

#199 - 7 Ways to Get Out of a Dinner Rut

Hi there! Welcome to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is episode 199 - 7 ways to get out of a dinner rut. I'm pretty sure there are some major ruts happening in this community. Most of you live in the United States, many of you have kids, all of us are living in varying degrees of isolation still because of the pandemic, and all the things. Yet we still have to eat, we still keep making dinner. But it feels like it's getting harder and harder, right? So let's try and give a couple of solutions here.

Before I give you the seven ways, I think it's very important to share why we're probably in a rut. It helps you name more specifically what the problem is and also hopefully gives you a chance to be kind to yourself - one of our very important Lazy Genius principles - instead of beating yourself up that you're cooking the same five meals over and over again.

So real quick, there are two main reasons that you might be in a rut in this particular time. The first is circumstantial. We're home more, so we're likely preparing more meals at home than usual. On top of that, we are depleted. Our people are depleted. All of us have way fewer reserves than we usually do because of how hard this last year has been. We're also very tired. At least I'm very tired. I hit a wall way earlier in the day than I used to, and it very much affects the energy around making dinner. And when we're tired and depleted and don't have a lot of margin for rest, our ability to make decisions plummets. It's like we can't choose one more thing. That often happens in relation to dinner in regular life, but you throw this pandemic into the mix and even now it's winter and Texas was blanketed in snow and blacked out across the state. We've had ice storms and even more hours and days in a row stuck at home, likely limited in what we can cook... it's just been a lot, you guys. So all of those things definitely impact our energy around thinking about dinner, cooking dinner, and not being overwhelmed by having to do it again tomorrow. We're just worn out. That's all there is to it.

The second reason you're probably in a rut is because of repetition. You're cooking the same things and again you do not have the energy to find something new. It feels like nothing new works, maybe your kids are picky, maybe you're like oh my gosh how many more ways to have to figure out how to be creative with chicken. And listen, feeding people, feeding yourself, making food, even setting out takeout on your table, all of it is an art. It really is. It's very meaningful and important to most people. Food connects us, it emotionally sustains us, not just physically, it can be beautiful and bring comfort. There are a lot of really powerful things that can exist around dinner. It is an art. And right now, I feel like I'm drawing with broken crayons every day. There is no creativity. My interest in being creative is there, but I have to get up off the couch and try and find the good paint and I'm like no crayons are fine. So not only are we dealing with the repetition; we're also dealing with the loss of the art of feeding ourselves and others because of that repetition. So there's a lot to make us feel stuck, to feel like we're in a rut of groundhog day dinners and even the feelings around them.

So the most important Lazy Genius principle we can pull out of our toolbox for this particular problem is to start small. Start small. There are lots of solutions and other principles we could use, but I think because of that exhaustion piece and the fact that our dinner rut is heavily due to our lack of energy, it's important we don't build something big here. We have to start small because we don't have the capacity for much more than small. So these are seven small ways to get out of a dinner rut.

Number one. For one week, do a family plan. If you live with other people, even little childrens, try one week - not more than that, start with one week - where everyone chooses something they want. Now, you're like, Kendra, my kids are going to pick the same things we've been eating all the time. I don't want any more spaghetti. This is true. But guess what, you get to choose too. And for your turn, pick something that makes you excited to eat it even if your kids will reject it. And that's part of the family group conversation. We all get to pick whatever we want. And if you want to, you could make ice cream for dinner as an option. You do what you want. But part of the group agreement is that we all get to pick something we want which means we are happy for the person who is getting the meal they picked even if it's not our favorite. I'm not saying that is going to keep your kids from complaining when you choose something they don't want, but it's part of learning how to be a person with other people. We don't always get what we want. Another twist on this is to pull out a cookbook and have everyone pick something from it. Whatever they pick, you'll make. What you pick, they'll eat. Or at least that's what's put in front of them. So that's number one - do a family plan. Just for one week.

Number two is more of a mindset that plays into number one - and by the way, all of these don't have to do with kids, but most of us are in ruts because of kids. Number two is change your expectation of how your picky kids will react to a new meal. If I pick Thai ginger chicken and rice which the flavors would eat if they couldn't see but because it's green they lose their minds, if I pick that, they're going to complain. But guess what? Sometimes that's fine. I don't love it when they complain. In fact, one of the most important things that matters to me as the primary cook in my house is that dinner is not a negotiation and full of whining because I just don't have it in me at the end of the day to deal with that. However, that priority leads to an exchange of new meals. That's what I sacrifice by wanting no complaining. I sacrifice new things because my kids complain about new things, even pizza with a new topping they're like freaking out. They're not very resilient, at least two of the three are. So if I want to get out of a rut and eat some new things sometimes, I have to expect that my kids will likely complain. And I can Magic Question that - I can ask what can I do now to make the complaining easier later? I can serve something alongside the new thing that the kids will eat. I can make it a chocolate milk night. I can play fun music that puts them in a decent mood. I can simply tell myself "they will complain. You can just tell them they don't have to eat it but this is dinner and smile and eat your own food." I think we have secret expectations that our kids are going to be so happy and surprise us when we serve them something new, and when they're not, we're disappointed. Just expect them to complain, make that part of the plan, have something else like fruit or bread or cheese or whatever your kids eat alongside, and enjoy a new recipe for yourself.

Number three is to plan something new. Don't expect it to magically happen. I have been putting off planning meals just in general because I'm tired of planning the same things, and I weirdly expect some magical wave of creativity and resources to hit me, you know, on a Tuesday. Like this is the night I pull down a cookbook from the shelf, I chop and saute and create something brand new, and it's like I'm a Nora Ephron movie. The opposite is true. If I don't plan, we end up having spaghetti again. It's just the way it goes. So if you want to get out of a rut, you have to plan something new. You can't just leave a space open and hope you have the ingredients or the energy to make a new meal. You have to plan for it. You have to do that to get out of a dinner rut. Even just one time. But it's not going to magically happen unless you choose for it to. You don't have enough resources right now for that to be a likely possibility.

Number four - do a chill recipe exchange. Okay, what do I mean by chill. Text a few friends that know each other, and you don't have to know each other very well. Maybe it's a group of school moms or church friends or your college girlfriends - whatever. Text a 1-5 friends and say, hey you guys, what's a recipe that you cook a lot at home that your family enjoys? Pool together those recipes because you will likely one from each person, and you guys cook them. You cook each other's family favorite recipes. It might not go well, but you're limiting your choices from trusted sources. You could even systemize it a little by choosing one day a week that is Recipe Team Night or something, and that's the night the whole group makes somebody's favorite recipe. So one night a week is taken care of, and you can swap stories about how things worked or didn't work or what changes you made to accommodate your family or whatever. But do some sort of chill recipe exchange.

Number five - make dinner early. I learned from this Bri McKoy and then turns out my sister does it too. One of the reasons dinner feels a rut is not always what you're cooking but when you're cooking. If your energy is super duper low by 4:30pm and the thought of getting out a pan and a knife and cans of stuff is like NO I CAN'T, maybe it's not the recipes you need to switch out but the time you make them. That could be a very easy fix for you. So you start dinner in the morning and finish it at dinner. Even if you're making soup in a Dutch oven, make it in the morning and then just put the pot back on the stove half an hour before dinner. If you're worried about food tasting like leftovers, it won't, especially if you heat it up in the stove or oven in the very pan you would've used if you cooked at 5 o'clock. So make dinner early. That could really help your rut.

Number six, add green stuff. Most of our ruts are due to the children and their proclivity for white, brown, and red foods. It can feel very much like a rut when you're seeing the same colors. So add some green. If your kids are freaking over green like mine do, they don't get the green. But think about herbs, pickled jalapenos, a side salad, a creamy herb sauce... add green to meals you already make, and it will feel different and taste different. I saw a photo today on Instagram of tacos, and they had cilantro and pickled jalapeno on top, and while my kids don't like tacos because they're weird - it's so annoying - the concept of meat and cheese type meals are familiar around here, but I already could feel the energy boost in me of having those meals with some green on top or next to them. So just add some green. It's amazing what it will do.

And finally number seven, think about the difference between ease and comfort. Not every repeated meal is a problem, but you might categorize it that way. For example, spaghetti is king around here. We have it once a week. All the kids eat it, I don't mind it, it's all fine. But that's a repeated meal we make because it's easy. It doesn't do anything for us, for me especially, emotionally. But tikka masala, oh my gosh, it's so comforting to all of us except Annie and she eats the rice and she'll be fine. But that's a comforting meal even though it's one that we have often. But we have it less often than spaghetti because it's not quite as easy. But if I plan it, it's not hard. So when you're thinking about your meals that you repeat, pay attention to ones that are repeated because they're easy and ones that you repeated because they're comforting. And then bump up the comfort meals and click down the easy ones. What that does is puts a different layer on your repetition. You're repeating for a different purpose, one that doesn't feel as boring or restrictive or like you're in a rut.

So those are seven ways. There are more of course. But hopefully these are ways that you can start small, start thinking a little differently about your meals, about how to get out of a rut, even if it's for one night. Think about it - a rut is a rut because you don't move out of it ever. Changing up one night does a lot for getting out of a rut. Just one night. One meal. So think about how you can change the energy around dinner just one time.

Do a family plan, change your expectations around your kids, *plan* something new, do a chill recipe exchange, make dinner early, add something green, and repeat comfort more than you repeat ease. I hope these help.

Thank you for being here today! I'm so glad you took the time to listen. It means so much. If you're a regular listener to the podcast, make sure you're subscribed of course, and if you have a minute and want to leave a review, that always helps more people find the show and then we can have more Lazy Geniuses in the world which is always a good idea. Less judgment, more help, less striving, more resting, all the things. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra and I'll see you next week!