

Episode 4 New Calm Christmas Pod Casts

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00:05

Christmas can be a very special time, but it can also be a very stressful time. And given everything that has been going on this year, who knows what will unfold this holiday season? What if, for once, we just relaxed and gave ourselves permission to focus on what really matters. Welcome to the Calm Christmas podcast with me Beth Kempton, just like my book of the same name. I hope the common Christmas podcast inspires connection, belonging, self care, nourishment, and joy. And a little bit of festive magic.



00:52

Hello there, and welcome to Episode Four, We Wish You a Slow Christmas. Just the other day, a stressed out friend of mine suggested that we put the Christmas trees up already and declare 2020 done. And I totally understand that feeling, what a year, it has been, you know, so much of what we take for granted simple everyday things like the school run or commuting, you know, yoga classes in an actual studio, children's parties, holidays abroad, all those things just disappeared. I think at the time, we couldn't imagine life without them. And now we've all experienced those everyday things just gone from our diaries. And on top of that many of us saw our incomes drop off a cliff, previously stable jobs hanging in the balance, or you know, extra pressure piled on to deliver results from our kitchen tables, whilst homeschooling our children, probably not sitting on a very good chair, but sitting in it for many hours. So we're aching in strange places, and just so much stuff that we weren't used to has become almost normal over the past few months.



02:03

And then of course, there's the uncertainty, the uncertainty is always there. But we humans tend to have clever ways to try and pretend it isn't. But I think there's no doubting that it has loomed larger than ever this year. In many ways this time has brought us together. It's done that but also whilst keeping us apart, weirdly. And all the things that have been thrown us in 2020, I think you've reminded us of the fragility of our systems and societies. Much of what we thought we knew we could rely on has been thrown into question this year. And no one knows what lies ahead. But as I have said on this podcast before, if there's one constant we can trust in, it is Christmas, it is coming around again. And actually after all that we've been through this year, Christmas offers a string of twinkling lights at the end of a long year. It's an opportunity to reflect on everything that's happened to offer thanks to those who've supported us through it. And together if we're allowed to celebrate those we love and those we miss. And so much has changed this year, it's the perfect excuse not to do Christmas, the way you've always done it, at least not the parts that don't work for you.



03:20

I think it's fair to say that lockdown taught many of us about what really matters. And what doesn't matter as much as we once thought it did. Before it plunged us into that period of enforced slowness, our lives had been racing along at breakneck speed. I think it's easy to forget about that. Forget that actually, everything wasn't perfect back in January 2020.



03:45

And we were really rushing as an entire human race. In parts of the developed world specifically, some 78% of people were so stressed that they felt overwhelmed or unable to cope. We were constantly plugged in, we were checking our phones every 12 minutes, apparently. And on average, we exchanged 65 WhatsApp messages and received 120 emails every single day. Whoa that is a lot. And that's just the average. So that means some people were doing way more than that and these are constant grabs at our attention. And now the economic strategies that are being rolled out to get every country back on its feet are encouraging us back to that fast paced normality.



04:35

But I think many of us realised during that strange time that actually slow is good. There was more time to cook properly, more time to go out for daily exercise, have lingering conversations, be together as a family or simply to think to reflect ponder and in some

ways to recalibrate.



04:57

So if we can carry that rediscovered slowness into the weeks leading up to Christmas, we can make our celebrations more mindful, more meaningful and easier on the wallet as well this year, as we focus on the gifts of family, friendship, health, and life. I don't know about you but that sounds really good to me.



05:19

Christmas can actually offer us that kind of slow time, every single year, if only we choose not to get caught up in the pressure to do it perfectly, or get sucked into the commercial reality of it. You know, for me, I love nothing more than after-school nature walks, making stuff around the table with a homemade hot chocolate, taking a stroll along the sea front, dreaming up mindful gifts for the people I love and soaking in the atmosphere of the approaching festivities on our local, independent High Street. There are so many ways to really just enjoy the season without having to spend all the time or do all the time. And today I'm going to share a few tips for a slower Christmas this year.



06:08

So my number one tip is something that I've been talking about in earlier episodes of the podcast, which is to set an intention for the season, to take a moment to get intentional about what really matters. That can transform your experience of Christmas because it gives you a simple way to decide what to jettison and what to keep. And by transforming your experience of Christmas, that can actually linger in a really good way in terms of affecting your experience of January, which is difficult month for many people. So if you set an intention for the season, you can use that intention as a guidepost as you prepare for the festivities.



06:48

As I've said before, letting go of the notion of the perfect Christmas is not about lowering your expectations but about changing them. So changing that word 'perfect' into something else, you know, cosy Christmas, family Christmas, calm Christmas perhaps, can make a world of difference. So just have a think about what might bring delight. What boundaries would protect you what might be a challenge this year, and how you can offer

comfort and joy to others in line with whatever intention you decide to set for this season.



07:22

My second tip for a slower Christmas is to embrace simplicity. I really think that simplicity is the key for calm at this time of year. There are so many different areas of Christmas that you can simplify from the decor to the food from the gifts to the gatherings if you're having any this year. Simplicity offers less to prepare less to buy and less to stress about which sounds good to me.



07:49

Have a think about what simplicity might mean in the way that you celebrate and the way that you connect with friends and family. Perhaps there are some simple nostalgic games that you can play which keeps you all away from screens and in the experience together. Perhaps there are some simple thoughtful gifts that you can offer that don't cost much but will bring joy. We're going to talk about mindful gifting in a later episode but it's worth giving a thought to that about now.



08:17

Perhaps you can share the load of preparation this year. So everyone brings something to a gathering and contributes to making it special. I think for some reason, whoever it is, who sees themselves as the keeper of Christmas as I call them, tends to take on everything else without taking take on everything without asking anyone else for support and help but often people want to help they just don't know what to do. So why not make this the year of delegation, bringing everyone into the preparations.



08:48

It can also make a huge difference to think about simplifying your weekly schedule in the run up to Christmas, reducing your commitments and making space for self-care, seasonal crafting rituals, spontaneous stargazing on a clear winter night, whatever it is. If your schedule is completely jam packed, there's no room to even think about those things. But a few tweaks in each area of your life can add up to a huge difference in your overall stress levels at Christmas. My third tip for a slow Christmas is to remember that Christmas is a season not a single day. When I was researching my book, *Calm Christmas*, I came across some research by the University of Edinburgh, which said that festive stress

amounts to far more than a little extra pressure. They call it 'Christmas hormones'. It's a potent mix of cortisol, serotonin and dopamine that race through our bodies causing highs and lows, but mostly chronic fatigue. So thinking about Christmas as a season instead of a single day can make some of that pressure go away and allow us to spread the enjoyment over a longer period of time.



09:55

My next tip for a slow Christmas is simply to talk to other people about it too. Share your intention for the season and your desire to simplify things this year. In doing so you're actually giving them permission to do things differently. And you might be surprised at people's reactions to that. It's true that not everyone will like it. But some people might completely embrace it or be happy to go along with whatever makes you happy. Who knows, you'll never know until you have that conversation.



10:24

And it's really good to remember that if you choose to cut down on the number of gifts that you give to other people, you actually release those people from the social contract of giving back to you. If you suggest an outdoor winter picnic, instead of a formal sit down meal, it's completely possible you're going to hear relief in the response of somebody who doesn't really like formal sit down meals. Opening up a conversation about what really matters in those shared celebrations can inspire new traditions, and allow you to let go of any stifling or expensive old ones. It's all good.



11:00

And then my fifth tip is to nourish yourself, because when it's approached in a gentle way, Christmas can be a time of nourishment a time of rejuvenation, a time of contentment. We discussed this quite a lot in Episode Three when we talked about the different ways to invite comfort and joy into the darkest season. You know, keeping up routines like your morning walk or your regular Zoom fitness class, journaling daily, or spending half an hour with herbal tea and a good book before bed. All those things can help keep you on an even keel through the season. Be sure to balance out those treats and festive drinks with nourishing healthy meals, plenty of water, and lots of rest. Personally, I love to batch cook stews and curries for an easy warming feast on a winter's night. And just imagine the difference it's going to make to your festive season, and to how you feel in January, if you take really good care of yourself from now throughout December.



11:58

My sixth tip for slower Christmas is to be careful where you spend your attention. Social media can be a fantastic source of inspiration for decorating, hosting, preparing for Christmas, all those things, but can also be a major source of stress. And it leads to comparison between other people's edited lives and your real life. Other people's imagery can trigger feelings of lack, loneliness, jealousy, all those things. Of course, on the other hand, some posts can offer connection, warmth, inspiration, I think it's just really important to look where you're looking and who you're following. And be mindful of what you're taking in.



12:37

And those of us who have our own social media feeds that we put out in the world, our own platforms, we also have a responsibility to be conscious about what we're putting out. It is tricky, because it's not to say you can't share the joy that you have in your own life. But I think it's also nice to take a moment to consider what the effects of your posts might be on other people and just bear that in mind when you're posting.



13:06

And my final tip for a slower Christmas is to focus on individual connections. It's very possible this year that extended family gatherings are not going to be the same as in previous years.



13:17

I'm going to go into this a lot more in an episode called To Gather or Not To Gather. But for now, why not just use this opportunity to focus on spending individual time with each person who matters most to you. Anytime from now onwards, it doesn't have to be on Christmas Day or in the couple of days surrounding it, you can create some sacred time to do something simple but special that's going to enable you to reconnect with each other. Perhaps you could see the Christmas lights being switched on in your town or dig out your own 10 year old turntable and play some records one night, or something I love to do with my children is hand-deliver Christmas cards that we've made to our local community. They put their little Santa hats on and round their streets we go. And that's something I used to do with my mum and my brothers when I was little. And it's a lovely moment for us to do something together. And then of course to have a conversation with those neighbours who come to the door to take their card and accept one of our homemade

mince pies. You can also make some natural Christmas decorations together, or just have a long, juicy conversation one evening when you decide not to turn on the television.



14:26

There are so many ways and it really depends on what you enjoy doing and what slow means to you. And I think we think about this word slowness, and think about how we can bring it into our festive build up. You might have heard of the concept of slow in the context of the Slow Movement, which has got roots in slow food which was born in Italy back in the 1980s. And in that context, SLOW stands for sustainable, local, organic and whole and you've probably heard that that movement has grown to spawn a host of sub-culture ideas, including slow fashion, slow parenting, slow travel, even slow cities. And I think it's really interesting to be inspired by this. And think about the elements of what a slow Christmas could be.



15:13

How could you bring these ideas sustainable, local, organic, whole, into your experience of Christmas, and your interpretation of Christmas, as well as inviting an overall slower pace, which is what I was trying to encourage with those tips that I shared earlier on in this episode. Perhaps the idea of slowness at Christmas is something to journal about this week.



15:40

And one lovely thing to do at this time of year can be to explore the origins of different symbols of Christmas. To understand why we have the traditions that we have, and why perhaps you hold a particular symbol very close. And in the coming episodes, I'm going to look at one symbol each time starting today, with the Christmas tree.



16:01

For many of us, the Christmas tree is an iconic symbol of Christmas. It's a prominent character in the Christmases of childhood for sure for me, I used to love the ritual of going to the New Forest, which is an ancient forest in the south of England near where I grew up, to choose a tree with my whole family. I have a distinct memory of being around six or seven. And me and my older brother putting on our Paddington Bear style duffle coats, little hands searching for the mittens dangling by elastic from the sleeves. Probably me - I

don't think he had mittens dangling from his sleeves when he would have been eight years old. But anyway, I remember us tumbling into the back of our old brown Volvo estate car with our dog mag golden Labrador. And my mum was in the front with our little baby brother in a basket on her knee. This is back in the day before car seats and seat belts in the back and we started off loud and fidgety, probably with our heads poking through between the front seats, telling jokes and poking each other in our excitement and just begging our parents let us have the tallest tree in the whole forest. And I remember how our voices fell away as the hum of the engine lured us into our own daydreams of Christmas. I traced the shapes of pine trees and the condensation on the window clearing the glass one finger swipe at a time to see the town washing past. And then eventually those buildings at the roadside petered out to make way for villages and then woodland.



17:29

As we got closer to Ashurst, which was home of the Christmas tree farm we visited each year, we'd be on the lookout for the same old hand painted sign that was always there. 'Christmas trees this way' it said above a giant arrow pointing to the woods, and we'd be desperate to be the first one to shout out, "There it is". And you know growing up, I was led to believe that it was Prince Albert who brought the Christmas tree to England from Germany. And although it certainly became popularised in Victorian times in the second half of the 19th century, the history of the tree in the house, or tree on display in public places goes back much further than that. And actually the tree was bought to England from Germany before Prince Albert. There's a very complicated history of the Christmas tree.



18:14

And to this day, there is a debate as to where the very first public Christmas tree was displayed. Several different towns and cities claim that title although according to Bernd Brunner, who's author of a lovely little book called *Inventing the Christmas Tree*, it's difficult to be sure. He says, 'The search for the first Christmas tree is a quiotic quest. Trees have always been part of human life both practically and symbolically. Ancient rock art found in Sweden depicts individual evergreen trees and there are many other references to trees as important symbols in many different cultures and religions. In terms of Christmas trees, specifically, those specially decorated in midwinter for the purposes of celebration.' There were various accounts but no definitive answer as to which tree really started the global phenomenon of bringing trees into our homes and decorating them.



19:07

According to Brunner, in 1419, the Freiburg Fraternity of Baker's Apprentices appears to have seen a tree decorated with apples, wafers, gingerbread and tinsel in the local hospital of the Holy Spirit. But another document claims that the first Christmas tree was erected in Tallinn, Estonia in the year 1441. So that must mean that they either didn't know about the Freiburg one or they're dismissing that as not being a real Christmas tree who knows. But apparently there the tree was set up in front of the town hall for a dance. In Riga, Latvia, the claim is that the first decorated Christmas tree can be dated back to 1510. And they claim that theirs is first so again, they must be presuming that the one in Estonia wasn't a real Christmas tree. It gets complicated and it's really important to these people because having, being the base of the first ever Christmas tree is a huge pool for tourists. You can see it in the tourist videos for both Tallinn and Riga, where they appeal to tourists with their claim to be the home of the first tree. And both cities have beautiful Christmas markets that have grown out of this legend. Even so, some historians think it's more like it actually came from Germany, and there are accounts of early decorated trees appearing in Strasburg, Bremen, and parts of Turkey too. And here in England, there are documents dating back to the time of King Henry the Eighth in the early 16th century, which talks about an epiphany pageant featuring a tree decorated in gold. And apparently in the 1790s, Queen Charlotte, who was the German wife of George the Third, decorated a tree for their children and members of the British Royal Family continued that custom into the new century. So Queen Victoria would actually have been familiar with Christmas trees from her childhood, rather than Prince Albert being the first one to introduce one to her.



21:03

Anyway, as a popular tradition, the Christmas tree came to prominence here in the mid-19th century. There's a very famous picture from 1848, which was in the Illustrated London News, and it shows the royal couple and their children enjoying Christmas at Windsor Castle. That image, which you can see in the archives at the British Library in London, features a tree bedecked with lit candles and simple decorations which the young royals gazed at in wonder. It was that picture and the joy that it evoked that prompted so many ordinary British families to decorate trees in their own homes from the following year onwards, and it has become really big business.



21:46

Before long, the custom had made its way across the Atlantic, where President Franklin

Pierce installed tree in the White House in 1856. And trees were being sold at Washington Square Park by the 1870s. These days, the Christmas tree connects us to each other through rituals of decorating it, singing around it, and opening presents beneath it. There's nothing quite like the smell of a real Christmas tree. And I don't know about you, but I also love to sit alone on a winter's night in the glow of a fire and the twinkling lights of the tree with festive music playing and a hot drink in my hand thinking, reading, reflecting, dreaming, any of those things. I'll quite happily spend an evening in the company of a Christmas tree. How about you I wonder? What role has the Christmas tree played in your life?



22:36

You know these days in the UK alone, we buy more than 8 million Christmas trees every year. If you're worried about the environmental impact of your tree then you can choose one that has been grown as locally as possible. For example here in the UK the Forestry Commission grows trees sustainably all over the country. And in some places, you can even rent a potted tree and return it after Christmas or buy a potted one that you can plant outside yourself in the spring. Ours has lived in the garden all year long and it's perfect for hanging out bird feed. Some Christmas tree farms will let you return your tree so it can be shredded and chipped, and some local councils recycled trees for bark chippings and compost for local parks. You can also make potpourri sachets from the needles and the bark, you can turn the branches into feeding stations for birds like we do. Or you can use parts of the tree in your cooking. I discovered this in the research for my book *Calm Christmas*. Apparently spruce tastes like vanilla when it's infused in custard or used to make ice cream, which is very interesting. I imagine finding a spiky piece of spruce leaf in your ice cream wouldn't be that much of a treat, but I can imagine that the taste of it could be quite delicious.



23:50

Of course, if you favour an artificial tree, it's ideal to store it carefully and use it for as long as you can. Some say that if you use a tree for more than 20 years, it actually has less of an environmental impact than buying real trees for those same 20 years. I think that probably depends what you do with your real tree when you finish with it. And I think it's hard to judge. But it's good to think about. And remember if you want to get rid of an artificial tree, try to donate it to a charity shop in November rather than January so someone can get good use of it this year.



24:22

So our Get Ahead Tips for this week.



24:25

This is a great time to start making natural decorations. Go on a nature walk to find pine cones, shapely twigs, branches, all those things. If you want to get some ideas for natural decorations, if you've bought a copy of Calm Christmas, you can get access to my digital Christmas Care Package. In that there's a whole load of ideas for natural decorations, as well as information on how to make your own race this year, which is a really lovely thing to do and all the information on how to get that is in the book. So you just need to get a copy of Calm Christmas.



25:00

This week it's also a really good time to go through your existing decorations and see if anything needs replacing or recycling. I find that with every passing year, I fancy the shiny tinsely things less and less. And I love the combination of natural decorations and fairy lights even more. And I find myself wrapping presents with natural decorations as well. Putting tiny sprigs of holly or something perhaps a little bit less spiky and as a part of the wrapping of a present and it's always greeted with will delight so maybe that's something to try this year.



25:40

This is a really good week to make your own advent calendar if you haven't done that already, and you want to try making one this year.



25:46

It's also a lovely time to have a crafternoon, or craft evening making things like paper snowflakes, which are super simple. You just take a piece of square paper, fold it diagonally corner to corner, fold it again. And for that triangle, fold that in half corner to corner, and then fold it once more corner to corner, and then still snip out some little shapes and open it up. And every single snowflake you make will be different and it's always a delight. Little children love to do that. And that's a really fun one to do and you can string them up and hang them in the window or against a wall for a lovely wintery decoration. There are so many simple crafting ideas online. Just a quick Google search or

YouTube search and you will have a full afternoon. Have fun things to do. And something it'd be really interesting to try this year is to make a Japanese kokedama which is a type of hanging bonsai moss ball, which is made from taking a plant out of its pot and putting it into a ball of soil which is held together with moss and string. And you can then hang that from a ceiling or from a curtain rod or a longer wall. And it's a really beautiful sculpture hanging plant that makes a wonderful gift. And I'm going to put a instruction video on how to make those in the show notes at [Beth Kempton.com/podcast](https://bethkempton.com/podcast), if you want to have a go because it's a really lovely thing to try.



27:11

And then finally, as I mentioned last week, you are invited to join my brand new free writing course. It's called the Winter Writing Sanctuary. And it takes place over two weeks from November 23 to December 5th online, and there is daily inspiration and a whole bunch of inspiring exercises. a live broadcast from me all about the writing life, and a wonderful community of fellow writers from around the world. This is going to be a real beacon in this darkest of seasons. And you can register for free at <https://dowhatyouloveforlife.com/course/winter-writing-sanctuary/>. I do hope you'll join us. Last time I ran a writing course in this format, the work that came out of it was extraordinary. And so many people surprised themselves with the luminosity they discovered in their own words. So go to <https://dowhatyouloveforlife.com>, find the free course called the Winter Writing Sanctuary, and register today. Make sure you invite your friends as well. It's such a fun thing to do together. Class starts on November the 23rd. But once you've registered, there are a couple of warm up exercises to get going with. I hope to see you there.



28:22

So that's it from me this week. If you're enjoying the Calm Christmas podcast, please do share about it. Tell your friends, or come and tell me over on Instagram [@BethKempton](https://www.instagram.com/BethKempton). And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss future episodes. I hope you'll join me next Thursday when I have a brand new episode coming called Winter Words to Soothe the Soul. In the meantime, take care of yourself. You've been listening to the Calm Christmas podcast with me. Beth Kempton For more inspiration and ideas. cosy up with a copy of my book, Calm Christmas and Happy New Year: A Little Book of Festive Joy. It's available now from all good bookshops or listen to the audiobook read by me.



29:12

Wishing you a calm Christmas and Happy New Year.