

Eggshells & Elephants *Talking About Taxing Topics*

By Judy Kay Mausolf ☺

It's the eggshells that create many of the problems in our dental practices today. What are eggshells? Eggshells are the *fragile feelings* that arise when we try to resolve a conflict with another. These *fragile feelings* are a result of what we perceive based on our past personal experiences and not necessarily the other person's intent. Some of the *fragile feelings* I am referring to are; fear, anger, judgment, retaliation, desire to be liked, insecurity, nothing changes, peer pressure, hurt feelings, disrespect, it's not nice, or it's not my problem.



These eggshells stop many of us from addressing the elephants (the unstated issues or concerns) in the room. We create barriers between each other by laying our eggshells all around ourselves and worrying about stepping on those that others have laid around themselves. We believe if we talk about what is not working or what is a problem or a concern we will step on their eggshells. Almost everything becomes too uncomfortable or off-limits to discuss. So we don't! Instead we just keep everything inside to avoid the eggshells and the practice environment deteriorates. The chance to make good things happen, (better results, better relationships, and more responsibility) disappear. What appears instead is a herd of elephants. Everyone knows they are there and yet no one will talk about them for fear of stepping on an eggshell.



The problem is, if we don't discuss the issues as they happen, they don't go away. Instead the issues become elephants and the herd continues to grow until it takes over the entire practice. We end up tiptoeing around each other's eggshells and pretending the elephants don't exist. Communication between team members becomes emotionally charged. The conflicts continue to grow; resolution becomes almost impossible. The office environment is stressful and negative. This emotional stress and negative environment can drive even the best of team members to leave the practice!

To overcome the eggshells we need to first acknowledge they exist. Have a team meeting to talk about the eggshells in the office. Have each team member identify which eggshells they surround themselves with most often. They are their hot buttons and can be set off very easily.

I recently held a team meeting where each team member identified their eggshells. There was a variety of answers; desire to be liked, hurt feelings, judgment, criticism, retaliation and nothing ever changes. They differ for each team member because of their past experiences.

Once the eggshells have been identified discuss the importance of talking about issues as they happen regardless of their existence. This proactive communication helps to prevent and remove the elephants in the room. Reinforce the message; we are all working together towards the same goal of a healthy office environment. In order to accomplish this we have to give each other a break and believe that our other team members' intents are good. We need to talk about the issues even if talking about issues creates eggshells like judgment, being disliked or criticized.

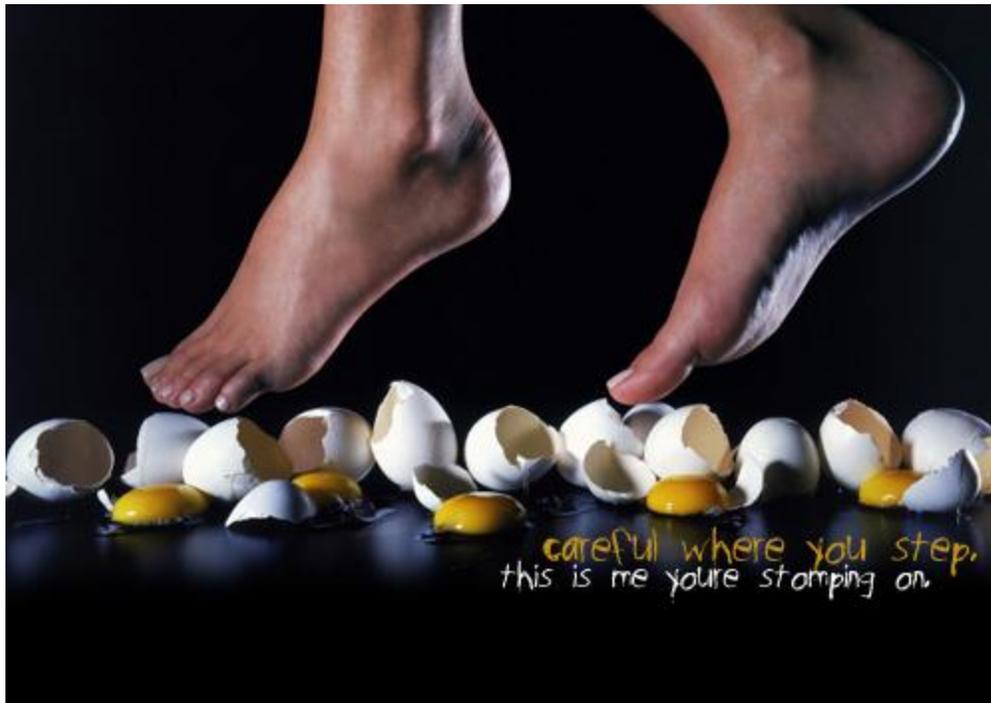
We need to stop assuming we know what someone meant by their actions or words or the way they said something. Sometimes even what they say or the words they use can mean something different than what we believe them to mean. Approach with care and concern to help relieve tension and avoid defensiveness. Respectfully ask questions until you understand the other person's true intent. Once we understand each other's intent our trust grows and it becomes easier to talk about the issues and resolve conflict. Resolving conflict as it occurs will help to prevent elephants and promote a happy, healthy, high performing team environment.

Here are 10 easy steps to resolve conflict to prevent the elephants!

10 Easy Steps to Conflict Resolution

- Set up time to meet with the person you have a concern or conflict with
- Don't talk to anyone else about the conflict before you meet
- Have a positive attitude
- Be open – don't come to the table with the solution, you haven't heard their side yet
- Don't personalize; instead of saying you did this, say this didn't work or I am not sure what you meant by....can we talk about it
- Listen calmly
- Focus on the solution; it will not be perfect for anyone, but can be good for everyone
- If you can't resolve; all members involved meet together with whoever handles conflict resolution and agree on a solution
- Hold each other accountable
- Believe they have positive intent; old habits die hard, they may need a few reminders before the new attitude, behavior, or system stick

Now more than ever in our world we need to be able to depend on and help each other. To do this we need to be approachable to others. Our coworkers, patients, colleagues, friends and family all need us and we need them. We can't expect to succeed on any significant level without working with other people.



If we create a situation where people worry about walking on our eggshells when they come to us (asking for help, guidance or a solution), eventually they'll stop walking on our eggshells and go to someone or somewhere else. We need to remove the eggshells around us and help each other make good things happen!

Be a good egg; approach and be approachable! ☺