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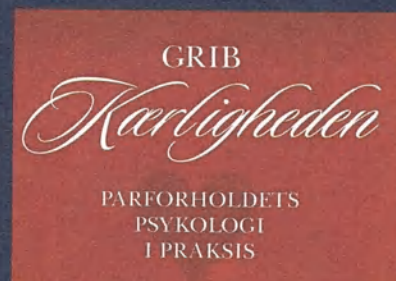
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Daily, caring contact is crucial fuel in a long-distance relationship

How do you get a long-distance relationship to work when you're apart and when you're together? Let couple therapist Gitte Sander advise you on how to maintain and recover intimacy, communication and cohesion.

By Kirstine Thye Skovhøj, journalist



Therapist Gitte Sander has many years of experience with long-distance couples.

What is most important to get a long-distance relationship to work?

"The cornerstone of a relationship is that you feel safe and that you can count on each other. If you want a stable relationship, you have to stay in contact. You don't have to have three-hour conversation every day, but you have to maintain daily, caring contact".

What kind of problems are typical in a long-distance relationship?

"Both parties can feel and think that they are less important and more insignificant to the other than they really are. When you are separated from your partner for long periods over and over again, you are left alone with your fantasies, thoughts and feelings. Some can struggle to maintain the feeling that they are important to their partner when they don't have any physical contact. Some might feel that because they are out of sight they are also out of mind. This issue is closely related to your self-image and self-esteem. Typically, it will release feelings like uncertainty or

maybe jealousy if you are doubting that you are still meaningful to your partner. That can develop and create more uncertainty if your partner stops getting in touch with you as normal, or if your contact becomes less caring".

How do you get a long-distance relationship to work?

"It is very important to agree on a structure for how and when you get in touch with each other when you are apart. It is also very important to give each other space, and respect that you have different reactions. When both of you feel safe and respected, it will cement and strengthen your relationship and make you share vulnerable feelings".

How do you avoid drifting apart when you are physically separated for a long period?

"Some couples spend time together daily, even though they are far away from each other, because they are really good at keeping in touch using Skype or social media. Couples like that usually share an understanding that there won't be big news every day. Maybe they turn on FaceTime while they are cooking or doing something similar. They talk about everyday subjects that are basically unimportant, like what was on sale in the supermarket or that the seafarer once again fixed a broken machine. But having conversations like that is

not unimportant for the couple's relationship because it's a way of staying in touch with each other's lives. The most important thing is to avoid getting into a pattern where you only have very sporadic contact".

What is most important to get a long-distance relationship to work?

"The cornerstone of a relationship is that you feel safe and that you can count on each other. If you want a stable relationship, you have to stay in contact. You don't have to have three-hour conversation every day, but you have to maintain daily, caring contact".

What does it mean that you can 'count on your partner'?

"To make a relationship work, it is very important to show each other that you are accessible, ready to be there for the other, and engaged in the other. Men can be especially action- and goal-orientated. And when they come home, they almost work themselves to death dealing with practical chores because they want to help their partner. They don't understand that doing a lot of practical chores isn't enough.

Instead, it's important that they show they are accessible, ready to respond to their partners feelings, and show that they're emotionally involved. Of course, you can show your engagement by getting involved in housekeeping, but often it means much more to women that their husband is ready to snuggle up, or listen to how tough it has been being separated".

How is it best to handle the great degree of unpredictability related to signing off a ship?

"It can be helpful to know your partner's feelings. It is easier to accept that your partner can't sign off as expected if you know that your partner is also annoyed about the situation, rather than thinking that their ship is the only important place in the world and that you and life at home has become unimportant. Again, that is why it is crucial to show the other that he or she is meaningful. Send a message saying that you don't know when you can sign off, but you are looking forward to seeing your partner again. A message like that can make all the difference. Of course, conversely, it is important that the one who is at home shows patience".

WOULD YOU LIKE TO READ BOOKS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS, COMMUNICATION AND INTIMACY?

GO TO SEAFARER'S LIBRARY P. 27

Many couples find it can be difficult to make everyday life work when the family gets back together after having been apart and living two very different types of lives. How do you get back together and unite?

"It is all about adapting your inner system to being in a new situation. It is very important that you take your time to establish some shared customs and routines, and get them up and running. Many make the mistake that they assume that everyday life will work without spending any time on banalities like that. But if you don't prioritize getting your relationship and family life working first, then you will end up with much bigger problems".

GET THE COUPLE THERAPIST'S ADVICE FOR A LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP

EVERYDAY LIFE APART

- Keep in touch every day. If possible, talk 15 minutes a day – video calls are the best way. It will strengthen your relationship that you hear and/or see each other. Choose a time that is suitable for both of you, where there is peace and you are not too tired.
- Greet each other with a caring hello and goodbye. Remember that a caring hello and goodbye is different from person to person.
- Don't talk about your relationship frustrations while one person is at sea. Wait until you are physically together again.
- If you start a fight or hurt each other, then try to fix it: Do something that will make the other person feel safe in the relationship again.
- Don't try to solve conflicts by text messages or email. In most cases, it will escalate the conflict or make things worse.
- Show understanding for each other's lives and needs. Recognize the other person.

TOGETHER AGAIN

- Make sure you take time to just be together; time where you can talk about difficult subjects calmly, without being disturbed.
- Don't make any plans for the first 24 hours you/your family is back together again. Make a "safe space" where you can reconnect.
- Spend the last day before signing on together, without anything scheduled with others.
- Always say a loving 'goodbye' and 'see you again'.