Loving Your Long-Distance Relationship

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Introduction

I start crying as the airplane moves away from the terminal. Wiping a tear, I recall what a wonderful time that I have just spent with my girlfriend. The picture is so vivid that I can feel her in my arms, hear her whisper in my ear, and taste her lips tenderly pressed against mine. My heart fills with the emotions that we share when we are together . . . laughing, talking, making love.

Suddenly the roar of an airplane distracts me. Realizing that my feelings are nothing more than a daydream, and that my girlfriend is on a flight travelling thousands of miles away from me, I start crying again. As her plane ascends, I am reminded that I will not see her for several weeks or even months, and that when we do meet again, it may be only for a few days. Now I feel angry, wondering why she cannot be beside me all the time. Why must I endure an emotional roller coaster every time I step into an airport? I start blaming myself for ever being in such a relationship. Then, as I watch her plane being consumed by an afternoon sunset, the vision returns of the wonderful time we have just spent together and how much we love each other. At once, everything seems worthwhile and the only thing that matters is rushing home to wait by the

phone for her call. Turning to leave the terminal, I try to conceal my tears from curious strangers. I know that they do not know me but in some odd way, they understand.

Does this sound familiar? If not, substitute the word "boyfriend," "wife," or "husband" for "girlfriend." If this still doesn't sound familiar, replace the word "train" for "airplane." How's that? More familiar? If so, you are probably in a long-distance relationship. You deeply love someone, but for some reason you must be apart from them for an extended period. Maybe you chose to attend university in a different country than your partner. Perhaps they accepted a job in another city because the same opportunity did not exist in the city in which you live. What if you just want to live in another country for a year or two to expand your horizons?

You know that you love your partner and that both of you will grow more by being apart temporarily. Yet your heart feels like it is breaking and you wonder how you are ever going to survive being alone without losing your mind. I know the feeling. As I write this book, I face two more years of separation from my girlfriend, Amanda. We both

love each other deeply, but because she could not find a local university that offered a graduate degree in her field of interest, we both agreed that she should study in another city--1500 miles away. This was the right choice, because I know her education will make her feel more secure and fulfilled. At the same time, I also realize that I am going to miss her terribly.

This is my third serious long-distance relationship so I know what to expect. Despite how much I love Amanda, I can expect to feel lonely. I can expect the only real contact I will have with her will be a daily ten or twenty minute conversation on the phone. I also can expect that when I am down, certain people or even my own imagination will try to sabotage my faith in my relationship.

Realizing that I must be apart from Amanda and knowing what to expect in her absence, I can spend my time in two ways. I can wallow in self-pity and let every challenge that arises while she is gone get me down. Or I can focus on how happy I am that she is enriching herself, trying my best to anticipate and overcome the challenges that distance will create in our relationship.

As you might have guessed, I chose the latter.

Unlike my past two long-distance relationships, I am committed to being happy while we are apart. However, I realize that commitment is only the start. If I want to be truly happy, I must anticipate the challenges in my relationship, and decide how to meet them with a positive emotional and mental spirit.

In the following pages you will find some stories that illustrate the obstacles that I faced being apart from a loved one. You will also find several insights describing some simple things that I did to overcome those difficulties. Please know that they are not cure-alls for the problems in every relationship, close or long-distance. They are simply what helps me from going completely insane from missing Amanda. I know you don't know me personally, but please trust that I am trying to do all that I can to be happier while being apart from her. After all, you can try a lot of things in two years if you put your mind to it.

As you read this book, I hope that you will feel like you are having a conversation with a friend. A friend who is in a long-distance relationship and wants to share his feelings on how he did his best to be happy for twenty-four months while being apart

from the woman he loves. I also hope that this book comforts you. I hope it reassures you that you aren't alone, and that people everywhere are experiencing the same emotions you are. Long-distance isn't the end of the world, and if you have the desire, you can be just as happy apart from your loved one as when you are together. If your loved one is like my girlfriend, I know that they would feel better knowing that you are happy while they're away. Even if you aren't in a long-distance relationship, chances are that you know someone who is, and may be looking for some support. Whatever your reason for reading this book, I offer you some stories and insights that if only to dry your eyes for an hour or two, were worth sharing.

Coping With Having to Say Goodbye Again and Again

It never fails. A week or two before Amanda goes back to university, a mysterious anxiety seems to surround our every move. We both know our time together was beautiful. We took long walks together, visited each other's family, and talked about how wonderful it will be when we are finally together--permanently. Nevertheless, two weeks before she plans to leave, we feel tense. Unlike the beginning of her stay, we feel an invisible wall coming between us. The smallest things, like what courses she will be taking, turn into disagreements. Although we cannot control our emotions, we realize that we are wasting the precious little time that we have left together.

If you are in, or have been in a long-distance relationship, you probably know exactly what I am talking about. If you have endured countless goodbyes, you probably realize that the feelings you experience before your loved one leaves, arise from you anticipating how much it will hurt once they go.

Whether I like it or not, about two weeks before Amanda departs, I cannot help thinking about how sad I am going to feel in the airport kissing her for the last time. Or how lonely I am going to feel on the weekend when I realize that our only time together will be a short phone conversation. Or how her leaving this time may mean the end of our relationship.

I don't even want to think of the time I have wasted in the past, feeling upset about a girlfriend leaving town. No matter how much I prepared for those troubling thoughts and feelings, I knew they would come. I would let my emotions consume me and spoil the time we had left. Looking back, I think I enjoyed feeling upset . . . in a warped sort of way. I felt entitled to feel bad, and would deliberately upset my girlfriend as a reward to myself for what I would have to endure in a few weeks. It's crazy what the mind and heart will do if you let them!

About a month ago, before Amanda left town we committed to make her last two weeks just as special as her first two (though we are true believers in letting emotions take their course). I am proud to say the experiment worked! For the first time in my

life, I experienced very little anxiety in the time before her departure. I didn't even feel crushed at the airport. We both felt calm and secure in her leaving, and we avoided putting any emotional walls between us to insulate ourselves from being hurt. Sound interesting? Here's how we did it.

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We found a good way to feel more secure was to make some long-term plans. We didn't sit and plan in detail what we were going to do with the rest of our lives. I think that's unrealistic and would be a waste of time in our last two weeks together. What we did do, was talk about when we would be together next, how long her stay would be at her university, and what we planned to do when she returned.

We, of course, knew all of this before she left. The goal in talking about our future, however, wasn't to make new plans, but to give each other the feeling that despite the time we had to be apart, we would eventually be together. After talking about how wonderful our future was going to be, a short term absence from each other seemed insignificant by comparison. All that mattered was being together again as soon as possible. How or when we would

be together was not an issue. We both knew we had to make it, or the hope of being together permanently would be lost.

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No matter how strong our relationship is, I eventually hear about another long-distance relationship that has failed and I wonder if we will suffer the same fate. The last time I heard one of these stories was from Amanda a few weeks before she left town. At a dinner one night, she described how a guy she knew had a girlfriend who went to Russia on an exchange program. They had gone out for several years and were planning to be married. Yet only weeks before she was to return home, she called her boyfriend and informed him that she had met someone else, she was staying away longer than anticipated, and that her plans for marrying him were over. Right out of the blue. Wham! Just when he was looking forward to picking her up from the airport in a few weeks.

Anyway, given that Amanda was leaving shortly, she and I could have used this story as a perfect opportunity to start doubting our own relationship by asking those dreaded "yes, but what if . . . " questions. Instead, we used the story as an

opportunity to reassure each other of what wouldn't happen in our relationship and how much we loved each other. We used the story as an example of what not to do, pledging never to let the same thing happen to us. We both came to the conclusion that this couple shared problems that had nothing to do with long-distance. They had problems such as a lack of commitment and trust that we didn't have, and would never contemplate having. After our conversation ended, we both felt stronger and reassured, knowing that we loved each other and were committed to our relationship . . . no matter what. This was a tremendous feeling of love and security to share with each other before she left town.

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If I know Amanda is leaving in a couple of weeks I will change my schedule so I can spend more time with her. It's a natural response when you love someone and enjoy being around them as much as possible. Nevertheless, what I have found is that altering my routine significantly triggers something inside me that says Amanda is going and I should feel bad. When I keep different work hours, or see her at different times than I normally would, I start

feeling like something is wrong. I feel like it is the beginning of a cycle that will end in hurt and unhappiness. I am not saying that one should not spend more time with their loved one before they leave town, but I have found that it is better not to alter my day drastically before Amanda leaves. The last time she departed, in the preceding weeks I tried to do everything I would do normally as if she wasn't going away. I didn't change my weekly work hours, daily workout routine, etc. I did, however, spend more time with her Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, the days when we would usually spend the most time together during the week if she wasn't leaving.

The result was I did not feel any different in the two weeks before her departure than I did the other four months that we were together. After all, nothing in my daily routine suggested that she was leaving. We both just went about our lives as usual, and as a result we encouraged no feelings of change or impending doom. I would not have believed it myself if someone told me just to act the same as I usually did before Amanda left. I always considered those two or three weeks as a necessary ritual in which I had to change everything and spend as much

time with her as possible, trying desperately to absorb as much intimacy and physical contact as I could. I was wrong. What I never realized was that the more my routine changed, the more my feelings did as well. So instead of changing my daily patterns, I will now keep the same routine just before Amanda's departure, along with the same feelings I have for her while we are together the other 99% of the time.

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It took me years to learn, but I finally realized it's better not to see a girlfriend just before she leaves town. In other words, I do not say goodbye at the airport anymore. Now before you condemn me for being an unfeeling monster, ask yourself this question: "What happens just before your lover leaves?" From experience, my guess is that you probably feel terrible. No matter what you have tried to do in the weeks leading up to your partner's departure, you just can't help feeling this is the last time you will see your loved one for who knows how long. Consequently, you both cry uncontrollably. You start holding and kissing each other like you will never see each other again. You pledge that you will always love each other, and that

you will never forget to call or write. Perhaps you exchange gifts, making the moment even more emotional and intense. You both try to ignore the loud speaker announcing that your lover's plane or train leaves in ten minutes. Finally, you realize that you can be together no longer. Using all of the strength left in your body, you give each other one last kiss, then say goodbye. You both start crying again as your lover walks away. You keep waving, but soon you cannot see each other anymore. You turn and leave the airport crying. You realize that no matter how hard you try, you probably will have a bad day and get nothing done.

One can look at last minute goodbyes from a different perspective. For example, in my first serious long-distance relationship, I believed that if I really loved my girlfriend, I had to endure massive suffering every time she left the city. Not to see her at the last minute of her departure would be like cheating both of us out of the one, final emotional moment that we had left together. If I did not see her off, I risked losing this moment with her forever. Worse, she might not love me any more if I missed her at the airport. I knew I would feel terrible when she left, but compared with the risk and the guilt

associated with not seeing her off, the pain of saying goodbye was worth it.

I might have maintained this perspective if farewells only occurred once in awhile, but they didn't. Saying goodbye happened every couple of months, and by the twentieth or so parting, I began to question whether seeing my girlfriend off at the airport was really worth the pain. I started to ask myself what would happen if we didn't see each other for that last hour. Would we love each other any less? Would we feel cheated? Would guilt consume us until we saw each other the next time? As it turns out, none of those things occurred the first time I avoided the airport. In fact, instead of feeling cheated or guilty, we both felt relieved that we could still love each other without having a nervous breakdown every time she left town.

I still avoid the airport in my current relationship. Instead of crying and clinging to each other while the last few minutes tick away on the terminal's clock, Amanda and I prefer to say goodbye the night before she leaves, in an intimate, stress-free environment. For example, we will usually go out for dinner and then come back home and hold each other by the fireplace before saying

goodbye. The next day, she usually gets a ride to the airport from her parents instead of from me. Call me unfeeling, but I prefer to say goodbye to her alone, in front of a fireplace in the evening, than at 6:30 a.m. in a public airport, among other couples who are crying while a loud speaker announces the time when they must leave each other again. Unlike my first long-distance relationship, I now associate saying goodbye with intimate, loving evenings, instead of crying at airports and feeling miserable. What a wonderful feeling!

Losing Romantic Feelings for Your Partner

No matter how much I love Amanda, at times I find it difficult to feel romantic toward her when we are apart. This usually occurs after I haven't seen her for eight or nine weeks. I begin to feel numb and detached from any romantic feelings. I think this is a result of being alone for such a long time. By neglecting these feelings, they just seem to give up and stop asking for satisfaction altogether. My mind says I love Amanda and I want to be in a relationship. Still my feelings for romance suffer because I have not seen or touched her in such a long time.

I accept these feelings as a natural part of a long-distance relationship. I also realize that left unchecked, they could cause trouble. I have seen other couples experience feelings of indifference after being apart for several months, but instead of taking steps to remedy the problem, they began doubting the relationship and seeing other people.

This is not what I call a good ending to any relationship.

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The first thing I do when I am feeling unromantic is call Amanda on the phone and tell her how much I love her. This immediately puts me back into the right emotional state and reminds me how deeply I feel for her. If my feelings of unromanticism are really strong, I will be honest with Amanda about my feelings. Confiding in her makes me feel better and eventually leads us to reassure each other that our desire to be together has not faded, but is stronger.

Sometimes all it takes to feel romantic again is to talk dirty on the phone. Why not? If you cannot see your partner, you may as well talk about what you are going to do when you will see them. Although you risk being frustrated for the evening, I have found naughty conversations to be fun and helpful in curing those long-distance blues. If nothing else, talking intimately with each other brings back memories that immediately make me feel passionate, loving, and perfectly clear on why it is worth being apart from my girlfriend for a little longer.

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Another way I can bring out romantic feelings for Amanda is by sending her a really long love letter. Although not as satisfying as a conversation, I have found expressing myself in a letter to be an excellent way to rekindle romantic feelings. All I have to do is start writing about how beautiful she is, or how fortunate I feel to have her in my life, and immediately I feel like I do when she is beside me.

Unfortunately, I have not sent Amanda as many letters as I should. In fact, when she reads the above paragraph, her response will probably be, "Letters . . . what letters?" Okay, I admit I have thought about writing her love letters more than actually writing them. Still, it's the thought that counts right? Wrong. Which is why, to make up for my delinquent letter writing, I use frequent flower deliveries. Whenever I am feeling down, I pick up the phone and send Amanda some flowers with a note saying I love her or that I am thinking about her. This is only the start of feeling better. When I send her flowers during the day, I can always expect a call from her that evening, thanking me and telling me how beautiful they are. Instantly her call makes

me feel wonderful (and relieves my guilt for not sending her a letter).

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If I'm feeling a little down, I can always rely on my family or friends to remind me of how beautiful Amanda is and how insensitive I am. All it takes is a self-deprecating comment from me such as, "Why am I even in this relationship . . . after all, I hardly ever see Amanda," and my family is quick to remind me that I am wallowing in self-pity and should smarten up. I think they call it "tough love." A great example of what I am talking about is a typical dinner at my family's house after Amanda has been away for four or five weeks. I will start feeling sorry for myself and I will test their sympathy by asking them whether being in a long-distance relationship is worth the pain and loneliness. They, of course, will not take the bait, but comment that I should feel lucky that such a wonderful woman stays in a relationship with me at all, never mind a long-distance relationship. I always like that one, and can always count on them for an immediate pick-me-up whenever I am feeling sorry for myself.

If your family or friends support your relationship, you can find no better source to put

things in perspective if you feel down. If your family and friends are like mine, they will sense when you are really down or just fishing for sympathy, and put you right back on track. I remember many times when I was really upset, and my family reminded me about how my relationship was worth the distance. Or how nothing good in life comes without sacrifices. Or how fortunate I am to have found somebody that I can love, period. Without a doubt, talking to my family and friends is one of the most powerful ways I use to maintain a passion for my relationship.

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Despite anything I can do alone, the best way to feel romantic about Amanda is to be romantic with her, and I cannot do that by myself. Therefore, I try to see her every four weeks, although things do not always work out that way.

Take our last conversation for example. Before Amanda left about a month ago, we pledged that we would not go beyond four weeks without seeing each other again. When is she coming back into town? In about five or six weeks. Why? We both agreed that we have tons of work to finish and that spending a weekend with each other is not possible.

Is this good for a long-distance relationship? No. Does it happen? Yes. It is funny, but no matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to avoid the "nine-week trap" in which we go for more than two months without seeing each other. No matter how much we miss one another, we get caught-up in our work and before we realize it, eight or nine weeks have passed. When possible, I try to see Amanda at least every four weeks. I use four weeks as the limit because I find that if I stay apart from her longer than that, getting reacquainted when we finally do meet is a lot harder and takes longer. Frustrations beyond not feeling romantic also occur around the four or five-week mark. Again, a phenomenon that is best left to the imagination. Anyone who has ever been away from their partner for a month or more knows exactly what I am talking about.

For me, four is the magic number. It represents the maximum number of weeks that I can be away from Amanda without feeling unromantic. I can blame not seeing her on being too expensive, or on my job, or on her school, but if I let the time between us go beyond four weeks I really have only myself to blame. No matter how many flowers I

send or how often I talk to my family, nothing I do comes close to the feeling of being with her. I think it's time to book a plane ticket.

Phone Conversations

My second long-distance relationship was fraught with phone arguments. At least once a week I found myself in a disagreement on the phone with my girlfriend. Despite my intent to keep our conversations short and happy, they always seemed to drift into long, intense discussions about personal values, politics, and whether either of us could stand being lonely any longer. We would start with talking about what we both had done during the week. At the time, we were in university, so naturally our conversation would focus on our courses and what we were learning. I don't know how it happened, but we always seemed to compare courses that taught opposing politics. For example, I would talk about a business course's perspective of the free market, then she would respond with her readings on socialism from one of her philosophy courses.

As you might have guessed, our discussions usually degenerated to a point where it was world capitalism versus Marxism. Although we both intended to talk objectively about the ideas we were

experiencing, somehow we always managed to take sides and duke it out over the phone. What's worse, our arguments became personal. Soon we were not just exploring ideas, but my girlfriend actually became a radical socialist in my eyes and I, a conservative capitalist in hers. To try to win, both of us took an extreme stance. She would be advocating a fundamental economic change in the world, and I was turning back the economic clock to the 1800's!

Eventually, we would both stop arguing and start to ask frightening questions about the foundation of our relationship. Given our opposing politics, how did we ever come together? Do we really have anything in common? How can we ever hope to stay together if we cannot agree on anything? Would either of us want to live with someone so different? Maybe ending things now would be better, and we should start looking for partners with similar values. We kept asking these questions until she was in tears, I was mad, and we both became disillusioned with the future of our relationship.

Those conversations make up some of the saddest memories of my second long-distance relationship. To make matters worse, I know I could

have done some simple things to avoid many of them. It is true that I did not share many of the same values as my girlfriend, but never to the degree voiced in our conversations. When we finally talked face to face, we found we had many things in common, a conclusion we could never reach after our phone arguments. On the phone we let our feelings of loneliness and insecurity come out in our belief systems, and we never knew when enough was enough in a conversation.

In retrospect, I can see now that our disagreements resulted from both of us being lonely and finding no other way to express our frustration but through self-created conflict. If we only put our loneliness aside and kept our conversations brief and focused on when we would be together next, we could have avoided many long, unhappy phone ordeals that hurt our relationship.

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If you have been together with someone for more than a few months, you probably know what issues upset your partner. Different issues upset different couples. For many, talking about religion can ruin a conversation. For others, talking about casual dates with members of the opposite sex might

cause an argument. Certain topics, which when discussed in person or on the phone, bother all couples. I try to identify these areas as quickly as possible by mentally taking note of them when they crop up in conversations with Amanda. As a result, I have a mental list of the topics that really bother her or me.

Given that I know what makes for a bad conversation, I try to change the subject every time an inflammatory issue arises. For example, I know that discussing politics bothers us, so when it comes up in a discussion, I change the subject to events that occurred in our lives during the week. If that topic bothers us, I will talk about the weather or social events occurring in our respective cities.

I do not try to make our conversations bland and lifeless. When I feel the odd argument brewing, I do try to change the focus to something less explosive. Discussing major issues over the phone has the tendency to be blown out of proportion and to become personal, because separating a real issue from how much I miss Amanda, is almost impossible. Also, on the phone, I can't see her facial expressions and body movements, which often tell me how she is really feeling versus how she says she

is feeling. Knowing the down-side of pushing each other's wrong buttons on the phone, I try to avoid those buttons at all costs, keeping our conversation focused on something that makes us both happy.

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Everyone who is in a long-distance relationship feels lonely from time to time. It goes with the territory. I feel the key is not to let loneliness rob me of the few times when I do get to talk to Amanda on the phone. If I know that I will be talking to her tonight, I try to look forward to that call and what I will say. I plan to talk about my family, health, work, or anything that is special to me and that I want to share with her. By the time she calls, I have lots of things to discuss, leaving me no time to brood about being lonely or how much I miss her.

I have found a good topic to discuss is when we will be together again. Planning our next visit helps us avoid talking about loneliness and gives us something to look forward to in the future. Talking about our next meeting inspires both of us, puts pleasant images in our minds, and makes us feel secure knowing that the loneliness we feel for each other will only be temporary. Now, when I feel myself slipping from "I really miss you, honey" to "I

can't stand this loneliness anymore," I change the subject to what I want to do the next time we are together. Immediately this makes me feel happy and puts our conversation back on track.

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If I do nothing else with my phone conversations, I try to keep them brief and information-based. I find that talking to Amanda for ten or fifteen minutes, four or five times a week, is better than talking to her for thirty or forty minutes, twice a week. Having shorter, more frequent conversations allows us to speak with each other every day. We can tell one another what happened while it is still fresh in our minds. This eliminates the possibility of forgetting details if we had to wait until the end of the week. Speaking frequently also makes us feel closer because we know everything the other person is doing and feeling daily. Talking to each other at the end of a long day lifts our spirits, and gives us something to look forward to tomorrow.

Another major benefit of having short, frequent conversations is that they force us to keep our talks light and information-based. In fifteen or twenty minutes, all we have time to do is tell each other

what we did during the day and that we love each other, the end. We don't have time to feel lonely, get into an argument, or analyse issues in our relationship to a point where we find no other alternative but separation.

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I want to stress again that I do not try to remove everything with meaning from my phone conversations. However, I do defer discussing major issues in our relationship until I am face to face with Amanda, or until the time when I can see her facial expressions and interpret her body language. You can easily say "it's over" and hang up the phone on someone. After all, a phone is merely a voice attached to a lifeless instrument that one can turn off and on at will. However, when I am face to face with her it is a lot harder just to unplug the relationship. If I need to discuss something important with her immediately, I do so. If the discussion starts leading to an argument or to the questioning of our relationship, I try to defer it until we can be together. When I cannot wait until our next planned visit, I get on a plane and go to Amanda or vice versa. If the issue is that important,

the least I can do is give both of us the chance to decide after discussing things in person.

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I try to interpret verbal cues accurately on the phone. For example, last week we were talking and based on the withdrawn tone in Amanda's voice, I thought that she was upset with me. At the end of the conversation, I asked her if she was annoyed and she said "no," but she had developed a sore throat during the day and was not feeling well. If I had not asked and she had not thought of telling me that she was sick (because she would not want me to worry), I would have left the conversation thinking she was mad at me. This in turn would have lead to an unpleasant evening with me brooding over something that in reality, was the farthest thing from the truth.

Now whenever I sense that Amanda is giving me negative verbal cues on the phone, I don't make any rash interpretations. Instead, I tell her how I feel and ask her to explain herself. If her response doesn't feel right, I ask her again. In fact, I keep asking until I know the reason why I am feeling uncomfortable with her tone or rhythm. Periodically I may uncover something unsettling behind her cues.

Although unpleasant, I would find this out in time anyway. If I do not ask her to clarify her signals, however, I risk leaving the conversation uncertain whether something is upsetting her or not. I don't know about you, but I do not like being upset for no reason, so I find it’s worth the effort to determine what Amanda is really feeling before I put down the phone. It not only eases my mind, but shows I care.

Being Tempted to Give Up on Your Relationship

Every relationship has its problems, and long-distance relationships are no exception. I feel like giving up sometimes, and I know Amanda does too. If you haven't seen your partner for months, your mind starts playing tricks on you, it's only natural. Maybe it's a friend who tells you that your relationship is too stressful and that you would be better off without it. You might be at a family dinner where everyone agrees it would be easier if you dated someone closer to home. What about an attractive person in a night club who comes up to you and asks you to come back to their house for the evening?

Every day I could find a thousand reasons to leave Amanda, and they might not even involve the need to date other people. Simply sitting alone in a room and thinking about how my relationship will not work, is a very effective way to start destroying it. I could start asking myself why should I make sacrifices for someone that I hardly ever see? How

much longer can I endure being apart from Amanda? Even if I do persevere, what if she finally decides not to return?

Driving yourself into a mental frenzy that eventually will sour your feelings toward your partner, is not hard. By asking the right questions, you can easily convince yourself why you must leave them immediately. Without even seeing your partner, you can lead yourself to believe that your relationship is destined to fail. In actuality this may be the furthest from the truth, but that will not matter once you fall into a thought-rut. I have observed it repeatedly. Things are going great in a friend's relationship, then one day their partner talks to the wrong person or starts asking themselves the wrong questions, and they start doubting the relationship. A doubting partner is painful in any relationship, but especially so in one where you cannot be near them to defend yourself.

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Whether it's another person's advances in a night club, or just a lonely Saturday night in which you think yourself into a fit, the only way to combat temptations is to commit to your relationship 100%.

Problems will arise, but if you are really committed, nothing should sway you.

I constantly endure periods of doubt and temptation, some more successfully than others. I have felt angry, deprived, and trapped. I have felt like I was missing things in life. I also have felt like I just didn't have the energy to continue loving Amanda. So what got me through? Commitment. No matter how bad I felt, I always returned to feeling 100% committed to my relationship and to the love I feel for Amanda---a powerful force. So powerful, in fact, that it alone pulls me back to where I should be every time I feel really detached.

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Although committing to your relationship is essential to staying in it, you can do some practical things to avoid thought-ruts. The first is ignoring support systems that you know may not approve of your partner, especially when you are feeling down or lonely. If you know that a friend or a family member may disapprove, do not go and talk to them when you feel like leaving. Without a doubt, my family and friends lend strength to my relationship by supporting it. They are the people I trust and respect most, which makes their approval a powerful

confirmation that I am doing the right thing by staying involved with Amanda. If they did not approve of her, however, it would make it a lot harder to justify staying with her, especially during times when I doubt our relationship myself.

I am not saying to avoid your family and friends. In fact, if most of the people who know you disapprove of your relationship, you may have a real problem. That was the case in my last romance, one, which as my family predicted, was destined for failure because I had completely incompatible values with my girlfriend. If you do know of any obvious critics, and we all have them, just avoid talking to them about your relationship. The drawback is that you can't discuss everything you may want with these people, but the benefit is avoiding a conversation that might pollute your mind with doubts that aren't justified.

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I like to have a good time, like most people. Socializing and meeting new people are fun pastimes. If I have not seen Amanda for several weeks, and I choose to go out with friends, I must accept certain realities. One is that I will probably

meet women who feel just as lonely. The second, is that on a crowded dance floor at 1 a.m., a 100% commitment to my relationship may not be the first thing on my mind. This does not mean that anything will happen, but putting myself in that situation, increases the likelihood of it occurring. I am not going to hibernate in my home while Amanda is at university. Life's too short for that. Nevertheless, when I do go out, especially when I am feeling a little deprived, I try to be aware of the temptations that exist in certain situations. No one is perfect, including myself, but if I want to stay in a trusting, committed, loving relationship--and I do--it helps to avoid situations that make it easy to compromise myself.

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If my mind wanders too far into doubt, it always helps to think about why I wanted to be in a relationship in the first place. One reason was that I loved Amanda very much and felt I could trust her completely. Another reason was our similar values and respect for our families. I felt we could both complement and support each other in whatever the other person wanted to do in life. Thinking about these reasons works wonders for me. If I am down

or doubting whether I have enough energy to continue, I just have to think about why I got involved in our relationship in the first place, and suddenly I feel like I did when I first started falling in love with Amanda. This is not a substitute for seeing her in person, but it is a good way to chase away those self-created thought monsters that creep up on me from time to time.

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If I cannot resolve things on my own, I try to talk to Amanda about my feelings before they get out of control. This is not always a pleasant experience. No partner wants to hear that you are doubting the relationship, especially when they are not. It's hard not to take it personally when someone you love, phones you and tells you that they are "reassessing their commitment," or "rethinking our future together." You feel slighted, angry, and hurt, all at once. Honesty is painful sometimes. Yet I think the alternative is worse. If you don't talk about doubting feelings, they will eat away at you until you can no longer bear it and you must leave your relationship. If I tell Amanda that I am having doubts, at least she has an immediate chance to assure me that my fears are unfounded. Yet if I

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don’t tell her about my uncertainty, I might continue to doubt forever. In fact, I believe that if I didn't express certain feelings to her in the past, they probably would have destroyed our relationship. For months, I would have convinced myself that we were doomed, and by the time Amanda might have guessed what I was feeling, she would not have been able to say anything to make things right. It’s sad to think that if people were honest about their feelings with their partner a little earlier, they might have saved their relationship.