

# Is There an Elephant in the Room?

By Julie Fuimano, MBA, BSN, RN, CSAC



Something is wrong. It doesn't feel right. Maybe you know exactly what it is. Maybe you haven't taken the time to identify the problem but it feels bad. You skirt around the issue. Perhaps it's something with your relationship or with your kids. Perhaps it's a work issue and everyone skirts around the issue; you just follow suit. People have been tolerating the issue for so long, who are you to bring it up? So you say nothing.

Plus, you're busy! Life is full of challenges. You'd rather not rock the boat. If you speak up, you are going to have to deal with the ramifications. If the person you are dealing with has a temper, has a need to be right, or is prone to becoming defensive, well, it's just easier to continue to put up with whatever is bothering you and hope it goes away.

And if it's something at home, well, that just means that everything will have to change and change is hard. What will you do instead? It's a scary prospect to consider that life could be different. After all, this is what you are used to.

And so it goes in life. Often, we dance around issues because we are either too busy to deal with it, we don't think it's that serious, or we really don't know how to handle it. Having an elephant in the room is a metaphor for living with a huge issue and either you see the elephant but do nothing to get rid of it or you don't even see it. These obstacles are known as avoidance and denial.

## Avoiding the Elephant

You know the elephant is there. You can see it. You do a dance to get around it every time you step foot in the room. It's squishy in this space. It requires tact and a lot of energy to avoid touching the elephant. It's like tiptoeing in the dark and trying not to hit anything. This is a tough way to live and to work and requires a lot of energy. Things tend to take longer because of having to avoid the elephant. It's full of effort and struggle. And he takes up so much space! There's not a lot of room in here for other things. This requires a lot of attention and a commitment to keeping this going. It becomes a game, a painful game. There are no winners in this game because with an elephant in the room, you are living a lie. This part of your life is an illusion. And it's yours because you're the one sitting in the room with an elephant! Like all games, there is always an ending. Eventually, the elephant becomes too big to avoid any longer.

If what you are avoiding lives at home, then you might find yourself staying late at work, making excuses for keeping so busy, taking on additional projects, or working overtime. You might feel like the pain of avoiding it is easier to deal with than facing it and having to actually see the elephant and how big it's grown, and then having to figure out a way of getting rid of the darn thing.

If the elephant is at work, then there are numerous costs involved including the cost of staff turnover, poor morale, a negative work environment, lots of sick days used in order to avoid the negativity, a lack of trust between leadership and staff, and low productivity because of all of the time wasted dancing around the elephant. There is also the loss of creativity and innovation because when people are stressed and are not free to be their best, when the environment is draining them, there is no room for creativity. There are no winners when you live or work with an elephant in the room.

Another way you might find yourself avoiding is when you minimize an issue. This is when you see the issue but make excuses in an attempt to deflate the impact it is having. It might sound like this, "It's okay. He always yells like that. It's no big deal. That's just the way it is. You don't really feel that way. It isn't so bad." When you hear yourself using some of this language or hear others make light of something that clearly doesn't feel right to them, bring it to their attention so they can see the elephant for what it really is. The key to eliminating the elephant is to accurately assess the situation without prejudice or bias.



Julie Fuimano, MBA, BSN, RN, CSAC | President, Nurturing Your Success Inc., A Coaching & Publications Co.

(610) 277-2726 | [Julie@NurturingYourSuccess.com](mailto:Julie@NurturingYourSuccess.com)

PO Box 851, Blue Bell, PA 19422 | [www.NurturingYourSuccess.com](http://www.NurturingYourSuccess.com)



## Denying of the Elephant's Existence

When you live in denial, you don't even see the elephant. "What elephant? I don't know what you're talking about." Denial is a protective mechanism of the mind. It's a thought process that protects you until you are ready to face whatever it is. This is characterized by looking the other way or by avoiding certain conversations or people. Somewhere in your mind is the inkling that something isn't right. You're just not ready to see it. But you're still living a lie. You still wind up sitting in and spending time with an elephant in the room. Just because you're not able to look at it doesn't mean it's not there!

Living with an elephant is difficult and painful. You are not free to use your talents or free to explore new territories of life. You are imprisoned by trying to navigate around the big obstacle in the room and therefore until you remove the obstacle, tackle it head on, you are not free from it and it impacts your life.

How do you become aware of these blind spots or areas of denial so you can address them? Start becoming aware of how you feel: in what situations do things feel uncomfortable or you feel like you have no space? Look for areas of your life where you are not free to do, think, or be who you want to be. As an adult – a mature adult – you are free to choose. And if you are not free to choose, chances are there's an elephant in the room.

## Removing the Elephant

Whether you are avoiding or denying, the way to destroy the elephant – metaphorically, that is – is to face it square in the face. Awareness is a powerful force in moving beyond the limitations imposed by living or working with an elephant. You want to make accurate assessments about what is going on without the subjectivity or concern about how to fix it or how you will address it. The first step is to simply see what is really going on. Accepting "what is" and being responsible, meaning accepting that you are "able to respond" to what is, is part of being a mature adult. It's the way you are able to empower yourself to create a life that frees you to be all you are capable of being and do all that you are capable of doing. With an elephant in the room, you are not free.

Denying or avoiding limits you and drains you; facing everything and being open to grow and develop yourself fills you up so you can contribute more of your talents and abilities to the world and you enjoy yourself more because you are free to. It seems like a great challenge to face everything and yet, what do you gain by living the lie or by dancing with an elephant? It's a great place to hide your beauty, brilliance, skills, and talents but you'll find over the years that you will have lost precious time – time that cannot be retrieved. You get to decide whether you want the elephant or the freedom. The choice is yours. May you choose to live – and work – in spacious rooms liberated from elephants.

*Julie Fuimano, RN, MBA, CSAC is named one of the TOP 100 THOUGHT LEADERS in personal leadership development. Your happiness and success is her business! Coaching clients experience dramatic and profound results in their productivity, level of confidence, and relationships. As a certified coach, accomplished writer, and motivational speaker, Julie empowers your personal best teaching you simple, practical tools for meeting your goals, communicating effectively, establishing good boundaries, managing your emotions, and living happily. Visit [www.NurturingYourSuccess.com](http://www.NurturingYourSuccess.com) or [www.NurturingYourSuccessBlog.com](http://www.NurturingYourSuccessBlog.com) to learn more about coaching with Julie or contact [Julie@NurturingYourSuccess.com](mailto:Julie@NurturingYourSuccess.com) to have her speak at your next meeting or conference.*



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