

The perils of a part-time lover

The realities of long-distance love can be rather difficult. Being connected to one's partner when separated by a 14-hour interstate drive or a 24-hour overseas flight is a lot harder than the romance of separated love may suggest.

Just ask any interstate politician who must live in Canberra for a good part of the year while the partner and family are hundreds of kilometres away.

But politicians don't have a monopoly on practising long-distance love.

Sometimes women, and it is usually women, are at home caring for a young family when men are away on work trips, and it can put a huge strain on the relationship.

Keeping the home fires burning means that many women feel they are single parents much of the time, so they adjust to this and play both mother and father while dad's away. The trouble is that if dad is away a lot, it can be hard to let him resume his fatherly role when he is at home.

One couple coped for several years with dad working interstate, but eventually the strain became too much, and the father no longer felt part of the family. To save the marriage the wife moved herself and the young children interstate.

While this had a happy outcome, it did mean the wrench of leaving the older child at university. But hey, didn't someone say that life wasn't meant to be easy.

Nor is long-distance love easy – but it can be managed with enough motivation, flexibility and commitment.

And email, texting and internet programs like Skype have an important part to play in managing contact.

Another model can be where one partner lives away during the week and returns home at weekends.

This often works quite well for a while because there is always the weekend catching-up to look forward to.

The only danger here is that it does have something of a honeymoon flavour about it.

Some people may become addicted to the excitement and not feel confident about developing the next stage of living together.

Often this model works for year or two, then a couple renegotiates the arrangement when they feel it's not enough for them.

Some people fall in love with someone overseas and have an email and telephone relationship that suits them, and Skype now offers a little more sense of connection than the other means by themselves.

As long as partners are happy, it's yet another variation and is a valid relationship.

For many people living in a long-distance relationship, it is enough that they are in each other's minds and have regular phone or SMS contact so that they can know they haven't been forgotten.

This can be enough to keep their affection and intimacy needs met.

Then there are others who need the physicality of a cuddle or sex, so for these people a long-distance relationship can be difficult.

The biggest problem with long-distance love is if a couple have started out living together in the one house and one of them get a job transfer. This is unexpected, and not their choice, so it is an added challenge.

If one partner embarks on an affair, it's a symptom of a relationship problem rather than the cause. If you have an affair you are not getting all your emotional needs met, and this is a big risk with long-distance love. Once again, new options like Skype can assist.

People who want to avoid having an affair need to work out how to get their emotional support networks going.

They also need to meet each other regularly enough and make the effort to have pockets of intimacy to sustain them throughout the year rather than just getting it all at holiday time. Santa comes but once a year, but most of us need to get together with our long-distance love much more often.

Survival tips

- Maintain regular phone, SMS and email contact
- Make the effort to get together for pockets of intimacy throughout the year
- If the relationship is under strain from the tyranny of distance, talk about making changes.