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made him wait
before saying YES**

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Caught In The Middle

What do you do when you find yourself in a relationship triangle and are torn between two people who don't get along? **MICHELLE WONG** asks experts for advice on how to handle the following tricky situations.

"I am torn between my two best friends"

Lydia, Julie and I have been close friends since college. One night, when the three of us were out for dinner, Julie opted to order the set menu because she felt it was value for money. Lydia joked that Julie was a tightwad. Julie stood up, walked off and Lydia called her to apologise for coming across as mean, but Julie wasn't having any of it. I didn't think anything of Lydia's comment because it said in a light-hearted manner, so I thought Julie was being petty. I figured they would clear up the misunderstanding, but after a week, Julie was still ignoring Lydia's calls and retaliated by sending Lydia a scathing e-mail, in which she accused her of being an irresponsible parent who relied too much on her maid. Things got personal when they both started sending childish, accusatory e-mails to each other.

It wasn't easy being caught between them. Although I've always thought Julie was a tightwad too, I didn't take sides. But we stopped hanging out together as a group and it felt awkward when I was alone with either of them. Lydia asked me to talk to Julie for her, but I told her not to get me involved. And every time I met Julie, she would find something new to gossip about Lydia.

It's been two months and they still aren't talking. I refuse to take sides and I'm afraid to help them patch things up because it's really none of my business. I just want things to go back to how they were, for the awkwardness to disappear, and for the three of us to be able to hang out again. I'm worried that our friendship – as a threesome and with one another – has been forever damaged. – Mandy Ng, 37, entrepreneur

THE EXPERT'S VIEW "How you deal with this situation is important, because it's when you can prove whether you're a trustworthy, honest and reliable friend. I recommend that you remain neutral. Make it clear that you care about them and want to be there for them, but you won't take sides because they may attempt to pit you against the other or put you in the middle to solve the problem for them. They need to solve the issue themselves and your involvement may worsen things.

If one gossips to you about the other – listen, but don't reciprocate, as it might backfire on you. If you feel the need to agree with the friend who is bad-mouthing the other, ask yourself why you feel this way. Is it fear of losing the friend, or losing that sense of belonging? Are they bad-mouthing you when you're not around?

If one of them wants you to stop meeting the other, is it because of her controlling nature, selfishness, or does she feel threatened about losing you? Ask yourself if this is the kind of friend you want.

It's usually during an argument that you see a person's true colours. You may realise that you are not meant to be friends, especially if the argument gets very serious and starts affecting your own well-being. If this is the case, give yourself some space and allow things to cool down and heal before reassessing the friendship. You need to remember that you can control no one's actions or choices except yours. You can only support them without passing judgement and let them come to their own conclusions. In the end, their choice to stay friends and resolve the issue will be made with or without you." – Hiroko Kobayashi, counsellor, The Counselling Place

“I’m caught between two bosses”

My direct supervisor gave me a set of instructions to follow for a particular project and I agreed with her that this was the best way to tackle the problem. However, my big boss, who sits in a different office, disagreed. He wanted us to follow the “proper procedure” to solve the problem, but the way my direct supervisor and I see it, his solution won’t work. I don’t think he fully understands the situation, because he doesn’t interact with the clients on a daily basis.

I am still waiting for final instructions on how to proceed with solving the problem. I am frustrated, because I need an instant solution to get on with my job, but it’s hard when your bosses have opposing views.

I voiced my opinion, but I didn’t take sides or decide on the solution myself, because such big decisions have to be made by someone in senior management. Until my team and I get permission to go ahead from either boss, we cannot move forward. – **Carmen Low, 30, graphic designer**

THE EXPERTS’ VIEWS According to Hega Schultz, director of HS Coaching & Consulting, Career and Business Coaching, you should steer clear of the conflict and not take sides – it is not your task to solve this situation. It’s also important not to be negative about one boss or complain to one about the other. Instead, make work your main priority. “If one boss rants about the other, listen politely but don’t comment

on it, then change the subject,” says Hega. “Make it clear that you are not part of this relationship problem and are not willing to take sides. Meet with your bosses and discuss the matter, including deadlines and resources, and let them agree on the most efficient way to handle it. They should be specific about the desired results of the project, how to achieve them and give this to you in writing.

“It’s also a good idea to create a master list with all the duties, deadlines and priorities for the project and have your bosses agree on this before you start working on any of the tasks.”

Jonathan Kwan, principal at Kwantum Leap Career Coaching, shares similar advice. “The key is to make the process of solving the current problem as objective as possible. Start by sitting down with each boss independently. Try to understand their position, why they want things done a certain way, and what the risks and benefits of each solution are. Is the situation part of a bigger issue that you don’t yet know or understand?”

Next, he advises, objectively weigh the pros and cons of your available choices, and come up with additional options if possible. “Once you’ve spent time evaluating the possibilities, return to each of your bosses. Explain your thought process, the situations you considered, the criteria you used, and the possible options you arrived at. Offer them your preferred recommended solution, and then get their feedback. Make them part of the process in coming up with the final solution.”

But if that doesn’t work, under no circumstances should you bow out and ask your two bosses to sort it out among themselves. Says Paul Heng, founder, managing director, and executive coach at Next Career Consulting Group, Asia: “Do not be subordinate to both bosses. If your solution lands you in a Catch 22 situation, be firm, repeat what you’ve said and add:

‘Please let me know the decision and I will act accordingly, thank you.’ Maintain your composure and keep your emotions in check. In the event you are threatened with dismissal or other forms of detrimental action by one or both of your bosses, approach the HR department to seek advice or intervention.”

“My mum-in-law keeps pitting me against my maid”

My maid, Tandy, has been with me for three years. She is an excellent worker – responsible, trustworthy, loyal and does what she is told. However, my mum-in-law who lives with us, isn’t too fond of her. When I get home from work, she’ll complain about what Tandy did or didn’t do, and try to find some reason for me to get mad at Tandy. I think my mum-in-law is jealous of Tandy and wants to get her fired. Whatever the case, I don’t need the extra stress and I hate feeling like I need to take sides.

I honestly just want to tell my mum-in-law to mind her own business, but I don’t want to upset her; when she complains about Tandy, I tell her I’ll look into it. When Tandy made minor mistakes, I didn’t make a big deal of them. But my mum-in-law told her that those mistakes might cause her to lose her job.

Unfortunately, Tandy takes my mum-in-law’s threats seriously, and as a result, is afraid to tell me about any personal problems. I usually have to mediate when they argue. Tandy has even threatened to leave.”

– **Desiree Wong, 29, hotel executive**

THE EXPERT’S VIEW “Avoid taking things personally, as it will affect your ability to handle the situation objectively. Be aware of your emotions and where they’re coming from, before addressing the issue; if you already have some negative emotions towards your mum-in-law, the conflict may amplify these emotions and skew your assessment of the situation.

Choose the more pertinent issues to address – put yourself in their shoes so you can empathise with them and handle the situation in a sensitive manner. Talk to each party respectfully and help them see the other’s point of view, without putting anyone down.

It is unhelpful to take sides. Siding with your maid may break the trust between you and your mum-in-law; she may feel disrespected and this may also put your husband in a difficult position. Siding with your mum-in-law may cause your maid to feel unappreciated and as a result, affect the quality of her work.

Try and find out why your mum-in-law is unhappy

with the maid; explore what she would like to see changed and what areas she is willing to accommodate. To help her maintain a sense of dignity, assure her that giving way does not mean that she is in the wrong, and that everyone has a different style of doing things.

You also need to hear the maid’s point of view; validate her emotions and appreciate her intention to do her job well. Assure her that the way she does things may not be wrong, but people have their personal preferences. Ask her if she can follow your mum-in-law’s instructions in some situations to minimise conflicts. In addition, address her threat to leave, as this attitude can be

interpreted as being disrespectful to your mum-in-law. Firmly but gently remind her that this attitude is not helpful or productive. If the conflict cannot be resolved after several attempts to mediate and is affecting the atmosphere in the home, you will have to make a decision to change your maid.

Involving your husband may not be a sign of bowing out. It will be helpful to talk to him about the tension at home. He may be able to help, as he knows his mother better and may be able to deal with her directly. You can also get your hubby to talk to his mother while you talk to the maid. Getting his support will strengthen your relationship and prevent possible misunderstandings when you communicate with your mum-in-law.” – **Sarah Poh, programme manager for counselling, Focus on the Family Singapore sh**

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How would you handle being caught between two family members?

“My sister and Mum never got along, and I was always dragged into their petty squabbles. I once got so fed-up of having to mediate between them, I told them both off. I accused Mum of being a nag, and my sister of being childish and rude. That hurt weeks before the three of us were on speaking terms again.” – **Ellie*, 30, teacher**

“My teenage son had a huge argument with my husband, and I was asked to take sides. I thought my son was right, but my husband also had a few good points, so I sat them both down and told them what I thought. I got them to look at each other’s points of view and then they made up.” – **Doris*, 42, stay-at-home mum**

“A few months ago, things at home got really awkward when my parents had a massive fight and stopped talking for a while. Secretly, I thought Mum was right and Dad was acting immature, but I kept my opinions to myself. It was only when they asked me to be their go-between in order to communicate with each other, that I put my foot down and told them to get over their fight and make up.” – **Chrystal, 29, teacher**

*Names have been changed