



MENDING FENCES BUILDING BRIDGES

A colorful illustration of diverse people in a mediation setting is integrated into the text. The illustration shows several individuals of various ethnicities and ages engaged in conversation. Some are seated at a table, while others stand. The style is flat and modern, with a focus on human connection and dialogue.

50 TALES OF MEDIATION
FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES



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for Stronger Communities

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FOREWORD

This year, Singapore marks her Golden Jubilee. Our nation's journey over the last five decades has been both challenging and exciting, and I am happy that we are celebrating this important milestone together as one people, united in heart and mind.

The Community Mediation Centre (CMC) and its volunteers have done 17 years of good work. They have played an important role in Singapore's dispute resolution landscape by supporting the resolution of relational disputes in the community. With the support and contributions of our volunteer mediators, the CMC has mediated a total of more than 7,500 cases in its history. These disputes have involved neighbours, family members and friends. Some of these disputes could have festered into more serious social and community problems.

Mediation is superior to litigation in many cases, particularly in the early stages of a relational dispute. Compared to litigation, mediation provides a more efficient and less acrimonious approach to resolving disputes, and helps to prevent a further breakdown of the relationship even after the conflict has been resolved. This is important because, in many cases, the long term relationship is much more important to both parties than the dispute at hand. However, a successful mediation depends on the willingness of parties to keep an open mind and to work towards a solution.

Over the years, the CMC has promoted the use of mediation as the preferred way to resolve relational disputes in the community. The CMC has worked closely with community partners to ensure that appropriate conflicts are referred to the CMC for resolution. Apart from providing mediation services, the CMC has also worked relentlessly to cultivate a culture of resolving conflicts constructively and to encourage good neighbourliness and considerate behaviour.

The stories in this book provide a glimpse into the work of our volunteer mediators. They highlight some of the challenges that many of you have experienced and overcome. They also convey the deep sense of satisfaction that comes from successfully helping parties to resolve a longstanding conflict. Whether between neighbours or family members, co-workers or friends, every successfully mediated dispute is testament to the commitment of our mediators.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to the CMC, its panel of community mediators and partners for helping to make our home, our Singapore, a better place to live in. I look forward to their continued support for many more years to come!



Ms Indraneel Rajah
Senior Minister of State for Law and Finance

MESSAGE

CHANGING HEARTS, INFLUENCING MINDS

I am happy to pen some thoughts on the occasion of this milestone publication by Singapore's very own Community Mediation Centre (CMC).

I am privileged to have spearheaded the movement to introduce community mediation in Singapore. In 1996, as Senior Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Law, I was appointed to chair a Committee on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) which researched and explored on how ADR processes, in particular, mediation could be further promoted in Singapore. With the findings gathered from a study visit to Australia and studies done on some US models, the committee adapted them to our local context and set out our recommendations in a 1997 report. The Government accepted the Report and with the passage of the Community Mediation Act in Parliament in January 1998, the first CMC was launched.

I am gratified that the CMC has lived up to its promise in the years since its founding. The process of mediation is a demanding one, requiring the mediator to possess not only strength of character, but a good measure of wisdom and patience as well. The functioning of the CMC is largely dependent on volunteers endowed with such qualities, giving up their time to attend to cases which may be complex and time-consuming. Over

the years, successive teams of committed staff have worked hard, making good headway in promoting the awareness of mediation and its benefits in resolving community disputes, partnering other community partners in a variety of activities ranging from talks to roadshows to community skits in the process. With the goal to building a mediation culture within the community, the CMC has also stepped up its efforts to equip the public with basic conflict management skills. One of such initiatives is the production of a self-help video on conflict management skills featuring 5 simple steps i.e. *F.O.C.U.S.*

The philosophy of mediation is one where creative options are generated towards an amicable solution to resolve issues faced by both parties. This only works when one takes responsibility for the issues and adopts an open mindset to work on possible solutions with the other party. The time is now ripe for us to take a leap forward to achieve an even greater goal: reshaping mindsets and influencing behaviour so that members of our society are willing and even motivated to settle any dispute in an amicable and positive way. It becomes a way of life! To do this, the benefits of mediating one's disputes must become eminently clear to all in Singapore.

There is really no magic formula to ensure that peace and harmony will remain the norm in society. But, a pervasive mediation culture will go a long way towards attaining this.

The CMC has built up a corps of motivated and trained volunteer community mediators comprising longstanding grassroots leaders and professionals with a heart to serve. With the passage of the Community Dispute Resolution Act, community mediation will be entering a new phase. I have no doubt that the CMC and its mediators will continue with their good work in promoting mediation as the preferred way to resolve community conflicts.

To all our mediators, stakeholders and staff, I say "let us press on resolutely!"



Fix it yourself
Objective
Communicate
Understand
Suggest solutions

*See the *F.O.C.U.S.* video at our website.



Assoc. Prof. Ho Peng Kee
Chairman
Advisory Committee on Community Mediation

PREFACE

Over the last 50 years, Singapore has grown from a small, newly founded state to a global metropolis. While we are now a peaceful and prosperous nation, the early years of our independence was marred by racial and communal conflicts. The kind of social harmony we enjoy today should therefore never be taken for granted. As Singapore moves towards a more diverse landscape, it is important that we continue to embrace diversity, to give and take, and to accommodate each other's different customs and ways of life. Nonetheless, conflicts are inevitable as long as there are differences between people. The timely use of mediation is one important and effective way to resolve social and community disputes. It also helps in fostering interactions between people in the community so that we continue to be a united and strongly bonded society.

With the setting up of the Community Mediation Centre (CMC) in 1998, the provision of its mediation services offers a viable alternative to resolve social and

community conflicts in a less confrontational manner and helps to prevent further damage to relationships when compared to litigation. The work of community mediators in resolving such conflicts amicably encourages harmonious living and contributes to the creation of a more cohesive and understanding Singaporean society.

This book entitled "50 Tales of Mediation for Stronger Communities" contains 50 stories, featuring different conflicts between neighbours, friends or families. Contributed by the CMC mediators, it is put together by the community mediation fraternity in commemoration of Singapore's 50th anniversary. While each conflict is unique, they are all common in the way that they often arise from refusal to communicate and to understand. Valuable lessons are gained by our mediators when facilitating the successful resolution of such conflicts. Through the nuances and salient elements accompanying each of these stories, we hope that this book will be a valuable guide not just to

Singaporeans, but anyone who is interested in finding out more about the nature of social and community conflicts in Singapore, the means of resolving them, and the useful lessons we can learn from them. Most often, when people are willing to listen and compromise, even the worse of disputes can be brought to an amicable outcome.

The publication of a book requires much effort and time. I would like to commend the work of the Community Mediation Unit (CMU) for making the compilation of this book possible. In particular, I would like to thank Elaine Teo for her invaluable assistance in co-editing this book.



Dr Lim Lan Yuan
Advisor
Community Mediation Unit

The
STORIES
begin...

Names and other identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals whose stories are portrayed in this publication.

THE SAD LITTLE DRUMMER BOY

Witnessing the misery a fellow human being is going through often makes us reflect on ourselves and tends to bring out the sense of empathy in us. Once we are enlightened, we are then able to think for the other person and be less self-absorbed. This particular story shows how sympathy and compassion that's brought out by the situation helped to bring a quarrel to a peaceful outcome.

Lek Kee could no longer stand the disturbance caused by his upstairs neighbour. There was often the banging of doors, sounds of cracking tiles and worst of all, drums beating in the night. Lek Kee had many times stormed up this neighbour's place to register his frustrations with Letchimi, the lady of the house.

During the mediation, Lek Kee's display of anger arising from the disturbance he faced was clear for all to see. However, this anger quickly subsided when Letchimi opened up to tell her side of the story, revealing how her own family was in fact going through trying times. She was headed for a divorce with her husband, and to add to her burden, was also facing financial woes.

The quarrels started when she found out that her husband was cheating on her. The daily slamming of doors was a result of such quarrels. The other strange

noise of cracking tiles that Lek Kee often heard was indeed the sound made by broken tiles. Without the means to replace such tiles in their aged flat, she resorted to using black tape to mend them so that they do not cut the feet of her children. As for the drumming, her son Arul had resorted to playing them more frequently to release the stress and frustrations brought on by his parents' quarrels and impending divorce.

In his heart, Lek Kee felt sorry for Letchimi's plight and was ashamed of his actions which had caused her undue stress. He felt that he could have approached the situation a little differently if only he had made an effort to get to know his neighbour first. With this new information, Lek Kee in fact became very proactive in wanting to help Letchimi with her situation in whatever way he could. Lek Kee also suggested certain music studios where Arul could practise his drumming at no cost, and was willing to reschedule his work hours during those periods when Arul was drumming at home.

Compassion aside, the sense of guilt in one party also contributed to the resolution of this case with a happy ending. When we are able to reflect on our actions and behaviour and how it could have affected the other party, there is hope that even the most bitter conflicts can see the light of day.

LOVE ME, LOVE MY LOVER

Jerlyn and Alvin, both in their 20s, never expected that falling in love would cause Jerlyn to fall out with those closest to her. The budding romance between Jerlyn and her neighbour, Alvin, was met with strong objection from her family when they came to know about it. For a while, it seemed that the young couple could never have a “happily ever after” story.

The young lovebirds’ romance became a problem as both her sister Jolyn and mother Madam Ong were convinced that Alvin was not the right guy for Jerlyn. Besides being neighbours, Alvin and Jerlyn had been friends with each other for a couple of years. Before they started dating half a year before, Alvin was seen to be with different girls every few months and that led to Jolyn and Madam Ong believing that he was a Casanova.

As Jerlyn got closer with Alvin, her relationship with Jolyn and Madam Ong became more distant. Jerlyn resented her family for trying to break them up when she felt that Alvin was perfect for her. A happy-go-lucky and open-minded girl, she believed that she and Alvin shared so much in common and had faith that their relationship would go the distance. This intrusion of her mom and sister into her love life inevitably soured their relationship.

While that was the main issue, it was also discovered that Jerlyn was also upset with Madam Ong for seemingly favouring Jolyn over her. She shared that this was particularly obvious after Jolyn’s delivery of a baby boy. Since then, Jolyn was staying with them and Madam Ong pulled out all the stops to make sure she was well taken of. This made Jerlyn go quite wild with jealousy. Their bickering became more frequent and heated, until one day, Jolyn had resorted to calling the police. The police suggested that the family consider mediation to “talk out” their unhappiness with each other, to which all three were agreeable.

During mediation, the mediators reminded the trio of the special relationship that they shared as a family, emphasising to them that blood was indeed thicker than water. While one may develop valuable relationships with others outside the family, one should also be mindful of the special ties and bond that family members share. Opening their heart and hearing each other out, it was obvious that all three members valued one another but were also at the same time deeply affected by each other’s actions or behaviour. Without voicing out such concerns, their misunderstandings deepened over time and eventually tore them apart. The mediators emphasised the need for this family to improve their communication. Instead of bickering, shouting and screaming, they should express their concerns by showing more love and talking it out calmly.



Towards the end of the session, while Madam Ong and Jolyn were still apprehensive about Alvin, they were agreeable to respect Jerlyn's choice, and promised to give their blessings to Jerlyn and Alvin if they do get married one day. From that session, Jolyn also had a better understanding of this special love that her family has for her which sometimes may hurt but should never be taken for granted. Thus, constant effort to communicate with your family members is perhaps the best way to keep that love alive and growing.

BLAME IT ON THE BIRDS



In this day and age, a seemingly trivial issue could instantly be blown out of proportion once it makes its way into cyberspace. The big quarrel between Lay Ying and her neighbour Ibrahim is perhaps just one of many such examples. What was a minor tiff that could have been settled easily with a friendly discussion soon made headline news in the estate – all thanks to birds and the Internet!

The two are proud owners of their brand new flats. Lay Ying, having invested substantially in the renovation of her unit, was all set to enjoy her new home with her family. Spending most of their weekends at home, they did not find the serenade by Ibrahim's proud collection of bulbul birds pleasing. In fact they would prefer that they be silenced.

Lay Ying, who is an avid blogger, decided that she should voice her discontent with her inconsiderate new neighbour on her personal blog and Facebook page. However, even she herself was not prepared for the flood of often damning comments that followed! One could only imagine how Ibrahim, the target of her stinging posts, must have felt upon finding out about his instant "fame" on the Internet.

While the situation have been blown out of proportion by anonymous contributors who fuelled the discussions online, the dispute itself was however relatively easy to manage because the parties involved were quite forthcoming in generating possible solutions to put things to a rest. Both have made sizeable financial commitments for their new homes and of course intended to make the best of their stay there. This important common ground allowed the mediators to successfully guide the two to arrive at a compromise that both could live with.

Lay Ying had, in fact, removed her online postings not long after putting them up and actually felt quite apologetic about them. Ibrahim also revealed that he was personally quite an easy going guy. He had shared that, after several reminders by his girlfriend about the possible disturbances that his birds could have caused to their new neighbours, he had in fact covered up their cages with cloth and installed curtains to "soften" such noise.

While the resolution was reached quite smoothly in this story, it also shows us how sometimes an impulsive comment made online could very well take a life of its own and result in damaging consequences which was never our intention. When posting your views and comments online, do it wisely and with discretion. If you have a problem with someone, why resort to the keyboard to express your displeasure? You would be denying yourself the opportunity to voice your concerns to him personally, and in the process also get to know him.

NO POLICE, PLEASE!

When neighbours quarrel over noise matters, it is common for the police to be called in. While this may seem to be a logical and more direct way to deal with the issue, it tends to have a damaging effect on the relationship between the neighbours. This is especially so when one party sees red after being visited by the men in blue a little too often. This was the case with Milton and Keat Song, who are upstairs-downstairs neighbours.

Milton, a young father, was exasperated with the noises coming from his upstairs neighbour. Loud conversations and sounds made by the dragging of furniture were often heard from that unit, occurring even during the wee hours of the morning. Milton was perturbed especially when his two-year old daughter, who is a light sleeper, was roused up from her sleep by such noises. Such a situation is made worse whenever his daughter fell sick.

As what most people would do, Milton reported such noise issues to the police on several occasions, asking them to convey his message to the upstairs neighbour to stop the noise. That, however, did not help matters and the police suggested that the two neighbours gave mediation a try. It turned out to be a surprise for both, when their longstanding dispute was settled quite speedily through that mediation session! As in many other similar cases, the two parties had never actually communicated with each other. They were too busy venting their anger at each other, each making out the other to be the “troublemaker”.

The mediation session provided an opportunity for the two neighbours to explain their situation to each other, in the presence of the mediators. Milton was quite placated after Keat Song shared on the various efforts that he had made to keep the noise level down after the first visit from the police. Keat Song further highlighted that some of Milton’s allegations on the loud conversations were untrue as he himself also experienced such noises. He commented that such noises could therefore be from their older neighbour (an old man who is hard of hearing) or from the void deck below their block. Above all, he had been staying in his apartment for a long time and felt embarrassed when the other neighbours see the police knocking on his door.

Upon realising that each was not really the “bad neighbour” the other thought he was, the two parties agreed to exchange phone numbers and contact each other should any similar problem arise in future. If only Milton had approached Keat Song on the noise that was disturbing him in the first place and allowed Keat Song to empathise with his situation, without involving the men in blue! Calling the police, if anything, should be a last resort for issues regarding noise unless your personal safety happens to be threatened. Sometimes, getting the authorities to take up the matter may result in your neighbour becoming defensive and thus create a bigger rift between the two of you, when in fact, things could be amicably resolved as long as you are willing to talk and listen.

FROM BAD TO BEST NEIGHBOUR, ALL IN A DAY

Karaoke is a popular pastime and by itself, a good way to relax and unwind. However, when the singing starts getting on the nerves of others, one may be singing his or her way to someone's displeasure. Dorothy, the singer in this instance, stayed with her dad, Mr Loo. Their neighbour, school teacher, Ron, certainly didn't find Dorothy's crooning to be music to his ears. And that wasn't all he was unhappy about.

Not only was Ron not a fan of Dorothy's musical performances, he was also increasingly irritated by the Loo family's mini collection of household items that was crowding the corridor and stairwell. Ron felt that this intruded into the common space and obstructed his movement. More importantly, they could very well be fire hazards. As Ron was a very quiet and shy guy, he felt uneasy to approach his neighbour to speak to him about his discomfort with the situation. As such, he thought that it would be much easier to raise his unhappiness by complaining to the Town Council.



Mr Loo, on the other hand, was a vocal and aggressive old man. He felt that Ron was an arrogant young man who had no respect for his seniors. He was angry with Ron for calling up the authorities on the slightest pretext and felt that Ron was creating a mountain out of a molehill regarding his items along the corridor. He was particularly upset with Ron's behaviour at a previous meeting held at the Town Council office to settle the issue, during when Ron banged the table midway through the discussion.

Noting the different personalities of the parties, the mediators decided to facilitate the discussion by adopting an approach in which both parties enjoyed equal "air time" to voice out their grievances. This also helped to prevent the more vocal party from dominating the discussion.

The mediators went on to relate a true story where two children, who were left alone at home, accidentally started a fire. A tragedy was avoided due to a caring neighbour who came to their rescue. The mediators wanted to use the story to remind the parties how important it is to have a good relationship with your neighbour and how a relative from a far distance could not be compared to a nearby neighbour, especially in times of emergency.

While Ron seemed to be pondering after the narration of the story, Mr Loo, on the other hand, remained unmoved. The discussion then continued with Mr Loo boasting about his past glory, where he shed some insights on his illustrious career achievements, including having led an army of employees. As he shared his story, he got increasingly emotional relating how in the end, now that he's already old, he was seen as irrelevant and useless. At one point, he even stood up, raised his fist and pounded heavily on his chest stating that "Youngsters nowadays have no respect for their elders and think that they are almighty!" The mediators complimented Mr Loo on his past achievements and how the young employees in his time would have benefitted from his leadership. That somehow struck a chord with Mr Loo and helped to calm him down.

To everyone's surprise, Ron, who was quiet all this while, suddenly shifted himself to face Mr Loo, extended both his hands and said "I'm sorry" to the older man. Not only did that melt Mr Loo's heart, he even gave Ron a hug on the spot.

Sometimes, finding the right buttons and pressing them at the right time could be the way to bring out the love for your neighbour!

CALLING UPON HIGHER POWERS? TRY TALKING INSTEAD

A simple misunderstanding may sometimes lead to an argument. If the argument escalates to something more intense and is not resolved promptly, it may end up being a prolonged and damaging dispute. The conflict between the Wong family and their neighbours, the Tees, was sparked off when Mr Wong placed a religious object outside his flat. After he did so, Mrs Tee felt that the gesture was unfriendly and believed that such an action had resulted in the series of unfortunate events faced by her in recent weeks. To counter such “effects” caused by the religious object, she too adopted a similar tactic and a full-fledged war soon ensued.

Prior to this so-called conflict and in fact ever since the Tee family moved in, the two families were sharing an unhappy history. The Wong family complained of the Tees’ nasty habit of peering through their windows whenever they walked pass their flat. They were also frustrated by the loud volume from their neighbours’ TV set and felt such action was deliberate. The Wong family had confronted the Tees and even made several police reports over such issues; the Tees, on their part, were glad to reciprocate with a torrent of verbal abuse. The Tee family was themselves aggrieved by the Wongs for their inconsiderate action in obstructing the common walkway with their bicycles and other objects.

The last straw in their series of “unreasonable” behaviour was delivered when Mr Wong put out the religious object, which made the Tees conclude that the Wongs were resorting to using the supernatural to keep them at bay.

But, were they angry enough to want this feud to go on forever? Apparently not. The first thing that the mediator sensed about the “war” between the Wongs and the Tees was that they actually wanted to end this long-drawn feud between them. However, the perceived “loss of face” if either party was to give in or admit that they were “wrong” in the first place prevented them from resolving the series of misunderstandings that fuelled this dispute. Not only was such a conflict unnecessary, it caused them much tension and stress with the constant fighting that was involved.

When the mediation session finally took place, it provided a suitable opportunity for the parties to address their unhappiness which had been accumulated over the years. The session turned out to be much more civil than expected, with a minimum of verbal abuse from either party. The mediators zeroed in on the two families’ eagerness to put an end to the feud, giving both equal amounts of time to first air their respective grievances.

Using a mix of dialects which the two families were more conversant with, the mediators gradually drew out the issues that ignited their quarrels. Both families soon came to realise that whatever they had been fighting over was simply not worth the fight. As it turned out, Mr Wong’s recent conversion to a certain religion required him to place that object outside his flat as a means to protect his own family. It was never meant to be a move to harm the Tee family. If only the Tees had approached them politely on this matter to seek a better understanding, the entire story might have played out differently, without any supernatural power being called upon!

ONE STEP BACK, TWO STEPS AHEAD

In using mediation to resolve a conflict, the mindset of the disputing parties is crucial. They must be willing to work with each other to find a solution to their issue and their demands or expectations on the proposed solution should be realistic.

Soo Hoon and her upstairs neighbour, Melissa, are both ladies with strong characters. When noise became an issue to fight over, theirs was a head-on clash! Neither would budge, with Soo Hoon insisting that all the noise created by Melissa be put to an immediate stop. Melissa, on the other hand, rebutted by saying that she had all the right to do whatever she wanted in her own house.

The feud began when Soo Hoon could no longer put up with the noise coming from Melissa's unit. Soo Hoon could not understand how and why so much noise could come out from anyone's house like it did from Melissa's. Such noises included the frequent dropping of items on the floor, loud footsteps, furniture being dragged all over the place, and people arguing violently – Soo Hoon had enough of the disturbance, and did not think twice about lodging police reports against Melissa's family, and surfacing the problem to HDB and the Town Council.

When the noises didn't seem to go away even after all these, the two parties grudgingly agreed to attend mediation, as advised by all the authorities. Both came with no intention to give in to the other party, as each believed that the other was at fault. It took the

mediators some time before getting both of them to each take a small step back and see the bigger picture, so they can hopefully move forward towards improving the situation.

Melissa was adamant at first and felt that what went on in her house was part of her personal life, so who was Soo Hoon to dictate what she should or should not do? She was upset with Soo Hoon, as she felt that as a woman, she could have been more empathetic to her situation as a working mother having to struggle with two young twins. This was made worse by Soo Hoon's reports to the police, as the numerous visits from the police frightened her children each time it happened. Soo Hoon, on the other hand, stubbornly defended her right to enjoy peace and quiet in her house.

What appeared to be a dead end actually opened up a door of opportunity to improve the situation. The mediators put in relentless efforts to review the "demands" from both parties, aimed at narrowing the differences between them and helping them reach a solution. Soo Hoon no longer insisted that all the noise be brought to an instant and complete stop and Melissa also agreed to heed the suggestions generated during the discussion to reduce the noise created by her family.

When there seems no other way to settle differences, taking one step back can often help everyone move a few steps forward instead. Sometimes, a small compromise is all it takes to resolve even the worst of disputes!

BLOOD IS THICKER THAN A 2-STOREY SHOPHOUSE

Is a piece of property, valuable as it is in land-scarce Singapore, worth more than a happy family? Different people may have different answers to that, but those who have been through bitter fights over a family property can tell you that nothing is as priceless as a loving and caring family.

The siblings of the Liu family had grown apart over the years as each of them pursued their own dreams. The eldest daughter in the family, Peng Leng, had two sisters Peng Ching and Peng Gek and one brother Peng Siong, who was the youngest. Besides their conflicting views whenever they were confronted with any issue due to their differing temperaments, the Lius were also burdened by their mother's illness which required them to all contribute towards her care.

The entire situation came to a head when one day, Peng Leng announced to the other siblings that she wanted to rent out part of a 2-storey shophouse unit bought by their parents some years ago. When their mother suffered a stroke two months prior to that, Peng Leng, being the eldest of the family, took up the main responsibility of providing care for her. She claimed that the costs for that came up to some \$6,500 a month, and rental from the shophouse would help relieve the burden of such expenses.

With all members of the family each having a share of the shophouse, a huge battle loomed on the horizon. It was at this point that they felt that a neutral third party (mediator) could help resolve their disagreement on the matter. That turned out to be the best decision that they have ever made as a family.

The mediators started by highlighting to the siblings that the so-called "problem" they faced was similar to many other family dispute cases that had come to CMC for resolution. They then shared on how in most of these cases, as long as all parties have the heart and are willing to resolve the issue, the matter will eventually be solved no matter how hard it is. The mediators also reminded the siblings of the special relationship and bond that they shared despite whatever differences they might have.

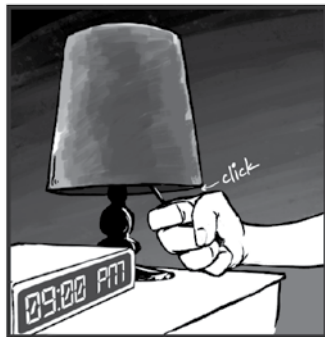
Besides the skill of the mediators, it also helped that they listed down possible scenarios and solutions generated from the discussion on the whiteboard in the mediation room, so as to keep the siblings' attention solely on the issue at hand. Such a move was aimed at drawing their focus on attaining a practical solution towards their problem, rather than letting themselves be distracted by purely emotional issues. With cool heads prevailing and after some four long hours of deliberation, a compromise was finally reached.

Everyone agreed that the shophouse could be rented out, and a certain portion of the rental collected would be contributed towards the care of their mother. It was also agreed that the youngest sibling, Peng Siong, will help share the responsibility of caring for their mother, with him voluntarily promising that he would continue with all the treatments and care routines Peng Leng had been providing her all the while.

With the last signature finally put onto the settlement agreement, the siblings managed to step over one huge obstacle together. Even if they might not have gotten over all their differences, this could be one small step towards setting them off towards becoming a much closer family than they ever were before.



STOPPING THE NOISE BY NOT KEEPING QUIET



It's not hard to imagine how irritated one can get if his or her sleep is rudely interrupted by unwelcome noise, night after night. And that was exactly the problem that was confronting Randolph and his family, thanks to his upstairs neighbour.

At all kinds of hours during the night, the sound of some kind of movement came through the ceiling and into Randolph's master bedroom from the unit just above, which was occupied by Mr Arumugam. Understandably, Randolph was peeved and ready to pick a quarrel with him. But fortunately, he decided to seek CMC's help, allowing this potentially explosive situation to be quite happily defused.

When the two came down for the mediation, it turned out that Arumugam had been having an equally trying time. His recently bereaved wife was suffering from a terminal illness, and needing assistance to go to the toilet several times a night. It was inevitable that some noise be made. However, after his wife's death, Arumugam was no longer occupying the master bedroom which his wife had been sleeping in.

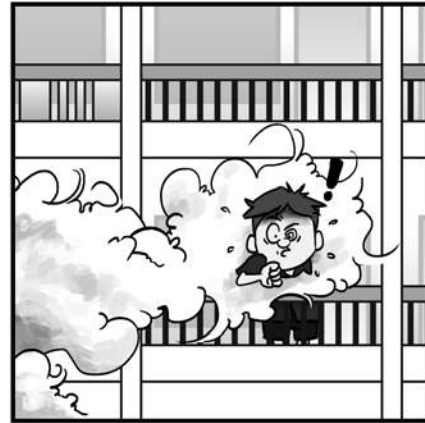
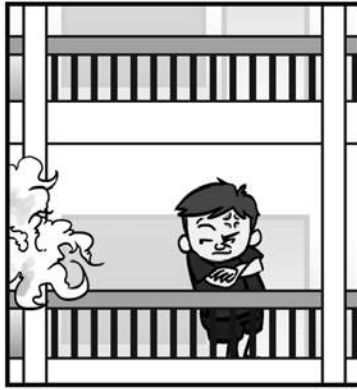
Not surprisingly, Randolph became quite sympathetic to Arumugam's situation after knowing his sad story, and was happy not to pursue the matter any further. Human as we all are, we tend to be more forgiving when aware of the other party's misfortunes. But that was not all. The mediators in this case took pains to ensure both parties explained their own situations clearly to the other. In disputes involving noise, it helps to find out how and why the noise has been generated – this was an important factor which helped Randolph and Arumugam to open up their eyes and heart and successfully reach a resolution to their problem.

Apart from the open and honest discussion, another plus point was the mutual respect both parties had as neighbours. They came willing and prepared to settle the issue, and with the help of the mediators, were able to come to an understanding with each other. Not only was the mystery of the unwelcome noise solved, a new friendship started to blossom between the neighbours!



WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S FIRE

Every night at Kian Seng's balcony...



Every day at Ryan's office...



On the way home...

Ryan is Kian Seng's neighbour.



A good relationship with your neighbour may take much effort and very often requires many years to build. It definitely does help to exercise a little thoughtfulness to ensure that the effort you have invested in such relationship does not go up in smoke.

Kian Seng had for a long while been upset with the cigarette smoke that regularly made its way to his balcony from the neighbouring unit occupied by Ryan. Every night, Ryan will hang out at his balcony for about 30 minutes just to smoke. To Ryan, that helped him wind down after a hard day's work. However, he didn't realise that the smoke drifting over to Kian Seng's balcony had caused this neighbour much dismay. Kian Seng was concerned about the harmful effects of the smoke on his family's and his own health, in particular, his young daughter who was asthmatic. He felt that they had become victims of second hand smoke caused by Ryan's inconsiderate action.

As it turned out, the two neighbours had never even exchanged a single greeting before – it was only in the mediation room that they spoke to each other for the first time! In fact, as they started talking and voicing their concerns and views on the issue, the mediators were able to uncover the key issue that was blurred by all that smoke and causing the problem to be blown out of hand. When that was accomplished, an amicable settlement was actually possible despite both parties being seemingly uncompromising at first.

From the onset, Ryan portrayed himself to be a very difficult person, stating firmly that everyone was entitled to their freedom and no one had the right to stop him from smoking on his balcony if he wanted to. However, this was actually a front put up by Ryan and his retaliation for Kian Seng's approach to the issue. It was learned that Ryan was in fact annoyed by Kian Seng's melodramatic reaction to the issue, where he

had lodged various complaints to the HDB and Town Council. In Ryan's view, this was a trivial issue and Kian Seng could have simply knock on his door and talked things over with him. Ryan was also frustrated that Kian Seng's action had given him "black marks" on his otherwise clean record with the authorities.

After breaking down this front that Ryan had put up, the mediators further worked together with the two neighbours to develop their empathy for each other's situation so as to form a common understanding between them. Finally, a mutual agreement was reached where Ryan was willing to reduce such smoking sessions to three days a week on the balcony and Kian Seng would also refrain from going to the balcony the same days. The two were also agreeable to working on their relationship, promising to approach each other directly on such issues should they wish to discuss any changes to their arrangement in future.



As in many disputes concerning cigarette smoke like this one, a conflict was unnecessarily fired up between the two parties. While each may have their standpoint on the issue, a solution can still be reached when both parties are willing to take a step back and empathise with each other's situation.

BREAK THE ICE, STOP THE NOISE

While mediation could serve as an effective tool to resolve disputes, it should never be a mechanical process. Mediators are after all, dealing with human beings and a keen understanding of the human nature is often the key to finding the right solution. When one is able to appeal to the better side of human nature, even the most impossible of situations can sometimes end with smiles and handshakes. Such was the case with Susan and her upstairs neighbour, Suan Leng.

For a long time, Susan had thought she was hearing noises coming from the unit upstairs. It was as if someone was hard at work with machines in the dead of the night. Yet, each time she went up to confront Suan Leng, the latter simply snapped at her, claiming that her hallucinations were driving her crazy. The bickering snowballed with time, resulting in the relationship between the 20-year neighbours deteriorating to freezing point.

The very first thing that the mediators noted when the two neighbours came for their session was their belligerent body language. Both refused to face each other and had their arms folded. Whenever Suan Leng spoke, Susan even resorted to making rude mocking noises. After spending hours encouraging the two to open up and try working with each other to find some compromise, it was obvious that such efforts would be futile and the mediators were in need of a new approach.

In order to break the tension between the two, the mediators decided to adopt a different strategy. Taking Susan to one side and showing their empathy towards her situation, the mediators were able to establish a rapport with her. Once that rapport was built, Susan was more forthcoming in working with the mediators on the key issue that was affecting her – she was being denied a good night's rest after a hard day's work, which was all she wanted. It was learned that due to the work stress that Susan faced, she suffered from sleep disorders that meant she valued her rest even more. When that "ice" was broken, Susan appeared much friendlier and softer. After witnessing this change in attitude and understanding Susan's condition, Suan Leng in turn also became more polite in her responses and even volunteered to give Susan her phone number. She explained that Susan could give her a call if she encountered such noises again, so that they could work out some solution together.

Sometimes when both sides in a conflict do not seem to want to give in to one another, pulling them apart for a while and getting just one of them to simmer down could help turn the situation around. It is said that a gentle word can turn away anger. Sometimes, kindness can indeed break down walls when reason cannot - that's just human nature!

“SORRY” IS THE MAGIC WORD THAT ALWAYS WORKS

Many disputes arise between people not over tangible things, but rather over hurt feelings and the loss of face. This is especially true in Asian cultures, where a high premium is placed on personal pride and dignity. Losing face is not lightly tolerated, and the person in question will do everything he can to win it back.

Kok Meng was dropping his passenger at a downtown hotel one day and taking some time to return the passenger his change for the fare. A minute later, James drove his taxi into the driveway behind Kok Meng’s taxi. After waiting for some time and with Kok Meng’s taxi still not moving forward after he sounded his horn, James got frustrated and stormed out of his cab to confront him. An argument followed, with James waving his fist and shouting at Kok Meng. The latter was irritated by James behaviour and retaliated by refusing to move his cab, until a hotel staff came out to request for Kok Meng to drive off.

During the session, it turned out that the supposedly calmer party of the two, Kok Meng, was in fact much more unwilling to settle the dispute. That was perhaps because Kok Meng felt that he was the victim in their brief but stormy encounter. Kok Meng was much older than James and resented the fact that he had been verbally abused by James, with the latter screaming that he was “stupid and not fit to be a taxi driver” in the presence of his passenger. As Kok Meng sees himself as a senior in the industry, he could not accept the loss

of face that James’ action had caused him. Kok Meng demanded for James to apologise and hand over \$300 as compensation for the damage to his reputation.

While James realised he could have been a little rash in his own words and actions, he argued that Kok Meng was also at fault when he refused to budge and was obstructing the common driveway. The mediators took time to talk to both parties separately and guided them to see the bigger picture in the situation. The session concluded with Kok Meng accepting a token sum of \$50 from James as compensation towards the damage done to his reputation. Kok Meng then declared that he would donate this \$50 to a charitable organisation for the elderly.

It was clear to the mediators that what Kok Meng wanted was simply an apology from James. As James’ senior, Kok Meng felt humiliated by James when he confronted him in front of a stranger and made him lose face. While the initial issue raised was apparently about seeking compensation, it was never the money involved that Kok Meng was after. Most often, in a dispute such as this one, the real issues could be lying under the surface, requiring some probing by the mediators before they can be uncovered.

A simple “sorry” could sometimes be the magic word that puts an end to a fiery fight. That’s one important lesson our two cabbies and everyone else should learn!

I SMELL A PROBLEM, DO YOU?

As a society progresses, besides becoming more prosperous, it should ideally also be one that is gracious. Every member of that society must play his or her part to be sensitive and tolerant of each other's differences, if there is to be peace and harmony.

Sherin had moved into her apartment two years before. Since then, she had been bothered by the smell of urine lingering just in front of her door. She suspected her elderly neighbours, the Chows, of intentionally urinating there. She believed that must be the reason the unpleasant smell did not appear to bother the Chows at all. To rectify the situation, Sherin washed her doors, grille gate and the floor area in front of her unit on a regular basis. She claimed that as she was performing this tedious routine one day, the Chows suddenly charged into her place, shouting at her rudely for accusing them of causing the smell. During the heated exchange, her elderly but still fiery neighbours even threatened to throw animal faeces into her home if Sherin continued with her allegations against them.

The Chows were accompanied by their son, Boon Keat, when they arrived for the mediation session. It turned out to be an emotional one. The mediators' immediate task was to get both parties to calm down. Private sessions were called shortly afterwards so as to break the impasse and help both sides get to the root of their problem. Once they started off, Boon Keat shared with the mediators that he and his parents had been staying in the same unit for almost 30 years. He explained that for many years, they had "suffered" the unpleasant smell from the urine and droppings of stray cats, due to the irresponsible act of a certain neighbour who fed the cats daily and never bothered to clean up after them. However, they didn't

want to make a big deal of it and tolerated the smell for so long that it no longer bothered them. And he swore it was definitely not his parents who urinated at the common area, as Sherin had accused them of. He felt that she was unreasonable and ridiculous to make such unfounded accusations about his parents.

Sherin was observed to be a sensitive person, who seemed to be disturbed by the stench and very affected by the recent incident where the elderly couple had threatened her. However, after hearing Boon Keat's explanation, she appeared surprised and became more willing to explore possible options to overcome what to her were distressing issues. With this positive progress, Sherin was asked by the mediators about her expectations if a resolution between herself and her neighbours were to be reached. In fact, while Sherin's behaviour showed that she was badly affected by the elderly couple's offensive comments and behaviour during their previous confrontation, she was now a little more understanding of their dilemma. All she asked for was nothing more than an apology from the Chows.

Being the bigger man and after witnessing Sherin's reactions, Boon Keat did not hesitate much in apologising. In fact, he honestly felt that the squabbles between his parents and Sherin should have come to an end much sooner. At the same time, he felt quite apologetic about his parents' rather crude behaviour. So, while emotions can sometimes escalate even in the mediation room itself, helping both parties in conflict appreciate the importance of being sensitive and exercising tolerance may help to remove misperceptions and make it much easier for them to work towards a resolution.

TO SELL OR NOT TO SELL, THAT'S THE QUESTION

Having a roof over one's head is a privilege many of us are able to enjoy in Singapore, but the same piece of property that provides shelter for a family can often become the reason they get torn apart.

Kim Huat and his two sons, Guan Eng and Guan Seng, jointly own a 4-room flat. He had been pestering his sons to sell the flat so that he could get his hands on some much needed cash. As Kim Huat claimed, the money he needed was critical as his two sons had not been providing him with any financial support, which resulted in him sometimes not having any meals. This was an allegation strongly refuted by the two brothers.

With Kim Huat dead set on selling off the flat and his sons stubbornly objecting to the idea, the mediation did not seem to make any headway. It was also an emotional session, with a lot of tears flowing during the discussion.

As the parties were observed to have many things that they wished to voice out, each were given ample time to air their grievances about the other. This is often a critical part of the mediation process, as it allows all parties involved to let out their pent-up frustrations, after which they become calmer. So in this case, after the parties had calmed down sufficiently, the mediator was able to start questioning them so as to gain more information to help them identify the issues really affecting them.

As it were, they found out that the sons were in fact quite filial and willing to take care of their father. However, Kim Huat was a habitual gambler, which explained why the sons had resorted to giving him allowances in small instalments. For the same reason, they were also worried that should the flat be sold, the father would gamble away all the proceeds he receive and the same problem would recur.

With this understanding, the mediators continued working with the two sons to reach a feasible arrangement, taking into account their relational and financial situations. They finally came to an agreement to rent out the flat, with the rental income collected to be handed over to Kim Huat in two instalments every month. The proposal was acceptable to Kim Huat because he would be getting more money than he had under the previous arrangement with his two sons. The two sons too had no objection as they also achieved their objective, which was to retain their flat and not risk their dad gambling away all his money.



KEEPING QUIET MAY NOT MAKE US HAPPY

Living in close proximity to each other in our urbanised environment, noise is one problem that sparks off many quarrels among neighbours. While this may be a common problem, it should never turn neighbours into enemies. More often than not, it is not the noise but the silence between two neighbours that threatens to turn things ugly.

Joel lives with his mother and younger brother. He could not stand his next-door neighbour, Mohan and his family, and not being able to understand why this family was always so noisy, especially in the middle of the night. Noises such as things being dragged around or dropped, or people yelling and screaming at each other came often from this unruly neighbour. Joel claimed that the noise was so bad that he had become exasperated, wanting very badly for it to be stopped.

When the mediation finally took place, Joel arrived at the session without much hope for the issue to have any resolution. He was of the view that Mohan was an unreasonable person and his family a problematic one. However, as they gradually opened themselves up to each other with the help of the mediator, his impression of his noisy neighbour began to change gradually.

Mohan was not the gruffy person Joel expected to meet. In fact, he was rather affable and soft spoken! Up till then, Joel had never attempted to talk to him, even though the noise bothered him so much. The yellings and other noises that emerged from Mohan's unit made Joel believe that Mohan was a hooligan and thus he thought it was better not to approach him or

his family directly to raise the issue. This was his very "first" encounter with Mohan and over the course of the session, Joel got to know more about Mohan and his family's challenges. Mohan was a security guard and the sole breadwinner of his family, comprising his wife, three children and his elderly mother. With his meagre earnings and increasing challenges to support the family, his relationship with his wife became strained. To make things worse, his shift work meant that only his wife was left to take care of his three young kids and his elderly mother, which stressed her out. All these resulted in the couple quarrelling regularly and the different kinds of noises that Joel experienced.

Getting to know Uncle Mohan better, Joel became more approachable towards him, even managing a smile at times. When the misperception was cleared, Joel also opened up to Mohan and requested for his help to keep the noise down, especially after 11pm because his family needed their rest. Mohan was apologetic for the disturbance caused to Joel and his family and promised that he would do his best to keep any yelling and screaming to a minimum, even if he could not promise to immediately stop quarrelling with his wife. Joel also assured Mohan that he and his family would help to look out for Mohan's wife if she required help with the care of their kids.

When it gets noisy, instead of keeping quiet, start talking. Communication is still the best way to break down barriers to better understanding and happier neighbours!

HELLO, WRONG NUMBER

We all make, and receive phone calls every day. However, when someone calls us at unholy hours every night for no good reason, it's hard not to get upset. That was exactly what happened to Elena, a Briton who was here teaching English in a private school. The worst part of it was, she hardly had a clue as to why she was the unfortunate victim.

The nightly prank calls affected Elena so much that she could not concentrate during the day. Sometimes, the mysterious caller remained totally silent. At other times, he mockingly reminded her that "it was time for a toilet break." Unable to put up with it anymore, Elena requested for the call to be traced, and eventually, it was found that a certain taxi driver by the name of Kah Heng was behind those prank calls. That puzzled Elena even more, because she didn't recall ever knowing such a person or having any dealing with him.

It was only when both of them met up for the mediation that the whole mystery was unveiled, and what a great misunderstanding it had all been! Kah Heng's nightly call turned out to be nothing more than an act of "revenge" for the inconvenience Elena had caused him that fateful day. When Kah Heng arrived at the location indicated by Elena, she was nowhere to be found. However, when there was another taxi that drove past his, he noticed this Briton flagging it down and hopping onboard! This infuriated Kah Heng, especially when he had been waiting for her for quite a long while. Kah Heng's frustration might have been understandable, but he took his "revenge" a little too far.

It turned out that there was another staircase landing in the building where Elena had been waiting for Kah Heng's taxi to arrive. After waiting for some time and still not seeing Kah Heng's car, Elena quickly jumped onto the other taxi when she saw it as she was running late for a meeting.

As the mediators spoke to Kah Heng, they realised that his anger did not arise from this one incident. His ranting against foreigners "robbing our jobs" made it clear that his prejudice against them was also a big factor behind his mischief. As he saw it, these foreigners were the reason why a local like him ended up having to drive the taxi to supplement his meagre income as a labourer. However, with Elena clarifying the misunderstanding, Kah Heng was seen to show signs of remorse, understanding that his action was uncalled for, especially since Elena did no wrong.

Due to the distress suffered by Elena because of Kah Heng's act of vengeance, she was not ready to let the issue go so easily. However, Elena was also guided by the mediators to understand and in some way sympathise with Kah Heng's hard luck in life. As such, she finally settled for a written apology from Kah Heng, where he promised that he would never repeat his prank calls on her again.

Before you press those buttons, be sure you are calling the right person, and for the right reasons. Making the wrong kinds of call will not only trouble the person at the other end of the line, but get yourself into hot soup too!

PLAY YOUR PART, IF MOM'S STILL IN YOUR HEART

Having given much of their lives in bringing up their children, parents naturally expect these children to return the favour by taking good care of them in their old age. In reality, this may sometimes not be the case. Caring for aged parents is not an easy task and a common cause for siblings to fall out with each other. The Khan family was undergoing just such a crisis, but not all was lost because the ties that bound them as a family still existed and they just needed a little help to realise that.

Madam Kumira was under the care of her daughter, Zeera, since she fell sick and became less mobile three years before. Despite Zeera showering her mother with much love and concern, Madam Kumira did not seem to appreciate her efforts and sometimes even hurled abuses at her for being clumsy. As Zeera needed to spend much of her time caring for her mother, it was rather challenging for her to find proper work. It was not long after that she faced financial issues. Coupled with Madam Kumira's cranky and often unreasonable demands, Zeera felt the burden on her shoulders was too heavy and almost fell into a state of depression.

Unable to cope with the issues in her life and her mother's demands, Zeera wanted her brothers – Ashok, Aman and Rohan to also play their part to help

care for their mother. When all the siblings came for the mediation, it appeared that they were not so much unwilling to look after their mom but more worried about finding an arrangement that was workable for everyone.

Seeing that all the sons still had Madam Kumira in their heart and were open to hearing what each other had to say on the possible arrangements, the mediators worked with the siblings to tackle the main issue at hand. All the sons, except Ashok, were not doing well financially. This was also the chief reason why Aman and Rohan had never volunteered to look after their mother. In fact, Aman was staying together with his wife at his in-laws' home. Rohan, on the other hand, being an odd-job worker, was thankful that his current workplace allowed him to stay in as he did not have a place of his own. Ashok, being a successful businessman, was doing better than his two brothers. He thus seemed to be the only one with the means to shoulder the responsibility. However, it was revealed during the session that Ashok left home at a young age and was not in frequent contact with his family since then. As such, he was never close to his mother or his siblings. Despite that, he still showed respect for the elderly woman and expressed willingness to contribute towards Madam Kumira's needs.

Family disputes usually require a lot of tact and sensitivity on the part of the mediators as they tend to be more complex and intense. While there were many other emotions and issues involved in this particular relational dispute, a resolution was still possible. Given that the siblings did open up and share about their respective challenges, and were also willing to explore viable arrangements to deal with the issue at hand, a set of solutions was generated with a little help from the mediators. Aman agreed to take over the duty of caring for their mother to relieve Zeera's stress, while all the other siblings were willing to contribute to the cost of hiring a maid to help him do so. Even Rohan volunteered to do his bit by contributing \$30 a month towards this cost.

In the end, the session concluded with everyone chipping in to do their part. No matter how big or small their contribution may seem, as long as it represented a step towards mending the ties that bound them as a family, it was one that was definitely valuable and worthwhile.



STAYING OR NOT, YOU ARE PAYING!

Taib signs rental agreement
with Jansen.



2 weeks after...



Taib called Jansen to fix
the problems...



After complaining...



Sometimes you may think that you have got it all covered when things are stated in black-and-white. However, whatever deal you have reached with another party, even when put down in writing, can easily fall apart when anything goes wrong in your relationship.

When Mohammad Taib first put his signature on a rental agreement with his landlord Jansen, little did he know of the trouble that was soon to follow. Barely two weeks after moving into the house, water started seeping in when it rained, and one of the two toilets went out of order. Finding such conditions unacceptable, Taib called Jansen up, demanding that those problems be fixed or he would terminate the tenancy immediately. Instead of an apology from him, Taib received a text message laced with vulgarities from Jansen, in which he also demanded that Taib move out immediately and without getting a refund on his one-month rental deposit.

When the mediator was called in to help with the case, it was obvious that the relationship between the two had become very strained. Neither was willing to even talk to each other.

During the discussion, Jansen was made to understand that his demand for Taib to move out immediately could perhaps be unreasonable and even impossible for anyone to accept. Even if Jansen wanted Taib to move out, he would need some time to look for new accommodation. Taib, on the other hand, was also

made to understand that the low rental rate offered to him by Jansen could be an indication that the house he had chosen to rent was not in perfect condition. As a tenant, he could perhaps had exercised more care when renting any property.

Both parties also recognised that a settlement for their dispute could be achieved much faster and more easily through mediation rather than the Courts, which would no doubt be a long drawn affair.

With the mediators' help, both Taib and Jansen were able to arrive at a win-win outcome, where Jansen agreed to return half of Taib's rental deposit and allow him to stay for another two weeks while looking for his new accommodation. Taib was also agreeable to pay Jansen rental for his additional two weeks of stay as he needed time to do his property hunting.

Whether an agreement is or is not stated in black-and-white, adopting a give-and-take approach may help all parties involved to have a better chance at achieving a win-win outcome should a dispute ever arise.



BLAME IT ON THE BAG



In a quarrel, the parties involved may be so “blinded” by the problem they face and thus not be in the best position to see or decide how it could be put to a stop. In times like this, identifying a person outside the quarrel who can help make that decision could be crucial. The case of Madam Liang clearly illustrates this point.

One day, while standing in queue in front of a restaurant, Madam Liang was brushed several times by the bag carried by Jeanette, who was standing in front of her. After a couple of such brushes, Madam Liang suddenly started screaming at Jeanette, waving her hands in the air frantically as she did so. As her emotions started boiling over, she went on to punch her in her stomach! David, who was Jeanette’s friend, was walking back to join her in the queue. When he saw what happened, he rushed to stop Madam Liang. In his attempt to do so, David too received a blow from Madam Liang on his face, causing his glasses to fall and break upon hitting the floor. Madam Liang’s husband Kok Wing and son Alwin, after coming back from the restroom, jumped in quickly to stop the commotion.

Jeanette was utterly offended and immediately made a police report following the incident. She was also ready to file a civil suit against Madam Liang for her violent and unreasonable behaviour. However, she was persuaded by David to try mediation first instead of going to the Courts to settle the dispute.

During mediation, she insisted from the very beginning that Madam Liang was to compensate her \$120 for the medical expenses incurred and another \$800 to replace David’s designer glasses. Jeanette also demanded that Madam Liang apologise to her for her irrational

behaviour. Madam Liang’s retort was that she too was hurt in the fight and therefore also demanded to be compensated for her own medical treatment.

What seemed like a deadlock situation was untangled by the presence and influence of one single person - Madam Liang’s son Alwin, who accompanied her to the mediation. It was in the private session that the mediators found out that Madam Liang was previously molested and how that traumatic experience affected her and made her hyper-sensitive to being touched by strangers. It was also understood from Alwin that Madam Liang had also suffered from depression after the incident, which could probably explain her rather irrational behaviour. The mediators also observed that Madam Liang was very close to her son and was willing to listen to him.

Ultimately, it was Alwin who managed to persuade her mother to give in, agreeing on her behalf to come to a settlement with Jeanette. While Jeanette was understandably very upset about the whole incident, her stance became softened after she heard about her attacker’s unfortunate experience. That important new piece of information made Jeanette more willing to compromise and accept a lower amount of \$400 for compensation, and to dismiss the need for an apology from Madam Liang.

The bag might be at the centre of the entire incident, but neither hitting someone with it nor raising a fist will solve the issue. Sometimes, in the heat of a dispute, getting the issues resolved through the “right” person who can help to influence and persuade the parties involved can be the best way to put a full stop on it.

INCENSED BY INCENSE

Whenever any dispute arises between two people, it is usually the wiser choice to speak to each other about it before bringing the problem to the authorities. Going behind someone else's back to lodge a complaint against them before even trying to talk to them tends to make matters worse and may just blow a relatively small issue totally out of proportion.

The smoke and strong smell from Kwok Leng's burning of incense papers greatly disturbed Gim Pang. That might not have been so intolerable, except that Gim Pang has a son who is asthmatic. His son would fall sick and had difficulty breathing whenever the neighbours were busy burning their incense papers.

To minimise this effect of the smoke on his son, Gim Pang tried closing his door and some of the windows but that didn't seem to help much. As Kwok Leng seemed to be a rather unfriendly and unapproachable person, instead of walking over to his place to raise the issue with him, Gim Pang decided to bring it up to the Town Council instead. That was how the case came to be referred to CMC for mediation.

When they entered the mediation room together, Kwok Leng clearly appeared to be the more upset and annoyed of the two. To him, the burning of incense was a trivial matter that could have been settled without the authorities being asked to step in. He insisted that his incense burner was a small one that didn't produce too much smoke, and was also positioned right beside his own front door and nowhere near Gim Pang's unit.

It took some patient explaining by the mediators before Kwok Leng began to understand and empathise as to why the issue was relatively serious in Gim Pang's view. While the amount of smoke generated might not have been too much in Kwok Leng's opinion, once it got into the air and depending on the wind direction, it might drift to other areas and affect those who were sensitive to smoke. Smoke of any kind can cause people to choke and tear, and those with asthmatic conditions might not be able to breathe properly. More importantly, Kwok Leng came to know of the asthmatic condition suffered by Gim Pang's son. On the days that the wind was blowing the "wrong" way, the boy's health came under threat, and might have worsened considerably in the long run if he was to continually be exposed to incense smoke.

Upon learning of the child's health problem, Kwok Leng became much calmer and more willing to compromise. To prevent the child from having an asthmatic attack, he finally agreed to move his incense burner into his hall in order to minimise the smoke travelling over to Gim Pang's place. After all, it was not a big deal to him - he would have done so much earlier if only his neighbour had come over to him and let him know in the first place.

Have a burning issue with your neighbour? Try dousing the fire by talking to each other, before you try talking to anyone else!

NOT MINE, NOT YOURS, BUT OURS

While laws, statutes, rules and regulations can help to instill some order and structure into a civil society, they cannot govern every aspect of our lives. In the case of maintaining harmony and fostering good relationships in the community, the members must learn to respect each other's rights, and give way to each other when necessary.

Abdul had a long time enjoyed exclusive use of the common corridor adjacent to his unit, where his "mini garden" and other belongings of his family were placed. After all, his neighbour had never complained, and they hardly made use of the corridor. However, things changed in a big way when that neighbour sold his flat and the Chang family moved in. Before long, the two families were fighting tooth and nail over the use of this corridor space.

With his previous neighbour not raising any objection, Abdul had "assumed" that the common corridor was his to use and, over time, his personal space had grown to occupy quite a substantial area. Aaron, head of the Chang family, objected strongly to Abdul's "unlawful" claim over this common space, asserting that the corridor belonged to everyone else as much as it did to Abdul. Having clashed headlong on many occasions over this thorny issue, they finally resorted to asking the Town Council to become their referee.

While it was made clear to them that regulations provided for the common use of the corridor space, Abdul insisted that since it was a common area, he had the right to use as much of it as he wanted. As

he had personally observed, the Chang family did not appear to be using much of it anyway. The fight continued even with a boundary line painted to divide the corridor into two halves for their respective usage, with the families taking turns to push each other's belongings as far back into the other half as possible. Mediation was then suggested to end this long-drawn and exhausting feud.

The mediators' sincerity in helping both parties come up with possible solutions to end their feud was felt by both Abdul and Aaron. Coupled with this was the mediators' effort at emphasising why it was important and in the best interests of both families to have this issue resolved. The final outcome derived by both parties was that Abdul, who had a much bigger family, could have a bigger share of the corridor. However, Abdul had to agree to change his attitude and be more courteous whenever he needed to use Aaron's half of the space.

To live in harmony with your neighbours, one must first learn to give and take. The law cannot dictate what you should do to be a friendly neighbour or a responsible citizen. Sometimes, it could just be a matter of common sense and being flexible in your approach to dealing with changes within your environment. That will tell you what you can or should do to be that friendly neighbour in your own community!

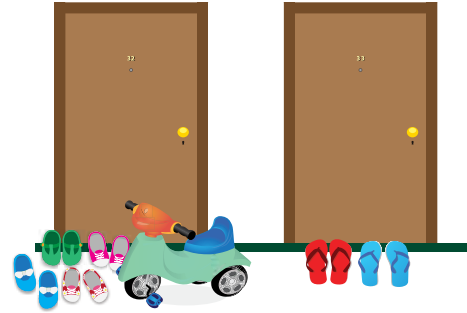
YOUR LIFE VERSUS MY LIFE

Adopting a give-and-take attitude is not just preferable, but essential to maintaining social harmony in our densely populated city. Spending a bit of time to understand your neighbours and appreciate the differences between you and them could help avoid unnecessary conflict.

The Cheng family had been complaining about the Pehs, who live just next door. As devotees of their religion, the Pehs would burn joss sticks on the 1st and 15th of each lunar month. The Chengs disliked the resulting smoke and smell from the joss sticks and claimed that the health of their entire household was being threatened. The Pehs were upset by this comment made by the Chengs and in turn complained about the noises that purportedly came from this neighbour's flat.

Both families attended the mediation ready to fight it out, each strongly believing that they were the victims. The mediators knew that if each party was able to, even for just a while, put themselves into the shoes of the other, they would be able to understand the situation better.

At the private meetings, both the Chengs and Pehs were able to share unreservedly about their respective grievances. The Pehs claimed that as devotees of their religion, the burning of joss sticks on the 1st and 15th of each lunar month was mandatory and not a matter of choice. The Chengs, on their part, acknowledged that



the alleged noises could indeed be caused by their kids playfully dragging chairs around. However, they added that they had tried to soften the noise by putting rubber padding onto the legs of the chairs. While they were willing to make that effort, they claimed that it was almost impossible for such noise to be prevented since it could also be due to the design and layout of their flat.

As the mediators tried explaining the differences in the situations of the two households to the respective parties during the private sessions, each was at last able to reflect upon their own actions and rethink their conclusions about the other party. With that, it became clear that it simply would not make sense or benefit either of them if they were to pursue the matter further. While both families may still not be willing to make big changes to their own way of life or agree with that of the other, they could now at least understand and accept each other's differences. Live and let live – isn't that what being a good neighbour is essentially about?

WE ALL LOVE MOMMY AS MUCH

Taking care of our mothers when they have aged comes naturally to us, especially when we were basking in their love and attention when we were little. That said, different people have different ways and ideas on how such care should be given.

As in the case of the Gan family, while the children all proclaimed their love for their mother and their willingness to play a part in taking care of her, their big question was, “how”?

Money was not an issue in Madam Gan’s case. Thanks to the money left to her by her late son, the family was able to meet the financial needs to take care of Madam Gan when the old lady was afflicted with dementia six months before. However, a problem arose when Kian Teck, the eldest son, insisted that Madam Gan be housed at one of their homes permanently instead of being moved around among the siblings. The five other siblings were united in disagreement to Kian Teck’s suggestion – each shared the love for their mother and wanted as much to play a part in looking after her as any other sibling. A 3-month stint with each sibling would perhaps be a good and fair arrangement.

Unable to reach an agreement among themselves, they agreed that mediation would be useful to help them come up with an arrangement acceptable to all. While each sibling was happy to play their part in

taking care of Madam Gan, they each had their own constraints and family commitments which rendered the idea of housing Madam Gan permanently with any one of them unrealistic. Instead, a schedule rotating such a responsibility among all of them seemed to be the best arrangement and this would also prevent any sibling from “monopolising” their mother.

The mediators saw that all of Madam Gan’s children had a common goal in mind - to provide the best for their mum. As such, they worked with the siblings to bring their focus to this common goal and to generate possible solutions toward this goal. During the discussion, it was understood that the siblings had much earlier consulted a doctor on the issue. The advice given by the doctor was for Madam Gan to be housed permanently at one location as that would be less unsettling for her, as compared to moving her to new surroundings every three months. This piece of information which was based upon the objective opinion of a doctor turned out to be an important factor that helped the siblings arrive at their decision.

The final decision, mutually accepted by all, was for Madam Gan to stay at the house of one of the sisters, who was a full-time housewife. To help this sister out, all would share the cost of engaging a maid to assist in looking after Madam Gan, who would now have a permanent home where she can be best taken care of.

LET'S PRAY FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING

Any disagreement touching on religion often requires to be handled with a high degree of sensitivity. However, as individuals, we should do our part to prevent any such disagreement from arising in the first place. We can do this by making the effort to understand each other's beliefs and respecting the differences so as to allow a harmonious co-existence among followers of different faiths.

Gek Keong is a man who loves nothing more than minding his own business. However, since Kannan became his next-door neighbour, he has found it difficult to do so. Early every morning, the noise of chanting and a bell chiming is accompanied by wisps of incense smoke wafting into his flat. Gek Keong's son works the night shift and only gets to sleep in the day when he returns from work. However he was often awakened whenever their devout neighbour began his daily ritual.

It appeared that one big part of the problem was the language barrier: Gek Keong and family spoke mostly Hokkien, while Kannan was only good in Tamil. Because of this, the two mediators, who were each competent in the respective languages, were called in to help bridge the linguistic and cultural gap between these neighbours. During the discussion, Gek Keong shared that his neighbour's chanting and bell chimings were so loud and noisy every morning. He did not know of any kind of religion that would require such "noise" to be made. Kannan stuck staunchly to his viewpoint

that everyone had the freedom to practise their own religion, especially since his ritual was conducted within his own house.

Being able to converse with the respective mediators in their native tongue quickly put each party at ease and allowed the mediators to explain the exact issues that were bothering their next-door neighbour. The mediators also enlightened Gek Keong on Kannan's religion and its related rituals so that he had a better understanding. Like many other issues in life, it is often the lack of understanding that results in rejection and resistance. Knowing why his neighbour had to do what he did made acceptance of his daily routine much easier for Gek Keong. The case was settled with Kannan agreeing to bring down the volume of the chanting and bell chimes in the morning.

The session allowed both neighbours to gain insights into their mutual concerns, and understand each other's situations: the noise generated in the morning by one side who is obligated to perform his rituals, affecting the sleep of the other who has to rest in the day as he works at night. Their problem was complicated by the fact that both were unable to communicate with each other due to a language barrier. With those problems and concerns ironed out, these two neighbours could at last continue to do what they want to in peace – one to pray, the other to sleep.

WHY SHOULD I LISTEN TO YOU

Children are to respect and obey their parents - this is a value deeply ingrained in Asian societies. However, as societies evolve and with the influence of Western culture, young people are nowadays more ready to speak up and question the rationale and relevance of such values, especially when it relates to something that they cannot understand about or have differing views from their parents.

When Paul invited his own father, David, for dinner at a food court, he did not expect to be shoved by David and get injured in the process. Paul had arranged for the meeting so as to talk things over with the old man and for him to meet up with his girlfriend's family. As David did not quite like Paul's girlfriend, Sherry or her parents, Paul thought that bringing all of them to dinner to iron out their differences could be a good idea. However, the first thing that David did upon arrival was to scold Paul. Paul tried hard to calm David down but in a fit of anger, David pushed him away so hard that he fell.

During the mediation, Paul was obviously upset over the loss of face his own father had caused him in public and, in particular, in front of Sherry's family. He made it clear that he deserved an apology from David and also demanded that David compensate him for the loss of income arising from the injury caused by the fall. David dismissed Paul's demand and instead embarked on a lengthy rant about the many misgivings he had with Paul and Sherry. The mediators patiently allowed David to pour out his frustrations before tackling the real issue in this matter.

It was clear to the mediators that both father and son had some misgivings about each other. The issues that appeared to be at stake – an apology from David to Paul and compensation for his loss of income were in fact just a cover up for the deeper issues lying within. Paul must have felt that David's actions in the incident belittled him in front of his own girlfriend's family. Getting David to apologise and "compensate" him could help Paul regain some "face" from the incident. David, on the other hand, just wanted to use the opportunity to air all his grievances about his son and girlfriend and to share with someone about the pains of being Paul's dad. The dispute was finally settled with David only agreeing to pay the amount that Paul had requested as compensation.

Those who end up in the mediation room often carry emotional baggage that may sometimes have nothing to do with the problem that brought them there in the first place. Finding out what that baggage is, is one important step towards achieving a successful resolution.



TRY STEPPING INTO MY SHOES

Everyone has his own way of life and personal habits. If there are times when you cannot agree with someone's way of life or habits, you may want to make some constructive suggestions to them rather than taking matters into your own hands.

Charles and his wife Tina had been staying in their apartment for two years. Their unhappiness with their next-door neighbour began shortly after they moved in. Charles and Tina noticed that the shoes which they habitually left outside their front door always ended up being strewn all over the place, sometimes even along the length of the common corridor. Tina was also irritated by the heaps of dirt and rubbish that seemed to be deliberately swept all the way to the front of their doorsteps by someone. Baffled, they decided to install a CCTV to "investigate" the matter.

It probably came as a surprise to Charles and Tina then that the lenses caught their next-door neighbour, Madam Yang, kicking their shoes around and sweeping rubbish towards their flat while mumbling and pointing fingers at their unit. Witnessing such scenes on their video upset them. Soon after, Charles and Tina went to confront Madam Yang. Seeing his mother being questioned by their neighbours, Madam Yang's son, Keng Hwee, swiftly came to her defence. Heated words were exchanged and after the incident, the relationship between these two families spiralled downwards. In retaliation, Keng Hwee also installed a CCTV which was aimed directly at their neighbours' unit.

During the mediation, Charles insisted that everyone present viewed the "evidence" collected of Madam Yang's irrational behaviour and for all to judge as to who was responsible in starting the whole episode. However, the mediators emphasised that the "evidence" would serve no purpose in the session as mediation is not meant to be a process to determine who is right or wrong. It is rather a discussion between disputing parties, facilitated by a neutral party (the mediator) to explore possible options to settle their differences amicably.

However, Charles refused to budge and with the agreement of Keng Hwee, all parties and the mediators agreed to view the video evidence Charles had brought along. Despite watching the scenes, Madam Yang simply commented that what she did was not wrong, since her untidy and dirty neighbours needed to be taught how to keep their place clean and tidy. She added that she believed that Tina must have been doing the same to her.

The mediators further engaged both parties in private sessions to work with them towards possible solutions to this issue. During the session, while Keng Hwee admitted that his mother's actions could be better managed, he also felt that their neighbours' approach to this issue was too hostile and uncalled for, especially in the installation of the CCTV that appeared to be spying on them. He also shared that his mother is a very tidy lady, as is shown in their own house which is

spick and span. Thus, it irritated Madam Yang that their neighbours' shoes were all over the place, sometimes even invading their space. Keng Hwee further added that to protect themselves against further allegations by their unfriendly neighbours, they were forced to install their own CCTV as a form of "check and balance". Keng Hwee's assertions helped to assure Madam Yang and convince her that since both sides were now being monitored by CCTVs, she did not have to do anything to spite their neighbours further. Ultimately, an agreement was reached when both parties were brought back together again in the joint session.

Though in this case, the issue was successfully resolved between the two families, this story goes to show that sometimes one needs to probe deeper to find the real underlying cause of the dispute.

As the "authority" of their respective households, neither Charles nor Keng Hwee would want their family members to be bullied. Neither would also want to admit up front that they were perhaps in the wrong, as that would make them and their family lose face. By allowing Charles to fulfill his wish of showing the video to prove his point about Madam Yang, and for Keng Hwee to have a chance to defend his mother's behaviour, the mediators were able to close this chapter in the ongoing dispute between the two families.

Reflecting on this, if you like to highlight anything to your neighbours about their habits or way of life, you should perhaps get to understand them a little better first? When that relationship is established, your advice or suggestions would maybe sit better with them, rather than your deciding on their behalf what should be the right way to get things done.



SPEAK NICELY, LIVE PEACEFULLY

While it is natural for one to flare up upon getting into some kind of conflict with another, it does not mean that it is only right for us to just let it all out. Sometimes, learning to stay cool, to think before speaking, and to use the right words are sure ways to prevent oneself from raging out of control and getting into a serious dispute with someone else. Mr and Mrs Aw and their younger neighbour, Chris, learned the hard way that words spewed out of sheer anger could in fact spiral out of control and be damaging to any kind of relationship.

The Aw's numerous interactions with Chris, if any, consisted mainly of a barrage of vulgarities hurled at each other. It was not long after that they decided to raise their problem to HDB who then referred the case to CMC for mediation.

The grievances which Mr and Mrs Aw shared were far from anything earthshaking. They listed all of Chris' actions that irked them – from smoking along the common corridor, intentionally pressing all the buttons in the lift and causing them great inconvenience and annoyance, to his habit of leaving leaking garbage bags along the corridor and dirtying the place for everyone.

With the long list of complaints that the Aws had raised, the mediators decided that it would be best to first tackle those smaller issues that were relatively easier to deal with.

Chris went on to clarify each of the issues raised by the older couple. He expressed that since the law against smoking in common areas came into effect, he had stopped doing so and thus that "problem" no longer existed. On their complaint about the intentional pressing of the buttons in the lift, he explained that it was a one-time incident where his son was being playful. He had reprimanded his son for his misbehaviour and the same thing had not happened again since.

The really sticky issue, it seemed, was the mutual spewing vulgarities whenever the two parties locked horns. Apart from giving them several reminders to be always mindful of their language, the mediators also got the two parties to recognise that the issues that gave rise to their big conflict were in fact quite trivial. From the session, they also learned that sometimes, in order to move forward, one should be able to let go of past unhappiness even if it were caused by someone else's wrongdoing. After all, if you have to see each other everyday, it is far better that the other person is wearing a friendly face rather than a hostile one.

So, if you should get upset with anyone in future, the first thing to do is calm yourself down. If you then need to approach that person to talk through things, be mindful of your language as choosing the right words can help cool down hot tempers, and who knows, gain you a friend instead of an enemy.

IT PAYS TO REPAIR BROKEN TIES

A change of perspectives could open up new possibilities in a situation that may seem to offer no way out. When people cling on to their own views without making any attempt to see it from another angle, it makes it difficult to open their eyes and heart to the range of possibilities which could help them walk out of a challenging situation.

One afternoon, Joshua took Faizal's bicycle and started riding along the small road outside their homes. As he was riding pass Leon's place, Leon suddenly jumped from behind Joshua and mounted himself onto the bike. This caused Joshua to lose his balance and the both of them to fall off the bicycle. As they fell, the bicycle also happened to knock against a car which was parked along the road. Besides scratching the car, the impact from the falling bike created a dent on one of its doors. The angry owner of the car confronted the three parents of the kids - Weng Kiat, Hong San and Azman - demanding that they compensate him for the damage which amounted to some \$2,400.

Weng Kiat, Joshua's father, was of the view that since all their sons played a part in the incident, the compensation should be borne equally by all three parents. Azman, Faizal's father, strongly disagreed. His point was that Joshua took Faizal's bike without asking for his permission before riding it away. He further mentioned that Faizal had even chased Joshua asking him to stop, after Azman instructed him to do so. As for Leon's mother, Hong San, she felt that since all three boys were playing and each contributed to the occurrence of the incident, she was agreeable to chip in her one-third share of the compensation. In fact, she was even willing to pay for Azman's share if he insisted

on his stand; the amount compensated would therefore be shared just between Weng Kiat and herself. However, Weng Kiat could not agree with Azman not contributing his share towards the compensation.

The mediators decided to focus their attention on Weng Kiat and Azman so as to uncover the untold stories. During the private sessions, Weng Kiat showed that he in fact couldn't care less about Azman's share of the compensation. He would even have no problem bearing the full cost by himself. What irritated him was Azman's approach to the issue, where he seemed to be pushing away Faizal's responsibility in the whole incident. In Weng Kiat's view, Faizal's chase after Joshua could be why he was speeding and therefore lost his balance. As such, Faizal was also at fault in the incident.

Azman, on the other hand, thought that Joshua had always been a mischievous kid. He felt that Weng Kiat should have in the first place watched over and have more control over Joshua so that this incident could have been avoided. His insistence on not paying his share was because if he had agreed to do so, it would mean he was admitting that Faizal had a part to play in this incident. That he totally disagreed with as Faizal's bicycle was rode off without his permission. It was simply a matter of principle.

Finally, both Weng Kiat and Azman were made to see that the compensation was not the biggest issue. Agreeing that maintaining a cordial relationship between themselves was definitely more important, both agreed to share in the compensation rather than have a rocky ride ahead as neighbours.

COOKING UP A STORM



Many a time, violent quarrels have erupted as a result of misperceptions and misinformation. Getting to the root cause could help to put things into perspective and perhaps prevent conflict from breaking out in the first place. However, trying to do so may not be easy.

It all started from the smell of Ah Cheong's cooking that bothered Peng Seng a great deal. Every morning, besides the smell, there seemed to be an awful din created by such cooking going on in his neighbour's place. Such activities started regularly every morning and dragged on till late morning, which made Peng Seng suspect that Ah Cheong was undertaking commercial cooking in his house. Peng Seng decided to report the matter to the HDB.

After knowing what Peng Seng did, Ah Cheong was upset and stormed over to Peng Seng's flat one day to ask for an explanation. Seeing Ah Cheong's hostile attitude, Peng Seng simply refused to open his door and even proceeded to shut his windows. Such an action angered Ah Cheong even more. In a fit of anger, he kicked on Peng Seng's door and banged on his window, causing a couple of panes to break. Peng Seng was surprised by Ah Cheong's violent reaction to the matter and demanded that he compensate for the repair of the broken window panes.

The mediators soon found out that while Peng Seng was irritated by the smell and din created by Ah Cheong's cooking in the early mornings, he was even more bothered by the threat of further violence from Ah Cheong after the recent incident. He wanted reassurance that the ugly episode would never be

repeated. When this message was conveyed to Ah Cheong during the private meeting, he was in fact quite apologetic about that incident. He assured the mediators he was never a violent person, but also agreed that he could have been too impulsive for that one time. He further added that he was upset with Peng Seng after knowing that he reported to the HDB about the issue. Ah Cheong felt that since both of them were long time neighbours and on friendly terms, Peng Seng could have just approached him directly on the matter if it bothered him that much.

Understanding each party's perspective on the issue, the mediators guided both parties and helped them generate possible solutions for resolving the matter. When the two parties were brought back together for a joint session, Ah Cheong passed Peng Seng a red packet, with a token sum enclosed within, to compensate Peng Seng for the damaged window panes. Peng Seng accepted the red packet, took out the money and returned it to Ah Cheong with a smile. He even suggested that they have coffee together after the session!

While no form of apology was explicitly expressed, both knew at that instant that they have decided to put the incident behind them and move ahead as friendly neighbours.



BRANCHING INTO "UNKNOWN" TERRITORY



DURING MEDIATION...

VEERAPAN IS TOO EXHAUSTED AND HARDLY HAS TIME FOR ANYTHING ELSE...





Anger and frustration are the usual reactions when one encounters someone “difficult”. However, what if you are to find out that the troublesome person in question is actually experiencing some painful problem, which explains his irritating or irrational behaviour? Wouldn’t you be more forgiving towards that person?

It is natural that a tree spreads its branches, but it’s a different matter once they invade your territory. Kelvin had been at loggerheads with his neighbour Veerapan over such a tree. Veerapan’s house is located right behind Kelvin’s but further up a slope. One of the branches of his tree had not only stretched over to Kelvin’s backyard, but happened to be also resting on his rear wall.

Not only was Kelvin tired of having to clear up all the fallen leaves on a daily basis, he was worried that his wall might one day collapse under the weight of that heavy looking branch. He had called both NEA and NParks about the matter, but it seemed little could be done as the tree was standing on private property.

Rather than resorting to legal action to settle this issue involving just one tree, mediation seemed a more sensible choice for Kelvin as it allows him to resolve the matter with his neighbour at a much lower cost. Thanks to his choice of mediation over litigation, Kelvin came to view the issue differently after hearing Veerapan’s side of the story.

Veerapan is a 50-year old single man who has shouldered the burden of taking care of his sick and elderly mother all by himself. Caring for the elderly woman is a demanding task that takes up almost all of Veerapan’s time and that was why he hardly has time for anything else. To make matters worse, due to the attention his mother required, he is also not able to take on most kinds of jobs and has to depend on freelance work to earn his keep. In fact, due to the uncertain nature of his work, he has been without income for some time. While Veerapan was aware of the problem that his tree could have caused Kelvin, he just didn’t have the time or resources to do anything about it.

Sensing Kelvin’s softened behaviour towards Veerapan’s situation, after hearing his story, the mediator seized the opportunity by encouraging Veerapan to share more about his selflessness in taking care of his sick mother, a job that many sons and daughters would have shunned. The sharing seemed to break Kelvin down even further, leading him to finally agree to let the matter rest, and giving Veerapan all the time he needed to get his tree pruned.

Everyone has a story to tell, some happy, some sad. The sharing of one’s story can often help to extend a branch out to the “unknowns”, which helps people gain valuable insights into each other’s behaviour and actions. Such sharing also helps to bridge any gap between two conflicting parties and makes them more willing to settle their differences.

PARK ANYWHERE YOU WANT, BUT JUST NOT HERE

Different people often have different views of the same thing. Such differences are one big reason why disputes arise. It is common to see parties in dispute trying to present their stories in a manner such that they become victims of the wrongdoings committed by the other party. The mediator's role is therefore to get the warring parties to understand each other's actions and behaviour during the course of their conflict, so as to pave the way to successful resolution.

Michael had recently moved into his newly acquired terrace house in a busy private estate. However, the joy of moving into his new house was disrupted one day when he saw a car parked outside his house, which as he claimed, was blocking his car from exiting his own unit. The car in question belonged to Kuo Huan, who lives a few houses away.

Michael shared that he indeed felt angry with Kuo Huan when he confronted him on this. However, instead of being apologetic, Kuo Huan hopped out of his car angrily with an umbrella, pointing at Michael and screaming a string of expletive-laden threats at him. To Michael, that was totally unreasonable behaviour, given that Kuo Huan was in the wrong to begin with. Michael insisted that Kuo Huan should just be using the parking spaces either in his porch or in front of his own house. His demand was simple - Kuo Huan was to never again park in front of his house and obstruct the movement of his own car.

As Kuo Huan proceeded to share his side of the story, it became clear what a big misunderstanding it had all been! He had parked his car in front of Michael's house for just that one time simply because he had no other choice. He owned two cars, with one already parked in his house on that day. As it happened, another neighbour had parked on the road in front of his house, and he was not able to find any vacant spot except in front of Michael's house. Yes, he was carrying an umbrella when he climbed out of his car, but that was only because it had been drizzling that day.

In the course of mediation, there is a tendency for each party to present himself as the victim, and the other as the wrongdoer. Knowing this, the mediators decided to take each into a private meeting to get at the real story behind their fight.

Besides guiding the two parties to appreciate their differences in viewing the same issue, the mediators also highlighted the importance of maintaining peace and harmony in the neighbourhood they live in. They also urged Michael to forgive and forget, especially since being new to the neighbourhood, he may not yet be familiar with the parking routines of drivers in the estate. After all, why make all that fuss over a one-off affair and fume over a simple misunderstanding to create an enemy in the estate, when he could go on enjoying the pleasures of a brand new home?

THIRD TIME LUCKY?

In some deep seated disputes, one round of mediation may not be enough to resolve all the issues that had been accumulated over time. However, having that first session may in fact start a conversation between the two parties, which in turn provides an opportunity for the mediators to bridge the gap between the disputing parties. Each small step towards achieving such an understanding helps towards the resolution of a dispute.

Kun Leng, an elderly and retired man, only wished for his upstairs neighbour to stop the ruckus which was disturbing his peace. He felt that at his age, good quality rest was more important than anything else. He claimed that whenever night fell, the commotion upstairs would start. Noises like furniture being dragged around, people stamping their feet and loud thuds caused by people jumping up and down could be heard. Kun Leng was adamant that such noises were from the unit directly upstairs, occupied by Wahid and his family.

It was already Kun Leng's third visit to the CMC and during this latest session, he claimed that Wahid's family were intentionally making all those noises just to get back at him. He shared that despite his numerous demands to Wahid for him and his family to quieten down, he would be disturbed by the same cacophony every other night. Wahid, on the other hand, flatly denied that his family had made any of the noise, and that it must have come from some other neighbour.

While the mediators had emphasised many times to both Kun Leng and Wahid the importance of maintaining peace and harmony in the neighbourhood, their words of advice did not seem to have any effect, especially with Kun Leng who was often screaming at the top of his lungs and

banging hard on the table. The mediators continued to try calming the emotional Kun Leng, and later proceeded to meet the parties separately so as to work with them to find a way out of their longstanding feud.

It was after much effort by the mediators that Wahid admitted that the noise which had been bothering Kun Leng could indeed have originated from his flat. Wahid shared that when he was first informed of Kun Leng's complaint, he had tried to improve the situation by getting his family members to keep the noise down and also stopped his kids from jumping around like they used to. However, despite being aware of Wahid's effort, Kun Leng continued to "harass" his family by often shouting at them. Kun Leng's behaviour upset Wahid and his family, while Kun Leng himself was angered at Wahid's refusal to admit his guilt even after two rounds of mediation.

After uncovering these issues which affected the two parties, the mediators worked on bridging the gap in understanding between them. They explained to them why their respective behaviour and actions could be counter-effective towards the resolution of their issues. They also emphasised the importance for each of them in communicating their concerns to the other in an objective and calm manner. Once Wahid acknowledged that the noise could have come from his household, Kun Leng was also placated and was more willing to work with him on getting their noise issue resolved. What was certain from this third session was that both parties had made progress from their initial positions. So, instead of having some cranky old man come knocking angrily on Wahid's door every night, we should at least have a calmer old gentleman visiting him if the noise proved too much for his peaceful rest!

THERE'S NEVER A DEAD END

It is not uncommon for stalemates to occur during mediation, where both parties are simply unwilling to come to a compromise. When running into such a situation, some effort is needed to achieve a breakthrough. Either party being willing to take just a small step back may sometimes be enough to create a breakthrough towards a possible resolution.

Wan Hui had been very worried about her ailing father's condition. It was bad enough that he was suffering from a heart disease, but things had become worse since their upstairs neighbour moved in. At least once a week, this neighbour would receive a stream of people starting from late morning and up until the evening. When the visits started, noise would soon follow. It appeared as if heavy objects were being moved, and someone was flailing a chain onto the floor. To top it all, cigarette butts from the visitors waiting in queue were thrown out the window, sometimes ending up in Wan Hui's house.

The upstairs neighbour were an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Tian. The noises heard by Wan Hui were from the religious rituals performed by Mr Tian once weekly. During the mediation session, it was observed that Mr Tian was a tough and aggressive character who flared upon any hint that he should cease his religious activities. He felt that it was his "calling" and nothing should stop him from carrying out his religious duties. Mrs Tian was observed to be the softer character, and was in fact quite sympathetic with Wan Hui's

predicament. She shared that she had long wanted her husband to retire from his religious activities, but that was a challenge as it was something he had done for all his life and he had already built up a big group of followers.

Given the circumstances, it seemed things had come to a dead end. However, noting that Mrs Tian had a common understanding with Wan Hui that the noise could in fact be disturbing to others, the mediators focused on this point to help both parties brainstorm some possible solutions to tackle the issue. As there was no way that Mr Tian would agree to stop his activities, the next best option was to look at how to reduce the noise in order to help ease Wan Hui's problem. At the suggestion of the mediators, the Tians agreed to place a carpet on their floor so that the noise caused could be cushioned and thus reduced. With that gesture coming from them, Wan Hui even offered to pay for the carpet so that Mr and Mrs Tian would not argue with each other over the cost. By allowing Mr Tian to continue with his activities, he was also more willing to help with the issue over the cigarette butts. Mr Tian agreed to provide an ashtray so that his visitors would no longer have to dump their cigarette butts out of the window.

Sometimes, when it seems that things have come to a dead end, a bit of creative thinking and some degree of compromise can bring surprisingly good endings!

A FAIR CHANCE FOR EVERYONE

Mediation is a process where all parties in dispute have an equal opportunity to state their side of the story. The mediator works with the information shared by each party, looking at it objectively while forging a common understanding between them before generating possible options acceptable to both. It is not some kind of debate where there's a winner and a loser. The ultimate aim is to achieve a win-win outcome for both parties.

Nana, a working mother with a daughter still in primary school, had many times walked up the stairs to her neighbour's flat. The visits to her neighbour's place, however, were not too friendly. Nana simply wanted her neighbour to stop bothering her and her daughter. This particular neighbour, Jega, also has a daughter, who seemed to enjoy jumping up and down, day and night. The noise made by this active toddler disturbed Nana daily and also affected her daughter's studying and sleep.

Even with complaints made to the police and Town Council, Nana felt that little had changed. Her case was then referred to the CMC. Nana was at first doubtful about whether mediation could help her with the situation she was facing. Nana believed that Jega, who was a professional and a much more eloquent speaker than her, would gain the upper hand in the course of the mediation. The mediators thus had to first correct this misconception of Nana's by taking time to explain the nature of mediation to her.

During the mediation, Jega was in fact observed to be the more easy going of the two. From the onset, he appeared eager to explore any possible options to resolve this issue with Nana. He also shared on how he had already tried his best to do everything possible to reduce the noise created by his daughter. In fact, he had actually requested his contractor to stop work earlier every day when Nana complained about the noisy renovation that previously was going on in his flat. He was a little upset that instead of trying to work out a compromise with him, Nana had chosen to go straight to the police and Town Council officers. What frustrated him even more was how Nana came up to his unit and scolded his daughter during one of her frequent visits.

The session allowed both parties, with facilitation by the mediators, hear from each other as well as present their own side of the story, calmly and coolly.

With the willingness of both parties to get the issue settled, a handshake and the exchange of phone numbers soon took place. Jega assured Nana that he would continue to try reining in his daughter, and Nana on her part agreed to give Jega a call should the noise bother again instead of getting the authorities to knock on his door.

Creating a win-win outcome for all parties involved - that's the beauty of mediation.

MAKING PEACE IS NO CHILD'S PLAY

Sometimes, a mediator's experience and knowledge about the issues raised in a dispute could help to open up the eyes of disputing parties, leading them towards a resolution of their problem.

To Mong Huat, having a childcare centre in his neighbourhood was the last thing he wanted. As he saw it, such a centre located so near to him simply disturbed his peace. This is especially so during the children's playtime. While Mong Huat claimed that he did not dislike children, his bigger point was: what was the childcare centre doing in the middle of a residential estate? He would have much preferred that it be located elsewhere and the children can doing their playing somewhere far from him.



Patricia, the private operator of the childcare centre, could easily understand Mong Huat's peeve. While she agreed that the children at the centre could be noisy at times, she had tried her best to explore all possible ways to keep their volume down. In addition, she had also gone to great lengths to minimise any inconvenience caused to Mong Huat by the operation of her centre. However, Patricia had obtained all necessary approval from the authorities for her childcare centre, and followed closely all the regulations set down for the centre's running. She thus felt that she had every right to stay where she was.

After hearing from both parties regarding their concerns, the mediators identified that the key issue of the dispute revolved around whether it was right for a childcare centre to be located within residential premises. They then went to great lengths to share their knowledge and experience on this issue with Mong Huat, as well as explained to him about how he could work with Patricia to resolve the dispute between them.

The mediators' sharing helped to open up the eyes and minds of both parties and also helped Mong Huat to gain fresh perspectives to the very issue that was disturbing him. Not only was the case settled with Mong Huat no longer having any more complaints about Patricia, he had also benefitted by becoming much more familiar with at least some of our many law and regulations.

FROM FURY TO FRIENDSHIP

It is advisable to nip any disagreement in the bud before it becomes a full-blown dispute. Mediation is one such way to prevent this from happening. Sometimes, not only is a resolution achieved, parties involved in a dispute might even make friends out of enemies!

Tian Song, a retiree, thought he would soon lose his marbles because of his upstairs neighbours. Every day, it seemed, irritating noise from their flat made its way down to his. Most of the time it sounded like, yes, people were actually playing with marbles! He knew the family had three children, and so assumed it was them who were responsible for disturbing his afternoon nap.

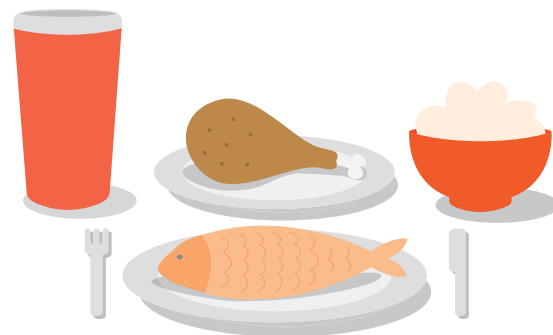
Tian Song came fuming to the mediation, aggressively pushing his case and demanding the noise be put to a stop. However, after hearing Keshia out for the first time ever, Tian Song realised that it could be a misunderstanding of his and appeared much calmer soon after.

The mother of the three kids, Keshia, was at a loss when she first received the letter from CMC stating that the Courts had referred the case, filed by her neighbour downstairs, for mediation. She had already explained to Tian Song that her children had never played with marbles, as they are all still small, with the oldest only five. Giving them marbles to play would prove too dangerous as they might accidentally swallow one. In fact, she even invited Tian Song to her place to see

the kind of toys her children played with. During the session, she also shared further that she was anyway only renting the flat for a year and would be leaving once her new flat was ready.

Hearing Keshia's side of the story and her sincerity to rectify the noise problem that had bothered him so much, Tian Song was convinced that it could be a misunderstanding on his part. From then on, he appeared much more friendly than when he first came storming in. The mediators noticed that and nudged them on to speak to each other more freely, and before long, some kind of friendship began to emerge.

The session continued with the two parties sharing more about their hobbies rather than the issue that bothered them at first. With Tian Song being an avid angler, and upon learning that Keshia loved to cook, he immediately suggested that she could help prepare some nice dishes with his future catch. In the end, it was a dispute well settled that helped someone create a friend out of an enemy!



BLESSED IS HE WHO WILL LISTEN

There are a variety of approaches to resolving a relational dispute. Having a keen sense of observation is perhaps one useful skill that a person can possess when attempting to handle such a dispute.

Madam Fong, an elderly lady, had been harassing her upstairs neighbour, Fiona, since she moved into her new flat six months ago. Madam Fong would often come knocking on Fiona's door, complaining of the noise caused by her children jumping and throwing things around. With each visit from Madam Fong, Fiona would shiver in fear. This was because not only did Madam Fong visit her numerous times in a day, she would hurl a flood of expletives at the hapless Fiona with each visit. At times, Madam Fong would even bang on her own ceiling with a laundry pole to express her displeasure to Fiona.



When both ladies came for the mediation, Madam Fong was accompanied by her son, Thye Soon. While Madam Fong was a feisty elderly lady, Thye Soon was observed to be more relaxed and friendly. Noticing that, the mediators decided to hold a private meeting with Thye Soon to talk through the problems faced by both sides. During the session, Thye Soon shared about his wish to have the dispute settled quickly and his embarrassment over his mother's behaviour. He expressed his wish for his own mother's behaviour over the issue. He was also empathetic towards Fiona's situation when he understood from the mediators that she has an autistic son who throws tantrums, and of her effort to reduce the noise by installing a large playmat in her living room.

With that, the mediators worked through Thye Soon to convince Madam Fong to reflect on her own actions and to be more empathetic towards Fiona's situation. With her son's influence, Madam Fong was then willing to withdraw the complaint and work with Fiona to monitor the improvement of the noise situation that was disturbing her.

A LITTLE PRAISE GOES A LONG WAY

Not everyone can accept being the loser. A bruised ego and sore pride resulting from some kind of loss can sometimes bring about a conflict. In order to soothe such a “wound”, the right amount of praise can at times work best, helping to restore one’s pride and dignity as happened in the following case.

Raju and Eric are both long-time members of the Elite Sports Club, which gathers those who are keen in various sports including soccer and billiards. With the aim of growing the club, Raju proposed at a committee meeting that membership be opened to foreigners. Eric, who was also present, strongly objected, believing the club should retain its local flavour and thus not accept foreigners into their ranks.

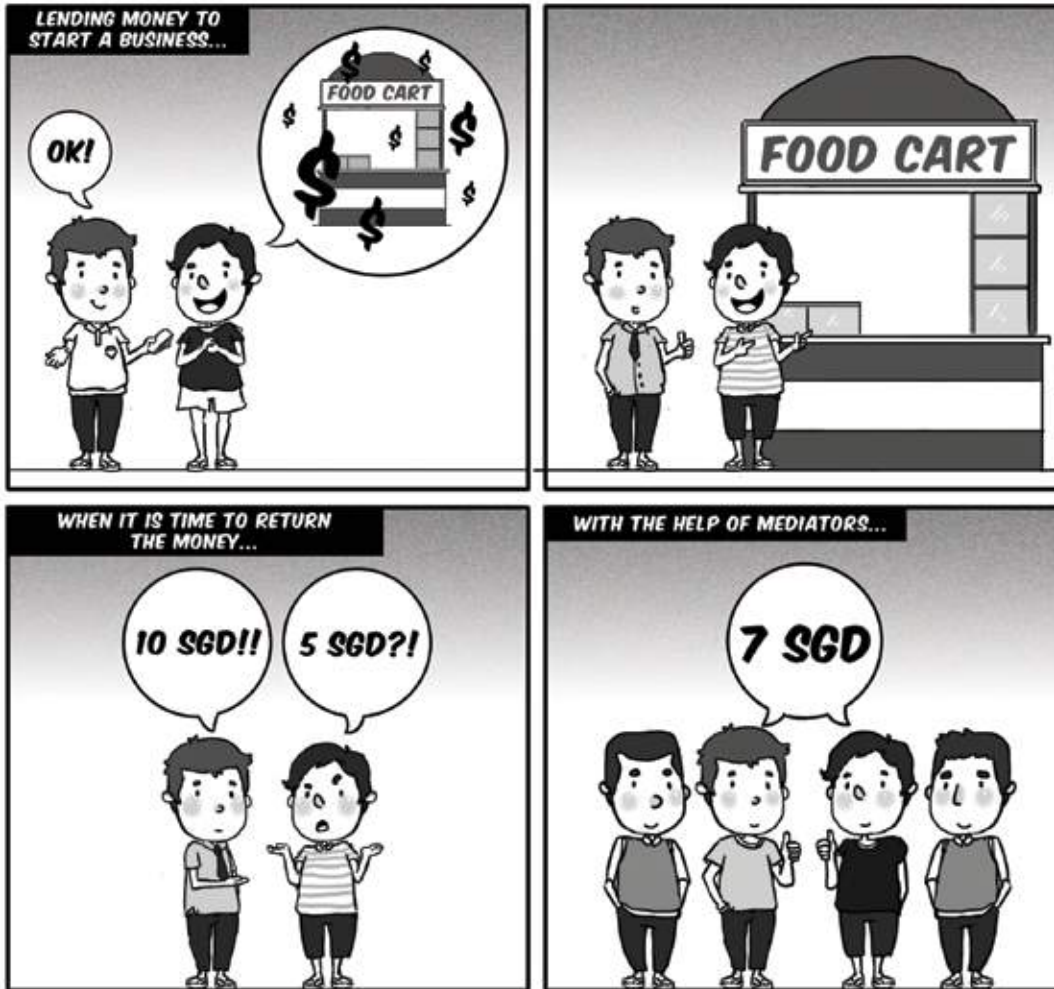
Both men were not ready to budge from their positions, despite many kind words of advice from fellow club members. Both wanted the best for the club and felt that their respective proposals should be accepted by the committee. To get a neutral person to help them resolve their disagreement on the issue, they jointly decided to seek mediation.

The mediation session ended with the two sports enthusiasts stepping out of the mediation room with big smiles on their faces. Apart from the facilitation of the discussion by the mediators, it was also the parties’ cooperation and willingness to work towards a compromise that produced the happy ending.

Observing that both Raju and Eric were passionate about sports and their club, the mediators then targeted their common passion and proceeded to help the parties “dissect” the issues that were bothering them. While doing so, the mediators lauded the duo’s commitment and contributions to the club, at the same time praising both their suggestions which were aimed purely at helping the club to grow and succeed. The mediators reiterated once and again that there was a strong common ground between both parties, which was their love and good intentions for their club. Given that, they should respect each other’s proposals and leave it to the club’s committee to make a decision at a later date.

The session allowed both parties to enjoy some sort of “recognition” for their contributions to sports and to their club, and that certainly placated the two avid sportsmen. With both parties being in a much calmer state and friendlier mood, the mediators worked on helping the parties to gain a different perspective to the issue, by identifying the merits in both their proposals. All these were instrumental in helping the parties reach an amicable settlement.

I.O.U., BUT NOT THAT MUCH



Money is a sensitive topic even among friends and relatives - we will all do well to remember that.

Over a long period of some 30 years, Li Yong had been lending money to his friend Peck Seah, who needed funds every now and then to keep her small food business going. For some years Li Yong simply handed the cash over to his friend, whom he had no problem trusting. It was only when Peck Seah's repayments started coming in late that Li Yong began making her sign IOUs.

As Peck Seah had started to make her repayments much later in recent months, Li Yong began to become worried. In fear that Peck Seah would default on the payment of the sum loaned to her, Li Yong decided to approach her to collect back the \$5,000 he believed she still owed him. Peck Seah refused to do so, insisting that based on her memory the outstanding balance due to Li Yong was only \$3,000. Unable to settle this discrepancy on their own, the two decided to seek mediation.

During the session, Li Yong produced some IOUs to support his claim regarding the amount that Peck Seah

still owed him. However, his claims were refuted by Peck Seah as some of the IOUs had never even been signed by her. As the purpose of mediation is to help individuals reach a compromise on their dispute, the mediators put aside the "evidence" produced and instead worked with both parties to generate possible options to narrow their differences.

Peck Seah highlighted to the mediators that it was not that she did not want to pay Li Yong back the money loaned to her, it was only that she could not agree with the amount he demanded. Helping Li Yong weigh the possibility of getting some of his money back from Peck Seah versus prolonging the dispute over the actual amount owed, they eventually got him to agree to a compromise with Peck Seah on an amount of \$4,000, to be returned by her in instalments.

While the resolution may not have gotten Li Yong all the money he loaned to his friend, the mediators' assistance did help both of them bring closure to this money issue and allow Li Yong to recover a bigger amount than might have otherwise been the case.

STAY COOL, WE GET YOU

More often than not, damage done to someone's pride in the course of a dispute could propel it far beyond the issue which started it. Trying to soothe bruised egos can therefore bring about some surprising outcomes when resolving such a dispute.

For Kok Fai, it wasn't his dirtied clothes and stained wall that infuriated him. It was the nonchalant attitude and cold shoulders he faced when he went up to confront his upstairs neighbours that got him boiling. These neighbours of his had one day arranged for their air-con unit to be repaired and the dirty water drained during the repair dripped downwards, causing Kok Fai's laundry and rear wall to be stained. Kok Fai thought that it was only fair that they be told of their inconsiderate action and also compensate him for the damage done. He thus went up a few times to make these demands known to them.

Kok Fai was on a few occasions greeted by Wei En and his girlfriend, who had rented their flat from the Shens, a middle-aged couple. Wei En, not wanting the matter to be left festering, had offered to pay for Kok Fai's damaged clothes as a gesture of goodwill, but didn't think it was necessary for him to pay for the cleaning of the wall, as that could be done by the Town Council for free. During a few other visits, the Shens happened to also be around and it was their attitude towards Kok Fai on the issue that got him flying into a rage. Kok Fai felt that the Shens seemed to dismiss the issues

Flat above



Flat below



Kok Fai explained that when he approached his neighbours upstairs about the problem, they don't seem to care about it.



he raised as trivialities while displaying a seemingly nonchalant attitude. So not only were his belongings damaged, Kok Fai's ego also became bruised in the course of the dispute.

The mediators' keen observation and patience helped to uncover the real issues to the dispute. It was understood that Kok Fai was not exactly concerned about the compensation but rather for "justice" to be done. So it would only be when such justice was done that progress could be made in the case. To Kok Fai, an injustice was committed when the Shens chose to ignore the mistake made by their tenants that caused him much inconvenience. Instead of rectifying the issue, the Shens' approach to this matter seemed to be belittling him each time he raised it with them. His demand for compensation was exactly to penalise such "irresponsible" behaviour on the part of the Shens.

The mediators were aware that Wei En just wanted to have this dispute settled as soon as possible so that he could get on with his life, and was thus quite ready to do whatever it took to settle the issue. They acknowledged the gesture of goodwill by Wei En, who agreed to compensate Kok Fai for his stained laundry, but knew they had to work harder to deal with the real issue – the Shens' attitude towards Kok Fai over the episode.

To address that, the mediators worked with the Shens to consider possible options to placate Kok Fai. With the guidance of the mediators, the Shens weighed the various options and finally agreed to get the Town Council's assistance to clean the stained wall so that this matter could be quickly put to rest. With this involvement of the Shens, Kok Fai was at last agreeable to putting the whole thing to an end.

HELP! YOUR SINGING IS GIVING ME A HEADACHE

Mediation is a process that requires all participants to weigh all the options generated before deciding on what appears to be a sound and reasonable solution to them. However, there may sometimes be challenging situations in which both parties, for their own reasons, may not be capable of making such an assessment. In such cases, more leeway should be given towards the parties to allow them more time to reach a resolution in their dispute.

Hup San had never enjoyed his neighbour Jimmy's singing. To him, Jimmy's nightly karaoke sessions only disturbed his peace. The problem got to the point where both were fighting so hard over this issue that their dispute had to be referred for mediation. Despite Jimmy lowering the volume of his karaoke after that, Hup San revisited him to complain about exactly the same issue a few months later.

Another round of mediation soon took place. This time, instead of Jimmy's singing, it was the obnoxious behaviour of Jimmy's family members that infuriated Hup San. He was in particular disturbed by their mischievous eldest son, Tim, claiming that Tim always slammed their door and metal gate at him. He also claimed that Jimmy's family had harassed and threatened him due to his complaining about their karaoke previously.

To Jimmy, it was simply Hup San who was the problematic one. He claimed that after their previous conflict, he had already taken the trouble to lower his volume whenever he was singing. And with this new case that Hup San had raised, he suspected that the

poor man was hallucinating as he was certain no one in his family had ever slammed their door at him.

As the session went on, Hup San revealed that he was having some behavioural issues, but which was aggravated by Jimmy's family's behaviour and actions towards him. This allowed the mediator to gradually uncover the actual cause of their conflict. Patiently drawing information out of Hup San himself, they soon discovered that he had been under treatment for a psychological problem.

While Jimmy's household could have been a little rowdy at times, there was every likelihood that it was Hup San's condition that had magnified the problem for him to such an extent that he could tolerate it no longer. There was hence the need for extra sensitivity to handle the issue, with the mediator having to ensure that any attempt to secure a settlement would be balanced by the need to keep Hup San's dignity intact. This case was indeed successfully resolved, but only with the help of an understanding and empathetic neighbour like Jimmy. Upon learning of Hup San's condition, Jimmy was willing to beat a retreat, assuring Hup San that he would try his best to take all measures necessary to prevent causing any further disturbance.

Perhaps, Jimmy was telling the truth when he claimed that his family had never been one to make trouble for any neighbour. However, his willingness to be the bigger man between the two, knowing of his neighbour's unfortunate condition, is one good example of the kind of gracious person everyone should aspire to be.

THERE'S NO TEA, HOW ABOUT 🍊RANGES?

The need for respect and dignity is often at the centre of many disputes. When such a need is successfully addressed, achieving a resolution is not difficult.

Eng Tuan, a “karang guni” man, had been good friends with Chew Siang, who runs a food stall at a nearby market. Their long running friendship, however, became threatened when Eng Tuan began placing a chair to reserve a parking spot for his truck in front of his block. Chew Siang, who lives in the same block, drives a car and sometimes find it hard to get a parking lot.

One day, when Eng Tuan was at the car park, Chew Siang came running to him, demanding that he stopped his habit of using a chair to “chope” the parking lot. Eng Tuan simply jeered at him, and in the ensuing quarrel, fell to the ground when Chew Siang gave him a big shove. While he did not appear injured, Eng Tuan still went to the polyclinic and chalked up a medical bill amounting to \$120.

At the mediation, Eng Tuan demanded that not only did he want \$120 to cover his medical expenses, he expected Chew Siang to compensate him with another \$8,000 and serve up a cup of tea as a gesture of apology. Chew Siang, though acknowledging that his actions had been rash, was only willing to say sorry and pay for Eng Tuan’s medical expenses.

As the discussion went on with both parties to come up with a possible solution to their dispute, it became obvious that Eng Tuan did not want a simple apology from his friend, but one which required Chew Siang to serve up a cup of tea. Such a gesture is deemed as a great loss of face for Chew Siang and had he done so, would imply that he had “admitted defeat”. Naturally, Chew Siang strongly disagreed.

It took the mediators some patience and much effort before a compromise was reached between the two parties.

There was no tea to be served to bring the unhappy matter to an end. Instead, Chew Siang offered two oranges to Eng Tuan, something he was quite happy to do. To Chew Siang, such a gesture would not cause him to lose face, as the oranges were symbols not so much an apology but an expression of his well wishes for Eng Tuan. As for Eng Tuan, he felt that the gesture would in itself have humbled the rash and disrespectful Chew Siang, and thus was glad to let the matter rest.

When a storm arises in a teacup, there may be many ways to help restore calm. However, whichever avenue one pursues, paying attention to detail and narrowing the differences between the conflicting parties can help bring forward a happy ending with or without a cup of tea.

STOP THAT CATFIGHT!

What is one person's beloved pet may be another's nuisance. There's certainly nothing wrong with keeping and loving your pets, as long as you don't allow them to become someone else's nightmare. With this as with other issues, a little thoughtfulness can go a long way towards a happy and peaceful neighbourhood.

Azlina is an all-out ailurophile, or in simple terms, a lover of cats and everything to do with them. She treated her pet cats as if they were her children, and so was quite shocked to find out that her neighbour Li Shan had been abusing them with brooms and sticks. What an outrage! She stormed next door to demand for an explanation for Li Shan's nasty behaviour, only to be yelled at by her. Apparently, her precious cats had often been straying into Li Shan's house and kitchen, frightening both herself and her children who were all afraid of cats.



In making her case to the mediators, Li Shan made it clear that she would be most happy if Azlina could get rid of her feline pets. Azlina's habit of feeding them along the corridors and then letting them stray around led to her cats having the chance to roam into Li Shan's house. To Azlina, asking her to get rid of her cats is like asking Li Shan to get rid of her family, which is impossible!

With the mediators' guidance to help both parties rethink their respective concerns and expectations for each other, possible options were generated to help them towards the resolution of the issue.

After holding private meetings with both, Li Shan's main concern with Azlina's cat was made known and explained to her. It was understood that both Li Shan and her children were fearful of cats, to the extent that the children were reluctant to step out of the house or even come home after school because of them. Upon learning the severity of the situation, Azlina was more empathetic towards Li Shan and her family and became more willing to do her part to reduce the agony her pets were causing them.

In the end, Azlina agreed to keep her pets in check by confining them within her house, only allowing them out when Li Shan's children were in school or had gone to bed. This goes to show that a compromise is always possible if one is willing to try. In this case, Azlina happily got to keep her beloved pets, while Li Shan was equally happy - to keep them away!

SOMETIMES, YOU CAN HELP MORE BY STAYING OUT

It is not unusual for friends and relatives of parties to a dispute to be present to offer them support and assistance during a mediation. Depending on the personalities involved, this may help in the quest for a resolution, or it can do the opposite and hinder one. Friends and relatives who are too eager to take sides might disrupt the process of negotiation and worsen the problem instead of helping to solve it.

Chio Tee's problem with her neighbour, Krishna, was never that serious to begin with. Krishna had started conducting certain religious rituals since the passing on of his wife. Chio Tee could understand the need for Krishna to engage in activities which were associated to his religion. However, she wished for the sound of chanting to be reduced and that something could be done about the smoke emitted by the joss sticks stuck into his flowerpots and the oil lamps at the front of his door. In addition to that, Chio Tee was concerned about the security of her surroundings since she noticed that many visitors, who were strangers to the neighbourhood, had been coming to Krishna's place since he started his religious rituals.

When the mediation took place, Chio Tee was accompanied by her son, Alson, while Krishna came with his niece, Rathi. With Chio Tee only able to speak Mandarin and Cantonese, while Krishna and his niece spoke mostly English, the mediation had to be conducted with a mixture of English, Mandarin and Cantonese. It was quickly noted that the companions brought along by both parties were actually more vocal and aggressive than the two persons directly involved in the dispute, with each of them happy to offer a rebuttal whenever the other party raised a point. For example,

Rathi countered Chio Tee's complaints by highlighting her equally "offensive" habits, such as boiling soup along the corridor and playing mahjong regularly and noisily.

The mediators noted that instead of helping with achieving a resolution, these third parties seemed to be escalating the conflict between the main parties involved. Seeing that their participation had been counter-productive to the progress of the mediation, the mediators reminded and highlighted to these parties that while it was understandable that they wanted to fight for the rights of their own kin, they should be more objective in viewing the issues at hand. The mediators further advised that if they really cared for Chio Tee and Krishna respectively, they should each be helping them come up with possible and mutually beneficial solutions instead of making matters worse.

With that gentle reminder, the third parties began to reflect on their own contributions to the dispute and ultimately, it was Chio Tee and Krishna who together came up with a resolution to their own dispute. The session concluded with Krishna agreeing to stop sticking joss sticks into his flower pots and reduce the number of joss sticks and oil lamps used in his rituals. Chio Tee appreciated this since after all, it was the smoke and smell that bothered her more than anything else. Chio Tee also assured Krishna that she would reduce the noise from her mahjong sessions, which was only held occasionally.

Wanting to side with a friend or relative is only natural. However, you should do so in the right way if you want to be of any help to them.

COME ON, LET'S BE CIVIL

In the heat of a dispute, it's usually difficult for the parties involved to think clearly or be objective given the negative emotions that prevail. In fact, if they were to look at things closely, there are sometimes more similarities between them than there are differences. Once they are able to realise that, they may just also realise that it is quite senseless to be fighting each other in the first place.

Howard's complaint against his upstairs neighbour, Mun Siong, is a familiar one. After coming home from a hard day's work and looking forward to a good rest, he was instead disturbed by noises coming from Mun Siong's household. It sounded like children were jumping around, and chairs were being dragged all over the floor. Howard was having a hard time putting up with the nightly nuisance, but his wife had it even worse because the noise disturbed her to the extent that she needed to consult a psychiatrist on the matter.

If there was one thing that the mediators quickly observed about the situation, it was that Howard and Mun Siong had quite a lot in common. Both placed top priority on protecting their own family, and were equally keen to get their dispute quickly settled. Both were also employed as civil servants. It was this common ground that the mediators worked on to help them bring the matter to a swift and amicable ending.

Both Howard and Mun Siong were made to understand that each other had the interest of their loved ones at heart. Howard was worried more for his wife than himself, which was why he demanded the noisy problem be put to a stop. Mun Siong too was eager to defend his own family because, as it turned out, Howard's wife had gone around spreading rumours about Mun Siong and his family, thus causing them much embarrassment. Mun Siong shared that in fact, after Howard's complaints, he had already made the effort to reduce any noise coming from his flat, including reining in his children and putting padding onto his furniture.

The dispute was resolved quickly as both parties had the same mindset when it came to settling their issue. With that, they were open to exploring all possible options towards achieving a settlement rather than pursuing an adversarial approach, which could have made the whole matter long drawn and tedious. Not only was their dispute successfully resolved, both parties also reached an agreement to communicate with each other directly if noise ever become an issue again.

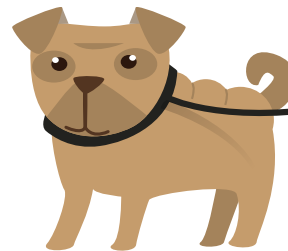
LET'S PUT A LEASH ON THOSE ILL FEELINGS

Walking one's pet is a simple yet satisfying pastime enjoyed by many. Sue Wern loved bringing her pet dog, Cookie, out for a stroll in the evenings. This daily joy of hers was one day rudely interrupted, when a dog belonging to her neighbour Lina suddenly came charging towards her and Cookie. Alarmed, her immediate reaction was to defend herself and Cookie by giving the canine one big kick! Witnessing this, Lina became enraged and the two ladies got into a scuffle, during which Lina alleged that Sue Wern had pushed and hurt her.

Sue Wern's rebuttal was that Lina should have leashed her dog, as is expected of anyone who is walking their dog in a public place. Had she done so, the incident could have been prevented and they would never had gotten into a quarrel in the first place. Furthermore, she pointed out that Lina became nasty to her after the incident, often passing abusive remarks whenever they passed by each other. Lina immediately jumped to her own defence, claiming that Sue Wern had kicked her dog for no good reason. She further demanded that a compensation should be made to her for the injury caused by Sue Wern in the incident.

With both parties refusing to budge, this dispute took the mediators some effort in terms of building a common understanding between the two parties. While the mediators highlighted the importance of the two maintaining a harmonious relationship since they would run into each other often, both parties continued insisting that the other party was at fault. Ultimately, the only agreement that they could come up with was to try avoiding each other as much as they could, and to restrain themselves from harming the other party in their conduct or speech.

Ideally, with the resolution of a conflict, an understanding will be reached between the parties involved and they can hopefully work on mending their relationship to become more friendly towards each other. Even in the above situation, where there did not seem to have been a perfect outcome, there was still a reasonable resolution offered for both to work on. One can only hope that given enough time, these so-called enemies can one day become friends.



TALK. NOT LOCK

It is almost human nature for us to indulge in a little gossiping now and then. Believing in such frivolous talk and spreading it in a way that hurts someone should however be discouraged. This story tells how the relationship between two flatmates went down the drain due to nothing so much as senseless gossip and sheer misunderstandings.

Kong Ann and Lian Beng were colleagues at a factory. Five years before, they came to Singapore to work and had since then stayed together in a rented flat. Kong Ann complained that Lian Beng often hurled various expletives at him whenever they had minor disagreements. He was also unhappy that Lian Beng had posted a picture of his fiancée on his Facebook page, spicing it up with a smattering of vulgar comments!

On the other hand, Lian Beng was furious with Kong Ann for being a snitch and spreading rumours about him being a substance abuser. Lian Beng was also upset with Kong Ann for telling him off whenever he invited his friends over to their flat and on one occasion, changing the door lock to deny him access to the flat. Lian Beng's offensive Facebook posting was simply a tit-for-tat for Kong Ann's behaviour. On top of that, he claimed that Kong Ann had somehow "ordered" people to tail him, tracking his movements and intruding on his privacy.

With so many allegations of threats and wrongdoings flying around, the mediators decided to get both parties to "put everything on the table" and to seek clarification with each other on their mutual accusations. Kong Ann emphasised that he would never have instructed anyone to follow Lian Beng around as he would definitely not want to spend any money doing that. In fact, he was amused with such an allegation! All he wanted was for Lian Beng to remove the Facebook posting which greatly bothered him and his fiancée. Kong Ann also highlighted to Lian Beng his concern about the group of friends that he had been hanging out with, cautioning him to be wary of them as they were obviously up to no good.

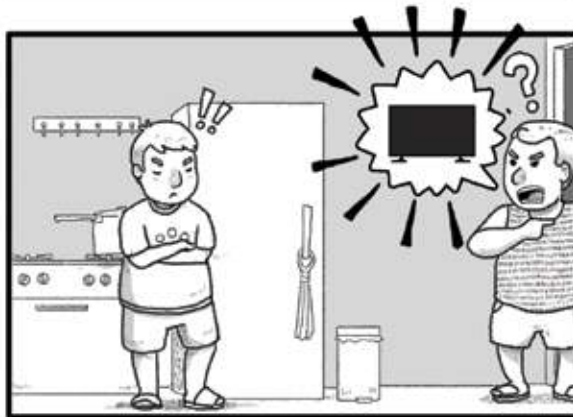
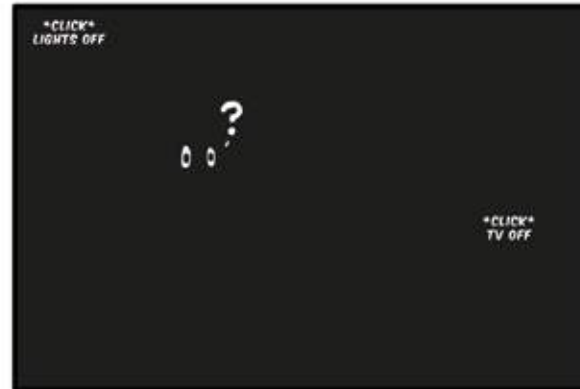
During the private sessions, where the mediators had the opportunity to further explore ways with both parties to help them settle their dispute, Lian Beng admitted that his allegations regarding Kong Ann being a snitch and spreading rumours about him were unfounded. In fact, Lian Beng has heard it from one of his friends, who told him to be wary of Kong Ann. Apparently, his "misjudgement" was due to the "instigation" of this friend. The entire saga could have been avoided if only Lian Beng had approached Kong Ann for a clarification in the first place.

Lian Beng, made to realise his offensive Facebook posting was uncalled for, was ready to take it down and also offer an apology to Kong Ann. Kong Ann, on his part, offered to walk with Lian Beng out of the mediation centre, just to assure him that he did not ask for anyone to tail him or track his movement.

Sometimes, listening to the wrong person and making your judgement based on what you have heard from that person could lead you up the wrong alley. Open your eyes and ears and seek to clarify before you make any judgement. You may be surprised to discover a whole new perspective to the issue before you.



FATHER AND SON – UPGRADED VERSION!



Mediation is usually seen as a way to resolve disputes and settle differences. However, in some cases, mediation can be transformative, changing people to become better than they used to be.

Soon Fatt was relaxing and watching TV in his room one day when his 17-year old son Leonard suddenly barged in and switched off both the light and TV set. Furious with his son's actions, Soon Fatt confronted him in the kitchen. In response, Leonard picked up a bottle and threatened to hit his own dad with it. In the commotion, Soon Fatt was pushed by Leonard and fell, hitting his head against the table as he went down. That unfortunate fall caused Soon Fatt a bruised left arm and five stitches on his forehead.

The enraged Soon Fatt was adamant that his son should be put into jail for physically hurting him. This vengeful thought was apparently still with him when he came in for the mediation. Neither father nor son took one single look at each other, speaking only through the mediator when they needed to. It was obvious that they had to be taken into private meetings if things were to go further.

It was during the meetings that the mediator discovered that Soon Fatt was upset about Leonard's behaviour as he felt there was no respect shown to him as a father. Not only did he not get the respect that he deserved, his son's violent behaviour towards him further infuriated him. For Leonard, he revealed that none of his family members respected his dad, who was jobless and doing nothing for the family.

When it comes to family disputes, which are often intense and highly emotional, counselling skills could

be useful during mediation. In this case, the mediators' assistance to counsel and guide father and son to see the issue from the other party's perspective was helpful towards getting a resolution. When that was achieved, Soon Fatt was better able to appreciate the fact that if his son, who is only a student, is going to have a jail record, it would certainly look bad and affect his future. Leonard, who was already regretting his impulsive behaviour, was reminded of the fact that Soon Fatt is his father after all and was only asking for respect.

This case concluded with Leonard apologising to his dad for his impulsive action. He also promised to be a good son and student if his dad could give him a second chance. Soon Fatt, who ultimately cared for his son, no longer wished to pursue the case. The incident also served to make this father reflect on his own position at home and reminded him that he could do something about winning back his family's respect.

People can change. It may not necessarily take a mediator to bring out the better side in a person, but he can help you reflect on your actions and behaviour to create a better you.



IT TAKES TWO HANDS TO BARK



While in most disputes, there's a complainant and a respondent, it cannot be assumed that either party has to be the wrongdoer. More often than not, both parties share some of the blame for starting the ball rolling and pushing things to the point where it becomes a major conflict. Bridging differences, rather than apportioning guilt, is what mediation is all about when it is used as a means to settle disputes.

Rina, a single lady who has been staying alone, had become afraid of her neighbour Kwang Joo. Rina has been keeping a dog for a long time to provide herself with some companionship. Whenever Rina uses the lift to go downstairs, she will have to pass by Kwang Joo's flat. However, each time she passed by Kwang Joo's unit, her dog would start barking incessantly. This apparently bothered Kwang Joo very much, to the extent that he made a complaint about the issue to the police and the grassroots leaders. Rina felt that Kwang Joo was overreacting to her dog's barking, which she never thought was any big issue.

Rina's first complaint to the mediator was that Kwang Joo was actually the troublemaker, having intentionally damaged her umbrella and the door of her apartment. She felt that such "harassment" was directed at her. She was deeply worried about Kwang Joo's behaviour and wanted it to be stopped. Kwang Joo vehemently denied the claims and rebutted that it was, in fact, Rina who was giving him trouble. Kwang Joo insisted that he had actually been the one trying to be a friendly neighbour to Rina, by bringing festive goodies to her during the Lunar New Year. Instead of showing gratitude for his kind gesture, Rina repaid him by damaging his plants and making spitting sounds each time she passed by his flat.

As the mediators saw it, while the barking was put forward as the main issue, it was actually more of an excuse that hid the real problem at hand. If anything, the conflict that arose between Rina and Kwang Joo was due to their conflicting personalities. As the discussion went on, it became obvious that the two parties hardly communicated with each other and thus never had a chance to work on clarifying the misunderstandings that had been building up over time.

With the help of the mediators, the main issue raised was resolved, with Rina agreeing to either carry her dog or put a muzzle on it whenever she walks past Kwang Joo's flat. Barking at each other had never helped either of them, because ultimately, honest and open communication is still the best way to put a dispute to rest.



LET GO OF THE PAST, PROBLEM SOLVED

It's no exaggeration to say that Kim Hor's list of complaints against his neighbour Amelia was longer than his arm. Staying directly opposite each other, the two had been on friendly terms when they first became neighbours. However, the cordial relationship between them began to sour from about five years before.

Kim Hor claimed that Amelia had begun harassing him and his family by snapping photos and stalking them for no obvious reason. Amelia also often cursed at them whenever they opened their door. Sometimes, she would intentionally burn something at the corridor and the fumes given out had made him sick by giving him headaches. He recounted that Amelia had even threatened to kill him, warning him that his life would be shortened if he did not move away.

Refuting all the claims made against her, Amelia too felt she had plenty to complain about this neighbour. She similarly alleged that Kim Hor was a nuisance to her and her family, and even all the other residents in their block. She claimed that Kim Hor and his family had performed the very same acts which they had accused her of by often harassing and stalking her. Occasionally, Kim Hor had even passed sexually suggestive remarks when he was able to get near to her. Amelia recalled one incident in which Kim Hor actually hit her with an umbrella when she ignored

him while they were together in the lift. Amelia added that Kim Hor had even called up her past and present employers, making false accusations to smear her reputation. She also shared with the mediators that she had done everything ranging from calling the police to raising the problem with her Member of Parliament, but they had all suggested that she tried mediation instead to resolve the issue she had with Kim Hor.

While Amelia did agree to attend the mediation, she insisted for the two of them to attend the session separately as she had a phobia about her "crazy" neighbour. Even after explaining the need for both of them to be in the joint session to understand the issues each party had in the dispute, it took some time for the mediators to convince and assure her that she would be safe with them around.

When both parties finally met in the mediation room, Amelia demanded that Kim Hor and his family immediately stopped all that they had been doing to her, singling out Kim Hor who seemed to be mentally unsound to her. The mediators then intervened to correct one big misconception that Amelia had of Kim Hor, explaining that there was no way for him to even contact her employers - he knew none of them, since Amelia and him were not on talking terms to begin with.

Having stayed in the neighbourhood for some years, Kim Hor was aware that Amelia had been suffering from some personality disorder which resulted in her bizarre behaviour. Since pushing the matter would not do either of them any good, he decided to take a step back and simply drop the issue. Perhaps by letting Amelia have her peace of mind, he too could then have his.

With both sides agreeing to refrain from harassing each other and Kim Hor's willingness to let go of the past, they definitely did find the best way forward, one which benefitted everyone and was the wiser choice given the circumstances.



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