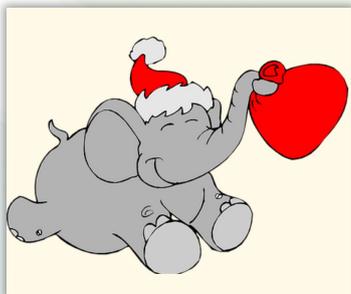


# A CONSCIOUS CHRISTMAS

**Alice Hopson – Environmental Specialist**

As I write this, I am not sure actually how many days until Christmas there are - this is probably something I should know, as my 3-year-old has already written to Santa explaining how he has been *sooo* good and can he please have “a baby elephant and lawnmower with a button on it” – clearly we need to have a discussion about endemic species and child safe toys, but that is for another post. It did get me thinking though; Christmas is nearly upon us, and with it comes a whole host of expectations (including those of a small child with a large African mammal infatuation and those from the rest of society).



Expectations about what we will do, what we will get, where we will be and who we will see at Christmas. Expectations about the quality of beverages on offer at the work Christmas party. Expectations about what size turkey we can really fit into our oven and how much sherry is acceptable in a Christmas pudding to the expectations of what unexpected deals the Boxing Day sales will yield. The list goes on, however, for some of us, the expectations deviate from the trite and light-hearted musings of some trivial ‘first world problems’ type of expectations to some hard and painful realisations.

Loss of livelihood, debt, social and family pressure, loss of loved ones, separation, anxiety, and homelessness are at the forefront of many hearts and minds right now too, possibly this year more than most. There is so much in the world that we cannot control (or even influence), so let’s focus on what we can change and do, and instead let’s move away from the expectation of getting to the intention of giving and have a more ‘conscious’ Christmas.

## What does a ‘Conscious Christmas’ mean to you?

Usually, when we think about having a more conscious Christmas, we might instead opt for a Tofu Turkey (tofurkey anyone?!) or elect to forgo the Christmas ham and ‘Pardon a Pig’ as many a worthy animal welfare group suggests to reduce our consumption of meat. Others of us may contribute to the local shopping centre Christmas tree for disadvantaged children or volunteer at the soup kitchen for the homeless. Some of us choose to sponsor a child in another country in a bid to be more charitable and make the world a bit better.



*Kmart & Salvation Army Christmas Wishing Tree Appeal. Source: Salvation Army.*

These are all wonderful, valid and absolutely important worthy causes which I am in no way suggesting we sacrifice (although I might decline actually calling it a ‘tofurkey’ at Christmas lunch), instead, let’s build on these kindnesses, and add these two very important gifts as well:

### 1) The Gift of Time

Challenge yourself and your family to put away the mobile electronic devices at your Christmas meal (once all the photos have been taken and phone calls to distant



### Summary/Quote



**Challenge yourself and your family to put away the mobile electronic devices at your Christmas meal and give the gift of quality time and undivided attention to your loved ones.**



family and friends have been completed of course!) and give the gift of quality time and undivided attention to your loved ones... No phones for the adults, tablets for the kids, or consoles for the teenagers (ouch!).

According to an article in Australian Men's Health (Stoneham 2017), "the average Australian spends 2.5 hours per day on their phones, which doesn't sound like much – but that works out to be a whopping 38 days a year!". Other estimates have found Australians spend an average of 10 hours and 24 minutes engaging with their internet-connected devices every day (Carmody 2016). Although this data is a few years old, one can only assume these numbers have not got smaller since then.



While we all understand the negative impacts this electronic media use can have on society (not least of all the quality of dinner time conversation or the awkward photos appearing on Facebook after the office Christmas party!), that remains 38 days we are not ever going to get back in our lives, so let's choose to spend them wisely, especially when so many of us are just craving quality time with loved ones after having been unable to socialise with them for a significant portion of the year.

(And, if you are wondering how to mandate this no-phones-at-the-table rule I suggest playing a game by putting all the phones face down on the table and the first person to use it has to wash all the Christmas dinner dishes....bingo, no phones at the table!).

## 2) The Gift of 'No'

Remembering it's ok to say 'no' can be a wonderful gift to yourself (and not just at Christmas). This can be anything from:

- Saying 'no' to engaging in an uncomfortable family conversation, or
- Saying 'no' to over-extending yourself financially for Christmas gifts, or
- Letting your child say 'no' to unwanted kisses on the cheek from well-meaning relatives, or
- Saying 'no' to the 3rd glass of wine.



In my case, it is saying 'no' to the baby elephant in the Christmas stocking. But all jokes aside, saying 'no' can be such a huge benefit for our mental health and can actually provide benefits to others around us.

The Mayo Clinic in their article on stress relief (2019) offers these four reasons for saying no:

**1. Saying no isn't necessarily selfish.** When you say no to a new commitment, you're honouring your existing obligations and ensuring that you'll be able to devote high-quality time to them.

**2. Saying no can allow you to try new things.** Just because you've always helped with something doesn't mean you have to do it forever. Saying no gives you time to pursue other interests.



**3. Always saying yes isn't healthy.** When you're overcommitted and under too much stress, you're more likely to feel run-down and possibly get sick.

**4. Saying yes can cut others out.** On the other hand, when you say no, you open the door for others to step up. Or you can delegate someone to take over the task. They may not do things the way you would, but that's OK. They'll find their own way.

That being said, while all those are perfectly valid reasons, saying 'no' (and being OK with it) is not always easy. In these situations, Katherine Hawley, Ph.D., (a professor of philosophy at the University of St Andrews, Scotland) recommends:

*"Remind yourself that you have to draw a line somewhere—if you always say 'yes' you're creating problems not just for you, but also for the people around you. So the only question is where to draw the line, when to say 'no': if not now, then when?" (Hawley 2017).*



I choose to draw the line at the elephant. That is definitely a 'no' for me. For others the line might be a little more blurry, that's OK too, as the level of commitment and stress we are comfortable with is totally subjective, which makes it even more important to stop and ask ourselves whether we are OK with what is happening at this sometimes chaotic and stressful time.

RU OK Day (held this year on the 10th of September) is a brilliant initiative supported by many businesses and community groups encourage us to ask our friends, family and co-workers 'Are You OK?', let's extend that kindness and concern to our own mental health.

So, this Christmas (and beyond), give yourself the gift of saying 'no'; cherish your own mental wellbeing, and who knows, someone may one day even thank you for it!

And remember, if you need to say 'no', go for it! And get some things off your plate (Christmas dinner pun intended!).

Integrate Sustainability wishes you and your family a Wonderful Christmas and encourage you to take time to enjoy our beautiful planet. If you need some extra resources now or in the future, please reach out as Integrate Sustainability can provide ad-hoc or ongoing support in the Heritage, Health and Safety and the Environmental space.

## Mental Health and Charitable Organisation Links

Organisation	Contact Details
 <b>The Salvation Army</b>	<b>(08) 9328 1600</b> <a href="https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/">https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/</a>
 <b>RUOK</b> <small>A conversation could change a life.</small>	<a href="https://www.ruok.org.au/">https://www.ruok.org.au/</a>
 <b>Australian Men's Health</b> <small>AUSTRALIAN MEN'S HEALTH FORUM</small>	<b>0419 319 140</b> <a href="https://www.amhf.org.au/">https://www.amhf.org.au/</a>

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■ environment ■ safety ■ community

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