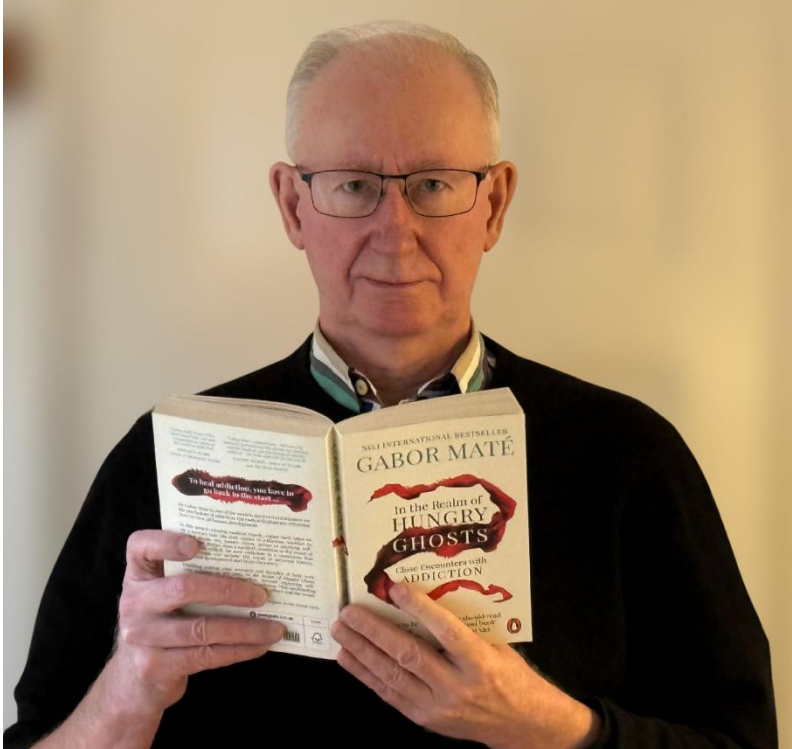


# Wealden Business Group

## Book Review: "In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts" by Gabor Maté Report by Bill Ferguson, 17 January 2024

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Bill Ferguson

### Introduction

In September, Paul Nolan from Canterbury Umbrella spoke to the Wealden Business Group. He received such an enthusiastic response and there was so much interest in the topic of addiction that I chose this book, a popular classic in its field, as our next book. Not the easiest of reads, but I hope those who made it to the end feel it was worthwhile.

I'm going to start my summary in the middle of the book where Gabor presents research

evidence from mice trials as I believe this evidence underlies the argument of the book.

1. A laboratory mouse that has had its dopamine receptors switched off will eat if you put food in its mouth but if you put the food down a few inches away from its nose, it will not move to eat it; it will actually starve to death rather than eat.

Dopamine is the incentive and motivation chemical. Dopamine flows whenever we are interested in something, when we are seeking food or a sexual partner. Without the dopamine, we have no motivation.

When the addict shoots cocaine, or crystal meth or almost any drug, they get a hit of dopamine in their brain. They come alive!

2. If we take a baby mouse whose endorphin receptors have been switched off: it will not cry for its mother if they are separated. In the wild that mouse would die, because only the mother protects and nurtures the baby.

Endorphins allow the experience of love; and attachment between the parent and the child. Heroin and morphine act on the endorphin system; that's why they work to give the addict a feeling of being loved.

## Background

Dr Maté was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1944, to Jewish parents. He was 2 months old when the German army moved into Budapest. Some of his family died in Auschwitz and his mother gave him to a stranger as a baby, in the hope that he would survive when she feared for her own life. They were reunited after a short separation.

At the age of 12 he immigrated to Canada. Married Rae when he was 25, studied and gained an MD at age 33. Maté worked in family practice, palliative care, and harm reduction. This the period of his life where the book is set.

The book title comes from Buddhist philosophy. The hungry ghost realm is considered an undesirable rebirth resulting from negative karma associated with greed and craving in a previous incarnation. Hungry ghosts have narrow necks and huge, empty bellies, symbolizing their intense hunger and craving.

Dr Maté argues that many addicts are hungry ghosts, haunted by unmet needs and profound emotional hunger.

The book starts with case histories. Maté's interactions with patients, offering poignant stories of individuals facing severe addiction. People who use heroin, cocaine, crystal meth, alcohol and any other drug they can get hold of.

He says: "If the success of a doctor is to be measured by how long his patients live, then I am a failure because my patients die very young. They die of HIV, they die of hepatitis C, they die of infections of their heart valves, they die of infections of their brains, of their spines, of their bloodstream. They die of suicide, of overdose, of violence, or accidental deaths.

These people lose everything. They lose their health, their beauty, their teeth, their wealth, they lose human relationships and, in the end, they often lose their lives. And yet, nothing shakes them from their addiction. Nothing can force them to give up their addiction. The addictions are powerful and the question is: why? "

If you want to understand addiction, you have to ask what the person is getting from their addiction?

Drugs like heroin, morphine, codeine, cocaine, and alcohol, are all painkillers. They give the addict temporary relief from pain, and a chance to feel good, or at least okay. But that isn't the whole story.

Gabor says it's a myth that drugs are addictive. Drugs are not by themselves addictive, just like food is not addictive, but to some people it is; shopping is not addictive, but to some people it is; television is not addictive, but to some people it is.

Most people who try most drugs never become addicted. So the question is, why are some people vulnerable to being addicted? Is the **prefrontal cortex** involved? This part of the brain controls decision making, it suppresses impulsive behaviour. But what if it is broken?

Maté challenges conventional views of addiction as a moral failing. We need to look at the neurochemistry of the brain.

The drugs are fuelling some sort of process. Research with animal trials gives some insight, as mentioned earlier. If the dopamine and endorphin systems failed to develop and the PFC is inhibited this all starts to make sense.

The human brain develops within its environment. It's not just genetically programmed. Many addicts are self-medicating because the benefits outweigh the side effects. We should be asking what happened to these people to make them need these chemicals from the outside?

The kind of environment that a child has will affect the development of his or her brain. Gabor stresses the importance of "attachment." He argues that the loss of secure attachments, especially at an early age, is often a root cause of addiction. The two key attachments are home and relationships.

He argues for a compassionate and holistic approach that recognizes addiction as a complex health issue rather than a criminal matter. Throughout the book, Maté advocates for harm reduction and compassionate interventions, emphasizing the need to meet individuals where they are. He presents a compelling case for supervised injection sites, safe injection facilities, and other harm reduction strategies as pragmatic responses to the opioid crisis.

He criticises the "war on drugs" as a political sound bite, an approach that criminalises addiction. It is so easy and politically convenient to say to the drug addict, "How can you possibly do this to yourself? How can you possibly inject this terrible substance into

your body that may kill you?"

The book concludes with a call for societal transformation. Maté argues for addressing the underlying issues of addiction through social policies that prioritise the well-being of individuals and communities. He challenges readers to reconsider their perceptions of addiction, urging a shift from judgment to understanding.

## Personal observations

It is surprisingly common in healthcare to come across "The Wounded Healer". The archetype refers to individuals who have undergone profound suffering, trauma, or personal challenges and, as a result, develop the capacity to help and heal others.

Dr Maté shows great empathy towards his patients, his own childhood was far from ideal and he tries to balance his responsibility as a doctor with his own feelings. He analyses his past dispassionately as an adult and links his own addiction to early influences: as a baby he got the message that his mother didn't want him.

He explains: "For a long time in my life, I wanted to distract myself from my own mind, because I was afraid to be alone with it. He became a workaholic to make people need him. And that way he could make up for the feeling of being unwanted.

"It means that I am working all the time, and when I am not working, I'm consumed by buying music; in my case, classical CD's. One week, I spent 8,000 dollars on classical compact discs, not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't help going back to the store. "

What message do my kids get? My kids get the same message that they are not wanted.

In 2010, he explored ayahuasca for addiction treatment. This brought him into conflict with mainstream Canadian medical policy and he was told to stop the research or be struck off.

Ayahuasca and other psychedelics, administered under medical supervision has become a growth area in addiction research. Some patients describe being spiritually "reborn" and lose all desire for the substances that previously dominated their lives.

Now, as an eighty year old Dr Maté is a popular guest on podcasts and a keen researcher in the field of psychedelic therapy. And it seems that he is finally able to work with his own trauma.

I heard Maté interviewed recently on a podcast. He has focused in recent years, on spreading his message by giving public presentations. He has taken up the cause of Native Canadian tribes who like the Native American Indians have been displaced from their homes and marginalised by society.

He went to one such event as a volunteer, to help with counselling and healing. Half way through the first day the tribal elders took him to one side and said “we can’t possibly allow you to work with these people, you are carrying so much trauma that we need to heal you first.”

## Critics

Not everyone agrees with GM: Psychologist Stanton Peele challenges Gabor Maté's addiction perspective, rejecting the idea that all cases trace to childhood trauma. Peele criticizes Maté's reductionism, arguing it overlooks individuals' natural resilience.

Professor James Coyne opposes Maté's rejection of evidence-based health solutions, noting concerns about overspecialisation.

In a controversial interview, Maté diagnosed Prince Harry with PTSD, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), anxiety, and depression, drawing criticism for his unorthodox and reckless nature.

Overall, scientific debate persists around Maté's views on addiction, mental health, and his diagnostic approach.

## Links and references

<https://youtu.be/66cYcSak6nE>

Rio talk TED 2012

Stanton Peele has authored numerous books, often focusing on the topics of addiction, recovery, and mental health. Some of his notable books include:

1. "Love and Addiction" (with Archie Brodsky) - Published in 1975, this book challenged traditional views on addiction, arguing that love and addiction are intertwined.
2. "The Truth About Addiction and Recovery" - In this book, Peele presents his perspective on addiction and offers alternatives to traditional approaches to recovery.
3. "7 Tools to Beat Addiction" - This book provides practical tools and strategies for

overcoming addiction.

4. "Addiction-Proof Your Child" (with Archie Brodsky) - A guide for parents on preventing and addressing addiction in children.
5. "Resisting 12-Step Coercion: How to Fight Forced Participation in AA, NA, or 12-Step Treatment" - Co-authored with Charles Bufe, this book critiques coercive practices related to 12-step programs.

Professor James C. Coyne is a psychologist and health psychologist known for research in psycho-oncology and behavioural medicine. Based at the University of Pennsylvania, he critically examines research practices in psychology and psychiatry. Coyne advocates for rigorous methodology and contributes to discussions on open science and research reproducibility.

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## Definition

Addiction is any behaviour that gives you temporary relief, temporary pleasure, but in the long term causes harm, and you can't give it up, despite those negative consequences.