Ep #197: Why ‘Making Up for It’ Keeps Backfiring

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 #197. If you've ever had an off day, an off weekend, or a stretch where things didn't go as planned, and your first thought was, all right, now I need to get serious, 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? We are talking about overcompensating today. It's something I see all the time in the women I work with, and once I describe this pattern to you, I think it's going to click. It tends to show up most obviously with food. So usually after a stretch where things feel a little off. Maybe it was a weekend that was off the rails or a busy week of work or call where nothing felt calm or normal, or maybe just a few days where you were just not eating the way you planned. And then this shift happens where it's like, okay, time to clean it up. No more dessert, no more carbs, time to be good. But I also see the exact same pattern with exercise too. Like if you were on vacation and didn't exercise at all, and then feel the need to kick it into high gear the week you get back. Or if you go a few weeks without exercising and then finally get sick of it and decide you're going all in like starting Orange Theory four days a week.

And what's interesting is that on the surface, it often looks like discipline. It looks like you're getting back on track, doing what you need to do. It can look like a good thing, but underneath it, there's usually a lot more going on. And I see this especially in high-achieving women, women who are used to doing things well, holding themselves to a very high standard and not letting things slide. So when something feels off and they feel a need to correct it, the response is usually pretty quick. It's decisive. Sometimes it's even rigid. And that's what we're going to talk about today. We're going to talk about the urge to overcorrect, where it comes from, why it feels so

compelling in the moment, why it usually doesn't work the way you think it will, and what you can do instead.

So, let's talk about this pattern because I think a lot of you are going to recognize yourselves in it. What I see all the time is this. When something feels off, women don't just return to normal. Instead, they overcorrect. And I want to be really specific about what I mean by that because this is not always dramatic. It can be subtle. It can even look kind of responsible. And the most common version of this by far is with food.

So, for example, maybe you have a weekend where things are chaotic. It could be travel, a girl's weekend, kids' sports, or even work. And maybe you went out to eat more than usual, had more desserts or snacks than you planned, did more grazing, or you just weren't eating with any kind of structure. Or maybe it's not even a weekend. This is not unique to weekends. That is for sure. Maybe it's a week of call or a really stressful work stretch. Maybe you're just dealing with a lot both personally and professionally all at once. And whatever the scenario is, it often ends in the same way. Food becomes whatever is quick, easy, or available. Your routine, it gets looser. Your processed food intake goes up. Dessert sneaks in more often. And the usual structure that helps you feel stable flies out the window.

And after a stretch of this, whether it's a few days or even a few weeks, you hit a point where there's a shift. Maybe it's because you feel physically uncomfortable, maybe bloated or puffy, or maybe you're just mentally over it. It's not necessarily a huge breaking point or some big dramatic moment, just this quiet but very firm decision of, okay, that was too much. I need to clean this up. And from there, things tighten quickly. Now, it's no more dessert, cut out the processed food, cut way back on the carbs. I have to get serious again. And again, what I want you to notice is that this doesn't feel chaotic. It actually feels controlled. It feels like you're doing the right thing.

But what's happening underneath is that your brain is taking a fairly normal deviation, a few off meals, a few days that didn't go as planned, and interpreting that as something that now needs to be corrected. So it's not just that something went off plan, it’s that your brain turns it into a problem to solve. And instead of returning to your baseline, you react. Instead of stabilizing, you tighten the reins and overcompensate. And this doesn't just show up with food. I see the same thing with exercise all the time. You miss a few workouts and suddenly the next one needs to be harder to make up for whatever you missed. Or you eat more than you usually do over the weekend and now Monday includes some sort of punishment cardio. Or you do an easier workout and it doesn't feel like it counted. So now there's an urge to push harder next time.

So, whether it's food or exercise, the pattern is the same. Something feels off and the response isn't neutral. It's corrective. It's tightening. It's a little bit urgent. And most of the time, underneath that, there's a mix of guilt, discomfort, and a pretty strong desire to get back in control as quickly as possible. And if that sounds familiar, I've got you. And there is a reason this feels so compelling.

So, let's talk about why this happens. Because if you've ever found yourself doing this, like tightening things up or getting really clean or deciding you're going to be extra disciplined after a stretch where you weren't, it probably feels pretty reasonable in the moment, like the right move. And the reason for that is because overcorrecting gives you something to do with your discomfort. After a stretch where things are messy, like a long weekend, loads of desserts, or missed workouts, there's usually some level of discomfort there.

Maybe it's physical, maybe it's mental, or maybe it's a low-grade sense of, yuck, I just don't like how this feels. But a lot of the time, it's also the discomfort of disappointing yourself. It's the discomfort of feeling like you didn't follow through the way you said you would. Like you let things slide a little more than you wanted to. And that feeling, that kind of internal

letdown, that's uncomfortable. But instead of sitting with that, many of us move pretty quickly into action.

And the minute you decide, okay, I'm cutting out dessert, cutting out all the snacks, I'm getting back on track, then you feel a little better. Not because anything has actually changed yet and not because the underlying issue is resolved. It's because now you feel like you're doing something about it. You feel back in control. And that matters, especially for high-achieving women. That shift into correction mode, it feels like competence. It feels like accountability. It feels like this is what women who have it together do. They notice when something is off and they fix it.

So, in a weird way, overcorrecting can feel very aligned with the identity you already have, the identity of someone who is on top of it and fixes things. And internally, it feels like, this is how I prove I'm not slipping. This is how I show that I'm still in control here. This is how I get things back where they need to be. And that is why overcorrecting can be so compelling because overcorrecting often feels productive. It gives you something to do with the discomfort of not liking what's been happening. It creates a sense of movement, a sense of forward action, even if that action isn't actually helpful. It's a little bit like emotional relief through activity. But often, what's actually happening is that you're trying to outrun the discomfort of feeling off or being out of your routine or not liking your choices.

And instead of letting that discomfort just exist, which is hard, you move into action. Not always useful action, but action all the same. And doing something, especially with a sense of urgency to hurry up and make it right, that generally feels better than helplessness. It feels better to clamp down and fix it than to sit in that in-between space of, okay, that didn't go how I wanted, and I'm just going to go back to normal. But usually, what's driving that urgency is not really the food or the workout itself. It's what you're making it mean. So, let's go one layer deeper here because this is where things will start to make more sense. What I want you to see is that the

reaction is often much bigger than what actually happened because of what it seems to mean.

So, on the surface, it might look like, I ate too much. I had more dessert than I planned this week. Or, I missed a few workouts. But for a lot of women, especially the women I work with, that's not really the issue. The issue is what your brain does with it next. Because very quickly, it turns into, oh my gosh, what if I gain weight? I'm going to lose all of my progress. What if this is the beginning of the end? Or, what if this is just me letting myself go? What if this turns into a version of me I don't want to become? And that matters because that version is not neutral. So at the heart of it, there's often an underlying fear or even a belief that missed workouts or extra desserts mean you're the kind of person who used to care but doesn't anymore, that you used to be disciplined but now you aren't. And this whole narrative that you're sliding and can't get it together, that starts to take over.

And for a lot of high-achieving women, that identity feels threatening because you're someone who shows up at a high level in multiple areas of your life, career, parenting, home, responsibilities, you get things done. People rely on you. You hold yourself to high standards. So when that same level of consistency isn't there with food or exercise, it doesn't just feel like a small slip, it feels like full-on failure. It's not just, that didn't go how I planned, it becomes, what does this say about me? And that is when things get intense because now you're not just responding to a few off meals or a few missed workouts, you're responding to what you think it means about your discipline, your consistency, or even your identity. And when the meaning is that loaded, of course the reaction is going to be bigger. The overcorrection is less about what you ate or didn't do and more about what you're afraid it means about you. This is really not about dessert or a missed workout. It's about the fear of becoming someone who's slipping.

And when that's the fear you're operating from, the overcorrection makes way more sense because now it's not just about getting back on track, it's

about proving you're still the kind of person who can be on track. And that is why your reaction can feel so urgent and intense. And sometimes it's a little bit all or nothing because the reaction is not proportional to what happened, it's proportional to the meaning you attached to it.

And I know this pattern well enough personally to tell you that I'm not speaking about it from some lofty place here because I have my own version of this. For me, it's dessert, specifically baked goods. That is my thing. And while I've gotten much better with it over time, dessert isn't something that runs the show the way that it used to. I can still feel an old familiar pattern show up sometimes. It's sneaky, but it's very recognizable. And it usually starts out like, okay, that was a little too much. And almost immediately, there's a follow-up thought of, well, all right, tomorrow, I need to be really good. And what's interesting is how fast my brain knows exactly what that means. It doesn't feel vague, it feels specific. It's tightening things up a bit, being a little more precise with my meals, paying more attention to portions, really focusing on protein, pulling back on the carbs and the fat. It's nothing extreme on paper, but if I'm being honest, there's a bit of me that's just trying to make up for it. Like, I'm just going to balance that out and move on. No big deal. And again, it doesn't feel chaotic. It actually feels pretty put together. It feels like I'm being responsible. I'm handling it.

But when I step back and look at it differently, what stands out is how transactional it feels. It starts to feel less like I'm eating in a way that's supportive and more like I'm out to correct something. Like there is a subtle sense of repayment happening. And I don't love that because then it's not just food anymore. Instead, food becomes moralized. And I've seen this happen with plenty of women I work with too. Dessert becomes this bad thing, while the next day's eating becomes the good thing that's supposed to undo it. And instead of just carrying on or just eating your next meal, now you're evaluating, adjusting, and doing all kinds of mental math to balance everything out. And that's the part that feels off to me now. It feels yucky. Because that's not a clean relationship with food. It's not neutral. It's definitely not supportive. It's a transaction. And even if it looks healthy on

the outside, the energy behind it is very different. It doesn't feel good. It's like a mental scoreboard, and it's a lot to keep up with.

And the same exact mental pattern can show up with exercise too. I see this all the time. A client will miss a few workouts. Maybe life got busy or the week just didn't go as planned. And instead of just picking back up where she left off, there's this immediate urge to double down. So the next workout has to be harder, longer, or more intense. Or maybe she ate more than she intended over the weekend, and suddenly Monday comes and there's this feeling of, I've got to burn this all off. Or if she does get a workout in and it was a little lighter than usual, instead of that being enough, it feels like that workout didn't really count. So now there's this pressure to make the next one hurt just a little more. And it all adds up to the same thing. It becomes less about movement as part of your routine and more about movement as correction.

And just like with food, this doesn't always look extreme from the outside. It can look like consistency or discipline or being super committed. But the energy underneath it is not matching up. Because the workout isn't just the workout anymore. It's tied to something else. It's tied to making up for what you ate or sweating something off or getting yourself back to a good place. And that's where things start to get a little shaky. When exercise starts getting used to compensate or erase or fix, your relationship with it changes. You're still exercising, but it's no longer neutral. There's pressure in it, maybe even a little bit of urgency. There's a sense that this workout needs to do something beyond just being a workout.

And to be clear, I'm not saying that pushing yourself or being intentional with your workouts is a problem. The issue is not the action. It's the energy behind the action. Meaning, is the desire to exercise, is it coming from a steady, supportive place, or is it coming from a place of panic or a need to correct something? Because those two things can look very similar on the outside, but they feel very different on the inside. And that distinction matters because this overcorrection pattern usually backfires in more ways

than people realize. So while it can feel productive in the moment, overcorrecting doesn't actually create stability. It does the opposite. It creates more swinging. It keeps the drama alive way longer than it needs to be.

So here's what I mean. A weekend where things felt off could just be a weekend. A day with more dessert than usual could just be one day. A few missed workouts can be just that, nothing more. But when you move into overcorrection mode, you turn it into something much bigger. Now, it's not just something that happened, it's something you're reacting to. You're thinking about it, trying to fix it, adjusting because of it. And instead of letting it just pass, you extend it and make it bigger with more drama attached. And over time, that starts to train your brain in a way that totally works against you because every time something is a little off and you respond by overcorrecting, you reinforce the idea that the deviation is the problem when that is just a normal part of being a human living her life.

So instead of learning that you can wobble and still keep going, you learn that every wobble needs some kind of response. And that makes you feel less flexible and less steady, not more. And you don't really build the skill of just returning to your baseline. Instead, you build a habit of reacting. And that reacting is often what sets you up for the next round of overdoing. This is especially true with food, where the common reaction is to tighten things up or cut things out or get more rigid. And while you may be able to keep that up for a short time, it eventually starts to wear on you. And then you get hungry. You get tired of thinking about it, and you feel restricted. And then you loosen, often more than you meant to. And that brings you right back where you started. So instead of building flexibility, you're building fragility where any miss messes up the whole system.

And the last piece of this is what overcompensating does for your overall sense of stability because when this pattern is running in the background, things start to feel less predictable. You don't feel steady. You feel like you're either tightening up or reacting to something. So you're either on or

you're trying to fix being off. And that creates a low-level but very real sense of instability where it feels like you're always trying to get back to where you're supposed to be, but you never quite land there. Because instead of just getting back to your baseline, you keep overshooting it and then correcting again and then overshooting again. And that is exhausting. And it's also why over time, this pattern can make you feel like you're not in control even though you're constantly trying to be. So, if overcorrecting is not the answer, what is? Well, it's actually a much simpler shift than most people would expect. The answer is not punishment or overdoing it. The answer is return. Return to your baseline. That's it.

So, please hear this clearly. You do not need to overcorrect. You just need to get back to what you would normally do. So you don't have to clamp down or get dramatically clean or make up for anything or earn your way back. No, you just resume. And what that looks like in practice is actually pretty straightforward. Your next meal is just your normal meal, not smaller, not extra clean, not a plate full of veggies and nothing else, just normal. The next workout is also normal. You go back to what you planned, not longer, not harder, not trying to compensate for anything. So you're not reacting, you're just resuming.

And I think this part matters because when I say return to baseline, a lot of women hear that as letting themselves off the hook, like you're ignoring what happened or pretending it didn't matter. But that's not what this is. This is not laziness, it's not denial, it's not pretending that your weekend didn't happen. This is just a more steady, less dramatic form of accountability. It's saying, all right, that didn't go how I planned. Now, how am I going to move forward without turning this into a whole big thing? Because in reality, it's stability that gets you back on track, not punishment. Punishing yourself into health does not work for the long haul, okay?

Returning to baseline as simple as that sounds, is not the same as giving up. It's just choosing to not make the situation any bigger than it already is. It's choosing not to spiral into something that's got to be fixed. And

honestly, this is one of those places where the most mature response is often the least dramatic one. You're just getting back to normal without all the extra energy behind it. And that will feel so much better than making it a big deal.

And if you want a simple way to catch yourself in this pattern in real time, here's a question you can use. If you're hearing this and thinking, okay, I do this. This is me. Here is something really simple you can use in the moment because this pattern, it happens fast. You don't usually sit down and think through it. It's more like you notice something feels off and almost immediately your brain goes to, all right, now I need to fix it. So what you need is something equally fast and easy to run through in the moment. And the question I want you to ask yourself is, is this neutral or is this repayment? And by neutral, I mean, am I just going back to what I would normally do? Not adding anything, not taking anything away, not trying to fix anything, just normal. Because those two things, neutral and repayment, they can look very similar on the outside, but they feel very different underneath the surface.

If your action is coming from repayment, it usually has a certain tone to it. Like, I need to be really good tomorrow. I need to cut this out now. I have to make up for this. I should probably burn this off. It sounds almost threatening. There's urgency to it and a little bit of pressure. But if your action is coming from a neutral place, it sounds more like, I'm just getting back to my normal meals. I'll have breakfast and lunch like I usually would. I'm doing my workout as planned. I'm not turning this into a whole thing. And the difference here is not just in what you do, it's how it feels. And that is huge. So neutral is calm. Repayment feels a little more panicked. Neutral helps keep you steady. And repayment is trying to make up for something. And the tricky part is there's no clear endpoint for that. You can eat really well the next day. You can get a great workout in, but it still doesn't quite feel like you're back to even. So you keep adjusting and tightening. You keep trying to get back to where you think you're supposed to be. And that's the loop.

And this is where you can interrupt it. Not by doing something more extreme, but by doing something more neutral. You notice when your brain wants to jump into overcorrection and instead, you return to baseline. And you remind yourself, nothing has gone wrong here. I don't need to fix this. I just need to get back to normal. I am okay. And you do that over and over again as many times as it takes. It's simpler, it's more natural, and I promise it will feel so much better. And now, if we zoom out a little bit, this pattern is about a lot more than just food and workouts. This is about how you relate to yourself when things aren't perfect because this pattern shows up everywhere. Something feels off at work and you grip tighter. Something feels off at home and you try to do more, fix more, control more. Or you fall out of a routine and the instinct is to overhaul everything instead of just picking it back up. It's the same response just in different parts of your life.

And on the surface, it just looks like you're trying to stay on top of things. But underneath, there's often a lack of trust in yourself. But self-trust is not built by panicking every time something isn't perfect. It's built when you show yourself that you can be imperfect and not turn it into something bigger. You can come back to your baseline without making it a crisis and be steady without being extreme. And that matters because the more you do this, the less you need to rely on intensity or overcorrecting to feel in control. You don't need to prove that you're disciplined by reacting every time things go sideways. You also don't need to earn your way back. You just get back to your baseline, back to your normal routines, back to what you already know how to do, and back to what actually works. That is where the consistency lives, not in the overcorrection, but in the return. All right?

And if this pattern of overcompensating feels familiar, this is exactly the kind of work we do in coaching. If you want help cleaning up what you do and how you think, let's go. 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 better relationship with your habits and with yourself. 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.