

# #84 - The Lazy Genius Guide to Lunch

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra, 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 84 - The Lazy Genius Guide to Lunch. I talk about dinner a lot, but lunch is an important meal, too. We all have different needs - feeding big homeschool families, feeding toddlers without leaving ourselves just sandwich scraps, or taking lunch to work every day. In this episode, we're going to find some lunch strategies and recipe ideas to make lunch not feel like such a throwaway meal.

First though, I want to tell you about a book written by my pretend brother Knox McCoy from The Popcast. His new book released last week, and it's called *The Wondering Years*. If you have an off-center relationship with religion or God, this book will make you laugh and think in all the best ways. While Knox's community was defining itself by Christian culture, he was defining himself and his understanding of faith through pop culture, two arenas that don't often play well together. This book is funny, thoughtful, and will make you feel less alone, especially if you happened to grow up in the south in the 80s and 90s which he and I both did. I'll pop a link in the show notes, so if you're looking for a good read for Thanksgiving weekend or need a gift idea for that brother-in-law who's impossible to buy for, check out this book. I think you'll really enjoy it.

Now let's talk about lunch! We all eat it, a lot of us make it for other people, and it happens in the middle of the day which has its own set of challenges. We're going to talk through some concrete lunch ideas for a variety of challenges, but first I want to offer a simple perspective to jumpstart your Lazy Genius thinking.

Lunch can take up space. If you work, you probably have a lunch hour, a literal hour where you can eat your lunch without focusing on any responsibilities. I love that and think it's a valuable practice for everyone that can make it happen. You might have that option but don't take it very often, or maybe your job is so busy that you have to fit lunch into the cracks. If you're a teacher or doctor or any number of professions, you just don't get the same time that a lot of other folks might get. If you're home, there's a chance you don't take a lunch hour at all. You fix a plate for your kid at home and then try and keep up with the laundry while going through the mail pile and putting away groceries from a couple of hours ago and in between steps, you grab a handful of whatever bag is left open from making a kid's lunch. Lunch can take up space. We can let that time breathe and take care of our bodies and souls and slow down if the situation allows for that. I realize that it's not an option for everyone, but if it's an option for you like it is for me most days, I think we should consider taking it.

Just like if you have a job where you get a literal lunch break, consider giving that yourself at home or within your own schedule. We're generally more productive when we've had breaks and give ourselves a chance to rest even though it feels counterintuitive, so if you usually avoid lunch because you're too busy, consider letting lunch take up a little space. Give your mind a chance to refuel with the space and your body a chance to refuel from the food. And if you tend to not give lunch its space because it just doesn't feel worth it, for example if you're home with

little kids and just don't have the energy to think about your own lunch alongside all the other minutia, I invite you to consider a different way. You are allowed to take some time in the day for yourself. You're allowed to leave dinner un-prepped and laundry unfolded to eat lunch like a person. It's okay. It's good. It's worth the time, even on the smallest level.

Okay, let's talk through the most common challenges to lunch and think through some ways to make them a bit more manageable. The three most common lunch challenges are volume, decisions, and boredom. Knowing specifically why lunch is a challenge will help you focus your solutions a little better. So volume. By volume I mean the literal amount of food. We're starting with the most niche-y challenge because it's quick to run through. If you're home with a lot of kids or send multiple kids to school with lunches, if you homeschool, if you're caring for aging parents, basically if you're making lunch for more than yourself, it can feel overwhelming. So do you find the source of your frustration around how many sandwiches you have to make or how many clementines you have to peel or how long it takes to make lunches for so many people? It's good to recognize that specific frustration before we jump into solution ideas.

The second challenge is decisions. You just don't want to make another decision. You already struggle with feeding yourself or others at the very start of the day, and we all know how crazy making dinner feels. Having to decide a meal in the middle of the day, too? No thanks. It's too much. So if that's your frustration, name it specifically. It'll help later.

And the third challenge is boredom. Maybe you're bored of eating the same lunch every day, or maybe you think your kids are bored with the same thing every day. Recently, somebody DM'd me on Instagram asking about packing lunches for kids and how to add variety. My question was, "Do your kids ask for variety? Are they bored?" And she was like "Actually, no! They seem fine!" Which makes the answer easy... don't worry about variety! Sometimes we try and find solutions for frustrations that are only in our own heads or don't even exist. If you think your kids are bored, don't plow ahead with intense lunch variations until you actually confirm they're bored.

So as you think about your frustration with making lunch, is it more centered around volume, decisions, or boredom? That could be for you or for the entire population of people you are responsible for feeding every day. Name it, and then narrow your response. It's a good way to think about a lot of things actually. Don't waste energy fixing invisible problems.

Next we need to talk about prep, but before that, we need a to make a tiny decision first about timing. It's good to think about when you currently make lunch and if it would make sense to change the time. If your frustration is volume and you make lunch at lunch time, I can see why it feels daunting to make multiple lunches in the crunch. You just walked in from running errands and everyone is hungry, and it's stressful to get everyone fed quickly. So maybe it's worth thinking about when you make lunch. Maybe it's in the morning or the night before. If you're making lunch for yourself, maybe it's once or twice a week in one fell swoop. and the definition of prep is very gracious in the context of lunch. When we think of meal prep, we often think of sliced bell peppers and a container of homemade meatballs and mason jars of salad and all the things. While those things are meal prep, lunch meal prep can totally mean that you have bologna in the house. Simply having supplies for lunch is meal prep. So we want to prep and supply your kitchen with what you need for lunch based on your frustrations about lunch.

So if your frustration is volume, that you have to make so many lunches, let's talk about the kind of prep that will alleviate that frustration. If you're packing individual lunches, pack the same thing for everybody. This might seem obvious, but I'm often guilty of this. Not all my kids like the same fruits or sandwich fillings. One kid likes potato chips, the other pretzels. One likes crust, one doesn't want his sandwich cut, one literally says he won't eat cheese except on Thursdays. It's bonkers managing volume, especially when people have preferences. While I do love making my kids happy with their lunches, I also know that it's okay for them to not love every component every time. That's true for all of us. Lunch doesn't have to be perfectly suited to every taste every day, and a great way to help with the volume frustration is to make the same thing for everyone or at least a very close variation.

If you're feeding multiple mouths that are at home for lunch, for example if you homeschool or nanny or something, consider prepping lunch as dinner and make one unit of food that will feed multiple mouths. Think about it this way. We'll use the idea of enchiladas as our example. Enchiladas are essentially cheese and maybe some other stuff wrapped into a tortilla, stuck inside a big baking dish, and covered in sauce. Now you might think of that as a great crowd meal because it's all made in one pan for many people. That's only partly true because you're still have to individually fill and roll each enchilada. They're going into one pan, but the individual work is still there. Compare that to making what is essentially enchilada lasagna. Put down a little sauce, layer on a bunch of tortillas, dump in half of your filling, do that whole thing one more time, douse the top with cheese, and then bake it. That prep takes way less time than the traditional way because you're limiting your movements basically. Making those kinds of choices with lunch is a good idea because you're feeding multiple mouths with as few motions as possible. I know I sound like a weirdo efficiency expert, but that's my job here, folks. Let's be a genius where we can. So make a one unit of food that feeds multiple mouths. Rather than making five sandwiches, get a big loaf of Italian bread and make one big sandwich that you cut into pieces. You still have to make food, but you're doing one unit instead of five. It makes a difference. And one more thought when it comes to prep for the frustration of volume, consider cutting up more than one serving of fruit or vegetables and keeping them for another lunch. When I buy strawberries or oranges for example, it's easy to slice only as much fruit as I need for that set of lunches, but when I cut up all the strawberries or slice all the oranges while I'm in the groove, not only is it more efficient mentally and physically because I'm already doing it, it makes the next lunch so much easier because some prep is already done. Basically there's not a single solution for everyone because we're all different, but if you start to think about how to adjust what you're already doing to make it a little bit easier - one sandwich instead of five, cutting up all the fruit at once rather than three or four times each week - your frustration with volume might lower a bit.

Next frustration is decision making. You just don't want to have to think about something else. How can you rethink lunch and meal prep if that's your frustration? Maybe deciding in the moment is the problem, so consider deciding what lunch is at breakfast. Maybe deciding every day no matter what time of day is draining; decide once a week. Now that doesn't mean you have to make a traditional meal plan with a different lunch every day. Maybe you choose what lunch is once a week and eat that thing every day that week. The same can go for your family. Maybe on Saturday, you decide that lunches for the week are turkey sandwiches, apples, mini cucumbers, and chips. Make that lunch every day for everyone, and decide a new lunch the next Saturday. Or you can do that for your kids but make a different plan for yourself if you're not into turkey sandwiches and chips. You can make a big batch of something and eat it on it all week. I've been known to make a pot of soup for my own week of lunches and no other reason.

Make it Monday morning, and you have lunch all week. No decisions needed. Another idea I got from my friend Anne Bogel from the podcast What Should I Read Next. She chooses a lunch that she'll eat for as long as a month or two, and it depends on the season. So maybe it's vegetable soup during the winter, salmon and salad in the summers, rotisserie chicken in a pita in the spring... that kind of thing. When you want to limit decisions, don't be afraid to make one decision for an extended stretch of time. It's kind of like a Monday uniform. Wear the same thing every Monday, and adjust it season to season. You might care way more about not thinking about outfits or lunch than you do about variety. That's why it's important to know the specific source of your frustration so you can know how to address it the best way.

And the final frustration is boredom. You get bored eating the same thing which could obviously be the opposite of what we just talked about! If you care about variety for yourself or your kids, let's talk about how to make that easier. For your kids, I want to bring up again that they might not care. Don't assume they're bored. For my kids, they eat pretty much the same lunches every day. My boys are in school every day and take their lunches, and my daughter takes hers twice a week and eats at home the other days. My boys get either a sunbutter and jelly or a turkey sandwich every day. Those are the things they both reasonably like, so we stick with them. We use Planetbox lunchboxes. I'll link to them in the show notes, but they're essentially stainless steel bento boxes. They're not cheap, but we use them year after year. Sam is on his sixth year with his, and it's practically the same as it was the day we bought it. No baggies, no tupperware, and they go in the dishwasher. I love them so much, and one of the reasons is because they almost pre-make decisions for me. There's a big compartment that fits a sandwiches, three other medium compartments, and a tiny one. Two of the three medium compartments get fruit or carrot sticks, the other one gets something crunchy like pretzels or chips, and then there's a tiny compartment that gets some candy or a Thin Mint cookie or something. That's what they have every single day for lunch, and they're fine. Annie gets that when she goes to school, and when she's home, she gets salami, a cheese stick, two kinds of fruit, and something crunchy. Every day. I realize that right now we're talking about the frustration with boredom, but I'm giving you the freedom to not feel pressured to give your kids a ton of lunch variety if it makes you crazy and they really don't care. Don't try and fix invisible problems.

Now if you want variety and hate eating the same thing every day for your own lunches, you have a couple of options. You can actually make a different lunch and spend the time deciding on and executing another meal. If you have the time and energy, go for it. If you want some variety but don't have that kind of energy on a daily basis, here are a couple of approaches. First, have a meal matrix for lunches. I talk about meal matrixes a lot when I talk about dinner, but a meal matrix is essentially a plug-and-play approach to meal planning. Give yourself some kind of limit to make your decisions easier. Taco Tuesday is a meal matrix; you know that you're having tacos but the kind of tacos can vary which still give you variety. Try that for your lunches. Monday is a sandwich. Tuesday is soup. Wednesday is a green salad. Thursday is a grain salad. Friday is something hot with cheese and bread. You can also do this approach for an entire month. One week is green salads. For example, you could make my Tim Riggins salad on a Sunday and again on Wednesday and eat that every day that week. The follow week is rice bowls. You make a giant batch of rice, and then make a couple of different rice bowls that week. The first few days you do something like a taco bowl where you have ground beef and sautéed peppers, and top it with salsa and avocado. The second half of the week, you have that same ground beef and sautéed peppers but top it with a ginger dressing, a dollop of plain yogurt, and fresh cilantro. The third week is chicken salad. Make or buy a big batch, and then put it in a pita,

in between two slices of bread, on a bed of arugula, that kind of thing. You can meal matrix the entire month by eating the same thing for a week and then switching it up.

Again, the most important thing here is to recognize what your actual frustrations are. When we say “ugh, I hate making lunch” but don’t identify why, we just stay frustrated because we don’t know what solutions to look for. So know why it’s frustrating, give it value and leave space for it, and then consider how to adjust when you make lunch and how you prep for it which, remember, includes just stocking your kitchen with fruit and sunbutter in my case. You’re not doing anything wrong because you’re frustrated. Making food feels like one of those things that should come easily, but it doesn’t always. And usually it’s because our lens is too broad. Narrow down those frustrations and seek our solutions within helpful limits like a meal matrix. And don’t be afraid to eat the same thing every day. It doesn’t make you a bad person.

Check the show notes for some helpful links at [thelazygeniuscollective.com/lazy/lunch](http://thelazygeniuscollective.com/lazy/lunch), and while we usually talk on Instagram every Thursday, this week we’re not because it’s Thanksgiving, at least in America, so we’re taking the week off. But I do have good news if you want to process and ask lunch questions. We have a Lazy Genius Facebook group! It took us long enough, right? If you want a community that has a Lazy Genius perspective and want to crowdsource some ideas based on what you specifically need in your life, join the group! I’ll put a link in the show notes for that as well. Lazy Geniuses are such a great resource for ideas to help us be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don’t, so let’s gather and help each other out and encourage each other in the things that matter to us. I’ll hang out in there for sure, and my delightful assistant Leah will make sure things are working and that everyone is treating us each other. You guys are fantastic and I have worries about weird dynamics, but we’re going to protect that space from badmouthing and judging for sure. Nobody’s got time for that. So check the link in the show notes and join the Facebook group!

And don’t forget to check out Knox McCoy’s new book *The Wondering Years*. I think you’ll love it.

Okay, guys, that’s it for today! I’m Kendra, and remember to be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don’t. See you next week, and Happy Thanksgiving! Bye!