

Chapter 1

Welcome to the World of Long-Distance Relationships

John and Catherine

John and Catherine met during the summer between their sophomore and junior years at college, when John inadvertently careened his bicycle into Catherine while rushing across campus. After exchanging apologies, John offered to make up for his blunder over coffee; and thus began two years of what Catherine later told me was a “deliciously romantic affair.”

As the end of their senior year approached the two found themselves applying for graduate positions at universities scattered throughout the country. John was looking for a position in chemical engineering, preferably in northern California, while Catherine was applying for a masters program in education in the Midwest. Ultimately, they both landed their top choices in graduate schools—placing them roughly 2,000 miles away from one another.

Both were very much committed to making the relationship work and decided to try a long-distance relationship (LDR). After roughly a year of monthly plane flights, escalating telephone bills, and lonely Saturday nights, Catherine spotted a flyer for a study of long-distance relationships, and she decided to come and share with me some of what she and John had learned.

John and Catherine belong to a growing number of couples who find themselves involved in long-distance relationships. That you've read this far suggests that you probably are either one of those many, or know someone who is. Assuming you are indeed in a long-distance relationship, rest assured that you are in a very large minority. We don't know exactly how many people consider themselves involved in an LDR, but estimates suggest that there are somewhere between 700,000 and one million of you in geographically separated marriages and an additional one to one-and-a-half million in long-distance dating relationships. And these numbers don't include the hundreds of thousands of you in the Armed Forces.

While the statistics may not be surprising, the lack of information and assistance for those in LDRs is. Make a quick browse through any bookstore and you'll find several shelves of books on dating, marriage, and romance, yet very little about LDRs. In my extensive search over the last 10 years, I have found a few dozen articles, a couple of books meant for psychologists, and very few books meant for those in LDRs. Unfortunately, some of the suggestions made in a few of these books, although sound for most “normal” relationships, were in direct conflict with the results of recent studies done with couples in LDRs.

Over the past decade that I have studied LDRs I have realized that, while a fair amount of accurate information exists out there, no one has taken the time to put it together in a simple guide for those of you actually in long-distance relationships.

This book fills that gap. It draws on several sources, the most detailed of which involves a study that I undertook during my clinical psychology training—a study that eventually became one of the largest projects examining LDRs ever completed.³ As part of the study, we examined over 200 LDRs, personally interviewed dozens of couples, and followed almost a hundred couples over time to see how their relationships eventually turned out. Since that time, I have had the luxury of speaking with several hundred people in LDRs, learning what worked for

them and why. I also draw upon my own experience, having been in a wonderful and fulfilling LDR myself for many years.

What you will learn in this book are the answers to the most common questions I'm asked about LDRs. You will also be provided with practical answers gleaned from the hundreds of those who shared their wisdom. Throughout the text I've illustrated certain points by introducing you to the true stories of various couples, like John and Catherine, who are in LDRs. I've changed the names and identifying situations of some couples, as they preferred to remain anonymous, but the rest of the information is accurate. I've also highlighted a number of survival tips in each chapter that provide practical advice to help make your experience as fulfilling and successful as possible.

While there are many opinions out there about LDRs, very few are anything but that—an opinion. This book will guide you along, with answers provided by both rigorous scientific study and the heartfelt passionate explorations of those who have traveled this path before. Because this book represents the first attempt to gather together all of the scientific information available on long-distance relationships, I've chosen to provide the specific reference for any claims or suggestions I make. The full description of any source cited in the text can be found in the bibliography at the end of the book.

Whatever type of LDR you have—dating or married, military or civilian, separated because of school or career—you'll find the secrets that have allowed others in your situation to triumph over the distance and keep that someone special close at heart.

Some of the many questions we'll answer include:

- Do long-distance relationships really work?
- How often should I visit?
- Is an LDR right for me?
- Are people in LDRs more likely to cheat on each other compared to those people in traditional relationships?
- How do I make it easier when we have to leave each other?
- I feel like I'm on a constant rollercoaster ride of emotions. Is this normal?
- Should we see other people while we're apart?
- How should we deal with arguments when we're apart?

LDRs can be a wonderful and exciting way to combine important career issues with a meaningful and committed relationship. They can and do work every day, and millions of us have tremendously fulfilling adventures with LDRs. However, long-distance love has many pitfalls, and navigating through the ups and downs unique to these types of relationships often takes guidance and reassurance. As you begin your journey of discovery, I'll answer the most pressing question in the next chapter: Do long-distance relationships work? In Chapter 3, you can take the *Separation Inventory* by answering 25 questions in a brief survey designed to assess important areas of your personality, your support system, and your unique situation, all of which may affect your LDR. Then, we'll expand on your *Separation Inventory* by having you and your partner together complete a second questionnaire that is designed to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses within your relationship that may need attention. Then in Chapters 5 through 8, I'll discuss the results of these two tests and focus on how to distance-proof your relationship based on your own unique strengths and weaknesses.

Part II discusses specific issues common to long-distance relationships, and

we'll discuss some very practical suggestions for your LDR. I'll show you the wonderful advantages that come from having a long-distance romance, and then discuss the emotional stages we all go through during separation: anger, depression, loneliness, emotional detachment, anxiety, guilt, and so forth. Building on these stages, I'll show you the 10 steps research has shown to help you stay emotionally healthy while apart from your loved one.

Chapter 12 discusses the secret to keeping your relationship as intimate as ever, even when you have to be so far apart. After this discussion, we'll tackle the question of how often you should visit, call, and write your partner. You can also peruse statistics from our study showing what the average couple in an LDR is doing in this regard.

I'll also tell you why using the telephone may not be the next best thing to being there. Research has shown six pitfalls of talking on the telephone, and we'll discuss how to avoid them.

Then in Chapter 15, we'll discuss the research that shows you may have a secret weapon for your LDR—writing letters! If you aren't writing to your partner, read this fascinating research and then get out your pen. In Chapter 16, we'll heat things up a bit and talk about sex and how the separation can make things wild or wobbly. We'll explore the various ways couples keep their sex lives hot even when they're a thousand miles apart. In keeping with this theme, we'll discuss the problem of sexual affairs. (Can you guess whether they are more common in LDRs?)

We'll also address the issue of whether you should date other people while you're apart, if this is something you're considering.

Finally, we'll explore the difficult process of saying goodbye, and I'll share some hints to make the parting a little easier. We'll look at problems that you're likely to encounter when you and your partner have the opportunity to get together. We'll also discuss the difficult issue of how to argue when you're apart, and we'll review some of the differences between men and women when it comes to separation.

While the vignettes I use to illustrate important concepts come from heterosexual relationships, I do not in any way mean to exclude those gay and lesbian couples in LDRs. The time I've spent with hundreds of couples in LDRs has led me to believe that the same fundamental principals apply to everyone in separated relationships regardless of their sexual orientation.

Before we begin I'd like to offer my congratulations and encouragement to you and your partner for caring enough about one another to embark on a long-distance relationship. The path may be turbulent, but the result is well worth the effort.