

Strengthening Long Distance Relationships

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Physical distance vs. emotional distance

Just because you're apart does not mean you have to grow apart. Think about what you already do to remain close, and what helps you feel comfortable with your partner when you're apart from day to day. Examine what keeps a relationship solid while living together or nearby. It's not a mystery!

Great LDR website: <http://www.longdistancerelationships.net/>

Keys to success in any relationship

1. Communication
2. Honesty
3. Demonstrated commitment
4. Empathy
5. Willingness to take risks
6. Solid and secure trust
7. Personal independence and healthy dependence
8. Mutual respect
9. Clear expectations of each other and the relationship
10. Quality time together and alone time (even during visits)

Other keys:

Create an interesting life for yourself:

Many people cut back on enjoyable activities, or feel they can't have an enjoyable time without their partner. This causes many difficulties, including boredom, resentment, and lack of good conversational topics. The absent partner feels the pressure of being the main connection to life. Learn to keep busy and focus on other things besides the relationship when you're apart. Find friends that support your long distance relationship, and just let you talk. Familiarize them with your couples' issues, so they know about your typical reactions to being apart for long periods.

The more time you spend dwelling on your relationship, the more insecure/ paranoid you become!

Reach out:

Stay in touch with e-mail, phone calls, photos, videos, cards and letters. Take time to share and express the good things-love, sex, and laughter- and don't save all the problems for your time together. This doesn't mean you should continuously discuss "problem or chronic" issues over the phone. This is destructive--choose your battles carefully! Balance good things and problems in each call or e-mail.

Develop daily rituals and shared activities:

1. Call at set times of day as much as possible; alert each other of needed time changes.
2. Do some activities (such as getting up, exercising, showering) at same time.
3. Watch same TV shows, or same movie weekly, or listen to a favorite radio station.
4. Read same book together and discuss each chapter by email or phone.
5. Take up a new activity or project together (i.e. yoga, cooking, reorganizing a room).

6. At the beginning of each new semester or rotation, describe your normal day in detail. Send photos of your workplace, friends, apartment, coffee shop, etc. so your partner will be able to picture these people and places when you mention them.
7. Collect interesting tidbits: jokes, ideas, news events, etc. and share them in your phone calls.
8. Plan upcoming visits, and take turns planning how you'll spend your time.

Don't read between the lines:

Without verbal (letters, e-mail) and non-verbal (all forms of long distance communication) cues, it is very easy to misunderstand each other. This is why understanding your partner's communication style and personality is so important. (Frequent vs. seldom calls, e-mails....talkative vs. quiet). We all have bad days, down days and quiet days. Let each other have them without panic. Share feelings and concerns, but don't pressure your partner to account for every minute of his/her day.

Jealousy:

It is natural to react with jealousy sometimes. Other people get to be with your partner much more often than you do. However...remember, trust is an essential element in long distance relationships. Choose to trust...and communicate your trust. When jealousy rears up, work through the feelings on your own, or with a friend first to avoid overreacting. Wait to discuss it until you're calm enough to share it with your partner without seeming angry or accusing. Then, let your partner know exactly what is causing you jealousy and (gently) state what you need. Problem solve together.

Compromise and make time for each other:

This is one of the most important elements in a long distance relationship. If you haven't had time to talk or email, set aside time to make it happen. You have all the rest of your week to study, see friends, watch TV, etc. Make time for each other a consistent priority.

Don't worry:

If you tend to be someone who envisions a catastrophe every time your partner boards a plane or drives a car long distance, work at breaking the worry habit, and see a counselor if needed. Accept that none of us gets a "safety guarantee," long distance or not. Worry make anyone safer, and it definitely hurts...both you and the relationship.

Reunions:

Allow for a period of readjustment when you reunite. Both of you have probably developed routines that get interrupted when you are reunited. This makes us edgy. Also, a recent study shows that travelers suffer more physical and psychological complaints. Don't misread jet lag, fatigue or illness as a relational problem.

Departures:

Some long distance experts suggest you don't accompany your spouse to the airport. Try to get used to frequent departures and arrivals so they seem normal. Don't make every "hello" and "goodbye" a major emotional upset. This is too hard, physically and emotionally.

3 key things to communicate before and during time apart :

1. *You are very much a part of my daily life, even the days when I don't see or talk to you.*
2. *You are not alone, no matter how far apart we are.*
3. *You have an important place in my future.* ("Future" means whatever you're comfortable with. If you're committed enough to be in a long distance relationship, you have some future together...short term or long term. Discuss next visit, holidays, dreams for a longer term future.

Emotional Stages in long distance relationships:

All relationships go through emotional stages, depending on the kinds of stresses in the partners' lives. In Vet school, partners who are together usually experience some difficulty during test times, finals, and long-hour rotations. Cycles in stress reactions during the academic year often differ during the early semester, mid-semester and the end of the semester. First year students have predictable stress times, as do fourth year students, etc. So, stages are normal...it's just that there are certain predictable stages in a long distance relationship. Familiarizing yourself with them helps you understand that what you (or your partner) is experiencing is universal rather than personal!

Some common emotional stages:

1. **Deep sadness and heartbreak upon parting:** As you part, the pain of separation may seem like physical and heavy. (Luckily this usually lessens as you get accustomed to coming and going.) Friends sympathize.
2. **Freedom and euphoria:** After the heartbreak passes, many people experience a sense of freedom. They feel strong, capable and optimistic. Doing a long distance relationship seems acceptable and doable. It feels good (for a while) to be back on familiar turf, immersed in your own activities and able to focus on your own life again. At this point the separation seems manageable...you feel secure in your love and able to be apart for several weeks. Free time spreads out invitingly. Friends may be surprised at your new attitude.
3. **Loneliness and emptiness:** The positive feelings slowly ebb and your mood becomes more bleak. Missing your partner intensifies and free time seems more oppressive than exciting. At this point, you may begin to feel sorry for yourself. You ask yourself "why" questions..."Why is our relationship like this?" "Why can't we be like other couples?" "Why couldn't we live within driving distance of each other?" Friends may get tired of your whining and stop asking you out!
4. **Anger and frustration:** At this point, it suddenly hits that there is no easy answer. You are stuck in a long distance relationship and it just doesn't seem fair or possible. You have needs. There is nothing you can do about it. This lack of control starts feeling unbearable. More "why" questions erupt..."Why do I have to endure this suffering week after week?" "Why can't I be in a normal relationship?" "Why did I get myself into this situation?" Friends don't know how to answer these cranky questions and steer clear.
5. **Detachment:** At some point, if you haven't seen each other for a while (the average time for this seems to be about 2 months), you begin to wonder if you're in a relationship at all. You can't remember your partner's face, kiss or touch. This is a tired numbness...your mind and body may have been through such an emotional roller coaster that they just turn off. You know you still love your partner, but it's hard to dredge up the feelings. Friends get worried and don't know what to say.
6. **Getting Reacquainted:** Don't fool yourself. No matter how much you love someone, you cannot help growing somewhat apart from one another if you're separated for a length of time. You've been having new experiences, meeting new people and learning new things about the world and yourself. Although you can update each other as you stay in touch, you will be different people each time you meet. You may even notice subtle physical differences.

Feelings of anxiety and unfamiliarity are natural when you reunite. It's common to feel ill at ease and different. You discover each other's shortcomings and idiosyncrasies all over again. You both want and expect to have a wonderful time together, which puts a lot of pressure on you, and makes you even more edgy.

Learn to separate "real issues" from the negative effects of the process of reacquainting.

Don't expect to solve all "chronic" problems or disagreements during visits. Figure out how to deal with them to keep them from "blowing up" each time you're together.

When people first experience some version of these stages, they may think they're going crazy, or that their relationship is making them unbalanced. (This is somewhat true, but nothing to worry about). This swing from happy freedom to despair to numbness can happen in a few weeks. If you're aware of what emotional stage you are in, you can cope with it accordingly. It's important for both of you to become aware of these phases and even discuss them during calls and e-mails.

How Do We Know When We're Trouble?

With all of the emotional stages and issues that come up in a long distance relationship, how do you know when the relationship is in real trouble and needs help? These aren't absolutes, but they do indicate the two of you are not having a successful LDR. Take some time to look over some of the ideas discussed in this handout and see if you can decide what positive changes to make. Trouble needs to be addressed when:

1. Phone conversations or e-mails typically deteriorate into arguments or dwell on negative subjects.
2. Full-blown arguments increase, and hurt and anger are not resolved.
3. Time between visits increases by choice.
4. Feelings of "being a stranger" don't seem to go away after a few days of being together.
5. One or both of you avoid discussing serious or important issues.
6. Unwillingness to compromise.
7. Obsessive thinking about problems or difficulties throughout your days.
8. Trouble eating, sleeping, or concentrating.
9. Attraction to other people.
10. Loss of common vision of a shared future.

*NOTE: This material was edited and adapted by Anne LaFrance, LMHC 8/2014