

Reach Out and Touch Me

*I will wash away your tears
Through the pain and through the sorrow
Better days are still to come
If you would only turn around and
Reach out and touch me
Reach out and hold me
Reach out and touch me*
Erasure

In the best of circumstances, intimate relationships are hard. Long distance relationships are even harder. Sure, if you have the right calling plan, you can call or text the object of your affections all you want with no added fees. Unfortunately, as exciting phone calls, text messages and the “You’ve Got Mail!” message on your computer screen are, they are poor substitutes for physical contact.

The problem isn’t just about physical connection. You can almost recreate the sensation of being held, touching and kissing your partner using the power of a vivid imagination. If you really focus, you can almost feel the visceral sensations of being with your partner in your body. The catch is that these physical impressions fade over time and phone sex is a poor substitute for making love in person.

Other barriers posed by long distance relationships have to do with the way the brain works. The cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that loves formulas and loves to mess around with technology, has a hard time communicating with the limbic brain, the part of the brain that manages emotions.

Technological gadgets allow you and your partner to communicate cerebral cortex to cerebral cortex. With e-mail and instant messaging (or snail mail for those who do it “old school” style), you can communicate thoughts with as much depth and thoroughness as you have time to write them. With phones, you can add volume and tone of voice to the information sent and received. And with web cams, you may even be able to add visual cues. The problem is that we are not robots. The limbic brain is rooted in the body and reads kinesthetic information and responds emotionally to both the thoughts generated by the cerebral cortex and the impressions picked up kinesthetically. Most of the kinesthetic information gets lost between the sender and the receiver when done via technology. Love, it turns out, requires more than the transmission of thoughts, sounds and images. It takes energy, touch, and perhaps, given what we know about the impact of pheromones*, smell. It is, in short, visceral. This is why it doesn’t matter how drop dead gorgeous someone is, if the “chemistry” isn’t there, your connection with them will stall into friendship, fade into ether, or grow into a prison of unfulfilled dreams and possibilities.

The human tendency to “make shit up” is another barrier that long distance relationships get bogged down with. There’s a great example of this pattern in season six of “Sex in the City.” When Carrie’s boyfriend, Jack Berger, explains to Miranda that that if a guy turns down an invitation to come up to her apartment, he’s totally not into her. A few scenes later, she’s on a date with a guy, leaving an Indian restaurant, and he turns down her offer to come up to her apartment. Armed with her newly discovered “truth,” she challenges him to be honest. He tries to convince her that he’s really interested and finally he blurts out, “I have diarrhea,” and runs down the street.

It’s important to know that you are probably “making shit up” any time you give meanings to your partner’s silence, tones of voice, or body language without checking it out. And as soon as the

cerebral cortex writes a story, the limbic brain responds with an emotional reaction. If the story you made up is negative, you will probably get angry, sad, scared or some combination of those feelings. You've probably gone to this negative spin place when your partner was late. The story may have been, "It's almost midnight and she's not home. She must have met someone. She's probably cheating on me." Or "It's 8:30. He was supposed to be here at 8:15. He doesn't care about me."

While all relationships get bogged down from time to time because one or more partners "makes shit up" without checking it out, long distance relationships are especially susceptible. Because the limbic brain isn't picking up the kinesthetic information, the cerebral cortex works overtime to fill in the gaps of information with assumptions and fiction. In long distance relationships, there are simply more gaps to fill in with fiction. It's also harder to correct the stories in long distance relationships because the kinesthetic information we use to sense the truth isn't there. If a late partner, for example, comes home wearing the signs of remorse, and says, "Sorry, I lost track of time," and is physically warm and available (and doesn't smell like another woman or man), the emotional state usually dissipates. Over the phone, all there is tone of voice, and it's easy to get stuck in the story line of, "She's cheating on me," or, "He doesn't care about me."

By this point in the article, you're probably thinking, "Given all these obstacles, how can you make a long distance relationship work?" The truth is, I don't know. But the following suggestions should help.

When you see yourself going into a spin, check in with yourself. Take an objective look at the data you are using to support your story. Do you have all the information or are you filling in a lot of gaps with fiction? If there are a lot of gaps in the "data" that you have, try to put the spin on hold until you can actually check in with your partner about what's going on. Work on breathing deeply and fully and being really present. Instead of focusing on the worst case scenario, list all the possibilities. Remind yourself that it's probably not about you. Maybe, for example, they are just late because they had to work late or because they got an emergency call from their mother or a close friend, or any number of other possibilities. And when you do get to talk to your partner, talk to him or her in a calm way without judging or analyzing them or making broad sweeping generalizations. If you say something like, "You never call when you say you will. You're self-centered and don't care about my feelings at all." Your partner will probably get defensive and regret the fact that they actually did call. And who's to blame them? You've attacked them with a broad sweeping generalization, judged them and analyzed them in one short exchange. Instead, simply point out the behavior and ask about it. For example, "You said you'd call at 8:00 and you didn't call. What was up?" You might add something like, "When you didn't call, I thought that you didn't care about me any more and I felt sad and scared." To really do this effectively, you have to come from a heart centered space.

More generally, in long distance relationships, you have to work harder to note and catch the communication gaps and fill them in with the truth before they become mired in creative muck. It would also be helpful to look at the emotional baggage you've been carting around from your past that gets triggered when the communication glitches happen. If you notice that you get really pissed when your partner doesn't call when they say they will, look at your own past – who else didn't keep their word? An ex? A friend who turned out not to be such a friend? A parent? When you figure out who it was, see if you can separate your partner from the ghosts of your past. Put differently; note how your partner is different from the person in the past that hurt you.

And finally, do your best to get together. The more you can see your partner, the more you can actually reach out and touch each other, the more kinesthetic information you will have and the more you can build the trust and commitment you need to sustain and strengthen your relationship.

Originally appeared in Outlook Weekly