284 - How to Lazy Genius Email

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 284 - how to Lazy Genius Email. Oh man have we been waiting a long time for this one! This is a highly requested topic, and I'm excited for us to walk through how to make email inboxes more manageable and less stressful.

So here's how this is going to work. Whenever we Lazy Genius something, we always want to start with what matters, right? And we're still going to do that. I also think it's super helpful to walk through the five steps to Lazy Genius anything. These five steps were originally explained and applied to the kitchen in my book The Lazy Genius Kitchen. It's a manual for living in the kitchen but it's also a manual for living your life because those five steps work just about everywhere. So if you haven't tried that book, I encourage you to! I'm going to encourage you to apply the five steps on your own if going through the full process feels extra helpful.

In this episode though, to keep it simple, I'm going to share a list of likely priorities you have about your email inbox and then share a few ideas that could make it work better for you. We'll apply a handful of Lazy Genius principles here and there, and hopefully that will either come fairly close to solving your frustrations or prime the pump as you get more specific in applying the five steps to your own situation after you listen.

So let's jump in. When I listed out all the things that could matter about email, the list is actually pretty short. Obviously I am one person with one set of experiences and can't name every priority here. I'm sure I'll miss something. But I do think a majority of you will resonate with one of these priorities: tending to email quickly, i.e. no red numbers, organization or being able to find what you need, boundaries, and quality of life or just being less annoyed with email in general.

First, let's talk about tending to email quickly or having no red numbers. Last night, I looked at my husband's phone and saw the red number 642 on his email app and I almost vomited on my new couch. Now, this is not a new situation, nor is my reaction surprising. His phone always looks like that. And I'm also appalled by it. I am a "no red number" person. I'm almost an inbox zero person. That is my priority. I value a quiet email inbox. My husband doesn't. And that's okay. So before we get too far into anything, it's okay if you have different priorities than other people do. You don't have to put your priorities on them just like they don't have to put their priorities on you. You can be an inbox zero person without being uptight, and someone else like my husband can have a huge red number on their app and it doesn't make them an unorganized troll. We're all just people living based on what matters to us, and that's okay.

One other thing I forgot to mention as we walk through these. You might have one priority for your work email and another for your personal. That's totally normal. That actually might be why you want to prioritize boundaries because how you have to be at work with your email is not how you want to be at home. So just pay attention to that distinction if it's there.

So inbox zero or no red numbers or tending to email quickly.

A great principle to start with when it comes to efficient email practices is Put Everything In Its Place. One of the reasons we can struggle with efficiency and tending to our email is that everything has a similar sense of urgency. If an email is unread, if that red number goes up a tick, it carries urgency because of our priority which is to get rid of that red number as soon as possible. We are held hostage by our desire to reduce that email clutter. One of the best ways to fulfill that desire without being totally attached at the hip with your inbox is to put everything in its place. What do I mean by everything? There are a few everythings in this scenario.

One, let's put the urgency in its place. There have been seasons in my life where seeing unread emails created almost a tic in my body. It's like I couldn't function without that inbox being clear. If you resonate with that, you might have a similar energy in your home with your stuff. You can't rest unless things are put away. Now one way that our stuff differs from our email is that our stuff can be put away, and unless we have small children or pets or something that just keep dragging stuff out again, once we tidy and rest in a space, it'll stay tidy. With email, we don't have that luxury. It'll just keep coming, right? So we need to put the urgency we feel in its proper place.

Hear me, "no red number" friends. You can have unread emails. You can have the red number. You don't have to swing to the other side of where you are and never delete anything again, but a lot of times our grip on something like email is really a grip on control. It's wanting things to fall in line and be a certain way, and you do not have to be at the mercy of the urgency of email. It'll keep coming no matter what you do, so practice putting that attempt to control in its place.

If you do love being a "no red numbers" person and practically want some tips on how to do that, here are a few. First, put a response time in place. Maybe while your kid is taking a bath or while you're stuck in traffic or on the train on your way home from work or sitting in the parking lot waiting for your grocery pickup, you can carve out a short window of time, just a few minutes, where you go through and do a first pass of your email and delete or archive what's no longer relevant. For emails that require a response but a quick one that doesn't require extra information or energy, respond and archive. But recognize that there are emails you'll need to come back to, right? Not everything can be answered or managed in the Walmart parking lot.

Which leads me to the second tip. If I read an email that requires more than I'm able to give it in that moment, I mark it unread. Then I plan a time to respond. But using some kind of visual whether it's leaving the message unread or using a star or a flag or a folder to create a place for a certain kind of email that requires a certain amount of energy and then creating a place in your day to deal with it is a great use of putting everything in its place.

So that's the first priority: no red numbers or tending to things quickly. Put everything in its place. The second priority we can consider is the priority of organization or finding everything you need. This is another great context to put everything in its place, but for me, this is where I apply

the principle of Decide Once. You know what I've decided? Use Gmail. Why? Because Gmail's search function is out of bounds, and as long as I archive instead of deleting, I can find anything at any time. I tried folders and color-coded things for a long time, but they didn't work for me. That system was too big. Instead, I would find myself saying to no one "where is that email from Lisa about the contract?" And I would search Lisa contract and get the email. I think with email we can sometimes think there needs to be a sophisticated approach, and there is a place for that. Your job might require folders and flags and colors, and I'm all for that. I'm just speaking to the people who think that's the only way to be organized. You can let your email platform do the organizing for you by just using the search function and letting them find where the email is instead of remembering what folder you put it in or what tag you gave it.

Another way of looking at organizing your email and finding what you need when you need it is almost the same concept as the episode about organizing paper. The helpful way to Lazy Genius paper is by thinking of your paper storage in zones. You have zones or places for different kinds of paper or more specifically, papers with different urgencies. With paper, you can't have one giant basket of papers of varying urgencies, or else you'll miss something or loss something and forget to pay a bill or go to a wedding or something.

So papers or, in this case, emails that need more immediate attention need a smaller, more obvious zone. For paper bills, it's a small basket by your keys. For your email, it's leaving just a handful of emails unread so you can see what requires your attention or something similar. The same is true for things that don't require immediate attention or urgency. That basket or zone can be much larger because there's no urgency attached to it. You get to it when you get to it, or you go find what you need when it's necessary. But what's great about an email inbox compared to a basket of actual paper you have to sort through is that you don't have to sort through email! It does it for you! Your email inbox is like that giant basket of paper but with an intelligent filing system you can't see. So whenever you need to find something, you just type in the word and poof it appears. Now sometimes it appears along with two dozen other possibilities, so because of this, I always delete what really doesn't matter and archive what might. That way when I search, there are fewer results to choose from since truly unessential things have been deleted completely.

We'll be right back…

Third, let's talk about boundaries. You might value boundaries as the highest priority for your email because you have to be on it a lot for work and don't want to bring it home, physically or mentally. Maybe you have a boss or a team at work that has different personal boundaries than you do and you have to fight against the pattern they've set that anyone can email and expect a response at pretty much any time. So sometimes we create boundaries against our own decisions, and sometimes they are for someone else's decisions. In both cases, this is the hardest priority to consistently handle with kindness and consistency. If we have email boundaries for our own personal habits, it's really easy to beat ourselves up when we don't align with what we wish we were doing. Shaming ourselves is always right there. And if we're creating boundaries because other people in our lives have none, that's a whole relational can of worms

that can be hard to navigate, especially if it's happening at your job and you need your job to pay your bills. So in listing this one with the others, I'm not giving them all equal weight. Boundaries are hard. So if that's what you're personally struggling with when it comes to email, I am sorry about that. It's tough. So let's see if we can't do something to make it even the tiniest bit easier.

For some of you, urgency is part of your job. Email is how your company communicates, and so everything is kind of urgent. It's hard to get rid of company culture. However, you could talk with your supervisor about expectations. You could create an auto-response that you turn on during certain hours of the day that says when you'll be back in your inbox or always keep it in your email signature. You can remove your work email from your phone when you are not at work so you will not check it and therefore be tempted to just answer this one real quick at 9pm at night. But then your coworker gets your email and responds back and now you're at work again. Basically, try and pay attention to the times you engage in your work email "just this one time real quick." Those one times add up to a person who slowly gets burned out at their job.

What about personal boundaries? The internet and our phones have programmed our brains into thinking we need to know what we're missing at every moment, at every stoplight, at every spare bit of silence, and it takes a lot of work and intention to break free of that. Personal boundaries aren't easy either. So there are things built into a lot of smartphones like downtime or time limits on certain apps where you get a cute little slap on your wrist if you try and open something outside of the designated time. I have downtime set on my phone, and here's what I've learned. If I set a downtime or limit just to hit the buttons that override the limit, it's not doing anything for me. If I set the limit and don't consistently honor the limit, I won't even see the limit. So if you do create some kind of personal boundary around your email and that matters to you, honor that limit. Most things that are urgent won't be coming through your email anyway, and they can wait until tomorrow. I know it doesn't seem like that. It also doesn't seem like checking your email at night a few times is a big deal, and for some of you it might not be. If boundaries aren't your priority, this isn't a big deal. But if it is a bigger deal, if it genuinely feels important to you, I'm here to tell you that those quick checks here and there at the expense of your boundaries will cause harm. Not like emotional harm or require you to bring it to your therapist next week, but the consistent ignoring of your boundaries will harm your boundaries themselves.

One final idea here today for boundaries is to turn off your notifications. I only get notifications for texts, phone calls, Voxer, and Netflix. Like literally my phone is next to me and just popped up with an alert from Netflix to let me know that Derry Girls season three is now on Netflix. And do you know what I'm going to stop and do right now? I'm going to turn off those Netflix notifications. I had them on when I was waiting for Stranger Things or something, but those alerts are not worth the exchange of my attention that is required.

You get to decide what your notification situation is. It might not bother you in the slightest. But I am here to tell you that a great way to set good boundaries with your email inbox is to not see each and every email on your homescreen. Set a time to check your inbox instead, and only do

it if you have the energy to triage those emails and put them in their place. Responding to each ping is a recipe for hating your email.

And finally, the priority of your quality of life slash just being less annoyed. This is one of the simplest ideas, but the number of messages I get daily about simple ideas that people just forgot existed is very high. So here we go. Here's your tip for being less annoyed by your email. Get fewer emails. Google does this thing where it will sometimes offer a prompt in my Gmail app that says something like "hey you haven't opened an email from Lands End in awhile. Would you like to unsubscribe?" And I almost always say yes please do that for me, Google, thank you. And then it does. I also enjoy the natural division that Gmail creates with a promotions folder and a social folder. Almost always, the real emails that I actually need go to my primary folder. But if you are annoyed by all the pings, turn off your email notifications, and if you'd like a world with less email, subscribe to fewer emails. You don't have to do it all at once. In fact, I highly recommend you not do that. That's big black trash bag energy, and it's not necessary. But when you get a new email and see who it's from and sigh or roll your eyes or get annoyed, scroll to the bottom and unsubscribe. Just do it right then for that one email. It'll take maybe ten seconds, and then you're free of that one. Start small. You don't owe anyone your email address.

As we wrap up, remember that a big system isn't the answer here. What is the thing about your email that gets on your nerves the most? That'll help you see what matters the most. Then try one simple thing to make it a little bit better. Start small. Maybe there's an idea from this episode that will help, or maybe something you heard inspired a different idea. I also realize that one idea isn't going to change everything. That's usually not a thing. But if you try one small thing and then another small thing a little later and then another after that, you slowly create a relationship with email that does work for you. So maybe stop seeking after a big system but instead start small with one idea at a time that matches what matters to you.

If you'd like to create a more extensive approach, try applying the five steps to your email. Prioritize or name what matters, essentialize or get rid of what's in the way, organize or put everything in its place, personalize or feel like yourself, and systemize or stay in a flow. Remember all of those steps are used often in these podcast episodes, but they are in their greatest detail in my book The Lazy Genius Kitchen.

Before we go, let's celebrate the Lazy Genius of the Week! This week it's Christy Pino who shared a tip that I think we all might enjoy using as we get into November and closer to the gift-giving holidays. Christy wrote "I use an app called "Santa's Bag" to track my holiday gifts. You can set a budget for the season or for individual recipients. You can manage ideas you have for people, where you purchased a gift from, and even where you stashed the gift (especially helpful if you are someone who hides gifts from your kids and then can't remember where.) I've used it for several years and it definitely reduces my holiday stress." Listen, anything that can reduce holiday stress sounds like an excellent plan. I looked at this app and promptly downloaded it. It seems really great, so check it out if you need a gift-giving resource. Another holiday season resource you might want to consider is The Holiday Docket! The Holiday Docket is available in our digital store and is a path to help you celebrate this busy

season well. It's our best selling thing we've ever made by a significant margin, and people say it not only makes their holidays less stressful but actually more fun and focused on what matters. It's very thorough and has undated calendars, so you can buy it once and reuse it year after year. As she does every week, Leah will put a link to that in the show notes so you can check it out. And for the gift-giving part, maybe you can follow Christy's advice and try Santa's Bag! It's got a lot of reviews and really does seem awesome. I especially love the part where you can put where you stored something because I always forget the hiding spots. Truly. Multiple years I've just found gifts that I didn't know where there. No more! So thanks for the tip, Christy, and for being the Lazy Genius of the Week.

That's it for today, y'all! Thanks 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!