



Life²

How to have a better Christmas

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How to have a better Christmas

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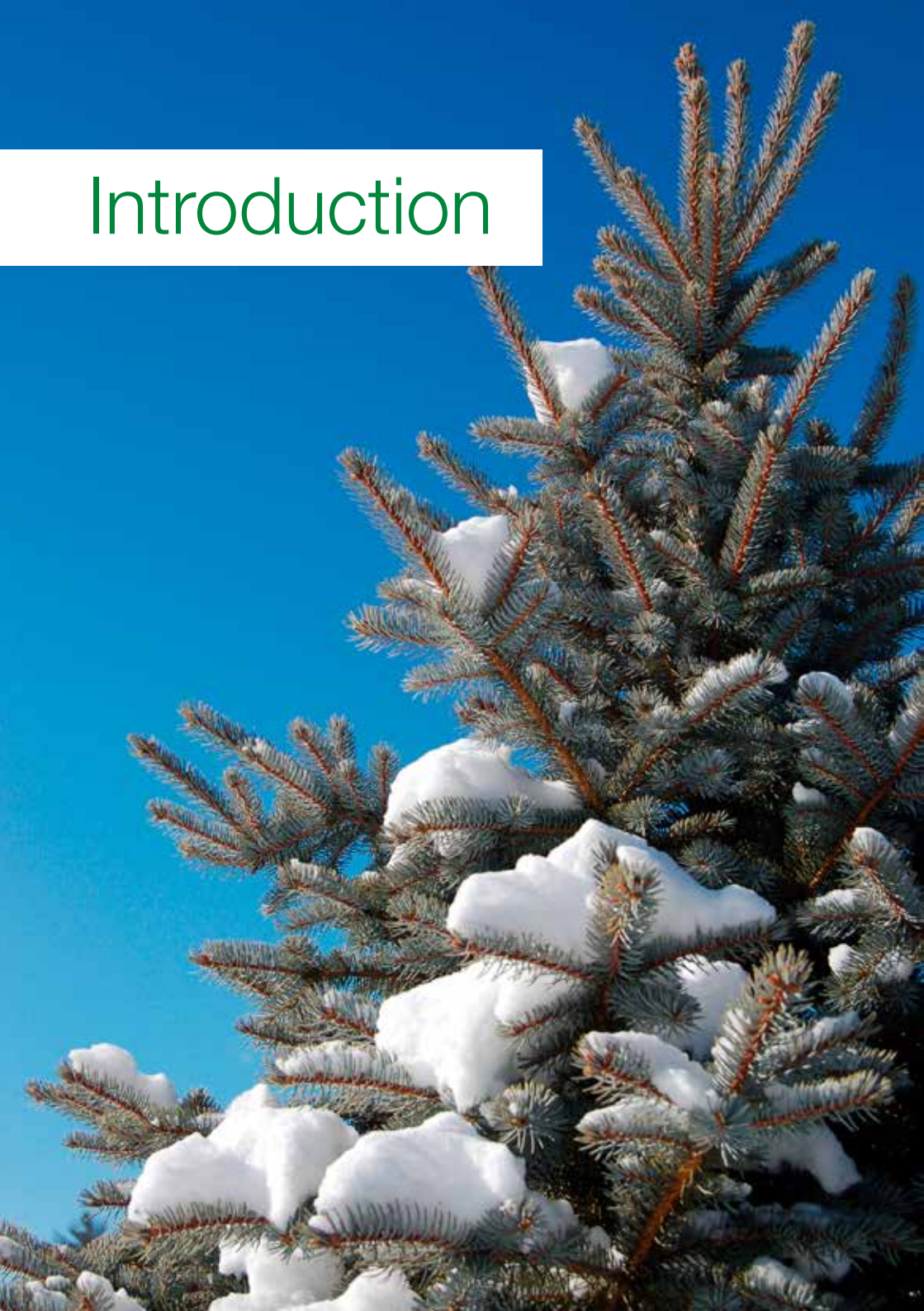
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Introduction



Introduction

For many people there is something special about Christmas, whether they have a religious belief or not. Many of us have fond memories of past Christmases from our childhood or romantic ideas of how an ideal Christmas would look.

It is common for people to look back on the past in a favourable way and to feel that things were better 'back then'. Sometimes this is just a case of wishful thinking and selectively looking at the past through rose-tinted glasses. But in our longing for a traditional Christmas one can't help but think that we have indeed lost some of the features of the festive period that are really important to us.

Just look at some of the most popular traditional ideas and scenes relating to Christmas – snow on the ground, good food and drink, people gathering together to celebrate and people showing goodwill, kindness and generosity towards each other. It is of course impossible to control one or two of these features (however much we may want a white Christmas!) but with the vast majority we can take steps to build them more into our experience of Christmas.

This booklet identifies some of the most important features of a happy and meaningful Christmas and

provides a wide range of practical ideas and tips on how we can bring more of them into our lives – both at Christmas and more generally, as many of these features not only contribute to a better Christmas, but also to a happier, wiser and more meaningful life.

Before we consider how we can make Christmas better, let us take a brief tour of the modern Christmas experience for many people, and some of the important things we might be missing out on.



Christmas in the modern world

Christmas in the modern world

Many people's experience of Christmas in the modern world is of a busy and stressful period dominated by consumerism and the pressure to buy as much stuff as possible.

This can make it difficult for us to experience the things that we think are truly important at Christmas, and is one of the reasons why many people feel Christmas has lost its meaning.

There are some important parallels between this commercialised and limp version of Christmas and our lives generally in the modern West, as many of us can find it hard to live the lives we really want due to a number of significant pressures on us, many of which are similar to those affecting our experience of Christmas.

Let us briefly explore a selection of the problems with Christmas in the modern world and how they can affect us.

Consumerism

In modern life, we're surrounded by more commercial messages than ever before but at Christmas this goes to another level. Christmas advertising campaigns

start several months before Christmas itself and are often targeted directly at children. This creates a pressure on parents and everyone else at Christmas to spend as much money as possible on as many items as possible, with the implication that if we don't spend enough money or buy a sufficient number of things for other people, we are letting them down, being mean or failing to show the generosity expected at Christmas.

If people's (and especially children's) expectations have been set in this way by advertisers and the media, it can be quite difficult to resist this pressure to spend. But as we will see later in the booklet, there are many other ways of showing generosity than just buying stuff.

This is just the commercial pressure before Christmas Day. No sooner has the day itself passed than we are lured into throwing ourselves back toward the shops for the New Year sales, which in recent years have moved forward to Boxing Day so that we get only one day of rest from buying stuff – on Christmas Day itself! Quite simply, we have been turned into consumption machines over Christmas.

Not only does this 'super-consumerism' have serious environmental consequences (which we will discuss later), but it also causes us various forms of pressure and anxiety that can make our Christmases (and our lives) much less fulfilling and enjoyable. For example, it causes us stress when trying to negotiate busy,

overcrowded shopping centres for presents, anxiety if we're not able to buy or afford everything we feel we should buy and pressure to keep up with the lifestyles and spending levels of others.

It also means that we waste our time dealing with these pressures when we could be doing other things, such as doing things for people that they would really appreciate or enjoying the things that really matter to us – like spending time with family and friends. It can also bring serious longer term consequences to our lives when we spend beyond our means and amass debts that take years to pay off.

There are very similar pressures on our lives generally in the modern world. We are surrounded by influences telling us that the 'good life' is to consume as much as possible (something that is simply not true for many people), and this can put pressure on us to consume more, aspire to certain lifestyles and keep up with other people - all of which can cause us anxiety and misery and may not be what we really want from life. It can also stop us from thinking about the things that actually do matter to us.

Being rushed

Life in the modern world is generally very busy – we work long hours and even outside work we seem to be busier than ever – trying to cram as many activities as possible into our lives. We also live in a 24-hour society where the pace of life has got faster. The idea



↑ Waiting facilities
← Bus station (see City Map on page 4)
← Travel & tourist centre
← Underground
↑ Way out (see City Map on page 4)
↑ Way out (see City Map on page 4)
Started Express tickets →

TICKETS
TICKETS

of being more productive with our time seems to have seeped from our working lives into our leisure time. This collection of things can lead to stress, bad health and a situation in which we lose control of our lives. It is also an arbitrary idea of what's good – many of us might not want to be rushed, but instead enjoy the experience of life and the activities within it.

It is a similar situation at Christmas. Many people only get a day or two off work over the festive period –if that. Of those of us who are lucky enough to get time off at Christmas, many don't seem to use it as a time to relax. Instead, we try to cram too many things into the holiday period – for example, rushing to finish the Christmas shopping, trying to visit several sets of friends and relatives and taking responsibility for doing all the cooking and preparation. This can cause us anxiety and stop us from enjoying each experience, as we are trying to do several things at once or constantly thinking about the next thing we need to do.

Isolation and lack of community

A sad feature of modern life is that many people have become more isolated from their local communities. Their work, shopping and social lives take place in other places so they fit in and out of their home area without really connecting with the place or the people living in it. And when people are actually in their community, they hole themselves up at home with isolating pastimes like watching television – the

average person in the UK watches three and a half hours of TV each day. These points can lead to a range of social problems including loneliness and a lack of support for the vulnerable and can even affect the physical environment and the pride people take in their surroundings.

Christmas is a time when people are expected to get together to celebrate, but some of these broader aspects of our increasingly individualised society also affect our ability and willingness to do this. For example, shopping in large out-of-town superstores can take away the feeling of community we get from doing the shopping in our local shops, where we can meet our neighbours and feel that we are sharing Christmas with other people. When we don't know our neighbours, we have less chance to enjoy celebrating Christmas with them and less opportunity to check whether anyone is alone during the festive period and needs help.

This sense of isolation can also infiltrate our own homes at Christmas, where we spend hours in groups glued to the television instead of enjoying each others' company and having fun.

One of the most basic things human beings need, enjoy and seek out is the company of other human beings, so we should take steps to ensure we get this – at Christmas and throughout the year.



Waste and environmental problems

If everyone in the world were to live in the way we currently do in the UK we would need more than three Earth's to produce the resources we would use and absorb the wastes we would generate. If everyone consumed at the US rate, we would need nearly five Earths. Overall, human beings have moved from using about half the planet's biocapacity in 1961 to over 1.25 times it in 2003. We are already living way beyond the planet's limits, so we have no choice but to significantly reduce the amount of resources we consume and waste materials we produce so that everything we do (even Christmas) takes place within the carrying capacity of one planet.

As we have already seen however, Christmas is currently a time of 'super consumerism' that exceeds even our usual high levels of resource use. Here are just a couple of examples of our environmental impact at Christmas:

- Britain uses over 8,000 tonnes of wrapping paper over Christmas, which produces over 83 square km of rubbish - enough to cover Guernsey.
- The average family wastes around a third of the food they buy at Christmas.

We therefore need to make some significant reductions in our environmental impact at Christmas and in our lives generally. Fortunately, as we will see later in the booklet, many of these changes can

go hand in hand with having a more enjoyable and fulfilling Christmas.

Summary

Although Christmas is still a special time for many people, there are a number of aspects of Christmas in the modern world that can dampen the experience for us by distracting us from the things that really matter to us and cause us additional stress and anxiety.

These problems have a number of parallels with our lives more generally in the modern world. In this section, we've just provided a few examples of some of the problems and pressures we face in our modern lives, but to read more about this, as well as what we can do to make our lives and the world better, see Richard Docwra's book 'Modern life – as good as it gets?'.

How to have a
happy Christmas



How to have a happy Christmas

Let us now consider how we can make Christmas happier, wiser and more meaningful.

We have divided the rest of the booklet up into some of the features that make Christmas fun and meaningful for many people. They are rest, people, food and drink, generosity, compassion, reflection and fun.

We have also added a section on the end called ‘sustainability’, which reflects the need for all of us to live within the parameters of one planet, whatever the occasion.

Within each of these sections, we will provide tips and practical ideas as to how you can bring more of these features into your experience of Christmas, and perhaps into your life more generally, as many of these features not only contribute to a better Christmas, but also to a happier, wiser and more meaningful life.

These are of course just broad categories, and you may feel that some don’t apply to you. But the main point of this booklet is to encourage you to think about the things that really matter to you at Christmas (and in life generally) and then try to incorporate them into your life.

1. Rest

In the modern world we all lead busy lives. We work long hours, live in a 24-hour society and even outside work we seem to be busier than ever - trying to cram as many activities as possible into our lives. For many people Christmas represents a rare opportunity in the year to get off the treadmill and just relax.

Sadly, many people feel unable to take this opportunity as they may feel there are lots of things to organise and do at Christmas and that other people are depending on them. Christmas can therefore become even more stressful and busy than the rest of the year. But who is in control here? Can't we just decide to slow down and enjoy our experience of Christmas? Will this really spoil the Christmases of people around us? And are these people really relying on us as much as we think they are – or could they do a bit more to help too?

A good Christmas, like a good life, demands that we take control of our relationship with time. This means deciding the pace we want to live at and then prioritising the activities that can fit within this, and rejecting some of them if they can't all fit. For some people, being busy may be what they enjoy, and this is fine. But many other people may prefer to do less and savour the time they spend doing each thing – rather than rushing around in a panic with the feeling that they are getting little pleasure out of the experiences they are having.



Tips and ideas

- **Take some extra time off** – some people are lucky enough to be given two full weeks' holiday by their employers over Christmas, but many people are not. If you're able to, why not take a few more days off around the Christmas and new year period to give yourself some real time to unwind?
- **Don't rush** – give yourself a present at Christmas – the gift of time. Promise yourself that you won't try to cram too much in. Prioritise the activities you feel you have to do, challenge yourself as to whether they are all essential, then work out how much time you need to do them (including whether other people could help you with them). Then add to this list any things you would like to do – but make sure you include plenty of rest and free time.
- **Make sure you enjoy it** – once you've got your number of activities down to a sensible level, make sure you savour everything that you do – even the activities that you might view as 'tasks' rather than things you'd choose to do. For example, enjoy the process of shopping in your local town and soaking up the Christmas atmosphere, enjoy preparing the food and enjoy your time with friends and relatives. Make things – from biscuits to decorations - rather than buying them, and do these creative activities with other people. One good way to get more out of these things is to see them as pleasures rather

than as duties and things you have to ‘deliver’ on. These points all link with the more general idea that we should appreciate our experience of living – second by second. Live in the moment rather than planning the next activity for the future.

- **Ignore the sales** – do not throw yourself back into the stress and pressure of shopping and the sales on Boxing Day – allow yourself the time to do something more relaxing and interesting. See the free LifeSquared guide ‘Better than shopping’ for some ideas.

2. People

In a poll conducted by Experian in 2002, people were asked to select the most important aspects of Christmas from a number of options. By far the most popular answer – selected by 70% of responders - was that ‘being with the family’ was the most important aspect of Christmas.

For the majority of us, the most important aspect of Christmas seems to be spending time with other people. This might include our families, but it might also include friends, neighbours and any other groups of people with whom we can come together and feel a sense of common humanity and community – even if it is just within the setting of a carol service or Christmas market. This spirit of ‘joining together with others’ is illustrated by the classic story of Christmas in the trenches during the First World War when

hostilities were temporarily ceased on Christmas Day 1914 and hundreds – maybe thousands – of soldiers from opposing sides chatted, sang songs and exchanged gifts.

Not everyone has friends or family nearby, but this doesn't mean that they need to spend the Christmas period feeling isolated. In the tips below we've included a number of suggestions that can help you to get out there and spend time with other people.

Tips and ideas

- **Invite your neighbours round for a drink** – this is a great time of the year to get together with your neighbours and is a perfect excuse to invite them round for a drink if you've never met them before.
- **Go to some local Christmas events** – from carol services to Christmas fairs. These can not only give you a greater sense of Christmas spirit but also give you the chance to spend some of Christmas in the company of other people. Take a look in your local newspaper or listings magazines to find out what's on near you.
- **Make Christmas a communal experience** – see the experience of Christmas not as one where you have your own isolated and onerous range of duties to complete, but as one in which everyone in your family or group is contributing together to a group experience – and helping to make that experience better. This includes making the effort to help each



other out and contribute in areas that might not normally be ‘yours’ – whether this involves cooking or buying the Christmas tree.

- **Do more together and watch less TV** – this isn’t the usual ‘watch less TV because it’s bad for you’ point (although this can be true), but is instead ‘watch less TV because it makes you miss out on more important and enjoyable things’. Your family and friends are round – why not enjoy time with them rather than sitting silently in front of the TV together? Play games, talk, sing songs, tell stories, muck about – anything to enjoy each other’s company!
- **If you are feeling lonely, tell someone** – Christmas is the time for people to make time for each other and show hospitality. So, if you want to be with people but don’t have anything planned, don’t be afraid to ask other people about what they are doing and whether there’s a space for you. They may well be able to find an extra chair and have enough food to go round.

3. Food and drink

A large proportion of the time, effort and money that people put into Christmas is spent on buying and preparing food and drink. It is therefore worthwhile to think about what we are spending this time, effort and money on and also to make sure we enjoy the time we spend doing this. This latter point links with the

earlier idea of savouring each of the activities we do during the festive period.

Tips and ideas

- **Buy local and seasonal** – make your meals from local, seasonal ingredients. Use local markets, suppliers and shops. Apart from supporting the local economy and reducing your food miles and CO2 emissions, this will give you a greater feeling of community and sense of Christmas than you'd get in a huge, soulless supermarket. It could even make you more creative in your cooking!
- **Buy good meat and buy less meat** – if you buy meat or poultry, make sure it is good quality, local and free range. Try to eat less meat, as we need to significantly reduce our meat consumption if we are to live sustainably.
- **Make some food yourself** – when we are busy it is often tempting and convenient to buy ready-made versions of everything. But it can be a great source of pleasure and fulfilment to make some of the food at Christmas yourself – even if it is just mince pies, Christmas cake or Christmas biscuits.

4. Generosity

In modern society, we are made to feel (by advertisers and others) that the only way to show generosity towards other people is to spend large amounts of money on buying lots of stuff for them.

On reflecting for a moment, we can see that there are many other ways of demonstrating generosity and showing people that we care than just buying them presents. For example, we could be generous in the amount of time, effort, attention, affection or many other things we could give them. This could involve visiting someone, making a phone call, helping out with the chores, making gifts or many other things.

The important thing is to give or do things that really matter to the other person – and this might often be something other than a material gift that you've spent lots of money on. It's not about buying loads of stuff – it's about doing things with love and care. This is quite a convenient point, because we need to consume much less anyway if we are to live within the limits of our planet (see the later 'Sustainability' point).

So whether you're thinking about which presents to buy people or how you want to behave towards others at Christmas – do it with love and care. They will appreciate it more, and you may end up spending and consuming less.

Tips and ideas

- **Consume less – give more** – when choosing gifts, think about what the person would really appreciate. Perhaps it is not something that you need to spend lots of money on – for example, making something for them or giving them the gift of time.



- **Agree a spending limit on gifts** – agree a maximum amount that you and your friends and family will spend on gifts for each other. It doesn't have to be much – a smaller amount can make you more creative in your gifts! By setting this limit, you remove any worries about 'not spending enough' on other people, and everyone ends up saving money.
- **Help out – domestically** – for example, do your bit in helping out at home – if someone else normally does all the preparation and cooking for Christmas dinner, offer to help.
- **Help out – locally and beyond** – show generosity to people beyond your own home. For example, give some time to a local charity over the Christmas period.
- **Look out for people** – many people can feel isolated during Christmas. Be aware of the plans of friends and other people you know, and offer hospitality to them if you think they would appreciate it. This could make your own Christmas even better too!

5. Compassion

Compassion is about showing empathy, recognising the needs and feelings of others and behaving unselfishly to improve the lives of others. We can show it not just to people (as an expression of our common humanity) but to all creatures.

Christmas is traditionally a time when people are

encouraged to think and act in a compassionate way. It is an ideal time to start carrying this thinking and behaviour into your day-to-day life on an ongoing basis. This can cover a range of behaviours – from showing forgiveness to helping someone in need. Acts of compassion and forgiveness can take bravery, but perhaps there could be opportunities for you to do them in your life – even in situations you previously thought impossible?

It may involve going out of your way to do an unselfish act for someone else, to admit a share of the blame for an argument (even when you feel you were right) or putting yourself in an awkward position for a moment in order to raise a sensitive issue. Challenge yourself to find the courage to do it where, in your heart of hearts, you think it is needed.

Tips and ideas

- **Resolve an argument** – if you've got an argument or some ill feeling remaining between you and someone else see if you can resolve it. This may involve you giving some ground.
- **Show forgiveness** – if someone has wronged you in some way (whether recently or long ago), try to show them forgiveness – it will lift a weight off your own shoulders. This could relate to a major issue or even something as minor as someone getting on your nerves during the Christmas period!

- **Show empathy** – trying to understand how other people are feeling and thinking can be a very useful habit to get into – for life, not just for Christmas!
- **Care for others** – show some unselfish behaviour to care for others. This point extends beyond just other people and could include any creatures. Give time, effort, money, or whatever you think is needed to the people and causes that need it most. This could range from helping an elderly neighbour in need through to donating money to a school in Africa.
- **Think about your ethical values** – take some time to think about the principles that matter to you and how you want to live your life. Then, try to live in a way that is consistent with these values. Our ‘How to live ethically’ booklet and our ‘Just think...’ course could help you to do all of this.

6. Reflection

One aspect of Christmas that can easily slip by is the opportunity for reflection. This might include taking time to reflect on the past year, the bigger picture of your life, how you are living, where you are heading and various other things.

Christmas can provide you with a useful pause at the end of the year to ‘catch up with yourself’ and regain some perspective on your life. Try some of the tips below to help you do this.



Tips and ideas

- **Have some daily reflection time** – give yourself at least ten minutes each day over the Christmas period to sit quietly without disturbance, close your eyes, relax and remove yourself from the rush. You might choose to banish all thoughts until you develop a sense of calm, as in meditation, or to stand back from your life and see it in greater perspective.

Either way, take some time each day to withdraw from the world and remind yourself that your life is part of something much bigger, that your thoughts are just abstract ideas and that you can control your response to the world.

Many people find that activities such as meditation, yoga or walking in the countryside can help this process, but choose the way that suits you best. Try to continue this daily reflection activity after the Christmas period, as it is useful on an ongoing basis.

- **Go to a carol service** – whether you are religious or not, singing carols can be a good way to soak up the atmosphere of Christmas, as well as an opportunity to pause, take part in a communal activity and do something that you wouldn't normally do – all of which can inspire reflection.
- **Get out of the house** – although it is one of the season's great pleasures, being surrounded by

people at Christmas can sometimes be tiring. It can therefore be great just to escape from the house and go for a walk or an outing somewhere peaceful. This can provide a great opportunity to reflect.

7. Fun

Christmas is a time for celebration, happiness and fun. This may seem like something that you can do perfectly well for yourself without any advice from a booklet, but it is worth examining it for a moment.

When we're having fun, we're usually 'living in the moment' and enjoying something without too many worries or anxieties getting in the way. Sometimes, our ability to have fun can be compromised by worries, fears, anxieties or other thoughts preoccupying us, and for some people these can be a feature of Christmas.

These can happen for many reasons – from trying to pack too much in to the festive period, through to having money worries or anxiety about family relationships. These thoughts can also be a feature of ongoing life for many people.

Some of the other tips in this booklet (such as having more time to rest or showing forgiveness) could help you to overcome some of these worries and anxieties, but overall the ability to manage your mind so that you can 'live in the moment' and enjoy the current experience you are having is one of the best Christmas

presents you can ever give to yourself.

So, one tip here is simply to try to relax and not worry or fear unnecessarily – just try to live in the moment. If you have difficulty doing this, why not seek some information or advice to help you get better at doing it?

Tips and ideas

- **Have some daily reflection time** – see the earlier ‘Reflection’ point for this tip. In particular, learning how to meditate can help to calm your mind and help you to move towards ‘living in the moment’.
- **Have fun your way** – we’re all different and not everyone gets fun out of the same things. So try to be honest with yourself and others about the things that give you pleasure, and do the things that you genuinely enjoy and avoid the ones you don’t. If a night out drinking isn’t your thing, see if you can arrange something else that is.
- **Help yourself to enjoy life** – if you are preoccupied by thoughts that are making it difficult to enjoy life, give yourself the present of doing something about it, as it could make a bigger contribution to improving your life than anything else. Read some information and books about it. Don’t feel ashamed to seek help about it from experts, including your doctor or mental health charities.



8. Sustainability

We cannot afford to ignore the issue of sustainability these days, as everything we do (even Christmas) must be done within the boundaries of our planet. As we discussed earlier, Christmas can be a time of enormous waste and environmental impact, and this is often driven by our thirst for more material goods and our supply systems importing food, gifts and other goods from around the world.

Fortunately, the ideas and tips we have given throughout this booklet so far support a different kind of Christmas – one that is not only happier and more meaningful for us, but one that is also wiser and kinder to the planet. It is not simply about cutting down on our levels of consumption because we have to – it is also because the drive to consume ever greater levels of stuff makes many people miserable and anxious and doesn't give us the things we really want or need in life – at Christmas or in life itself. This is an important lesson, and shows that the ideas of happiness and fulfilment on the one side, and sustainability on the other, are two sides of the same coin.

Tips and ideas

- **Consume less** – this is the big one. We can recycle as much as we like, but until we stop taking more resources than the planet can afford, we have no chance of living sustainably. We can consume

significantly less at Christmas simply by buying fewer things, and by questioning whether buying stuff is the best way of making the gestures we want to make. For example, would it mean more to your family if you were generous with your time over Christmas (and 40 the rest of the year) rather than just your money? Another example - do you need to send Christmas cards to everyone? Could you make a few or email them? As for food – we throw away around a third of the food we buy at Christmas, so try to buy only what you realistically feel you will eat – this doesn't mean you're depriving your family or letting them down – it is simple common sense.

- **Reduce your waste** – when you do have to consume, try to minimise the amount of waste you produce. You can do this in a number of ways – often, more than one at the same time. For example, choose items with less packaging, make things (like decorations and gifts) yourself with materials you already have rather than buying them and recycle and compost everything you can – including your Christmas tree. See www.foe.co.uk for more ideas.
- **Reduce your number of 'Christmas miles'** – many of the things we consume at Christmas – including food, decorations, presents, wrapping paper and trees – have been imported from many miles away. Millions of Britons also travel abroad during the Christmas period. Both of these things contribute

significantly to our CO² emissions at Christmas. There are many things we can do to reduce our Christmas miles, including spending Christmas in the UK rather than travelling abroad, buying food that is both seasonal and local, buying gifts and decorations that are made locally and making our own presents, decorations and wrapping paper. We need to drastically reduce our CO² emissions in our day-to-day lives as well as at Christmas – see the free LifeSquared guide entitled ‘What can I do?’ and our ‘just think...’ course for details.

- **Use less energy** – there are many things you can do to reduce your energy consumption at this energy-hungry time of year. For example, buy fewer energy-intensive gifts for people (like electrical gadgets), turn your thermostat down a degree or two and turn your Christmas lights off during the day and when you go to bed. Watching less TV should help too!

See www.energysavingtrust.org.uk and the free LifeSquared guide ‘What can I do?’ for more ideas.

Final thoughts

We hope this booklet has shown that there are many steps we can take to have a happier, wiser and more meaningful Christmas. And remember – many of these steps are for life – not just for Christmas!

We hope the ideas in this booklet are useful and wish you a very happy and fulfilled Christmas!

References

- i Source – <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/galleries/ethicalxmas/>
- ii Ibid.
- iii <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/christmastruce.htm>



How to have a better Christmas

Many people think Christmas has become too commercialised and has lost some of its meaning – rather like life in the modern world generally. This booklet explores some of the things that really add meaning and fun to our experience of Christmas (as well as those that don't) and gives a range of practical ideas and tips to enable you to have a happy, wise and meaningful festive period!