Ep #221: When It Feels Like Your Body Is Broken: Adjusting to Injury and Illness

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 #221. When injuries and illness keep changing how you can move, it can start to feel like your body is failing you. Today, we're talking about how to adjust to what your body needs right now, without deciding that you're broken.

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, physically, it has been a little rough around here lately. And by a little rough, I mean that over the past few months, it has literally felt like one thing after another. It started in April when I developed plantar fasciitis. And if you've ever had that before, you know how annoying it is. My heel hurt, running made it worse, to the point that eventually, I had to stop running all together. And I ended up taking months off, which I did not particularly enjoy, but I knew that continuing to run on a bum heel was not really helping my cause.

So, fine, I couldn't run, and I decided that I would focus more on swimming instead. So, I started swimming a few days a week so I could still get some cardio in without pounding on my heel. And while swimming is probably one of my weakest exercises, I've learned to like it and even enjoy it sometimes. And then, I did something wonky to my lat. I still don't know what I did, but I strained something around my lat, my shoulder, and my triceps to the point that swimming started to hurt. And even certain upper body lifting exercises started to hurt. And sitting at my desk, typing could even aggravate it. So, there went swimming and a number of my usual lifting exercises along with it.

I started physical therapy. I took out the lifts that aggravated things. I changed up my workouts. And then, I got sick. And I do not mean a little sniffle. I got some cootie that knocked me on my tail, like to the point that I

could not get out of bed. And that does not happen here. It took over a week to feel halfway normal again, and that is totally not me. And then, because life is just crazy that way, and just as I was finally starting to run again, I rolled my ankle rolling out our team's route for cross country practice. I heard the pop, then the pain, and then by night, my ankle had swollen to twice its normal size, and I am still waiting for the bruising to go away.

So, now, in addition to plantar fasciitis in one foot, the lat injury, physical therapy, and the nasty cootie, I had a giant swollen ankle on the other foot to add to my collection of woes. Awesome. And so I'm not telling you all of this because I want to spend the next 30 minutes boohooing and complaining about every body part that is hurting. Honestly, each one of these problems by itself is manageable, and none of them is the end of the world. People deal with far more serious physical problems than what I am describing here, and I get that. Really, it's the accumulation of all of it that has started to wear on me because every time I adjusted to one limitation or found another way to move, something else happened.

I couldn't run, so I started swimming more. Then I couldn't swim, so I adjusted my lifting and kept biking and walking. Then, I got sick and couldn't really do much of anything. And just as I was starting to come back and be able to run, I messed up my ankle. And at some point, it stopped feeling like I had a few separate unrelated problems and started feeling more like my body was breaking down, almost like it was revolting against me. And that has been the real challenge for me. Because my brain immediately wants to know why. Is it my age? Is this perimenopause? Is this the result of years of having a go hard or go home mentality? Did I push myself too much? Did I not recover enough? Is this all connected somehow? Or is this just an impressive but really annoying run of bad luck?

And honestly, maybe the most unsettling question of all is whether my body is going to keep doing this. And I don't know. I don't have a neat

explanation that ties together all of this. Maybe there are changes I need to make in how I train and how I recover. Maybe age and hormones do have a role. Maybe I've just had a really unfortunate few months. And maybe it's a combination of multiple different things. But what I do know is that this has impacted me more than a stretch of missed workouts normally would. And that's because for me, exercise has never been only about exercise. And maybe that's true for you too.

You might exercise because you want to take care of your physical health. You may want to add muscle, improve your heart health, manage your weight, or stay active as you get older, and lots of people exercise for those reasons. But if movement is an established part of your life, it probably also gives you something beyond the physical benefits. Maybe it's how you manage stress after a really hard day. Or maybe it's the one chunk of time in your day when no one is asking you for anything. Maybe it gives you space to think, or maybe on the flip side, it's a much needed break from thinking. Maybe it's a place to feel steady when everything else in your life feels like chaos.

And maybe it's one of the places where you feel most capable, as in you lift something you couldn't lift before. Or you run faster or farther than you thought you could. Or you finish a really hard workout even though part of you wanted to stop. Whatever it is, over time, those experiences became evidence that you can depend on yourself and handle hard things.

So, when you lose access to exercise because of an illness, injury, surgery, chronic pain, exhaustion, or some other change in your body, you don't just miss the workout. You may also miss the routine, the release, the challenge, and the confidence you get from it. You may lose one of the primary ways that you take care of yourself at the exact time you need it the most. And that creates a really frustrating loop. The thing that you normally would use to help you deal with stress and frustration is the exact thing you're stressed and frustrated about not being able to do. You want to

go for a run and clear your head, but not being able to run is part of what you need to clear your head about in the first place. Or you want to lift because it helps you feel strong, but your injury is making you feel anything but strong.

So, you want movement to help you feel like yourself, but your body is not allowing you to move in the ways that you normally would. And that can be super destabilizing. I don't know how else to describe it. Not being able to exercise as you normally would can make you feel off, especially if exercise has become part of how you see yourself. And you may know that taking some time away does not fundamentally change who you are. But emotionally, it may not feel that way. And I think it's important to acknowledge that before just trying to look on the bright side and telling yourself to focus on what you can still do.

Because like I said, I've been looking for what I can do this entire time. When I couldn't run, I changed course. When swimming aggravated my lat, I changed course again. I took the painful exercises out of my lifting routine, started physical therapy, and adjusted my workouts to find what I could tolerate. So, I am doing what I can. I'm not refusing to adapt, and I'm not insisting that running is the only form of movement that counts.

But here is the important lesson I am learning. Doing what you can does not make you stop wanting to do what you can't. And I think this is where some of our well-intended advice falls short. So, when someone is injured or physically limited in some way, we're very quick to say, just focus on what you can do. And yes, that is certainly useful advice. Looking for what is still possible can help you continue taking care of yourself instead of deciding that all bets are off because your usual routine is unavailable. But sometimes, we treat that advice like finding an alternative should just solve the entire problem. Meaning, you can't run, bike. Okay. You can't bike, swim. You can't do lower body exercises, fine, work your upper body. Or can't do 45 minutes, take a walk, or do 10. Well, from a practical

standpoint, those all sound like reasonable options, but emotionally, that replacement may not give you exactly what you lost.

I worked with a client who had a significant leg injury. Before her injury, she was an Iron Man triathlete. So, running, biking, and swimming, these were not casual hobbies for her. She spent years training, competing, and identifying as someone who could do extremely difficult things with her body. And then, she got injured, and suddenly, she couldn't run. She also couldn't bike. She couldn't do flip turns in the water because those also aggravated her injury. And she couldn't do many of the lower body strength training exercises that she was used to doing.

Now, there were still things she could do, and we talked through those things. She swam but did open turns instead of flip turns. She lifted her upper body and did whatever lower body exercises she had clearance to do. So she followed her treatment plan. She made adjustments. She did whatever she could to help herself recover. But that did not make the experience easy because this was not just missing a few workouts here. She had lost access to a major part of her life and how she knew herself. She missed hardcore training. She missed competing. She missed the routine and the community that she had built around exercise, and she missed feeling powerful in her body. And we needed to make room for that loss in her life.

Meaning, we needed to let her be disappointed, angry, and sad without immediately trying to move her out of those feelings and onto focus on the positive. Because she had experienced a real loss. It may not have been permanent, but it was long, and it was very real for her as she moved through her injury, which took over a year to recover from. And the point here is that grief is real, and that loss of an important part of yourself is also real. And that doesn't mean you're being dramatic, and it also doesn't mean you're ungrateful for what your body can still do. And it doesn't mean you've given up on recovering. Really, what it means is that something important

to you has changed, and you have feelings about it. That is a normal human response.

But I think sometimes we rush toward gratitude because we're uncomfortable with grief. We tell ourselves that other people have it worse. We remind ourselves that the injury could have been so much worse. We list all the activities we can still do and tell ourselves that we should be thankful for them. And all of those things are true. I am grateful that I can still bike and walk and continue lifting even with modifications. My client can be grateful that she can still swim even if she has to adjust, and she can be grateful that she can still lift her upper body. And we can still be annoyed that we can't run or swim the way we normally would do right now. Those feelings do not cancel each other out.

Because here's an important takeaway. Gratitude does not mean you have to pretend you haven't lost anything. And being disappointed does not mean you don't appreciate what you do have. So, yes, look for what you can do. Make the modifications. Follow your treatment plan. Find other ways to move if there are options that are safe and available to you. But do not use focus on what you can do as another way to tell yourself that you shouldn't be upset. Because there are two parts to this. Sometimes, the next step is a practical one, and you change the workout. And sometimes, the next step is emotional where you acknowledge, this is hard. You miss what you used to be able to do, and you wish the circumstances were different.

You are allowed the both and here. And the problem isn't that you're disappointed by your limitation. The problem happens when that limitation stops being something you experience and starts becoming a verdict about your body as a whole. And that is what I noticed happening for me. The facts here are pretty simple. I have plantar fasciitis. I strained my back. I got sick. I injured my ankle. And right now, there are multiple things I either cannot do or have to modify. That's it. Those circumstances are real. I'm

not imagining the pain. I'm not making up the bruising and swelling that is still sitting on my ankle. And positive thinking does not make an injury disappear.

But taking all of that and making the declaration of my body is broken, that is different. That's not just a description of what's happening. That is a conclusion about what all of those things mean. And because multiple things happened within a relatively short period of time, my brain has started lumping it all into one larger story of, my body is falling apart. It doesn't work the way it used to, and this must be what getting older is going to feel like. And that is an important jump because I went from having a few body parts that hurt to feeling like I have a body that no longer works, but those are not the same thing.

And maybe you've done this too. Maybe your knee started hurting, and you had to stop running. Then, your back flared up when you tried a different type of exercise. Maybe you noticed that you weren't recovering as fast as you used to or that workouts you used to tolerate pretty easily now are leaving you exhausted. And instead of seeing those as separate pieces of information, you combine them all into one larger verdict of, I'm getting old. My body is failing me. I'll never be able to do what I used to do.

And this doesn't mean the limitations aren't real. It doesn't mean you need to fake yourself into believing that your body feels great when it doesn't. Really, it means paying attention to when you have shifted from describing the problem right in front of you to making a sweeping conclusion about your entire body and your future. Because once you decide that your body is broken, you know what comes next. Your brain starts collecting all the evidence to prove you're right. So, every ache is proof. Every slow recovery is proof. Every exercise you have to modify, also proof.

And then meanwhile, your brain filters out any evidence that doesn't fit that story. And you might discount the things that you still can do. So, you might ignore that you're showing up for physical therapy or adjusting your

workouts or slowly regaining your strength. Those things may not even register because your brain has already locked into the conclusion that your body no longer works. And this matters because what you tell yourself about your body is going to affect how you relate to your body.

So, instead of seeing your body as something that needs attention and time, you start seeing it as the problem. You may get super angry with it or even worry about what it's going to do next, or you might even be afraid to do anything at all because you stopped trusting your body to hold up. But either way, my body is broken, that leaves very little wiggle room. It takes your body when it's injured, recovering, changing, or temporarily limited and turns it into a body that is straight up failing.

And I don't think the answer here is to replace your thinking with something full of rainbows and unicorns but is unbelievable like, my body is perfect and everything is fine. No. Everything does not feel fine right now, and pretending otherwise would not help. But you can be more accurate. You could say something like, parts of my body are giving me trouble right now. My physical capacity is different than it was a few months ago. Or you can even say, I'm frustrated. I don't know why this keeps happening or how long it will take to recover. Those things still leave room for the reality of what you're experiencing. But they also don't turn what's happening right now into a permanent judgment about your body or your health. And that is an important distinction.

At the same time, while being more accurate about what's happening, it's helpful in some ways, it does not answer the question that your brain really wants answered, and that is, why is this happening in the first place? Because when your body isn't working the way you expected to, it makes sense that you would want an explanation. I know I do. I want to know if this is all related to the way I train or if perimenopause is totally affecting my recovery. I want to know if I've pushed too hard or rested too little, did I have bad form, or did I miss something that I should have seen earlier?

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And I know I'm not alone here because we like answers because if you can identify a cause, then maybe you can control what happens next.

Meaning, if it's the way you train, maybe you can train differently. Or if you need more recovery, you can recover more. Or if there's a physical problem that needs treatment, you can treat it. Or if you somehow did something to cause it, you can make sure to never do that again. This is what high achievers do. We look for the problem so we can solve it. And that feels better than doing nothing. And honestly, there is nothing wrong with gathering information. There are absolutely times when you need medical care or physical therapy, testing, or a change in how you exercise. That's all part of taking care of yourself.

But your search for useful information to explain why things aren't working can easily turn into an interrogation session. And you can tell where you're headed by listening to the questions you ask yourself. It will sound like, what did I do wrong? Should I have known better? Did I push too hard? Did I ignore something? Have I permanently damaged myself? So, at that point, you're not asking questions so you can care for yourself better. It starts to sound more like looking for a reason to blame yourself. Or you might be looking for certainty that no one can give you yet.

And the hard part here is that sometimes there isn't just one explanation that neatly ties everything together. Maybe you did make some training mistakes. Your body may be changing, hormones, stress, sleep, recovery, they all may be contributing. Or you may just be having a really annoying string of bad luck. And when you go to troubleshoot this, you may eventually figure out a way to prevent these things from happening again in the future. But here's the thing. You do not need to solve the entire mystery before you can decide how you're going to take care of yourself today. And whatever caused your limitation, here's something else to keep in mind.

Your current capacity is not a measure of your character or worth. I really want you to hear that, okay? Your physical capacity is not a measure of

your character. I think it's really important for you to keep reminding yourself of that as you go through the process of recovery or regaining strength. Because high achievers are really, really good at turning capacity into a grade. Meaning, if you can complete the hard workout, lift the heavy weight, or maintain the pace you expected, you're doing awesome. You're strong, disciplined, and taking care of yourself.

But if for some reason your body cannot do those things, it feels like you're falling short. You might be thinking to yourself, you're getting weak, losing your edge, or you're becoming less athletic or letting yourself go. And that's when information about your body starts becoming a judgment about who you are.

But your capacity is not a grade. It's just information. It tells you what your body can handle right now, today. And right now matters because your capacity is not the same every day or in any season of your life. What you can do today may be different from what you did six months ago or even last week. And responding to that information and adjusting accordingly, that does not make you weak. It means you're paying attention. And I don't know about you, but I'm guessing that may be hard for some of you.

Most of the women I work with are super comfortable doing more. But they are not as comfortable holding back. Think about it. Going hard feels strong. Adding weight to the barbell feels strong. Running, swimming, or biking farther or faster, that feels strong. Those are visible accomplishments. You can measure them and see that you did something difficult. But right now, strong might look very different. Strong might mean stopping an exercise when it hurts instead of finishing out the set. It might mean following your physical therapy plan instead of testing whether you can get away with more. It might mean changing your workout, taking another recovery day, or allowing your body to heal even when it feels like it's taking way longer than you wanted it to.

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Because here is a hard lesson I'm learning right now. Discipline is not always making yourself do more. Sometimes, it's following the plan even when that plan asks you to do less. And that is not easy. It requires restraint, patience, and adaptability. And those might be harder skills for you than just pushing through. Is that just me? But if your current capacity is different, the goal here is not to use it as evidence that you're weak or lazy or failing in some way. Instead, the idea is to let it just be information. And then, use that information to decide what taking care of yourself actually looks like today. And you may not like the answer, but you don't have to like it in order to accept it.

And honestly, this is where I think acceptance gets misunderstood. Accepting your current capacity does not mean being happy that you cannot run. It doesn't mean pretending that riding your bike feels the same or that a modified workout gives you everything your old workout did. Acceptance also doesn't mean feeling grateful every second, deciding that your injury happened for a reason, or turning your experience into a lesson about resilience. And acceptance definitely doesn't mean giving up on healing or deciding that you'll never return to the activities that you love doing. Really, acceptance just means acknowledging, this is what my body can do right now, whether I like it or not. That's it.

And the key here is that you are not fighting reality. You can wish the circumstances were different while acknowledging that they are not different today. You can also want to run again without pretending that it's safe to run right now. You can also work toward recovery without fighting the fact that healing is where you are right now and it feels like it's taking forever. Because fighting really doesn't change it. It just adds another layer of suffering onto an already challenging situation.

Because now, you're not just dealing with an injury, you're also spending your energy arguing with yourself that the injury shouldn't have happened or that the recovery shouldn't be taking this long or that your body should

be able to do more than it currently can do. And I'm saying this because I'm currently living it. I'm not sitting over here peacefully walking or biking, totally unfazed by the fact that I cannot run or swim the way I want.

Yeah, I'm annoyed. I'm frustrated. I'm worried about how long some of this is going to take to heal. And acceptance does not make those feelings disappear. It just allows me to stop using those feelings as evidence that something has gone wrong with how I'm handling this. And a few episodes ago, I talked about how a tool can be working even when it doesn't create the perfect result you hoped for. Well, this is another example of that. Modifying workouts works if it allows you to keep moving without aggravating an injury. Physical therapy works if it helps you recover even if the process feels slower than you want. Rest works if it gives your body what it needs, even if you feel restless while doing it. So, the fact that adjustment does not make you happy does not mean it's the wrong adjustment. And the fact that you're still disappointed does not mean that you failed to accept your circumstances.

Acceptance is not measured by how cheerful you are about the situation. Really, acceptance is reflected in whether you're willing to work with the reality that is in front of you. Because once you stop demanding that your body be different right now, you can stop wasting that energy and put it toward how you're going to take care of yourself today. And that brings me to the question I keep reminding myself of right now. Instead of asking about how I can keep doing what I was doing, now I'm asking, what can I do to take care of myself right now? That is a very different question. The first question keeps the old plan at the forefront. And it assumes the goal is to get as close as possible to what you were doing before despite the circumstances.

So, you keep looking for ways to maintain your same workout and the same intensity even though your body may not be able to perform up to your expectations. But the second question puts your current body at the

center, not the body you had six months ago and not the body you think you should have right now. We're talking about what you have to work with today. And that is what I want you to keep coming back to. You're zooming in, not zooming out, and looking at what you can do today. And your answer may change from one day to the next.

Taking care of yourself might mean modifying your workout, finding a different way to move, following your treatment plan, prioritizing sleep, or giving yourself more time to recover. And sometimes, it may mean not repeatedly testing an injury to see if it's still hurts. I know I'm guilty of that one. And the big takeaway here is that taking care of yourself does not always look the same day in and day out. Sometimes, it means challenging your body and going hard. Other times, it means backing off and giving it what it needs. And the goal is not to prove that you can always find another way to exercise. Though I admit, I got very caught up in that when all of these injuries started happening.

The goal is actually to work with your body, not against it, even when it cannot give you exactly what you want. And remember that right now is not the same as forever. You may heal and get back to the types of exercises you love. You may find new ways to move all together. And you may also learn that taking care of yourself right now requires a different kind of strong than what you're used to.

So, while your capacity right now may have changed, your ability to show up for yourself has not. Because you are not broken. You're learning how to work with the body you have right now, and that most definitely is strength too. All right? If you want help with this, let's go. When you coach with me, I will help you adjust your plan when your circumstances change without treating those changes like a personal failure. Check out my website, send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact, and let's talk about how coaching can help you stay on your own side and keep you taking

care of 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.