

## Book Review: The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté<sup>1</sup>

Review by Pete Flagg, RCH for the Canadian Association of Counselling Hypnotherapists and Educators

**Synopsis:** Touted by one of his reviewers as Mate's "magnum opus"<sup>2</sup> this book is devoted to Mate's central theme that the body and mind are not just connected, but are one thing, one being. It recounts how unresolved emotional trauma early in life can lead to mental health issues and chronic disease. The author strongly argues that without treating these original wounds in our psyche, the eventual physical or medical illnesses cannot be completely treated. The book is written in excruciating detail, thoroughly researched, and documented. It includes personal insights offered by Dr. Maté and ventures into social and political commentary, the use of psychedelics and discussion of what healing is and is not. Ultimately, Dr. Mate is attempting to make the case that "what passes for normal in our society is neither healthy nor natural"<sup>3</sup>.

**About the Author:** Gabor Maté is a physician, therapist, and author of several books in the field of treating mental health, including ADHD, cancer, autoimmune disease, and addiction. His book on addictions titled "In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts" drew on his experiences treating addicted people in Vancouver's East End. Now in his early 70's, Mate has co-authored this latest book with his son. Kudos for the book: another of Mate's reviewers says "With rigorous research and painstaking detail, this book...is a tour de force manifest of how trauma impacts not just our individual bodies and psyche but our whole society"<sup>4</sup>.

**Structure and content:** "*painstaking detail?*" – I would say the book fairly bludgeons the reader with repetitive tales of individual trauma histories involving horrific anecdotes and details. While the details support the author's argument for trauma's significant deleterious effects, this is not light reading – it's a tough and at times daunting read.

The book first explores the understanding of trauma and the interconnection of mind and body, and then discusses how trauma arises in early human development and its' impacts on later behaviours and life experiences. Later chapters offer a rethinking of afflictions as adaptations for emotional survival and continue exploring the toxicities inherent in our current culture. The book finishes by framing what healing is, and is not, including the pathways to healing. The end emphasizes the author's desire for a saner society and his pleas for the emergence of a trauma-conscious society.

Given the length of this book, my review focuses key points that most support (or undermine) hypnotherapists in their practice and hypnotherapy as a valid healing therapy for mental and emotional issues.

### Take home points for Hypnotherapy:

1. Bodymind connection:

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<sup>1</sup> The Myth of Normal, Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture, by Gabor Mate, MD. With Danie Mate, Published by Alfred A. Knopf, Canada

<sup>2</sup> Julie Holland, MD, author of Good Chemistry: the Science of Connection, from Soul to Psychedelics

<sup>3</sup> The Myth of Normal, Gabor Mate, in the introduction. (Note: since reviewing the book as an e-book, page numbers can be misleading. Quotes are referenced by the book Part and Chapter.)

<sup>4</sup> Lissa Ranking, MD, New York Times author of Mind Over Medicine and Scared Medicine

Maté extends a commonly held hypnotherapy principle - that the mind and body are connected – to the belief that they are actually “one thing” or “one being”. Indeed, he argues even “connection” misleads by suggesting separate parts, whereas “this new discipline is predicated on the unity between all our constituent parts...”<sup>5</sup>

While putting him at odds with many if not most modern western medicine practitioners, he suggests that the new science of psychoneuroimmunology maps the body mind unity. This may be an area of interest for hypnotherapists to explore.

2. Stress, trauma, traumatic events – not the same thing:

Maté quotes Peter Levine as saying: “Certainly all traumatic events are stressful, but not all stressful events are traumatic.”<sup>6</sup> The author includes a list of criteria as an elimination checklist to distinguish stress from trauma useful for our practise and our clients. He goes on to say: “trauma is not what happens to you but what happens inside you” and uses the metaphor of a car accident, stating the accident is the event, the trauma is our internal reaction to the event.<sup>7</sup>

3. Trauma causes us to escape the present:

Maté recounts being in a restaurant with psychologist, Franz Ruppert where the noise and loud music and bright tv screams were overwhelming to Maté. When he asked his colleague what this was all about, Ruppert replied “Trauma”. Long term trauma, according to the author separates us from our bodies, our authentic selves and from the present moment, enabling our separation from unresolved emotions that we were unable to handle productively previously in our lives and have resulted in disabling behaviours and/or disease.

4. Stupid Friends, elders, “parts” and disease as a teacher and road to healing; afflictions as adaptations and disease as a process:

Maté calls out both medical doctors and psychiatrists with their “biological determinism” viewpoints that limit treatment options and undermine the power (or agency) of the client in their own healing. These views keep sufferers in a passive position, receiving treatment with medications often for the rest of their lives.

Dr. Maté describes himself as not “anti-pharmacology”, rather it’s just that in his view the medications, while treating symptoms for some positive relief, do not address the underlying emotional or mental trauma – the genesis of many diseases.

Instead, Maté and many of his references see disease not as a “thing” to be battled but as a process that is revealing much about the clients’ life experiences which are the genesis of illness. He argues that if we saw illness as an imbalance of the entire organism, we (both healers and patients) would have more options for healing strategies.

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<sup>5</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part I, Chapter 2

<sup>6</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part I, Chapter 1

<sup>7</sup> See The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part I – for an exhaustive discussion of trauma.

One of the options is a different way at looking at illness and disease as teachers: "The question turns from 'How do I get rid of this?' to 'What is this for?' Why is this here?' ... The truth is, these disturbers of the peace have always been our friends...their origins were protective and beneficent and that remains their current aim.....Although they cause pain now, they first came along to save us." <sup>8</sup>

Mate calls these things that cause our illnesses "stupid friends".<sup>9</sup> He refers to indigenous viewpoints that call them "elders", and in hypnotherapy, we may call them the "parts" of us that originally were trying to protect us and are now working against our well being. It can be useful for the hypnotherapist to remember that our clients' "parts" and worldviews that cause current suffering were originally developed as adaptations to emotions that our clients just did not want to acknowledge or weren't able to deal with productively at a time in their life. The process of healing is not necessarily to dispose of these parts entirely, but to "realign" or reassign them: "What matters is that we, rather than they, are in the lead".<sup>10</sup>

#### 5. Carrying Auschwitz:

My favourite quote from the book (among many) comes not from the author but from one of his colleagues. Maté was having lunch with a colleague and discussing his healing principles and his own life history, when his colleague told him: "Gabor, you don't need to drag Auschwitz around with you wherever you go."<sup>11</sup> He explains that his colleague was saying that Maté didn't have to keep holding on to the pain of the past and the beliefs he developed to defend himself from emotions he just could not process earlier in life.

This is a brave revelation for the author and speaks to our honest interactions with our clients – we, none of us, *have to carry our psychic and emotional wounds with us through life* – we have 'agency'; we can make a choice to stop carrying these wounds, deal with the emotions we have avoided for so long and embark on a healing path. I remember one of our CACHE supervisions, where my colleagues commented we have clients that 'want to heal' (e.g. stop smoking, overeating, being depressed, etc.), and clients who 'want to want to heal'; but they are not quite ready yet to do the work uncovering the genesis of their issues. The point for ourselves and our clients: we have a choice – we don't have to keep carrying our traumas with us.

#### 6. Taking on our client's diseases:

At one point in his personal life experiences, Mate discloses that he was forbidden by the shamans of an ayahuasca healing session, to interact with fellow medical sojourners in the session(s) because he had a "dense dark energy" and could not be around those people, who have just had revelatory, or even spiritual, experiences. He had carried too much of the

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<sup>8</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part I, Chapter 30

<sup>9</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part V, Chapter 30

<sup>10</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part V, Chapter 30

<sup>11</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part V, Chapter 25

wounded energy of his clients and their stories with him, and needed to spend some time “communing with God” on his own. The organizers told the author he had been working for so long with trouble people, carrying their negative energy, and had done nothing to clear that energy out of himself.<sup>12</sup>

While feeling compassionate about our clients’ suffering is entirely common and necessary, (dare I say “normal”), we need to remember that we are attempting to facilitate our clients’ own self-healing paths and strategies, not to take on their woundedness into our own psyches. We, as much as our clients, need to learn to release the impact of our wounds regularly so that what we do absorb does not stay with us.

7. The four A’s and Five Companions: Maté suggests focussing on or employing four healing principles: Authenticity, Agency, Anger, Acceptance, and five ‘companions’:
  - a. Ordinary Human Compassion,
  - b. The Compassion of Curiosity and Understanding,
  - c. The Compassion of Recognition,
  - d. The Compassion of Truth, and
  - e. The Compassion of Possibility.<sup>13</sup>

These are all worth reading about and incorporating into our practises and interactions with our clients.

8. Parenting and childhood trauma: Maté goes to many lengths to say it is wrong to blame the parents and parenting for inducing trauma in childhood, and then relates many examples where ineffective parenting, or outright abuse are the root cause of distress and eventually disease. He points out though that not all childhood trauma has to originate in abuse. Sometimes it is enough for a child’s experience and emotions to be unvalidated or unsupported in a critical emotional time, for them to develop “adaptive strategies” that stay throughout life and ultimately do not serve them.<sup>14</sup>
9. Compassionate Inquiry: Mate has developed his own approach to what is essentially an ancient practise of self-inquiry at the root of Buddhist and other very old contemplation practises. His questions are worth reviewing for the hypnotherapist.<sup>15</sup>
10. Mindfulness practices: Maté makes mention of mindfulness as a useful practise for dealing with emotional distress and habitual mental self-images and resulting emotions and behaviours.<sup>1617</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: See Part V, Chapter 31

<sup>13</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part V Chapter 26

<sup>14</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: See Part II: The Distortion of Human Development

<sup>15</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: See part V, Chapter 28

<sup>16</sup> See Peter Flagg’s article on the CACHE website on the connection between mindfulness and hypnotherapy.

<sup>17</sup> The Myth of Normal by Gabor Maté: Part V, Chapter 32

11. Disillusionment: Maté makes the point, supported again by many references that to even start on the road to healing, an individual must often face a critical disillusionment in one of their cherished “world views” or “self-views”. The fear of letting go of these iconic figures, viewpoints or self-identities and associated sense of loss related to that release can be the very thing blocking an individual’s growth and healing.<sup>18</sup>
12. Healing is not necessarily a cure: Maté makes a distinction between healing and cure that is helpful in our practises. He states that “cures” per se cannot be guaranteed with any treatment, medical or psychological, and that healing is a process towards wholeness, not necessarily an endpoint.

Conclusion:

Is Dr. Maté’s book a worthwhile read for hypnotherapists – yes it most certainly is. There are many insights, approaches, references, research, principles, anecdotes, and personal stories that can support our practise and aid in our understanding of the genesis of our’ client’s issues and potential healing pathways. There is still more compelling content in the book I did not have room to comment on, including useful healing approaches. However, as hypnotherapists we are already working under the assumptions and main theory of bodymind unity that Maté’ proposes must be taken to heart in our society and in our current health care practices and education. So the book, while very useful for hypnotherapists is to me more of a confirmation of our views on bodymind unity, than revelation of new knowledge.

If you do undertake to read the book, I encourage you to take notes as you go, read it slowly and allow yourself time to digest the content of each chapter for your own practise and clients and, just as important, give yourself a break from the difficult material.

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<sup>18</sup> The Myth of Normal By Gabor Maté:: Part V, Chapter 33