

Meal Planning 101

Hooray!! It's here. A simpler way to do things. I know you'll love it.



The Why...

It's easy to get excited by a meal plan created for you. But there is something EVEN BETTER... and that is MAKING ONE YOURSELF.

Meal plans are definitely where it is at once you have a system that works for you. And there are MANY SYSTEMS OUT THERE. It's really about discovering how each one will fit with your life. And it may change as your children get older, or you change jobs, or people eat differently.

I find the most exciting reason to meal plan is really the stress relief it brings.

It reduces stress because:

You always know what your plan is (at least usually)

You save money

You save time

You usually eat healthier

Maybe when you lived on your own it was really simple. But with a family to feed, there are so many considerations to make. And the bigger your family gets, the more valuable your time, and therefore the more important planning ahead becomes.

1. **Planning Ahead:** There is nothing worse than going to make almond milk, and finding the almond un-soaked. Or going to cook a hunk of meat and find it still in the freezer. It is most often the little steps that make our life better.
2. **Saving Money:** There is absolutely NO DOUBT that meal planning saves you money. You can meal plan based on your ingredients, if you are an avid farmer's market go-er or receive a weekly CSA box. OR you can plan your meals and shop accordingly. But having everything go bad because you're missing one ingredient to make this, or you're too busy to make that. It is so depressing when the beautiful produce you've purchased now becomes your compost.
3. **Use Up Ingredients:** There are always going to be leftover ingredients. And you don't want the same things hanging around forever — INCLUDING grains and beans. If you make a plan you can get rid of these ingredients faster.

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Nourish ~ Real Food | Sara Bradford | www.nourishrealfood.com

4. **Have the right ingredients:** There is truly nothing more annoying than going to make a dish and finding you're missing that ONE ESSENTIAL ingredient. Argh.
5. **You WILL Eat Healthier:** It's true. The chances of you eating healthier in general, will be for a few reasons. You've PLANNED to eat healthier meals. Your blood sugar will not spike or drop, as often — the thing that often leads to more unhealthy choices. You won't need to eat processed foods, because you'll have planned to make time to create real food.
6. **Eat Out Less:** You really will. What is the one reason people eat out? Because they don't have time or energy to whip something together. This rarely happens if you have something fast you can make on hand.
7. **Family Involvement:** You can make it a family affair, and create your meal plan together. The advantage of this? Kids are more likely to eat what they've helped decide on. Same goes for your hubby.
8. **Save Time:** Making trips to the grocery store — and you can plan appropriately for busy days.
9. **Less Stress:** This is worth its weight in gold.



The How...

MY METHOD

So you want to build a meal plan. There are different methods for doing this. I'm going to show you MY method. If you have a system that works, then use that. But this works for us, and I'm hoping it'll work for most of you. Once you see how easy this makes life, you will never want to go without meal planning ever again. I promise you that.

PROTEIN

Keep in mind when preparing your meals...ensure there is an adequate source of protein. Often meal choices will be based on the protein, so knowing which proteins you have on hand is very useful. If you have a deep freeze, keep a list of your protein sources. It's amazing how easy it is to lose an item to the bottom of your freezer. It's a resource when you are planning, and often ideas will pop up from it alone.

When you are planning your breakfasts or lunches, also keep protein in mind. A salad can make a wonderful meal, but doesn't do you a whole lot of good if you're hungry one hour later.

FYI: "Protein" doesn't have to mean animal protein. Nope — it sure doesn't.

STEP ONE — MASTER LIST

The first step, before doing anything, should be to make a list of every single family meal you can think of that you love. Like a master list of favourite foods. This can obviously be added to as time goes on. But it's very important. I don't know how many times I've sat around wondering what the heck to make for dinner, not being in the mood for anything. I look at the list and figure it out very quickly.

If your brain works this way, you might want to break down your meals into their Protein Type. This will make life easier when you are in the mood for a particular



protein, or if you're planning and you know you have it in the fridge or freezer already.

I'd break the list into Poultry, Beef, Pork, Eggs, Beans & Legumes, Cheese, Tempeh, Other. If you are a vegetarian family you may want to break it down even further — into specific plant-based protein.

Once you've made this list, take a look at all of your dinners. Mark a * beside all the meals that are quick and easy. Mark a ** beside all the meals that use a slow cooker. This handy list COULD change your life. Do not forget the beauty of Breakfast For Dinner, and other super quick ideas.

You can also make a list of handy, healthy breakfast and lunch ideas. Use the * for these also. Don't forget snack foods. Having a bean dip on hand, or protein bars made up and frozen is a lifesaver.

Now, you've got your list of foods. You know what takes less time.

Handy Tip:

When you make your favourite dishes, try and make a double batch. Why not! Throw half in the freezer, in either individual portions or meal portions.

Example: chili — We eat so much of this in the winter, I HAVE to make double batches. Knowing I have SUCH an easy meal at my disposal. I don't even need to thaw overnight. If I know in the morning I thaw and heat in the slow cooker during the day.

STEP TWO — THE PLAN

Now, the next step is to take your calendar, look at your schedule and DECIDE which days are busy, less busy, not busy. Obviously you want fast choices on busy days — the not-so-busy days are best for prepping.

Choose the dishes you want or love but VARY the protein. Eating chicken three nights in a row is enough to bore ANYBODY. Plunk in the super fast meals for the days you are super busy, or choose a slow cooker meal.



You can decide from there what you'll eat for lunch or breakfast. Will you use leftovers for lunch? Can you make something for breakfast that will last 3 mornings? Do you need to soak something overnight?

Here's an example:

DAY ONE

Breakfast Granola and homemade almond milk
Lunch Sandwich (using leftover chicken from Sunday's chicken dinner)
Dinner Slow Cooker Stew

DAY TWO

Breakfast leftover granola and almond milk
Lunch leftover beef stew
Dinner Black Bean Burritos

DAY THREE

Breakfast Heuvous Rancheros with leftover black beans (freeze any remaining)
Lunch thawed out soup from the freezer
Dinner Salmon with veg sides

MAKE-AHEAD PREP (for above plan)

before DAY ONE: make up batch of granola, soak almonds overnight

DAY ONE: drain and prepare almond milk, throw beef stew ingredients in the slow cooker

DAY TWO: take soup out of freezer for Day Three's lunch, make a double batch of black beans — place half in freezer for future meal (or use cans)

DAY THREE: Prepare salmon (or thaw)



You may even want to download a calendar for the entire month and include activities AND meal plan. OR use an app on your smart phone or computer — this is what I do!

Meal planning takes a bit of time — but it SAVES you MORE time in the end. Once you've done it a couple times, it becomes easier and faster. I would also suggest KEEPING meal plans around and reusing at a later date. I keep mine.

Download Your Meal Plan Template: [HERE](#)

THEME DAYS

Our family has a theme for each day of the week. The actual dish varies at each meal, but the kids know what to look forward to and really enjoy it.

For example...

MONDAY: Meatless Mondays (but a busy activity night so it's something fast)

TUESDAY: Taco Tuesdays (we change the type each week)

WEDNESDAY: Wacky Wednesday (we try something new)

THURSDAY: no kids (I play it by ear — usually soup or leftovers)

FRIDAY: Chili Fridays or Pizza Fridays

SATURDAY: Wild Card (dinner party, take-out, go-out, something easy)

SUNDAY: Sunday Supper (usually a roast to re-use throughout the week)



BREAKFAST

That's why breakfast is often so appealing to so many. The "breakfast foods" commonly eaten in the North American diet are easy-peasy. But they aren't a nourishing way to begin the day. So we need to make them easy and awesome by thinking ahead.

Scrambled Eggs = simple

Overnight Oats = night before = instant breakfast

Buckwheat Granola made ahead = breakfast for days

Smoothies = blender food = fast food

Leftovers = why not? soup is great

LUNCH

Lunch can be equally as simple. While its important that there is a decent amount of protein and fat (think beyond a green salad). But the trick to lunch is re-using leftovers, in my opinion. I'm actually disappointed when there isn't enough dinner leftover for the next day's lunch. So I plan for it. Again, it is best not to be left without a clue what to eat.

Leftovers = instant lunch (heat up — not in microwave — or use in other things)

Salad Jars = make up entire week's worth for fridge

Soup or Chilli or Stew = make it up ahead and eat all week or freeze portions for another week

DINNER

This is the tricky one for most people. But once you know what your family's best system is, this is the real thing to plan for.

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