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Long distance relationship: Taking the sting out of separation ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am a grad student in a two-year master's program in New York City who is suffering from great amounts of love-sickness. My boyfriend of three years is continuing work on his master's at our undergrad institution on the west coast. We talk over email and on the phone, and will see each other spring break, but it's so hard!!! I don't suppose you'd have any suggestions for helping pass away the time? Once the semester gets moving and I have work it's easier, but now, having just left his arms, I am missing him like crazy.

It's worse at night, when I'm used to having him next to me. I know the time will go fast, and soon we will be together again, but I'm worried because the potential to sit and brood about how much I miss him is so high. I really love this guy and vice versa. We've talked about it. In fact, I wouldn't be writing you except for he's in class for the moment and I'm just sitting here trying to figure out what to do for this three day weekend.

— Sigh.

Answer

Dear Sigh,

Absence may make the heart grow fonder, but few talk about the loneliness that can follow. Fortunately, the fact that you've been together for three years can lessen the element of doubt that may occur in some long distance relationships. Also, as you said, once the semester gets going and you become busier, it'll most likely get easier to be apart. Although every relationship is different, many couples feel that it can be more difficult at the beginning of a separation and will ease up as time passes. Also, it appears that you're in a completely new environment yourself. Keep in mind that adjusting to a new school, academic program, city, and social network can be hard work and could be contributing to the sting you feel being separated from your guy.

One way to cheer yourself up may be to think about this period as a time to explore ideas or places you haven't had the time or the inclination to do previously. Often in a relationship, it's

easy to get so caught up in managing and working on being a couple that it's not uncommon to forget what it's like to do activities by and for yourself. Your curiosities, desires, and hobbies can often accidentally fall by the wayside or become neglected as you make a place for another person to be such a big part of your life. One of the many great aspects about living in New York City is that it's filled with endless opportunities to fulfill those curiosities while simultaneously taking your mind off of missing him. You could try visiting a museum, seeing a movie or show that your partner wouldn't like, and making new friends as an individual rather than as part of a couple. If you use your imagination, you might surprise yourself with some creative ideas and fun activities to do. The more you try, the more you'll have to talk about and share with your boyfriend the next time you see him!

To help maintain the long distance relationship, you may find comfort in setting a schedule for when you and your partner talk. Making sure the lines of communication stay open by talking frequently and always being honest with one another can also play a major role in bridging the distance. With technology these days, you can text, talk, or video chat — whatever works for your relationship! Looking at pictures of the two of you together or reading old emails, cards, and letters every once in a while might also make you feel closer to him emotionally, even if he's still physically far away. As a way to pencil in an event you can both look forward to, you may try to schedule your next visit to one another before the end of the current visit.

As for late at night, this is a time that many people feel the loneliness or pain of missing someone. You may want to try establishing a nighttime routine (which, by the way, can help improve sleep) as that may ease the pain. There's a certain comfort that comes from routine behaviors. This routine could involve your boyfriend... or not. You could talk to him on the phone before you go to sleep, write an email or message to him as your last activity of the day, or take time to reflect on the day in a journal.

It's also good to remember that you had a life before your boyfriend, so you can make it through this period. Prioritizing yourself during this period is totally okay and may be necessary, trying to go easy on yourself, reaching out to good friends, and taking care of your physical health may provide some comfort. If you feel like you can't seem to cheer up anytime soon, you may want to set up an appointment with a mental health professional. They'll likely be able to help you figure out ways to work through this difficult period. Good luck going the (long) distance!

Alice!

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