Ep #222: Is It Really the Wrong Time? How to Tell Strategy From Avoidance

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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This is the *Strong Is a Mindset* podcast, Episode #222. Sometimes choosing not to do something is a strategic decision. Other times, it's a choice to avoid something uncomfortable. Today, we're talking about how to tell the difference without using the answer as a reason to judge yourself.

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, I had a bit of a wake-up call a few weeks ago, and it has really stuck with me so much that I decided to make it into an episode because I'm guessing I am not the only one who has run into this. So this came from a conversation I had with a coach colleague, and we meet regularly to talk about what we're working on, ask for guidance, get coaching when we need it, and really just troubleshoot whenever we get stuck.

And during one of our recent meetings, I was talking with her about work and where I felt like I was turning in circles. And in particular, we were talking about social media. And if you've listened to this podcast for any length of time, you may already know that I don't really love social media. I do not love creating posts. I don't like taking or posting pictures of myself. I do not want to spend hours making reels or trying to figure out what Instagram is looking for this week. So, over time, I have pulled back from it, and I have plenty of legitimate reasons for that. I have a weekly podcast. I work with my clients. I have a family. I coach cross country.

And at the time I was having this conversation with my colleague, school had just started, I began physical therapy, and then I got super sick. So I really did have a lot going on. None of that was invented. But as I was explaining all of this, my coach friend just asked me a question. She asked whether my decision not to put myself out there felt like a strategic decision or if it felt more like avoidance. And that question basically stopped me in

my tracks because I wanted to say it was a strategy. I wanted to say that I had carefully considered social media and made a deliberate business decision that it was not where I wanted to spend my time and energy.

And some of that might be true. I may ultimately decide that social media is not an effective or sustainable way for me to put myself out there. But here was the problem: social media was not the only thing I wasn't doing. I also wasn't doing much networking or reaching out to people. I wasn't pursuing speaking opportunities or making new connections. I wasn't doing many of the things that would require me to put myself and my work in front of people. So if I had strategically decided not to focus on social media, I should have been able to point to what I had decided to do instead. But I couldn't do that. And that was the part that did not feel super awesome because, yes, my reasons were real. I was genuinely busy, I had been sick, and then injured, and I don't really love social media. But a reason can be true and still not be the full, entire truth.

And if I'm being fully transparent here, maybe I wasn't really making a thoughtful decision about where to spend my time. Maybe I was also avoiding the discomfort of being visible, initiating conversations, talking about my work, and possibly hearing no. And I have not stopped thinking about that conversation with my colleague since then.

So if you zoom out here, this is not just about running a business or posting on Instagram. We do this in many areas of our lives. You may tell yourself that you're waiting for a better time to start exercising because your schedule is just super busy right now. You might say that you haven't changed the way you eat because you still need to find the right plan, or you may decide that you need more information, more time, or more confidence before you take the next step and move forward in any area of your life.

And your reasons may be completely legitimate, but I think it's also really important to ask if those reasons are also helping you avoid something that

you just don't want to feel. And that is what we're going to pull apart today. So now, before you hear all this and start questioning every decision you've ever made, or worse yet, before you use this as another reason to beat yourself up, because that is exactly what I did, I want to be super clear about something.

Choosing not to do something does not automatically mean you're avoiding it. Sometimes, not doing the thing is absolutely the right decision. You may genuinely not have the capacity for it right now. Your body may need rest. The timing may not make sense. The task may no longer be a priority, or the way you've been trying to do it may not be working for your life. And you may have very consciously decided that something else in your life needs more of your attention right now. And sometimes, the potential benefit of doing something is just not worth what it would cost you in time, energy, money, or even well-being. So that is not avoidance. That's different. That is taking everything into consideration and making a judgment call. And that is discernment.

And honestly, that connects directly to what we've been talking about over the last few episodes. Not everything will fit into your life at the same time. And sometimes, strength really does look like stopping, scaling back, or choosing a different direction. And all of that still holds true. So I'm not suggesting that every time you skip a workout, postpone a project, or change your plan, you need to accuse yourself of making excuses. And I'm also not suggesting that you should just push through illness, injury, exhaustion, or an already impossible schedule just to prove that you can squeeze in one more thing. That is definitely not the point here.

The point is also not to put every decision under a microscope and assume you have some hidden motive for everything you choose not to do. Instead, I want us to approach this with curiosity instead of judgment. And if there is a part of your life where you keep saying you want something, but you also keep finding reasons to not move forward on it, it might be worth taking a

closer look at that. And not so you can accuse yourself or beat yourself up for making excuses. We're taking a closer look so you can understand what is behind the decision that you're actually making, because the decision itself may not tell you whether it's strategy or avoidance. And this is where things get interesting because strategy and avoidance can look exactly the same from the outside, because you cannot always determine what's happening just by looking at the decision someone made. So we can use exercise as an example.

Imagine two women who both decide to skip their workout today. The first woman, she has been sick. She still feels tired, maybe a little better, but not fully recovered, and she's consciously decided that another day of rest is more helpful than forcing herself to push through a workout. She knows why she's resting, and she's got a plan to reassess how she feels tomorrow and will do an easier workout when it's her first day back. Now, the second woman also says she's tired, but she's not sick or injured or physically depleted, and she sees the workout on her calendar, starts thinking about how hard it's going to feel, and decides she'll wait and do it another day when she's got more energy. So from the outside, both women did the exact same thing. They skipped a workout. But even though it's the same decision, they are not serving the same purpose here.

For the first woman, skipping the workout supports her larger goal because resting is part of taking care of her body and getting her back to exercise safely. For the second woman, skipping the workout may be helping her avoid the discomfort of getting started. And to be clear, this doesn't mean the second woman is lazy or that she should force herself through every workout, no matter how she feels. No. Really, what this all means is that “I'm tired” may not be the whole story about why she made the decision she did.

And the same person can make both of these decisions, but at different times. There may be a day when skipping your workout is the most

thoughtful choice you can make based on everything happening in your life. And there may be another day when skipping it is a way to avoid doing something you just don't feel like doing. So the behavior is the same, but what's driving it is different. And that's what we're trying to look for here. What is driving the behavior?

And the same thing can happen with food. Two women may both decide not to follow a particular eating plan. So one woman looks at the plan and realizes that it is overly restrictive, requires more time than she's got, and includes all kinds of food rules that she knows she can't sustain. So she decides not to follow the plan because she knows it does not fit for her life, and she chooses a more realistic plan instead. Now, the other woman also decides not to follow her plan. And instead, she moves on to researching another plan, and then another one. And in her search, she finds that every plan has something wrong with it. None of them feels quite right. And she keeps telling herself that she'll get serious once she finds the best approach, but she never actually chooses anything. And here, both women could say the plan wasn't right for me. And both of them may be telling the truth. But for one woman, rejecting the plan helped her make a more useful decision. And for the other, rejecting the plan may have just helped her put off the discomfort of committing to anything.

So the distinction here is not always in the action itself. It's really about what your decision is doing for you. You can even look at it this way. Is the decision helping you protect your health, manage your capacity, or direct your energy toward something that matters more? Or is your decision helping you avoid uncertainty, effort, vulnerability, disappointment, or the possibility that you might not succeed? Those are not easy questions to answer, but that is where the money is at. That is where there is so much good information to be found. And this is why it's so important to look at more than just what you did or didn't do.

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Not doing something is just the visible part of the decision. That is the tip of the iceberg. But it does not tell you what's happening underneath it. And sometimes, you may not immediately see the difference because avoidance is subtle and it's sneaky, and it rarely sounds obvious. It rarely sounds like, "Hey, I'm afraid to do this, so I'm just going to avoid it." No. If it were that obvious, it would be so much easier to recognize. So instead, avoidance usually sounds practical and completely reasonable. It sounds more like, "This isn't the right time. I have too much going on right now. I need to do a little more research. I haven't found the right plan yet. I'll start when things calm down."

And again, any one of those statements could be true. That is what makes avoidance so convincing. It doesn't always require that you make up a ridiculous excuse or tell yourself a blatant lie. Avoidance can take something that's completely true and use it to build a super strong case for why you should not take action or move forward. So, yes, your schedule is busy. Yes, you could do more research. Yes, there might be a better plan. But the question is whether those facts are helping you make a decision or if they're helping you put off making one.

And I think this can be especially challenging for high-achievers to recognize because high-achievers rarely avoid doing something by doing absolutely nothing. That is not in your DNA. So you may be doing plenty. You can answer emails. You can reorganize your calendar. You can listen to another podcast, read another book, research another eating plan, or compare five different exercise programs. You can clean your office, update your website, take care of your family, and check off 15 other things from your very long to-do list. So you can have an incredibly productive day and still avoid the one thing that feels most uncomfortable.

And honestly, the fact that you're so productive can make the avoidance that much harder to see because you can point to everything else that you've accomplished as proof that you aren't really avoiding anything. So

no, you are not lazy, not at all. You're actually working extremely hard. But productivity and avoidance, they can exist at the same time. It's fascinating. And how do we do that? Well, sometimes we avoid the work that feels most uncomfortable by doing a lot of other work that feels safer.

I know I am totally guilty of this. This is where you balance your checkbook instead of writing the email that you've been putting off. I do this all the time. Or you continue to research instead of just choosing. Or you plan endlessly instead of beginning, or tweak repeatedly before jumping in and testing an idea. Or something that I see all the time in the women I coach, you take care of everyone else because it feels safer than setting a boundary and making room for yourself. This one is so common. This is huge.

So all of these behaviors cause you to remain active and super productive, but without having to face the uncertainty, vulnerability, or possibility of failure that comes with taking the action that you keep putting off. So avoidance doesn't necessarily look like vegetating on the couch and refusing to do anything. Sometimes, it looks like working super hard around the thing you don't want to do. And this is not about criticizing yourself for being productive or deciding that every preparatory step is actually avoidance. No, research, planning, and preparation, those are all useful until they become substitutes for moving forward. That is key.

Because at some point, more research is not going to give you a better answer. Another plan is not going to make you feel more ready, and a calmer week may not be anywhere on the horizon. But if you keep circling the same decision while waiting for the discomfort to disappear, it may be worth asking whether the thing that you're waiting for is actually necessary, or if waiting has just become your way to avoid getting started. Because for a little while, deciding not to act, it can make you feel better. And that temporary relief is a super important piece to this. And with that in mind, here is another clue that can help you recognize avoidance.

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Pay attention to the relief you feel when you decide not to do something, because that relief is a clue. So, as an example, imagine you've been thinking about starting a new exercise routine. You've chosen a gym, you've looked at the schedule, you have found a class that you want to try. But as the day gets closer, you start thinking about everything that can make this difficult. You are tired. You don't know anyone there. You don't know what you're going to wear. You're not sure that you'll be able to keep up. So you decide, hey, this week is already busy. I'll just go next week instead.

And the second you decide to put it off until next week, you feel better. You exhale. There's relief there because now you no longer have to walk into that new gym. You don't have to wonder whether everyone else around you will be more fit than you. You don't have to feel awkward, uncomfortable, or unsure of yourself, and the pressure disappears, for a little while, anyway. And the same thing happens when you decide to do more research before you change how you eat. As long as you're still researching or thinking about it, you don't have to choose a plan. And if you don't choose a plan, you don't have to find out whether you can actually follow it. Or maybe there's an email you've been putting off sending because the response you might get is no.

So the minute you decide this probably is not the best time to send it today, you no longer have to risk that rejection and feeling icky. And that relief is real, but it's also short-lived. Because sometimes the relief you feel after making a decision doesn't mean it was the right decision. Sometimes it just means you successfully escaped the discomfort. But let me make an important point here. Relief alone doesn't prove that you were avoiding something. You may feel relieved after canceling an obligation that genuinely did not fit into your life. You may feel relieved when you decide to rest an injury instead of trying to keep pushing through it. You may feel relieved after turning down an opportunity that was never right for you in the first place. So feeling relief does not automatically mean that you made

the wrong choice, but it is useful information because our brains naturally want to get away from discomfort.

And if postponing something allows you to avoid feeling exposed, uncertain, embarrassed, inconvenienced, or disappointed, your brain gets an immediate reward, and it learns that avoiding the action makes the uncomfortable feeling go away, at least for the moment. The problem is that relief doesn't last. You may feel better when you cancel the workout, but later, you're still frustrated because exercise is not happening. You may feel better when you postpone a difficult conversation, but the tension in your relationship is still there. You may feel better when you decide not to apply for the job, but you're still unhappy with the work you're doing now.

So the immediate discomfort goes away, but the original problem does not. And now you've got frustration and disappointment on top of everything because you still have not moved forward. And this right here, this is how avoidance keeps us stuck. It works just well enough in the short term that we keep doing it, but it does not get us any closer to what we want in the long term. And the point here is this. When you decide not to do something and feel an immediate wave of relief, just notice it. You don't need to judge it or immediately reverse your decision. But zoom out and ask yourself, am I relieved because I made a thoughtful decision that's supporting me, or am I relieved because I no longer have to feel uncomfortable? And you may not know the answer right away, but paying attention to the relief gives you one more piece of information. And then from there, you can look more closely at what separates a strategic decision from avoidance.

So how do you tell the difference? How do you know whether it's a strategic decision or if it's avoidance? Okay, well, it's like most things, the answer here is certainly not black and white. You can have legitimate reasons for not doing something and still be avoiding discomfort. You can make an intentional, thought-out decision and still feel relieved afterward. And there may be times when you may not even fully understand what's driving your

decision until you've had some time and distance from it. But with all that said, here are a few differences you can look for.

So first is clarity. A strategic decision usually includes some clarity about what you're choosing and why, meaning you're not just declaring, "I'm not doing this." You understand what you're prioritizing instead. Maybe you are not exercising this week because you're recovering from an illness, and you've deliberately chosen rest as your priority. Maybe you're not following a particular eating plan because it is too restrictive, and you've decided to focus on regular meals that include protein, fruits and veggies, and food you actually want to eat. Or maybe you decided not to pursue a particular opportunity because it would take time and energy away from something else that matters more to you. And the key here is that strategy directs your resources somewhere. So even if you choose rest, recovery, or more space in your life, there is some intention and purpose behind it.

Avoidance, on the other hand, tends to be less clear. It often ends with not now, without identifying what you're choosing instead, or more commonly, it doesn't identify when not now might change. It is very open-ended and loosey-goosey. So essentially, you keep moving the starting line. You'll begin when work slows down, when the kids' schedules are better, when you find a better plan, or when you feel more confident. But you know what happens? Work slows down and something else happens, or the schedule changes and a new obstacle presents itself, or you find another plan, but it still doesn't feel quite right. So the reason may change, but the decision stays the same, and ultimately, you stay stuck.

So the second difference between strategy and avoidance is whether you're willing to acknowledge the trade-off. So this is a big one. This is a doozy. Every decision has a cost, including the decision not to act. So if you strategically decide not to exercise while you recover from an injury, you may temporarily lose some fitness or strength. That does not mean your decision is wrong. It means you understand what you're choosing and

why the benefit of recovery matters more right now. If you decide that changing how you eat is not a priority during an especially demanding stretch, you may not make progress toward your weight loss goal during that time. And again, that does not automatically make it the wrong decision. The point here is that when it's strategy, you're willing to acknowledge the consequence instead of expecting to choose one thing and somehow receive the benefits of the other. This is huge.

On the flip side, avoidance wants to put off both the action and the consequence, meaning you don't want to start exercising, but you remain frustrated that your fitness is not improving. Or you don't want to make changes to your eating, but you're angry that your body is still not changing. Or you avoid the difficult conversation, but you continue wishing for the relationship to improve on its own. So the decision you make and the expected outcome that you've chosen, they don't add up. They don't match. So a strategic decision does not require that you like the trade-off. Really, it's just asking that you be honest that there is one and that you accept it. You don't have to love it, not at all, but you at least acknowledge it.

And then the third difference here is whether there's a next step. This is also a big one. Often, a strategic decision has a next step. And along with that next step, there might be a date attached to it. Like, I'm going to rest for one week and reassess on Monday. Or it might even have a condition attached to it. Like, I'm not going to run while this injury hurts, but I'm going to ask my physical therapist what movement I can still do safely. And other times, the decision is that there will not be a next step because you've consciously decided to let something go. That counts too.

Now, avoidance, on the other hand, often leaves the next step vague and fuzzy, if there is one at all. You tell yourself you'll come back to it later, but you don't decide what later actually means. So the decision stays open, but nothing moves forward. Or you leave the conditions so nebulous or

impossible that there is no time in the future that makes sense to take action. Like, when you have more time or when you feel more prepared, or when things are more calm. I do this all the time myself. But as I've said many times, there is always something that will make you feel like you're not ready. And yes, you are allowed to decide that a plan, a goal, or an opportunity is no longer right for you. But that is very different from keeping a goal alive indefinitely and halfheartedly while you repeatedly tell yourself you'll get to it later. There is a big, big difference. It's the difference between strategy and avoidance.

So really, there isn't one clue here that gives you an automatic answer. But together, they can help you pick up patterns. Strategy, it's intentional. It names the priority, acknowledges the cost, and makes a decision about what happens next. On the flip side, avoidance tends to keep you running in circles because it doesn't do any of those things. You repeatedly decide not now, but never clearly decide on when or if later will arrive. And the explanation might change, but the outcome stays the same. You don't move forward.

So if you've got a decision in your life that you are starting to question, or if you are feeling totally stuck on something, I want to help you. And this does not mean conducting a full-on investigation of yourself here. We're not turning this into a complicated process. Instead, I've got three questions you can ask. And you may not even need all three of them. One of them may immediately show you something that you hadn't been willing or able to see before. And so the first question is, what am I choosing instead? If you've made a strategic decision to not do something, you can usually identify what is getting your time, energy, or attention instead.

So maybe you're choosing recovery over a workout or time with your family over an opportunity at work, or a simpler way of eating over a plan that would require more time and energy than you're willing to give. And remember, rest can be what you're choosing. More space in your life can

also be what you're choosing, because you do not have to replace every task in your life with another productive task. But either way, it helps to know that you've made an actual choice and that you haven't just put off something because you don't want to deal with it. So you're answering, what are you choosing instead?

Next, your second question is what would need to change for me to reconsider? So if you keep saying, "This is not the right time," challenge yourself to take it one step further and answer what would make it the right time. If you're taking a break from exercise, when will you reassess? If you need more information, what information are you actually looking for, and what will you do once you've got it? Because remember, a strategic delay has some kind of condition or timeline or next step attached to it, and avoidance usually does not. I will rest and reassess on Monday is very different from, I'll get back to it when I feel better. And please note that a strategic delay does not have to come with a perfect plan or a firm deadline. It really just helps you be honest about what you're choosing and why, instead of continuing to tell yourself you'll do it someday when you have no real intention of getting to it.

And the third question is, if this felt less uncomfortable, would I still make the same decision? Meaning, if you knew no one would judge you, would you send that email? If you knew you wouldn't feel awkward, would you walk into the gym? Or if you knew you wouldn't fail, would you go ahead and get started? And I really, really like this question. And this question doesn't mean you have to go and immediately do the thing. And answering yes does not mean your other reasons are bad or fake. This question really just helps you see how much the discomfort might be influencing your decision. So maybe you really do need more time. Maybe the plan is genuinely not right for you. But if you find that you would make a different decision without the fear, uncertainty, inconvenience, or possibility of disappointment, that is useful information. And once you've got that

information, you don't have to respond by forcing yourself to take a huge flying leap. You can run a small experiment instead.

So send one email instead of creating an entire marketing plan. Walk for 10 minutes instead of committing to five workouts a week. Make the appointment instead of trying to solve the whole problem yourself. Try one approach for a week instead of continuing to research every possible option. And the goal of the experiment is not to prove that you are making excuses. The goal is to get more information, like what happens when you take one small step instead of waiting for all the discomfort to disappear. Maybe that action confirms the timing really is wrong, or the plan really doesn't fit. Fine. Now you know more. But you may also discover that you can, in fact, tolerate the discomfort. And the obstacle you've been waiting to disappear does not actually have to disappear before you can get started. So choose one decision you've been circling. Ask yourself what you are choosing instead, what would need to change, and whether you would make the same decision if it felt less uncomfortable.

Then, if you suspect that avoidance may be part of this equation, take one small, teeny-weeny action and see what you learn. And as you do this, remember that recognizing places in your life where you're avoiding moving forward does not mean that you're lazy or weak. Avoidance, it is common. Avoidance is human. It's one of the ways we try to protect ourselves from discomfort. We avoid the possibility of failing, being judged, feeling embarrassed, or discovering that something might be harder than we thought. That is a very human way to live. So the goal is not to eliminate avoidance from your life or shame yourself whenever you notice yourself doing it. Instead, the goal is to recognize when avoidance may be making a decision for you without your awareness.

Because you're still allowed to say no, you're allowed to rest, you're allowed to wait, change the plan, or decide that something no longer warrants your time or energy. But you also want to be honest when the

problem is not really the timing, the plan, or your circumstances. Sometimes the problem is that moving forward feels straight-up uncomfortable. And admitting that doesn't mean you have to force yourself into action. It really just helps you make a more honest decision about what happens next. So maybe you still decide not to do it. Maybe you choose a smaller step, or maybe you see that you're ready to stop waiting for the discomfort to disappear. So you don't have to turn every no into a yes. You just want to know what is driving your decision. You, or your desire to avoid discomfort. Because when you can tell the difference between strategy and avoidance, you get to make the decision with your eyes wide open, and discomfort doesn't get to decide for you. You get to choose what's right for you.

And if you want help with this, let's go. When you coach with me, I'll help you get honest about where you're making a strategic choice and where avoidance is keeping you stuck. Check out my website, send me a message at www.CarrieHollandMD.com/contact and let's talk about how coaching can help you move forward even when it feels uncomfortable. 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.

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