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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

Answer

Dear Helpless,

Long distance relationships (LDRs) sometimes get a bad rap, but try not to let that get you down. After all, “absence makes the heart grow fonder” is a proverb for a reason, right? Between the distance and your partner’s new journey, there may be some challenges that lie ahead in your relationship. However, keep in mind that a challenge is only that — a challenge. It doesn't spell doom for your relationship. The good news is that there are creative ways to keep the spark alive even when there are miles between you and your partner, ranging from timeless to trendy (read on for more specifics). Besides, you two may find that these miles actually help build a strong relationship based on open communication and trust.

As you mentioned, LDRs may not be the easiest to maintain. That said, distance *can* work for some relationships. This could depend on how strong the relationship is before distance is added as a factor, as well as the personalities of the two people involved. Given that you're thinking about both your needs and your new partner's in trying to maintain this relationship, it sounds as though you two are off to a strong start. In addition to distance though, another issue to consider is that your potential partner 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 some college students, numerous romantic relationships can start and end during this period. It's a time when people are learning about themselves and what they want in relationships, while simultaneously meeting a lot of new people. Again, this doesn't mean that you can't make your relationship work. Together, you both may want to talk openly about expectations and concerns around these

factors before the relationship progresses.

If you two decide to continue with the relationship, there are many ways to keep it strong across the distance. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- **Prioritize communication.** A key aspect of any relationship is communication. Let your partner know how you're feeling and encourage her to share her feelings with you. Try 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 both of you feel like it's okay to bring it up? The ability to be honest with each other about where you are may be a critical part of maintaining the relationship.
- **Tinker with technology.** The 21st century is a good time to be in an LDR. Think of all the ways you're able to stay in touch through technology. Texts, phone calls, email, social media, and video chat are all ways to stay connected. While technology makes communication much easier, you may want to remember that meaningful communication still takes conscious effort from both partners.
- **Schedule a different kind of date.** Set aside intentional time, just like you would if you lived in the same town. Ask each other out. Get the same type of beverage or food, and hang out via a video chat. 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 you could try to make it semi-regular.
- **Consider 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 technology-facilitated communication can lack.
- **Plan on some visits.** In-person visiting may be a key part of keeping the relationship alive and well. Do so as often as you can — budget and time permitting. One drawback of distance is that you might over-idealize your partner. While people who date in proximity could do this, without your partner in your everyday 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 could 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' social media sites? When you're in another person's real space, you're more likely to sense the ebb and flows of the relationship because you have information that comes from daily interactions, nonverbal communication, and physical intimacy (among others). 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 [2]? If so, what are the conditions? Some couples say safer sex of the no-strings-attached 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 jealousy arises, can you both talk through it? Address the issue of open versus closed status of your relationship early on to help establish trust and open communication. Also, keep in mind that it may need to be re-visited along the way.
- **Work on establishing 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 both people's energy. If and when it feels appropriate, talk about when and how you might be in a position to share a zip code.

While thinking about what you need and what your potential partner might need in a relationship helps build a strong foundation, so does self-care. If a committed relationship across the miles is in your future, consider checking in with yourself regularly about how you're feeling and what you're wanting. This regular self-check could allow you to be present in your day-to-day life, even when you're just looking forward to the next time you get to see your partner.

In addition, keep in mind that you don't have to shut out people around you because your heart is with someone far away. Having a strong support system around you may be just what you need when the relationship gets tough or when you really miss your partner.

Lastly, it's wise to keep the lines of communication open, be willing to put in some work, and nurture your relationship like a seedling. With some effort (and a little luck), it may just blossom across the distance.

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

Alice!

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