

Awakened By a Different Perspective

I was very fortunate to have the support of CAW Local 240, who provided me the opportunity to attend a one day seminar, which focused on combining science and compassion when working with addicted people. This seminar was delivered by Dr. Gabor Mate, a Canadian doctor, on July 14, 2009 at Place Concorde. It was hosted by House of Sophrosyne and sponsored by Green Shield Canada.

I never realized what an impact this doctor would have on my willingness and determination to understand addiction without judgment or preconceptions. He made me aware that addiction wasn't just a narcotic, it is any behavior that is done with compulsiveness, done with preoccupation, impaired control over the behavior, persistence or relapse despite evidence of harm, dissatisfaction, irritability of intense craving when the object, be it a drug or other goal is not immediately available.

He taught us that we have to challenge our assumptions with addictions. Some often say "People can just say no" or "the person needs to hit rock bottom", or "the person is a moral failure". We need to learn that although we should not be making moral judgments, it's a natural process of the human mind, and we should be aware that judgments are meaningless and have no value when you're assisting someone with an addiction. We have to work towards compassion and curiosity and fight the urge to judge, and then we can better understand the addictions and start making a significant difference with the recovery. Usually when we judge, subconsciously we're looking at ourselves. We've exposed ourselves to a weakness or feeling we may have about ourselves or our past. We must learn to clear our judgments and practice being mindful and aware of these misconceptions when learning of someone's addiction.

We often focus on all the negative functions that a drug is serving to the addict. We need to challenge these presumptions. Every drug contains a chemical that will produce more serotonin, dopamines or endorphins, which are all necessary in our life. In fact, from a medical perspective, some of these very drugs are the only way an addict can cope with their life and get the chemicals released in their body in order to function and feel alive. Addicts are self medicating. Cocaine acts as an anti-depressant, heroin, opium and Percocet's are known to relieve anxiety. Often alcoholics have social phobias, and turn to alcohol to "loosen them up" so they can "fit in" more easily. Workaholics work tirelessly for acceptance and pleasing someone other than themselves, even at the risk of their health and the many proven side effects that stress causes on our body. People addicted to food put themselves at risk for heart attacks, diabetes, and many other ailments (they normally aren't eating healthy food when they're addicted.) It's all the same. There are health risks from any addiction.

Instead of always assuming that the drug or behavior is the problem, we need to see beyond that and understand what the addict is really trying to cope with life and what may be missing in their bodies. We need to understand that the first part of the addiction is caused from the pain the addict has often endured; often pain that is even unknowingly

to them. The only way they can be aware and make progress is by not being labeled as a moral failure.

Dr. Mate is convinced that genes are not the root cause of addiction, but merely behavior being passed from one generation to the next. He added that statistically studies have shown that people, who experienced ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences), such as a death of a parent, violence, sexual abuse, jailed parent, or an addicted parent, were 40% more apt to becoming addicted. The environment in which we are reared controls the genes. The genes are predisposed for addiction, but the environment that you are around can turn addictive behaviors on or off.

An alarming fact that Dr. Mate brought forward was people who have ADD are at more of a risk for addiction because for many they have low self-esteem, sense of being an outsider, ingrained feeling rejection, the inability to read social cues, difficulty learning from negative experiences, and the desperate need for acceptance and belonging. Addiction regulates stresses.

The human brain is the most premature of all creatures when born. It does most of its developing in the first three years. The circuits in our brain will grow based on the environment that surrounds us. How we're nurtured, how we're touched and the situations that arise around us our first three years of life will have a significant impact on whether we become addicted to something.

One of the best quotes I took away from this seminar, and certainly worth passing along to you, is: **“Only in the presence of compassion will a person allow themselves to see the truth.”** Please remember this when someone is in need of a confidant. We need to be as compassionate to the person who has an addiction to a substance, as we would to the person who is addicted to food or gambling.

Addictions come in the form of drug use, gambling, working, food and any other thing that consumes your life with negative affect. All addictions utilize the same brain circuits, one addiction is no worse than the other.

I hope that sharing my experience from this workshop will enable you to stop yourself next time a judgment comes to mind, and focus on what you might be judging yourself for. This will not only help the addicted person, you will be surprised at how much it may help you.

Respectfully,

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