

# The Invisible Elephant: The Role of Siblings in Explaining Your Personal Problems

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

Things are not always what they seem. If you have a problem that won't go away, no matter what you do to solve it, perhaps you are misreading the situation. Often the problem isn't what it seems. What you think is the problem may only be an illusion while the real problem is ... an invisible elephant. An elephant would take up a huge amount of space in a room, but if you couldn't see it, you would keep bumping into it, unable to move ahead.

Michelle is a renowned scientist; she has a relatively good marriage and two well behaved teenagers. Yet, she is depressed and never feels good enough about herself. A number of years ago, she was in therapy for this same depression.

When I ask what she learned back then, she says, "I have a poor self image; my father didn't spend much time with me and when he did, he ridiculed me. I'm always seeking validation from others, as if I'm still trying to get his approval, and he's been dead for 10 years. No matter how many promotions and awards I get, it's never enough. I'm killing myself by always working harder which, I know, doesn't leave enough time for my family."

All of her insight hasn't reduced her depression or improved her self esteem. Insight that doesn't lead to change isn't helpful. Insight about the wrong problem is also not helpful.

Since Michelle's depression hasn't lessened with her insight about her father, I decide to take another approach. I ask, "What would you lose if you gave up feeling bad about yourself?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. You mean, what would I gain?"

"No, I mean what would you lose? There must be some reason you hold onto not feeling good about yourself, given your accomplishments, your insights, and your prior therapy. Your

explanation may account for why you originally became depressed and developed a low self image, but it's possible that a secondary gain has kicked in."

Michelle looks baffled.

I say, "Tell me about your siblings."

She continues to look baffled but explains she is the youngest of two; Benita is two years older. Their father wanted a son so baldy. "I tried to be that for him."

"Tell me about Benita," I nudge.

"Benita's great." Michelle now sounds more animated. "She's a wonderful mother; she's divorced, but she's always doing things with her kids. And she's a great sister, too. She never forgets my birthday. She's always there for me."

"What do you mean she's always there for you?"

"Well, when I get really depressed, like after I got that last award, she's so supportive. She let me talk on and on and said I could call her any time. She even offered to fly out to visit me; she asked if I wanted to go camping with her family."

"Does Benita work outside the house?"

"She did finish college," Michelle says this as if responding to an attack on her sister.

I ignore the challenge and wait.

"Once she was divorced and the children were old enough, she started working for an insurance company."

"How does she feel about your having a Ph.D. and being a famous scientist?"

"She's proud of me. She's comfortable with her life; she's not jealous, if that's what you're asking."

"From what you describe, it does not sound like she's jealous. But, I wonder if you're feeling guilty?"

"Huh?"

"I wonder if you feel guilty knowing she isn't as professionally accomplished as you?"

"Benita loves me; she's proud of my accomplishments."

"It sounds it. But maybe you're the one who's having difficulty with your being more successful than she. One way to make her more successful is by bringing yourself down, by having her help you. You have more money and a nicer home than she; your husband and kids are all doing well. On the surface, it looks like you have it all, in addition to your professional success. One way to equalize this is to bring yourself down, let Benita help with your problem, one that doesn't ever go away. This way she remains your big sister, your competent big sister."

"Do you really think I could be doing that, making myself have a problem so she can help me?"

"If you remember, I asked what you had to lose if you gave up your depression. If you weren't depressed, what would you and Benita talk about? How often would you talk? Would you worry she may not feel good enough about herself? I wonder if your depression is the invisible elephant you keep bumping into – your discomfort with success because of Benita."

"This is making me really uncomfortable." Michelle shifts in her seat several times. "So you must be hitting on a nerve. I'd hate to think that I'm keeping myself depressed to make her feel better."

"Especially when you don't have any indication that Benita feels badly about your being more professionally successful than she."

Michelle looks troubled.

I continue, "You have no indication that Benita feels bad about her life, about her work or lack of money. So, your issue may be

less about preventing her from feeling bad and more about making you feel better about being more successful than she.”

Michelle jumps in. “You’re supposed to look up to your big sister. And I did. Benita was the high school homecoming queen. But I did feel bad that she got pregnant in senior year. You may have a point.”

The following week, Michelle comes in smiling. “I don’t believe in miracles -- I’m a scientist, after all -- but it’s as if a weight has been lifted. The depressive heaviness is gone, just gone. I’m going to call Benita later and talk about this, but I want to give myself a few more weeks to see if I continue to feel better.”

Three years later, she still did. Michelle’s invisible elephant was now visible. ]

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis has been a marriage and family therapist for over 40 years with an expertise in adult siblings. She is author of numerous [books on relationships](#) – for siblings, marriage, singles, and friendships. Since 1996, she has run [Unique Retreats for Women](#) and does weekend retreats for adult siblings. She has offices in Washington, DC area and Cincinnati, Ohio. She is also available for phone and skype consultations.

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