Addiction is a human problem not a drug problem, we have to know about the human person to know why they are vulnerable to addiction and what has happened to put them at risk – Gabor Mate

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction – Gabor Mate: A book review by Jesse Edgington. SSCI 302

Gabor Mate is a talented writer and storyteller. I was taken in by the stories of struggle, explanation and care that he shared about his experiences working in Vancouver’s downtown eastside. Mate intertwined stories about his work, applicable research, his patients and his own struggles with addiction. Prior to reading the book, I had some understanding of addiction and its causes but the depth of reading, research and experience that Mate brings is evident. Mate walks the reader through the complexity of psychological, sociological, physiological issues, (and more) with great depth and explanation.

Mate shares about his patients’ stories, their history, upbringing, abuse, struggles with family, struggles with partners or spouses, challenges of being pregnant and caring for newborns. Associated health issues, either caused or exacerbated by drug use, often complicate these important life events. The stories spoke of people as artists, poets, composers, writers, spouses, family and community members. Some are stories of addicts with transformed lives who had their vision widened beyond their own bubble, lives expanded and who are now able to give back to the community. Mate also makes comparisons with his own upbringing and experience living with shopping/music/workaholic addictions. Very early in the book I was struck by how Mate viewed equality in all people.

“[Working with] people who are the sickest, the neediest and the most neglected of any population anywhere… At heart, I am not that different from my patients – and sometimes I cannot stand seeing how little psychological space, **how little heaven-granted grace separates me from them**. What draws me here? All of us who are called to this work are responding to an inner pull that resonates with the same frequencies that vibrate in the lives of the haunted, drained, dysfunctional human beings in our care. But of course, we return daily to our homes, outside interests and relationships while our addict clients are trapped in their downtown gulag. Some people are attracted to painful places because they hope to resolve their own pain there. Others offer themselves because their compassionate hearts know that here is where love is most needed. Yet others come out of professional interest: this work is ever challenging. Those with low self-esteem may be attracted because it feeds their egos to work with such powerless individuals. Some are lured by the magnetic force of addictions because they haven't resolved, or even recognized, their own addictive tendencies. My guess is that most of us physicians, nurses and other professional helpers who work in the Downtown Eastside are impelled by some mixture of these motives.” Pg. 20/21

There were many quotes to capture for future reference and they are phrased so well that I would do them disservice to paraphrase them. Here is one such lengthy quote that takes the reader into the world of one of Mate’s clients named Ralph.

“…as a chronicler of his own drug urges and those of his fellow Hastings Street addicts, Ralph spoke the bare truth: people jeopardize their lives for the sake of making the moment livable. Nothing sways them from the habit - not illness, not the sacrifice of love and relationship, not the loss of all earthly goods, not the crushing of their dignity, not the fear of dying. The drive is that relentless. How to understand the death grip of drug addiction? What keeps Penny injecting after the spinal suppuration that nearly made her paraplegic? Why can't Beverly give up shooting cocaine despite the HIV, the recurring abscesses I've had to drain on her body and the joint infections that repeatedly put her in hospital? What could have drawn Sharon back to the Downtown Eastside and her suicidal habit after her six-month getaway? How did she shrug off the deterrents of HIV and hepatitis, a crippling bone infection and the chronic burning, piercing pain of exposed nerve endings? What a wonderful world it would be if the simplistic view were accurate: that human beings need only negative consequences to teach them hard lessons.” Pg. 28

Sadly, it is not a wonderful world for those caught in damaging addictions. Mate first tells the reader that addiction is rooted in pain, whether conscious or not. People are searching for painkillers, escapes and emotional relief. “When people speak of feeling "hurt" or of having emotional "pain," they are not being abstract or poetic but scientifically quite precise.” Pg. 34. He also points out a fact that does not surprise me but explains a lot of the foundations to addiction. “The research literature is unequivocal: most hard-core substance abusers come from abusive homes.” Children have suffered neglect, maltreatment, witnessed trauma, learned self-harming life patterns or the suicidal addictions of their parents. They often had to take care of their own parents or siblings in one-way or another. Pg. 34

When I read the following quote from Mate, it reminded me of some of my interactions with people in my life. “I’ve often been struck by the childlike insouciance of my addicted patients when they lie to me. A naïve manipulation … is simply part of the game, and being caught is no more shameful than being found while playing hide-and-seek.” Pg. 48. In situations like these, control, authority and power are a tricky balance to navigate. Doctor-patient, healer-rule enforcer, care giver-friend, church representative-community member are all messy dynamics in the relationships.

When it comes to addiction, spirituality and faith are certainly large components of the picture. The broken relationships with self, others and a higher power are always at the core of circumstances of addiction. The science behind it is complex, many disciplines are interwoven and yet it often comes down to basic principles of humanity and love. One of these complicated contexts is evidenced by an individual Mate talks about named Dean Wilson.

Dean Wilson’s mom calls him Canada’s most famous junkie because of his work with international conference audiences, political lobbying, and the co-founding of a Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). Wilson has been a tenacious and articulate advocate of decriminalization, harm reduction policies and a prime mover in the establishment of the pioneering Supervised Injection Site. These measures are only a start to exploring other possibilities in the understanding, control and healing of drug addiction. Pg. 93

After an introduction to some of the characters in Mate’s life and work, and after an initial overview of addiction and drug use, Mate focuses in on more of the details of addiction.

“Addictions, even as they resemble normal human yearnings, are more about desire than attainment. In the addicted mode, the emotional charge is in the pursuit and the acquisition of the desired object, not in the possession and enjoyment of it. The greatest pleasure is in the momentary satisfaction of yearning. The fundamental addiction is to the fleeting experience of not being addicted. The addict craves the absence of the craving state. For a brief moment he's liberated from emptiness, from boredom, from lack of meaning, from yearning, from being driven or from pain. He is free.” Pg. 107

Mate describes addiction as involving compulsion, preoccupation, impaired control, dissatisfaction, craving, harmful consequences and relapse. His first hint at moving into a biological explanation happens in the following statement.

“As we shall see shortly, all addictions-whether to drugs or to nondrug behaviors share the same brain circuits and brain chemicals. On the biochemical level the purpose of all addictions is to create an altered physiological state in the brain. This can be achieved in many ways, drug taking being the most direct. So an addiction is never purely "psychological"; all addictions have a biological dimension.” Pg. 128/129

Mate’s explanation about the multifaceted complexity of addictions blew some of my preconceived notions about addicts out of the water, addiction viewed as a disease being one of them. Addiction involves brain chemicals, nerve circuits and elements of human biology and interactions with their environments.

“Addiction has biological, chemical, neurological, psychological, medical, emotional, social, political, economic, and spiritual underpinnings – and perhaps others I haven’t thought about. Because the addiction process is too multifaceted to be understood within any limited framework, my definition of addiction made no mention of "disease." Viewing addiction as an illness, either acquired or inherited, narrows it down to a medical issue. It does have some of the features of illness, and these are most pronounced in hardcore drug addicts like the ones I work with in the Downtown Eastside. But not for a moment do I wish to promote the belief that the disease model by itself explains addiction or even that it's the key to understanding what addiction is all about. Addiction is "all about" many things.” Pg. 130

Of these many things, drugs are part of the picture, but Mate points out research that shows they are not the complete picture. He talks about research on war veterans coming back from the Vietnam War who were drug users under high stress but did not show signs of addiction once that stress was abated. He also points out animal research that suggests three factors needing to coincide for substance addiction to occur: a susceptible organism, a drug with addictive potential and stress. Pg139. When Mate explains the chemicals of the human body, the biologist in me was fascinated with the subtlety of how little difference there is in the natural composition of certain ones and their changes in production/function. I remembered some of those intricate connections between biology and psychology from a Brain and Behavior class that explained things like attachment. “When endorphins lock onto opiate receptors, they trigger the chemistry of love and connection, helping us to be the social creatures we are… Children who have not received the attentive presence of the parent are … at greater risk for seeking chemical satisfaction from external sources later in life.” Pg. 156

Part of the book goes into the brain science, opiate receptors, activation pathways, chemical effects, brain composition and function. Mate describes the specific functioning of areas of the brain; like the orbitofrontal cortex and the prefrontal cortex. I was blown away as he described one cue the OFC watches for in the brain of developing babies. In social interactions, especially in the eyes of smiling faces, the OFC can distinguish size of pupils and interpret them to mean enjoyment and delight or not. The OFC helps babies pay heed to physical/emotional, rather than verbal messages, which affects their development. The OFC also contributes to decision-making and to inhibiting impulses that may not be healthy or desirable (up to a 50% capacity reduction in addicts). It also helps balance the short-term objectives we face with long-term consequences. So if these systems are underdeveloped or impaired, the person is more susceptible to addiction. Pg. 170-171

Mate makes strong statements that seem to be aimed more at cohorts and not the average reader. The role that environment plays has been researched but is not being well received by the populist as a whole; media, politics, even education and medical communities.

“Brain development in the uterus and during childhood is the single most important biological factor in determining whether or not a person will be predisposed to substance dependence and to addictive behaviors of any sort, whether drug-related or not… Genes do dictate the basic organization… development and anatomical structure of the human central nervous system, but it’s left to the environment to sculpt and fine-tune the chemistry, connections, circuits, networks and systems that determine how well we function.” Pg. 180 – 181

It was really interesting how Mate described the evolutionary process of humans becoming upright standing creatures and the changes in our pelvis positioning affecting brain development. To achieve that stance, our brain growth had to focus on different things and by comparison would be at least a year and a half behind in development as compared to a four-legged animal. This then means that the development that does happen after birth is still vitally important and is affected by numerous other environmental factors. Three quarters of brain growth happens outside the womb in the first few years. This explosion of growth outside the womb allows for greater potential for learning but comes at a greater risk. Addiction is one of these possible negative outcomes. Pg. 182-183

After having gone through the parenting phase of infants and toddlers, in the not too distant past, I was quite profoundly taken aback by Mate’s description of infant brain development. “Infants read, react to and are developmentally influenced by the psychological states of the parents. They are affected by body language: tension in the arms that hold them, tone of voice, joyful or despondent facial expressions and, yes, the size of the pupils. In a very real sense, the parent's brain programs the infant's, and this is why stressed parents will often rear children whose stress apparatus also runs in high gear, no matter how much they love their child and no matter that they strive to do their best.” Pg. 186

“These, then, are the traits that most often underlie the addiction process: poor self-regulation; lack of basic differentiation; lack of a healthy sense of self; a sense of deficient emptiness; and impaired impulse control. The development of these traits is not mysterious or, more correctly, there is no mystery about the circumstances under which the positive qualities of self-regulation, self-worth, differentiation and impulse control fail to develop. Any gardener knows that if a plant hasn't grown, most likely the conditions were lacking. The same goes for children. The addictive personality is a personality that hasn't matured. When we come to address healing, a key question will be how to promote maturity in ourselves or in others whose early environment sabotaged healthy emotional growth.” Pg. 228

Mate takes a section of the book to address societal norms and views about drugs and drug addiction. He discusses such topics as fear of the extreme addict, perceptions of addicts and “the War on Drugs.” Here he pulls in points of discussion that I have rarely, if ever, heard as part of the discussion around drugs.

“We need hardly mention legally permissible substances like nicotine and alcohol: in terms of scale, their negative consequences far surpass the damage inflicted by illicit drugs. Even with societal reductions there are still 44 million smokers in the USA in 2008… In 1995 illegal drugs caused 805 deaths in Canada. But alcohol was 6507 and tobacco was 34728… so is the so called War on Drugs misplaced?” Corporations, industry, economics and politics push its agenda. Pg. 275-277

Mate also points out some of the deficiencies in our laws, policing and court systems. “Incarcerated in institutions where fear and violence often rule, many will re-experience exactly what they suffered early in their lives and ever since: helplessness and isolation.” Pg269. “If we are to help addicts, we must strive to change not them but their environments. These are the only things we can change. Transformation of the addict must come from within and the best we can do is to encourage it.” Pg. 299

What we need to do is aim to help to alleviate pain, eliminate stress and bring emotional states back to a healthy balance, to have a chance to consider oneself in a safe, supportive social environment. A painful past, distressing present and bleak view of the future is a recipe for disaster and must be worked on to present a real possibility of sobriety. We need clean safe facilities, trained staff, healthy food, contact with creation, medical care, counseling, skills training, emotional support, cultural connection, strong human relationships and spiritual supports. An ally needs COAL: Curiosity, Openness, Acceptance and Love, enacted out in compassionate curiosity. Supporters need not justify actions, they only need understanding, acceptance, respect and to see humanity as equal to all. Pg. 333

As Mate moves his discussion towards healing, many of the things he talks about are emotional, spiritual and aspects of mindfulness. Room to explore and practice these things in the proper, stress free, supportive physical environments can help people work on the fear they feel, the pain they experience and to be aware of the factors that are contributing to them. Dr. Schwartz, and the UCLA School of Medicine, developed a four-step method for conscious attention and Mate adapted it for the healing of addiction.

4 Steps (Mate added a fifth): Practiced daily, with journal reflections.

1. Re-label – label the impulse for what it is, not a need but a want/desire
2. Re-attribute – give the impulse the real reason, stress, anxiety, tiredness, etc.
3. Re-focus – distract the urge, what you DO counts, redirect to something enjoyable
4. Re-value (or De-value) – give the new things more attention and value, see the other old things as destructive and harmful, change the priorities
5. Re-create – choose a different life. Each one has gifts, passions and values; lets make steps towards those again. Be mindful of the activities you choose and the things you want to create or recreate.

This step method has similarities to the 12-step program, one of which is the goal of sobriety and not just abstinence. A more holistic view of a person and their need for “attachment, attunement, to be in a community, to be loved by people, to be able to give love, to have joy, to be able to be [their] self.” Pg. 365. This book was very interesting, enlightening and did an excellent job illuminating the complexity of addictions. I would recommend it to anyone wrestling with self, working with others, living with others, raising children, or walking the path of life. Hmm, I guess that means everyone.

Healing and treatment are possible; the brain can change and improve in areas that were maladapted or underdeveloped. It will take a healthy environment and work though. Mental effort, mindfulness, awareness, intention and attention on the part of the person are required to improve brain physiology – Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz