

Dr. Gabor Mate (a workshop)

In the past week, one of our members was able to attend a workshop put on by the city of Lethbridge with Dr. Gabor Maté as its guest speaker. In the past we have previewed two of his books, entitled "Hold On To Your Kids" and "In The Realm Of Hungry Ghosts". He spoke about addictions, one of which is very little understood, yet very prevalent, the workaholic. He spoke quite openly about this addiction in his own life, so he could certainly speak from experience.

He said that 29% of all Canadians are workaholics. Addicts are about getting something for themselves, and when speaking about workaholics, it is also ultimately about getting something for ourselves, praise, success, money, status, etc. So often we hear that addictions are inherited. Some say there is evidence that a person will be prone to a certain condition, this only gives the addict an easy way out. Not only does that addict have a valid excuse for his choice, but society is also off the hook, because we can now blame genetics for our addictions rather than our surroundings and ultimately our choices. There can be no support for addiction being genetic, since there is always a choice. A choice to abuse substances, a choice to drink, a choice to smoke, even a choice to work longer hours and more days per week. Alcohol in itself is not addictive, or we would all be alcoholics, but rather, the choice to use alcohol as an escape is what often leads to the addiction. As Dr. Maté says in his book "In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts" there is a large empty place that an addict seeks to fill from the outside. There is a craving, which becomes a long term craving, which becomes a loss of control. Then the choices being made are made for a self gratification and for our own fulfillment. Is this not the case with the workaholic as well? Dr. Maté then went on to speak about self-medication. He spoke first about the person diagnosed with ADHD. The drug that is given to treat this condition is actually a stimulant. The ADHD sufferer will often self medicate with Prozac, Ritalin, alcohol, marijuana, pot, or cocaine. These stimulants are actually being used to calm down their racing mind. The person may begin with something so common as Ritalin or alcohol, but that often leads to something stronger for more relief. Dr. Gabor stressed that too often addictions are just people who are self medicating a mental issue.

"How addictions work on the brain" was Dr. Maté's next topic. The brain gives off its own opiates, endorphins, and dopamine's. These are produced to soothe physical as well as emotional pain, and give a sense of pleasure. When a person is feeling pain, it is an indication that something is wrong, our body is speaking to us. When medication is taken to deaden that pain, we no longer receive the message that something is wrong, and often ignore that signal. When endorphins are released we have a sense of pleasure, the more endorphins, the more pleasure felt. What happens to the addict? Stimulant drugs such as cocaine and crystal meth, elevate the dopamine in the brain, which then give such a state of drug induced pleasure that it takes away all motivation, even the feeling of being alive. An addict then craves that state, most of-ten to escape the reality of life, or his/her surroundings. So we must first ask, not why the addiction, but rather, why the pain. The biggest burden an addict carries is shame. They know they are betraying themselves, and then they engage in more of the addiction to cover the shame. Any healing must come by breaking that circle. Therefore we must not become judgmental of them,

but rather we must try to understand their need. We need to look at people's lives to determine the need of a pain reliever. So for everyone, we need a stress regulator, or impulse control. This brings us back to the ADHD sufferer. We tend to punish the child with ADHD because we think his behavior is within his control. So we give drugs to children to control this behavior. A child will often tune out his surroundings because he doesn't have the regulator, or impulse control to keep his mind at rest and deal with all the stimuli around him. Therefore he will do what works best for him: fight/flight/help. The "fight" reflex is the aggression, which is often prevalent. The "flight" reaction is the shutting out and the dead eyes and the defensive detachment. Then the "help" reflex is the self-soothing reaction such as thumb sucking or rocking. Dr. Maté again stressed that in our society today, when there are dysfunctional homes, stressed parents, separated parents, distracted parents, it is the child that must deal with these emotional issues. The child then sees himself as alone and actually to blame. The environment has much to do with the development of a child and their emotions. They need connections and relationships. They need compassion and nurturing. Truly, "it takes a community to raise a child".