

An Elephant in the Living Room

By Rhea Alley

Imagine an ordinary living room--chairs, couch, coffee table, a TV set, and in the middle, a **large, gray elephant!** The elephant stands there, shifting from one foot to another and slowly swaying from side to side.

Imagine also the people that live in this house, you along with your mother and father and maybe some sisters and brothers. People have to go through the living room many times a day, and you watch as they walk through it **very carefully around the elephant.** No one ever says anything about the elephant. Everyone avoids the swinging trunk and just walks around it. Since no one ever talks about the elephant, you know that you're not supposed to talk about it either. And you don't.

But sometimes you wonder why nobody says anything or why no one does anything to move the elephant. After all, it's a very big elephant, and it's very hard to keep walking around it all the time, and people are getting very tired. You wonder if maybe there is something wrong with you, but you just keep wondering, keep walking around it, keep worrying and wishing there was somebody to talk to about the elephant. Living in a family where chemical dependence is a problem is a lot like living with an elephant in the living room.

There was a large, gray elephant in our living room when I was growing up, and we all tried to ignore it. As an adult, I can talk about it; the elephant was my Dad's alcoholism. He is a binge drinker, which means he doesn't drink everyday. He may go for days, weeks or even months without drinking, and then all of a sudden, something, most of the time we're not even sure what, but something triggers it. He may start drinking and not stop for a couple of weeks, sometimes without even coming home at night. He will just sleep in his truck and get up and start again first thing in the morning.

Alcoholism is defined in our Med-Surg book as a chronic, progressive multisystem disease, characterized by an inability to control the consumption of alcohol. If not treated, it can be fatal. Alcoholism not only affects the alcoholic, but everyone that loves and cares about him. It can be very devastating for a family.

There are some common myths associated with alcoholism, such as: (1) Only those who drink everyday can become alcoholics. This is not true, as evidenced by my Dad. (2) "I'm too young to become an alcoholic; only old people become alcoholics." Anyone at any age can become an alcoholic, and teenagers are drinking more and more these days. (3) "Alcoholics are usually men." Alcoholics can be either men or women, and women seem to hide it better. (4) The amount of consumption: "I don't get drunk every time I drink." Alcoholics build up a tolerance, and it will take more to get them drunk. (5) "I can quit anytime I want to." Call them on it!

There are three rules that tend to govern homes where alcoholism is a problem. The "Don't Talk" rule. The reasons we don't talk are: (A) Ashamed: "Oh, I hope my friends don't realize that my Dad's truck is at the bar again!" (B) Sense of loyalty to family member. "He is my Dad and I love him." (C) Confusion: "Today he is drinking, but tomorrow he may be fine." (D) We don't identify the problem: "He's not really drinking that much." (E) We believe others won't believe us: He still has a job. (F) Those who do recognize the problem have been told not to talk, an unwritten law, but one that is well understood. (G) "No one else talks about it."

There is the "Don't Trust" rule. (A) Inconsistencies: Physical and emotional absences occur. (B) Blackouts: Alcoholics are unable to recall promises and decisions made. (C) Unpredictability: "Will he be home for supper tonight or will he stop at the bar and get drunk?" (D) Distrust: "Will he stay sober for an important occasion?" (E) Physical jeopardy: Driving while intoxicated. (F) Loss of honesty: Alcoholics lose this with themselves and others.

There is also the "Don't Feel" rule. When you have a law that says "Don't Talk" with a premise of "Don't Trust," it teaches that you "Don't Trust," and it teaches you "Don't Feel."

People who live in homes where alcoholism is a problem tend to deny their own feelings and perception. They build up walls of defenses and self-protection. They feel (1) sadness, (2) anger, (3) shame or embarrassment, (4) fear and (5) guilt, but deny those feelings to try to convince themselves and others that they are "OK." Over 15 million people in this country have been raised in homes such as these and develop ongoing problems with isolation, loneliness, expression of feeling, depression, trust in relationships and powerlessness.

PART II

Each person in the family takes on specific roles; there are several, but I'm only going to address a couple of them. The enabler makes excuses or blames himself. He or she says things like "If only I had..." or "If I would have...he wouldn't have drunk." Enablers act to protect or shield the alcoholic from the consequences of alcoholism. The enabler doesn't view the person as addicted, but as someone trying to cope with the stress in his life by using chemicals. In my family, the enabler was my Mom. She would cancel appointments or not go to the store for fear my Dad would go on a binge. It never mattered, because he went whether she was home or not. Today, she has numerous health problems from dealing with this stress for years. Denial is often associated with the enabling process.

The other role I'm going to talk about is the co-dependent; that was me! The co-dependent's life revolves around the alcoholic. If he was having a good day, then so was I. When my Dad wasn't drinking, my life was great and I would try to be good and not cause any problems, thinking he wouldn't have a reason to drink again.

Without the alcohol, he was a wonderful husband, father and grandfather, but when he would start drinking, I was like a nut. When I was in high school, if he was on a binge and I heard the fire whistle or ambulance, I would immediately run to the pay phone and call home to check on my Mom. Yes, there was also domestic violence in our home.

I was lucky when I was in high school that I had a teacher that I could talk to and she understood because she also was the child of an alcoholic. I could also talk to my best friend, Michelle, but I never really felt that she understood. After I grew up and started discussing alcoholism with others, I had so many people that were in school with me tell me that they had no idea about my situation. But while I was growing up, I was always shy and felt embarrassed because I had thought everyone knew.

After I got married and had children, I was still a basket case when he would drink. I couldn't eat or sleep, I couldn't concentrate on anything; it was like I was so wrapped up in him and my Mom that I couldn't enjoy my own family. After years of living like this, I finally got counseling, and it felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted off my shoulders. After a couple of sessions, the counselor and I decided it was time for me to let it go, and because I don't like confrontations (I wonder why?), I sat down and typed three letters: one for Dad, one for Mom and one to keep for myself. In it, I told them I loved them, but I could no longer take on their problems; they were adults and while I would still be there for them and listen, I couldn't try to fix things any longer. The problems were theirs to work out, not mine. After I gave them the letters, they cried and said that they didn't realize how much I had been affected by this throughout the years.

After three years of counseling, I finally started living by the three C's: I didn't Cause the addiction, I Can't control it and I can't Cure it. He is the only one that has any control over this disease. There is help available, and AA is wonderful, but the alcoholic has to want the help. Absolutely no one else can do it for the alcoholic. My Dad went into a rehab on his own and did AA; he was sober four and a half years, and another time, we as a family had him put into a rehab, and he was drinking again in less than two weeks. So therefore, if the help is in front of an alcoholic but he does not want it, it's just not going to work!

We all know that alcoholism ruins families. My Grandfather was an alcoholic, and out of eight kids, two of them, both boys had the disease. In my family, out of the four of us, my brother is the alcoholic. I never went out and drank much because in the back of my mind, I always thought that maybe it could be me, too. Nobody starts out an alcoholic, but a lot of people end up there.

Today, my Dad still binges, but it is a lot less often and the domestic violence stopped quite a few years ago. I love my Dad with all of my heart, and that is also something that I had to learn; I can hate the alcohol and still love my Dad.

If you know of a child living in this situation, please make yourself available to talk with him or her. Or more importantly, just listen if the child decides to talk.

And last but not least, I have something I want you to read. This is how I felt after going to counseling and finally breaking free from being a co-dependent. I found the following poem to be the essence of what I hope for you. May your journey offer the choices in your life you so deserve!

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

By Portia Nelson

I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost...I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit.

I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

[**Editor's note:** Other articles in the pages of *Gospel Gazette Online* present the biblical perspective of the consumption of alcohol; they may be found by going to the Archive page and using the Search Engine for the word "alcohol." We are indebted to sister Rhea for putting the frank face of realism on alcohol.]

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