

Taking the Food Stamp Challenge

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By Laura Mindlin

I knew that living on \$1.50 per meal a day would be difficult, but by day three of the Food Stamp Challenge, I was exhausted. It wasn't just because of the small portions of food I'd been eating to avoid hitting day six with nothing left but a half empty jar of peanut butter; making \$31.50 in groceries stretch a whole week was tougher than I imagined. My exhaustion instead came from constantly thinking about food.

I consider myself a foodie, so this was not a big change for me, but the nature of my thoughts had changed. On the days leading up to the challenge, I was kept up at night thinking about how I would spend that \$31.50. Which foods would last me the whole week? Would I be able to get even a sampling of fruits and vegetables? What would I have to sacrifice? Those first few days I managed to pull together some pretty decent dishes with the foods I bought: pasta, kidney and black beans, tofu (best bang for your buck), peanut butter, brown rice, mango, oatmeal, broccoli/carrot mixture, eggs, chicken drumsticks, tomatoes, cantaloupe, cereal, red pepper, sweet potatoes, and an eggplant.

Despite my naïve expectations, my food-related stressors didn't dissolve when I finally made my purchases. They actually led to some frustration, as well as a few other emotions that I couldn't quite put my finger on. But I kept those feelings inside. I'd sit in a café and watch with wide eyes and outrage as the person next to me threw away half of a perfectly good sandwich.

Other times, I had to explain to friends that I was a little grumpy because I hadn't eaten much that day, and I was exhausted by all of the thoughts circulating in my mind. But then I'd stop and remind myself why I took on this challenge in the first place. Grumpiness? Mental exhaustion? Who was I to use these excuses when there are people living on a food stamp budget week after week, maybe even working two jobs, simply to provide for their family? I knew that by the last day of this challenge I'd likely have gained many new insights--not just about the hardworking New Yorkers who rely on food stamps to get them through difficult times, but also about myself. I'll share more of the lessons I've learned in my next blog.

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