

ERP 082: How To Survive A Long-Distance Relationship

Welcome to The Empowered Relationship Podcast, helping you turn relationship challenges into opportunities and setting you up for relationship success. Your host, Dr. Jessica Higgins, is a licensed psychologist and relationship coach who shares valuable tips, tools and resources for you to dramatically improve your relationship.

This podcast is 100% ad-free. To support this show, please subscribe and write a review today. Here is your host.

* * *

Hi, thank you for joining today's podcast episode. Today's episode is 82, and it's titled How To Survive A Long Distance Relationship. This question comes from a listener and she has been waiting for a period of time, so I just want to thank you for your patience. Before we get started, I just want to invite you, if you're interested in being on this show, to receive live laser coaching with me, you can contact me on my website, which is DrJessicaHigging.com and click on Contact, and you can find the ways to reach me there. You can also submit a podcast topic. Also, if you have other questions around how to deepen in your practice of these relationship principles, you can also connect with me about setting up a free strategy session, or also about my relationship curriculum.

Let's get started with today's podcast episode. Again, this question was submitted by a listener who would like to remain anonymous. She writes:

"I have recently discovered your podcast and I have listened to a couple episodes. I appreciate your insight in many relationship scenarios. I was hoping that you could dedicate an episode on long distance dating and how to sustain it.

I have been dating my boyfriend for a little over a year, and we live one state apart. We seem to have an issue with communication, in that he doesn't like talking on the phone that often and he has two jobs, so he doesn't have much time to give me.

I wouldn't call myself a talkative person, but I do love one-on-one talks and just building a deeper connection. It doesn't seem like he is interested in that, and I feel I'm taking over the conversation most of the time.

I have laid it out clearly that I need consistency and communication in a relationship. Dr. Higgins, is there anything you can speak on regarding what is needed in a long distance relationship and what signs may be that it's not working out."

First of all, I just want to thank you, listener, for submitting this question, having the courage to reach out. I feel honored to be able to offer some input and support to you today. I get that long-distance relationships are unique. I think they require us to go at a much slower pace, given the limitations of the physical separation. Not being able to be together, missing one

another, yearning to be close, that lack of physical contact, not being able to hold each other, hug each other, sleep together, have sex together - I get how extremely painful this can be.

I know a lot of people refuse to do this long-distance dating at all because it's not for the faint of heart. It requires a level of commitment, money (all the traveling back and forth), the extra time, the energy... It is more of an effort. However, if you have found someone special that you really believe in your connection and you wanna commit to developing a relationship despite the distance, I do think there's actual benefits to a long-distance relationship, especially when you're in the beginning phases of developing your foundation.

I think it can bring an opportunity to strengthen your connection, the time to not be distracted by sex or just the pressure of the steps you're taking, moving forward, whether you're gonna move in together - all the different things that come with being in the same proximity, geographical location. It requires us to have a much slower pace, which can allow us a little more space to be mindful, strengthen, build that emotional intimacy.

And I think one of the other benefits is it requires us the thing that you're asking me about, around communication, to be much more clear, much more explicit about our needs, desires and expectations, and I'm gonna give you some tips today around how to negotiate some of those things.

We sometimes have to spell it out, where when we're with one another, we can read each other's non-verbal cues, you're kind of in this natural flow, and it has to be a little bit more intentional when you have the distance, and things have to be spelled out, because there's a greater opportunity for misunderstanding and missing each other, the void of not having the different modes of communication.

I think that distance also poses the opportunity to build trust, because I do think insecurities can come up, jealousy can come up when we're not together, so it requires us to look and work through some of these things. This is gonna come up a little bit more sometimes in long-distance relationships, which I think is an opportunity. I'm presenting it here as a benefit, that to work through some of those insecurities and to build more trust you need a level of trust when you're not in physical proximity with one another.

The other benefit - I think that this allows people to hold on to themselves, keep your independent endeavors, your friends. You're not losing yourself. I think that this pacing with the long distance can be a real benefit.

I think there's some real value, and there's a lot of considerations. I have some tips to offer you today. I think the biggest one - this might be really classic and stating the obvious, but I wanna say that if you don't have an end goal or an end date in mind, this can be extremely tricky. I think the most success comes from when you have a date in mind. Whether or not it's two years or three years, but we're gonna get to be together at this time in the future.

I think it's much easier to sustain some of the difficulty or tolerate some of the discomfort when we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Simply, I'll go to these yoga classes... Sometimes I take a Yoga Sculpt class and it's these repetitions, and the instructor is trying to get everybody to push themselves to muscle fatigue, so she's doing the countdown: "Give me three! Give me two! Give me one!", and it's like every part of me wants to give up, but if I can hear that countdown, it allows me to push a little further.

I know that's a silly example, but I think if we can mentally get our mind around, "Okay, just this last little bit. We're in the homestretch, or we have this many months left", I think it can really help build that motivation, it can help us dig a little deeper. Because I get how painful it can be to be not around each other and not being able to be together, so if you can have something to really mark an end date where you'll ultimately get to be together, I think this can be helpful.

A few other sub-points under this bigger point to have an end goal in mind is to individually really assess your level of commitment, to be really honest with yourself. This is gonna require more effort, it's gonna require more flexibility, more creativity, and sometimes digging deeper. What are you gonna do when things get hard, when you start to doubt or start to wander? Or maybe you're not feeling so great, things aren't feeling so hot - how are you gonna deal with that? Maybe even having some agreement with yourself, like "I'm going to push myself to talk about it." It's not easy to talk about those upsetting feelings, and it's sometimes the last thing you're gonna wanna do when you're at a distance and you have an opportunity to talk to one another; you want it to be positive, so to talk about negative things can feel really like the last thing you wanna do. So to really have an agreement with yourself... How are you gonna handle when things get hard?

The other thing I'll say here is being able to invest in a longer-term goal or vision. What's the payoff? If you get to be together, you get to share space together, live in a home together - whatever it is that you long for, and together reminding yourselves of the longer-term goal. That's gonna help you feel more motivated along the way.

I have a friend, and her and her significant other are in a long-distance relationship, and he's in a graduate program, so there is an end date in mind, and it is a significant amount of time. I think they still have about a year and a half left. When I listen to her talk, it does sound like she is practicing some of the points that I'm about to lay out. She is utilizing the pace of the relationship in the long distance to really develop a solid foundation. It seems as though they're negotiating a distance successfully. It does have its challenges for sure, but it is possible.

Number two - practice constructive communication. This seems obvious, and most couples don't actually have to do this level of work until they're in the power struggle phase, which is the second stage of a relationship and usually comes about a year and a half to three years in. Basically, it's the stage where couples recognize their differences and it requires them to

develop a process with one another where they can recognize when there's upset or conflict, and they can approach it differently. They're essentially building a process that allows them to be curious, allows them to be respectful and accepting of the differences, but essentially work collaboratively for a win/win. So I'm not gonna really go into that; if you're interested, I can put a link to an article that you can reference a little bit about that stage.

The bigger point I'm wanting to make here is that when you're in a long-distance relationship you don't always have the luxury to lean on the physical proximity and all the beauty that is in just being together. There's usually a natural flow to the dating and courting phase, the romance phase, that is a shared thing that just develops. When we're at a distance, we have to be a little more explicit, we have to state the obvious, we have to communicate a little bit more in depth. This also requires us to clear the air, talk about our experience.

I remember there was a few times in the earlier stages of my husband and I's relationship, and I remember whether or not he was taking a trip, or... We didn't live together for the first year or two, and we would have phone conversations sometimes, at length, and there would be a couple times when we had issue with one another, and for whatever reason, whether or not he was visiting family or I was visiting family, but we were on the phone together, and I remember those conversations being so fruitful. It was almost as if he wasn't distracted, or we weren't distracted by the presence of one another. It was almost as though being on the phone really required us to connect deeply with our own experience, and really reveal and share more openly about our thinking, our thoughts, our experience about something... And we were able to have a real heart to heart conversation that was very deep.

I remember there was a time where I was like, "I should leave and we should have a conversation on the phone." I feel like those conversations are so fruitful. Because we're not distracted by each other's non-verbal... It is a little bit more concentrated verbally. I think when you're at a distance, it also is important to talk about your expectations, needs and desires. I think this is key in any relationship, and it's particularly even that much more important in a long-distance relationship. Because I do think that the opportunities for connection are fewer, and the opportunities for miscommunication and assumptions is greater.

Those are two negatives. You don't have as much opportunity to strengthen and connect your bond, and you have more opportunities for misunderstanding and assumption. So again, I think this is why it's that much more important to get really clear - who is gonna visit who, how are we gonna try to connect with each other? Less about rules; this isn't about setting up a structure, it's just understanding one another, and I'm gonna talk about that a little bit more, about methods of communication. But allowing a little more space, to be curious, a sense of being slow to judge; it's easy to assume or think that we know what the other person is doing, but again, just slow that reaction time down to be curious, so that you can learn a little bit more about how your partner operates, because they are gonna be different than you. They're gonna think about things differently than you, and they're gonna have a different experience.

So if you can open up that dialogue, talk about what things mean to one another and really check it out with one another - "This is what I think. What do you think?" or "It looks like this happens for you. Can you help me understand?"

And the other thing here about constructive communication is really working together to create a plan. You need to plan a little bit more. Have a date, have a trip, have something that you can look forward to. Sometimes one person is gonna be feeling a little more down, and how do we meet each other's needs, how do we meet each other's desires and how do we plan accordingly? All of this is challenging. In some ways, it's putting the relationship on fast track, if you will, with all these principles that you're really required to practice a little more in depth. You don't just get to lean on the joy of being in each other's presence; it's a little more intentional.

So this practicing constructive communication can feel like more work, but I can guarantee you these foundational skills will serve you regardless. They'll serve you in your relationship moving forward, they'll serve you in your individual growth... I don't think there's any negative that will come from practicing this level of communication and skillfulness. Knowing what you want. A lot of the times I need to pause to check in, to ask myself "What do I want? What's my vote? What would my preference be?" Or, if I have really strong emotions, to try to understand that a little bit more. What's going on for me there? Is there a need that I'm having? What is that need? I have that curiosity with myself, so that I can then be that much clearer with my significant other.

This is really important work, and again, not easy work. Work that we typically don't anticipate having to do. We think often times love happily ever after just happens, right? Okay, that was my second point.

Let me just recap here. Number one, have a goal in mind. Number two, practice constructive communication. Number three, I wanna really invite flexibility, having different ways of connecting. If your partner or your significant other doesn't really like to talk on the phone, how do you round it out? How do you supplement with other ways of connecting? I find this to be true with my relationship with my mother. We live in different states, and she is not a talker; she doesn't enjoy talking that much. It's not her primary mode of connecting. She's much more kinesthetic, like to just share and then experience together, she likes to be in each other's energy and just be together. She's not that verbal. I mean she can, but she doesn't enjoy it as much, where I can talk on the phone and it works for me.

So she and I will sometimes videoconference. She'll send me videos about her life, I'll send videos about things that are going on in my life; we'll send photos. We can send a meme to one another. There's different ways of sharing each other's life with one another and connecting. So just being open and flexible about different ways of relating.

The other thing about flexibility is I think it can be really helpful to give some permission that you don't need to talk every day. Sometimes it can feel like your lifeline to one another. But if you can allow some space for breaks, maybe time for not connecting. It allows the excitement to grow, the juice to build, in the sense of really feeling that desire, rather than it being driven by a rule, like "I have to call at this time." That feels more obligatory.

So if you can allow some space sometimes to not talk every day, or to not feel this pressure of when to call and when to communicate, then you can feel that draw, rather than the drain of a rule.

The other thing is being aware of each other's schedules, and maybe stress that you're under. I have clients where they might have a big deadline approaching, or they might have midterms or finals, or something that is a big push, and to be aware of what your partner is going through. Offer some flexibility there. You said your partner has two jobs. When would he be more available to have some quality time with you?

Sometimes it's not about the quantity, it's about the quality. Because if he can really be available when he's available, you're gonna get a lot more connection out of that interaction than a lot of interactions that maybe he doesn't feel that available to.

When I was preparing my notes for this episode I also did a little bit of googling, and I came across this BuzzFeed article, which I will put the link on the show notes. Again, you can find the show notes on my website, which is DrJessicaHiggins.com You can find the link under Mentioned.

This was a survey of couples who had been in long-distance relationships and things that had worked for them; they did a survey. StevenH92 submitted:

"Believe me... After three years of long-distance, I've come to realize that sometimes you have to go the extra mile. My girlfriend texts me a hundred times more than I text her. I visit her ten times more often than she visits me. She makes the effort to call me or write me way more than I do for her, but we don't keep score. We each do what we're able to do to make this work."

So this not keeping score, really allowing flexibility and receiving one another's gift and extension and generosity, and giving what we have to give.

Number four - deepen in your emotional intimacy. I think this is my favorite. Actually, I like the next one a lot, too. But I really love what long distance can provide for emotional intimacy. We can ask one another deeper levels of questions. This is the other thing I googled - questions to ask your partner. And there's all these really creative questions out there, and it's just endless. I'll put three links on the show notes. There's hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of creative questions. For example, "What would constitute a perfect day for you?" So you and your partner, you don't have to dominate by being the facilitator; you guys could each pick out questions, or maybe you e-mail each other and you have a Google doc that you

share and you guys put questions up and maybe you just randomly select one for one night. Or maybe you ask each other, "Oh, here's a good one... I wanna know this one!" So you kind of go back and forth asking each other questions, maybe just for a little while. It doesn't have to be this structured thing.

Another question is, "If you could wake up tomorrow having gained one quality or ability, what would it be?" Or another one is, "Is there something you've dreamt of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?" One other one here is, "What is the one thing that makes you feel alive?"

These questions are literally endless. You could put them in a drawer and pick one out randomly. There's lots of ways to play with this, but I love the space to get creative and get to know each other. Ask these questions that, again, I don't know that we would do, being in close physical proximity with one another.

One other idea as far as developing the emotional intimacy is really designing your relationship, crafting the type of relationship you wanna cultivate together. How do we deal with conflict? How do you deal with anger? What do you do when you're upset and your feelings are hurt? These are things that you can design together. Here's what I know about myself. Here's what I'd like to be. What would help us create that?

Another idea here too is reading a personal growth book together. I remember I had a colleague when I was in my PhD program. She was dating her fiancée - or maybe they were just dating at the time, I don't remember... But they were reading some book around questions to ask before you get married. They were reading this book together, and I believe they're married and have a baby now; and it was just something they tried to be very intentional together.

You and your partner can also take my relationship program, my couples curriculum. It's 12 modules. It's multi-dimensional, but it's meant to be done virtually, so you guys could do it in two different locations; it's a system that I'm gonna give you all the relationship principals and pillars for a very healthy, authentic, successful relationship. This is paced over a period of time. So that's another thing to plug into to develop that foundation together.

Short recap. Number one, we have "Have an end goal in mind." Number two, practice constructive communication. Number three, flexibility. Number four, deepen your emotional intimacy. Number five, have fun and be creative.

Some of ideas I have, but again, I think if you start to get into this creative mindset together, if you composed your significant other or your boyfriend, say "Hey, I noticed that I'm a little more inclined to wanna have conversation than maybe you are, and I thought maybe we could change it up a little bit. Maybe we could do some fun things together, that might work better for you. Can we brainstorm?"

A couple ideas here... You could read a novel together. Reading out loud to one another - I think it's a very sweet thing to do. I know some couples do this, where they're interested in a topic or they wanna read a short story, or a novel, and they'll take turns reading to one another.

When my husband - this was 2009 - and I went to Italy together, we were eating *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. It was so fun to be reading it together and engaged into the story. There was nothing process-y about it, it was just we were enjoying a story together. We'd also done this on road trips, where we'll read short stories together and we'll take turns reading to one another. Obviously, whoever's not driving.

Another thing that is fun to do is to play a game together. Sometimes my husband and I do this on a road trip, we play *Would You Rather*, and we basically make up our own questions. For example, "Would you rather be able to breathe underwater or fly?" or "Would you rather know the secrets of the past, or be able to tell the future?" Sometimes people get kind of gross, or... "Would you rather not shower for a week, or would you rather not brush your teeth for a week?" I don't know, you can make up all kinds of stuff. Again, this is using the creativity.

One other idea... I have some friends that traveled, and they played a game where at 11:11 every day they took a photo of whatever they were doing at the time. Regardless of whatever they were doing, they just took a photo at the same time. I guess that's fun when you're traveling the world, but it's something you could perhaps do. But if you have a very consistent schedule and you're gonna be always at your desk, that might not be that fun.

Perhaps watch a television show or a movie together. I think there's an app or some cool apps that allow you to sync your Netflix account together, so you can actually be watching exactly at the same time. That could be fun.

One of my closest dear friends lives about an hour and a half away, but we've often straddled the distance of different states, and one of the things that we really enjoy doing together is we'll both go for a walk. Sometimes I'll be hiking and she's walking, in the neighborhood or vice-versa, and it's something that we've really enjoyed - being outside and moving the body, being in nature, and still sharing time together. Perhaps sending care packages, like "I thought of you, and here's some little goodies", or something.

Another quote from the BuzzFeed article that I mentioned - this was submitted by Danni Little:

"I sent my husband a sapphire ring of mine that he could carry around everywhere, and he sent me a t-shirt that smelled of him that I could wear at night, so that it was like I was getting a cuddle from him. There's something soothing about having something physical that they've touched in your hands."

I think that's really sweet; some tactical thing that you can feel and touch in their absence.

Last point here, create space for sexy time. I get that you do not have each other physically to share your sexuality together, and there's phone sex. I know it's not your first choice, but it's better than not being in each other's sexual energy. You wanna be able to share that with each other.

One time my husband - again, on a road trip... I had brought a tantra book, and the first chapter was this whole survey about your sexual history, your sexual beliefs, your expectations, things you're not proud of, and there was this whole... I don't even think we got through it, but it was a great way to share and getting to know each other around the topic of sex. It's a very intimate, personal, vulnerable topic, but again, there's a lot that we can attend to sexually without necessarily being in each other's physical proximity and having intercourse, so to speak.

Nurturing this aspect of your relationship, getting creative, and attending to your sexual intimacy. Again, without the physical proximity, that's gonna take some creativity.

Again on the BuzzFeed, submitted by Alisha Cogdell - she said:

"You need to seriously trust this person. Scrutinizing everything and constantly questioning them only makes things worse. We both learned that quickly. Your sex life will take a huge toll, so you need to get creative."

Lastly, as far as your question about signs that the relationship is not working out, I would treat that just like relationship in general. Looking for the signs of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, discontent, lack of intimacy, unresolved conflict, lack of motivation... All of these things lend to things not feeling like they're working. All of this can be addressed, but again, this has to be something that both you and your significant other are willing to invest in.

I'm giving you some things to consider. Number one, having an end goal in mind. Number two, practicing constructive communication. Number three, being flexible. Number four, deepening your emotional intimacy. Number five, have fun and be creative. Number six, create space for sexy time and your sexuality.

For those of you that are listening, that are either in a long-distance relationship now or have been through a long-distance relationship and you have some thoughts or input to offer this listener, I would love to include your feedback into this dialogue. How you can do that is you can comment on today's podcast episode. The way you do that is comment on the show notes. You can go to my website, which is DrJessicaHiggins.com, click on Podcast. You can find the most recent episode there at the top. Again, this is episode 82, and it's How To Survive A Long-Distance Relationship.

So what you'll do is you'll scroll down to the bottom and you'll comment. Again, if you want to offer things that have worked for you or any input that you would like to suggest, I'm sure the listener would love to feel your support.

Thank you so much for listening. Again, if you would like to reach out to me, you can find me on my website on my Contact page, which is at DrJessicaHiggins.com. Until next time, I hope you take great care.

* * *

You've been listening to Empowered Relationship, your relationship guide. Remember to take a moment to write a review and subscribe today. You can also get your free relationship gift by visiting drjessicahiggins.com