

Chapter 2

Do LDRs Really Work?

Tara and Keith

Tara and Keith had been married only two years when Keith was offered a huge promotion that he'd been waiting for since he began working as a biotechnology consultant. He had assumed that Tara would approve of the 1200-mile move, even though Tara was working as an architect in her dream job. Keith was wrong. The couple began a two-week battle over whether Keith should take the promotion (although Keith had already begun to make the arrangements). Toward the end of the two weeks, they had come no closer to a decision, and Keith felt strongly that he needed to take the promotion in order to continue climbing the corporate ladder. Tara felt strongly that her career was well entrenched and that a move would significantly set her back. Each had a lot to lose. A friend of Tara's finally suggested that they could compromise by having a temporary LDR. Keith would take the new job and move, and they could see one another about once every three weeks. Tara thought that their relationship was strong enough to survive an LDR and she set out to sell the idea to Keith. Keith was leery of this option but recognized that it did seem better than the alternatives. He began asking around his office, curious as to what his coworkers would think of the idea. The consensus: "You guys are going to try a long-distance relationship? They never work!"

Eventually Tara and Keith decided to give it a go, and I was able to talk with them after an eight-month separation. They had made a very difficult choice because they had heard from almost everyone that LDRs don't work. They believed that they were taking a serious risk with their relationship in order to further their careers. Ask around yourself whether LDRs work and you'll find that most people have the same opinion. In my own studies I've found that you get two different answers. If you ask people who are not currently in an LDR they will say, "LDRs don't work." Of course, you get a slightly different story from those in separated relationships who, understandably, want to believe that everything will work out in the end. The truly sad part about these opposite camps is that those in LDRs often face daily bombardment from the naysayers, which for some couples makes them constantly reevaluate their choice.

Julie, a 20-year-old college student dating a Navy diver, asked me once, "Am I crazy for even trying this? Everyone tells me this will never work out." Julie wasn't having any particular difficulty with her LDR and told me she was quite satisfied with the relationship. Julie needed reassurance that what she was doing was normal and rational.

Let me assure you that LDRs are both normal—in the sense that a large majority of us have, at one time or another, been involved in an LDR—and rational, in that they do work, and often they are the best choice given the alternatives that we face. In one study of premarital couples, we found that nearly three-quarters had been involved in an LDR at some point and that around 25% were currently involved in an LDR. Long-distance marriages are less common, but by no means rare. So LDRs are everywhere, and everyone wants to know one thing: Do they work? Before answering this I need to define what it means for a relationship "to work." Most people are interested in whether or not the relationship can simply survive the separation. They want to know if trying a long-distance relationship means that they have a greater chance of breaking up than if they were in a geographically close relationship. The most accurate answer to this is that no one

knows for sure. However, the majority of studies that have been done show no greater risk of an LDR breaking up than any other relationship.

Many people find this hard to believe, and I've heard scores of people scoff when I say this. They then quickly produce their own story of how their LDR didn't last. Let me make it clear that I'm not saying that every LDR will work, only that they work *as well as any other relationship*. When we followed premarital couples in LDRs and compared them to another group of couples in geographically close relationships, we found that around 40% of both groups eventually went their separate ways. Many relationships end, but we tend to remember those LDRs that did not work, more so than the geographically closer relationships that failed. Studies have shown that whenever a close relationship ends we try to figure out why. People basically focus on four possibilities:

- There was something wrong with themselves. ("I was too clingy.")
- There was something wrong with their partner. ("He was a jerk!")
- There was simply an incompatibility. ("He's kind of an introvert and I like to party.")
- There was something external to the relationship. ("We just couldn't handle the distance.")

Interestingly, research has shown that women tend to find fault within the relationship, seeing the breakup as resulting from interpersonal problems ("We're just not right for each other"), while men are more likely to try to place the blame on something outside of the relationship, such as too much time apart. While the studies have shown that LDRs stay together just as frequently (or infrequently) as

Survival Tip # 1

First and foremost, remember that despite anything people tell you to the contrary, studies have shown that LDRs have as much chance of making it as any other relationship.

other relationships, we often try to blame the distance when they do fail. Admittedly, it is easier to say, "Everything would have been fine had we lived closer," than to say that things didn't work out because of some issue with the relationship or ourselves. In fact, this tendency to blame the distance usually ends up in a more amicable breakup. However, this also means that many people firmly believe that LDRs don't work. Fortunately, the research shows that this isn't true. While this is good news, it's only part of the story. Staying together isn't always the best thing for a relationship, as we all know. Many relationships should end if those involved are unsatisfied or feel trapped. So another way of looking at whether LDRs, or any relationship, "work" is to examine the quality of the relationship. Conveniently, researchers have done just that. In our study we compared those in LDRs with those in geographically close relationships. We looked at relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and trust. We found that on all these measures the two groups were *identical*.¹¹ While our study was the largest and most detailed, several other studies have found the same thing.

Remember, these numbers compare one group to another. However, there are certainly individuals who have more or less difficulty in an LDR. So while it is true that, as a group, those in LDRs do as well as those in geographically close relationships, this does not mean that you personally will do as well. Many factors make some people better able to deal with the different advantages and disadvantages of LDRs. The next chapter examines the question, "How difficult will an LDR be *for me*?"