Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Carrie Holland, MD, CPT

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

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, Episode #220. If it feels like every time you handle one thing, something else gets added in its place, you may not need a better plan. Let's talk about what overwhelm may actually be telling you and what you can do when everything no longer fits.

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, school is officially back in full swing, and we are slowly but surely settling into our new fall schedule. Or maybe I guess I should say we're trying to settle into our new fall schedule. And I use that word trying because if I'm being totally honest, I had this idea in my head that once school started, life would feel a little more structured.

Summer is most definitely fun, but the schedule for us anyway is a little loose. There are vacations, camps, sports, kids coming and going at all different times, and no two weeks look exactly the same. So part of me thought that once school started and we got back into a predictable routine, that everything would feel a little more organized. But that is not quite how this is shaking out. Instead, school started, cross country is in full swing, and all the other kid activities also started. So there are practices, meets, forms, car pools, schedules to coordinate, and plans that seem to change almost immediately after they've been made.

And work obviously doesn't stop just because school started. There is still plenty going on in that front. And meanwhile, meals still need to happen. Laundry needs to be folded. People still need things. And apparently, our refrigerator decided that this would be a really great time to stop working, which is, in fact, happening as I record this. And really, if I zoom out for a second, none of these things in isolation is necessarily catastrophic. A car pool snafu, which happened earlier this week, that can be solved with a

couple of text messages and emails to the school. A schedule can be arranged if need be. The refrigerator can be repaired or replaced, and we'll find that out in a few hours.

And whatever your own version of stressors is, it's not necessarily any one thing, but it's generally the accumulation of all of it that can wear on you. Because I don't know about you, but every time I get one thing handled, something else pops up. Every time I think I've figured out the schedule or every time I think I've got my life under control, something else changes. And every time I start to think I'm getting on top of things, instead of running behind, another problem needs my attention.

And it all boils down to this one central theme, and that is, there is always something—literally always something. And it can feel like every day seems to produce another problem to solve, decision to make, or detail to remember. And one of the worst parts about this is that it can make you feel like you're forgetting something. Or is that just me? Because even when I sit down to work, part of my brain is still thinking about who needs to be where later, whether the car pool is handled, who is going to eat dinner when, and when am I going to make time to write the email that's been on my to-do list for at least the last three days. And it starts to feel like you can never catch a break.

And you might even think to yourself, because you are tough and you know you can handle a lot, you might think, okay, fine, once I get through this, things will be a little easier and then I'll be able to catch my breath. But before you do that, something else happens. It almost feels like the fates are transpiring against you. And I want to reassure you that what you're experiencing is not just being busy. It is more than that. So, yes, you are certainly busy. No one will deny that. But underneath that is the feeling that you're always reacting and never quite getting on top of anything. That is what can really start to wear on you.

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

And what this all adds up to is a feeling of overwhelm, which is what we're talking about today. And we're talking about it now because I'm guessing I'm not the only one feeling it. Back-to-school season has a way of stacking a lot of demands into a very small amount of time. Because work is still happening, home is still happening. But now, on top of that, everyone also needs rides, lunches, supplies, forms, and a transportation plan to make it through the week.

And sometimes there are legitimately multiple problems happening in your life all at once. So, you're not inventing an enormous project. It's really that life is just asking a whole lot of you. And when that happens and it feels like there is just one thing after another, it's not an automatic conclusion that you're doing something wrong. Because what if the overwhelm you're feeling actually makes complete sense? And that is where we're going.

I want to help you see that sometimes overwhelm is not actually a sign that you need a better system or a better attitude. Sometimes it's just feedback that everything no longer fits and you've got an opportunity to make some decisions about how and where you spend your time and energy. So, this episode today really is meant to empower you. I work with so many women who are juggling so much and overwhelm comes up all the time. And I want you to walk away feeling like you've got a way of managing it. All right? So, let's go.

One of the things I want to point out from the get-go is that often when we get overwhelmed, one of the first things many of us do is assume we need a better system. We think we need to be more organized. We might even think we just need a better planner, a more efficient routine, or just better time management. We start thinking if we could just get everything written down and color-coded correctly, maybe we wouldn't feel so overwhelmed. And none of those things are necessarily wrong. You might do better with a different routine if the one you currently have is leaving you constantly frazzled and chasing your tail.

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

So, those things like a planner or an upgraded routine can definitely be helpful if the problem itself is disorganization. But we are talking about something different because there is a difference between organization and capacity. Organization is when you've got a clear system to structure your time in order to take care of the tasks that need to be done. But capacity, on the other hand, that is different. That's when we're talking about the total amount of mental space you have available for all the things going on in your life. It's the total energy, time, and probably most importantly, the mental bandwidth you have available to you. And organization is the system you use to manage your capacity.

Or let's make this even more simple. You can think about it this way. A planner or a calendar can show you what needs to happen. That is organization. But that planner cannot create another three hours in your day when the number of things you've got to handle is more than what you have time or energy to take on. So, do you see the difference there? A schedule can organize your commitments, but a schedule or a planner or a skylight calendar cannot guarantee that no one gets sick, the car pool works perfectly, or the fridge keeps running instead of sounding like a rocket about to take off. And I think that's where we can get tripped up. We assume that if we still feel overwhelmed after making a plan, the plan must not be good enough or that we must not be good enough at following it.

But sometimes the problem isn't that your responsibilities are poorly organized. Sometimes there are genuinely more demands on you than what can reasonably fit into the time and energy you have available. Okay, I know I just blazed through that, so I want to slow down and say it again so you really, really hear this.

Sometimes there are too many demands on you that cannot be met in the time and energy you have available. And no planner is going to change that. You can organize 10 hours of responsibilities into a lovely, color-coded schedule. But if you've only got eight hours available, you still have 10

hours of responsibilities. And those two missing hours are not hiding somewhere in your calendar. You can't find them by planning harder.

But then, when we call that a planning failure, which we often do, we create a second problem for ourselves. Because now, we don't just have schedule changes, work demands, car pool problems, or sports practices. Now, we also have added on top of that, the belief that a more organized, capable, or disciplined person would be managing all of it better. And then we start judging ourselves for feeling overwhelmed. And we tell ourselves that we should be able to handle this. We have to get it together. So now, we're carrying the actual load of all the things on our plate plus the belief that the fact that we're struggling means that something is wrong with us.

But what if nothing is wrong with you? What if you're actually not bad at planning? What if your load is just too big for the capacity you currently have and that is not a moral failing on your part? Because recognizing that doesn't mean you give up. It also doesn't mean you stop planning, lower all of your standards, or decide that you're incapable of handling hard things. It just means you've identified the problem. It's a load and capacity mismatch.

Because if you misdiagnose the overload as disorganization, then you'll just keep trying to solve it by becoming more and more efficient, meaning you'll create more systems, squeeze tasks into smaller spaces, and find ways to fit even more into your life when it already feels too full to begin with. And eventually, that efficiency is only going to take you so far and it will lead to exhaustion, both mental and physical.

And the point here is this: Sometimes overwhelm is not telling you to get more organized. In fact, sometimes it's telling you the load itself needs to change.

And I think part of why an otherwise ordinary problem can feel so destabilizing is because new problems generally don't arrive on empty, easy days. Meaning your refrigerator doesn't usually stop working on a

quiet Saturday when you've got nothing else to do. It stops working in the middle of a full week while school schedules are still being ironed out, car pools are shifting, cross country and swim are going, work needs attention, and dozens of other things are taking up space in your brain.

And while a broken refrigerator may sound like just one problem, the visible problem is rarely the entire problem. So think about it. You have to figure out what's wrong. You've got to decide if the food can stay in the fridge or if it has to be moved to a cooler. You've got to call someone, schedule an appointment, be available when they arrive, figure out if the fridge is saveable, and maybe even start searching for a replacement. So, the fridge isn't working is really just the tip of the iceberg.

Or the same thing can happen with a car pool problem. At first go, it seems super simple. Someone can't drive. But now there are texts to send, schedules to rearrange, another driver to find, emails to the school to send, and decisions to make about everything that was supposed to happen before and after that drive. So, one small change in the car pool can end up affecting multiple people and multiple parts of your day. And many of these problems don't require hours of physical work. You may not spend the entire day dealing with a fridge or driving the car pool. But they do require thought. They require decisions. They require attention and coordination.

And the other thing they do is leave invisible but significant loops in your brain, things you've got to remember, follow up on, or solve later. So even when you're not actively working on the problem, part of your brain is still hanging on to it. And this is exactly why one more thing can sometimes feel so upsetting. You might find yourself having a much bigger reaction than you expected. The car pool changes and email lands in your inbox or someone asks you for one more favor and suddenly you feel like you're going to lose it.

And often on top of everything else, you start judging that reaction. You might wonder, why in the world am I getting so upset about this? This really

is not a big deal. I should be able to handle one schedule change or one broken appliance without losing it and becoming completely overwhelmed. But you're not just reacting to that one thing. You're reacting to that thing on top of a work deadline, the appointment you still need to schedule, the laundry that has been fluffed five times but still not folded, the practice you need to get your kid to, the unanswered email, and all of the other details you're trying to hang on to.

So, the problem might seem small when you look at it all alone, but you aren't experiencing it alone. You're experiencing it on top of everything else. And that is a subtle difference, but it matters because the last thing to happen may not be the biggest or the hardest thing that you're dealing with. It might just be the straw that broke the camel's back. So maybe your reaction isn't as disproportionate as it seems. Maybe it makes a whole lot more sense when you consider everything else going on in your life.

And if that's true, if each new demand we encounter is landing on top of an already large load, why do we still keep expecting ourselves to just absorb every new problem that shows up, but without adjusting anything else? Here is where I think there's a hidden expectation underneath all of this. I have seen this with many of the high-achieving women I work with. And that expectation is, I should be able to handle this, and I should be able to do it without letting anything else slide.

Because high achievers, they're used to being the people who figure things out. You know how to reorganize a schedule. You make the phone call. You find a replacement driver. You move the appointment. You solve the problem and get everyone where they need to go. Honestly, that is a real gift. It's part of what makes you successful. But because you can handle so many things, it becomes really easy to assume that you should be able to handle all of them at the same time.

So, all these new things get added, and the expectations you have for yourself stay exactly the same. So, the fridge breaks, but you still expect

yourself to get the same amount of work done. Or the car pool changes, but you still expect to start work at the same time you always do. Or the school schedule shifts, but you still expect to maintain the same routines, stay on top of the house, take care of everything and everybody, and do it all with the same energy you would have as if nothing unexpected happened. Like the new problem is supposed to take no time and use no energy and everything just goes as usual.

And when something inevitably slips, you don't see it as a predictable result of having more on your plate. You see it as evidence that you didn't handle the situation well. Meaning, you don't think, of course, I got less work done today. I spent two hours dealing with the fridge. Instead, you think, I didn't get enough work done today. Or you don't think, of course, dinner was thrown together. The carpool changed at the last minute. Instead, you think, I really need to get better at planning dinner.

And again, this is an important distinction because in one case, you're recognizing that the demands on you changed. But in the other, you're using the outcome as evidence that you're failing. And it's hard because doing less, especially for the high achievers, that can feel really irresponsible. Delaying something because you just didn't have time, that can feel like you're falling behind. Asking for help, ooh, that may feel like more of a pain than just doing it yourself. And doing something that's good enough instead of an A+ may feel like you're lowering your standards. And most people do not love any of those.

But you keep trying to keep everything at the same level even though stuff has come up and circumstances have changed. And then what is legitimately a busy stretch in your life becomes personal. So, it's no longer just I've got a lot going on. Now, it's I need to get it together. I don't know why I can't stay on top of anything. And that just adds shame and frustration to a situation that was already challenging to begin with.

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

And here is what I want to make super clear. There is a big difference between saying, I can handle hard things, and saying, I should be able to handle every hard thing at the same time without changing anything. So, saying "I can handle hard things," that's confidence. It means you trust yourself to respond, make decisions, and work through whatever is sitting in front of you. "I should be able to handle every hard thing at the same time without changing anything," on the other hand, that is an impossible expectation. It assumes that hard things should have no impact on your time, attention, or productivity. But that is not how life works. Hard things, they take from us. They require time and thought, and sometimes they require time to recover. And acknowledging that does not make you less capable of a human being. It just makes you honest about what handling hard stuff actually requires of you.

And if there will always be something, because there most certainly will be, then maybe handling it well cannot mean adding that something to the pile while refusing to let anything else change. So, maybe sometimes something has to move.

And I've said some version of there will always be something many, many times on this podcast. There will always be a schedule change, a crazy week at work, a sick kid, a car problem, a trip, an appointment, an unexpected expense. There will always be something that interrupts your plan.

In the past, when I've talked about this, my point has been that waiting for life to completely calm down before you take care of yourself is not a very useful strategy because I don't know about you, but for most of us, life doesn't really calm down. And if you keep waiting for a completely predictable life before you exercise or eat lunch, get enough sleep, or do anything else that matters to you, you may be waiting for a very long time. And I still agree with all of that. But I realize there is another side to there will always be something that I have not talked about as much.

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

So, the fact that there will always be something does not automatically mean that you are expected to absorb every new demand while keeping everything else exactly the same. It doesn't mean that whenever life gets hard, you should just buckle down, be more efficient, and find a way to keep producing at the same level. That's not flexibility. That is expecting yourself to operate as if nothing happened. And that is asking for you to be superhuman.

So, in contrast, flexibility may mean continuing to take care of yourself and take care of what matters, but adjusting what that looks like because things have changed. So maybe you planned a full workout but the carpool changed and you do something shorter. Or maybe you intended to finish a project today, but an unexpected appointment took two hours and now the project gets finished tomorrow. So, the original plan wasn't bad. You didn't fail to follow it, but the facts changed, so your plan changed too, because every new thing or every new demand is going to cost you something, like time, energy, attention, money, decision making, or even emotional capacity. And it often costs multiple of those things all at once.

And honestly, it doesn't matter if you consciously acknowledge the cost or not. It is still there. Meaning, even if you don't intentionally decide what can move, something will usually move anyway. Like you stay up later to finish the work, or you skip lunch because you're trying to catch up. You throw together whatever food is in front of you. You become impatient with your family, or you walk around resentful because everyone needs something from you and you've got nothing left to give. So, something has already moved, you just didn't choose what it was.

And I think that's another part we miss. We act like maintaining the original plan means nothing changes. But if the plan is only being maintained because you sacrificed your sleep or skipped a meal or pushed yourself past your limit, something did change. And the cost just came from you.

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

So, when we refuse to decide what can move, something interesting happens. The decision gets made for us. And the first things to go are usually our sleep, health, patience, or peace. And I don't think the answer here is to drop everything as soon as life becomes difficult. This is not an all bets are off approach where one unexpected problem means your plans and habits go out the window. But it's also not permission to automatically abandon the things that matter to you as soon as your schedule is busy.

So instead, it's really about making a conscious decision instead of pretending you're superhuman and doing the impossible. It's asking, okay, given what's changed, what makes sense now? What matters? What can stay? And what needs to look a little different, at least temporarily anyway? Because there will always be something. And when something does come up, it does not mean everything else has to stay exactly the same. Sometimes something has to move.

But then you have to decide what moves. And when you're already overwhelmed, even that can feel like one more problem to solve. So, how do you make that decision without turning it into another overwhelming project?

Okay, well, so the last thing I want to do here is give you a complicated five-step process to go through when you're already overwhelmed. You don't need another system to manage or a long list of questions to answer. Instead, I want you to ask yourself one question: What can move? That's it. Not, how do I fit this in without changing anything else, and not, how do I get all this done? Just, if this new thing needs more of my time or energy or attention, what can move in order to make room for it?

And once you identify what can move, or what really what has to move, you've got three basic options. You can move it later, you can make it smaller, or you can hand it off. First, let's talk about move it to later. So, maybe the task matters, but it doesn't need to happen today. Maybe the email gets answered tomorrow, or the errand waits until the weekend. Or

the project gets paused a few days while you deal with whatever is happening right now. And to be clear, later does not mean never. It also does not mean you're procrastinating or failing to follow through. Really, to keep it very simple, later means you've decided that something else needs your attention first. That is it.

And then next is to make it smaller. So maybe the task still happens, but it happens in a smaller or simpler way. Like dinner is takeout or the workout is 20 minutes instead of an hour. The email is clear but brief. The house, maybe it looks a little messier for a few days. Because not everything can get your maximum effort and not everything needs your maximum effort, especially when there is more being asked of you than what you've got. Sometimes, good enough is not a lower standard. Sometimes it's just the most appropriate standard for the situation you're dealing with.

And last, you can hand it off. So, that means maybe someone else can make the phone call, drive the carpool, complete the form, pick up dinner, or handle one part of the problem. And be forewarned, that person may not do it exactly the way that you would. And that's okay. Just because someone doesn't do it your way, that does not mean it has to remain your task to handle. But it also means letting someone else do it how they do it.

And I'm mentioning this specifically because I often run into this problem when coaching. I'll have a client who says she wants to delegate or offload to someone else. But when push comes to shove, they really don't want to hand it off because it won't be done her way. And that is a very real roadblock and one that you may need to confront. And you have an opportunity here to decide. Am I willing to let someone else do this differently than I would, so I can take this off my plate and focus on this other thing that really needs my attention now?

And that is really what all three of these options have in common. Something can still matter without happening today, at full scale, or entirely

because of you. You are not deciding that it doesn't matter. You're just deciding how it fits along with everything else that needs your attention.

And to be completely transparent here, you may not love any of these options. Sometimes there is no one answer that allows everything to happen exactly the way you wanted it to. But that's not really the goal. The goal is to make an intentional decision instead of continuing to add things until something falls apart by default. And remember that moving something doesn't mean that it was unimportant. It doesn't mean you're giving up on it either, and it doesn't mean you failed. It means you recognize that you're a human and your time and energy are limited and you made a conscious choice about how to use them.

So, the next time something else piles onto your already very busy day and you start to feel the swirl of overwhelm sinking in, resist the urge to immediately ask, how am I going to fit this all in? And instead, ask, what can move? And then next, how can it move? Can you move it to later? Make it smaller or hand it off? Because the goal isn't to keep rearranging everything until you finally reach a point where the entire list is done. Because honestly, I don't think that point exists.

And this brings me to one final thought. I think many of us are living as if peace is waiting for us at the bottom of our very long to-do list. Meaning, once the emails are answered, or the schedule is settled, the house is cleaned up, and everyone has what they need, then we can relax. But the problem is that the to-do list just keeps growing. So, the fridge will eventually be fixed. The carpool will certainly get worked out. The form will be completed and the email will be answered. And then, another part of your life will need your attention. That's how it works. And it doesn't mean that your life is going wrong. It really means that life requires ongoing maintenance. Because there will always be meals to make, schedules to coordinate, problems to solve, and people who need something from us. You can count on that.

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

So, it doesn't make sense for the goal to be to reach a permanent state where everything is finished, nothing unexpected happens, and no one needs anything. That finish line just does not exist. So, the goal instead is to decide what matters right now, what can wait, and what you are consciously choosing not to carry right now. And I think that last part is actually pretty important because an unfinished task is not always evidence that you're behind. Really, it's just evidence that you made a choice about where your limited time and energy are going.

So, that means you can leave an email until tomorrow without making yourself irresponsible. You can do something adequately without deciding you've lowered all your standards. And you can let someone else handle something without thinking that you should have done it yourself. And you can leave something unfinished and it is not an emergency.

So, maybe then the answer to overwhelm is not figuring out how to finally get everything done. Maybe it's accepting that everything will never be done and learning how to choose what gets your attention now versus later, or what can be given to someone else. Because there will always be something, but not everything has to be yours and not everything has to happen today. And when something new comes in, something else can move. You do not have to get everything done to be handling your life well.

And if you want help with this, let's go. When you coach with me, we sort through what needs your attention and decide what can move and help you stop treating every unfinished task as evidence that you're behind. Check out my website, send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact, and let's talk about how coaching can help you handle your busy life without having to do everything all at once. All right? Thank you again for hanging out with me, and I'll catch you again next week.

—

Ep #220: When There's Always Something: You Don't Have to Fit It All In

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.