

Kicking the 'Elephants' Out of Your Marriage

It's one thing to have an "elephant in the room"—the big problem that nobody wants to talk about or deal with. But what about when that room is your bedroom?

In marriage, the elephants can become so big that there's no space in your bed for either of you. The time comes when you can't ignore them, work around them or co-exist with them.

And you certainly can't sleep with them. And by "sleep" I mean both refreshingly rest in what is supposed to be the safest space physically and emotionally in your home, and the intimacy—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—that God designed to be between husbands and wives.

I've heard from a number of individuals and couples recently who are trying to sleep with elephants—dealing with really big marriage problems. And it's just not working. Some of those elephants include:

- Infidelity of one or both partners recently or many years ago
- Constant fights (or at least disagreements) over the when and how of sexual intimacy
- One spouse who consistently drinks too much
- Pornography stealing marital intimacy
- Sexual abuse in the past, making intimacy traumatic or impossible

Sometimes problems such as infertility, a rebellious child, serious financial reversals, chronic physical or mental illness, or others can also become elephants.

The thing about elephants is that they usually continue to grow. Elephants just don't leave on their own. Time doesn't

make them go away. Until and unless the elephants are dealt with directly, they will stick around sleeping in your bed and robbing your peace, regardless of how many years have gone by since they entered.

Perhaps you're tired of trying to sleep with the elephants, and you know that if things don't change you, your spouse or your marriage is about to self-destruct. You may have tried to kick the elephants out of your bedroom in the past and feel as though you've failed miserably. You may have tried to ignore them and know you can't do that any longer. You may wonder if the elephants are there to stay and you're the one who will have to leave.

The circumstances are often complicated and painful. Solutions are challenging and often take time. But here are a few important keys to kicking the elephants out of your bedroom and regaining the relationship you signed up for.

1. Remember that you can change only YOU, not your spouse. A marriage takes two. Whether that marriage is destructive or successful depends on both husband and wife. Asking, begging, pleading, nagging, criticizing or shaming your spouse just doesn't work; you probably know that by now. Ninety percent of the time I hear from individuals, they have a complaint about what their spouse is or isn't doing that is causing the problem.

If both you and your spouse are committed to working things through, God can use your marriage to bring both of you a measure of healing that you would never have received any other way. He can use the very elephants in your relationship to open deep parts of your heart where deep work is needed in changing both of you and bringing you closer together.

If your spouse does not seem interested in working things through, *you* can still change. Focus on that. You can refuse to do the dance steps that keep the destructive cycle going.

You can learn to feed yourself, learn what forgiveness is and isn't, refuse to enable bad behavior, and walk forward with courage, kindness and clarity. Sometimes your change of behavior will be the necessary trigger for your spouse to want to do the same. If not, you will know you've done your part.

2. Focus more on the heart than on behavior. Behavior has consequences, but the only real change begins on the inside. Trying to push for a change in behavior may help temporarily, and sometimes it's necessary. But for your marriage to thrive, you will both have to deal with what's going on in your hearts.

If your spouse is behaving badly, take a step back and look for the underlying pain. That doesn't mean you must accept bad behavior, but looking for the pain will bring you a level of understanding—and hopefully compassion—that you will need to survive. You may not necessarily be able to fix them, but you may be able to support them in dealing with the deeper heart issues behind the issue. The elephants are probably not about *you* at all.

Your heart will need to change. Your spouse's heart will need to change. Be open to that. Look for where God is working to change your own heart and your spouse's heart. Pray for that. When you see a positive step toward heart change in yourself or your spouse, celebrate that. Encourage that. Nurture that.

3. Fight the elephant, not your spouse. It's easy to see your spouse and the elephant as one and the same. But they're not. If you see your spouse as the enemy, you will constantly be fighting and resisting. Your heart will be closed. Work hard to differentiate your spouse from the elephant in your mind. Direct your energy to identifying the problem separate from your spouse. That makes your heart open.

In marriages that survive—and thrive—there is no shortage of elephants. But when both spouses can identify the problem as

a *thing*, separate from each other, they can learn to fight the problem and kick out the elephants. You're directing your joint energies in the same direction rather than directing your fear, anger or hurt at each other.

The biggest single determinant of whether a marriage survives elephants in the bedroom—and kicks them out—is whether both spouses can come to the place of dealing with the problem from the same side. If you can do this, God can work miracles in your relationship.

4. Get some help. You're not alone if you get stuck. Other marriages have dealt with the same or very similar elephants in the bedroom, and many have survived and even thrived. If you aren't getting anywhere, seek out some wise help. A weekend conference, a regular podcast, an online community, an experienced Christian counselor—there are many resources available now. If it's not working, don't keep fighting alone.

Sometimes simply getting perspective will change everything. It may help you see your own part in the dysfunction and how you can make a change. It may help you understand your spouse's pain better. It may help both of you over humps you're not seeing your way over.

Most of all, seek God's help. Pray, of course, for your spouse, for yourself, for wisdom, insight, courage and clarity. Be aware that sometimes God allows pain to increase as a means of making one or both of you ready for the necessary change. Be willing to accept the help or intervention He makes you aware of. {eoa}

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