Long distance relationships: Giving it a go! [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a recent college graduate who has fallen for a girl that has just begun college on the west coast. Before she left, I told her how I felt about her, more or less, and she reciprocated the same emotions. How can I give this a good go? I know that long distance relationships (LDRs for short) are very difficult to maintain, but is there any sound advice that you can think of? I don't want to stifle her, but I definitely don't want to lose her either.

? Helpless in DC

Answer

Dear Helpless in DC,

There are two primary challenges to the survival of your relationship, but take heart: a challenge is only that — a challenge. It doesn't spell doom for your relationship. The first challenge is the fact that she is beginning a journey that you have just finished. Starting college is a big life transition and a time for growth, new opportunities, and new people. For many college students, numerous romantic relationships will start and end during this period. It is a time where people are learning about themselves and what they want in relationships, while simultaneously meeting a lot of new people. Again, this doesn't mean it can't work out for you two.

The second issue is the distance, which is the issue you raise in your question. It's great that you're thinking both about your own needs and your new girlfriend's in trying to maintain your “LDR.” As you mentioned, LDRs can be tough. Distance works for some relationships, but not for all. It depends on the status and strength of the relationship before the distance factor is added, as well as the personalities of the two people involved in the relationship.

Here are some things to keep in mind the prospect of an LDR:

Communication. One of the most important aspects of a good relationship is communication. Let your girlfriend know how you are feeling and encourage her to share her feelings with you. Make sure to listen when she does, even if it's about all the wonderful people she's meeting in college. Encourage honest communication and keep the lines open. If one of you feels the other is drifting away, do you feel like its okay to bring it up? The ability to be honest with each
other about where you're at may be the most important part of maintaining the relationship.

**Technology.** The 21\(^{st}\) century is a good time to have an LDR. Think of all the ways you can stay in touch through technology. Phone calls, email, social networking sites, and video chat are all good ways to stay connected. If you have your own computer, and it doesn't have a webcam, get one. They can run as cheap as $10. And don't forget the very useful text message.

**A different kind of date.** Set aside intentional time, just like you would if you lived in the same town. Do it up all romantic like. Ask each other out. Get the same type of beverage or food, and hang out in front of the webcam. Dress up for each other, light some candles. Make it special. How often? That depends on the two of you and how busy you are, but try to make it at least semi-regular.

**Snail mail.** Who doesn't like receiving letters and cards? Or care packages? Or flowers? Letters and cards can have a special warm and intimate quality that computer-facilitated communication lacks. If you have the time, try to be pen pals in addition to phone and e-buddies.

**Visits.** In-person visiting is a key part of keeping the relationship alive and well. Do so as often as you can? budget and time permitting. One of the greatest drawbacks of distance is the opportunity to over-idealize your partner. Many people who date in proximity do this, as well, but without the person in your every day world, the imagination can run wild. You may end up dating the imaginary person in your head more than the real person across the miles. Visits can help reduce this tendency.

**Notice reciprocity.** Are both of you spending money on visits? Do both of you call, text, chat, and initiate dates? Do you both send letters and post on each others' walls? When you're in another person's real space, you are more likely to sense the ebb and flows of the relationship because you have information that comes from subtle, daily interactions, nonverbal communication, physical intimacy, etc. Noticing this over the distance requires paying more attention and being willing to talk about it.

**Agree on your degree of monogamy.** Are you each allowed to see other people? If so, what are the conditions? Some couples say safe sex of the NSA variety is okay, but sex with emotional potential is not. Others feel that dating with some emotional intimacy is okay as long as it doesn't threaten the relationship. What works for both of you? Can you come to an agreement that suits you both? What will you do if this changes for one of you, but not the other? How much do you want to know about each others' sexual partners? If feelings of jealousy arise, can you both talk through the feelings? The issue of open versus closed status of your relationship should be addressed early on to help establish trust and open communication. Know that it may need to be re-visited along the way.

**Can you establish a timeline?** If your relationship continues to progress and become closer, the two of you may feel the need to set some timelines for when you might be able to be together. Feeling like the distance is indefinite could drain the energy you both have. If and when it feels appropriate, talk about when and how you might be in a position to share a zip code.

Check in with yourself regularly about how you are feeling and what you are wanting and allow yourself to be present in your day-to-day life. Don't shut out community that is in
proximity to you just because your heart is with someone far away. Keep the lines of communication open, be willing to put in some work, and nurture your relationship like a seedling. With any luck, it will blossom across the distance.

Here's to love (however far away or close it may be),

Alice!

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