



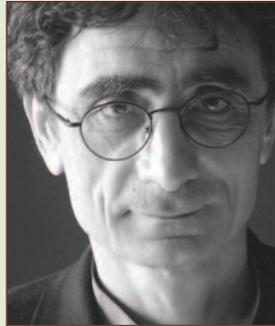
A Human Future

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The Practice of Compassion An Interview with Gabor Maté, M.D.

L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.



Gabor Maté is a medical doctor and author in Vancouver, British Columbia. He has worked in family practice, palliative medicine, and addiction medicine. Currently he is staff physician at a facility for drug addicted persons in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, many of them with HIV. His special interest is impact of early childhood experiences on lifelong emotional and physical health.

Dr. Maté has written four nationally bestselling books in Canada, most recently *In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters With Addiction*.

Gabor Maté is a family doctor who has made a huge difference in the lives of many vulnerable and struggling people – addicts, people with Attention Deficit Disorder, parents trying to understand their children. We are grateful for his work and his fascinating and highly readable books; and we are privileged to be able to present this interview.

A Human Future, is a free e-publication. We invite you to read back issues or to subscribe at www.larche.ca. Beth Porter, ed.

Beth Porter: You work with drug addicts in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, one of the most sordid slums in Canada. Some addicts are desperate enough to lie to and cheat even their doctor. You could work in a more pleasant setting. Why do you do this work?

Gabor Maté: Pleasantness is very subjective. I could ask the same question of almost anybody who works in difficult situations. The behaviours of addicts are expressions of distress and pain, symptoms – the same as if someone came in with a rash or a cough. I went into medicine to help alleviate suffering, and these people are suffering. The work is engaging, it's with interesting human beings, very good human beings. It is challenging, and rewarding.

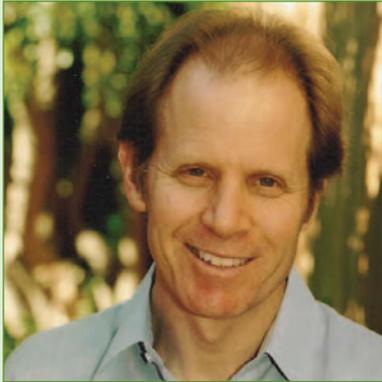
We hear the term "harm reduction" in relation to some street programs. What is harm reduction?

Ideally, one would like to heal people, to actively help people overcome their addictions. But for that, you need all kinds of conditions that are not available. Stress is the

"What is important is to see the possibilities in the present."



Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.



If our attention is on something other than what we are doing for most of our lives we can come to feel empty and numb.... Living on automatic also places us at risk of mindlessly reacting to situations without reflecting on various options of response. The result can often be knee-jerk reactions that in turn initiate similar mindless reflexes in others. A cascade of reinforcing mindlessness can create a world of thoughtless interactions, cruelty, and destruction.

Being mindful opens the doors not only to being aware of the moment in a fuller way, but by bringing the individual closer to a deep sense of his or her own inner world, it offers the opportunity to enhance compassion and empathy. Mindfulness is not “self-indulgent,” it is actually a set of skills that enhances the capacity for caring relationships with others....

Life becomes more enriched as we are aware of the extraordinary experience of being, of being alive, of living in the moment.

From *The Mindful Brain*, pp. 14-15, W.W. Norton, 2007.
Also by Dr. Siegel: *The Developing Mind*, Guilford, 1999.
The Mindsight Institute: www.drdansiegel.com.

biggest driver of addiction, and people are stressed by being ostracized, impoverished, criminalized. With approaches such as the “war on drugs,” large numbers of addicts are not going to be redeemed. So, what can we do? We can reduce the harm of the addiction to the individual, and the harm of the system to the individual, and also the harm of addiction to society as a whole.

A needle exchange program, for instance, is one way to reduce harm, because it means that people won’t be injecting with dirty needles, so they won’t be transmitting or receiving other people’s infections, and the stress that feeds their addiction is also reduced.

What is essential in training workers in situations where people behave in challenging ways, so that the workers don’t do harm – don’t add to the person’s stress and escalate the undesirable behaviour?

People who are addicts lack impulse control, much as is the case with some people who are developmentally challenged. That’s not their fault. The development of the brain circuits that regulate impulse control require conditions in childhood that they didn’t have, so they react a lot. The key to understanding is to recognize that they don’t act, they react. Rather than focusing on their behaviour as the problem in a particular situation, we can ask, “What are they reacting to?” And the answer is that they are reacting to the kind of energy that we bring to our work with them. If, one day, I’m stressed or hostile or aggressive, that’s going to bring out aggressive action in my client. If I’m mindful and aware, if I take responsibility for the emotional space that I am in, and can therefore be present and calm, I don’t get the same kind of reaction.

People can restore their mindfulness. I suggest five minutes of breathing and watching meditation, or even just one minute every hour. If it’s built in, it takes very little time to check in with our emotions and body, to see how we are feeling, become self-aware. Employers can help by putting in place



Norman Doidge, M.D.



AL GILBERT

While the human brain has apparently underestimated itself, neuroplasticity isn't all good news; it renders the brain not only more resourceful but also more vulnerable to outside influences.

A recent study of more than twenty-six hundred toddlers shows that early exposure to television...correlates with problems paying attention and controlling impulses later in childhood.

Much of the harm from television and other electronic media, such as music videos and computer games, comes from their effect on attention. Children and teenagers who sit in front of fighting games are engaged in massed practice and are incrementally rewarded. Video games, like Internet porn, meet all the requirements for plastic brain map changes.... dopamine – the reward transmitter, also triggered by addictive drugs – is released in the brain during these games. People who are addicted to computer games show all the signs of other addictions: cravings when they stop, neglect of other activities, euphoria when on the computer, and a tendency to deny or minimize their actual involvement.

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opportunities for employees to practice mindful awareness.

Sometimes passion seems to slide over into addiction and people who love their work become workaholics. How can this slide be avoided?

A passion is a positive engagement in a human endeavour. It's creative and it calls forth one's best energies. It has its justification in and of itself. It's not a fix for something else. Addiction can look like passion, but addiction is always about filling a hole. If there is an unresolved void inside a person, their passion can slide into addiction. The key is how aware one is of the inner void and what one is doing about it. If one does not acknowledge the void, any activity, even though it looks positive on the outside, can become addictive. The difference is that in an addiction the person is not in charge anymore.

In your book *Scattered Minds* you write about Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). You mention that ADD can tend towards addiction, but you also say that even adults with ADD can work to heal themselves. Please explain.

ADD is not a disease, though this is the usual medical view. It is a developmental problem arising in the very first years of life. Human beings can develop new brain circuits and new traits and ways of coping even later on in life. I have written about the conditions that support this development.

ADD is part of the human continuum, so people who don't have ADD *per se* but don't have a lot of self-regulation and are very much affected by an environment of excessive interruptions, constant email for instance, can get into a kind of pseudo-ADD state.

You likely heard the recent tragic story of a 15-year-old boy who died after running away from home when his parents took away his Xbox game. Can you offer any insights for parents who struggle to deal with their adolescent children?

The problem is that parents are always taught to react to the kid's acting out, instead of asking what is being acted out.

In this case, what was being acted out had two dynamics. One dynamic was that the boy had lost his human contacts and replaced them with electronics. Secondly, the situation was a power struggle and the parents did not have power to assert their will, but they tried to. Parents don't realize that the power they have arises only out of the relationship. If the kid is attached to his peer group, for instance, the parents don't have any power. When they try to assert their power, conflict arises. The solution is not to try to assert power but to try to rebuild the relationship.

What is important, for anybody, is to see the possibilities in the present. There are always possibilities. The question is, what is in the way of those possibilities. People want to love one another, but they kill each other. People want to nurture and love their children, but they end up in some terrible situations with their kids. Even loving parents do. Those possibilities of love and connection and nurturing are there. We need to ask, what's in the way of our natural human loving self, and to see what we can do to realize our possibilities.

A Human Future is edited by Beth Porter.



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 134 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 28 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

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FOR YOUR INTEREST

“Contrary to a popular misconception, confrontational ‘tough love’ interventions are likely to fail.... Family, friends and partners of addicts sometimes have only one reasonable decision in front of them: either choose to be with the addict as he or she is or choose not to be with her. No one is obliged to put up with unreliability, dishonesty and emotional withdrawal – the ways of the addict. Unconditional acceptance of another person doesn't mean staying with them under all circumstances, no matter what cost to oneself; that duty belongs only to the parents of a young child. Acceptance in the context of adult-to-adult relationships may mean simply acknowledging that the other person is the way he or she is, not judging them, and not corroding one's own soul with resentment that they are not different.” Gabor Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, p. 378.

Suggested reading (click on the websites)

- Gabor Maté's website: www.drgabormate.com
- Gabor Maté:
 - *Scattered Minds: A New Look at the Origins and Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1999
 - *When The Body Says No*, Knopf, 2003
 - *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*, Knopf, 2008.
 - Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté: *Hold Onto Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*, Knopf, 2004
- Article on a safe injection site in Vancouver's Downtown East Side (2003): www.cmaj.ca. Another opinion: josephbenami.com/
- Mindfulness website: www.mindfulness.com/
- Mindfulness session led on youtube, by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn ca.youtube.com/watch?v=3nwwKbM_vJc
- Bruce K. Alexander:
 - *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit*, Oxford, 2008.
 - “The Roots of Addiction in Free Market Society.” April 2001. A study by the Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives: www.policyalternatives.ca/
- Jaak Panksepp:
 - *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*, Oxford Press, 2004.

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