

Why the Pain?

THE WORK OF GABOR MATÉ

This guide draws substantially on the work of Dr. Gabor Maté — physician, and one of the world's leading voices on trauma, addiction, stress and childhood development. It is based on his books When the Body Says No (2003), In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts (2008) and The Myth of Normal (2022, with Daniel Maté).

Maté's central question reframes how we think about both addiction and chronic illness: not "why the addiction," but "why the pain?" His work traces a common root — unprocessed stress, disconnection and unmet needs, often beginning in childhood — that can surface either in the mind, as addiction, or in the body, as illness.

THE CENTRAL MODEL Based on the work of Gabor Maté (2003, 2008)



Maté's key reframe: addiction and many chronic illnesses are not separate categories of "broken" versus "unlucky" — both can be traced back to how the nervous system adapted to pain that had nowhere else to go.

KEY THEMES ACROSS HIS WORK

WHEN THE BODY SAYS NO (2003) The Mind-Body Link Explores how repressed emotion and chronic stress contribute to illnesses including cancer, autoimmune disease and MS. Emotions like anger help defend our boundaries; suppressing them can weaken our physical defences too.	IN THE REALM OF HUNGRY GHOSTS (2008) Addiction as Adaptation Drawn from his work with severely addicted patients, Maté argues addiction is rooted in trauma and disconnection, not genetics or moral weakness — "the opposite of addiction is connection."	THE MYTH OF NORMAL (2022) Trauma in a "Normal" World Argues that much of what we call normal — chronic stress, disconnection, self-abandonment to meet others' expectations — is itself a source of widespread trauma and illness in modern life.
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MAIN POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

1 ASK "WHY THE PAIN?" Rather than judging a behaviour or symptom, Maté encourages curiosity about what it may be protecting against or soothing.	2 TRAUMA ISN'T JUST "BIG EVENTS" Maté defines trauma broadly — as what happens inside us in response to disconnection, not only major single incidents.	3 CONNECTION IS PROTECTIVE Safe relationships and belonging are central to healing — isolation tends to deepen both addiction and illness.	4 SUPPRESSED EMOTION HAS A COST Habitually overriding one's own needs or feelings to keep the peace can carry a long-term physical toll.	5 COMPASSION SUPPORTS HEALING Maté advocates for humane, non-punitive approaches to addiction and illness, over stigma or blame.
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"The first question is not 'Why the addiction?' but 'Why the pain?'"

"Illness can be the body's way of saying no to what the mind cannot or will not acknowledge."

A MOMENT TO REFLECT

- Are there patterns — behaviours, habits, or physical symptoms — that might be trying to tell me something?
- Where in my life do I tend to override my own needs or feelings to keep the peace?
- Who or what helps me feel most genuinely connected, rather than isolated?

SOURCES

Maté, G. (2003). *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*. Knopf Canada.
 Maté, G. (2008). *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. Knopf Canada.
 Maté, G. & Maté, D. (2022). *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture*. Avery.