

When The Elephant Poops

The metaphor, “elephant in the room” is often used to describe what it’s like to live with someone who abuses substances or alcohol. The idea is that if you had a real elephant hanging out in your living room, you’d notice. You’d have to feed it. And because what goes in must come out, that elephant would poop. The elephant would be impossible to ignore.

The catch is you can’t always see the “elephant in the room.” Substance abuse is rarely obvious, at least not at the beginning. Addicts, for example, don’t start their drug-using career by shooting heroin in an abandoned house filled with homeless addicts, stealing to support their habit. And many people who abuse alcohol never “hit bottom” or end up on the streets like the stereotypical “Skid Row bum.” More likely drug addiction begins with taking prescription medication to ward off pain, or drinking or taking drugs with a group of friends as the newest, coolest way to party. Many people dabble but never get hooked.

Contrary to the stereotypes, many alcohol and substance abusers are quite functional. They go to work. They go to family functions. They hold it together in public and hide their substance and/or alcohol abuse. They don’t get rip-roaring drunk when they go out for drinks with their co-workers or go to trainings stoned out of their minds. And if they do stagger into things and hurt themselves, they can provide a plausible explanation or pass it off as a funny story.

And because so many people who abuse alcohol and other substances can function, there’s a mental accounting process that makes the deviant behavior hard to see. Every time any of us do something “normal” it’s like we are depositing points into a conformity account. When we slip up and do or say something deviant, we lose points. The amount of points we lose depends on the visibility and seriousness of the “offense.” Most people carry a significant balance in their conformity account so it usually takes awhile to drain the account.

Add to this, most of us are motivated to not acknowledge deviant behavior because we are afraid that our acknowledgement will come back and metaphorically bite us in the butt. If you acknowledge the fact that your partner, close friend, or child abuses alcohol or drugs, you might have to look at your own substance or alcohol abuse or admit that you are codependent.

Ultimately, it’s usually the poop that gives the elephant away. One sign that your partner, friend or child has a substance or alcohol problem is that they have begun to neglect responsibilities at home, work or school. Your partner might start missing work because they are drunk or high, or calling in sick because they are hung-over. Your friend might skip out on social functions or commitments because they interfere with drinking or using, or because they were drunk or high and forgot. Your child might start flunking classes or missing school. Legal problems are another sign of alcohol or substance abuse. Arrests for driving under the influence or drunk and disorderly conduct should be bright red flags. An unexplained need for money, financial problems, or legal problems do to embezzlement, shoplifting, burglary, or selling stolen goods might be indicators as well. Other clues are deteriorating personal appearance or grooming habits, sudden changes in friends, hobbies, and/or hangouts, mood swings, irritability, and angry outbursts.

If your partner, friend or child does have a drug or alcohol problem, the best thing you can do for them is stop feeding the elephant and shoveling the poop. Stop accepting lame excuses for

missed commitments. Don't call in sick for them at work or let them off the hook for doing chores or work that they are supposed to do. Don't give them money or let them get away with stealing from you. And set and keep firm boundaries around what you are willing to tolerate. For example, you can say, "I won't talk to you when you're drunk or high. So if you call and you seem impaired, I'm going to get off the phone." And finally, it's important to accept that you can't make them stop abusing substances. While you can tell them about your concerns, pouring out their vodka, throwing out their pills, shaming them, or lecturing them will just frustrate both of you and give them a reason to use out of resentment or defiance.

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