



## First Aid When Words Collide: Coping with a Social Emergency

*By Karen Mathieson*

You know instantly when it happens, the relational equivalent of screeching tires followed by a tremendous crunch. Someone just brought up the unmentionable, leveled an insult, or dumped a gunny sack of long-cherished wrongs. You look around the room, or across the table, and think . . . Actually you're probably not thinking right now. You're likely just feeling stunned.

It might not have been a literal crash, with a car plunging through plate glass into your meeting, but this would be a good moment for some social first aid training to kick in. With appreciation to the Red Cross, here's a three-step approach to handling the immediate aftermath of a social disaster:

### **CHECK**

Take a few seconds to let your rational brain catch up with the emotional whomp. Inhale deeply through your nose to activate your inner oxygen mask, and let the breath out slowly through your mouth. Ask yourself, "What just happened here?" Putting yourself on broad observational alert will help to counter some of the impact of the adrenalin currently racing through your system.

Intentionally relax and widen your field of view, which has probably narrowed to that of a carriage horse in blinders. Using peripheral vision goes against an automatic reaction that helps creatures in nature focus on a threat to life and limb, but it can protect us in an environment of dangling electrical lines and potentially explosive tempers.

Read the body language around you, and note which voices are by now high and rising. Who is breathing rapidly and turning red? Who has thinned lips and a steely expression? Who is tuned out and unresponsive, clearly trying to disappear? Who has a concerned look, but doesn't seem overly horrified? Who just looks bewildered? Take another deep breath, to:

### **CALL and RECALL**

An effective recourse as your own first responder is to call on your knowledge of the people around you. Recall exactly what your role is in the group. Use another moment to consider whether something has come into the open that needed to be heard. This might not be the meeting outcome you'd envisioned, but it certainly has gotten real, hasn't it?

Like the conscious relaxation of eye muscles, taking a few seconds to remember your role or to consider how the scene may affect future communication short-circuits emergency sirens in the head. Under stress, not only our vision becomes a narrow slit but so does our perception of time. There is only NOW-WOW-WOW clamoring for attention.

In the classic poem, “If,” Rudyard Kipling advised his son to keep his head while all about were losing theirs. When things get grim, as they are sure to do at times, simply affirming one’s motivation for being present is a powerful tool. It summons the aid of the executive suite in our brain to silence the alarm system, release counteractive chemicals in the body and brain, and get ready to:

## **CARE**

Gather your impressions of the situation, your understanding of the interpersonal dynamics, and a clear intention to do no harm. Decide what’s appropriate, here and now—perhaps a suggestion for creating a buffer zone of time or space, an appeal for civility, or a request for using established community ground rules. Find something that will lead others to respond rather than simply to mindlessly react, and you’ll be helping them get control of both themselves and the situation.

If your role is as a group leader, lean forward in your seat and let your eyes connect with as many people as possible in a slow sweep. It’s quite likely the room will fall silent with this signal, but don’t force the issue. Simply wait. As a group member, catch the eye of the leader as you sit up straight, keeping your expression alert but neutral, and take the cue when it comes. If there is no formal leadership, focus your eyes on the current speaker, wait for a break, and enter the conversation calmly.

When you speak, try to say your first word at the moment of gently releasing the air from another of those deep, grounding breaths. This will reduce the forcefulness of your tone and help to support your voice through whatever you have to say. Create a segue from the previous comment to your own contribution, so that the last speaker feels heard and respected.

Bleeding egos, bruised feelings and burning indignation respond well to kindness, applied with skill and a lack of fuss. The wounds will remain. Of course they will. But if we demonstrate an ability to keep calm under emergency conditions, other people will follow that example. The healing may take a long while, but your intervention has made it possible to imagine. That’s a social first aid certification to celebrate.

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## **Suggested Bio Text:**

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