

Laughable lapses — bouncing back from blank outs

My youngest son didn't speak until he was nearly four and a half years old, followed by many years of speech therapy to help him overcome fluency and auditory processing struggles. So, you can imagine our incredible pride when at 12, he took the stage as a lead role in his camp production of the Greek comedy "Lysistrata." We were amazed at the number of lines he had to memorize and deliver — which he did with grace and ease.

But about three quarters of the way through the play, he forgot one of his lines. My eyes darted nervously to my husband's when suddenly, the prompter who was off to the side of the stage loudly yelled out the line him. For my husband and me, the seconds that followed ticked endlessly. My stomach felt a little queasy when suddenly Alec stopped, smiled, looked out into the audience and then pointing off stage quipped,



Perspective on People

Karen Friedman

"Whatever she said!" The crowd roared and the aspiring actor took an unscripted bow. Even though "Lysistrata" is a comedy, in this version, he got the only real laugh of the night, but they were laughing with him, not at him, turning a lapse into a laughable moment.

It has happened to all of us: We forget something we were going to say. But what happens if we blank out at an important meeting, in front of the boss or as we're about to close that huge deal? Some clients confide they don't sleep for days when they have to speak at an important event. One professional likened it to a feeling of gasping for breath.

For starters, ask yourself these questions: What's the worst that can happen if you forget a line or don't remember the next slide you intend to talk about? Will you die? Not likely. Will you be fired? Probably not.

That's why it's important to understand how to grab a life jacket in advance so you are equipped to pull yourself to safety. It's important to remember that most people don't realize you've had a memory lapse unless you call it to their attention.

Here are a few techniques to calm your nerves.

■ **Prepare key words** — Think about the two or three words that convey the heart of your message. Growth.

Stability. Direction. When you blank, recall one of those words to put you back on track.

■ **Buy time** — Take a deep breath and pause. It will feel like light years to you, but your listeners will hardly notice. You can repeat your main point or re-state the last thing you said to reinforce your point.

■ **Preventive medicine** — Prepare, prepare, prepare. Just because you've given this talk or are a subject expert doesn't spell success. Preparing bullet-pointed notes and simple visuals when using slides will help you recall what you want your audience to know.

■ **Practice out-loud** — Broadcasters almost always rehearse out-loud to help them quickly recall points they want to make and help them internalize, not memorize.

■ **Eye contact** — It is essential to look people in the eye and not at the floor or ceiling when you forget what you wanted to say if you want to appear confident. If you are speaking to a larger group and blank when someone asks a question, look directly at the person who posed the question. Then repeat the question. After you first respond, pause and shift eye contact away from the questioner to the rest of the group so everyone feels included.

Finally, if you do forget what you wanted to say, enlist your audience for help. Often if you ask them "where was I?" they'll be happy to tell you!

KAREN FRIEDMAN is a professional communication coach, speaker and chief improvement officer at Karen Friedman Enterprises (www.karenfriedman.com). This column is based on her book "Shut Up and Say Something: Business Communication Strategies to Overcome Challenges and Influence Listeners."