



A Simple Life is Simply Beautiful.

In 2013, I was living and volunteering for a couple of months in Senegal, West Africa. During this time, I was living with a local Senegalese family and working at a nearby centre that was set up to offer medical, educational and mental health support to talibé children. My new lifestyle was reduced to basic needs and I had to adapt to Senegalese culture and the daily life of my host family. Interestingly, despite this and the poverty and hardship around me, my new simple life suited me well. In fact, it was much more of a struggle returning to normal life after my time volunteering came to an end.

As we get closer to our next big festive season – a time that can trigger a lot of additional stress for many, but especially women – it leads me to reflect on my time volunteering and how beautiful a simple life can be, as long as we are healthy and all our basic needs are met.



Having few possessions and little responsibility can also give us a certain freedom. Or, to put it more provocatively, *what you own, owns you too*. Lets say you have a holiday house; this means you will have to look after it, spend time there etc. It's the same thing if you have a skateboard or a new pair of fancy shoes. You have some responsibility to all the things you own. The skateboard should be used and the shoes should be worn. Everything you possess needs your time and attention in return.



My little journey of self-exploration began 12 months before leaving Australia. I stopped purchasing things that were not absolutely necessary. In Senegal, I chose and was blessed to have the opportunity and experience of living with a host family and immersing myself in their lifestyle and habits. While it was certainly challenging at times, with high summer temperatures, the sometimes poor hygiene conditions, the hardship my host family and their friends and neighbours experienced, and the difficult living and health conditions of the talibé children, overall I felt very grateful that I was able to help, and it made me appreciate my own life and good health.

After the three-month program ended, I had two surprising realisations. The first was how judgmental I was towards myself after seeing my appearance in a hotel mirror. And the second, how much our excessive over-supply and consumerism shocked me. You can call me vain or overcritical and I would agree, to some extent. Based on [research](#), our own body image can cause many negative outcomes,

such as depression and anxiety, unhealthy weight-control behaviours or low self-esteem. In the US, around 25% of male children and adolescents were concerned about their muscularity and leanness. In Australia, 17% of male children and adolescents, and 15% of adult men, were dissatisfied with their body. The numbers sadly increase to around 50% for 13-year-old girls in the US and reaches nearly 80% by the time they reach 17 years. And it does not look much different for adult women.

So, why didn't this matter to me during my time in Senegal? It comes down to the fact that I had hardly any social media access and only a small mirror with me, and I very rarely made an effort to check my appearance. If I took photos of myself and others with my outdated mobile phone, all I saw were happy, smiling people. Almost all references about the way I looked came from other people's comments. 'You look so nice today!' or 'You look so happy!'. Naturally, after a few weeks living there, I felt great about myself. I was walking down the street, confidently swinging my hips, like the Cuban women I had once admired for their beautiful, carefree walks. And to be honest, I had no thoughts about how I might look. How amazing is that? No references to looks through social media, fashion magazines or even a full body mirror, meant no judgment, no comparison and absolutely no self-criticism.

According to the article published by Dr Jake Linardon 'it is well known that the media has a negative influence on our body image*'. Just sit with that for a minute.

Once back in Europe, I remember walking around Nice, France. And while I was happy to have my freedom back and was enjoying the Côte d'Azur and being with my friends, seeing the excess of choices in all the stores literally made me feel sick. The reason why I felt the need to write about this in November is that we are heading straight into the Christmas season. Perhaps a simple celebration of the holiday season without the stressful shopping and preparations might be just what you need this year, alongside meaningful connections and experiences.

According to the study of wellbeing by Dr Lori Santos, experiences last longer and are more satisfying for us over time. If you look back at your life, you may remember playing card games with your grandparents or funny moments from past family holidays. You re-experience these when you share them with others by talking about them or showing photos, or even when you re-visit them on your own.

And since many of you might not be able to see your family this Christmas, in case you feel lonely or stressed, please contact me, or read my blog around both topics. I will be working during the holiday season to support you and others.

[Get in touch](#) if you would like support building your resilience and reflecting on your challenges. I am here for you.

Iris – Your Transformational Coach

* Source: [Body image](#) refers to how we think about, feel and act towards our body. It is a multifaceted construct, consisting of perceptual, attitudinal and behavioural components.