

The author of **IN THE REALM OF HUNGRY GHOSTS**

**GABOR MATÉ, MD**

with **DANIEL MATÉ**

the  
**Myth**  
of  
**Normal**

**TRAUMA, ILLNESS & HEALING  
IN A TOXIC CULTURE**

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## Praise for *The Myth of Normal*

“In *The Myth of Normal*, Gabor Maté takes us on an epic journey of discovery about how our emotional well-being and our social connectivity (in short, how we live) are intimately intertwined with health, disease, and addictions. Chronic mental and physical illnesses may not be separate and distinct diseases but intricate, multilayered processes that reflect (mal)adaptations to the cultural context that we live in and the values we live by. This riveting and beautifully written tale has profound implications for all of our lives, including the practice of medicine and mental health.”

—Bessel A. van der Kolk, MD, president, Trauma Research Foundation, professor of psychiatry, Boston University School of Medicine, and author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*

“Gabor and Daniel Maté have created a magnificent resource for us all in *The Myth of Normal*, a powerful, in-depth, science-packed, inspiring story-filled opus that helps us see how stress within our culture shapes our well-being in all its facets. By carefully reviewing medical and mental health through a wide lens of inquiry, they challenge simplistic views of disease and disorder to offer instead a wider perspective on human flourishing that has direct implications for how we live individually, at home, and as a larger human family. A thorough and inspiring work of the heart, this book urges us to question our assumptions and think deeply about who we are and how we can live more fully and freely, harnessing the power of the mind to bring healing and wholeness into our shared lives on Earth.”

—Daniel J. Siegel, MD, clinical professor, UCLA School of Medicine, executive director, Mindsight Institute, and *New York Times* bestselling author of *IntraConnected: MWe (Me + We) as the Integration of Self, Identity, and Belonging*

“Wise, sophisticated, rigorous, and creative: an intellectual and compassionate investigation of who we are and who we may become. Essential reading for anyone with a past and a future.”

—Tara Westover, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Educated*

“Gabor and Daniel Maté have delivered a book in which readers can seek refuge and solace during moments of profound personal and social crisis. *The Myth of Normal* is an essential compass during disorienting times.”

—Esther Perel, psychotherapist, author, and host of *Where Should We Begin?*

“Gabor Maté articulates bluntly, brilliantly, and passionately what all of us instinctively know but none of us really want to face: The entire social construct of the world we’re living in is deeply flawed, with toxicities on every level. Yet though the book makes clear what’s so terribly wrong, it also points to how we can make it right. Maté is a guide through the dangerous forest of our minds and our society, not letting us ignore the darkness but ultimately showing us the light. *The Myth of Normal* is exactly what we need.”

—Marianne Williamson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Return to Love*

“*The Myth of Normal* is an astonishing achievement, epic in scope and yet profoundly down-to-earth and practical. I believe it will open the gates to a new time when we come to understand that our emotions, culture, bodies, and spirits are not separate, and wellness can only come about if we treat the whole being. I will read this book again and again.”

—V (formerly Eve Ensler), author of *The Vagina Monologues* and *The Apology*

“*The Myth of Normal* may forever change the way you view your life experiences and how they can shape your biology. But more important, Gabor Maté points us to a path of desperately needed communal healing.”

—Elissa Epel, PhD, professor, University of California, San Francisco, and co-author of the bestseller *The Telomere Effect*

“In this brilliant, compelling, and groundbreaking book, Gabor Maté unveils the societal trance that has blinded us to the death grip of pervasive trauma in our world. He shows that this is not our personal trauma. It is sourced in a culture that undermines meeting our basic needs for connection, authenticity, and meaning. Drawing on his decades of pioneering clinical work, fascinating contemporary science, and

contemplative wisdom, Maté offers us a way to bring clear seeing and a greatness of heart to the crisis of our times.”

—Tara Brach, author of *Radical Acceptance* and *Radical Compassion*

“Gabor and Daniel Maté offer a powerful and surprising redemptive path out of the toxic illusion of ‘normalcy.’ This remarkable and revolutionary book will profoundly impact the well-being of self, society, and our earth at a time when wisdom and compassion are essential for our common survival.”

—Reverend Joan Jiko Halifax, abbot, Upaya Zen Center

“At a time when so many of us are struggling physically and psychologically, Gabor Maté’s *The Myth of Normal* is a godsend, providing wisdom and realistic hope. Maté is a revolutionary thinker and gifted writer whose work has always inspired me. *The Myth of Normal* is no exception. It’s no exaggeration to say that this groundbreaking book can help us heal as individuals, families, and a society.”

—David Sheff, author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Beautiful Boy*

“As if Gabor Maté hasn’t done enough already by depathologizing addiction, autoimmune diseases, and ADHD, now, in this magnum opus, he challenges us to expand our minds even further. In *The Myth of Normal*, he asserts that those problems, and the many other social ills that plague us, are not only related to the traumas we’ve suffered but are also symptoms of the toxic nature of our materialistic, isolating, patriarchal, and racist culture. What’s remarkable about this beautifully written book is not just that he makes that bold contention, but how well he backs it up with an amazing amount of scientific research, compelling stories of his patients, and moving disclosures from his own life. Our culture is indeed very sick and I don’t know of a better diagnostician of and physician for it than Gabor Maté. This book contains a prescription that, if we have the courage to follow it, will heal us all.”

—Richard Schwartz, PhD, creator of the Internal Family Systems model of psychotherapy

“*The Myth of Normal* is a book literally everyone will be enriched by—a wise, profound, and healing work that is the culmination of Dr. Maté’s many years of deep and painfully accumulated wisdom.”

—Johann Hari, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Stolen Focus*

“This gripping book builds upon two key truths for our time—that everything is connected, including psychic wounds and physical illnesses, and that these are not anomalies but ordinary, even epidemic, in the society we’ve built. *The Myth of Normal* is a powerful call for change in how we live with, love, understand, treat, and think about one another, by someone ideally situated to map the terrain and to give us some valuable tools with which to navigate it.”

—Rebecca Solnit, author of *Men Explain Things to Me*

“In this wide-ranging and beautifully written book, Gabor Maté and his co-writer son Daniel offer an acute diagnosis of what ails our culture and a blueprint for personal healing, while pointing the way to what is required to create a more hospitable, human-friendly world for ourselves and our children.”

—Dr. Shefali, *New York Times* bestselling author and clinical psychologist

“Gabor Maté’s latest book is a guide to self-awareness, social insight, and healing that is deeply personal and utterly transparent. Written with fluid, crystalline prose, profound wisdom, great humor, and hard-won humility, it merits becoming this generation’s *The Road Less Traveled*. In my two-word summation, *The Myth of Normal* is Fiercely Tender.”

—William M. Watson, SJ, DMin, president and founder, Sacred Story Institute

“*The Myth of Normal* is a detailed and wide-ranging look at what we all need to know—but all too often fail to live up to—when it comes to human health, sanity, maturation, and happiness. It’s also a clear-eyed examination of the benefits, triumphs, limitations, and blind spots of our health and mental health care system.”

—Resmaa Menakem, bestselling author of *My Grandmother's Hands*, *The Quaking of America*, and *Monsters in Love*

“*The Myth of Normal* is a tour de force journey into the dissonant experience of being human in our aberrant and toxic modern culture. The journey is both heartrending and exalted in its underlying purpose—to heal the rift from our authentic selves and the collective trauma that stifles our natural expression and joy. If you are ready to do the brave and life-shaking work of examining the truth of your life and the culture that we are literally in the death grips of—this is your read.”

—Rachel Carlton Abrams, MD, MHS, ABoIM

“*The Myth of Normal* presents a unique perspective in viewing what we see as ‘normal’ and opens up a way to wake up to what is real and authentic in our lives. Gabor and Daniel Maté have written a compelling book that will challenge your views and help lift the veil of illusion to what is truly happening in your mind and in your body.”

—Sharon Salzberg, author of *Lovingkindness* and *Real Happiness*

“With rigorous research and painstaking detail, this book by esteemed physician Gabor Maté is a tour de force manifesto of how trauma impacts not just our individual bodies and psyches but our whole society. *The Myth of Normal* plants seeds for revitalizing what we consider ‘normal’ and giving ourselves permission to say no to what is making us unnecessarily sick.”

—Lissa Rankin, MD, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Mind Over Medicine* and *Sacred Medicine*

“This, Gabor Maté’s magnum opus, is essential reading for us all. A genius writer, he gives it to us straight: From the mindbody to the body politic, we learn how loss of authenticity takes its toll psychologically, physically, spiritually, and socially.”

—Julie Holland, MD, author of *Good Chemistry: The Science of Connection, from Soul to Psychedelics*

“Every once in a rare while a book comes along creating a new vision of the world, illuminating for us that which until now has been invisible, yet as vital to our health and well-being as water is to fish, oxygen is for our bodies, and love is for our souls. This work is such a tour de force, a humbling and brilliantly written exposition of what deeper healing requires.”

—Jeffrey D. Rediger, MD, MDiv, assistant professor, Harvard Medical School, and author of *Cured: Strengthen Your Immune System and Heal Your Life*

“Gabor Mate is brilliant and passionate, tender and fierce, writing with an urgent honesty. His analysis is comprehensive and penetrating, combining deep scholarship, hard-earned clinical wisdom, personal trauma, and practical suggestions. This is a masterwork that reads like an intelligent thriller, highlighting our challenges with dramatic clarity while showing the way to their solutions. A must-have book for anyone interested in their own mind, in how our world got so crazy, and in the better future we can forge together.”

—Rick Hanson, PhD, author of *Resilient: How to Grow an Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength, and Happiness*

# the Myth of Normal

Trauma, Illness & Healing  
in a Toxic Culture

**Gabor Maté, MD,**  
with Daniel Maté

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To dearest Rae, my life partner, who saw me before I could see myself and who loved all of me long before I could love myself at all. None of my work would exist without her. And to the children we brought forth together —Daniel, Aaron, and Hannah—who light up our world.

The best physician is also a philosopher.

—Aelius Galenus (Galen of Pergamon)

For if medicine is really to accomplish its great task, it must intervene in political and social life. It must point out the hindrances that impede the normal social functioning of vital processes, and effect their removal.

—Rudolf Virchow, nineteenth-century German physician

When you're trying to survive, you turn malady into a coping strategy, and loss into culture.

—Stephen Jenkinson

# Author's Note

There are no composite or fictional characters in this book. Each story told is that of a real person whose words, from transcribed interviews, are reproduced accurately with occasional editing for purposes of clarity. When only a given name is used, it is a pseudonym to protect privacy, at the interviewee's request. In such cases, some biographical data may also be slightly altered. Where both names are given, the identity is real.

Unless otherwise stated, all italics are mine.

A word about authorship. This book was co-written with my son Daniel. Usually the word "with" in identifying authors is meant to denote a ghostwriter, one who actually renders the main author's ideas into written form. That wasn't the case here: on most chapters I was the primary author, with Daniel following up with a particular eye to style, tone, clarity of argument, and accessibility, and often contributing his own thoughts. Occasionally, when I found myself stuck on what to say or how to say it, he would take the writing reins for a while, crafting a particular section or chapter based on material I had collated and penned. In all cases, we would pass the chapters back and forth until we were both satisfied. The structure and flow of the book was also very much an ongoing collaboration between us, from the preparation of the book proposal through the final draft.

So while the book's *authorship* is unequally distributed, in that it reflects my work, research, analysis, and experience, it was very much *co-written*. I truly could not have accomplished the task without Daniel's brilliant partnership.

Gabor Maté

Vancouver, B.C.

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*Introduction*

# Why Normal Is a Myth (And Why That Matters)

*The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane.*

—Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*

In the most health-obsessed society ever, all is not well.

Health and wellness have become a modern fixation. Multibillion-dollar industries bank on people’s ongoing investment—mental and emotional, not to mention financial—in endless quests to eat better, look younger, live longer, or feel livelier, or simply to suffer fewer symptoms. We encounter would-be bombshells of “breaking health news” on magazine covers, in TV news stories, omnipresent advertising, and the daily deluge of viral online content, all pushing this or that mode of self-betterment. We do our best to keep up: we take supplements, join yoga studios, serially switch diets, shell out for genetic testing, strategize to prevent cancer or dementia, and seek medical advice or alternative therapies for maladies of the body, psyche, and soul.

And yet our collective health is deteriorating.

What is happening? How are we to understand that in our modern world, at the pinnacle of medical ingenuity and sophistication, we are seeing more and more chronic physical disease as well as afflictions such as mental

illness and addiction? Moreover, how is it that we're not more alarmed, if we notice at all? And how are we to find our way to preventing and healing the many ailments that assail us, even putting aside acute catastrophes such as the COVID-19 pandemic?

As a physician for over three decades, in work ranging from delivering infants to running a palliative care ward, I was always struck by the links between the individual and the social and emotional contexts in which our lives unfold and health or illness ensue. This curiosity, or should I say fascination, led me in time to look deeply into the cutting-edge science that has elegantly delineated such links. My previous books have explored some of these connections as they manifest in particular ailments such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), cancer and autoimmune disease of all types, and addiction. I have also written about child development, the most decisively formative period of our lives.<sup>[1]</sup>

This book, *The Myth of Normal*, sets its sights on something far more encompassing. I have come to believe that behind the entire epidemic of chronic afflictions, mental and physical, that beset our current moment, something is amiss in our culture itself, generating both the rash of ailments we are suffering *and*, crucially, the ideological blind spots that keep us from seeing our predicament clearly, the better to do something about it. These blind spots—prevalent throughout the culture but endemic to a tragic extent in my own profession—keep us ignorant of the connections that bind our health to our social-emotional lives.

Another way of saying it: chronic illness—mental or physical—is to a large extent a *function* or *feature* of the way things are and not a *glitch*; a consequence of how we live, not a mysterious aberration.

The phrase “a toxic culture” in this book’s subtitle may suggest things like environmental pollutants, so prevalent since the dawn of the industrial age and so antagonistic to human health. From asbestos particles to carbon dioxide run amok, there is indeed no shortage of real, physical toxins in our midst. We could also understand “toxic” in its more contemporary, pop-psychological sense, as in the spread of negativity, distrust, hostility, and polarization that, no question, typify the present sociopolitical moment.

We can certainly fold these two meanings into our discussion, but I am using “toxic culture” to characterize something even broader and more deeply rooted: *the entire context of social structures, belief systems, assumptions, and values that surround us and necessarily pervade every aspect of our lives.*

That social life bears upon health is not a new discovery, but the recognition of it has never been more urgent. I see it as the most important and consequential health concern of our time, driven by the effects of burgeoning stress, inequality, and climate catastrophe, to name a few salient factors. Our concept of well-being must move from the individual to the global in every sense of that word. That is particularly so in this era of globalized capitalism, which, in the words of the cultural historian Morris Berman, has become the “total commercial environment that circumscribes an entire mental world.”<sup>[2]</sup> Given the mind-body unity to be highlighted in this book, I would add that it constitutes a total physiological environment as well.

It is my contention that by its very nature our social and economic culture generates chronic stressors that undermine well-being in the most serious of ways, as they have done with increasing force over the past several decades.

Here’s an analogy I find helpful. In a laboratory, a culture is a biochemical broth custom-made to promote the development of this or that organism. Assuming the microbes in question start out with a clean bill of health and genetic fitness, a suitable and well-maintained culture should allow for their happy, healthy growth and proliferation. If the same organisms begin showing pathologies at unprecedented rates, or fail to thrive, it’s either because the culture has become contaminated or because it was the wrong mixture in the first place. Whichever the case, we could rightly call this a *toxic culture*—unsuitable for the creatures it is meant to support. Or worse: dangerous to their existence. It is the same with human societies. As the broadcaster, activist, and author Thom Hartmann asserts, “Culture can be healthy or toxic, nurturing or murderous.”<sup>[3]</sup>

From a wellness perspective, our current culture, viewed as a laboratory experiment, is an ever-more globalized demonstration of what can go awry. Amid spectacular economic, technological, and medical resources, it induces countless humans to suffer illness born of stress, ignorance, inequality, environmental degradation, climate change, poverty, and social isolation. It allows millions to die prematurely of diseases we know how to prevent or of deprivations we have more than enough resources to eliminate.

In the United States, the richest country in history and the epicenter of the globalized economic system, 60 percent of adults have a chronic disorder such as high blood pressure or diabetes, and over 40 percent have two or more such conditions.<sup>[4]</sup> Nearly 70 percent of Americans are on at least one prescription drug; more than half take two.<sup>[5]</sup> In my own country, Canada, up to half of all baby boomers are on track for hypertension within a few years if current trends continue.<sup>[6]</sup> Among women there is a disproportionate elevation in diagnoses of potentially disabling autoimmune conditions like multiple sclerosis (MS).<sup>[7]</sup> Among the young, non-smoking-related cancers seem to be on the rise. Rates of obesity, along with the multiple health risks it poses, are going up in many countries, including in Canada, Australia, and notably the United States, where over 30 percent of the adult population meet the criteria. Recently Mexico has surpassed its northern neighbor in that unenviable category, with the result that thirty-eight Mexicans are diagnosed with diabetes every hour. Thanks to globalization, Asia is catching up. “China has entered the era of obesity,” Ji Chengye, a child health researcher in Beijing, reported. “The speed of growth is shocking.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Throughout the Western world, mental health diagnoses are escalating among the young, in adults, and among the elderly. In Canada, depression and anxiety are the fastest-growing diagnoses; and in 2019 more than fifty million Americans, over 20 percent of U.S. adults, suffered an episode of mental illness.<sup>[9]</sup> In Europe, according to the authors of a recent international survey, mental disorders have become “the largest health challenge of the 21st century.”<sup>[10]</sup> Millions of North American children and