

Meal Planning for Beginners – in Just 30 Minutes a Week!

It's often thought that meal planning is a very long and complicated process; indeed, the thought of having to actually *plan* meals as well as *cook* them seems, to some, to double the work they already dread. Then there are those who are curious to start meal planning but find the whole range of styles, approaches and processes totally overwhelming. They never get started because they simply don't know how.

If this rings a bell with you and you're curious how meal planning can help, then read on, because meal planning can be both simple and successful.

30 Minutes a Week

You've probably heard those people who boast "I only spend 30 minutes a week on my meal plan, it's soooo easy". Ok, spoiler alert: I'm one of 'em. I genuinely only spend 30 minutes a week meal planning, because I've got my method honed to suit ME.

You see, that's the thing.

There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to meal planning. You have to find the method that suits YOU, YOUR schedule and YOUR household – or it'll be more harmful than helpful.

Let me give you an example: dieting. There are thousands of different diets out there that all, ultimately, claim to help you lose weight. But you wouldn't pick just any diet, would you? Oh no. If you actually want to stick at it and see real results, then you know you've got to find a diet that suits you (and ideally still allows you to eat copious amounts of chocolate, right?).

It's the same with meal planning.

If you try and follow the exact process your friend/neighbour/mum recommends, then unless your circumstances are *exactly the same*, it'll never work!

So here's what you're going to do: you're going to complete these three easy tasks, and create a personal meal plan that will give YOU real results. Then you're going to be the smug person who boasts about "30 minutes a week". Even if you're a total beginner.

One-Off Task: Food Diary

Let's start with a really simple one, a one-off task. For a week, you're going to keep a record of what your household eats (or think back over last week). It can be breakfast, lunch and dinner if you like – most people just focus on dinner, though - but the important thing is to WRITE IT DOWN on your phone, a notepad, whatever.

Next to each meal that you record, you're also going to note whether it was quick to cook, a last-minute panicked trip to the grocery store or an emergency takeaway after a late finish. You need to be able to look back over this and see what worked, was liked and was easy, and what was a nightmare.

Regular Task: Scheduling

When you're ready to plan meals for the coming week, print out the freebie and grab a cup of coffee (or glass of wine, if it really is *that* daunting).

NB. You need to have the two printed planning sheets side by side for this.

Start with the MEALS FOR THE WEEK sheet, and next to each day of the week, put a SCHEDULING PROMPT note for what you will be doing this coming week.

For example, you might write “late in, meeting” or “dinner @ home with friends” or “kids out @ party” – anything that jogs your memory about your upcoming commitments.

[If you like, you can use your Food Diary to help you; look at which nights you had time to cook and which you didn't, what kinds of meals worked well and were popular, and where you had to run to the shops. Then build these into your Scheduling prompts too, by adding a comment about them.]

Regular Task: Menu

Now the fun starts: your MENU. The MENU sheet is divided up into four categories:

Quick and Easy, Low and Slow, In Advance, No Cook.

Quick and Easy meals are those that you can throw together in 30 minutes or so – think stir fry, fajitas, pasta and so on.

Low and Slow meals are the kind you put in the oven and forget about – think casseroles, stock pot, slow cooker (crock pot).

In Advance means you will do most (if not all) of the cooking ahead of time, for example by batch cooking on the weekend, or by cooking double of something and freezing half for later.

No Cook means just that – it really will be too difficult to cook and so you're all on sandwiches, leftovers or raiding the fridge!

Under each heading, try to write down three meals that you regularly cook that fit the bill. Now is not the time to try something new; it's also not the time to choose something that only half the family really likes. You need to go for tried-and-tested favourites so that you don't have any additional battles on your hands. Again, look back to your Food Diary to remind you.

Finally

Look again at your SCHEDULING PROMPTS. Now, pick a meal from your four MENU categories that suits that prompt!

So, if it's “late in, meeting”, then choose a **Quick and Easy**.

If it's “dinner @ home with friends” then choose a **Low and Slow** and use the time to set the table and get ready!

If it's “kids out @ party” then go for a **No Cook** and enjoy the evening off!

Once you've followed these steps, it not only gets easier to plan for your week, but it gets much, much quicker too:

- The Food Diary was a one-off task to learn your household's eating habits.
- The Menu can become a permanent list that you pin up in your kitchen, add to as inspiration hits, and refer to week after week.
- Now all you need to do is write new Scheduling prompts for each coming week and pick meals from your Menu that suit.

30 minutes a week? Easy.