

The Science Tells Us to Give Gabor Maté a Fair Shake

Lucas Rahn

Western first-world nations such as the United States and Canada are seeing a decline in their population's well-being, health, and life expectancy (United Nations), while at the same time also experiencing a rise in crises such as the mental health crisis (CAMH) and the opioid epidemic (Bains). Gabor Maté, a Canadian physician, argues, particularly in his most recent book, *The Myth of Normal*, that these Western first-world nations fail to recognize the societal and cultural factors, which show themselves through trauma, as the main factor in driving these trends. He argues Western first-world nations have an over-emphasis on the individual, particularly biological/genetic factors, as the main explanations for mental health issues and disease. Through his medical practice, his publications, and online media interviews, Maté calls for a more holistic approach to health and wellness that centres around the body-mind connection, and he recognizes "emotional suffering in... physical illness and the embodiment of mental illness" (Haslam). In Nick Haslam's 2023 article, "Gabor Maté Claims Trauma Contributes to Everything: From Cancer to ADHD. But

What Does the Evidence Say?” is a critique of these claims, as well as a critique of Maté’s simplification of the culmination of factors that impact mental health and disease. Haslam argues that Maté oversimplifies the causes that affect overall personal health. Haslam feels that Maté places too much emphasis on experiences of trauma during early childhood and disregards other factors contributing to overall health, such as biological influences like genetics. Haslam argues that we should listen to Maté but take both his diagnosis and prescription for the problem with a grain of salt, as, to quote Haslam, Maté sometimes veers towards “quackery”. However, Maté may, in fact, be right, and while a skeptical approach similar to Haslam is merited, after looking at the scientific evidence that is increasingly supporting Maté’s claims, Maté’s claims should be taken more seriously. Furthermore, Haslam’s assertion that there is little to no scientific evidence supporting trauma’s role in health is incorrect., similarly, Haslam’s argument that Maté unjustly dismisses the genetic contribution’s role in health is also false. Lastly, Haslam’s condemnation of what he considers some of Maté’s “more out there claims” such as advocacy of psychedelics to be unfair, and unjustly dismissive.

One argument that Haslam makes that dissuades him from believing Maté’s claims is that he feels there is insufficient scientific evidence to support them. Haslam writes, “[t]hese and

other strong claims about links between personality and illness overstate the scientific evidence - which typically finds them to be small, absent or inconsistent with the hypothesis of excessive responsibility” (Haslam). Haslam argues that Maté imposes a limited and overly simplistic view of overall health, placing excessive emphasis on the impact of trauma on both mental and physical well-being. While skepticism is warranted when strong claims are made, it should still be equally important to consider any claim carefully and give them a fair evaluation. There is a growing body of evidence supporting Maté’s claims regarding the role of trauma in contributing to overall physical and mental health. Published in 2024, a study conducted by Germany’s largest health study, The German National Cohort (NAKO *Gesundheitsstudie*), investigated the association between childhood trauma and a multiplicity of somatic and mental illnesses in adulthood. The results of the study determined that there was a definitive and quantifiable association: people with childhood trauma were more likely to bear a diagnosis of all of the studied conditions such as cancer, depression, anxiety disorders, cardiac health, stroke, diabetes, etc., (Klinger-König et al.). This evidence supports Maté’s claim that trauma affects both mental and physical health. This finding strengthens the validity of his argument by supporting the idea, that health and wellness are centered around the body-mind connection, and

trauma, which disrupts this connection, negatively affects physical and mental health. This evidence also serves as a clear counter to Haslam's argument that Maté's claims lack the scientific basis to support them. Now that it is clear there is scientific evidence supporting trauma's role in health, Haslam's other argument should also be considered: that Maté "dismisses the genetic contribution" when examining factors that affect our health (Haslam).

Another argument that Haslam makes that dissuades him from believing Maté's claims is that he feels that Maté "dismisses the genetic contribution"—which Haslam believes is backed by scientific evidence—when looking at factors that impact our health (Haslam). For example, when Haslam discusses Maté's book *Scattered Minds*, in which Maté claims that attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) results from childhood trauma as a coping mechanism, rather than being a genetic or heritable disease, Haslam argues, "[t]his unorthodox position, [...] dismisses the genetic contribution to the condition and links it to sensitivity and anxiety" (Haslam). Although Maté tends to lean towards the "nurture" side of the nature vs. nurture debate, this approach is justified in the case of ADHD. Maté is not arguing that ADHD is caused more by environmental factors or trauma than by genetics; rather, he claims that we have misunderstood ADHD entirely. According to him, trauma is the

sole cause of ADHD. An article published in the medical journal *Current Psychiatry Reports* in 2020 determined that recent studies have concluded that the genetic contribution, or heritability of ADHD which was previously assessed as being 80%, are now estimating the proportion of heritability at 22% (Grimm et al.). This reduction in the estimate of genetics being a primary factor to a small factor is a radical shift away from the traditional belief that it is a hereditary brain disorder, which gives merit for alternative perspectives such as Maté assessment of ADHD. Another study that supports Maté's take on ADHD was a study that examined the relations between childhood trauma, ADHD, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in college students (Miodus et al.). It found that students who had ADHD had experienced higher rates of trauma or symptoms of PTSD. It also found that these students were generally depressed and experienced trauma reminders indicative of the presence of post traumatic stress. Once again, this aligns with Maté's beliefs about trauma's role in ADHD. At the same time, it challenges Haslam's argument that Maté oversimplifies the causes of personal health issues. In this case, recent findings suggest it's becoming less likely that biological factors like genetics are responsible, and more likely that Maté's perspective, which emphasizes the impact of trauma, reflects the direction in which the science is heading towards.

Haslam also critiques Maté's advocacy towards the use of psychedelics, which Haslam calls "radical." This is meant to discredit Maté in hopes to weaken Maté's character, and therefore his arguments (Haslam). The use of psychedelics and other plant medicines are far from novel; for centuries, on a world-wide scale, Indigenous peoples have used these substances in spiritual and healing practices. The western world is simply skeptical toward psychedelics, which stems from cultural biases that often frame these substances as dangerous or bad rather than therapeutic (George et al.). It is a fact that these substances are extraordinarily powerful and have the potential to shape our mental health (Tupper et al.). Increasingly, these substances are being recognized by psychologists and are being used to help treat people such as veterans or retired police with PTSD. Studies have shown that psychedelics such as psilocybin, LSD, MDMA, and Ayahuasca are very successful at treating symptoms of PTSD, which modern medicine is incapable of replicating (Tupper et al.). Maté suggests that these substances should be used in the right circumstances (and acknowledges they are not for everyone), but they can open the door, so-to-speak, and pull back the curtain on one's life. They allow for deep introspection and allow you to identify areas where you are disconnected from your body and mind (*The Myth of Normal*). The preliminary scientific evidence is there, and that

Maté's educated advocacy for these substances is justified. Haslam was therefore incorrect to use this topic as a point of criticism against Maté.

In conclusion, Haslam's criticisms that Maté oversimplifies the causes of personal health by focusing too heavily on trauma while disregarding other factors, such as biological influences like genetics, along with his view of Maté's opinions verging on quackery, though based on skepticism, are unjustified. There is a growing body of research supporting Maté's claims that health and wellness are based on the body-mind connection, and anything that disrupts that connection, the biggest factor being trauma, negatively affects both physical and mental health as a result. This was argued by challenging Haslam's assertion that there is little to no scientific evidence supporting trauma's role in health, through the identification of a definitive and quantifiable association between childhood trauma and a multiplicity of somatic and mental illnesses in adulthood. Haslam's opinion that Maté unjustly dismisses the genetic contribution's role in health is incorrect. This is demonstrated by showing recent scientific findings suggesting it's becoming less likely that biological factors like genetics are responsible for conditions such as ADHD, and more likely that Maté's perspective, which emphasizes the impact of trauma, reflects the direction in which science is heading. Lastly,

Haslam's characterization of some of Maté's stances or practices as being "more out there", such as advocacy of psychedelics, reflects an unwarranted dismissal of new ideas on how to tackle issues related to mental health. Through scientific literature, it is demonstrated that the use of psychedelics has real and practical uses that should not be dismissed. Overall, Maté's opinions are worth exploring and dismissing Maté's views as extreme or "bordering on quackery" risks overlooking promising perspectives supported by evolving research. As Western first-world nations like the United States and Canada face declining well-being, health, and life expectancy, alongside rising crises such as the mental health crisis and the opioid epidemic, it becomes increasingly important to reconsider how we understand the root causes of these issues

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