Ep #174: The 3 Biggest Traps Keeping High Achievers Stuck (And How to Break Free)

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 #174. If you've ever wondered why you can't seem to get started, stay consistent, or stop burning out, this episode is for you.

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? Well, this week, I had the opportunity to give a keynote talk for a local area credit union's enrichment day. And when the conference organizer contacted me, she asked if I could talk about something related to mindset, but make it relevant not just to the workplace, but other parts of our lives too. So, I got to work. And as I put the talk together and started pulling apart the central themes that I wanted to share with the audience, I realized that these concepts really do apply across the board, whether it's related to career, wellness, relationships, habits, really any of it.

And I started the talk by sharing a belief that I held for years before I got into all this self-improvement stuff. And that belief was this: If I just push harder, things will get better. And as you know, if you've been around here at all, you have learned and you have heard me say that pushing harder is not the answer. It doesn't work. But saying that sentence out loud to a room full of people and seeing them nod in agreement or smile knowingly, well, that reminded me just how many of us live by that belief, especially anyone wired to overachieve.

We think that if we just do a little more, push a little bit harder, or give a little extra, things will finally fall into place. Things will finally get better. You will finally have time to take care of yourself. You'll finally have the space to do the thing. You'll finally stop putting yourself last. But here's the thing: you can't outwork your exhaustion. You can't outwork your stress. It's a trap because more effort is not the answer. And sometimes, more effort is

exactly what's keeping you stuck. And that effort is clouded by the belief that you have to keep grinding.

And here's the thing, the problem isn't necessarily the work itself, but instead, the story we tell ourselves about it. So, I am not saying this to say that you are not busy. And I'm not saying that you're not overloaded with work. Burnout is rampant in so many industries. In fact, I can't think of a single industry where people aren't burned out. But that being said, I want to also point out that it's not just the workload that's the problem. It's not solely your to-do list that's the problem. It's also your perspective. It's how you're looking at your workload. It's how you're looking at your life. It's your mindset.

So, there are likely parts of your life that you can't control, whether that's your work, your boss, your family, certain relationships. There will always be things in your life that you cannot control. So then knowing that, the next question is, well, okay, what can I control here? And what you always, always, always have control over is your thinking. You always have control over the stories that you tell yourself. And that is huge. That's so important because that really is your key to thriving. It's your thinking.

But the problem is, we have stories that we tell ourselves that are running on autopilot. Stories that you may have been telling yourself for so long, you don't even think to question them anymore because you've made them your truth. Things like my job is too demanding. I can never get caught up. I am too busy. I never have time. My schedule is impossible. This is too hard. Those sentences, they sound innocent enough, right? You might hear yourself saying them and think nothing of it. But the problem is, when you say those things to yourself over and over again, they become your beliefs, they become who you are, and they keep you completely stuck.

So today, I want to share what I talked about in that session because these concepts really do apply to literally everything you do, whether you're building habits, changing your routine, leading a team, or just trying to get

out of your own head. So, we're going to talk about the three biggest traps that keep people stuck. They're the big three: perfectionism, all-or-nothing thinking, and overachiever burnout. And as we talk through these, see if you can find yourself here. I'm going to bet a nickel that you're going to hear yourself in at least one, if not more, of these traps.

And if you do, good. If you recognize yourself, that means you have awareness, and that's the first step. If you're aware of the issue, that opens the door to change. And I'm going to offer you some tools for how you change your thinking if any of these traps are getting in your way. All right? So, let's go.

The first trap is a big one. It's perfectionism. And perfectionism often shows up sounding like, "If I can't do this perfectly, why bother?" And so here's the thing, perfectionism is sneaky, and that's because on the surface, perfectionism sounds like high standards. You aim for excellence. You take pride in your work. You accept nothing less than the best. So, on the outside, perfectionism looks like ambition, and sometimes perfectionism even gets rewarded by your family, your friends, or even at the workplace.

But then, if you peel it back, perfectionism really isn't about excellence. Instead, perfectionism is about fear. Fear of being judged, fear of failing. Fear that if it's not flawless, you are not enough. Eck. So, perfectionism is a trap because it ties your worth to your output. You start believing that how well you perform determines how valuable you are. And underneath it is a thought that says, "If this isn't perfect, I am not good enough." And that is a trap because no amount of achievement will fill that hole if you don't believe you're good enough as you are first.

When your value depends on a perfect performance, which is impossible, you will never feel like you've done enough. And you might tell yourself, "I'm just being thorough." But really what you're doing is protecting yourself from discomfort. If you don't put yourself out there, if you don't try something, you can't be judged, you can't be criticized, and you can't fail or be

embarrassed. So you don't try. And instead, you endlessly tweak and review and think and edit or research, but you never really get moving.

So it's sneaky because perfectionism comes disguised as diligence or doing things right, but underneath it is serious procrastination and avoidance. And maybe you tell yourself, "I'll start when I'm ready, or when I have more time, or when I know more." But you spend so much time waiting to be ready that you actually don't get started at all. You don't actually do the thing. And that's because readiness is not a feeling. Readiness is something you create by taking action. But perfectionists go at it in reverse, and they often don't take action because they're waiting to feel ready, and that time never comes.

And here's the irony. The irony here is that perfectionists actually end up producing less. This is where perfectionism totally backfires because you're waiting for certainty or approval or the right time or the right barometric pressure, and that moment never comes, and you don't get started. So, perfectionists end up creating less. They create less progress, less creativity, less confidence because they're busy endlessly editing, tweaking, or avoiding all together. And if you only allow yourself to move forward when it's perfect, you'll never get where you want to go.

So, even though many of my perfectionists out there, they know they're perfectionists, they still find it really hard to shake. And why is that? Why is perfectionism so hard to let go? It's your brain. Your brain loves comfort and it equates comfort with safety. And your brain also sees imperfection as a threat to your image, to your sense of control, to your safety. So if you put yourself out there and you try something new or you try to change a habit and it doesn't work, then you might feel something. You might feel judged, you might feel embarrassed, you might feel disappointment or even shame. And your brain considers this and says, "No, thank you." And instead, your brain offers all kinds of resistance and gives you all kinds of reasons to not try. It will tell you, "Don't bother because you don't want to face criticism if

you mess up. Don't get started because you don't want to feel like a failure. No way."

So your brain is doing its job by protecting you with perfectionism. But even though your brain is protecting you, remember this: safety is not the same thing as growth, and that is why perfectionists often stay stuck. They want to change, but they're afraid to get it wrong. And so now, here is the million-dollar question. If perfectionism is your brain's way of keeping you safe, how do you start doing things differently without feeling like you're jumping off a cliff?

So the answer here is not just stop being a perfectionist, okay? Instead, it's learning to practice imperfection on purpose. So, that means instead of trying to think your way out of perfectionism, you have to act your way out of it. And that means you start small. You send the project without reworking it five times. You go to the gym even if you don't have the perfect plan ironed out. You try the thing you've been thinking about without over-researching it first.

And when your brain starts panicking, as it most surely will, and when it tells you, "Hang on, this isn't good enough," you remind yourself, "Yep, I knew this was coming. This is the part where it feels uncomfortable, but that's okay. I can handle this. I can let done be better than perfect." That right there, that is your real reset. Because the antidote to perfection is not more effort, it's more willingness. Willingness to be exposed, willingness to make mistakes, willingness to finish before it's flawless.

The more you do this, the safer it becomes to keep doing it. You're literally training your brain to see imperfection as normal instead of dangerous. And that is huge. So, if you want to break the cycle of perfectionism that is keeping you totally stuck, you do not need to get existential. You do not need to overanalyze. You don't need to ask yourself any fancy questions. You have to decide to do the thing, even if it's rough, unfinished, or awkward. So that means you hit send, you walk in, you press record, you

try, and you let it be uncomfortable, and you let it be imperfectly done. And it won't feel great at first, and that's fine. That doesn't mean anything has gone wrong. You're not supposed to feel confident yet. You don't build confidence by getting it right, you build confidence by getting it done and proving to yourself that you can handle being imperfect. So that is a big one.

All right. So now, let's talk about the next big trap. So if perfectionism keeps you from getting started, the next trap keeps you from continuing. And that is all-or-nothing thinking. All-or-nothing thinking shows up as, "Well, I already blew it, so the whole day is blown." It can also be called "might as well thinking." Meaning, "Well, I ate this whole pizza, I messed up, so I might as well have the cupcakes too."

And this is another serious trap because all-or-nothing thinking makes every decision depend on the one before it. So, instead of one choice being independent, all-or-nothing thinking ties them all together. When the reality is, each meal, each workout, each decision stands on its own. But the problem with all-or-nothing thinking is that it collapses them all together. So, if you fail one, you fail the whole thing, and it leaves you no room for being human.

And as a result, you live in extremes that are not sustainable in either direction. Meaning, you are either all in, perfectly on plan, following your rules, giving maximum effort, going at 100%, or you are all out, where you quit, give up, and you let it go completely. And neither extreme is doable for the long term, and it's only a matter of time before you give up and swing to the opposite extreme. And it's totally exhausting.

And then on top of that exhaustion created by swinging from one extreme to the other, you also end up with guilt and shame loaded on top of it when you inevitably fall short of your impossibly high standards. And when you do fall off, you don't just see it as a single mistake. Often, you use that one slip-up against yourself and turn that into proof that you are failing

altogether. And the resulting guilt fuels even more giving up, which reinforces the whole cycle.

And so ultimately, all-or-nothing thinking totally blocks your consistency. When your progress collapses the moment it's not perfect, it makes it really hard for you to stay consistent. So when you eat your weight in french fries and you tell yourself, "That's it, I blew it," and then you proceed to go on a week-long junk food better as a result, only until you get sick of it and go back onto salad, that is not consistency. That on-again, off-again nature of all-or-nothing thinking will totally erode your consistency and make it really hard for you to keep up your habits.

So, why is all-or-nothing thinking so hard to fix? Well, once again, there's a pattern here. It's your brain. Your brain loves certainty. It loves clear categories: right or wrong, success or failure, good or bad. It wants black and white answers because they take less effort. Your brain wants clear wins and it does not like the gray zone at all. And that's the tricky part. That gray zone, which is messy, it requires thinking, deciding, and staying present. And those all take a lot of energy, and your brain does not like that at all. Your brain wants shortcuts and it wants certainty.

So, the minute you slip, your brain freaks out and it thinks, "Oh God, we failed. We've got to start all over." But your brain is not trying to sabotage you; it's actually trying to simplify things. But in that process, it erases all of your progress in between. And that's why this trap feels so real. Because when you're wired for high achievement, doing anything less than 100% feels like failure. Being in the middle feels like mediocrity, and your brain hates that.

So knowing this, and knowing how much your brain dislikes living in the messy gray zone, what do you do? How do you actually change this? So again, the answer isn't to suddenly just be okay with imperfection or force yourself to love moderation. That is not how this works. So instead, the

reset and your key to overcoming all-or-nothing thinking is to learn how to live in the gray. And that takes serious practice.

So that means you stop deciding, "I'm all in or all out." And instead, you decide, "What is the next right choice for me right now?" So that means, if you eat five pieces of pizza when you plan to eat none, you move on. You don't make it mean that you might as well eat the cupcakes, and you have your apple for a snack instead, just as you planned. Or if you skip one workout, you still show up tomorrow and get the next one done. So in essence, you stop using one misstep as permission to burn the whole thing down, okay?

And here's the thing to know. Being in the gray zone, that feels awkward. I'm not going to sugarcoat it. It is not satisfying. It does not give you the nice dopamine hit of perfect or the emotional release of, "Screw it, I give up." Being in the gray, it just feels ordinary. And I know that's a hard sell. But ordinary is where your consistency lives. And when we're talking about changing your habits, or really changing your life, that consistency is essential.

So the more you practice living in the gray zone and letting it be messy, the more you teach your brain that imperfect is okay and imperfect is still progress. And that progress might look like getting up faster after you mess up or realizing it sooner instead of pretending everything is fine, or having less of a low before you get back up. All of it. All of those are evidence of bouncing back. Those are all evidence of resilience, and they all count. And they all speak against all-or-nothing thinking, okay?

So when you realize and actually practice that missing once does not erase all your progress, that is when you're unwinding all-or-nothing thinking. When you prove to yourself that you can have a less-than-perfect day of eating or a less-than-perfect week of exercising and still keep moving forward, then you are unraveling this trap. And that is the real work, not trying to do it all, but instead, learning how to keep doing something. And

honestly, that is what actually builds your momentum: showing up on the days you don't nail it without starting over every time, letting each decision be independent of the one before it and not holding yourself to perfection. That is how you keep moving forward.

All right. So we've talked about perfectionism, which keeps you from getting started. We've talked about all-or-nothing thinking, which keeps you from continuing. And this last trap, this one keeps you from stopping, and that's overachiever burnout. And this one is very personal to me because this is me. So for years, I believed my worth was measured by my productivity, by how much I could do, how much I could hold together. And I thought slowing down was weakness. I thought rest meant that I was falling behind. So I kept pushing harder. Go hard or go home was tattooed on my brain. And for a while, it worked until it didn't.

So, overachiever burnout sounds like, "If I stop, everything will fall apart." And this trap is super sneaky because on the surface, it looks admirable. On the surface, it looks like commitment and dedication. You are the one who works harder, stays later, gives more. So it looks like drive. And overachieving thrives under the belief that more is always the answer. More effort, more hours, more giving. Because every time you do give more, you get a hit of validation, whether that's from friends or family or your work. But underneath it all, overachieving is fear. Fear of slowing down, fear of letting someone down, fear of not being enough. And at some point, doing more actually stops helping and starts hurting.

And in order to keep up with your impossible standards, you ignore yourself. You ignore the signs that you're exhausted or overly stressed or need a break. You ignore the voice inside you that says, "I can't keep this up." You become a machine. And instead of listening to your own signals, you double down and keep pushing. And here's the irony. When you do that, and the harder you push, the less effective you actually become. So you end up with diminishing returns despite pushing harder. So your quality

drops, your creativity shrinks, and your energy disappears. And you end up insanely busy, endlessly spinning, but you're not productive.

And to make it worse, overachieving erodes your self-care because when things get busy, most often, you are the first thing to get cut out of your busy, overscheduled, overachieving life. So you skip cooking at home and order takeout. You skip one workout, then two workouts, then a month of workouts. You stay up late grinding on a project, and that turns into a pattern of staying up hours after your bedtime. So you get lost in the process. And you might achieve more on paper, but you feel worse in real life.

So, why is overachieving so hard to shake? Okay, well, once again, it goes back to your brain and also a bit of conditioning. So, most of us have been conditioned since childhood to accumulate gold stars, good grades, trophies, recognition. And how do you get those things? By working harder, by producing more, by giving more. So when you brought home an A+ on your math test, maybe you got rewarded, and your brain remembers that, and it wants more of that, even when you're an adult. So every time you do more, stay late, take on one more committee, or run one more mile, your brain gives you a hit of dopamine. And the message sent is, "Good job, keep going."

And the lesson learned here is the harder I work, the more recognition I get, the more reward or dopamine I get. And because your brain loves the reward of achievement, slowing down will feel completely uncomfortable. It will feel like failure. And your brain learns that overdoing equals reward and rest equals risk. And that's why slowing down feels so uncomfortable. Your brain literally sees it as a loss because your brain has been wired to crave validation, achievement, and the next win.

But here's the catch: the same reward system that drives achievement also drives depletion. Every time you chase another win, another goal, another task checked off your list, your brain gives you a little hit of dopamine, and

that feels good. But that system is not designed to just stop on its own. Instead, it just keeps asking for more. So you end up chasing the next thing and the next and the next until you're completely spent. But at the same time, you're restless, unsatisfied, and still reaching for your next fix of enough. It's a total swirl.

And that is how burnout sneaks up on overachievers because exhaustion often shows up looking like dedication. It's so sneaky. You're praised for it, rewarded for it, even promoted for it. So your brain learns, "This is who I am. This is how I stay valuable." And underneath it all, you're running on fumes.

So, how do you pull yourself out of the trap of overachiever burnout when your brain has been rewarded for overdoing your entire life? Here's the truth: you don't just flip a switch and suddenly feel okay slowing down. You have built years of evidence that more is better. So your brain believes that more is the only safe way to operate. So knowing that, that means the reset here is less about doing less and more about proving to yourself that enough is safe. So really hear that. It's about proving to yourself that enough is safe. And you are the one who gets to decide that you are enough as you are without having to run yourself into the ground joining every committee, project, carpool, book club, all of it.

And declaring enough starts small. It might look like closing your laptop when the workday ends, even when your brain is screaming at you, "Just one more email." Or it might mean going for a walk instead of your usual 4-mile run when your body is tired, not because you're lazy, but because you're choosing recovery on purpose. It might also mean saying no to something you technically could fit in, but you say no anyway because you're learning that protecting your time and energy matters. And it's through these small but significant decisions that you not only start to feel better, but you also prove to yourself that actually taking care of yourself is a strength, not a failure.

Ep #174: The 3 Biggest Traps Keeping High Achievers Stuck (And How to Break Free)

And here's what I want you to expect. When you do that, when you decide to choose enough and not push yourself to exhaustion, it actually won't feel relaxing. It will feel wrong. Your brain will start to panic and it will tell you, "Hey, you're falling behind. You're selfish. You're slacking off. This is not how we do." And that is okay. Expect it. Be ready for it. That is the withdrawal phase of overachievement. And all you're doing is teaching your brain that slowing down does not equal danger. It just means rest. That's it.

And that's really the key. In order to overcome overachieving, you have to redefine what strength really means and then go live it out. So for me, and hopefully for you too, you learn that strength is not running yourself into the ground. It is not being a machine and giving so much that you have nothing left for yourself. It's not giving up everything that makes you whole in order to make your friends, your partner, your kids, or your coworkers happy. Instead, strength is having the courage to trust that you are enough as you are and that your worth is not measured by what you are for other people. Your worth does not evaporate when you rest, and the world does not fall apart if you slow down.

Because when you start operating from that kind of strength, the quiet sustainable kind, you'll finally have the capacity to do your best work and still have something left for yourself. All right. If you heard yourself in any or all of these traps, good. That means you're human. So these patterns, perfectionism, all-or-nothing thinking, overachiever burnout, these are not character flaws. They are actually coping mechanisms. They're the ways your brain has learned to protect you from judgment, discomfort, and failure. And they work until they don't. Remember, perfectionism keeps you from getting started. All-or-nothing thinking keeps you from continuing. And overachiever burnout keeps you from stopping.

Here's the good news: these patterns, they do not have to be permanent. They are not personality flaws or fixed traits. They are habits of thought. Remember, thoughts are habit too. And like any habit, they can be

unlearned and replaced with thinking that moves you forward. So it takes work, it takes awareness, and practice. And your progress is not going to be linear.

Progress for you might mean you catch yourself a little faster, or maybe you interrupt your usual spiral a little sooner than you would have six months ago. Or maybe you mess up but make the next best decision when normally you would have let everything fall apart. And over time, these small shifts add up until one day, you realize you are not stuck in the same loop anymore. That's the work. You notice the trap when it comes up, you name it, and instead of defaulting to your usual pattern, you pause long enough to intentionally choose something different.

So you send the thing that is not perfect. You get back on track after one day off instead of throwing the whole week away, and you trust that enough really is enough, that you are enough. And no, none of that is easy, and it's not quick either. It's uncomfortable and it takes repetition. But every time you do it and choose a different way of thinking, you're retraining your brain.

Every time you practice believing progress over perfection, consistency over extremes, or rest over more, you're teaching your brain that safety and growth can exist in the same space. And over time, that is how you change. Not by grinding harder, but by thinking differently.

So, if you feel stuck right now, I want you to remember this: change, it is possible. It's certainly not easy, it's not comfy, but it is possible. Start noticing the traps, catching yourself sooner, and proving one action at a time that you can do this differently. You can start before you're ready, you can keep going when it's messy, and you can stop when you've done enough. That right there, that is your reset. That's how you get unstuck. And that is how you build real strength from the inside out.

Ep #174: The 3 Biggest Traps Keeping High Achievers Stuck (And How to Break Free)

All right? And if you want help with this, let's go. When you coach with me, I'll help you find the traps that are keeping you stuck and we'll rewire both how you think and what you do. Check out my website, send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact, and let's talk about how to get you unstuck for good. 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.