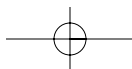
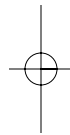
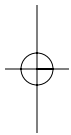


Part II

*Strategies for
Separated Couples*



Chapter 9

The Advantages of LDRs

Maria and Chuck

“When we first began the LDR, I thought we were crazy,” began Maria, a neurology resident in California dating a surgery resident in Boston. “But now I can honestly say that it has been the best choice for Chuck and I. We both have such little free time that if we lived closer we’d just be disappointing one another all the time. This way we both put 100% into our work when we’re apart, and we put 100% into the relationship when we’re together.”

While LDRs do have their trials and tribulations, they also have some very distinct advantages over the alternatives. Don’t get me wrong. I certainly would have preferred that my partner and I lived closer together if our career paths had so allowed. But to focus on the negatives, without giving proper credit to the positives, will only make the experience a miserable one. Many people find it relatively easy to obsess over how much they miss their partner or how lonely they are. Yet they rarely make the effort to acknowledge the good things that come from the separation: the amount of time they have to focus on work, the time to explore friendships, the time to be alone and grow as a person, the excitement of rediscovering their significant other after a long time apart. These are not trivial gifts, and I believe that for many of us the LDR grants us a wonderful opportunity to foster our careers, our personal growth, and our intimate relationships.

Career or Educational Advancement

The number one advantage of most LDRs is the opportunity for career or educational advancement. With the exception of relationships separated as a result of incarceration or military deployments, the vast majority separate to allow one or both members to grow in their career field. Researchers have shown clearly that

those in LDRs do experience significant opportunity for career or educational growth.^{3, 16}

In part of our study, we asked hundreds of college students in LDRs and in geographically close relationships how much they had been bothered by some common college hassles. Included in this list were questions related to difficulties in meeting academic standards. We found that those in geographically close relationships reported significantly more difficulty with several aspects of their education, compared to those in LDRs. They found the courses more demanding and less interesting, and they had too little time for work. They also reported their schoolwork was interrupted more frequently. While it's possible that those in LDRs were simply more intelligent, I think that's unlikely. Clearly those in LDRs were able to use the time that others spent on relationships to focus more intently on their educational growth. This advantage holds true for most LDRs: The time away allows us to accomplish something important in our lives while also holding on to an important relationship.

Free Time

Paula and Mark

“Two years ago, after I married Paula, I began to realize how I had gradually stopped hanging out with my friends. I spent the day at work, and then Paula and I had become accustomed to spending the evening alone as a couple. One Monday morning I found out that the old gang had gotten together for a game of basketball and hadn't invited me. ‘We didn't think you'd come,’ was their excuse. It hit me how much I missed their friendship.

“Then Paula left to go to Japan for a year, which certainly was difficult for us both. But I reconnected with my buddies, and even now that Paula's returned, I feel like I have brought a better balance to my life. Paula and I have a wonderful marriage, and the guys now invite me for the Saturday afternoon game.”

Mark and Paula used their time away from one another to help develop other areas of their lives. Paula advanced her career as a civil engineer by working in Japan on some projects related to her expertise. While their separation did not particularly benefit Mark's career, he used the time to focus on reuniting with his friends and developing relationships that continue to enrich his life.

The free time that comes with most LDRs provides a framework that we must choose to fill with either loneliness or personal growth. Some people with whom I've spoken have had a great deal of difficulty with the separation, and they sit morbidly at home spending their time watching TV and waiting for the telephone to ring. Obviously, this is not a great way of making it through the LDR. Others have used the free time in a wonderful variety of ways: exercising, canvas painting, adult

education classes, winemaking, working on relationships with friends or family, writing a book, building model trains, or learning to crochet. The list is endless.

Survival Tip # 24

Most LDRs allow us to have more free time to focus on areas of our lives that interest us. The free time can be either a blessing or a curse, and only you can decide which it will become. Use the free time to develop and grow as a person. Think about taking a class, or working on a hobby, or spending more time with friends and family. Actively work on using the time to your advantage. You'll find that the more you do, the more positively you'll view the separation, which is very important to a successful LDR.

Novelty

Michelle and George

Michelle and George, you'll recall, have a very long-distance relationship, with George in the Navy in Japan and Michelle teaching school in Indiana. While she'd prefer to be closer, Michelle has found that the separation has prevented their relationship from becoming too routine.

"I only get to see George every three or four months, and we can't talk all that often on the telephone. So when we do meet, it's like we're falling in love all over again. You know that giddy feeling you get when you first start to fall for someone? Well, I get that every time we get together. I go through a period of re-discovery where I realize again how special he is and how much he means to me. I don't think we ever take each other for granted anymore."

I remember as a child going to an amusement park and riding the rollercoaster in an endless process of standing in line, hopping onto the ride for the 30-second thrill, and then running down the exit ramp to assume my position again at the end of the line. This entertained me exactly four times before the novelty wore off. While routine plays an important role in stabilizing our relationships, it also tends to dull things down. Much like the interplay between autonomy and intimacy, novelty and routine work against one another, and each of us must find the balance that works for us in each particular relationship.

Geographically close couples have the advantage of seeing one another daily. Yet that level of familiarity sometimes creeps beyond routine and into boredom. Many of these couples struggle to bring novelty to their relationship. LDRs have novelty thrust upon them. Most couples in LDRs report a honeymoon period whenever they get together, with each partner paying special attention to the other.

As Michelle mentioned previously, the feelings unearthed during this period are likened to falling in love all over again.

Survival Tip # 25

Most couples in LDRs describe an enjoyable honeymoon during the first few hours to days of a reunion. This time together allows for a mutual rediscovery of each other and of the relationship. For many people the emotional excitement of seeing their partner begins even before they actually get together. Just planning and preparing for reunion can bring out the exhilaration. Try to enjoy the experience and recognize it as another gift that your LDR affords.

As mentioned earlier, we already know that LDRs do not break up any more frequently than geographically close relationships. What we don't know is what exactly prevents them from breaking up, given all of the disadvantages that come with separation. One interesting theory comes from one of the best-researched branches of psychology known as behavioral psychology. Studies have shown that we are much more likely to keep doing something when we get rewards only every so often rather than all the time. Continual rewards seem to cause us to lose interest as soon as the reward is stopped, even if only temporarily.

The owners of the casinos know this very well. The slot machines are designed to pay out only every so often, so that people don't lose interest. If they paid out a little every time someone pulled the lever, people would still play, but they would get really bored. If the machine then stopped paying out, even for a short time, people would rapidly move to other machines. However, if the machines pay out just often enough, people find themselves excited, and they will continue to play for long after the machine stops paying them back.

If we equate the payoff from a slot machine with the fun we get when we interact with our partner, we see some similarities. Those who receive constant payoffs by being in a geographically close relationship reap many benefits but often become bored. If those payoffs suddenly stop, for example during a period of conflict, these couples may quickly lose interest in one another. However, those of us in LDRs receiving only occasional payoffs will tend to "keep playing" even when the rewards stop for a while. It's only speculation at this point, but I certainly believe that for many people the thrill of seeing their partner after a long break helps offset some of the disadvantages of being in an LDR.

One last point about novelty: Many couples told me that when they do finally get together, they tend to plan exciting activities to make the most of the weekend. Picnics, woodland hikes, camping, skydiving, canoeing—the list goes on. While

there's no need to overschedule your time together, you may want to plan some fun activities that you ordinarily wouldn't give yourself the time to enjoy.

Survival Tip # 26

Research shows that couples in LDRs enjoy more exciting outdoor activities than couples who live closer to one another.³ Take advantage of the times when you do get together to plan some novel adventures—rollerblading, skydiving, camping—whatever the two of you might enjoy. This extra benefit of being in an LDR will help offset the occasional disadvantages.

A Chance to Grow

Donna and Ed

Donna and Ed are not the traditional couple in an LDR. They have been married for nearly 21 years and both are in their early fifties. Donna works part-time at a local library while Ed helps manage one of the major national computing firms. Two years ago, Ed's company asked him to move to help supervise a new project in California. Unfortunately, Donna's mother, who lived only a few miles away, was in poor health and Donna chose to stay nearby.

For the past year and a half, Donna and Ed have managed to see one another almost every other weekend. For Donna, the separation has allowed her to reconnect with a part of herself that she had let slip away nearly three decades ago.

"For a long time I've relied on Ed to take care of things: the checkbook, car repairs, planning our time together, deciding what we'd watch on TV. The first month after he left was quite a shock. I didn't have him around to balance the checkbook. I thought I'd wait until he came home, but finally I sat down and worked it out. Now I take care of most of the business around the house and I feel like I've reasserted myself. My sense of independence and self-reliance has grown tremendously."

As I mentioned before, LDRs require greater self-esteem than geographically close relationships. Fortunately, they also provide an opportunity to bring out the very activities that help build self-esteem.

As children we begin to learn our own self-worth and our own abilities by asserting our independence and trying things on our own. However, children require a reliable support (mom and dad) to fall back on should they fail. In many ways, the LDR provides us a similar opportunity to begin to explore our self-reliance

while maintaining an important supportive connection (our partner) should we need the help.

Survival Tip # 27

Self-esteem flourishes in an environment that requires self-reliance, but also provides a secure relationship to fall back on when times get tough. For many people the LDR provides the perfect blend of independence and support to nourish self-esteem and personal growth.

LDRs as a Learning Experience for the Future

Judy and Lane

“Our relationship is definitely different than most,” began Judy. “I don’t think that on my wedding day I could have envisioned spending nearly a decade in a long-distance marriage. Now, looking back, I must say that it has brought more intimacy, personal growth, and family prosperity than I could possibly have imagined when Lane and I first reluctantly decided to work in two different cities.”

Judy and Lane have been married for 31 years. For the past 10 years of their relationship, they have lived in an LDR, though the distance and structure has varied during those years. Both Judy and Lane are professors. Following their marriage, Judy took time to complete her master’s degree before they started their family. After they had two children, Judy stayed home until all the children were in school. She then returned to the university and completed her PhD. During that time, she started teaching in the anthropology department. She liked that arrangement and on completion of her degree she was offered a teaching position at a university 120 miles away.

They purchased a small second home there, where Judy would live four days a week, returning to the family home for three days. Lane took responsibility for the children during the week. The couple felt it was beneficial for all in the family because each could have their unique time with the children as well as with each other. This arrangement lasted for four years until Judy was offered a teaching position at her former university and agreed to take it. Just as she was moving back home, Lane was offered a very prestigious position in a city some 350 miles away. Again, the couple made the decision to take both positions and continue their LDR. This next phase lasted six years, during which Lane purchased a home in his new city. Judy and the children continued to live in the original home, while Lane

spent every other weekend with the family. He also spent holidays and parts of his sabbatical year at home. Judy and the children spent holidays with Lane in what they called “dad’s house.”

After six years, the children were grown and out of the family home, and Judy was offered a new position at a university 50 miles from Lane. The couple felt it was still too far to attempt a commute. Lane kept his home and they bought a new family home in Judy’s city.

The couple has come to terms with their separation and togetherness, and they value both blocks of time. They have both developed very successful careers and find that their separate time enables them to continue to enhance their careers. They also have much in common, and find that their time together is rich and fulfilling and gives them a lot to go on when alone. As Judy and Lane reflect back on their years together, both agree that they would not have undertaken their LDR if not for these advantages. Their children agree that it created unique relationships for them with each parent, as well as time together as a family, which they valued.

When Judy and Lane started their LDR, it was a very unusual lifestyle. However, now their story is only one example of many couples who are living a large portion of their lives through an LDR. Many couples are finding that the unique job that they want may not be in the same location as their partner.

With the transfer of Hong Kong back to China, a number of Hong Kong couples have made the choice to live out LDRs. One member of the couple has moved to another country to take up residence to apply for citizenship. This was viewed as a safety precaution should they decide to leave Hong Kong following China’s takeover. For several years now, these couples have been living with one in Hong Kong and the other in their new country. The distance between Hong Kong and the new country of residence is always several hours by flight, so their time together has been minimal. The majority of these relationships have maintained their stability despite the distance and the time apart. Coping with an LDR enables these couples to manage a transition that was not of their own making, but rather part of a larger cultural upheaval.

Many couples, where one partner is in a diplomatic career, find that it is important to structure their relationship as an LDR so that the other partner’s career and personal goals can be fulfilled at the same time as the one on diplomatic assignment. In the past, it was expected that the partner would go along with the overseas assignment. Today, it is more common that the couple choose to live this stage of their relationship as an LDR, rather than to jeopardize the future of the non-diplomatic mate. As we become a global economy and a more global community, the location of jobs tend to take on a worldwide scope. One never knows when they may be asked to spend at least a part of their job time in some distant location. To maintain a secure job, most individuals take a long and very serious look at this request.

As I have discussed in earlier chapters, when this request to fulfill a job at a distant location is within a limited time structure, most couples find ways of managing the transition. A temporary separation may secure a more enriched future not

only in terms of financial and job security, but also in terms of personal enhancement and relationship enrichment.

Futurists predict that individuals who live comfortably and creatively with rapid and spontaneous personal and relational adjustments will adapt best to the fast-paced lifestyle of the new millennium. Given all these points, another benefit of a temporary LDR is that it provides good preparation for the future. While we have been learning how to manage our LDR, we have been learning coping and adapting methods that enhance our ability to adjust to an ever-changing world.