

Chapter 11

Ten Steps to Staying Emotionally Healthy While You Have to Be Apart

Angela and Tim

Angela and Tim met during a seminar sponsored by the computer company for which they both worked; Angela in the Colorado office, and Tim in the California office. After several two-hour telephone calls, Tim flew out to visit Angela. After having a wonderful weekend together, they decided to try to make the relationship work, even though they were several hours apart by plane. Angela spent some time talking with me about the difficulties she had during the separation and some of the tricks she used to help make things a little easier.

“First and foremost is the loneliness,” she began. “Not all the time, but particularly on the weekends, or whenever I go out with friends and see them having a great time with their dates. When I’m in an environment that is geared toward socializing, I notice that I miss Tim a lot more. Then there are times when the loneliness creeps into a depression. Luckily these aren’t very often, and Tim is great about helping me pull myself out of a slump.

“Early on, right after we met and decided to keep seeing each other, I spent several weekends wondering what he was doing. Was he out at bars picking up other women or on a date with someone else? We both had implicitly agreed that we would be monogamous, but we had never said anything directly. Finally, we had a long telephone call and discussed what was and wasn’t okay for each of us. That seemed to help me with some of the anxiety. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him. I wasn’t sure we were on the same page before, and now that we’ve spelled everything out I know.”

Angela described three very common reactions to separation: loneliness, depression, and anxiety. In the last chapter, I discussed these in more detail. In this chapter, I’ll outline ways of dealing with these feelings.

First, remember that these emotions and many more are a normal and natural response to being separated from someone you care about. In fact, the least healthy response is to have no reaction whatsoever to separation. Obviously, if these feelings are so intense that they interfere with getting things done during the day, then you may have gone beyond the usual reaction to separation and you may need to seek some professional advice. But for most of us in LDRs, the loneliness, depression, anger, and guilt are a nuisance rather than a crippling reaction, even if it is a rather unpleasant nuisance.

Ten Steps to Staying Sane While Separated.

Step 1. Maintain a satisfying and intimate relationship.

I admit this sounds rather obvious. But it is worth discussing. The single most important step in staying emotionally healthy is forming and maintaining a healthy relationship with your partner. Numerous studies have shown that intimate and satisfying romantic relationships help buffer us from the usual stresses that the world hurls at us every day. One study in particular looked at separated couples and found that the quality of their relationship, more than any other factor, predicted the degree of emotional difficulty each would have with the separation. Fortunately, as I’ve already mentioned, LDRs, as a group, report just as satisfying and

intimate relationships as geographically close couples.

Step 2. Socialize.

Loneliness comes with the territory for those of us in LDRs. As Angela mentioned, there are usually certain times when we feel lonelier. The usual culprits include being around other couples and doing activities by yourself that you would usually think of as something couples should do; for example, going to a movie, going out to eat, or watching a favorite television show on a Friday or Saturday night. For others, there are specific rituals that they developed with their partner, prior to their separation, that trigger the loneliness. Tina, an airline pilot, told me of how she and her husband always snuggled together on the couch to watch a particular TV show. Now, whenever that show comes on, it reminds her of his absence and the loneliness sets in.

Unfortunately, there is no simple trick to get rid of the loneliness we feel when away from our partners. Psychologists who specialize in loneliness describe two types: emotional and social. *Emotional loneliness* occurs whenever we feel an unanswered need for intimacy. This is the type of loneliness most people in LDRs experience, and it's specific to one particular person. However, even geographically close couples experience this when their relationship begins to deteriorate and the intimacy disappears. The second type of loneliness, *social loneliness*, results when we isolate ourselves from society. It is a yearning for casual relationships with others. Unfortunately, many people in LDRs also experience this type of loneliness.

Sarah noticed this isolation early on in her separation from David. Recall that Sarah is working on an MBA at a university located four hours away from her husband. For the first few months, she would return to see David every weekend. After she decided to spend many of her weekends at school, she found that no one in her program thought to invite her along for the weekend events, even though she was now available. Her early absence from their group resulted in a persistent assumption that she did not want to participate, even after her schedule changed. Eventually Sarah took charge and managed to get more involved in the social activities. Yet her first few evenings out went rather poorly. She noticed the same feelings Angela described: She missed David more when she was out than if she stayed home and worked. She also had a distinctly unpleasant interaction with a man who assumed that, because she lived apart from her husband, she was fair game. Sarah eventually decided it wasn't worth going out, and she pulled further away from her friends.

Some of us have to deal with both social and emotional loneliness. Emotional loneliness is virtually impossible to eliminate without actually having your partner at your side. And, as researchers learned, you can't completely do away with one type of loneliness by dealing with the other type. You can have the best social network in the city and still feel emotionally lonely. You can have the most wonderfully intimate connection with your partner and still feel socially isolated. But there is some crossover between the two types of loneliness that those of us in LDRs can use to our advantage.

Minimizing the amount of social isolation will lessen (but not eliminate) your feelings of emotional loneliness. Several studies on separated couples have confirmed the importance of getting out and spending time with friends. Companionship with friends helps strengthen your relationship and reduces the loneliness and depression reported by those in LDRs.

While it may feel awkward being out with friends on a Friday or Saturday

night, you should make every effort to join the group. Consider it your contribution to keeping yourself sane and keeping your LDR strong. Be proactive in forming bonds with colleagues. Realize that your ambiguous status (not single but not with a date) may make others feel uncomfortable, and they may choose not to invite you along. Generally, once you voice a preference to be included, others will involve you in their social circle.

Step 3. Find a confidant.

One study of relationships found that people who had a confidant—someone they could easily talk with about personal problems—were 10 times less likely to be depressed or lonely than those without one. That's a tremendous effect that even modern anti-depressant medications can't match. Other studies have shown a similarly powerful effect. The ability to simply share both our fun times and our difficulties with someone we trust is a power you must use to your advantage. Let me say early on that the confidant is *not* your romantic partner. The importance of that relationship has already been stressed. This confidant must be someone else, preferably someone geographically closer to you. Usually people tend to choose someone of the same gender, although men sometimes share their feelings more easily with women than with other men. Ideally, this confidant is in a long-distance relationship as well, so the two of you can share ideas and experiences. This not only provides you someone to go out with, but also a companion who understands and shares your dating status.

One creative young law student, Tracy, placed a personal advertisement in the school newspaper, suggesting that anyone in an LDR meet for pizza and beer at the campus union to share their insights. She had roughly a dozen people attend, and she managed to meet several companions who routinely would get together on weekend nights to socialize. Included in this group was Meg, a sociology graduate student, who hit it off well with Tracy, and they spent the next two years supporting each other through their mutual LDRs. (Tracy eventually married her long-distance sweetheart with Meg as a bridesmaid.)

If Tracy's idea isn't for you and you're having trouble finding a confidant, you might consider paying for occasional time with a therapist. While the thought of seeing a therapist turns off many people, I assure you that generally the least healthy people are the ones who refuse to see a psychologist or other professional when they need to. Seeking someone to listen intently to the important issues in your life is anything but crazy. The advantage of paying this person is that you don't have the obligation to listen to his or her own problems. Additionally, professionals often have constructive insights and perspectives that you and your partner may not have considered when looking at the situation from within your own context.

Step 4. Touching.

One of the wonderful advantages of an intimate union that those in geographically close relationships often take for granted is the gift of human contact. Touch is a powerful force and has some amazing effects on the body that we don't fully understand. Touch has been shown to slow the heart rate, lower blood pressure, reduce the frequency of cardiac arrhythmias, and even help premature babies gain weight. Exactly how it accomplishes these feats is a mystery. Unfortunately, while we're separated from our loved one we may find that the amount of touch we experience drops significantly. This lack of touch may even be partially responsible for the persistent blues that many of us report throughout the separation. The good news is that pretty much any touch helps reverse this deficit. While it would be wonderful if we could receive this touch from our partners, it's not always possible.

One way of increasing physical touch is to seek out nonsexual contact from friends and colleagues. This is where having a confidant who lives nearby can be very helpful. A simple hug can make a great emotional Band-Aid. Women typically are more comfortable hugging their friends than are men. It's unfortunate that in our society men aren't supposed to show that much affection, because it removes a wonderful source of touch. Other ways of touching that are more acceptable to men involve sports. Football, basketball, soccer, and baseball all can incorporate some amount of nonsexual touch. Personally, I work out with weights with two friends and we often support each other's elbows for safety reasons when we lift. Even this level of touch is much better than none at all. And for those of us who can afford it, a massage is perhaps the most lavish (and very effective) way of reducing stress and gaining the benefits of touch.

Another alternative is to get yourself a pet. The therapeutic effects of petting a dog or cat have already been shown in nursing home studies. If your situation lends itself to a furry friend, and you have the support system to help take care of him or her while you're away, a pet can do wonders for your spirit.

Step 5. Take control.

One of the most celebrated theories of depression called the *learned helplessness model*, focuses on the importance of control. In this model many of the unpleasant emotions we experience, including anxiety and depression, result from the often incorrect belief that nothing we can do will make things different. When researchers were first exploring this model, they placed dogs into a room that was split in half with a little door between the two sides. After the dogs were placed in one side of the room, a mild electric shock was administered. If the dogs ran through the door into the other side of the room, the shock was stopped. The dogs soon learned that to escape the shock they simply had to run into the other room. The dogs learned that they had control over this unpleasant event.

Next, a new set of dogs was put into the room. The researchers then administered shocks that could not be avoided by jumping through the door. These dogs learned that they could not escape the shock and were therefore helpless. However, when the researchers returned to the earlier strategy of stopping the shocks when the dogs jumped to the other side of the room, these new dogs couldn't seem to learn what to do. Their earlier episodes of learned helplessness prevented them from taking control of their destiny, even when a method to do so existed. Instead, these dogs simply stood around neither eating well nor playing. Essentially, the dogs were showing signs of depression.

Although I'm not a fan of shocking dogs in the name of science, this study did provide important insights into the nature of mood disorders. The implication from this research is that depression and anxiety result, in part, from our feelings of being out of control.

Imagine for an instant that you had access to a transporter machine that would allow you to step in and immediately materialize in your partner's room. It's a pretty nice fantasy, right? The transporter simply represents a level of control, albeit one that none of us will obtain. But each small step toward recognizing the control we do have helps quell those jittery feelings.

How do you establish control? First, you need to recognize that you have a choice in your decision to separate. Granted, some of you don't have much choice (such as military separations and those in prison), but the vast majority of us do. While it may be terribly expensive to close the distance, in either monetary or career terms, it's still possible and you have control over that choice. In my own

LDR, I realized that I made the decision every day to: 1) continue in the relationship with my partner, and 2) continue the relationship as an LDR rather than give up my career goals and move closer to her. While it would have been costly for me to simply pull up roots and move, I *could* have done it if I so chose. I had ultimate control over that decision.

The next way of feeling in control is to more explicitly define the parameters of the relationship. At the beginning of the chapter, Angela mentioned how helpful it was for her to openly discuss where she and Tim stood in terms of dating others. They also discussed how often they should talk on the telephone, how often they would try to visit one another, and what their eventual plans were for closing the distance. I realize how difficult it can be to discuss these issues, and working through them while separated seems even harder. In fact, couples in LDRs may indeed have more difficulty discussing issues about the relationship than do couples in geographically close relationships. Unfortunately, couples in LDRs require this sort of discussion more so than other relationships. Try working through these issues when you're together. Being able to watch your partner's body language greatly increases your ability to understand and connect with your partner.

Once you've decided on how often you will talk on the telephone, consider setting up *telephone dates*. A telephone date is an agreed upon specific time in which you and your partner will get together by telephone. Protect that time as you would a face-to-face date. Knowing in advance when exactly you'll be talking with your partner helps remove some of the uncertainty and helps regain some control. The same is true of face-to-face visits. When you purchase tickets in advance, as suggested before, not a single day of uncertainty has to pass. Both of these strategies—telephone dates and making reservations early—help by creating structure to the separation, and providing some degree of control.

Step 6. Positive thinking.

During World War II, many thousands of couples were separated from loved ones as our men and women shipped out. During the separation, an Army sociologist studied the situation in detail, hoping to uncover the dynamics of separation to better support families during wartime. One of the most important findings he uncovered was that the degree of difficulty families experienced depended primarily on whether they viewed the separation as a crisis. Those families who believed that the separation was a dreadful event that would result in great hardship, and in all likelihood the breakup of the relationship, found the LDR most difficult. Families that saw the separation as a challenge that they could overcome together reported much less difficulty.

The actual time away from one another was exactly the same for both groups of families; only the meanings that they gave to the separation differed. Once again, this research shows that a large amount of control rests in your hands, rather than in the factors that are less easily manipulated, such as the time apart and the frequency of visits. Simply redefining the separation as an opportunity to grow, rather than as a relationship crisis, may be one of the most powerful strategies to maintain a healthy union while apart.

Our own study of civilian LDRs showed very similar results.³ When we attempted to uncover the best coping strategy for dealing with the separation, only one approach clearly stood out. Those who focused on the positive aspects of the separation were more likely to stay together and less likely to report personal difficulty dealing with distance. Other studies have found similar results. If you're having difficulty seeing the positive points of your LDR, turn back to

Chapter 9 and review some of the advantages of LDRs.

Step 7. View the separation as temporary.

When we first asked couples in LDRs how long they anticipated being apart, their answer was 26 months, on average. Barely five months later, when they should have had 21 months left, their estimate was only 15 months. What happened to the extra six months? Had events changed that allowed these couples to reunite sooner than they originally anticipated?

Actually, very few of them had any real change in the reasons they had separated or in the possibilities of reuniting. But what did happen was that these couples identified times when they could consider closing the distance. These same opportunities existed all along, but the couples began to view the separation in shorter blocks of time. Rather than assume that the separation would last the entire 26 months as they had originally planned, they decided that it could end in a total of 15 months if need be. This allowed them to see the time apart in smaller blocks. In the future they could reevaluate and decide either to continue at a distance or close the gap. Viewing the separation as temporary, and focusing on managing small blocks of time apart rather than large ones, helped couples cope with the separation.

As I mentioned earlier in the book, many couples with whom I spoke used a six-month plan to help ease them through the separation. Every six months they discussed how the relationship was progressing, how often they needed to see one another or call each other, and whether there needed to be any other change in the mechanics of their separation. Setting a date for each six-month block allowed them to focus on simply getting through those six months, rather than trying to swallow the enormity of being separated for more than two or three years. One variant of this is the one-month plan that some of the couples used. In this strategy, people broke the LDR down into even smaller blocks, focusing on the separation from reunion to reunion. In any case, no one I interviewed felt the separation would be permanent; almost everyone sees it as temporary.

Step 8. Acknowledge each other's contributions.

We've all experienced a time when we went to great lengths to do something special for our partner, only to feel like he or she didn't fully appreciate the effort. While this happens in both geographically close relationships as well as LDRs, it seems to affect the latter to a greater extent.² LDRs require special investments that often don't occur in other relationships. We take the time to write letters, we send little packages in the mail, we work around our schedules to catch airline flights, we drive four, five, or even six hours to spend the weekend. These events often take a fair amount of effort that can easily be overlooked when we're on the receiving end. I'll admit that I've not given my partner credit for the effort it takes to drive six hours to spend some time together. While this may seem like a small thing, our study showed that for some it was quite important. For example, men, compared to women, were more likely to complain about their partner ignoring their efforts. Why this difference? Perhaps men are simply more likely to expect thanks and recognition, or they fail to appreciate it when it's offered. In any case be aware of the time and effort each of you put into the relationship, and try to genuinely show your appreciation.

Step 9. Fuzzy poles.

Back in the 1950s, researchers conducted a fascinating study of separation using young monkeys. The monkeys were separated from their mother and placed in an area that had two artificial mothers. Both mothers were manufactured from wire mesh poles shaped to look like adult female monkeys. One of these poles

was left as is—just bare metal. The other was covered in a fuzzy material to make it feel soft and warm. Then the researchers placed a milk bottle in either the bare metal mother or the fuzzy mother. To their amazement they found that regardless of which mother fed the monkeys, the monkeys spent the vast majority of their time clinging to the fuzzy mother. This observation seemed to run contrary to the prevailing theory that the monkeys would spend more time with the mother that gave them food.

However, the monkeys chose to spend time with the mother that had fur, as it apparently provided comfort and reassurance. The fur on the pole acted as a *transitional object* for the monkeys. Although mom wasn't around, the feeling of the fur provided some sort of connection to her. In LDRs, transitional objects amount to anything to which you give special meaning because it connects you to your partner. It may be a stuffed animal, a picture, a letter, a piece of jewelry, and so on.

Many of us have our own fuzzy pole. I carried pictures in my wallet that I glanced at every time I opened it. Others wear necklaces or bracelets. Even wedding rings can function as transitional objects. Stuffed animals can make good companions at bedtime, as do those full-length body pillows. But transforming a simple gift from your partner into a fuzzy pole takes a little effort. First, try to have something unique about the object. My partner had a stuffed bear that wore a sweatshirt from my medical school. Anything that will set the object apart from others will do.

Next, take advantage of your partner's brain. The limbic system is a connection of nerve pathways in the brain that is probably one of the most primitive in humans. There are two fascinating oddities about the limbic system. First, it holds the power of emotion. The vast majority of our feelings—love, anger, sorrow, rage—seem to come from the limbic system. Second, our sense of smell plugs directly into this system. In fact, smell is the only sense that doesn't go through the processing station of the thalamus, another little bundle in the brain, prior to reaching our awareness. Smell can play a pivotal role in emotion, and I recommend tapping into that power. If your partner wears a certain perfume or cologne, dab a little on your fuzzy pole. I'm always amazed at how quickly images of my partner come to mind when someone passes by wearing the same perfume. You'll never have more direct access to the love center of your partner's brain, so use it to your advantage.

Finally, tap into your partner's voice. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I have an inexpensive digital voice memo key chain on which I have about 20 seconds of my partner's voice. When I found myself working late at night, I would occasionally hit the play button while running down a hallway, and her voice always picked me up. I know of one woman who has two voice memo recorders: one she carries with her and one she keeps on her nightstand. She has purchased one of the long sleeping pillows that substitutes for her husband (complete with cologne) and the voice memo has his personal "Goodnight, I love you" prerecorded.

Fuzzy poles can work for you. Virtually everyone has something that works as a transitional object, but you can (and should) work on creating the best connection possible.

Step 10. Keeping a healthy sex life while apart.

It probably comes as no surprise that sex can play an important role in our mental (and even physical) health. Studies show that orgasm has many of the same effects

as morphine on pulse, blood pressure, pain, and stress, but without the adverse effects.
78 Unfortunately, for some of us in LDRs the lack of opportunity makes our sex life less than stellar. Some people choose not to involve sexual intercourse in their relationship, and I respect that decision. But if sex plays a role in your relationship, you may want to spend some time actively developing your skills as a long-distance lover.

Sexual intimacy seems to play a more important role for men in LDRs than for women. In our study, men who reported great sexual intimacy with their partners reported fewer episodes of loneliness and depression while apart. The connection between the two was less apparent for women, but undoubtedly exists. How to become a first-rate long-distance lover is a question I've been asked many times. Because it's such an important issue we'll discuss it in detail in Chapter 16.