Ep #167: Over-Scientizing Your Health & Fitness: Why More Data Doesn't Mean Better Results

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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This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, Episode #167. If you've ever thought finding the right tracker, gadget, or app would solve fitness or weight loss for you, 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 a phenomenon that I've seen repeatedly. I've seen it come up again and again for many clients, and maybe you've done this too. So I call it over-scientizing weight loss. So in full transparency, I don't even know if that's a real word, but it's what I call this phenomenon, so we're going to go with it.

And what I mean by over-scientizing is this. You collect loads of data: so calories, steps, glucose spikes, sleep scores, heart rate variability, but then you stop there. And too often, I see women collect that information and then turn it against themselves. So ultimately, instead of that data helping you, it ends up hurting you.

And before I get too far in, I want to be clear, I'm not here to bash data collecting. But remember, data itself is neutral. It's neither good nor bad. And knowing more about your body can be useful. But with that being said, if your house is full of gadgets and you can tell me the exact heart rate you have minute to minute, but you're not using that information to guide or change your action, then we've got a problem. Because that's like the equivalent of filling up a toolbox and never picking up your hammer.

So to be clear here, the problem is not the numbers. The problem is when the numbers don't translate into the behavior change that supports the life you want. And this is tricky because I love data. I'm a doctor, okay? I'm a scientist. I geek out on numbers. Ask any of my clients and they will vouch

for me on this. But at the same time, I've also seen firsthand how numbers and data and gadgets can keep you stuck if you're not careful.

So, let's break this down. Here's where we're going today. I'm going to share with you some of the most common ways I see over-scientizing fitness show up for my clients. Then, we're going to talk about why we get so caught up in the numbers in the first place and why this creates a problem. And then finally, we're going to talk about what to do instead. So, you can use the data as a tool to help yourself instead of not using it at all or using it as a weapon against yourself. All right? So let's go.

So first, let's talk about the many, many different ways that over-scientizing can show up for you and for my clients. I've got lots of examples of this. So to start, one of the biggest culprits of over-scientizing is calorie tracking apps like MyFitnessPal. And so here's what I mean by this. I've had clients swear up and down that they were in a calorie deficit because the numbers in MyFitnessPal said it was so. And some have even sent me screenshots of their total caloric intake per day for the last week, showing numbers that suggest they're in calorie deficit.

But here's the thing. If you've been tracking for months and your app says that you're in a caloric deficit, but your weight is not changing, you are not actually in a calorie deficit. And I know that's hard to hear, and I've had this very hard conversation with clients countless times and it never gets easier. Because they have numbers right in front of them. So what is the problem? Why aren't they losing weight? Well, I wrote an entire podcast about exactly this because it has come up just that many times. So if you want to do the deep dive, you can go back and listen to episode 118, and that's where I literally pull apart all the many ways that tracking is imperfect data at best.

Food labels aren't 100% accurate. Portions get miscalculated, and entries in the database are off. And sometimes you just forget to log things or you underestimate, and it all adds up quickly. And before you know it, your deficit really isn't a deficit at all. So calorie tracking is a great example of

over-scientizing. It's clinging to the numbers because they feel safe and exact, when in reality, they are full of wiggle room. And sometimes you can get so caught up in proving the deficit in the app or on paper that you stop looking at the bigger picture. And that bigger picture is your actual results and behaviors.

So instead of taking the data and asking, "What is the next best action from here?" or "How can I use this information to change what I'm doing?" you end up spinning your wheels, stuck, frustrated, and ultimately doubting yourself. And that's when you're missing the forest for the trees. You're focusing so hard on the individual numbers that you lose sight of the overall goal, which is to build consistent habits that actually move you forward. And it's really easy to do because the numbers are numbers. They're hard to argue, especially at first go. But again, if the numbers say one thing, but your weight is not changing, then something is not adding up and the math is not correct here. And that is where over-scientizing tracking can become a weapon that you use against yourself.

Okay? So now, let's talk about another thing that is super hot right now, and that is continuous glucose monitors. So for anyone unfamiliar, the continuous glucose monitor, or CGM, that's a small sensor that you wear on your skin that measures your blood sugar continuously throughout the day. And CGMs are huge right now. I cannot tell you how many of my clients have tried a continuous glucose monitor thinking this would be the solution. And they will spend hundreds of dollars, wear the sensor faithfully for a few weeks, and then come to our sessions surprised that a bag of M&Ms spikes their blood sugar.

But here's the thing. After seeing the spike, they keep eating the M&Ms anyway, and nothing changes. And the device didn't magically cause any weight loss. So it just confirmed what they already knew: that refined sugar raises your blood glucose. And here's where the over-scientizing comes in. Sometimes you get so caught up in the graph, the spikes, the dips, the

novelty of the device that you mistake watching data for doing the work. Or you spend your energy analyzing the lines on a chart instead of actually shifting the habits that would change the chart in the first place. And that, that right there, that is the big, big difference.

The numbers feel productive, but if your eating doesn't change, it's just information. There's no transformation unless you do something with it. And that's the big trap: confusing awareness with action. And that's why the device ends up being an expensive distraction instead of a tool that actually helps you change. You're zooming in on lines on a chart instead of stepping back and asking, "What does this mean about the choices I made? What do I need to do with this information? What do I need to change here?" And again, that's missing the forest for the trees.

All right? So now, let's also talk about the Oura ring or the Whoop or whatever similar sleep and heart rate variability tracker you've got. So if you're unfamiliar, these devices track your sleep cycles, heart rate variability, skin temperature, and maybe even recovery, and then give you a readiness score to tell you how prepared your body is for the day. So these devices give you a bunch of data, but here's the catch. You might wake up and feel just fine, but then you check your ring and it tells you your readiness score is a 42 out of 100, and suddenly, you're dragging all day because your data told you to.

So it's the same phenomenon that I've seen from clients who tell me they're feeling great, working out regularly, eating well, their clothes are feeling good. And then they step on the scale and they see a number that hasn't changed, and then suddenly all of that good that they were feeling flies out the window. So with your Oura ring or your Whoop or even your Garmin Body Battery, whatever you use, what I see happen is that instead of using your score as feedback to tweak your bedtime routine, you let the number dictate your mindset. And I've seen clients get obsessed with their sleep stages, heart rate variability, and recovery scores. They check their app

religiously, but they never actually go to bed earlier or cut caffeine later in the day, or adjust the intensity of their workouts, or create a nighttime routine that helps them calm down.

And that right there, that's the problem. You're staring at data points while your habits stay exactly the same. And you might feel productive watching those metrics, but if you don't change anything about your behavior, those numbers don't mean anything. They're just noise. And this is just another way of missing the big picture. You're tracking every detail of your sleep, but meanwhile, you're overlooking the simple or maybe even obvious changes that would actually help you feel more rested.

And then let's also talk about things like smart scales and the Apple Watch calorie burn estimates. So I grouped these together because I think they're similar. They give you data, but it is not the most accurate or reliable data. So, while these devices can be useful for noting trends, here is the reality. They are often wildly inaccurate. Your body composition scale, it is not the same as a DEXA scan, and it's an estimation of percent body fat or skeletal muscle mass that could be far from the truth. So I have seen this in real time for clients where they have an InBody scale at home, and then they go get a DEXA and the results are wildly discordant. And similarly, if you've got an Apple Watch and you track your calorie burn or your red circle, that can also be far off base, sometimes by hundreds of calories.

So the point here is to please take those numbers with a very large grain of salt, okay? Do not accept them as gospel because they are just not as accurate as we'd like to think they are, okay? And the problem is when you treat these numbers as hard truth, you can run into trouble. When you eat back every calorie your watch says you've burned, or you panic over the very normal daily weight fluctuations that your smart scale shows you, that's no good. When you start treating those numbers as absolute fact and then get frustrated because your progress is not lining up with what the data says it should be, that is a red flag.

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That is a sign that the numbers aren't working for you anymore. Because instead of those numbers guiding you, they're fueling discouragement and sometimes even anger. And that is when the data stops being a tool and most definitely starts being a weapon because you've turned it against yourself. So you tell yourself you must be doing something wrong or that you're a failure, when in reality, it's the tool that's imperfect. Those numbers should be there to help you make informed choices, but they are not there to knock your confidence.

Okay? The same is true for meticulous macro tracking or trying to hit your protein to the exact gram. Now I've talked about this before and I'll reiterate it here. Tracking can be a helpful awareness tool, but it is so far from an exact science. Food labels can be off. Entries in the apps database can vary, and portion sizes are not always perfect. So you can think of these tools as providing structure, but they are not perfect precision instruments, okay? And if you forget that, it's easy to turn them into yet another way of over-scientizing your efforts, focusing on the numbers as if they're absolute, instead of remembering that the point is to build habits.

Okay? And let's also talk about this because this is something that I have seen explode in the last five or so years, and that is getting every lab under the sun drawn. So I have seen clients get full hormone panels, vitamin levels, food sensitivity testing, you name it. So in medical school, I learned an important principle that I want to share here, and that is, order a test if you can actually do something about the result. Otherwise, you run the risk of wasting money, time, energy, and all the while creating anxiety.

And currently, there are more and more labs being marketed directly to consumers, things like broad food sensitivity panels, cortisol rhythm mapping, or micronutrient testing. And many of these do not have strong science to back them up, but they're often peddled by influencers, some of whom are even physicians who swear you need to know a particular

number. And of course, right alongside that claim is a super expensive supplement or system that they just happen to sell to help you manage it.

So here's the truth. Knowledge, yes, it is most certainly helpful, but it's only helpful when you can actually do something about it. And it's even better when that action is supported by good, repeatable, actual science. Otherwise, all that information, again, becomes more noise. And at best, you've wasted time and money. At worst, you've created stress over something you can't fix or wasn't even an actual problem in the first place. So knowledge without action and without evidence to support that action, that gets you nowhere.

Okay, so now that we've gone through some of the most common ways I see people over-scientize their health and fitness, let's talk about why. So why do we do it? Why do we get so wrapped up in those numbers? Well, data feels safe. Numbers feel concrete. They feel like truth. They feel like control. And when everything about your body, your health, your fitness, your weight loss, when that all feels unpredictable, numbers might feel more like a lifeline.

You can point to something and say, "Hey, this is it. This is why." And when you're frustrated with weight loss, that sense of control, it feels comforting, even if it's a false sense of control. Those numbers can give the illusion of certainty when you're in a process that feels anything but certain. And to take this further, data also feels exciting, especially when it comes packaged in something new or flashy or high-tech. And it gives a new hope, like maybe this gadget will finally be the answer. Maybe this is what I need in order to get me where I want to go. And some of these ads promise that by tracking one more thing or discovering this one lab, you'll finally unlock the mystery of health, fitness, longevity, or weight loss. But I call their bluff.

And honestly, it can feel motivating at first, opening your app or checking your device or following your numbers. That becomes a dopamine hit or something to look forward to. But that shine wears off super fast if that data

isn't paired with new choices or different habits. And that's because it's easier to chase the shiny thing and follow the data or use that gadget than it is to do the very unsexy work of eating vegetables or moving your body or getting to bed at a decent time.

And then there's also the distraction. Numbers can most definitely be a distraction. Sometimes without even realizing it, you use the data as a way of avoiding. If you're busy analyzing your spreadsheet or comparing your sleep scores, you don't have to face the harder, more uncomfortable work of making change. You can spend hours thinking about or Googling or tweaking your macro targets instead of actually cooking dinner at home and loading a salad onto your plate. So you can keep chasing the perfect plan all the while telling yourself you just need to figure it out instead of sticking with a good enough plan consistently.

And in that way, data becomes like a smokescreen. It looks like you're doing the work because you're busy tracking and calculating and analyzing, but in reality, that is a very small part of it because you're avoiding the harder actions that would actually move you forward. Those numbers might give the appearance of progress, but they can also cover up when nothing in your daily habits is actually changing. And sometimes, those numbers even become a shield. If the data looks good, you get to tell yourself you're doing everything right, even if your results aren't changing. This happens all the time, all the time.

And that's because it can feel safer to believe the numbers than to look at the possibility that you've got to do something differently. So if you're fading on me, come back for just a second and really hear this because this is super important. It can feel safer to believe the numbers than to look at the possibility that you need to do something differently. And that, that right there, that is the double-edged sword of data. It can be helpful, but it can also keep you totally stuck if you're not being honest about how you're using that data.

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Okay? So now that we've talked about examples of over-scientizing, and there are many, and also talked about why we do it. Now, let's talk about the problem with over-scientizing. So here's the problem. Numbers are neutral. They carry no meaning on their own. They're just data points, like blips on a screen. The numbers, they do not care about you, your history, or your goals. Those numbers don't understand how tired you are from work, or how stressed you feel about your kids, or how emotional eating sneaks in for you at night. Those numbers, they do not solve anything on their own.

So a calorie count in MyFitnessPal or a glucose spike on your CGM or a readiness score from your sleep tracker, it's all just information. Whether that information helps you or hurts you, it really depends entirely on what you do with it. Those numbers, they do not make you stronger or healthier or leaner. It's your actions, what you decide to change, or what habits you build. That is what gives your numbers meaning. Data without action is useless, and sometimes that data can become harmful.

It can pull your focus so tightly onto one metric that you lose sight of what really matters. Because instead of looking at the bigger picture, like how you feel, how consistent you are, or what your habits look like, you zoom in on a single number and decide it means something about your worth. And that's when the data stops being helpful and starts becoming a weapon. And this plays out in real life all the time. So, for example, if MyFitnessPal says you went over your calories by 200, you may mentally beat yourself up and make it mean you failed. Or your scale says you're up 1.5 pounds today, so you call yourself a failure, even though it may just be water weight. Or your Oura ring says you slept poorly, so you go through the whole day believing you're exhausted because the app told you so. And in all of those scenarios, the numbers dictate your mindset instead of acting as neutral feedback.

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And that is not at all the point of these tools. Their purpose is to inform you and to guide you, but not shame you, okay? But when you let the numbers or the gadgets define your identity or dictate your mood, you've crossed into over-scientizing, and that will most definitely keep you stuck.

So, what's the alternative here? What do you do instead? Okay, so first, I want to be absolutely clear. I'm not saying ditch all your gadgets, not at all. If you like data, if checking your step count motivates you to get out for a walk, or if tracking your food helps you feel accountable, then please go for it. But use that data as a tool, not as the ultimate truth. Use the data to guide you, not to define you. Numbers, they should inform your choices, but they should not dictate your worth.

So instead of obsessing over your CGM graph and every single spike or dip, zoom out and ask yourself, what do I want my nutrition to look like, especially over the long term? What are the habits that help me? What can I do to feel good and get closer to my goals? And similarly, instead of buying another sleep tracker, hoping it will fix your rest, maybe take a pause and ask, how do I actually feel when I wake up? Am I giving myself a chance to get enough sleep? Am I winding down at night instead of scrolling my phone? Because in all honesty, it's those kinds of questions that matter way more than whatever score your app spits out.

So to be really truthful, most of us do not need another gadget or lab or device. What we really need to do is get back to the basics and stick to them. And those are the totally unsexy, boring, foundational habits that we know work. So those are things like eating more fruits and vegetables, and not because your app is telling you your fiber is low, but because you feel better when you fuel yourself with real whole foods. Or move your body most days, and this does not have to be tracked down to the calorie burned because we know that's not accurate anyway. It can be as simple as you going for a walk after dinner or doing 20 minutes of strength training. And

the point is to move your body and to move it consistently rather than aiming for perfection.

Or go to bed earlier. You do not need an Oura ring to tell you that midnight bedtimes, they're not helping you, okay? Instead, work on creating a nighttime routine that actually gives your brain and your body rest. Or drink water, no fancy electrolyte mixes that cost an arm and a leg, okay? And not a complicated hydration tracker. Just have a water bottle on your person and drink it throughout the day. Okay? Or manage your stress. So this does not come from a device. Stress management comes from practices like journaling or talking with your friends, setting boundaries, moving, or meditating, things that make you feel grounded and in control of yourself. Okay? So you do not need another gadget.

You need the basics. And you might be hearing this and saying, "Yep, I know. Stick with the basics." But so many people get caught up searching for the next best thing: a new tracker, a fancy app, or the latest test, when in reality, they don't even have the foundations in place. And I get it. It is easier to be wooed by the shiny objects and systems than to face the hard, repetitive work of nailing the fundamentals.

And here's another truth though. Basics, they are basics for a reason. They are fundamental and they work. But that doesn't mean they're always easy. Getting enough sleep, eating enough veggies, moving your body regularly, they all sound super simple. But sticking with them day after day, that is where the challenge is. And instead of troubleshooting why the basics feel so hard, many people instead reach for the flashy gear or the gadget or the next metric to measure. But that usually leads to a dead end because tools do not replace the fundamentals.

So yes, it is the unglamorous habits that matter most. Veggies, water, walking, and sleep, they may not feel as exciting as strapping on a new device, but those really are the backbone of sustainable habit change. The lifestyle you build, so the way you live day in and day out is really what

creates your results, not your CGM graph, not your readiness score, and most definitely not your daily weigh-in. Okay? Simple, not flashy, and not something an app can do for you.

So, here is what I want you to take away. Stop over-scientizing your fitness. Data, it's not bad. Gadgets, also not bad. But they will not change your life unless you use them to change your behavior. Numbers on a screen, they will not lift the weights for you. A readiness score does not get you to bed earlier. A food log, that does not put veggies in your mouth. Only your actions can do that. And here, this is what I really want to drive home. The information itself, it's not the solution. It's what you do with that information that matters.

If you use the data as feedback to make small, consistent changes, then it can be powerful. But if you simply collect the data or even worse, let it dictate how you feel about yourself, then it just becomes noise and it keeps you stuck and maybe even resentful. So you really do not need another metric to chase. So instead, I would suggest that you focus on building a lifestyle, one that feels good and that can be sustainable for the long haul. And it shouldn't be something that you maintain with dread or drama. Okay? The basics, they may not look glamorous, and they really aren't, but they are actually what creates your results.

So yes, use the tools if you like them, but also remember what they are: guides. They are not the absolute truth, not at all. So don't get so caught up in them that you lose sight of what really matters. And don't let them distract you from the simple, boring, unsexy basics that actually work. And keep working long after the novelty of your new gadget has worn off. All right?

If you want help with this, let's go. If you've been caught in the cycle of chasing numbers and gadgets, but you're ready to actually build the habits that create real change, let's talk. This is the work we do in coaching. We take the data and we make it actionable so you stop beating yourself up

with the numbers and use them as tools. Check out my website. Send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact and let's talk about how coaching will help you build a lifestyle you can feel proud of. All right? Thank you again for hanging out with me. 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.