

# How To Cope With Tricky Relationships

Difficult boss? Friend ignoring you? Our agony aunt, **Keren Smedley**, is here to help you put things right

## The best friend who dumps you

**S**tanding in the supermarket with a full trolley, I saw my friend Angela entering the shop. I smiled, feeling certain that she saw me – she was looking straight at me. But instead of responding, she reached down for a basket, turned her back and disappeared quickly down an aisle. If this had been an isolated incident, I would have told myself that she probably hadn't seen me. But it was the final nail in our friendship coffin.

We'd been best friends for around 10 years. We met once a month, usually for a meal. Sometimes it was just the two of us, but often we met with our

respective partners. We celebrated our birthdays together, and spoke on the phone regularly.

Then I separated from my husband. Angela was supportive about my break-up, but when my new man arrived on the scene, things started to slide. Whether this was coincidence or not, I have no idea. It shouldn't have affected our friendship, surely? She would arrange to meet up with me several times, then cancel at short notice. I sent her a birthday card, but she 'forgot' mine, and then no Christmas card arrived either.

I had no problem particularly with Angela not wanting to be friends with me any more. But I really wish she'd just had the courage to tell me, to save all the anxiety she caused. I felt she owed it to me. These days, I am much more wary of being too friendly with just one person and spread myself about a bit. I still have two good friends who live far away, but locally, I don't have a best friend any more.

Is there something that I should have done – or had our relationship simply run its course?

*Olivia, 64, London*

**Keren says:** 'We're quick to think, 'It must be me, my fault'. It's easy to walk away and withdraw as you did, but ideally this friend needs to be challenged. The only way to find out would be to ask why she's behaving like this. Something else may have been going on in her life that affected her behaviour and it might not have been anything to do with you. Unless you chat, you'll never know.'

## Relationships don't just happen

'All our relationships – with children, men and women, need to be nurtured – they don't just happen,' Keren says. 'We need to work at them continually to make them OK, so we shouldn't take any of them for granted. Our intentions may be honourable, but we don't know if our actions affect or upset other people, unless we ask them. Women are very good about talking about issues – sounding off to a close friend to get your ideas and thoughts in place may be a good idea – but discussing your 'difficult relationship' with everyone but the person involved is not a productive way forward.'

✦ [experience-matters.org.uk](http://experience-matters.org.uk)

Feature: Olivia Greenway. Illustrations: Joanna Kerr/New Division. \*Some names have been changed



## The daughter-in-law who snubs you

**I** had an acrimonious split from my partner when I discovered he'd had a child by another woman while he was still with me. As a result, I've never had an easy relationship with my son, Sam. He's the spitting image of his father and they adore each other. He's been with Adele, my daughter-in-law for nine years. Sadly, I wasn't invited to the wedding, which was two years ago.

She's a really sweet girl, but my son won't let her have anything to do with me. Once, she phoned me for advice after she'd had a row with Sam. He found out and was furious that she had had the temerity to discuss their relationship with me. She's hardly been in touch since. I'm disappointed she is so weak and accepting of the situation.

I suppose they will have children one day, but I know I won't be a welcome as a grandmother. It's heartbreaking. I have to say, Sam has a great job and I'm very proud of his success, but it still bothers me that we don't have a close relationship and that this impacts on my relationship with my daughter-in-law.

*Patsy, 54, Kent*

**Keren says:** 'The root cause of the problem from what you've said is the early relationship you had with your son. If things are going to change, you need to talk with him about his childhood, hear his thoughts, explain why you behaved as you did and how this is now impacting on your relationship with both of them. Until that is resolved, things won't change with his wife. She understandably is holding back because that is what he wants. Her loyalty will rightly be with him. Once you and Sam sort out the underlying issue, you will all be able to move forward.'

## The difficult boss at work

**I** was thrilled to get a senior job a few years into my career. But almost from the start, things were not right. My boss, Sally, was going through an acrimonious divorce – and she seemed to take it out on me. I learnt after a few weeks that my deputy had applied for my job, so she had it in for me, too.

When Sally undermined me in front of the others, it just played into the hands of my seething deputy. My usual experience of a friendly supportive atmosphere at work quickly turned into something unpleasant and toxic. I often stayed late to get through the work, as I really believed in what I was doing, but my boss would never praise me for doing this, and criticised me at every possible opportunity. I stuck it out for a year, thinking things might get better, but one morning we had a power cut that lasted all day. I tried to contact my boss, who wasn't in the office, but couldn't get hold of her. I decided that we should all work from our homes, as it was impossible to do anything in the office without power. The next morning, Sally went ballistic, saying it was a stupid decision.

*Monica, 42, Edinburgh*



**Keren says:** 'When you have a problem at work, you ideally need to raise the situation with the individual. If nothing changes or things become more difficult, you need to take it to their boss. It's best to tackle these issues early on and not let

them fester. You need support, from the HR department, your union or both. If others are also being bullied, talk with them and tackle this as a group. Advice on all sorts of work issues is available on the ACAS website ([acas.org.uk](http://acas.org.uk)).'