

You're either getting a 100%, A+ on your diet and exercise, which is, frankly, no fun, or you are totally off the chain. There is no middle ground whatsoever. And that is going to lead you to be very up and down in your weight, your physique, and in turn, how you feel about yourself. The all-or-nothing approach is exhausting both mentally and physically.

All right, another way that overachievers can struggle with their body image is through the emphasis that they put on other people's opinions. This can play out in a number of ways. For some overachievers, there is a strong need for external validation. There may be a strong need for recognition, not just in your career, but that may extend to your appearance too.

And that recognition and praise may be a significant driver of your self-worth. When other people approve of you or compliment you, that is a message that tells you, “Okay, I'm good. I am enough.” And when you don't get it, it can be very upsetting.

I had a client who was super upset because she was at a party and felt that her coworker that she was with was getting all kinds of compliments on her appearance and she wasn't. I had another client who recounted when she was younger and leaner. Again, before work and kids and career and all the things. She remembered being out with her friends and being complimented about her leanness and muscularity. And how she missed that now. Both of these examples are opposite sides of the same coin.

When you put your value in the hands of other people's opinions, that is a setup for disappointment. So yes, we are human. And by nature of being human, we want to feel accepted. We want to feel that we belong. We want to feel that we are enough.

But at the same time, when we rely on getting that validation from other people, when we haven't done it for ourselves first, well, it's not going to be enough. Because it is really, really hard to get enough acceptance and enough validation and enough praise from other people when we don't give it to ourselves first and foremost.

You cannot look outside for something that you need to be giving to yourself, okay? It will never be enough.

Overachievers often fear judgment, and I'm talking about judgment not just in their professional lives, but also judgment in how they look. Overachievers may worry excessively about what other people are thinking

of them. They may worry about how other people perceive their body. And they may get caught up in the fear of judgment because they haven't met a certain standard or ideal.

This can very easily increase an overachiever's self-consciousness and then reinforce a negative body image. It's easy to do when you're constantly thinking that you're being judged by what your body looks like. Ultimately, what this leads to is that for some overachievers, your physical appearance and your body become areas where you feel pressure to succeed in order to be worthy of love, respect, or acceptance by others.

Whether conscious or not, you make a decision that until you look a certain way, no one will fully accept or love you, including yourself. And that drives you to push harder. And when that doesn't work, you push even harder. Because that's what overachievers do, push harder.

When your self-worth is tied up in how you think you need to look, you will feel compelled to keep pushing in pursuit of the impossible standard that you've set for yourself. You place an overemphasis on body image. You make it essentially impossible to accept yourself unless you meet certain physical standards.

Alright, next. Let's talk about control, because this is another way that overachievers can struggle with their body image. For many overachievers, the drive to succeed is, at least in part, related to maintaining control. Again, this can play out in a number of ways.

If you're an overachiever and you feel out of control in your work, relationships, or personal life, you might feel compelled to laser in on controlling your body through diet and exercise. It's a way for you to balance the other areas of your life where you may not feel in control.

On the flip side, your diet and exercise can be a source of struggle for you because it might be the one place in your life where you don't feel that you have full control.

Ep #123: Overachieving and Negative Body Image: Unpacking the Link

I cannot tell you how many times a client has said that she has so many parts of her life pulled together. She's got a good career, she's got a good family, she's got friendships and community, and she feels stable and secure in almost every part of her life. But this one place, she does not feel in control of her diet or exercise. As a result, she feels that she is failing.

And it makes sense. When you're an overachiever and you feel that you're in control of pretty much every part of your life, it can be insanely frustrating to not feel in control of your body. It can be super discouraging when you have worked really hard, succeeded at pretty much everything else you've done, and have this one part of your life that feels out of control. It feels like you're failing.

Often, your knee-jerk response is, again, to push harder, because that's what led you to succeed in every other part of your life. You studied while your friends were out partying. You did the extra credit work. You worked longer hours. You went above and beyond what was expected.

So it makes sense that you would try that approach with your diet and exercise. You restrict harder. You cut your food and calorie intake super low. You cut out all carbs. You design all kinds of food rules for yourself and work super hard to get an A+ for following your own rules, because that is what you did.

Or, you think you need to run 45 minutes a day instead of 30. Or you need to add another HIIT session. You just push harder. But pushing harder on your diet and with your exercise, that does not work.

Because this is your body we're talking about. Taking the extreme overachiever approach, by drastically cutting or restricting your food intake or by over exercising, that's not going to do it. In fact, as a side note, I could probably do an entire podcast about overachieving and overexercise, because those two very commonly go together.

For now, the key point here is that trying to overachieve on your fitness by being super restrictive with your diet, or being super extreme with your

exercise, that is not the answer. The answer is not to push yourself over your limit.

Because, often, what happens is that you try so very hard to control and micromanage your own eating and exercise that it becomes unsustainable. You get so overly focused on it, and you start nickel and diming yourself for every calorie and every minute of exercise. It becomes too much, and you can't maintain it.

I think of it as overachieving on your fitness, and that is a recipe for burnout and reverting. Like in your career, you hold yourself to an impossible standard, combined with the fear of failure and unrealistic expectations.

Alright, so just a few other ways that overachieving and body image intersect. Another factor that overachievers may struggle with is competitiveness and comparison. Let me make it clear, as humans it is natural to compare ourselves to others. We do it so we know where we stand and where we fit in within our communities. It's a normal part of being human.

Overachievers are no exception. But they may compare themselves to a degree that it becomes a detriment. And while overachievers may certainly compare their professional accomplishments, they may also compare their personal appearance to others, too. And where this can get messy. Overachievers are used to being better than average.

When you're an overachiever, you're used to being at the top. But when you're an overachiever and you compare your weight, or your musculature, or your clothes size, or how you look in a swimsuit… When you compare your appearance to other people and use it as a reason to beat yourself up, that is not going to feel good. That constant comparison can lead you to feel inadequate.

You may feel that you're not measuring up to what society considers acceptable, or what you consider to be the standard, and that can be really,

really hard for someone who is used to being better than average in most every aspect of her life. Alright?

And last, often, overachievers put so much of their time, energy, and effort into their career, or their work, or their families, that it comes at the expense of taking care of themselves. Again, most of the women that I work with don't get where they are by going easy. They work, and they work hard. And we all only have a certain number of hours in the day.

So when you're an overachiever and you're working really hard at your career, or you're working really hard at taking care of your family, or both, what often happens is that it leaves, essentially, little to no time left to take care of yourself. So it's not that you don't want to take care of yourself, but often it's that you are so busy that you aren't making time for it.

And I really do see it as making time for yourself. Because your time can get very easily snapped up by all of the other commitments you have. Again, this could be an entire podcast. But the idea here is that overachievers may put work and family first, and that comes at the expense of taking care of yourself.

It can be really, really hard to undo that because it's what you know. You may be so used to going full speed at work, and your life may be so full with work and family, that it feels completely foreign to make time and space for yourself. But I would argue that time and space for taking care of yourself is essential. You can only churn and grind for so long before either your mental or physical health suffers, and you're forced to take care of yourself.

Along with this, of course, comes stress. Overachievers, while they are high producers and accomplish a lot, those accomplishments often come with a price tag of stress. When you are so busy taking care of everything and everybody at work and at home, and you don't give yourself time to manage or process that stress, that can lead you to emotional eating.

That may be the way you cope. But over time, that coping mechanism can lead you to gain weight. As a result, it can lead you to feel shame or frustration. And it becomes a vicious cycle. Alright?

So, now that we've talked about the many ways that being an overachiever is potentially impacting your body image, and ultimately your health and fitness goals, what do you do? What do you do if you're an overachiever and it's impacting your body image?

Well, first, I said it before but I want to beat the dead horse here, the answer is *not* to push harder. The answer is *not* to keep trying to overachieve. I want to shout this from the rooftops because it is just that important. The answer is *not* to restrict more food, or add another mile to your five-mile swim. That is not the answer.

Overachieving, when it comes to your body, is not going to take you in the direction you want to go. It's going to exhaust you, your body will revolt, and most times you end up going in the opposite direction. You push harder, but then you break and start eating whatever because you've been overly restrictive.

Or you get injured, or you get an overuse injury, from pushing too hard. Or you overtrain and start going backwards on your fitness goals. Things that used to feel easy start feeling hard. So the answer here, again, is not to push harder. That may work at your job. That may work when you're doing chores at home, but it does not work when you're talking about your body and your mind and your soul. Okay?

And so here is what I want to offer you. What I would offer is that your self-worth is not tied to how much you weigh. Your self-worth has nothing to do with what is on the inside of your waistband. Your self-worth is not dependent on how much muscle you have. Okay?

I want to stop for a second and recognize that this is easy to say. Intellectually, it makes sense, but it's not always easy to practice. I get that. We live in a world of diet culture. We live in a world where thinness is

celebrated, and people can be treated very poorly because of their weight. So I want to recognize that. Because that most definitely is part of the problem. This is a complex, multilayered issue.

But I want to zone in on your relationship with yourself. If you do not like yourself, and if you do not accept yourself as you are, being thinner is not going to suddenly change that. You will be the same person, just in smaller sized pants. Okay?

You have to work on liking yourself as you are, first and foremost. And that means having self-compassion. There it is again, self-compassion, I know. I know I talk about self-compassion frequently, and that's because, frankly, I need to, especially for my overachievers who have very high expectations of themselves and who are very hard on themselves.

Many of the women I work with are not super kind towards themselves. And we've got to change that. If your answer, when things are difficult, is to put even more pressure on yourself and beat yourself up, then we have to work on that. If you talk to yourself in ways that you would never utter to another person, well, we need to fix that.

Remember that you change best when you feel good. Okay? Positive change and self-acceptance do not happen when you tear yourself apart. It feels terrible and it does not compel you to take better care of yourself.

So remember this is not a work assignment. This is not a grade or a classroom. This is not a big work project. It's none of that. This is your body and your mind and your soul that we're talking about here. What got you A+ in school, what got you promotions and titles and letters after your name, that is all fine and good. But that is not going to work for your health. It's not going to work to make your body thinner, smaller or more muscular.

I will be the first to admit there is a lot to this, letting go of all-or-nothing thinking and taking a less extreme approach to your health and fitness that's going to be hard for you if you're an overachiever. Because that's not

how you roll. You like to go all in and you like to go hard. That's what got you success in the past.

But this is not the same, so there will be some unlearning to do. I've talked about all-or-nothing thinking before, and it goes hand in hand with overachieving and perfectionism. The more you recognize when you are doing this, the more you can correct yourself.

And when I say “correct yourself”, I mean, instead of holding yourself to an impossible standard and accepting nothing less than perfect, instead you practice sufficiency. You practice being enough. You practice letting what you do be good enough. Okay?

I've even heard it called “enoughness”. You practice telling yourself, and believing, that you are enough. That what you do is enough. That means finding sustainable habits that you can do and make part of your lifestyle in practicing flexibility with yourself.

It means practicing being okay with slow and steady change that is actually sustainable, instead of trying harsh, extreme measures to try and hurry up and lose the weight or change how you look. You let it be enough.

And, of course, the underlying message here is that it all goes back to your brain. It goes back to your mindset. It always does. What you believe to be true about yourself matters. It matters a lot.

So if you can practice believing that you are whole and awesome and worthy as you are, and you actually believe that, that's when you're on to something. That is when you are taking an inside-out approach. I truly believe that you can like yourself, accept yourself, and you can want to change.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to look a certain way, okay? Let me make that clear. It's okay to want to look a certain way. But I'll offer you what my own coach offered me: Make sure you like your reason.

Ep #123: Overachieving and Negative Body Image: Unpacking the Link

If you want to change yourself so that people will like you more… If you want to change yourself so that you will like yourself more, that is taking an outside-in approach and that's not going to work. I've tried it. I've seen my clients try it and it doesn't go well. It doesn't work.

Instead, you have to like yourself. And decide that you are going to like yourself no matter what size you are. No matter what you look like. No matter who has a smaller waist size than people around you. No matter what.

I'm not here to talk you out of being an overachiever, okay? I say this because I have identified as one, and for many of us our drive to succeed has gotten us where we are. But that being said, and having experienced the mental and physical pain that comes with pushing myself to my limit and still not thinking that's enough, and then having spent years trying to unravel that, let me offer you this:

If you're going to overachieve at something, how about you overachieve at liking yourself. Overachieve at self-compassion. Be outrageously kind to yourself. I'm not saying you let yourself off the hook or you stop holding yourself accountable or that you have an inflated sense of self. No, instead practice liking yourself. Okay?

Get really, really skilled at that. Because when you truly like yourself, and you accept yourself without constantly having to do more, be more, or push harder, you will feel better. You will have peace. And in that space, real growth and change happens.

Not because you feel like you need to, but because you want to. Alright? And if you want help with this, let's go. When you coach with me, you'll learn how to let go of overachieving and stressing out in exchange for high achieving acceptance and peace, and you will feel better.

Check out my website. Send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact and let's talk about how coaching will change your perspective and change your life.

Alright, thank you for hanging out with me, and I'll catch you again next week.

Hey, if you're looking for your next great read, I've got you covered. Head over to CarrieHollandMD.com/books and download my list of most favorite reads. I've got two collections waiting for you. One is all about work-life balance. The other is a collection of books that have changed my life. I've referenced many of these books in the podcast, and now you can access those titles all in one place.

Again, that's CarrieHollandMD.com/books. Check it out and find your next great read.

Thank you for listening to the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast. If you want to learn more about how to build both a strong mind and a strong body by eating, moving, and most importantly, thinking, check out CarrieHollandMD.com.