


# Getting Along



No Trust in M.D.'s

Dr. James P. Comer
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Dear Dr. Comer: My 10-year-old nephew is disturbed and needs help. He loses control at the drop of a hat, has no friends and recently set fire to a classmate's books. His parents are divorced and he is an only child living with his mother.

My sister, his mother, knows that he needs help. But she feels that a white doctor can't understand a black child. There are no black doctors in our area. What can be done?

G.R.

Dear G.R.: It sounds like your nephew is in need of a psychological evaluation by a qualified person as soon as possible. Your sister's feelings about white therapists are held by a number of black people.

I know therapists—medical doctors, psychologists, social workers, nurses and others—who have been successful with people from all groups. There are some who can't work with people who are different because of their biases.

The most important ele-

ment in all doctor-patient relationships is trust. It's even more important in the treatment of psychological problems.

Trust is more difficult to come by when preconceived negative attitudes are held by patients or therapists about people who are different by virtue of race, religion, sex or class.

The burden of maturity and competence—the responsibility of being fair and respectful—is on the professional. Such attitudes and ways will make it possible for them to help patients who are different.

Understanding the culture and style of a patient is helpful but not curial. Certain behaviors—deference to elders, comfortable physical distance when talking or eye contact in communications, the degree and style of aggression—are culture based. There are culture influenced attitudes, values and ways.

When a therapist is knowledgeable about these differences and can respond to them appropriately, it helps a patient feel understood, reasonably comfortable and can enhance trust.

But again, in the vast majority of cases, sensitivity to differences, fairness, and respect of the individual can overcome the lack of knowledge about specific cultural differences.

Therapists can be helpful to people who are different because their major job is not to tell a

patient or client what to do but to help them think through their own life situation and act to improve it. Thus it's not necessary to know every detail or cultural difference.

While race, religion, sex and class make us more or less different by groups, we all have problems and opportunities that are the same or similar because we are human beings.

We all have feelings, energies, life tasks and experiences that give us joy, hope, sorrow and pain. Our ways of handling these situations, and the severity or frequency of them, can permit us to continue to function well or result in emotional or psychological problems.

When we develop problems, we sometimes need help. In the case of your family and your nephew, I suspect that the therapist will have to deal with problems related to divorce and separation from the father more than racial or cultural differences.

Your sister may have two or three concerns that need to be recognized. She, like many other people, may feel that a psychological problem and a need for help is a sign of weakness. Her lack of contact and knowledge about therapists in the area and their racial attitudes can be causing her to have hesitation and fear.

But she may be hiding behind this fear and hesitation to avoid dealing with what she feels it means to have a child with a problem. For her own good and the good of the child, she needs to get some professional help.

I suggest that your sister discuss the problems you have described and related problems with her family physician, pedia-

trician or whomever has provided medical care to your nephew. He or she should know professional psychotherapists in your area who are competent and can be fair and respectful to people who are different.

[If you have any questions for the doctors, send them to "Getting Along," care of this newspaper. [c] 1979, Summit Press Syndicate

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## Alaska

from page 8

said Lloyd.

They were there during the time of "the midnight sun," when the sun stays out all day. "We didn't see any darkness," said Nesby. "People were working all night long."

"It's the cleanest place in the world," said Mrs. Hartley. "Guys were always going around picking up little pieces of paper. The city was spotless."

"She was scared she would die without seeing the 50th state"

The thing that most stuck out in the minds of the three, all former or current educators, was a clipping Mrs. Lloyd brought back to show to her friends.

The story discussed union negotiations between the local schools and the teacher's union. The schools proposed an increase from \$24,595 for a beginning teacher to \$32,855. The union was


holding out for more than \$40,000 to start.

"If I were younger, I'd go to Alaska," said Mrs. Lloyd.

While in the 50th state, the travelers took a side trip to visit two Winston-Salem natives, Robert and Annette Wells, both graduates of Winston-Salem State. "They live in Eagle River and they've bought land up in the mountains

and are working on their third house." She's a teacher and he's a prison supervisor.

The three said they found the state free of racial prejudice or intolerance. "It's almost utopian," said Lloyd. "Everybody says 'Hello, how are you' and you almost don't know how to act. You look like a fool if you don't say hello."



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