

Family Answer Book
Psychology

By Bette-Jane Raphael



I Can't Believe I Just Said That!

We were out to dinner with one of my husband's clients and his wife, and I was chatting away about how much we'd enjoyed a recent trip to England. "But the women were so dowdy," I finished up. "It must be a crime over there to read fashion magazines."

No sooner was this flippancy out of my mouth than I remembered: The client's wife was a Londoner, born and bred. I'd made a true *faux pas*—in English, a false step. Worse than just saying something stupid, I'd said something offensive, something that might hurt another's feelings. I felt awful, and at a loss what to do next.

If I thought I belonged to a select group of unfortunates who couldn't open their mouths without putting their feet inside, I might choose never to speak to anyone outside my imme-

diately family. But a quick survey of my friends revealed that almost all of them could remember—and blush at—impolitic remarks they'd gladly take back if they could.

We can't take them back, of course. But there are ways we can keep ourselves from making future gaffes, recover quickly from the ones we do make, and live more easily with those that leave us cringing for years.

An Ounce of Prevention

"Many blunders," offers Judith Martin, a.k.a. the socially impeccable Miss Manners, whose latest book is *Star-Spangled Manners* (W W Norton & Co.), "can be prevented by following a few simple guidelines." Regarding my regrettable dinner table remark, for example, she imparts an easily followed rule of social interaction: "Never make negative generalizations

about people, especially if you're with someone you don't know **everything** about. You're bound to step on toes sooner or later."

And, she adds, "Never assume anything about anyone." This last piece of advice would have been invaluable to my neighbor, Janet, had she gotten it before she ran into another neighbor of ours getting out of a taxi. Noticing the woman's greatly expanded midsection, Janet blurted out the first thing that occurred to her: "You're pregnant!" she announced, loudly enough for anyone within shouting distance to hear. No, the woman said, glowering, she wasn't pregnant; she'd just put on some weight and was trying to take it off.

Not surprisingly, the exchange left both women mortified. "Guessing somebody else's secret," comments Martin, "is a recipe for disaster."

You don't have to intrude on others' privacy to get into trouble. Insulting them will do just as well. My cousin Sally says she still feels terrible when she remembers the argument that erupted between her and another guest at a friend's dinner party several months ago. "We were having a loud disagreement, and in the heat of the moment I called him an idiot. I felt awful. I'd insulted a fellow guest, disrupted my friend's party and made everyone uncomfortable."

Again, Martin has a good rule of thumb to help you avoid this kind of social catastrophe. "Don't bring up controversial issues that people may get violently upset about," she warns. "Unless you're among people you know think the same way you do, steer clear of topics like abortion, say, or animal rights."

I was discussing nothing more controversial than the weather with a group of people at a party one evening, when an acquaintance I recognized walked in with newly dyed hair. "Oh, dear," I said to my husband, "Anne

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looks awful as a blonde.” With that, a woman standing right behind him said, somewhat defensively, “I think my sister looks great.” I cast my eyes down to the drink in my hands, hoping there was something in it that would make me invisible.

“That’s the type of comment you make to your husband in the car on the way home,” Martin advises. “Don’t forget that when you go to a party you’re surrounded by people who are friends of the host, and probably one another. So it’s not the place to talk about other people who are there.”

Recovering Your Aplomb

Even when you’ve learned all the rules by heart and are on your guard, there may come a moment when your mouth works faster than your brain and the wrong words escape before you can stop them. What do you do?

“One thing you can try is to make light of what you’ve said,” suggests Marlene Waldoock, who, through her company First Impression Communications, teaches public speaking and communication skills to business and professional people. “This is an effective option if you’re with people you know. You can try saying something like, ‘Excuse me, I’m not sure who the person was who said that!’ Remember, people don’t expect perfection,” Waldoock adds. “They’ve almost certainly made blunders of their own.”

If you’re quick-witted, Martin suggests, you can try putting a positive spin on your gaffe. For example, she suggests that after my “dowdy” remark, I could have added something like, “I mean, of course, that English women have a deeper sense of style that is much more important than keeping up with the latest trends.”

My friend Patty told me about how, after uttering a badly timed remark, she recovered by using just such a ploy. “We were at a housewarming,” she recalled. “The place was very big and, I thought, very vul-

gar. At one point I turned to my husband and said, ‘All this must have cost a ridiculous amount of money.’”

A moment after she spoke, Patty realized that her hostess was standing a foot away, offering her a plate of hors d’oeuvres. “I knew she’d heard me, so I tried to turn what I’d said into a compliment. I explained that I was just wondering how much her house cost because my husband and I were trying to figure out if we’d be able to buy such a beautiful place ourselves. Thankfully, she seemed flattered.”

Unfortunately, not all of us can be as socially nimble. After saying something awful, most of us are likely to be speechless, however belatedly. In that case, an apology may be our only recourse. And it should be made sooner rather than later.

“When you think you may have insulted someone, it’s better not to let things fester,” advises Waldoock. “If you’re sorry for what you’ve said, say so as fast as possible. A display of real remorse can often ameliorate even the worst breach of diplomacy.”

Also, adds Martin, a profuse apology may defuse the whole situation. “If you go on and on about it—about how it’s the worst thing you ever did in your whole life, and how you’re just sick about it—the person you’re apologizing to may feel obliged to say, ‘Oh, it wasn’t so bad. Never mind.’”

Forgiving Your Trespasses

No matter what you do, though, some misguided words can haunt you forever. I’ve asked myself a hundred times how I could ever have passed on a piece of gossip about one friend to another as the two of us were putting on makeup in the ladies room of a restaurant one night. A few seconds after I spoke, the woman I’d betrayed emerged from a nearby stall and left the room without looking at me. I ran after her to apologize, but really, what was there to say? I’d done something awful, and we both knew it. It took a long time to regain my friend’s trust.

Ultimately she did forgive me, but I’ve never really forgiven myself.

“When you’re ashamed of something you’ve said,” advises Waldoock, “you have to try and let it go. If you don’t, you face the prospect of agonizing over it for a long time to come.” One of the best ways of letting a bad experience go, Waldoock says, is by sharing it with someone else. “Sit down with somebody you trust and say, ‘I said this thing and I feel miserable about it.’ The person you’re talking to may be able to give you a different perspective on the incident. It may not seem as bad to her as it does to you. She may even come back at you with a similar experience, perhaps a faux pas of her own that makes yours pale by comparison. It’s always good to be reminded that everybody makes social blunders at one time or another, that for most of us it’s a fact of life.”

You can also try writing down the incident in a journal, suggests Waldoock. “If you write them down every time they occur, you might find a thread linking your verbal misdemeanors to one another.” For instance, you might learn that you make blunders because you’re anxious to say something when you’re with other people, to add anything to the conversation, even if it’s an ill-considered remark. “Once you determine what’s at work in your behavior,” Waldoock points out, “you have a better chance of controlling it.”

Whichever way you do it, the point is to get the story out of your mind and into the open. “Because,” says Waldoock, “when things are locked up inside you, they tend to grow bigger and bigger. You could wind up beating yourself over the head forever.”

Apologizing to the person you’ve offended, even well after the fact, may be the ultimate way of sharing, and alleviating, your distress. Making amends to whomever you’ve wounded—letting them know that you are deeply sorry for your hurtful words, and that you respect them and care about their feelings—can relieve both their pain and your guilt. With a sincere apology, you can make it clear to yourself, as well as to them, that while you may have a wayward tongue, you have a steadfast heart. **FC**