

The 5 levels of compassion

Guest: Dr Gabor Maté

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Hi, I'm Alex Howard and welcome to this session as part of the Trauma Super Conference. I'm particularly excited to share this interview with you. It's an excerpt from a 4-part online program, Trauma and Awakening, which we recently ran with Dr Gabor Mate and Hameed Ali, who writes under the pen name A.H. Almaas.

In this series, Trauma and Awakening, we really explored the area of trauma from the point of view of, can trauma be a pathway towards spiritual awakening? But also, how can trauma show up on the path of awakening as well?

In this clip Gabor explores the five levels of compassion, which I think is a really helpful frame and way to understand the different ways that we need to show up for ourselves and other people as part of the healing journey.

Just to give you a bit of background on Dr Gabor Mate, Dr Gabor is a retired physician who after 20 years of family practice and palliative care experience, worked for over a decade in Vancouver's downtown EastSide with patients challenged by drug addiction and mental illness.

He's the best selling author of four books published in 25 languages, including the award winning *In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. Gabor is an internationally recognized speaker, highly sought after for his expertise on addiction, trauma, childhood development and the relationship of stress and illness. For his groundbreaking medical work and writing, he's been awarded the Order of Canada, his country's highest civilian distinction, and the Civic Merit Award from his hometown, Vancouver. So here is Dr Gabor Mate.

That superego, inner critic voice that often is saying, 'you don't deserve it, you can't do it, you haven't got what it takes.' Maybe you can just put a little bit of a spotlight on that piece for a minute because it's been very implicit in what you've been doing.

Gabor Mate

This is what Freud called the superego. The ego being the eye, the superego above the eye, the 'Über-Ich' in German. And it's generally understood to be the voice, the internalized voice of the parent who says, 'you're not good enough or this is not good enough, or do this, you shouldn't do that, that's bad, that's immoral'. I think it's deeper than that.

And I think everything has an evolutionary purpose. Our systems are not crazy. Organisms have a wisdom in them. So that self suppression itself has got a wisdom in it, doesn't it? Even though it gave you an autoimmune disease, or it made you depressed or God knows what, or got you into bad relationships, originally it had a purpose. That purpose has a wisdom behind it. The wisdom was to ensure your survival.

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So to go back to the example I gave of the child who is angry, you can't be with me, there's a wisdom in that child suppressing the anger. The wisdom is, 'now I'll be taken care of', without which I can't survive.

It's the same with this voice of not being worthwhile, and 'I'm not good enough and I'm bad'. So here's the thing, it's not just the internalized voice of the parents. It's easier to get rid of if it was that simple. It'd be much easier to get rid of it, to be free of it. I think it's something deeper than that. It's that, but it's something deeper than that at the same time.

Let's say, Alex, I'm your father and I'm mistreating you, I'm not attending to your needs. You have two fundamental assumptions you can make. One is that my father is incapable of loving me. I'm all alone in the world. And I'm 1 year old or two years old. Or, gee, my father, there's something wrong with me. And if I work hard enough maybe I'll be loved. Which assumption is safer?

Alex Howard

The second one, because one wants to believe that the parent is safe and wonderful and perfect. So it's easier for me to blame myself.

Gabor Mate

And if I work hard enough, maybe I can justify my existence and earn the right to be lovable. So there's a survival purpose to this belief that you're worthless, even though it's so debilitating later on. But that's just the whole point about all these adaptations. They always have a purpose, but they out stay their welcome. They out stay their need. And that's what the problem is.

But originally, you can actually be compassionate with your belief that you're worthless. Here's how it works, I'll give you some examples. So the thing is that attachment, or the desire to attach, it's a very vulnerable state to be in. Alex, if I approached you with, 'jeez, Alex, I really want you to love me'. That's pretty vulnerable. You might be freaked out by that, or you might not be comfortable with it, or you might not know how to respond to it. So then I'll develop some ways to seek your attachment with you that are not so vulnerable. I don't have to just directly ask for it. Because the experience was, for the infant when they were small and openhearted, they were hurt, so we don't want to be vulnerable, because if we're vulnerable, we're hurt.

So then we have to develop less vulnerable ways of getting that attachment need met. So it's very simple, if you didn't get the attention you needed, and by the way, I'm cribbing here from my brilliant friend Dr Gordon Neufeld who is a developmental psychologist here in Vancouver. He's the world's most astute developmental psychologist. He's too busy helping people and teaching, than publishing. So he's not as well known as they might otherwise be. But our book, *Hold On To Your Kids*, has been published in close to 30 languages. I wrote it with him because he's very eloquent, but he's not quite a writer when it comes to books. So I ended up writing the book with him, but it's really his work. And so that's what I'm channeling here now as well. Just so I don't get the laurels I don't deserve here.

But Gordon points out what I just said about depersonalizing the attachment. In other words, you make it less vulnerable. So if you didn't get the attention you needed, guess what you're going to do? You're going to be consumed by attracting attention. And how can I do that? By being attractive.

You can attract attention in a number of ways. One is by physically being attractive, and then you spend half your life in front of a mirror and your cosmetic surgery and all that kind of stuff. We all do that because we want to attract attention. If you didn't get the approval that was your right, that was your expectation, if I can put it that way, you'll be consumed by winning approval. So you have a winning personality and you'll always be out there trying to get people's approval.

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If you aren't valued for who you are, you'll be measuring up to other people's expectations in order to be valued.

If you weren't made to feel special for what you were, you might be very demanding and go into politics.

If you weren't esteemed for who you were, you'll be wanting to impress people with your attributes.

If you weren't made to feel important just for who you were, you might become one of these people that are always helping other people. Now you'll be important. As a doctor I know that one really well.

If you weren't liked for who you were, you might become very nice so that they'll like me. And you'll never present your real emotions and what's really going on because that's not nice.

If you weren't loved for who you were, you might become very charming. All these charming people.

And if you weren't recognized for who you are, you might seek status. Now you get recognition. And our whole society runs on those false attributes. Those attributes that are really just displacements over genuine attachment needs, and then we identify with them. And as Gordon points out, these traits are runaway addictive because they don't satisfy.

So as a physician colleague of mine said about addictions, that it's hard to get enough of something that almost works. So heroin makes you feel warm and loved and open for a while. So it almost works. So you gotta have to go and get some more and get some more and get some more. The more you do, the more addictive it gets.

It's the same as being attractive. It's the same as being nice. They never totally satisfy, because underneath it there's always a niggling suspicion, do they really like me or do they like what I do for them? Am I getting their attention because they really care about me? Am I getting it because I presented an attractive package to them? So it never fully satiates. And satiation, by the way, can only come from within, which is what Hameed's work is all about. But it's very addictive and so we have people in their 50s and 60s doing Botox so the wrinkles don't show, what a sad thing.

Alex Howard

That last piece you just said, Gabor, I think, is really important. It brings us back to the awakening piece of trauma work, that if we're just trying to manage the behavior, if we can recognize, for example, I'm trying to meet my need to be loved by looking beautiful and putting pictures on Instagram and trying to get as many likes as I can, or whatever it may be, that, in a sense, just managing the behavior only goes so far, that we have to go deeper.

Gabor Mate

Absolutely. Yeah. Well, that's true all around. And that's why this inquiry, whether you do it from my inquiry or Hameed's inquiry or some other form of inquiry, but you just keep asking, you keep asking, what is this really all about? And what am I really trying to compensate for here?

And, as it often turns out to be the case, once you do the inquiry, the thing that you were looking for that you thought you didn't have, actually shows up. Why? Because it's been there all along. You just lost touch with it. Like with Diana, you become distanced from it because it was not safe to connect, but it never went away, never went away.

[00:13:11] Alex Howard

One of the other challenges, Gabor, is that there's the addictive element in terms of those variable rewards that you're speaking to, but also often people's lives get built around these roles. So, for example, if someone's role is that they're dealing with their sense of being insignificant by constantly achieving, they then built a career, they've built a livelihood, they've built a family now dependent upon that livelihood, it becomes often quite challenging to dismantle the way that one's life has been constructed around these patterns of behavior.

Gabor Mate

Absolutely. And I know that personally, and you identify with it, and it works, and the world gives you all kinds of accolades for it even. So, we get rewarded for our self betrayal is what happens. This society rewards you for betraying yourself.

Alex Howard

That's a powerful statement.

Gabor Mate

Yeah. It's not a question of giving up, by the way your genuine commitment to helping others or your genuine interest in making a difference in the world or genuine drive or calling to create. But it's a question of, are you following a calling or are you being driven?

If you're following a calling, you're in charge. If you're being driven, you're not in the driver's seat. You're like a leaf being driven by the wind, just tumbling and tumbling and tumbling. Eventually you end up in trouble.

So it's not a question of giving up all that. It's a question of who is in charge? Drives or are we doing what we are called to do? So I can call you to do something, but you can decide not to do it. But if I'm driving you with a whip, you don't have a whole lot of choice in the matter.

Alex Howard

I noticed someone asked in the comments, Anna asked, how do we know if it's a calling or it's being driven? And I just want to reflect, and I'd love to hear your thoughts. As someone who's always been very driven, for me the difference of the earlier parts of my adult life was it was driven by a sense of deficiency. Like if I get to this place then something's going to feel better. The difference I noticed in more recent chapters of my life is a sense of engagement and passion for what I do. But if I achieve or I don't achieve, it doesn't seem to have a big impact on my quality of life. There's less attachment to the outcome somehow.

Gabor Mate

That's exactly right. Also, in the driven state there's a constant tension, in the called state there's no tension. And I teach my students, one of the phases I keep repeating is whenever, and I think I may have used it last week, whenever there's tension, it requires attention. So just keep attending to the attention. If you're being driven, there's going to be tension there, and when you get it, it feels good temporarily, and then it turns to ashes in your mouth is what happens.

Alex Howard

Sometimes I think this can be very delicate and very sensitive material. Because, in a sense, often it's the way one's life is set up, and whether it's that drivenness or that making everyone else's needs more important, there's obviously different manifestations of what we're talking about.

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But going back to what we were saying a little bit earlier about the piece around the superego or the inner critic, that sometimes the more we put a spotlight on these pieces, the more vulnerable we become, actually, the more important it is, I think, to defend against those inner attacks.

Gabor Mate

Yeah, I know how Hameed talks about defending against the superego. That's one way to do it. And that's perfectly good as far as I'm concerned, you can just say 'to hell with you'. My interests are a little bit different. Just to recognize the value of it in my life when it first showed up and to have some compassion for it. You know what? I get it. You've been working so hard. Relax a little bit. I don't need you anymore. It's really the same thing, but it's just maybe a slightly different emphasis.

Now, for some people that superego stuff is really devastating. The shame that they live with for their very existence. I think it can all be addressed with compassion. At some point, even that shame served a purpose.

Alex Howard

What do you find helps someone cultivate that compassion, particularly when they haven't been on the receiving end of it? When they've been on the end of a lot of harshness, and that's in a sense, the essence of the trauma. What helps one cultivate that for themselves?

Gabor Mate

Well, in the first session that you did with Hameed I saw that happen with one person that he was interacting with. Just the sense of his presence opened some compassion for themselves and that person, and that allowed their presence to manifest to some extent.

You saw it a couple of times today where people had this sense of compassion for themselves, not a sense of compassion, they had compassion for themselves. What it took, in both cases, is the presence of another, the compassionate presence of another. And I think that's what it takes. I mean, we can do it, like the Buddha did, sitting by himself under the bodhi tree for however long it took. But most of us aren't going to get there that way.

So this is where the work comes into it. And this is where the presence of a teacher or a guide or a therapist who can be compassionate. And as Hameed, one of the sayings that I cite all the time is, 'only when compassion is present will people allow themselves to see the truth'. So I think when compassion is present, people can then open to their own self compassion as well.

So I think that's work. And I think that involves interaction for most of us.

Alex Howard

Let me ask you, on one hand, a very simple question but I think actually it's quite a subtle one. How would you define compassion? What are we actually speaking about here?

Gabor Mate

Okay, well I've distinguished five levels of compassion, and to some extent it's my own observations, to some extent I've been influenced by the work of others, including Hameed. But I distinguish five layers of compassion.

So that's what I call ordinary human compassion. When I say ordinary, I don't mean trivial. I mean, in the ordinary run of things, most of us are capable of feeling compassion in the ways we see it.

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Compassion actually means, if you look at the meaning of the word, passion means suffering, the passion of Christ. And com means with, to suffer with. In other words, when somebody is suffering, I feel bad about that and I don't want them to suffer. That's ordinary human compassion, by the way, not just humans, mammals have it. Rats in a laboratory will demonstrate it. It has to do with the activation of the brain system that has to do with caring for others. We have a brain system that's designed to help us care for others. If we didn't have that brain system, no child would survive. So circuits in the brain, and most of us, unless we're so badly hurt, that care system will function to something or another. Some people can't feel it for human beings at all, but they'll feel it for animals.

But anyway, that's the first level of compassion, ordinary compassion, just a fellow creature, a fellow sentient being of suffering and I don't want them to, I feel bad about that. Okay, that's what I call the first level. Not enough, necessary but not enough.

The second level of compassion is what I call the compassion of understanding. This is where, not only that I feel bad that you're suffering, I want to understand why you're suffering.

So I may feel bad that you're homeless or that you're addicted or that you've got this autoimmune disease, but if I'm really going to help you or myself, for that matter, it's not enough that I feel bad about it, that I have a sense of empathy, I also want to understand what happened. That's more work. That's where the inquiry comes in, what happened. That's the second level of compassion.

The third level, this is when it comes to other people, is what I call the compassion of recognition. That means, I don't see myself as different from you.

So when I worked with addicted clients in Vancouver, severely addicted people with dependence on every substance in the world and severe diseases as a result, like hepatitis and HIV and abscesses all over their bodies. But you know what? This is no exaggeration, I didn't see myself as all that different from them because the same addictive, not to the same degree, but the addicted drive to soothe myself from the outside, to try and get satisfaction from the outside, the emptiness within, the desperation to fill that emptiness, the dishonesty about the ways I try to fill that emptiness, the manipulation, I share that with all my clients. That's what I call the compassion of recognition. We just recognize, okay, we're on the same boat. That's the third level.

The fourth is one I can thank Hameed for, it's what I call the compassion of truth, where I'm not trying to protect you from pain. I want you to know the truth because I believe the truth will liberate you. We can talk about how that happens. Hameed's got a whole teaching around it. Jesus said it. But the truth may be painful.

So if I'm trying to protect you from pain I may not ask you certain questions, but as you see, I don't stop myself from asking anything of anybody. And if it brings up pain for them, it's not that I'm trying to make them feel pain or I'm trying to hurt them, that would be manipulative. I never try to do that. But at the same time, I will not hold back from asking questions that may bring up pain or sadness because I think the truth is necessary. So that's what I call the compassion of truth.

The fifth level is what I call the compassionate possibility, which is when I'm looking at the most object, street dwelling drug addict, I don't mistake them for their demeanor, their clothing, their body armor. I see them for the full, beautiful human beings that they are, which is a possibility waiting to be manifested at any moment.

Now, I have to say, I'm not claiming that I can do that all the time. In fact, a lot of the time I don't do it at all. But I'm aware of that possibility. I'm aware, that's why I call it the compassion of possibility.

So those are the five levels of compassion, so when I talk about compassion, that's what I'm talking about.

[00:26:13] Alex Howard

That was super helpful.

I'd love to also touch a bit more on that piece around truth. Because I think sometimes the story that we can have is that these things happened in the past, they're terrible, but I don't want to think about them, I don't want to feel them. There's a rejection. And I think often there are psychological paths or spiritual teachings that, in fact, celebrate the bypassing of those things, that just looking towards the positive as a place to get. Maybe just say a few words about why truth is so important, but also it's so powerful.

Gabor Mate

Well, when you go back to the Ten Commandments, the first one says, 'I'm thy Lord by God, Thou shalt have no other gods before Me'. You can interpret that as some personalized deity, embodied deity dwelling somewhere, who is a jealous God who just hates it when you worship somebody else. Or you can say when God talks to Moses from the burning bush, he says, 'I am what I am', which is the simplest statement of truth that you can possibly get. 'I am what I am'.

The way I interpret that first commandment is not that there's some deity sitting up there in some heavenly throne demanding obeisance and devotion and loyalty, but it's the truth speaking, saying you put anything else in front of me, you're going to suffer. So truth is important because the ignoring of truth and the denial of it creates suffering, that's simple.

And to put another way, I can't prove this but I think our essential nature is truth, so that when we're ignoring truth or we're not open to it, we're ignoring rejecting who we are. So we want to look at it from a large sense that if you put anything ahead of truth you're going to create suffering for yourself and other people. And don't we just see that in the world? And you ignore your own nature. So that's why truth is important.

Now, when it comes to specific issues, whether it's climate change, whether it's the Israeli Palestinian conflict, whether it's the war in Iraq, in Afghanistan, whether it's inequality in a society, so much suffering is created by people's refusal to look at the truth.

Truth just demands itself and when we ignore that demand we create suffering for ourselves. That's why the Buddha talked about The Four Noble Truths. He didn't talk about The Four Noble Teachings, or The Four Noble Facts, he said, The Four Noble Truths.

Alex Howard

I hope you enjoyed that conversation with Dr Gabor Mate. You can find out more information about Gabor using his bio and website link below. If you'd like to find out more about the program from which this excerpt was taken, Trauma and Awakening, you can also find a link to find out more. There's also a free 3-part video series introducing that program as well. You'll find the details below this video. Thanks for watching.