

How dealing with past trauma may be the key to breaking addiction

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Opening up to past trauma is difficult, but self-awareness is key to addressing issues that leave us vulnerable



Facing trauma: 'It takes a lot of work to wake up as a human being, and it's a lot easier to stay asleep than to wake up.' Illustration: Eva Bee/Observer

What's your poison, people sometimes ask, but Gabor Maté doesn't want to ask what my poison is, he wants to ask how it makes me feel. Whatever it is I'm addicted to, or ever have been addicted to, it's not what it is but what it does – to me, to you, to anyone. He believes that anything we've ever craved helped us escape emotional pain. It gave us peace of mind, a sense of control and a feeling of happiness.

And all of that, explains Maté, reveals a great deal about addiction, which he defines as any behaviour that gives a person temporary relief and pleasure, but also has negative consequences, and to which the individual will return time and again. At the heart of Maté's philosophy is the belief that there's no such thing as an "addictive personality". And nor is addiction a "disease". Instead, it originates in a person's need to solve a problem: a deep-seated problem, often from our earliest years that was to do with trauma or loss.

Maté, a wiry, energetic man in his mid-70s, has his own experience of both childhood trauma and addiction, more of which later. Well-known in Canada, where he lives, he gives some interesting reasons why Britain is "just waking up to me" and his bestselling book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*. There's a generational conflict here, he says, around being open about past trauma: he cites Princes William and Harry opening up about their mother's death, and says it's something the Queen's generation would never have done. He applauds the new approach: "I think they [the princes] are right to be leading and validating that sense of enquiry, without which life is not worth living."

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The infamous British stiff upper lip is something Maté has watched with fascination over the years. Born of our imperial past, he says, it was maintained for as long as there was something to show for it. Boarding school culture and traumatic childhoods played out into dominance of other countries and cultures, giving the “buttoned-up” approach inherent value. But once the empire crumbled, lips quavered. “With rising inequality and all the other problems there are right now,” he says, “people are having to question how they live their lives. People in Britain are beginning to realise they paid a huge price internally for all those suppressed emotions.”

Part of that price was addiction – whether to alcohol or drugs, gambling or sex, overwork or porn, extreme sports or gaming – but essential to understanding it, says Maté, is to realise that addiction is not in itself the problem but rather an attempt to solve a problem. “Our birthright as human beings is to be happy, and the addict just wants to be a human being.”

And addictive behaviour, though damaging in the medium or long term, can save you in the short term. “The primary drive is to regulate your situation to something more bearable.” So rather than some people having brains that are wired for addiction, Maté argues, we all have brains that are wired for happiness. And if our happiness is threatened at a deep level, by traumas in our past that we’ve not resolved, we resort to addictions to restore the happiness we truly crave.

Life is certainly a lot more work than I anticipated

He speaks from experience: Maté is a physician who specialises in neurology, psychiatry and psychology, and who became a workaholic and lived with ADHD and depression until, in his 40s and 50s, he began to unravel the root cause – and that took him all the way back to Budapest, where he was born in January 1944. Two months later, the Nazis occupied Hungary: his mother took him to the doctor because he wouldn’t stop crying. “Right now,” the doctor replied, “all the Jewish babies are crying.” This is because, explains Maté, what happens to the parent happens to the child: the mothers were terrified, the babies were suffering, but unlike their mothers they couldn’t understand what the suffering was about.

Later, Maté’s mother, fearing for his survival, left him for a month in the care of a stranger. All this, he explains, gave him a lifelong sense of abandonment and loss which had an impact on his psychological health. It affected his marriage and his own parenting experience. To compensate for his buried trauma, he had buried himself in work and neglected his family.

Opening up to the trauma, exploring it and investigating it, was incredibly difficult. “The problems for me showed up in the dichotomy

between my success as a physician and my miseries as a husband and a father,” he recalls. “There was a big gap between them, and it’s taken me a long time to work through what I needed to work through.” As Oscar Wilde believed, pain is the path to perfection; and nearly five decades on from the day of their wedding, Maté says his marriage is better than ever.

“We’re happier, but it’s taken many years of work,” he says. In a few weeks it will be the couple’s 49th wedding anniversary. “We’ll go out for dinner and raise a glass to five happy years,” he quips. He’s already chosen his epitaph: “It’s going to say, this life is a lot more work than I anticipated. Because it takes a lot of work to wake up as a human being, and it’s a lot easier to stay asleep than to wake up.”

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For Maté, self-awareness is the bottom line: when we wake up and become properly self-aware, we are able to address the traumatic childhood issues that leave us vulnerable to addiction. But because the process inevitably involves pain, we don’t address the issues until we absolutely have to – until something happens that forces us to face up to the fact that our lives aren’t working as they should. And as with the individual, so too with society: although all around us in politics and the wider world is mayhem and chaos, Maté holds on to the fact that this discomfort – which we are communally aware of – will force us to examine what’s gone wrong in our collective psyche, and to seek to correct it.

Unsurprisingly, given his central message, Maté is in favour of drug decriminalisation. He points to Portugal, where it is no longer illegal to possess a small amount of heroin or cocaine, and says the country has seen a reduction of drug-taking, less criminality and more people in treatment. In his view, it’s not really the drugs that are being decriminalised, it’s the people who are taking them – and given that they are, in his view, always victims of trauma, and never merely “bad” or “dangerous”, that’s entirely logical. But decriminalisation is only the beginning: reform must cut much deeper. “The whole legal system is based on the idea that people are making a choice,” he says. “This is false – because no one chooses to be an addict, or to be violent.”

Everything about Maté seems to be based on a workaday, efficient kindness: his message is about understanding, blue-sky thinking and common sense. However, with any philosophy that references retrospective experiences, there’s the inevitable tendency to parent-bash – the “they fuck you up” mentality. But read on in [Larkin](#), and his approach is not so different from Maté’s: “They may not mean to, but they do.” There’s no room for blame because, says Maté, **virtually all parents do their best, and the deepest love they have is for their child.** One of the best things that ever happens to him, he says, is when a parent whose child has died of an overdose comes up to him and tells

him that, through his book, they can understand why it happened. And when readers tell him – sometimes accusingly, sometimes gratefully – that his work humanises addicts, he can only answer: addicts are human. The only question for him is, why has it taken us so long to realise that?

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction by Gabor Maté (Vermillion, £19.99) can be ordered for £17.59 at guardianbookshop.com