

# Holidays Are Tough After a Divorce. Here's How I Learned to Prepare.

The coming season can be brutal for families going through a difficult time. One single mom offers her holiday-survival plan.



By Hanna Ingber

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The winter holidays are approaching, and I am bracing myself.

If you or your family has been going through a difficult time, my suggestion is that you don't take the holidays sitting down. Prepare for them.

Before my ex and I divorced, I thought the upside of an otherwise terrible situation would be that I'd have a little time to myself. But the reality is that it's agony to long for one's kids and be without them — especially during the holidays.

Even Halloween can be hard.

The Halloween after we separated, my ex and I agreed that we'd split the holiday. This was during the Before Times, so I left the office early and rushed home to take the kids trick-or-treating. I got to my apartment, grabbed my devil horns and waited. And waited. The sun was nearly down. *Where were they?*

I knew the kids were probably happy with their dad, and of course that's what matters most. But at that moment, that wasn't the issue. I wanted them to be happy trick-or-treating, making memories and looking adorable in their dinosaur costumes — with *me*.

I quickly changed the plan and suggested to their dad that we instead meet at a friend's house between us. When I pulled up, I saw my boys on the front steps. "Hi, guys!" I shouted. They ignored me. As I got closer, I saw that Isaac, 5 at the time, had already taken off the top half of his costume. He looked ready to eat dinner and count his stash. My heart sank even further.

I convinced them to put their shoes back on and walk around this neighborhood, too. They kindly acquiesced.

That night after I put them to bed, I remembered the Halloweens of years past — the good ones. My ex often tried to coordinate our family outfits. One year when Isaac was a toddler he chose a lion costume, so his father and I were both lion tamers with black hats. I have a video of Isaac wobbling around our neighborhood. He grabbed his dad's fake whip and tried to chase him down the street. Facebook reminds me of that moment every Halloween.

By the next year, Aarav had arrived. I bought him a lamb costume, so my ex decided the rest of us would be chefs and picked out white hats and aprons. We put our chubby little "lamb" in a big pot and got ready to go. But Isaac, then 2, suddenly understood the concept and cried out: "Me no eat Aarav!"

Those were the Halloweens I missed; the ones I longed for. The memories that for a moment made me wonder if I had made the wrong decision.

After Halloween comes Thanksgiving, and then Hanukkah and Christmas: All days just asking for pain when your family is going through an upheaval. Even MLK weekend had me distraught one year. (I was convinced that, unlike us, all the intact families had amazing plans. Possible but, I now realize, unlikely.)

Holidays often bring joy, but they are also reminders of who and what we have lost. During rough years, they tell us that the picture we had of our lives is no longer looking how we imagined it. Days intended for family and friends, they can also make us feel alone. And yet, ironically, we're not alone in this. Particularly during a pandemic and a health crisis that has affected millions of families, it's likely that so many people feel this way.

This year, I am going to prepare for each holiday ahead of time. On Halloween, I will make sure the time my boys and I have together is as fun as possible — and try to lower my expectations. If they go trick-or-treating with their father, we can be together beforehand getting all dressed up. (As it turns out, shockingly, Halloween is not actually about me.)

I'll have my boys for Thanksgiving, but I now know that the rest of that week can feel depressing without them. Perhaps I'll reach out to my group of divorced mom friends and plan a Friendsgiving for another day. A holiday weekend alone is also a great opportunity to volunteer at a local food pantry or help others in the community — this year, I'm doing it.

Thanks to my own experience, I'm more aware that others might be going through this, too. My father and stepfather are both having rough years, and I'm going to be sure that during the holidays I spend extra time with them.

My kids will be with their father for the winter break. Long stretches without them can be rough, particularly when others are posting cute snapshots of their children lighting menorahs and wearing matching PJs. The audacity. (Pro tip: On sad days, take a break from Instagram.) I have learned that it helps to focus on hobbies while I wait for them to return. During the pandemic, I spent my every-other-weekends without them writing. Rather than feeling lonely, having a manuscript to work on gave me something to look forward to.

This winter break, I'm going all in. I'll make a list of projects I've been eager to accomplish. (Finish my novel! Learn how to paint! Clean out my attic! Become a ballerina — why not!) And in case that still isn't enough, I'm planning a trip with a friend.

Many families, especially those who have lost a loved one, have it much harder than me. My heart goes out to them, and I hope that they too find ways to cope with their loss.

For me, I know that holidays will often be challenging, but with each passing season, I'm leaning on old rituals, embracing new ones and learning what I need to manage better.

My biggest tip for others newly in my boat: As with your shopping this year, plan ahead. And remember that despite how you may feel, you are not alone.

***We'd like to hear from others who find the holidays difficult. What do you do to make them easier? Please share your suggestions in the comments, and we may publish a selection in an upcoming story.***

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