

Can absence make the heart grow fonder?

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It seems obvious really: When you are travelling you always call home. But apparently, having the 'space' to think about loved ones when away on business, can actually enhance relationships, promote domestic harmony, allowing couples to reflect on what brought them together in the first place.

This is the conclusion of an online survey of 740 business travellers based in the UK conducted by Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts. Three quarters of travellers said 'I love you' more often when away from home; and 40 percent admitted to sending text messages to their partner during business meetings. Distance is an important factor, with 60 percent of travellers saying that the farther away they are from their loved ones, the more likely they are to call them.

Over half the respondents said they would 'check in' with their loved ones at least once a day, with two thirds waiting until the evening to call from their hotel room so that they could catch up properly – and privately. And over 55 percent said that when away, they learn more about their partner's day through phone conversations than they would normally; that catching up on the phone allows them to move away from the mundane and instead have a more meaningful and focused conversation.

People may even have more direct contact when apart than at home, where, on a typical evening, a third prefer to unwind in front of the TV than talk to their partner, with over a quarter admitting that eating dinner may be the only time spent together in the same room all evening.

'Psychologically, two things are going on here' says Susan Quilliam, a relationship psychologist in Cambridge, 'the first is when we are with our partners, we can get habituated, take them for granted. Distance helps you look at things in a new light you suddenly start to appreciate them more, miss them more because you don't have the touch-down time – for men in particular, for whom physical contact – I'm not talking sex here – is important.

'The second is that for business travellers, the experience of being away can be quite an alienating one; you're in a foreign town, an anonymous hotel, the challenge of meeting new clients, so the need to go back to your roots, and contact with the people you love is much greater.'

The survey shows that women are more likely than men to be better focused on the job, more dedicated, less emotionally tied and far less easily distracted when they are away; with men calling home more often than women, especially on longer trips and the farther they go: 28 percent of men call home once, twice or three times a day compared to only 25 percent of women; 17 percent of women are likely to call their partner only once every other day. Three quarters of men, but only 68 percent of women said they sent text messages to their partner during an important business

meeting and with men more likely than women to send something romantic.

‘Gender differences are not overwhelming,’ Quilliam says. ‘But there are contradictions. While there’s a slight tendency for women to be more focused when they’re away from home, they also feel guiltier than men about travelling on business.’

I can understand that one can become more homesick, and have a greater need for reassurance, the longer one is away. But why should distance alone make such a difference to a tendency to call more often?

‘This is because subconsciously you know it’s going to be more difficult to get back, in the sense you couldn’t get back,’ Quilliam says. ‘So the farther you are away, the more likely you are to check in to see that everything is all right, and to make strong statements of love. If there’s a huge distance it makes contact more important and probably more emotional; we all need more bonding contact, even in long-term relationships. Men are more emotional in many ways; they will have fewer intimate friends. Women will have a big network; and men are far more likely to be dependent on one significant other.’

I suppose saying, ‘I love you,’ is really saying, ‘do you love me?’ ‘That would be a lovely way of putting it,’ Quilliam says. ‘It’s almost entirely down to your need for reassurance; because you are the one who’s out of the information loop; at home they are stable, secure; they don’t have this alienation thing.’

The late Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan said that radio is a ‘hot’ medium, whereas television is a ‘cool’ medium. Like radio, the telephone is an intimate medium, making one focus entirely on the voice, the spoken word. One can acquire more information in listening to what people are saying and how they’re saying it, than searching for visual clues; especially true with loved ones. There is a sense in which the phone is as confessional as the psychoanalyst’s couch; which is why it might be easier to deal with intimate or difficult subjects. Phone conversations force people to actually listen to what the other is saying, their tone of voice, whether they are sounding upset, and the particular words they use.

Some relationships may survive in spite of or because of frequent or prolonged absence. So what is the secret to a healthy long-distance partnership?

‘Do exactly as the survey describes’ Quilliam says. ‘Keep in regular contact in private time; and also take the opportunity of being separated to remember what’s good, the things that at the beginning of the relationship just overwhelmed you; regain that sense of appreciation, not as something you resent. And see separation as an opportunity, not a problem.’

Original article by Roger Collis

