

'When the Body Says No' by Dr. Gabor Mate

- Review and Commentary by Sinéad McAteer RPP

When the Body Says No examines what happens to the body when we are unable to assert ourselves to say "no". Dr. Mate goes right to the heart of the matter, describing illness as "a culmination of a lifelong history of struggle for self." He takes a deeper look at stress, commonly thought to be triggered from outside, by work pressures, big life events etc. His findings show that stress, or rather the internal strain experienced, is fuelled by patterns of emotional repression which disrupt the internal harmony of the system, causing illness and dis-ease.

Mate recognises the affect relationships have on health, as borne out by his patient's stories. "Many of us live, if not alone, then in emotionally inadequate relationships that do not recognise or honour our deepest needs." He shows how emotional coping styles set up in childhood continue into adulthood, often unconsciously. A key point is that people may not consciously perceive their own emotional stress. "Isolation and stress affect many who consider their lives to be quite satisfactory." Mate challenges a common myth about illness being 'all in the genes'. He outlines the biological affect of stress on the body; the complex web of beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, the immune system, hormones, and cells. The real life stories of his patients remind us of our fragility as human beings, our deep need to be heard, to feel loved and express our truest self.

Saying Yes When We Mean No

Mate describes how emotions like fear, sadness, despair, anger and hostility can be denied and repressed in order to survive a hostile childhood environment, or to gain love and approval. Repressed emotions shape beliefs, behaviour, personality, and may eventually create imbalance in the body. Mate's message is: when we have difficulty saying no, our bodies say it for us. I have witnessed this in clients who experience a flare-up around the time of a stressful event which they felt they could not avoid. They may or may not hear the inner 'No', but they suddenly come down with flu, break a limb, pull a muscle, an old injury or illness flares up, one way or another the body shouts a resounding 'No'. As Mate explains, the inability to say no reflects an inner dynamic of emotional repression and difficulty asserting boundaries. Anne, a breast cancer patient, states: "I'll lie to people. I'll say 'I'm moving to Tibet so I can't take part in that', I'll do anything but say 'I don't want to'".

In the chapter "The Little Girl Too Good to Be True", we see how little girls (and sometimes little boys) raised to be nothing but good, compliant, helpful, and self-sacrificing, continue in this vein into adulthood, driven by the unconscious need to win approval. Difficulty asserting their own needs later arises, finding it hard to say no, to assert boundaries, and express anger or any emotion that may be deemed 'unpleasant'. The little girl in this chapter found herself clinging to a destructive relationship as an adult. She came to see how early conditioning created a pattern where she subjugated her own needs in order to get approval.

In “The Power of Negative Thinking”, Mate highlights the importance of telling the truth about one’s inner state. For healing to take place, the whole truth must be faced; all the feelings we avoid must be felt. Mate’s caution against “terminal optimism” is interesting since positive thinking is often encouraged to aid healing. Leaning into emotion always brings us closer to the truth. Mate states, “Genuine positive thinking begins by including all our reality. It is guided by the confidence that we can trust ourselves to face the full truth”.

Carrying the Fire: Anger as Gift and Teacher

Anger is the emotion most often repressed across Mate’s patients and other studies. Mate states: “People diagnosed with cancer or with autoimmune disease, chronic fatigue or fibromyalgia, or with potentially debilitating neurological diseases are often enjoined to relax, to think positively, to lower their stress levels. All of this is good advice, but impossible to carry out if one of the major sources of stress is not clearly identified and dealt with: the internalization of anger.”

Mate finds that early conditioning, where anger was not given healthy expression, leads to difficulty managing the emotion later in life. This is evidenced in many stories of people with a range of illnesses. One woman with rheumatoid arthritis says:

“The way my stepmother raised me, I think I am not supposed to be angry.”

Another patient, with ulcerative colitis, describes feeling angry and stressed a lot during his first marriage. On being asked what he did with that anger, he replied: “Swallowed it – no question.”

From a Polarity Therapy perspective, anger is associated with the Fire element; let’s recall how Fire manifests and the signs of balance and imbalance.

Characteristics of balanced fire:	Characteristics of imbalanced fire:
Healthy sense of personal power	Low vitality
Good boundaries and the ability to maintain and defend these when necessary	Poor personal boundaries and difficulty asserting them
Autonomy, independence, and healthy sense of control over one’s own life	Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness
Enthusiasm and vitality, ‘can-do’ attitude and the energy to follow through	Overbearing, or totally submissive behaviour (sometimes the same person can oscillate between both)
Forgives easily	Bitterness and resentment
Focus, clarity	Confusion, lack of focus

Mate finds that without good boundaries, we are “disarmed”. His findings reflect what we know about fire. When fire is low, defences or boundaries are weakened, making us more susceptible to invasion, emotional and physical. Anger turned inwards confuses the defences and the body may attack and harm itself. Mate makes the connection between confused emotional boundaries and a confused immune system, which fails to defend, or may turn on itself, in the case of auto-immune diseases.

Healthy fire naturally expels invaders; the physical effect is when the firey stomach expels harmful substances out of the body. Fire also regulates body temperature and fever burns to drive out infection when the immune system detects an invasion. With balanced fire, we have healthy

boundaries and can oscillate between anger and forgiveness naturally. Mate notes that wild animals protect themselves, their young, and their territorial boundaries if they need to. We do not judge this behaviour, we admire and respect it. With instincts intact, they may be all at once gentle, loving, and fierce. What a pity we have not been taught to extend the same respect to our own natural instincts.

Mate explains that neither repression of anger nor acting it out is the answer. He finds that both repression *and* acting out come out of a fear of the genuine experience of anger. Quoting Dr Allen Kalpin, "Aggressive impulses are suppressed out of guilt, and the guilt exists only because of the simultaneous existence of love.....It is incredibly anxiety-provoking and guilt-producing for a person to experience aggressive feelings toward a loved one." So what can we do with our anger? Total acceptance of anger, allowing it to be present without judgement, is the first step. As a healer once said to me: "Anger is a sign that 'something is not ok with me'". Whether it alerts us to a very real and present threat, or triggers an old wound that needs healing, anger is a powerful teacher and should be respected as such." Anger does not require hostile acting out" Mate states. A balanced approach is to allow anger to be there, feel it physically, and contemplate its causes before deciding how to act. We can then take an empowered stance and assert our needs if we feel we need to. "Healthy anger", Kalpin says, "is empowerment and relaxation".

Freedom to Be

In the final chapter, Mate offers hope in the form of his seven A's of healing. These include: acceptance of how things are, anger - allowing it to be there, autonomy, assertion and affirmation. Assertion is our deep need to say "I am who I am". Affirmation of our self, he explains, comes from honouring our own creative self and our connection with the Great Mystery, or All That Is. He recognises the need for a holistic, integrative approach to healing the whole self:

"Many people have psychological work without ever opening to their own spiritual needs. Others have looked for healing only in the spiritual ways - in the search of God or universal Self - without ever realizing the importance of finding and developing the personal self. Health rests on the three pillars: the body, the psyche, and the spiritual connection. To ignore any one of them is to invite imbalance and dis-ease."

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