

“Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved”

— Viktor Frankl

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HOW TO CONNECT WHEN YOU MUST STAY APART

— by Sudhakar Haridoss, Counseling Psychologist

Human relationships are fundamentally built on communication and emotional attunement. Whether separated by a few kilometers or entire continents, maintaining connection with loved ones is essential for emotional well-being, psychological resilience, and sustained affective bonding. While distance can introduce relational strain, it does not inevitably weaken relationships. In many cases, intentional and meaningful communication can deepen attachment security and strengthen interpersonal bonds despite physical separation.

The modes of long-distance communication have evolved dramatically over time. From handwritten letters and costly international phone calls to instant messaging and video conferencing, technological advancements have transformed how families remain connected. Yet, the underlying psychological need remains unchanged: to share experiences, provide emotional support, express care, and sustain a sense of belonging in each other's lives.



My Personal Experience: Staying Connected Across Countries (1994)

One of the most meaningful experiences in my life occurred between 1994 and 1997, when my father was working in Brunei while I lived in Chennai. The geographical distance was significant, and the available communication tools were limited compared to today.

For nearly three years, our primary modes of communication were landline calls and handwritten letters. Each phone call carried emotional weight. Conversations, though brief due to cost constraints, were rich in emotional exchange and relational presence. We spoke about health, daily routines, and family matters—engaging in what psychology describes as maintaining relational continuity.

Letters played an equally vital role. They allowed for reflective expression and deeper cognitive processing of emotions. Unlike today's instant communication, letters required patience and delayed gratification. This waiting period often intensified the emotional value of each message, reinforcing anticipatory attachment and emotional significance.

Occasionally, I sent my father books and cassette recordings of his favorite Hindi songs—objects imbued with emotional symbolism and nostalgic triggers. These parcels carried more than physical items; they transmitted affective meaning, reinforcing our bond across distance.

Through these consistent efforts, we preserved a strong relationship despite physical separation.

Another Experience: Staying Connected with My Wife during My U.S. Secondment (2014)

Nearly two decades later, I experienced a similar separation when I traveled to the United States for a professional assignment while my wife remained in Chennai. This time, however, technology had transformed the communication landscape. With smartphones, video calls, and instant messaging, we could connect daily. Unlike the 1990s, there was no prolonged waiting period. However, despite technological ease, the *emotional experience of separation*—including *longing, mild anxiety, and attachment needs*—remained very real.

The nature of communication also differed. While conversations with my father were informative and supportive, interactions with my wife involved deeper *emotional intimacy, companionship, and shared identity*. We missed daily routines—small but significant rituals that contribute to *relational stability*.

Our video calls became a form of *emotional regulation*, helping to reduce feelings of *loneliness* and *separation distress*. Even brief interactions helped restore a sense of closeness. We often asked each other questions that facilitated *emotional disclosure* and *psychological connection*:

- What was the most meaningful part of your day?
- Did you experience any stress or discomfort today?
- Are you taking care of your physical and emotional health?
- What did you miss most about home?
- Did anything evoke a positive emotional response today?
- Is there anything causing you concern or anxiety?

These questions promoted *empathic listening* and *interpersonal attunement*, strengthening our relationship.

Sometimes, we simply shared silence—a powerful form of *non-verbal connection*. These moments reinforced the idea that communication is not only verbal but also deeply emotional and experiential.

This experience reinforced a key psychological insight: communication is not merely the exchange of information; it is the process of *co-regulating emotions*, expressing care, and maintaining *relational presence*.

When I compare my father's stay in Brunei during the 1990s with my Secondment in the United States in 2014, I see two different generations of communication. The first relied on letters and landline telephones; the second relied on smartphones and video calls. Yet both experiences demonstrate the same timeless truth: distance can separate people physically, but consistent communication keeps hearts connected.

The Transformation of Communication in the Modern Era

Today's communication tools support diverse forms of connection. Modern communication tools include:

Video Calls

Video calling allows family members to see one another in real time regardless of location. Facial expressions, smiles, and visual interactions make conversations more personal and meaningful.

Video calls help family members:

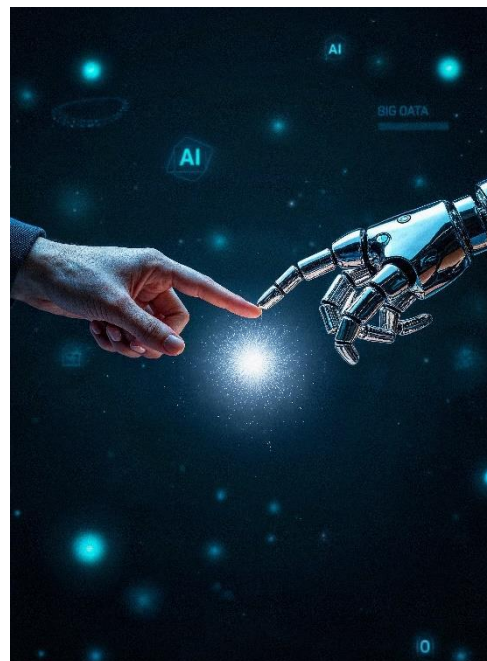
- Monitor each other's health and well-being.
- Participate in family celebrations remotely.
- Offer emotional support during difficult times.
- Feel present in each other's lives despite physical distance.

Instant Messaging

Messaging applications allow immediate communication through text, voice notes, photographs, and videos.

Benefits include:

- Quick updates throughout the day.
- Easy sharing of family moments.
- Convenient communication across time zones.
- Creation of family group chats.



Voice Messages

Voice notes combine the convenience of messaging with the warmth of hearing a loved one's voice.

They are especially useful when:

- Time schedules do not match.
- Detailed explanations are needed.
- Elderly family members find typing difficult.

Social Media Connections

Families can stay updated through shared photos, achievements, travel experiences, and important life events. Social media helps relatives remain involved in each other's lives even when they live in different countries.

Email Communication

Although not as popular as instant messaging for casual conversations, emails remain useful for:

- Sharing detailed information.
- Sending important documents.
- Maintaining long-form communication



Conversations that Strengthen Relationships

Communication is not only about exchanging information; it is about maintaining emotional connection.

Today, I often speak with my father through video calls. Our discussions include:

- His political interests and current events.
- Football matches and favorite teams.
- Tennis players and tournament results.
- Family matters and future plans.
- His health and wellbeing.

These conversations help us remain closely connected despite busy schedules. To make conversations meaningful, it is helpful to ask thoughtful questions.

Online Family Gatherings

Virtual family reunions have become increasingly common. Family members can celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, festivals, and special occasions through online meetings.

Shared Photo and Video Albums

Cloud-based storage services allow families to create shared albums where everyone can upload photographs and videos.

This creates a digital family history that can be enjoyed by all generations.

Health Monitoring and Care

Modern technology allows family members to assist elderly parents remotely.

This may include:

- Video consultations with doctors.
- Medication reminders.
- Sharing medical reports electronically.
- Monitoring health updates through wearable devices

Healthy Questions to Ask Family Members

About Health

- How are you feeling today?
- Have you been sleeping well?
- Are you taking your medications regularly?
- Have you been exercising or walking?
- Is there anything concerning you about your health?

About Daily Life

- What was the best part of your day?
- Did anything interesting happen recently?
- What are your plans for the week?
- Have you learned anything new lately

About Emotional Well-Being

- How have you been feeling emotionally?
- Is there anything worrying you?
- What has made you happy recently?
- Is there anything I can help you with?

About Interests and Hobbies

- What football match did you enjoy recently?
- Which tennis player impressed you this season?
- What books or articles have you been reading?
- Have you discovered any new hobbies?

About Family

- How are the relatives doing?
- Is there any family news?
- What family memories have you been thinking about lately?

These questions encourage deeper conversations and help strengthen relationships over time.



Why Staying Connected Is Psychologically Important

Maintaining relationships across distance is not just beneficial—it is essential for mental health:

- **Emotional Support:** Reduces *stress*, *anxiety*, and feelings of isolation.
- **Attachment Security:** Strengthens trust and relational stability.
- **Mental Well-being:** Enhances *positive affect* and life satisfaction.
- **Care for Elderly Parents:** Supports *intergenerational bonding* and reduces caregiver anxiety.
- **Shared Milestones:** Reinforces *collective identity* and belonging.
- **Memory Building:** Creates a lasting *emotional archive* for future generations.

Conclusion

Distance is an inevitable part of modern life, driven by education, careers, and opportunities. However, *physical separation does not equate to emotional disconnection.*

From my experience—communicating with my father through letters in the 1990s to staying connected with my wife through video calls in 2014—the tools have evolved, but the *core psychological need for connection* remains constant.

Ultimately, relationships thrive on *intentional communication, emotional presence, and empathy*. Whether through a letter, a call, or a digital message, each interaction contributes to sustaining *meaningful human bonds*.

By prioritizing communication, we nurture relationships, build resilience, and ensure that distance never diminishes the connections that matter most.

About the Author

Sudhakar Haridoss (SU) possesses 28 years of diverse experience spanning various fields, including Electronics, Mechanical, Chemical, Publishing, Leadership, Managerial, and at last, Psychology. Sudhakar is a Counseling Psychologist who specializes in adeptly addressing a wide spectrum of psychological & emotional challenges, encompassing a thorough range of deeply experienced conditions and mental health issues. Additionally, SU, a certified Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) practitioner, a certified BrainWorking Recursive Therapy (BWRT) therapist and a certified Cognitive and Behavior Therapy (CBT) practitioner, enhancing his ability to support clients through advanced therapeutic techniques. His passion lies in guiding clients toward these goals, engaging in the one-on-one sessions that offer a safe and non-judgmental space for exploring the Cognitive triad thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.



CERTIFICATION

- Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Practitioner, **NIPR**
- Brain Working Recursive Therapy, **BWRT** (UK)
- Master Diploma in Coaching and Counseling, **NIPR**
- Lay Counselling Certification Program, **NIMHANS**
- Counseling Skills Training (OI), **Psychoflakes**
- Counseling Psychotherapy and Case Studies (OI), **Reframe**
- Summer Immersion Program, **3G SAP**
- Diploma in Behavioral Science, **EoU** (Europe)
- Internship in Counseling Psychology, **EMOJAR**
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Practitioner, **ACHOLOGY**
- Diploma in Mental Health and Wellness, **ACHOLOGY**
- Autism (Identification, Assessment, and Therapy), **MANOVIKAS**

THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)
- Mindfulness-Based Therapy (MBT)
- Brain Working Recursive Therapy (BWRT)

CONTACT

PHONE: +91 **8248402637**

EMAIL: sudhakarh@zohomail.in

LOCATION: Chennai

LANGUAGE: **Tamil** and English

WEBSITE: www.calmyourmind.life

WORKING HOURS

Offline: Saturday and Sunday — 10.00 am – 12.00 pm



www.calmyourmind.life