Ep #165: When Looking Good Feels Bad

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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

Ep #165: When Looking Good Feels Bad

This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, Episode #165. If you've ever lost weight and thought you looked great, but felt awful on the inside, 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 talking about something I see all the time in my coaching practice. And honestly, I think it's something that so many women and men can relate to, whether we say it out loud or not. So, we are talking about the tension between wanting the body you had before and remembering that actually living in that body was kind of miserable. So, it's a real, legitimate, mental tug of war. And maybe you've experienced something similar, like when you're scrolling through old photos and you land on that picture. The one where your arms look super defined, your waist looks small, and your legs look amazing in those shorts or that cute little dress.

And when you see that picture, it might make you think to yourself, wow, I want that back. And at the same time, if we're being completely honest, there's the sting of loss, almost like you're grieving a version of yourself. You might remember what it felt like to zip your jeans without a struggle or get compliments on your arms every time you went somewhere in a tank top, or feel like you looked the way that you were supposed to look.

But here's the thing. I've had this happen with so many of my clients. And whenever a client mentions one of those photos and says, "This was my best, I want to look like this," my response has been, and will always be, "Okay, but how did you actually feel in that body?" And without fail, the answer is some version of terrible, exhausted, hangry, obsessed with food. It is not, I felt strong, I felt confident, I felt free. It's not, I had energy for my life. In fact, it's quite the opposite. The answers I've gotten were more like, I

was counting every single calorie. I was nickeling and diming myself. I went to bed early because I was too tired to function.

I skipped out on dinners at restaurants because I couldn't figure out what to eat that fit my plan. I even had a client who left an international vacation early because she could not find foods that were aligned with her plan. So, that to me is not ideal, far from it. That is not freedom. That is being trapped in a body and a mindset that is taking you nowhere.

And so this, this is why we have to talk about it. Because while yes, the picture or the visual tells one story, your lived experience tells another very different story. The photo says, you were at your best, and it captured the highlight, the lighting, the angle, the clothing that all came together just perfectly. But for many of you, if you look deeper, you find that in reality, that was the season when you were skipping social events because you didn't trust yourself around food. That was the season when your workouts felt more like punishment instead of something that you looked forward to doing. That was the season when your energy was so low that getting through the day felt like dragging a boulder uphill.

And when those two stories don't match up, it creates a weird, confusing longing. And what I see more often than not is that you're chasing an image without remembering the cost. You're drawn to the way that you looked, but you're forgetting how you actually lived. And deep down, you probably know that you don't actually want to go back to that way of living. It's like wanting the postcard version of your trip, but without the jet lag, the missed flights, the food poisoning. And I've got a number of examples of this from clients.

So, one of my recent clients, before she came to work with me, she was doing the E2M program, and she crushed it. She lost 20 pounds. She looked lean. People noticed. Friends told her she looked amazing. But here's the thing. When she was telling me about this, she said it herself. She said, "When I did E2M, I looked the best I ever have, but I felt like garbage." Her energy started tanking. She was eating so little, it was

affecting her workouts. Then, perimenopause hit, and everything fell apart because the program wasn't sustainable for her body anymore.

And while she shared all of this with me, at the same time, she admitted that part of her still wanted that body back. She knew how bad she felt, and yet she still wanted it. And she's not the only one. I had another client who was working really hard to lose weight, and she had a picture from a trip to Disney World years ago. And in that picture, she was wearing a pair of shorts that she absolutely loved. And she loved how she looked in those shorts. And even years later, she kept thinking of that picture and kept saying, “I just want to fit into those shorts again.”

But when we unpacked it, she admitted that during that time, she was working with a personal trainer who had her eating way too little food. And she was tired, crabby, and essentially white-knuckling her way through every single day. But still, at the same time, those shorts and that picture, they had a power over her. That one photo carried more emotional weight than the memory of all of her exhaustion and restriction.

And then there is yet another client. She had photos of herself on stage in a killer dress while performing with her band. And she said it, she looked phenomenal. She said she was thin, but when I asked her how she felt, her answer? Terrible. She was hungry all the time, and her life revolved around not eating just so she could look the way she did in her dress. And I have got loads of other stories just like these. I had a client who kept pining for the days when people complimented her arms when she wore tank tops out to bars, even though she was eating next to nothing to support herself. I have so many stories just like this.

And all of these stories, as I was reflecting back on them, they all led me to the same question. Why do these smart, self-aware women who know how it felt, still want the body, even though it came with misery? So, I started doing some digging. And there are real, legitimate, scientific and psychological reasons to this. So let me tell you why this happens because

wanting the body despite the misery is actually normal, even if it is frustrating.

So, part of this desire comes from something called glorified memory bias. So, that is our tendency to remember parts of our past as more positive, enjoyable, or even better than they actually were. So, it's focusing on the positive parts of your experience while downplaying or even ignoring the negative parts. So to put it really simply, it's viewing your past through rose-colored glasses. Your brain edits out the bad stuff. So you keep the highlight reel, meaning you see the dress or the shorts or the definition in your arms. You see the smile in your face in the photo, but not the exhaustion behind it.

And you don't see the headaches from being hungry, the skipped social outings, or the way that your whole day revolved around avoiding bad foods. You forget how much space that body took up in your brain. How your whole day revolved around finding ways to burn off whatever you'd eaten. Maybe you've erased the constant bargaining with yourself, things like, if I skip lunch, I can have wine later. You blurred out the panic that set in when someone suggested grabbing dinner spontaneously.

And the problem is when your brain only replays the flattering parts and cuts out the messy ones, you've got a false narrative about that time in your life. And it's not that you're lying to yourself, but instead, your nostalgia has a way of blurring reality.

Okay, so another reason that we put so much weight on those pictures and previous versions of ourselves is something called identity attachment. So what the heck is that? Identity attachment just means that once you've been a certain version of yourself, your brain treats it as the real you. So that's the identity you're proud of, the one that got noticed and got attention, and the one that you think you should be able to keep up for forever. But here's the problem. When you're no longer in that body that got noticed all the time, you might feel like you've lost something. You might feel like you've lost your status, or you lost your place. And even if no one else is

thinking about you, you are. You might look back and think, that's who I'm supposed to be. That is the standard, and anything else feels like a downgrade or not good enough.

It's like remembering the days when you can get by on five hours of sleep, drink a latte, and still power through your to-do list and believing you should be able to do that now, even though your life looks completely different. Or it's like holding on to your pre-kid wardrobe thinking, this is me and one day I'll get back there. But that attachment isn't just about your body. It's about what you believe that body meant about you. So maybe you made that body mean you were on top of it, or that you had control, or that you were capable of doing hard things. And letting go of that body can feel like letting go of those qualities, even though who you are has nothing to do with the size of your pants.

And another part of this is cultural reinforcement because when you looked that way, it's likely that people noticed. Maybe they said things. They told you how amazing you looked. They asked what you did to look that way and how they can do it too. And whether you realized it or not, those compliments got logged into the deep recesses of your brain. So, you start to associate being in that smaller, leaner body with being seen, with being valued, with being good. And here's the frustrating but hard truth. Our culture loves to reward discipline, even when it comes at the expense of your health and happiness.

And the problem is those same people who praised you for your discipline are not there when you're exhausted or when you can't sleep, or when you can't eat dinner with your family because you're scared of what's on the menu. They don't see the mental gymnastics happening in your brain as you weigh the pros and cons of eating half a cookie and what that means for your bottom line. The people who are praising you often only see the polished, perfect-appearing exterior. And their approval only reinforces the idea that the outside, or how you look, matters more than what's going on inside or how you feel.

And this is just scratching the surface. But I wanted to point out to you that there are a number of reasons that can reinforce the idea of looking a certain way at any cost, even if you feel awful on the inside. So there are true, scientific, psychological, and even cultural reasons for this.

So now, let's talk about the cost of this. Because here's the truth I really want you to hear. Looking good on the outside does not automatically mean that you're thriving on the inside. And often, getting your picture perfect ideal body comes at the cost that you don't realize until later. So what exactly is that cost?

Well, so first is the very real physical toll that this can take. And so sometimes getting to your picture perfect body means an energy level that is so low, you're hitting the snooze button repeatedly only to drag yourself out of bed. Or maybe your hormones are so out of whack that your sleep is terrible and your mood is all over the place. Or maybe you feel cold all the time because your body doesn't have enough fuel. Or you get sick more often or take longer to recover from your workouts because you're asking your body to run on fumes. So however it manifests for you, the physical toll from chasing and then maintaining a body that is stressed beyond its limits, it's real, and that does not feel good.

And then besides the physical toll, don't forget about the mental toll that this can have on you. And that mental toll is very real. Food takes up way too much space in your brain. You may be nickel and diming yourself, mentally calculating every bite, including the salad dressing, the handful of pretzels, the bite of cookie that you didn't include in your calorie allotment for the day. Maybe you lost focus at work or in meetings because you're too busy wondering if you'll mess up at the work lunch. And what this all adds up to is that your weight, your food, and your discipline and rigidity take on a level of importance that becomes entirely unhealthy. And your sense of accomplishment depends more and more on what the scale says in the morning than anything else.

And then of course, there's the toll that this pursuit has on your lifestyle. So that may look like saying no to pizza night with your family because it doesn't fit in your plan, or packing your own food for every event and feeling like you're living in your own little bubble. Or skipping the spontaneous ice cream stop with your kids because you're afraid you won't stop at just one scoop. And what all this boils down to is that having your killer body results in you missing out on life and missing out on experiences because your plan wouldn't allow for them.

And here's the sneaky part. When you're in that body that you worked so hard to obtain, you often can't see those costs clearly. And that's because you're too busy chasing the next win, whether that's the next weigh-in, the next smaller size jeans, or the next compliment from someone at the office. It becomes a constant, unending game of more. One more pound down, one more piece of clothing, one more week of staying perfectly on track. And it's never enough.

You start structuring your life around keeping up with your physique, not because it feels good, but because you're afraid of what will happen if you let go. And the truth is, you can get so overly caught up in maintaining your physique that you miss all the ways it's draining you, like not being able to relax on vacation because you're trying to find a gym or a salad bar instead of actually enjoying your trip. Or when you stop saying yes to dinners out with your friends because you don't want to mess up your macros. Or when you get dressed in the morning and you check yourself, not for how the clothes feel, but whether they show the extra water weight that you're holding on to after a salty meal.

So, to be clear, the cost is not just physical hunger. That is only the tip of the iceberg. The bigger, more taxing cost is the mental load of living in constant low-grade fear that you're going to lose what you've got. It's the anxiety that stirs every time you see a photo of yourself and wonder if other people notice that you look different. Or the disappointment that hits the

second you see the scale go up, even if you know logically it's just water or hormones.

And the worst part of all this, well, for so many women, you've tied your newer, leaner body to your worth. You've tied it to being disciplined, admired, and in control. So even though the cost is high from both a mental and physical standpoint, you put up with it, even though it's quietly sucking the joy out of your life. You might even tell yourself, it's not that bad, I can keep this up. But deep down, you know something's got to give. You're paying the price of having the physique with your energy, your peace, your flexibility, and the moments you can't get back, all for the sake of keeping an image alive.

But at the same time, despite everything I've just laid out, despite the mental, the physical, and the emotional toll this can take, it is hard to let go of that physique. Even though you know that version of you wasn't happy, it is still hard to let go of that version of you. And I think it's worth slowing down here because this is where so many women get stuck.

And let me start by saying this is totally normal. Remember, your brain loves the familiar, even if what's familiar isn't healthy. And even if you were miserable, your brain has filed that smaller, leaner version of you as safe and successful because you've been there before. So, it becomes a reference point. And your brain is wired to prefer what it knows, even if what it knows is not actually good for you.

So, that's why nostalgia feels so powerful. You're not just remembering your body, you're also remembering the sense of control, the routine, and the praise. And your brain hangs on to that and interprets that as security. And another reason it's hard to let go of that physique is because external validation is addictive. Often, when you're in that body, people noticed. They told you how amazing you looked. And whether you realized it or not, that feedback hit the same reward centers in your brain as a dopamine rush. You might not miss the exhaustion or the restriction, but you do miss how it felt when you walked into a room and got complimented. And that

approval can become something you crave, not because you're vain, but because you're human.

And another reason it can be hard to let go of your physique is because you may be operating under the belief that if you did it once, you should be able to do it again. I hear it from clients all the time, and it most often sounds like, I just need to get back to what I was doing. And underneath that is an unspoken assumption. If I don't get back there, it means I'm failing. This often happens when clients refer back to a time when their lives were less full, like during college or grad school or before having a family and ascending in their careers. There's this false belief that they should be able to go back to a body they were able to achieve when their lives were less full and a feeling of failure when those expectations don't match up with their real lives as they are now.

And here's the thing. You aren't failing if you can't get back to what you were doing five years ago. Please really hear me. You are not failing. Your body, your life circumstances, your stress load, your hormones, they are all different now. So expecting to live the same life you did back then is like expecting yourself to function on college kid's sleep and still crush it at work. It's unrealistic and it's not fair to yourself.

And then there's also grief, which we don't talk about enough in this context. Because yes, you can grieve a body you'll never have again. You can grieve the feeling of being that person. And here's the tricky part. You can grieve it even if you choose not to go back there. That's why this is complicated. It's not always about wanting the exact body, it's about wanting what you think that body represented for you: confidence, youth, control, possibility. And you may feel grief when you choose not to pursue that body.

So, if you've ever looked at an old photo and thought, what is wrong with me? I used to be able to do this. Please know that there is nothing wrong with you. When you put all of this together, your brain's love for the familiar, the high of external validation, the belief you should be able to do it again,

and the grief for what you think you've lost, of course it's hard to let go. Because you're not just walking away from a size, a shape, or a dress size. You're walking away from an identity and a story you've been telling yourself about who you are and what makes you valuable. And that is not easy.

So now, let's dive into a question that I have worked on with so many of my clients. How do you move forward when part of you still wants the body you had, even though you know what it cost you and that price was too much? Well, you start by changing the question. So we're going to reframe here. Meaning, instead of asking, how do I get back to that person, you ask, how can I create a version of me that looks good and actually feels good to live in now?

And to be clear, that shift matters a lot because getting back is about rewinding your life to a set of circumstances that no longer exist. Your age, your stress, your responsibilities, your hormone levels, your schedule, they've all changed. And chasing a past version of yourself means ignoring the reality of your life as it is right now.

So what happens if you shift the focus to creating a version of you that looks good and feels good? So then you're building something that works in your current life and with your current body in a way that's sustainable. So that means finding a way of eating that fuels you instead of depletes you. So you can have dinner with your family, go on vacation, or say yes to a piece of birthday cake without spiraling.

It also means moving your body in ways that make you feel stronger and more energized, instead of just making you smaller. And it means giving equal weight to the mirror and the way you feel when you wake up in the morning. Because when you get both, when you can look in the mirror and feel proud, and move through your life with energy and with confidence, that is when you've hit the sweet spot. That's when you know you've built a system that works and is worth keeping.

And here's the other thing to consider. When you focus only on looking good, you miss the full picture. You might hit the number on the scale or zip the jeans or get the photo that you wanted, but if you're drained, hungry, and stressed, that is not real success because all of those successes are external. They're only skin deep. But when you focus on feeling good, something shifts. You start thinking about health and fitness as more than just a size or a number or a shape. And as a result, looking good often follows.

So, we're going from the inside out here. That's how it works, inside out. And to be clear, it's not about abandoning your aesthetic goals. There is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to look a certain way. But instead, what we're doing here is broadening the definition of success so that it's not solely based on a scale number or the size of your waist. We're making success include the whole experience of living in your body. You stop aiming for a look that you can only maintain by sacrificing your energy, your mood, and your relationships. And instead, aim for a way of eating and moving that supports both how you look and how you live.

So, instead of defining looking good purely by weight or by size, you can start asking other questions. So questions like, how do I want to feel in my body? Do I want to feel energized, strong, comfortable in my clothes? Or, how much energy do I want to have? Enough to get through the work day and still have something left for my family, my hobbies, my life. Or, what foods and movement make me feel strong or feel alive? And not just for the next hour, but all day. What leaves me feeling fueled instead of depleted? Or, what do I want my health to allow me to do in five, 10, or even 20 years? Travel, play with grandkids, hike without pain, whatever it is.

And here's why I'm offering these questions. When you start answering those questions, instead of, what do I need to do to lose weight? Then you open the door to a completely different approach to health and fitness, one that is not about white-knuckling your way to a smaller size, but about creating a lifestyle that you're proud of and a body that you can actually live

in. It's not just about what you see in the mirror. It's about how you feel getting out of bed in the morning, how you move through your day, and how much mental space your health is taking up in your life.

And here's the best part. When you do this work and shift your focus from looking good to feeling and looking good, something really cool happens. When you eat to fuel your body, move in order to get stronger, rest when you need to, and leave room for joy in your life, you are not just healthier, you're freer. You stop carrying around the mental load of counting every single calorie or worrying about what to eat when you go to dinner with friends. You're just living your life.

So the goal then is to become that version of you, not someone who's chasing an old photo, but someone who looks in the mirror and sees someone strong and capable and free staring back at her.

So, how do you actually do that? Let's get really practical now. If you've been holding on to a past version of yourself, maybe it's a photo that you can't stop comparing yourself to, or an outfit from 20 years ago you're determined to fit into again, or even a compliment that's stuck with you, we need to shift your focus. Instead of chasing that old version of you, let's talk about how to create the new you, one that both looks good and feels good and is actually sustainable.

So here are a few tools for you to consider. First, when you're thinking about a certain picture or outfit, be sure to tell the whole truth about that photo or clothing. So that means take that picture that you cannot stop comparing yourself to and write down what was really going on at that time. Like how you were actually eating, how much energy you had, what your social life looked like, and especially how you felt physically and mentally.

And the idea here is to see the entire picture in black and white. I want you to not just be looking at the picture through rose-colored glasses, I want you to remember all of it, including how you felt and how you were thinking at that time. And this will help you remember that you're not just chasing a

body, you're chasing a whole lifestyle. And the lifestyle that led to that picture or the lifestyle that led you to fit into that outfit, may not be worth repeating.

Alright, and another tool you can use is to adopt a yes, and approach. So this is one of my favorite mental shifts. So that means as you're looking at that picture, you can say to yourself, "Yes, I liked how great my arms looked then, and I hated how little I could eat." Or, "Yes, those jeans fit amazingly well, and I went to bed hungry almost every single night." And what you're doing with this tool is making space to hold both truths at the same time. It stops your brain from cherry picking, and it stops your brain from romanticizing the past. So you can still acknowledge what you love about how you looked, but you're not leaving out the yucky parts. You're being real with yourself instead of only seeing the highlights.

Alright, and another tool you can use is to shift your metrics. And that means you move away from the scale or your clothing size as your only markers of progress. And instead, you start tracking things like how many pushups you can do, or how many flights of stairs you can climb without getting winded, or how well you're sleeping, or your mood throughout the day. Or how often you say yes to experiences instead of shying away from them out of fear of what the food situation will be.

So, do you notice anything about these metrics compared to the number on your scale or inside your waistband? These metrics are the things that actually reflect how you're living in your body, not just what your body looks like in a photo. And here's why this matters. The way you live in your body is what shapes your daily experience. It's what determines how you move through your day and if you have energy to keep up with your kids or the stamina to hike on vacation, or the strength to carry your own groceries, or the resilience to handle a busy day without falling apart. The scale, scale will not tell you any of that. So when you shift your metrics, you stop measuring yourself by the least interesting thing about you, a number, and start measuring yourself by your capability, your energy, and your quality of

life. And that is what will keep you motivated long after the thrill of a smaller size wears off.

And you can also pay closer attention to your language. So that means you pay attention to how you talk about your past self in that photo versus how you talk about your current self now. So remember that your words are so powerful and they shape the way that you think and feel. So if you're constantly telling yourself, I was so disciplined back then, be honest and ask yourself, was it really discipline or was it more like restriction and obsession? Or, instead of saying, I was so fit, try to be more specific because it might come out more like, I was smaller, but I was running on too little food and too little sleep. Or instead of, I was in such good shape, it might sound more like, I looked leaner, but I didn't have the strength or energy that I've got now.

And the goal is not to trash your old self. Let me make that clear. Instead, the idea is to tell the whole truth about what it took to be that person in the photo or to be that person who fit into the skinny pants. When you describe your past accurately and use language that matches the reality of what was going on at the time of the old photo, you take away the illusion that it was all sunshine and rainbows. And when you choose your language to match reality, it helps your brain stop glorifying the old version of you and start appreciating the value of where you are now.

And one other tool I want to offer is to start setting identity-based goals. So, that means instead of chasing a number or a clothing size, or what I call result goals, instead, you aim to be a healthy, energized person instead of just looking like one with the numbers to back it up. So, remember, result goals like your weight or your pant size are very much black and white. Either you hit the number or you didn't. And the truth is, you do not have 100% control over result goals. Think about it. The scale can be influenced by hormones, water retention, muscle gain, sleep, stress. So you could be doing all the things and you still may not hit your result goal.

But process goals, on the other hand, those are different. Those are the actions and habits that you do have complete control over. The things you do that will quietly shape your health, fitness, and even your appearance over time. So, think of goals like, I strength train three days a week. I get at least seven hours of sleep most nights. I include protein at every meal. Or, I walk at least 20 minutes every day. So, when you set identity-based process goals, you're building habits that match the kind of person you want to be, someone who values strength, grit, and long-term health. And here's the bonus. When you live like that person consistently, your body will reflect it in a way that's actually sustainable. You're not just working towards a single number that you can lose overnight. You're building a life and a body that you can actually keep.

Alright. So here's what I want you to know. You can do both, look good and feel good at the same time. They are not mutually exclusive. But doing both is built on a completely different foundation than what got you to your golden photo. That foundation is not restriction, exhaustion, or saying no to everything you enjoy. So instead, it's sustainable habits, strong muscles, healthy food, flexibility, and the ability to live your life without constantly negotiating with yourself about what you can and can't have.

So, think about my E2M client or my client with her shorts at Disney World or my client on stage in her dress. Every one of them looked amazing in photos. But every one of them felt miserable in real life. And now, imagine what's possible if you could combine the pride of liking what you see in a photo with the freedom of having energy, enjoying meals, saying yes to dinners out, and not thinking about food all day. That is the shift. When you build your health around feeling good, like having energy that lasts through your day, sleeping well, eating in a way that fuels you, and moving your body because it makes you strong, you create a life that you can actually keep up. And when you live like that, the outside will take care of itself and match what you're doing on the inside.

Ep #165: When Looking Good Feels Bad

And here's the best part. When you feel good, you look good in a way that no crash diet or short-term program can duplicate. You carry yourself differently. You smile more. You have more confidence. And people notice, not just how you look, but how you are, how you show up. And that, that is what makes this version of you worth chasing. Not because you look like a past photo, but because you're living a life you actually want to keep.

And if you want help with this, let's go. If you've been chasing a body from an old photo, but forgetting the reality of living in it, let's talk. We'll build a body and a life that feel as good as they look and that you can maintain without feeling miserable. Check out my website, send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact, and let's talk about how coaching will help you create a version of yourself that you're proud to live in, one that feels as good on the inside as it looks on the outside. Alright?

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.