Ep #141: Diet Not Sticking? Here's What You're Missing

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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

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Here's What You're Missing

This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, Episode #141. If you want to change your habits, let's talk about what actually matters.

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 gonna talk about what really matters when it comes to changing your diet. And this episode is largely inspired by a recent conversation I had with a client.

So this client and I have been working together for just a few weeks. And in that time, we identified a small behavior for her to work on that would have a significant impact on her diet. So for her, her takeaway after looking at her current patterns was that she wanted to find a way of incorporating more protein into her breakfast.

So she came up with some ideas to replace her usual toast with butter. She found a recipe for a protein bake. She tried yogurt. She found some protein shakes. And I would say, all of this is a good shift. This is progress.

But then a little later into the call, she mentioned how while at work, there were always treats around. Someone was always baking something and bringing in cookies or pastries, and they were generally out in the open and super easy for her to access. And she said it straight up, if I'm bored or if I have empty space in my schedule, I'm gonna eat. And then she shared how she did this multiple times since our last session. She found herself snacking at work, even when she wasn't hungry. And even if she didn't like the treats that were out in the open in the first place, so interesting.

And then even a little later into the session, she mentioned that she was frustrated because she wasn't seeing progress fast enough. And then she asked what she should be doing differently. Did she need to come up with

more protein ideas for breakfast to help her keep her fuller longer? Did she need to have something crunchy at breakfast in addition to drinking a protein shake so that she had the physical sensation of chewing to keep her satisfied? Was there something else she should do?

And what I realized as she was talking through these questions and brainstorming other food ideas is that we were focusing on the wrong thing.

So let me ask you this. How many times have you done a Google search for a diet plan, hoping that in that search you would find your answer?

How many times have you jumped from one diet to the next because the first one did not deliver results fast enough? How many times have you adjusted your macro split? How many times have you cut down your carbs and then re-added those carbs just a few weeks later when it didn't result in a measurable change on the scale? Or how many times have you tried to make yourself follow intermittent fasting, but gave it up when it got to be way too hard to stick to your eating window?

And I bring these up because these are common solutions that my clients have tried. These are the things that come up all the time. And these are the kind of questions that show up in my email and my DMs on Facebook and Instagram. And in many of the consultations I do with the women who are looking to lose weight or change their diet, these are the kinds of questions I get asked. Questions like, how many carbs should I have? Is it better to have three meals and no snacks or three meals and one snack? Is it better to have a big lunch and a small dinner?

But what if I told you that none of that really matters? What if I told you that the real problem is not what you eat, but how you think about food?

So to be clear, none of those questions are necessarily bad, okay? It is helpful to know if you feel better with more carbs or less carbs in your diet. It's important to look at how much protein you're getting in your meals and what those sources of protein are. It's helpful to know how many snacks

you're planning to have throughout the day and to make sure they're filling enough to keep you from grazing.

But the problem happens when you get so overly focused on answering those questions that you miss the other, bigger, more important questions. So go back to my client I was talking about. She was asking about how to tweak her breakfast to make it more protein centered, which is an important question to answer. But there was another much more important question to answer and finding that answer would help her way more than getting 30 grams of protein at breakfast would.

And that question in her particular situation was why was she eating when she was bored? Why was she eating when there was an empty space in her schedule? Because that, that right there, answering that question would take us to a very different place entirely.

And here's what I want you to know right from the outset. If the only thing you're focused on is the food, then you're missing the point because changing your habits is not just about the food. That is secondary. Changing your habits is really about what's going on in your mind. It's about changing your thoughts.

So to make this super clear, your thoughts about food are way more important than the food itself. And that, that is where we're going today. We're diving in to explore why staying overly focused on the surface level stuff like calories and macros might seem like the obvious route to take, but in reality, it's keeping you stuck.

And we're also gonna talk about the real work, which is much harder. And that real work is looking at why you do what you do. We're looking at why you overeat. We're looking at why you don't follow through on the things you say you're going to do. We're looking at why you accept your own justifications.

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And I know those questions, those questions are much, much harder to answer. But in full transparency, those are the questions we need to answer. Because if we can solve for why you overeat, if we can solve for why you're not following through, or if we can solve for why you accept your justifications, then that's when you'll succeed at long-term habit change.

So my goal today is to help you make answering the hard questions less of a roadblock. And I'm gonna share what you'll need in order to answer the questions that are beyond surface level. All right, let's go.

So first, let's talk about why it is so easy to get caught up in things like finding the best way to lose weight, how much protein or carbs to eat, and whether or not intermittent fasting is better than calorie counting.

So if you think about it, food is external. And what I mean by that is that most people approach food as an external problem, like they just haven't found the right diet yet. And again, to be clear, yes, it is important to address the specifics of your diet, for sure. Finding the answers to questions about calories, macros, meal timing, et cetera, those answers, they are helpful. Answering those questions will guide you and give you direction. That's giving you the what, where, when, and how.

And answering those questions will give you the framework of your plan. And you know how I feel about having a plan when it comes to eating… it's essential. But while having a plan is essential, remember that is only one small part of this work. And to be fully honest, that's the surface level work. And when we're only addressing the surface level stuff, it's only gonna take you so far.

Because what happens when you've got a plan, like my client who had planned out meals and snacks. But then you find yourself bored and eating in the middle of the day. Then what? And often, for many people, that's when things get hard and that's when they give up and start to think, this diet isn't working. What other diet is there? Or what macro adjustment can I

make? Or what eating window should I follow so that I can actually lose this weight.

I see this pattern all the time. But really what's happening when you jump from diet to diet, constantly change your macros or buy every meal plan or diet plan under the sun or restart keto for the umpteenth time. What's happening here is that you're treating the symptom. You're treating the symptom instead of treating the cause.

So let me give you an analogy to help you make sense of this. So let's say you're my patient and you show up in my office with arm pain. And I look at you, but I don't really evaluate you or even so much as touch your arm, and I send you home with some ibuprofen and I tell you to ice it, and you should be all good. That is treating the symptom.

But then you come back a few days later because your arm is still hurting and it's not getting any better. So then I actually examine you for real and notice that you've got point-specific tenderness in the middle of your forearm, so I get an X-ray. And that X-ray shows me that you broke your radius, one of the bones of your forearm. And so now that I know you've got a broken arm, I can stick a cast on it and you can actually heal. So that is treating the cause.

To bring it back to your diet, when we're answering questions like what's the best macro split and is calorie counting or intermittent fasting better for weight loss, do you see what's going on here? We're treating the symptom.

That is throwing ibuprofen at a broken arm. Because the real issue is not what you're eating. The real issue is why you're overeating, or why you're eating when you're bored, or why you're not following through on your plan. When we answer those questions, that's when we're getting to the cause. But it's really easy to get caught up and think, if only I found the right diet program, if only I could figure out what the right macro split is for me, then it might be easier.

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So I can think of another client that I worked with, and it seemed like nearly every time we met, she wanted to change her macros. And she decided that macro counting was working for her, but then she spent many of her sessions asking if she was eating too many carbs, or then too few carbs, and maybe she should exchange some of her proteins for fats. And no, that's not the real problem.

The real problem was that she was snacking every time she walked by the break room at work. She was grabbing pastries while shopping at the grocery store and eating them on the way home in her car. The real problem was that she let one cookie turn into three cookies on the weekend. And she even recognized that she wasn't hungry when she was eating at these times, but could we just get back to her protein to carb ratio?

And I cannot tell you how many more examples of this I have. And this pattern is so common and it underlies an important concept about human behavior, habit, and change psychology. It is easier to count carbs and protein than it is to figure out why you eat when you're not hungry. It is easier to strong-arm yourself into a 12 noon to 8 p.m. eating window than it is to sit with your boredom and not eat like you normally would.

It is easier to start keto again than it is to dig in and figure out why you don't follow through on the plans that you make for yourself. It's easier to take action. It's easier to do the surface level stuff than it is to think. And this is especially true if you're an overachiever. If you're used to being a machine, that may have helped you in the past.

If you're used to pushing hard at work or at home, and if your MO is to push even harder when things get challenging, then it would make total sense that you would do the same with your diet. For high achievers, action is your default mode. You've trained yourself to push through challenges, grind harder, take on more, because that's what's worked in other areas of your life. But when it comes to food and your habits, that approach backfires. And the problem is, you end up pushing harder on the wrong

things. You're pushing harder on treating symptoms without getting to the cause.

So instead, I would urge you to push harder on getting into your brain. And I know that sounds funny to say that, but honestly, if you want to get to the root cause and solve for why you're overeating, I would encourage you to push harder on thinking about why you're eating. Push harder on learning to feel instead of eat. Push harder on paying attention to your habits. Push harder on self-reflection. And when you do this, you'll get the answers that will actually help you for the long run. You'll get to the root cause.

When you take a cause-based approach and ask the harder questions, you'll get to the why. And when you get to the why and answer it, then you've found your real work. So again, one more time, the real issue isn't what or when or where or how you're eating. It's why you're eating. And you're not going to find that answer in a Google search.

So now that I've made it clear that we need to get past the what and get to the why, the question that naturally follows is, why is getting to the why so much harder? Why is it so hard to think about why you're eating? Why is it so hard to learn to feel? Why is it so hard to self-reflect?

So in full transparency, those things are harder because they require self-awareness, honesty, and discomfort. Ooh, I know. And you can't Google those. You can't buy those in a program. You can't find them in a book. But let's talk about these. Let's talk about what it means to get to the why by accepting discomfort, building self-awareness, and getting really honest with yourself.

And for any of you who are either cringing or shaking your head that this is the mushy stuff or this is the part where you fast forward, hold up. And I say that because I was that person. I didn't want to do the hard stuff. I didn't want to get into my feelings. I didn't want to self-examine, and I certainly did not want to be uncomfortable at all. I just wanted someone to tell me

what instructions to follow, what weights to lift, what food to eat, and what pace to run so I could just feel better.

But just like my client, I was trying to solve an internal problem with an external solution. And now looking back on it, I can see that part of my hesitancy was that I told myself I had already gone through so much discomfort. Why in the world would I want to do that again? My relationship with my parents and the trickle-down effect that I let it have in my life was super uncomfortable. So why in the world would I want to go back to that? Why in the world would I want to dig all of that up?

But as time passed, and despite me eating and exercising and working and parenting and still feeling miserable, I realized the problem. I never really dealt with it. I never really pulled apart the impact that my parents' own problems and their lack of presence had on me. I never pulled apart the assumptions I made in my own marriage because of what I witnessed in my parents' marriage. I never looked at my own self-destructive behaviors and thought patterns and asked myself why I did them.

Instead, I avoided it all like the plague and shoved all of that discomfort in a pocket, thinking that if I just kept going, maybe that discomfort would evaporate into thin air. And instead of working on the things that would actually make a difference and help me find more peace in my life, instead, I got really good at following instructions. I got really good at taking action. I got really good at going through the motions.

I've said it before, I was a machine. But remember, machines don't feel. Machines don't think. They just do. And if overworked and pushed to their limits, machines burn out. They break down. They eventually stop working. And this is especially true if that machine is not optimized in the first place. So do you see what's happening here?

When you push yourself harder from a place of pain, you're not really fixing the pain. You're just trying to make a dysfunctional machine work harder. And eventually that machine is going to give out. And then you're left with

the same discomfort that you never dealt with in the first place. And that was me.

So when I decided to grow up and face head-on all of the junk that I had shoved in a pocket for decades, it was painful. It was so, so painful. And I honestly didn't really do the work until it became more uncomfortable not to. And honestly, I think that's how change works. We don't change until the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing.

And so when you face the harder, deeper questions, you might find yourself dealing with feelings that you have been avoiding for years or even decades. Feelings like frustration, loneliness, anxiety, or sadness, or even despair. You may find that you've been using food or even exercise as a shield against discomfort, and removing that forces you to sit with emotions that you'd rather escape.

But then, when you do get really uncomfortable and face that pain head on, what you see is that on the other side of that pain is peace. On the other side of that pain is an improved marriage. On the other side of that pain is the realization that you can handle something really hard and even come out on the other side feeling better. And that is because true healing begins once we turn towards the parts of ourselves that we used to turn away from. The parts that we try to ignore or avoid or shove in a pocket, those are the things that when we face them with curiosity and even compassion, then we start to find relief.

And for me, when I did this work and made that realization for myself, that was when my world finally changed for the better. And to be clear, I am not saying that since doing that work, I live in a world full of rainbows and butterflies and that everything is perfect and happy. There is still plenty of junk, but now I don't have to run away from it. I don't have to use a monster cookie or an enormous scoop of peanut butter or a 5-mile run to escape that junk because I know now that I can handle it with my brain. Now I know that the worst thing that happens is I feel pain and I feel discomfort and I'm okay.

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I know now that discomfort is not going to destroy me. It's not going to ruin me. In fact, it's quite the opposite. That discomfort is exactly what makes me stronger. So even though in the short term, it might seem easier to be a machine and do and do and do and focus on the external stuff, like how many calories and your intermittent fasting parameters and how to get more veggies in your diet. Those are not the answers that will bring you long-term relief.

What will bring you long-term relief from discomfort is walking through it, dealing with it, facing it head on. I'll say it here because I say it at least once a day. The more discomfort you are willing to feel, the more success you will have. And this is true in pretty much every aspect of your life, whether that's related to your fitness, your career, your relationships, really anything. Discomfort really is the key to your success. So if you are willing to feel the discomfort of looking for the deeper level answers, you will make progress.

Okay, so we've talked about how discomfort is one piece of this puzzle. Self-awareness is another. So self-awareness or really lack of self-awareness is another potential roadblock getting in your way of change. But what exactly does it even mean to have self-awareness?

So when I think of self-awareness, I think of paying attention to yourself. When you have self-awareness, you observe your thoughts and your behaviors, but what's important is that you don't immediately react to them. The key to self-awareness is the pause. It's slowing down to give yourself time before responding. It means being willing to step away from your autopilot behaviors and responses and actually notice what you're thinking, feeling, and doing in the moment.

And why does self-awareness even matter? Well, without it, change is not possible. I will be so bold and make that statement. You cannot change if you don't pay attention to yourself. If you don't recognize the problem, you can't fix it. And again, what have we been talking about all along? The

problem is not the food, it's how you're thinking about food. So In order to fix that, you have to think about your thinking.

So how do you know if you have it? How do you know if you have self-awareness when it comes to food?

Well, ask yourself this. Ask if you can explain why you made a food choice without defaulting to "I just felt like it", or "I don't know"? If you can't answer, that's helpful. And that tells me that there's work to do. It tells me that you have an opportunity to start creating more self-awareness because it really is a skill. And I've got a very simple way for you to start building that self-awareness.

So at the risk of oversimplifying, I'm gonna offer you one of the most useful questions I use myself and offer to my clients to start creating more self-awareness around their diet. And that question is, "Why am I eating this?" That's it. It's a pretty simple, straightforward question to answer. "Why am I eating this?" And your answer is going to fall into one of three categories.

One, you eat because you're hungry. Two, you eat because of a positive emotion, like you're happy or you're celebrating, like at a wedding or a birthday. Three, you eat because of a negative emotion, like sadness, anger, or boredom. And for simplicity, I add habit here too. I add it to negative emotion because eating out of habit when you're not hungry is generally not a positive behavior that helps you.

So the question, "Why am I eating?" The answer, because you're hungry, because of a positive emotion, or because of a negative emotion, including out of habit. If you want to start building more self-awareness around your eating habits, honestly, this is where I suggest you start. Ask yourself that question and then answer it honestly. And do not accept, "I don't know", do not accept, "I just felt like it".

I would challenge you to go deeper and ask for more of yourself by answering the question with something more than a surface level response.

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And here's the thing, when you answer the question, it might be uncomfortable. It might feel uncomfortable to admit to yourself, "I ate this cookie that I didn't even really like because I was bored. I ate this bag of chips because my kids are driving me crazy. I had that second piece of cake because everyone else was still having cake and I didn't want to sit there not eating."

So whatever it is, find it. Find your answer, okay? Do not stop at "I don't know."

Do not stop at I just wanted it. There is more there to unearth, okay? So please, go beyond your knee-jerk response and look for the deeper answers, even if they're uncomfortable. It's in that discomfort that self-awareness, self-compassion, self-understanding, and progress are found. This is the part you cannot skip over. You can't skip this part if you want to truly find long-lasting change.

So answer the question, why am I eating this? And the more you answer this question, the more you'll recognize patterns in your decision-making, the more you'll notice emotional triggers for your eating, and the more you'll understand how your thinking shapes your actions. And that right there is huge.

If you answer the question and realize that you eat every time you're bored, then you found your work and you need to zone in on managing your boredom without eating. If your answer is that you eat because everyone else is eating and you don't want to feel like you're missing out, there's your work. And then you can start diving in to address what it would feel like to not eat the chips and salsa while all of your friends are.

So that question, why am I eating? That question is super basic, but it's also super helpful because if you answer it honestly, you will find the answer. You will find what it is you need to work on, and you will most definitely build self-awareness.

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Alright, and that leads me to the next reason that dealing with the deeper level questions is so much harder than counting calories. And that is because in order to find the answers to why you think the way you do about food, you have to be honest. You have to be honest with yourself.

It's easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that it's just the food, and it's just the calories and minutes exercised and sets and reps and what dumbbells you're using for your chest presses. But it's not. It's actually about emotions. Ugh, I know. But please stay with me on this for just a minute.

Being honest means that you acknowledge that your overeating is not just about the food, but rather it's about stress, boredom, self-soothing, and it's not just straight-up physical hunger.

So being honest with yourself means that you acknowledge the real reasons behind your behaviors without making excuses or sugarcoating them. And that requires a willingness to face uncomfortable truths about yourself instead of hiding behind your rationalizations.

So for me, this is where I had to own up and admit to myself that I was using exercising and eating as a way of coping with all the junk happening in my life. I had to admit that I was using my muscle as a shield of armor to protect myself. And while it was hard to see that, and even harder to admit that, it was also liberating. And it allowed me to look at my behaviors differently.

And so why does honesty even matter? Well, if you're not honest about why you eat the way you do, and if you're not honest about your patterns, you will never be able to change them. If you just keep telling yourself, "I have no willpower", or "this is just the way I am", or "I just wanted that", without looking deeper and looking at the why, you are going to run in circles. And when you go in circles, that's when you start jumping from one diet to the next.

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So how do you know if you're being honest with yourself? So this is a good question to consider and it is also a hard one. So my own coach, the reason I chose to work with her was because when we first met and did a consultation, she said it. She said, "I will ask you if you're lying to yourself. And then if you are, we are not gonna stop there." And I knew right then she was my coach. I don't want to get trapped in my own stories. I don't want to keep holding myself back by lying to myself, but I knew I needed help getting past it.

So how do you know if you're being honest with yourself when it comes to your diet? Well, here are some questions to consider. When you overeat, are you willing to admit that you're doing it for reasons other than hunger? Do you recognize when you're using food to cope with negative emotions like stress, anxiety, or frustration?

And then here's my personal favorite. Do you blame external circumstances for your eating habits rather than taking responsibility for them? So that last one, that strikes a nerve, and that one is by far my favorite. And it's my favorite because this is where I see so many clients get tripped up.

So as an example, the Super Bowl was not that long ago.

And the Monday after the game, I heard a lot of the same stories over and over again from my clients. So I can think of one client in particular who said very matter of factly, well, it's a Super Bowl. So of course I was gonna overeat. There was no way I couldn't eat the food at the party. And I heard that same story a number of times that day. And that story was, everyone overeats on Super Bowl Sunday. But I respectfully disagree, because here's the truth. If your food choices are always controlled by external circumstances, then your results will always be at the mercy of those circumstances.

But when you take ownership and recognize that your choices are always yours to make, that's when you regain your authority. When you own your

choices, you also own your ability to change them. So you'll know that you're being honest with yourself when you own your choices, rather than blaming them on external circumstances like the Super Bowl or a night out or being on vacation or going to a restaurant.

And here is one of the key messages I want you to take home. You are always in charge. You always have a choice, always. And whatever food choices you make are yours to own, whether that's the hamburger you had when you meant to have salad, or the three football-shaped cookies you had at the Super Bowl party when you meant to have none. Don't blame it on the Super Bowl. Don't blame it on being out at a restaurant. Take responsibility for your own choices.

And notice what I said here. I said, take responsibility for it. I did not say beat yourself up about it. There's a big, big difference. There is a difference between owning up to something and saying, yes, that's on me. I had a plan to eat this salad and I completely ignored it versus saying, oh my God, I'm a total failure. I never do anything right. I'm the worst person on the planet for eating those chicken wings. I totally blew it. No, I don't want you to beat yourself up. Trust me, I tried to change myself that way and beating yourself up does not work.

So instead, you own it. You own your choices and you make a commitment to keep trying, even when you mess up. So you take responsibility, but you don't wear your choices like a scarlet letter on your chest.

You don't over-identify with them, but you don't under-identify with them either. Because when you are honest with yourself about your eating habits, and when you're honest with yourself about your choices and take responsibility for them, you can address the real problem instead of trying to force a diet or behavior onto yourself. If stress eating is your issue, no diet plan is going to work until you address how you handle stress. Again, treat the cause, not just the symptom, okay?

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All right, so there it is. We just talked about what really matters when it comes to changing your diet. And I hope that at the end of this, you see It's really not about the food. And I will keep talking about this for as long as I need to because what you eat is not nearly as important as why you eat.

If you want to create real lasting change, I would simply encourage you to stop searching for an external solution to what is really an internal problem. Instead of constantly tweaking your diet, changing your macros, or looking for the next best meal plan, go there and ask yourself the harder questions. Ask questions like, why do you overeat? Why do you eat when you're not hungry? Why do you struggle to follow through on the things you say you're going to do?

And yes, this work is harder. And now you know that it requires discomfort, self-awareness, and honesty. And we talked through how to manage those. But when you push through the discomfort, when you build the skill of self-awareness and when you are radically honest with yourself about your choices, you take back your authority. Because here's the truth, you are in control. The food is not, okay? It's not about the food.

No diet, no meal plan, no macro split can replace the work of understanding yourself. You cannot circumvent that work, okay? Because the better you understand yourself, the better choices you will make consistently, intentionally, and for the long haul.

So my challenge to you is this. Start paying attention. Practice paying attention. Before you eat, pause for just one second and ask yourself, why am I eating this? And then, instead of stopping at I don't know, or I just feel like it, go deeper. Look for the real answer. And that is where your real work begins. All right? And if you want help with this, let's go.

When you coach with me, we don't just talk about what you eat, we dig into why you eat. If you're ready to take that step, check out my website, send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact, and let's work through this together so you have more peace around food.

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

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Hey if you want to build muscle but don't know where to start, I've got you covered. Head over to CarrieHollandMD.com/buildstrength and download my free guide to help you maximize your strength training. Inside, you'll find the essential exercises for building muscle, plus simple one, two, and three-day workout plans you can follow with just dumbbells and a bench.

You'll also find strength training tips to help you train smarter and see real results. My goal is to help you get strong and this strength-training guide will help you do it. Go to CarrieHollandMD.com/build strength and check it out.

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.