

Managing Long Distance Relationships

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Introduction

Long distance relationships are more common than ever. Reasons for this include technological advancements that allow for communication without being face-to-face, the popularity of online dating, and a rise in work related travel and military deployment. Maintaining an intimate bond with your partner while many miles separate the two of you is a challenge. Together, a couple should establish clear expectation and boundaries to stay connected and ensure that you both maintain a satisfying relationship-and don't forget the creativity!

Define Expectations Before the Separation.

Whether the separation occurs sometime after your relationship has been established or is there from the very beginning (as in many online unions) it is important to agree on a specific time in which the separation will come to an end. Being separated indefinitely adds additional stress and uncertainty to a relationship.

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It is important that you both are committed to each other and the relationship. Discuss and set boundaries regarding friends of the opposite sex and respect what your partner is or is not comfortable with. Understand each others' expectations for individual and group social interaction.



Determine how often you expect to connect with one another. Think about the different ways you can stay in touch (in-person, email, phone, text). It is important to not only take a close look at what makes sense to you, but also to understand how your partner feels. Your individual expectations may be very different so it is crucial that you compromise, take appropriate actions, and stick to it!

Schedule Regular Date Nights.

Date nights will most likely be done over the phone so make sure you both have an adequate cell phone plan (or

long distance coverage) that will allow you to contact each other as frequently as you'd like without paying a hefty bill.

Discuss and agree with your partner on the frequency of the "dates" (once a week, twice a week, every other Friday night, etc.) and method for connecting. You may want to consider methods such as skype or online chat as a way to stay connected for free. Things do come up from time to time, but try to stick to your date schedule as often as possible. Be sure to let your partner know if you need to reschedule. Neglecting to call your partner without warning can cause them to feel forgotten and uncared for.

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Schedule In-person Visits.

Phone calls and emails are generally not enough to keep your relationship afloat over an extended period of time. Communicating will allow you to maintain your relationship, but spending time together and experiencing new things as a couple will allow your relationship to grow.

Consider that problems and issues that arise between the two of you are usually better resolved in person. Though you don't want to put a damper on the limited amount of time you might see each other face-to-face, you don't want to postpone necessary discussions indefinitely. Don't base the entire status of your relationship on these in-person visits. A good weekend together does not necessarily indicate that the relationship is problem-free and a less-than-satisfying trip together does not mean that the relationship is in trouble.

Be creative with your Interactions.

Write letters and send care packages. Not only will your partner have something physical to remind him/her of you, but this action demonstrates that you took extra time (above and beyond a quick email or phone call) to make him/her feel special.

Think creatively. Surprise your partner with an "I Love You" ad in the classifieds section of the local newspaper. Leave detailed voice messages or video so your partner can hear/see. During a date night, rent the same movie, watch it at the same time and talk about it afterwards.

Trust and Be Trusted.

As hard as it may be at times, try not to make assumptions about what your partner is doing when you aren't around or how he/she is feeling about the relationship. Effective and frequent communication should alleviate any insecurities you may have.

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On the same token, you want to give your partner every reason to maintain trust in you. Don't put yourself in risky situations. Keep independent tendencies in check, use discretion when spending time with members of the opposite sex and remind yourself that you are in a relationship even when your partner is a distance away. If your partner were there, would this interaction make them uncomfortable? If the answer is yes, it would be wise to avoid those situations.

Understand that your partner and/or your relationship is likely to change over time. This is normal! People and circumstances are continually changing, but this will be more noticeable after being separated for an extended period of time. This is truly not a reason to lose confidence in what you share with each other.

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Stay Emotionally and Intimately Connected.

Details, details, details! This may seem mundane, but couples that see each other regularly tell each other tidbits about their day (disappointments, frustrations, accomplishments) that couples in long distance relationships often forget to mention. Spend time discussing your next visit together as

another way to stay emotionally connected. This will be a topic of conversation that you can both contribute to and will get you excited for the next time you see each other.

Engaging in intimate conversation with your partner shows that he/she is desirable. The resulting anticipation increases the passion you'll have when you're able to connect with each other physically. Being able to articulate emotionally and verbally about your own needs and desires for intimacy not only heightens your partner's awareness, but also builds trust and confidence in your relationship.

Attend a Relationship Education Workshop Together.

If there is time before the separation, consider enrolling in a relationship education workshop together. You will learn how to resolve conflicts that may arise during the separation (and any phase of the relationship for that matter!) and will become well-equipped with tools for effective communication. Dedication from you and your partner will ensure that your relationship stays strong and healthy until you are united once again.

Conclusion

Staying connected to your partner while being physically apart is possible. It is important to openly discuss the boundaries and expectations you each have for your relationship. And remember, stay creative!

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Sarah Murrell of the Resource Center for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.

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