

**How to
keep your**



**out of
your
mouth**

One night I went to a dinner party with several people I'd never met before and eagerly proceeded to tell what I thought would be an amusing story. I started by describing the weekend house my partner and I had just bought in a small country town. "Oh," said the woman sitting across the table from me, "I know that area very well. My grandparents had a house there that sounds just like it and I spent several summers with them."

Rather than pause to hear the particulars of her childhood summers, I barreled on, describing our property and the previous owner, an extremely good-looking man about whom we'd been told some juicy gossip by the real-estate agent who sold us the house. It seems this man had been the chauffeur of a very wealthy widow, and that she had left the property to him in her will. The rumor was that the chauffeur had been, as our real-estate agent quaintly put it, her "fancy man," and that he'd done a lot more for her than drive her car. After I finished my story, there were murmurs of amusement around the dinner table, until the woman across the table from me, looking story, spoke again: "That woman," she said, "was my grandmother."

At first I thought she was joking. The statement was too much of a social nightmare come true. But she wasn't joking, and while she went on to talk good-naturedly about her somewhat eccentric ancestor, my mortification was complete. The only positive outcome of the evening was that it prompted me to (1) analyze some of my more fatal verbal indelicacies and (2) devise techniques to keep myself out of social hot water.

I'm not alone in having a tendency to confuse my mouth with an open spigot. No matter how socially sophisticated we may believe ourselves to be, all of us get into trouble when we forget that one's ability to keep a secret often has a direct bearing on one's ability to keep a friendship, or that verbal spontaneity with friends can be as ill-considered a practice as sexual spontaneity with strangers. All of us, at one time or another, say something we wish we hadn't said: We mention to a friend that we glimpsed the man she is dating at a party, momentarily forgetting that this may not be the most treasured piece of information she will ever receive; we answer our sister's fashion-related question with the words, "Yes, it *does* make you look fat." Fortunately, there are ways to train yourself to keep your foot out of your mouth:

RECOGNIZE YOUR BLUNDER SPOTS

Understanding your own particularly vulnerable verbal areas is the best way to stop a gaffe before it occurs. For instance, if you know you tend to get into trouble when asked for your honest opinion on anything other than the weather, a warning light will go on in your brain the moment your best friend asks you what you think of her new boyfriend. You will feign death before you tell her that you think she'd be better off dating your dog, who is better behaved, better educated, and better looking. Instead, you'll say something noncommittal, such as "He has nice ears," or excuse yourself from the room.

Recollecting your worst verbal blunders should alert you to your trouble spots. My often outspoken pal Nancy says she realized her problem is offering advice before it's been solicited. The incident that finally made her turn over a new tongue was the time a good friend came to cry on her shoulder because her boyfriend was behaving abominably. (Continued)

by Bette-Jane Raphael

FOOT IN MOUTH

Continued

(He was dating Nancy's friend and another woman simultaneously, telling each about the other, and claiming an inability to commit to either.) Nancy told her friend to send the guy packing, suggesting, too, that dating an obvious sadist indicated serious flaws in her friend's self-esteem. "Six months later she married him," says Nancy, "and that was the end of our friendship."

SIDE-STEP YOUR BLUNDERS

The tricks memory experts recommend to give you more time to remember things on demand (like the name of the person who just said hello) can be used to give yourself more time to avoid a gaffe. Some of the suggested maneuvers are smiling, clearing your throat, adjusting your glasses or taking a deep breath. To this list I would add taking a sip of water—especially if you have to leave the room to get it. But what if your lips are cracked, you don't wear glasses and you're out in the desert? Then remember the most effective stalling maneuver of all: asking questions. Asking questions is viewed by others as a sign of interest and it gives you information and time, both of which can keep you from uttering something you might later regret. For example, Nancy regrets that she didn't find out right away that her friend loved the cad she was dating. "If I'd known that," she says, "I'd have compared him with someone other than Ted Bundy."

If stalling maneuvers don't work for you, borrow a technique from behavior-modification experts. These people give their clients an unpleasant sensation whenever the latter are tempted to indulge in a bad habit. In the same way, you can give yourself an unpleasant sensation whenever you're tempted to speak before you think. Do this by forming a repulsive picture in your mind. For instance, before advising your partner at dinner that, considering his rapidly vanishing waistline, he'd do better to skip dessert for a few days rather than stuff his face with cookies, picture yourself eating alone for the rest of your life.

CUT YOUR LOSSES

When, despite your efforts, unfortunate phrases slip out of your mouth, keep in mind that the quicker you can remedy the situation the better. Once, at lunch, a friend asked me what I thought of her new, thoroughly objectionable roommate. My gut reaction was to make gagging noises in my throat, but as soon as I'd done it, I thought better of it and pretended that I was choking on a morsel of tofu. I took a long sip of water and carefully suggested that the woman in question seemed a better choice than my own roommate of several years back (a woman who snored like a lumberjack and had an advanced case of bulimia).

My friend Annie recalls that once she asked a rather chubby woman to whom she'd just been introduced when she was expecting her baby, only to have the woman huffily reply that she was not pregnant. "Although it was her shape that suggested pregnancy," says Annie, "I immediately tried to turn my blunder into a compliment. I said, 'Oh, but you look so glowing!'"

ISOLATE YOUR SHORTCOMINGS

Of course, saying something stupid isn't necessarily proof positive that you're unfit for civilized society. Annie, for instance, says that she has come to accept the fact that she's congenitally tactless. "Even when I've practiced saying something tactfully, I wind up blurting it out in the worst way possible. I once wanted to compliment the dinner a friend had served, even though it wasn't very good. In my mind I practiced saying, 'What was that wonderful herb you put in the soup?', but it came out, 'What was that in the soup?' I'm resigned to living with my mouth. I figure I've got other qualities that make me fit for human company."

LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

You may want nothing more than to forget that you told your boyfriend's mother that oversalting her food was probably her way of venting her anger at being a housewife. However, *not* forgetting it will help you ensure that on your next visit you don't comment on her lethal use of sugar.

Moreover, remembering your worst blunders can teach you verbal caution—which is your best insurance against having to lie awake in bed wishing you'd been born wearing a muzzle. ■

Bette-Jane Raphael is the author of Glamour's "Can This Be Love" column.