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COUPLES GET A BRIEF RESPITE FROM WARTIME SEPARATION

AN EXPERT REVEALS SIX TIPS TO MAKE THE MOST OF TWO WEEKS TOGETHER

Hundreds of separated couples are getting a brief reunion as soldiers in Iraq are given 15 days of R & R to come home and see their loved ones. While these well-deserved vacations will be peppered with hugs, tears, and precious moments, the time together will come to an end far too soon. For most couples these reunions represent an emotional oasis where they will re-connect with their partner and bolster their morale. But for a few, these fleeting reunions can result in frustration, despair, and depression. “Reunions can be a remarkably difficult experience for some long distance couples,” says Dr. Gregory Guldner, director of *The Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships* in Southern California and author of *Long Distance Relationships: The Complete Guide*. “Sometimes their expectations are too great and the reunion ends in disappointment. Many people in long distance relationships will gauge the health of their relationship by looking at the quality of their most recent get-together. If it goes really well, things are great. If it goes badly, the relationship is in trouble – or so the thinking goes. This places a tremendous burden on the couple to make sure their time together meets their expectations.” We asked Dr. Guldner to discuss how couples can best prepare for these brief reunions.

“One of the defining issues of long-distance relationships is learning to deal with the sudden, and extreme, shifts between intimacy and autonomy. For most military couples dealing with deployment, the majority of their time is spent away from their partner, and they are forced to live a very independent lifestyle. Upon reuniting, they suddenly switch worlds and become exceptionally intimate and intertwined. It’s no wonder many couples describe long-distance relationships as an emotional roller coaster,” explains Dr. Guldner

While most people in LDRs ask about how to cope with their time apart, few ask how to cope with their time together. They should, says Dr. Guldner, because many difficulties originate at reunion rather than during the separation. “When couples are apart they

often develop some unrealistic ideas about how great their partner is or how wonderful their relationship has become. These ideas probably help keep the relationship together through the stresses of being apart. But once the couple reunites and the reality that all relationships have good and bad sides, the unmet expectations can have devastating effects. We know that military separations probably result in even more of this idealization than civilian separations. So this may be a particular concern among military personnel returning from Iraq.”

Six Tips for Successful Reunions

It's okay to schedule some time to yourself during your reunions.

Despite what many couples seem to think, there is no need to spend every second with your partner when you get together. In fact, many couples find the transition from living apart to the intense intimacy of a reunion a bit awkward and uncomfortable. Some people recognize this feeling quickly, while others simply become irritable or angry with their partner for no obvious reason. “Everyone needs some space to themselves, and when we can’t obtain that distance physically we obtain it emotionally,” explains Dr. Guldner. “Military couples are even more prone to succumb to the idea that they must spend every moment of a reunion with a loved one. Their inevitable return to duty seems to make this an imperative. Unfortunately, people usually can’t tolerate that degree of constant closeness without some underlying discomfort. While separated they have plenty of emotional space, but not so during reunions. I’ve known couples who, when reunited, are never more than 20 feet away from one another for an entire week. Some couples can deal with this intimacy easily but most can’t.” If you find yourself irritated or smothered, try scheduling some time away from your partner; for example, a jog, a journey to the bookstore, or solo shopping. Often couples find that an hour a day away from their partners makes the intimacy inherent in their reunion even more exciting.

Try to schedule some time with mutual friends.

Some couples have a tendency to spend all of their reunion alone as a couple. Because they see one another so infrequently they withdraw from their usual social network and spend all their time in isolation together. A reunion spent entirely with yourselves can be fun and quite rewarding. But don’t underestimate the importance of spending time as a couple with your friends. Dr. Guldner explains, “Some very interesting studies have shown that the amount of time a couple spends with their social network *as a couple* is one of the best predictors of whether the relationship will eventually survive. When friends and family see you interacting as a couple it makes the relationship appear more real to them. This, in turn, reinforces their role in supporting the relationship – support that has repeatedly been shown to help couples in the long run.” This is particularly important for less well established couples who may not have developed a network of friends who know them *as a couple*. So try and schedule at least some time together with your friends and family.

Schedule some time out in public as a couple.

Even if you don’t find time to get together with friends, try to find time to go out in public as a couple. Most couples have no difficulty with this, but a few become so isolated during reunions that they spend very little time in public. “Spending time together around other people has an effect similar to spending time as a couple with your friends. The more society recognizes you and your partner as a couple, the more real the relationship will feel to both of you. Even the common question asked by hostesses at restaurants, “Table for *two*?” helps to reinforce the fact that you and your partner exist as a couple,” says Dr. Guldner. While this sounds somewhat trite,

it isn't. "Couples in LDRs often begin to feel like they aren't *really* in a relationship because they spend so little time together. Society has propagated the myth that if you are in an intimate relationship, then you must spend a significant amount of time together. LDRs violate this standard, so some people struggle to accept that their relationship is as real as any other. And though we'd like to escape it, we're all subject to the influence of society. When we go out as a couple, others treat us as a couple. It is our recognition of this societal acceptance that helps bond the relationship together."

Prepare for a little let down.

Another major theme of long-distance relationships involves idealization and disillusionment. According to Dr. Guldner, researchers have shown that the majority of those in LDRs tend to focus on the positive aspects of their partners while downplaying the negative ones. "This probably represents one of the factors that helps protect their relationship from breaking up while they're apart. However, it also develops unrealistic expectations that rarely are met during reunion. This idealization becomes more pronounced the less often they visit one another. Couples who spend several months away idealize their partners more so than couples who see one another every week." The major difficulty inherent in this fantasy occurs when disappointment sets in during a reunion. Disillusionment can lead to anger and frustration and ultimately emotional distance that leads to a feeling of a spoiled weekend. Dr. Guldner continues, "The best way of avoiding this trap is to prepare just prior to reunion. While the excitement of seeing your partner is growing, remind yourself that your partner is only human. Remember that every relationship has some good things and some not-so-good things. That's what makes relationships so challenging. Expect that some of the less than wonderful aspects will come out during the reunion. When they do, rejoice in the fact that you have a perfectly normal LDR."

Leave some unscheduled time together.

Couples in geographically close relationships spend much of their time together just "hanging out." During this time they are not focused on one another but are simply "in the world together," says Dr. Guldner. "Take for example a couple who just sit and watch TV together. They are not actively or consciously trying to develop their relationship, yet they create an important sense of intimacy that is often lacking in LDRs. When separated couples reunite they are understandably very focused on each other and their relationship. While this type of interaction is wonderful and important, so too are the more casual moments of being together but focusing separately on something other than the relationship." These are called "parallel activities" and they occur when two people are physically together but each is doing different tasks, such as reading a book. "Research has shown that parallel activities help cement the relationship together, maybe even more so than joint activities. Joint activities are the kind of couple things we all do, like going to dinner together, where we are both focused on each other. Many couples in LDRs schedule their reunions with a great deal of joint activities, but they have little time left over for the more mundane parallel activities. Leave time for spontaneity and just lying around together."

Stay Optimistic

"Many military couples, at the end of these two weeks, will find it even more difficult to separate than they did for the initial deployment," says Dr. Guldner. "We know that the pain that comes with separation doesn't seem to get better with experience – in fact, there are some studies that show it gets worse. People learn to cope with the pain a bit better or more efficiently, but the pain is still there." Dr. Guldner urges couples to stay optimistic about their relationships. "Despite what most people hear, long distance relationships stay together just as frequently as any other

relationship, and military couples have an even better chance of surviving the separation than couples separated for other reasons.” The support structure from the military families contributes significantly to the better success rates for military couples, says Dr. Guldner. But until they are reunited more permanently couples should, “Be optimistic! Long distance relationships work. They work as well as other relationships, and usually they are the best alternative among those available.”

About the Author

The author, Gregory Guldner, MD, MS, is a graduate of Stanford Medical School and Purdue University’s Clinical Psychology Program. He is the leading authority on long distance relationships, the director for *The Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships*, and the author of the most comprehensive study of long distance relationships ever completed. He has published numerous articles on relationships and sexuality and serves as a peer reviewer for multiple professional journals including *Military Medicine*. He is also an officer in the Army Reserve with knowledge about military related separations. He combines his scientific expertise, interviews with hundreds of couples in long distance relationships and his own personal experience into his comprehensive book.

Ordering Information for *Long Distance Relationships: The Complete Guide*

Based on groundbreaking research *Long Distance Relationships* reveals the little known but critical secrets to a happy and healthy long distance relationship. Extensively referenced and with a detailed index, *Long Distance Relationships* is the first work for to comprehensively review, cite, and synthesize five decades of research on separated relationships.

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