



# Grief During the Holidays

(... and Other Special Occasions)



# GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS (... AND OTHER SPECIAL OCCASIONS)

*Dear friend,*

When my eldest son passed away, an inner voice I had never heard before dropped in and said without any audible sound, "Tell people what you need." Of course, I had no idea what I needed, but the voice continued, "This is not just about you."

Soon, my house filled up with family and friends all wanting to grieve together and help my family any way they could. None of us were prepared for a loss of this magnitude, and I realized that I also had no idea how to help someone in my position.

From that day forward, we figured it out together. Day by day. Step by step. Holiday by holiday.

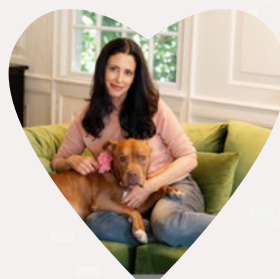
There are many valuable resources on how to approach grief during the holidays. One of the most comprehensive I've found is written by grief expert David Kessler (and can be found on his website or by clicking [HERE](#)).

What follows are some of the greatest personal lessons I've learned walking through six holiday seasons with my family, and how they continue to prepare me for my seventh coming up.

While time does heal, the holidays tend to remind many of us how far we may still have to go.

The following resource is for anyone who is grieving a loss this holiday season. It is also for those of you who want to support friends and family during the most difficult times, but either forget or simply don't know how.

While I have written this with the holidays in mind, every one of these personal lessons can be applied to all special holidays, as well as regular days of the year. After all, grief in its rawest form has no boundaries, and while some days are harder than others, they are all better when we get through them together.



*From my heart to  
yours,*

*Nikki*

### I. Tell People What You Need

The person I was before my son passed away was private, independent, and rarely thought of asking for help from others. Boy, has my life changed. Now I understand that it's not selfish to ask for help—it's selfish not to ask for it.

In fact, author and teacher [Derek Rydall](#) says, **"To not ask for help is to deprive another soul of the opportunity to give more to this world and find more in themselves."** He also says, "Allow people to give to you. It's one of the most generous things you can do for someone."

Soon after my loss, I got honest about my needs and communicated them to people who asked. Friends and family were naturally afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, so I needed to help them help me.

What I first discovered I needed (and still need) is for friends and family to talk about my eldest son—forever. Day by day, I learned that I needed friends to sit with me. To walk with me. And to support my younger son any way they could, for me.

When it came to the holidays and special occasions, I needed friends both old and new to include my family in their holiday rituals, so that we did not have to be alone. Once I had a few offers in hand, I made sure they were all flexible so that my family could decide last minute which one was right for us that year. Just knowing we had options was comforting.

I have learned that humanity is good and people really do want to help each other. They often just don't know how. So, when it comes to the holidays and the more difficult times of the year, it may help you to communicate what you need, and then open up and allow yourself to receive.



## 2. Welcome New Friendships

It became clear to me in the weeks following my loss that some people carry a special gene which compels them to show up for others. We typically have no idea who has that gene until the time comes when it's needed. Some of my closest friends, as well as strangers, showed up for me in ways I will never ever forget. I would stare at them and wonder, *How do they know how to do this?* Other friends couldn't show up—they simply didn't know how.

It's easy to get angry at friends and family whose lives are still intact and don't show up the way we hope they will, but I've discovered that it's far healthier to appreciate those who do—whenever they do.

The hardest days of the year have brought some of my most cherished relationships into my life. If you are someone who wants to help friends and family who may be grieving this holiday season, one of the very best things you can do (no matter how close or not close you are with the person) is include them in your holiday rituals or do something to let them know you are thinking of them on that day. It doesn't matter how well you know each other. In fact, the less you know them, the more meaningful your thoughts and actions may actually be.



### 3. Create New Rituals

Two days after the date of my son's passing is my birthday. Three weeks later, it is his birthday, followed by Mother's Day. Talk about an impossible time of year... every year.

I will never forget my very first Mother's Day, when the grief was unbearable, and my family went out to brunch with my stepson and his mother and stepfather. Combining families on Mother's Day was not something we had ever done before. Following an emotional brunch, we all went to an art exhibit before ending the day at a professional soccer match surrounded by 20,000 fans (not something I recommend, by the way!). In retrospect, it didn't matter what we did that day, we just had to get through it *together*. Trying something new was the beginning of an annual Mother's Day ritual that has also turned into one of my favorite Christmas Eve rituals. I wrote a blog article about this experience ([CLICK HERE](#) if you want to go deeper into it!).

What "trying something new" has taught me is that when it comes to holidays and special occasions, anything goes. One year, my family ignored Mother's Day altogether. For the past two years, my family's [TM23 Foundation](#) has hosted a youth soccer tournament for 250 children across Los Angeles, which brings me so much peace and joy on a day that is difficult for so many of us.

My point in telling you all this is that it is quite liberating to learn that we can celebrate special occasions however we want. Rituals are wonderful. And so is the freedom to change them. When we open ourselves up to new experiences, we also open ourselves up to the relationships they often attract.

### 4. Don't Be Afraid to Shake Things Up

The hardest major holidays for me are Thanksgiving and Christmas. For the first few years after loss, it was easier for my family and me to be with friends on major holidays, instead of with my own parents and extended family. I even had to tell my parents and my brother's family that being together was too painful because it only reminded me of who was missing. Fortunately, they didn't take it personally. They remained patient and supportive—and waited for me to tell them when I was ready to celebrate as one family again. It took a few years, but that day did come. The holidays are different now. Instead of recreating what they were before, I take the opportunity to make them something new.

Ultimately, I plan them around my younger son and do what I think is best for him.

One year, this meant splitting up and allowing him to be with his own friends for Thanksgiving. Another year, it meant bluntly asking other families with children my younger son's age if we could possibly join their plans. The experience has taught me to be open and considerate about including others in my family's plans, instead of being exclusive and rigid about what the holidays should be.

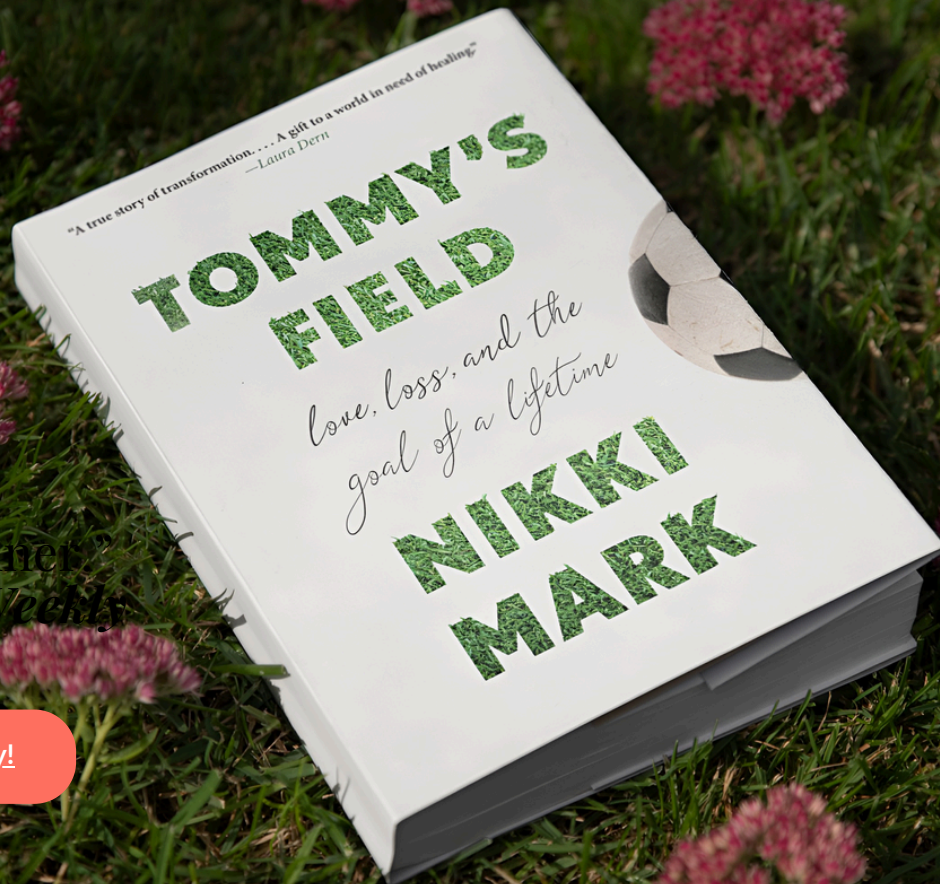
### 5. Host Your Own Gathering!

This may seem counterintuitive, but one of the best ways I have found to get through the hardest days is by hosting my own gatherings. Being surrounded by so many people I love and appreciate lifts my spirits. Also, the actual process of preparing for the gathering minimizes stress around the occasion and serves as a healthy distraction leading up to it. Some years, I host a Pre-New Year's party. Other years, a [Día de los Muertos](#) event. Seeing our community laugh and smile together year after year reminds me how far we have come and that we are forever bonded by heartbreak and love.





Sometimes what brings us the most pain can be the very source of our greatest inspiration.



This is a winner  
from *Writers' Weekly*

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\*100% of author's proceeds are being donated to build more Tommy's Fields.

In 2018, Nikki Mark's twelve-year-old son Tommy went to sleep one night and never woke up. Devastated, Nikki embarked on an unconventional journey to honor Tommy by building his legacy and healing her heart.

From raising over \$1,000,000 to build an athletic field in Tommy's name, to taking on big city politics, to exploring alternative healing modalities from meditation to mushrooms, Nikki now shares her intimate story of navigating grief with love and action – and a little coaching from beyond.



**NIKKI MARK** formerly developed and led operations for music, hospitality and sports team start-ups. She is the Founder of the [TM23 Foundation](#), which opened the first Tommy's Field in 2021, the second one in 2023—and now has a third field in the planning stages. Her weekly articles, alternative healing toolkit, and free resources can be found at [Nikkimark.com](#). She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, son, and dog Ginger.

