Ep #212: Your Evenings Aren't the Problem - Why Everything Falls Apart at the End of the Day

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 number 212. Do you ever feel like you hold it together all day, only to have everything fall apart at night? If you keep wondering why your healthy habits disappear by the end of the day, the problem may not be your evenings at all. 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? Today, I want to pull apart a common phenomenon I see all the time. And that phenomenon is the evening come apart. And I'm guessing many of you know exactly what I'm talking about. That is the tipping point at the end of the day when you are just done. And you may have already noticed this about yourself. You may find that you tend to do well and make good decisions that support you for most of the day, like eating a healthy breakfast with protein to keep you full, or staying on top of your inbox and answering all your emails as they come in, or keeping everyone else around you afloat. So basically, you juggle all the balls and you do a darn fine job of it.

But then, somewhere around dinner, everything seems to fall apart. And despite how on top of it you've been all day, you find yourself snacking constantly while you're making dinner. Or you finish dinner and immediately find yourself looking for chocolate, or you're snapping at your kids or skipping the workout you planned and sitting on the couch doom scrolling instead, or cracking open a bottle of wine and giving yourself a hefty pour. And when all is said and done, you might find yourself declaring, I have no willpower at the end of the day. I need more discipline. Or tomorrow will be different.

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But here is what I want you to consider. What if the problem isn't your evenings? What if 7 o'clock is actually not where the problem starts? What if it's just where you notice it? Because honestly, I don't think evenings create the problem. I think they reveal it. And that's where we're going today. We're going to peel back the layers on the evening breakdown, why it happens, what's really underneath it, and then most importantly, what you can do about it. This is huge. It is so, so common, and I think you're going to hear yourself somewhere in this episode, and I hope it helps you. So, let's go.

So here is what I have found so interesting about this. So often, women come to coaching convinced that they know what their problem is. And they'll tell me things like, I do great all day and then I lose it at night, or I have zero willpower by the time I get home from work, or I have no discipline. And at first go, it sounds logical and I get why it feels that way. Because if you're only looking at what happens between dinner and bedtime, it looks like a discipline problem, like the cookies or the wine or the scrolling or the fact that you skipped your workout. But I almost never think that's actually what's going on, because when we start digging into this, we almost always end up talking about everything that happened before the evening even started.

We talk about the five-minute lunch you had to scarf down between patients or meetings. We talk about your work stressors and kids and aging parents and deadlines and the difficult conversation that totally threw you off or the water you forgot to drink. All the decisions you've been making since 6 o'clock that morning. And that is when something super important starts to become apparent. And that is, most women do not have a discipline problem.

They have a capacity problem. And when I say capacity, I don't just mean physical energy. I'm also talking about your mental capacity, your emotional capacity, because it all adds up. So, when everything seems to be falling

apart, I don't think it's because you suddenly lost all of your discipline. I think it's because you've just reached the point where you've been asking more of yourself than you can sustainably give. And eventually, something's got to give. So the problem isn't that you fall apart at night, it's that you've been holding yourself together all day with no end in sight.

And so now, if that's true and if this really is a capacity problem instead of a discipline problem, then the next question becomes, how does this happen? How do we even run out of capacity without even realizing it? So you can think of it this way. Imagine you wake up every morning with a tank. And to be clear, that tank is not always the same. Maybe you had a great night of sleep and your tank is pretty full. Or maybe your kid was up three times overnight or your teenager came home way past curfew or you're in the middle of a super stressful stretch at work.

And on those mornings, you wake up with less in the tank than on other days. But regardless of where you start, you slowly empty that tank all day long. And the tricky part is that often, we only think about the physical energy we're using and we think about whether we're tired. But that is just one piece of this puzzle because your capacity isn't just physical, it's mental and emotional too.

So the energy you use to think, decide, remember, plan, solve problems, and keep everything moving, that is just as draining as running miles on the treadmill. And throughout the day, you are slowly but surely emptying your tank with all of those tasks. Let me give you an example. This is an example from one of my clients. She gets up at 5:30. She gets herself ready, gets her kids out the door. She works all day, makes dozens of decisions, handles multiple difficult conversations. Then she leaves work and she gets her kids to and from various activities. Then she starts dinner and answers texts that have gone unanswered all day. Then laundry. And then, when all is said and done, she finds herself standing in front of the pantry eating handfuls of Goldfish crackers.

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Now, if I asked her what the problem was, she would most likely tell me it's the Goldfish, or I have no willpower. But let me ask you something. Is the pantry really the problem? No. Are the Goldfish crackers really the problem? No. So then what is the problem? And I think it's this. Somewhere along the way, she stopped checking in with herself and the accumulation of her physical, mental, and emotional load has left her completely empty. So from the moment she woke up, she's been asking herself questions like, what do my patients or clients need? What do my kids need? What does work need? What needs to get done next? Who needs me? And all of that adds up. It's not just one email. It's not just making dinner and it's not just one hard conversation. It's the combination of all of it.

And in the middle of this, she hasn't stopped to ask what do I need? And why would she? She's just getting stuff done. She's a machine. She's not thinking about herself because she's so busy thinking about everything and everybody else. And I think that's where so many women start looking in the wrong place because by the time they're standing in the pantry, they're trying to solve a problem they don't even realize they're having. They think they're hungry and maybe they are, but maybe they're mentally exhausted.

Maybe they're emotionally spent. Maybe they need a break. Maybe they need someone else to make a decision for a change. Or maybe they just need five minutes where no one needs anything from them. But because we don't stop long enough to ask ourselves what we actually need, the Goldfish become the answer. Not because they're the best answer, but because they're the fastest one.

And that's why I keep coming back to this idea. Your evening isn't actually what emptied the tank, it just revealed how empty the tank already was. So now, if all of this is true, and if we're quietly emptying our tank throughout the day, then I think there's another question worth asking and that is, why don't we notice it sooner? Why do so many of us only realize we're running on empty after we're standing in the pantry with Oreos or snapping at our

kids or halfway through a bottle of wine? And I think part of the reason is that we tend to recognize physical exhaustion pretty easily, but we don't recognize mental or emotional exhaustion nearly as well.

Think about it. If you didn't sleep well last night, you know you're tired today. Or if you've been on your feet all day long, your body lets you know. Those signs are pretty obvious, right? But what about mental exhaustion? That is much harder to see and it usually doesn't announce itself. Instead, it shows up pretty quietly. That looks more like making decision after decision, or constantly thinking ahead, trying not to forget something, keeping track of everyone else's schedules, problem solving before problems even happen, or switching from work mode to mom mode, to spouse mode, to chauffeur mode without ever really stopping to breathe.

And then there's also emotional exhaustion. And I don't just mean having a terrible day. I mean the energy it takes to stay patient when you're extremely frustrated, or calm when someone else is upset, or professional when you are stressed to the max. It takes energy for you to keep showing up, to keep giving, and to keep holding it all together. That all costs you something. And here's a tricky part. Because so much of that happens inside your own head, it doesn't even feel like work. You don't get credit for it. You don't even notice you're doing it. It's just you doing what you do, taking care of things. It's just life.

And I think that's one of the biggest reasons so many women miss what's happening. It's because so much of the work that's draining them is invisible. But all of that work costs you something. It costs you capacity. And what I find most fascinating is that women don't stop and think, well, gee, I have really emptied my tank today. Instead, they think, why am I craving sugar? Or why can't I stop scrolling? Or why am I so impatient? They're trying to solve the symptom, but not the problem.

Think about what all of those things have in common. The cookies, the wine, the scrolling, the shopping, the television. They're all trying to

accomplish the same thing. They're all trying to change how you feel, not forever, but just long enough to take the edge off and give you a second to finally exhale. And that's because by the time you're standing in the pantry, your brain isn't trying to solve a cookie problem, it's trying to solve a need that has gone unmet all day. And I think that is a really important distinction, because if you're standing in the pantry thinking, I just need more willpower, you're solving the wrong problem. The question isn't how do I stop eating the cookies? The question is, what do I need right now that the cookies are trying to provide? And that is a very different question.

One question leads to trying to muster self-control. The other leads to understanding. And when you look at it that way, the cookies start to make a whole lot more sense. That doesn't mean they're the best solution, but they are a very understandable one. Because your brain isn't trying to sabotage you, it's just trying to take care of you in the quickest way it knows how. So, now, if you're hearing this, you might start wondering, okay, so what do I actually do with this? And I think the good news here is that once you understand what's really happening, you can start focusing your attention on the real issue. Because if your evening is just revealing what happened throughout the rest of your day, then maybe 8 o'clock isn't actually where you need to focus.

In other words, stop trying to fix 8 o'clock. If everything is feeling like a battle, stop studying the battle itself and study the hours before it instead. So that means instead of asking, how do I stop eating the cookies? Maybe ask what happened today that made those cookies seem like the best idea? Because that is a completely different conversation. When you ask that question, now, you're not just looking at eating cookies in isolation. Now, you're looking at context. So maybe you skipped lunch. Maybe you had back-to-back meetings and never had five minutes to yourself. Maybe you spent the entire day making decisions for everybody else. Maybe you had three really hard conversations before noon. Or maybe you got home

and immediately started taking care of everything and everybody without ever taking a breath for yourself.

So when you look at the whole day, your evening often makes sense and the cookies make sense. And that's an important shift because now you're no longer lasering in on what's wrong with me? And instead you're asking, what happened today? Or maybe an even better question, what led me to this point? That is a question I find myself asking clients all the time because once you understand what it is that led you to the pantry, you're in a much better position to decide what you actually need. And that is a very different approach than just trying to white knuckle your way through another evening.

So then what does this actually look like? So, let's imagine you're standing in the pantry. Normally, the conversation might sound something like, okay, here we go again. I have no self-control. I know I shouldn't eat this. Tomorrow I'll do better. And if that sounds familiar to you, that's what we're aiming to change. And notice something here. Every one of those thoughts starts with judgment. They are all so common and often they run on default, but none of them actually help you understand what's happening.

So instead, I'm going to ask you to practice pausing. Yep, a pause. Not 20 minutes, not a break to journal, but just long enough to interrupt your autopilot. And in that pause, I want you to consider one simple question. What do I actually need right now? And maybe the answer is food. Maybe breakfast was coffee. Maybe lunch was five bites of something between meetings. Maybe dinner was the first real meal you've had all day. And that is not a willpower problem. That is your body telling you it needs food. Or maybe the answer isn't food at all. Maybe it's quiet. Maybe it's a break. Maybe it's 10 uninterrupted minutes before you start taking care of everyone else, or asking someone else to unload the dishwasher, or maybe it's going to bed, or maybe just a hug.

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Because once you identify the need, you've got choices. And here's the thing. Sometimes, after asking yourself that question, you still decide to eat the cookie, and that is okay. The point is not to convince yourself not to eat the cookie. The idea here is to help you make a decision instead of simply reacting on autopilot. Those two things may look exactly the same from the outside, but they will feel very different on the inside because one comes from autopilot and the other comes from awareness. And awareness is essential. And honestly, I think that's the biggest shift I'm trying to help you make. The goal really isn't to become someone who never has a hard evening. I cannot promise anyone that.

The goal instead is to stop being surprised by your hard evening and have awareness around it. So, that means you recognize the signs that your tank has been running on low way before you're standing in the pantry. And I think there's one more important piece to this. When I work with clients, the most trouble doesn't come from what happens in the evening itself. It's really what happens afterward. Because often, many women have the cookie or the wine or skip the workout and then immediately turn on themselves.

And they tell themselves things like, I blew it. I have no discipline. I am failing at this. And that is where the screw-it moment shows up. It's the moment when you've decided you've already failed, so you might as well just keep failing. So, you eat even more. You tell yourself the day is a wash and you'll just try again tomorrow. And then tomorrow becomes another day of trying to be perfect until evening rolls around and the whole cycle starts again.

And that's why understanding this is so important. It's not just about recognizing your capacity. It's also about stopping the shame cycle that so often goes along with this when you aren't perfect. And understanding how all of this ties together, it doesn't let you off the hook. It really just helps you interrupt the cycle and it gives you another option besides shame. It gives

you the option of understanding. And I think one of the biggest takeaways from this whole episode is that we spend so much time trying to build more willpower when maybe what we really need to build is more capacity, because those are two very different things. And if you misdiagnose the problem, you'll keep choosing solutions that don't work. So willpower takes the stance of, how do I make myself push through this? But capacity instead, it asks, how do I stop running on empty in the first place?

So, your evenings aren't the problem. They are the feedback. Your evenings are telling you that somewhere during the day, you drained your tank without putting much back in. So maybe the goal isn't just to become someone who's better at resisting cookies. Maybe instead, the goal is to build a day where the cookies don't have to do a job they were never meant to do. Because if every evening leaves you feeling totally depleted, the answer probably isn't to become tougher. The answer is probably to become a little more protective of your capacity. So, that might mean eating lunch instead of working through it, or planning an afternoon snack because you know you're always starving by 5:00 p.m. It might mean asking your partner to make dinner one night. It might mean saying no to one more commitment.

And the specifics are going to look different for everyone. But the underlying principle is still the same. Capacity is not something you discover, it's something you protect. And every choice you make throughout your day is either helping you preserve your capacity or quietly drain it. And that is what I really want you to see.

Because once you start looking at your evenings this way, something's going to shift. You stop seeing every hard night as black or white or evidence that you're either succeeding or failing. And you stop assuming that you just need to try harder. And instead, it becomes much more proactive and you start asking yourself a different question. What can I do earlier in the day to support myself later? And I think that's way more

productive because instead of constantly reacting to your evenings, you're designing your day intentionally to set your evening up for success. And that is really what I hope you take away from today.

Maybe the next time you find yourself standing in the pantry or reaching for wine or halfway through the bag of chips, instead of making it mean something about who you are, remember that one evening does not tell your whole story, and one evening does not erase all of the good decisions that you made earlier in the day that were moving you forward. And one evening most definitely does not determine the kind of person you are.

But what one evening can do is give you information. It can point you towards something that needs your attention. Maybe that's food, maybe that's rest, maybe it's help or support from your family or your coworkers. And whatever it is, my hope is that instead of immediately turning against yourself, you become just a little more willing to understand yourself first. Because understanding doesn't excuse your behavior, but it explains it. And once you start understanding your behavior, you stop fighting yourself and you start solving for the actual problem. And I think that is a much better place to begin. All right?

And if you want help with this, let's go. When you coach with me, we don't just work on changing your habits, we work on understanding what's driving them in the first place because once you solve the right problem, changing your behavior becomes so much easier. Check out my website, send me a message at CarrieHollandMD.com/contact. And let's talk about how coaching can help you build habits that fit your life instead of constantly fighting against it. 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/buildstrength 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.