

# Loving Long-Distance: Families Separated by Distance Leader's Guide

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## Lesson Objectives

By the end of this program participants will be able to:

- define what long-distance relationships mean to them,
- understand key concepts for maintaining strong family connections,
- recognize the five R's of family change, and
- apply new tools to assist in maintaining strong familial bonds.

## Audience

Any community member affected by geographical family separation.

## Introduction

One major obstacle to maintaining family connection can be distance. Families can be separated for any number of reasons. Whether the separation is job related, the result of a family circumstance, or due to military careers, tools to keep the family growing and strong are important for making the separation successful.

Many family members feel that staying connected is essential for family togetherness. How can families build strong connections from a distance? *Loving Long-Distance: Families Separated by Distance* (MF2979) will help participants understand the time, motivation, and effort it takes to keep connected during times of geographical separation. This program will also encourage participants to share their experiences and successful tools for long-distance relationships with others.

## Preparation

- Familiarize yourself with the *Loving Long-Distance: Families Separated by Distance* fact sheet.
- Collect materials needed for workshop program: a copy of *Loving Long-Distance: Families Separated by Distance* fact sheet for each participant, blank writing surface, tape, markers, pens, index cards, pre-cut words for Activity 1.
- Make Activity 4 question sheets for participants to share personal tips and tools.
- Review support materials listed in this guide.

## Icebreaker:

Give each participant an index card. Have the participants write the amount of time (days, weeks, months, years) they have experienced a long-distance relationship. Once the cards are passed back to the front, add all the time together. Tell the group "This is how many (units of time: weeks, months, years) of long-distance relationship experiences we have in this room. We are all experts and just want to learn more about staying connected."

### **Activity 1**

Divide a blank writing surface down the middle with a line. On one side write “together” and on the other side write “apart.” Using the pre-cut words, have participants discuss if the word shown describes a relationship that is “together” or a relationship that is “apart.” Tape the words to the appropriate category. Some words may fit both categories and can be placed on the middle line.

These words can include: Trust, Sharing, Complicated, Stressful, Difficult, Connected, Negotiate, Easy, Normal, Maintaining, Conflict, and Satisfaction.

Discuss why participants placed each word into the specific category. The central theme should be that all relationships take work, whether people are geographically together or separated.

### **Activity 2**

How does a relationship change during geographical separation? Use Mary Dooley Burns’ “5 R’s” to explore this concept with participants. (Found in reference section, *Parenting Alone Together . . . How Does Our Family Change?*)

Read each definition and discuss as a group. These can be found in the fact sheet.

Encourage participants to share personal experiences with the group.

### **Activity 3**

Review the “Tips for Staying Connected” section in the facts sheet. This information is from North Dakota State University Extension Guide titled *Making the Connection: Building Long-Distance Relationships Member’s Guide*.

Ask participants to add their own “tips” to the list.

### **Activity 4**

Place four sheets with a question on each around the room, with a marker at each station. Have participants share personal experiences and answers on each question. Examples of questions include: “How will we celebrate holidays and special occasions?” “How will we keep in touch?” “What is one family rule that we have?” “What ‘job’ do I do at home now?”

Once participants have completed the activity, review the answers as a group. Allow time for clarification on any answers.

### **Wrap-Up Activity**

As a final activity, ask the participants to each share one possible new tool they can use in strengthening their connections over long distances.

## Community Awareness

Educate community leaders on the importance of helping families stay connected during times of geographical separation.

Interview leaders, groups, citizens and others on their own personal experiences with long-distance relationships.

Present information and provide *Loving Long-Distance* program to groups that are likely to experience long-distance relationships (i.e. military populations, business travelers, communities with transient populations).

## References and Resource Materials

Brotherson, S. (2002). *Making the connection: Building long-distance relationships*; Member's Guide, Handouts #1, #2, #3, and Overhead #1. North Dakota State Extension Services. <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/family/family-community-education/making-the-connection>.

Burns, Mary Dooley. (1994). *Parenting Alone Together ... How Does Our Family Change? The 5 R's*. Minneapolis, MN: Family Information Services.

Hill, M. J. (1996). *Keeping in touch: When distance keeps you apart*; Fact Sheet. Ohio State University Extension.

Hill, M.J. (1997) *Welcome Back! Here's what's been happening while you were gone*; Fact Sheet. Ohio State University Extension.

Military OneSource. (no date) *Double Duty: Staying connected with your kids when you're a deployed dad*. (CD) <http://www.militaryonesource.com/MOS/FindInformation/Category/Topic/Issue/Material.aspx?MaterialID=16611&MaterialTypeID=0>; (800) 342-9647.

The National Institute for Building Long Distance Relationships (2001). *Dads at a distance: An activities handbook for strengthening long distance relationships*. A&E Family Publishers, Provo, Utah.

Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences (2004). *Becoming a couple again: How to create a shared sense of purpose after deployment*. [www.usuhs.mil](http://www.usuhs.mil); Bethesda, MD.

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