

#271 - How to Fix Summer Dinners

Hi there! You're listening 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 271 - How to Fix Summer Dinners. Yeah, we need to fix dinner, as in make it. But also summer dinners feel a little broken, especially around July, so we're going to fix them that way, too! I love a pun.

Let's start with the problem. I asked y'all on Instagram @thelazygenius what your biggest summer meal challenges were, and there were so many responses. Like, so many. And while there were definitely some specific ones because we all have different needs, most responses fell into one of five categories: one, the lack of motivation, two, the unpredictability of your summer schedule; three, you're tired of eating the same things over and over again; four, your usual easy meals or your Brainless Crowdpleasers are better suited for cooler weather than the summer; and five, it's too hot to turn on the oven. Seriously, the number of responses that were that verbatim was many, and I love it. We're all in more or less the same boat!

We're going to talk about all five of those categories today, but before we do, I want to remind you of two very important things.

First, let's remember the Lazy Genius principle, live in the season. The summer is a season for weird food patterns. It just is. A lot of those categories I mentioned are loosely rooted in the season, right? Motivation. It's hard to be motivated when it's hot outside, when schedules are unusual, when days are spent kind of active and by dinner you're out of steam, when you're tired of eating the same things but don't know how to cook new meals that don't require an oven and aren't expensive and are also easy and your kids will eat. There are a lot of things about the season that play with our motivation.

The summer season impacts the unpredictability of our schedules obviously, it impacts the repetition of our meals because it also impacts and depletes our Brainless Crowdpleasers. And obviously the oven. The season itself is a foundational contributor to our frustrations.

Now that doesn't mean we just have to stay frustrated because it's the season oh well! No, it's okay to be frustrated by those things. It's good to name what makes us crazy and be honest about whatever struggles we have because of our season. But we don't have to let those frustrations and struggles be in charge. Sometimes we can name the season we're in, be honest about it, maybe make a small change or two which we'll get to, but we also can relax a bit more into its difficulty. Our tendency is to either ignore it all or change it all, and remember that as a Lazy Genius, we have a wide middle.

So just remember that food in the summer is, in fact, challenging. It is. There are a handful of people and life stages where it's not - maybe if you're single or don't have kids and have fewer preferences and bigger budgets to manage. But even so, it's a different season. Live in it. The

summer season of food is not going to behave like the other three, so try not to force it into a shape it won't take.

Next, I want to remind you that not everything can matter. I just named the five main categories, and you'll have offshoots of those or completely different challenges to add to the list. Me personally, the oven is less of a concern because I have and very much use our AC, but the other four categories? One hundred percent challenges for me, too. And it's easy to try and fix them all, right? Here is your very important reminder that not everything can matter the most. A lot can matter, but not equally.

For example, of those categories - motivation, the seasonality of my Brainless Crowdpleasers, annoyed with repetition, and the unpredictability of schedules - the one that matters most to me is the motivation. I don't love repetition, but also whatever it's mostly fine. I can rally. I don't love the inconvenience of not being able to depend as much on soups and cold weather things, but it's mostly fine and I can rally. I don't love that our schedules aren't consistent based on a long list of things, but it's mostly fine and I can rally. The thing that I can't rally around is the lack of motivation. Oh my goodness. And it's not even so much that I'm not motivated to cook. It's that I'm not motivated to make a decision. I don't want to choose. I don't want to pivot. I don't want to get off of the couch and look in the fridge to figure out what to do. So for me personally, if I can specifically tend to the motivation part because it matters most, the other challenges will ease up a bit. And they're less important to me anyway. Does that make sense?

So remember that not everything can matter equally, and it's worth the effort to figure out what matters most in this season. That way you can invest the limited amount of energy you do have at that one problem. Likely, some of the others will fall into place.

Okay, let's jump briefly into the five categories and help you find a path to a solution.

Let's start with the lack of motivation. So many of the Instagram responses were about having no energy, no motivation, no margin to choose dinner, cook dinner, even get out of the house to get groceries for dinner. We're just cardboard cutouts of ourselves by the end of the day. If that's you and especially if motivation matters the most, here's a question for you.

Do you have to be motivated? Is it important to you to stay on top of dinner, to manufacture or reconfigure your motivation because the end result matters? Or can this be a season where you're lazy about motivation and just eat a lot of cereal and hot dogs? Of course no one *wants* to eat a lot of cereal and hot dogs, but if resting and not forcing yourself to be motivated does not matter more than the ease of cereal and hot dogs, you can be lazy about motivation. I'm giving you permission. It's not ideal and it's not what you want, but unless it's what you want most, you'll just keep feeling bad about not having any motivation. Does that make sense? Do you have to be motivated?

Let's say you do. Let's say motivation matters the most. Here are two other questions I want you to ask. First, what do you want to be motivated to do? It's not just dinner. That's too broad. Is it

the cooking? The planning? The choosing? The literal getting off the couch? What do you want to be motivated to do? Name that specific thing. The smaller it is, the better. Remember that it's a lot easier to solve smaller problems.

Once you've named that, what's in the way of you having the motivation to do the thing you need? Is it the time of day? The expectations you or your people have of what dinner will be? That you have too many choices? Too few? What's in the way? Name that, as well! Now you can more easily see a solution.

For me, the thing I'm not motivated to do is choose. I don't like to choose, especially at the end of the day or when we've gotten home from the pool at 5pm, or I've been working all day in the office and the first thing the kids say when I walk in is "what's for dinner?" This is why I love a meal plan. If I batch the choices at a time where I'm more motivated to make them, I at least have somewhere to begin. It's okay to me if those choices are repeated or even if they have to swap because of those unpredictable schedule changes. But having a baseline of a plan really helps me.

This past week, I didn't plan. And I felt it. Every night I was like a walking "uggggghhhhhh" and we ended up getting a lot of fast food. Not because I wasn't motivated to cook but because I wasn't motivated to choose. So I don't need meals made in the morning to help my dinner-time cooking motivation. That's not my particular issue. I need the choice made ahead of time, no matter what the choice is. Does that make sense?

So what do you specifically need motivation to do, what's in the way of that motivation, and what small thing can you try to help that along? Maybe some of these more specific categories might give you some ideas there, too.

We'll be right back...

Let's move on to the next category: the unpredictable summer schedule. Similar to the motivation question of do you need to be motivated, I'd like you to ask yourself, do you need predictability? Is that important and the most important thing above everything else? The answer is yours to name, and whatever you say counts. If your home and family have been going through hard transitions during this first half of the summer, maybe you want to prioritize connecting over a meal. Maybe that predictability really matters for the health and connection of your family. Or you might say, nah I guess it doesn't matter that much. It's not great, but it's just the season. Either way is great.

Now let's say that having some kind of predictability does matter. Here's what I'd like you to think about. What in your life when it comes to meals *is* predictable? Maybe summer schedules make dinner unpredictable, but is breakfast predictable? Lunch? Having dessert or something after dinner? Maybe you can experience some regularity, even amidst an irregular summer schedule, by shifting the meal that gets the most attention. Maybe your "big meal" is breakfast or lunch. That's where you and your people put effort, and the others can have the same

casualness or repetition as breakfast and lunch often do. Sometimes we have seasons where dinner doesn't get to be the main meal. Put that predictability somewhere else for this season.

Another way to approach the importance of predictability is to see if there's something about the unpredictability that can be tweaked a bit to make it more predictable. Maybe not like a machine, but a little more regular than things are now. For example, if the unpredictability is because your job schedule varies from week to week because you're on a nurse or your job is understaffed and you don't know when you'll be asked to work overtime or maybe you have teenagers with jobs who have the same unpredictability in their schedules... what can you notice or tweak to make that irregularity a little more palatable? Not completely transformed! Just a little bit easier? Maybe you notice that despite the crazy work schedules, no one seems to work on Sundays. Prioritize summer Sunday dinner. You only have a few left, but spend energy there. Make that predictable.

Maybe you notice that your family's hunger levels are irregular and don't sync up! You're trying to feed everyone, like someone said, at either 4:30pm and 8pm, and you can't seem to get everyone on the same page. Maybe the tweak is shifting the expectation that everyone will be hungry for the meal, but you'll still sit together for a bit. The leftovers can work for someone for a late dinner or lunch the next day, or maybe you make less. But you could tweak the expectation of how much everyone eats when you actually get to sit together.

See what I mean? Tiny tweaks. Pay attention to the irregularity and make your own regular thing to make it a little easier. It likely won't impact the entire week or every day for sure, but one small change could make a big difference.

Okay, let's do the same thing for repetition. And another way of thinking about this is feeling like you're in a rut. Does a rut matter enough to use the energy to get out of it? It might not. But if it does, what are some ways you can make the problem of repetition smaller? Sometimes a rut isn't food; sometimes it's indecision. You feel like you're in a rut because you're having to choose from things you don't love making. It's not really about the food but about the decision. But it could also be about the food.

Recently, I joined Bri McKoy and her Cook's Club for a book club zoom gathering because they had all read my book, *The Lazy Genius Kitchen*, and we did a rapid fire problem-solving session. One woman asked for more ideas for easy summer meals. Sure! That's something we're all looking for. But as we talked, I noticed that she was bringing some all or nothing energy to her question and that she wanted literally every option of a great summer meal ever. Guys, we can't do that. That's big machine thinking where you assume you need a dozen new recipes or you have to cook something new almost every day to not feel like you're in a rut. Make it smaller. Find one new recipe you want to try. Find one day that makes sense to make a new food. You don't need to shake every single day up to have your meals feel shaken up. One small change way less often than you probably realize will likely make a difference. And listen, small changes are easier to maintain, right? If you say "I'm tired of eating the same things all the time! Get ready, you guys, we're going to eat some new recipes around here!" and then you

crap out after one try because that's too big. That's the equivalent of Big Black Trash Bag energy where you throw everything out, just for meals.

Start small. What is one way you can interrupt the repetition or the rut?

Next up is the seasonality of Brainless Crowdpleasers, and I'm also going to grab that fifth category of the oven being too hot in the summer. Those two things are fairly connected. Here's what I want to do here. Sure, you can approach this in the same way as we did the others, but I also want us to have some ideas. I love permission, but we also need practical stuff, like actual recipes. So over on Instagram, I've already posted a place where people can share their favorite non-oven summer meal. Even if you find one idea in those comments, you'll be better off than you are now. I'll also be sharing some other specific recipe / meal ideas on Instagram all week because stuff will live longer there and be easier to reference. We'll also put some links to my past summer dinner queues and a few recipe roundups we've done in the past so you have a collection of resources.

The most important thing to remember here is that you don't need every idea. You just need one. Maybe three. Start small. Even the smallest solution will make things easier than they are now, and that is our goal as Lazy Geniuses. Focus on what matters most, and try and make things just a touch easier than they are currently. Avoid the all or nothing, this or that, fix it all or burn it down mentality. One small change can make a big difference.

And that is how to fix summer dinners.

Before we go, let's celebrate the Lazy Genius of the Week! This week it's Erin Pidgeon who sent this to me on Instagram. "I wanted to share one of my favorite house rules that I hope will be my legacy: the Clean for Fifteen. This is great for people with roommates, people with kids, and especially for vacations where you're staying in a home (lake house, beach house, etc.). You pick a time, set a timer for 15 minutes, and crank up some music. Like high intensity music. (I love the specificity there from Erin.) Then everyone cleans until the timer goes off. Anything counts as long as it's bringing order to the space. The rules are that you have to find something to clean the entire time, and when the timer goes off, you're done. No one will be forced to continue beyond the timer. The transformation of a space in 15 minutes is magical and almost anyone can get on board for that amount of time. Thanks for everything, Kendra!" That's such a great idea, Erin. I'm guessing it's one that a lot of you listening have done before, or at least a version, where you clean for a set amount of time to music, but I like the name. I know that's simple, but calling it Clean for Fifteen rhymes, has a ring, and it's long enough that a lot actually gets done. I also love that it can be used in various contexts, like a vacation home. So simple, so great. Thanks, Erin, for being the Lazy Genius of the Week!

Okay, that's it for today! Thanks so much for listening, and be sure you're following me on Instagram so you can get some summer meal ideas this week! I'm @thelazygenius and look forward to hanging out with you there. 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!