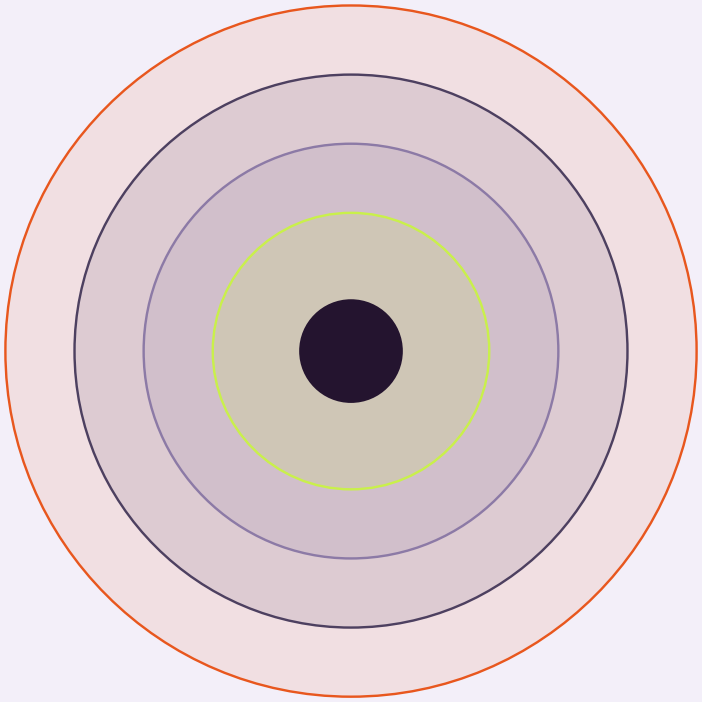
NOVEMBER 6, 2026



In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction

A reading of the book by Gabor Maté (2008)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Gabor Maté is a Canadian physician who spent years working with people in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, at the Portland Hotel, a residence run by the Portland Hotel Society. In this book he argues that addiction is an attempt to soothe pain, and that the pain usually begins in early stress, loss and trauma. He defines addiction by behaviour rather than substance: anything a person craves and finds relief in for a while, but keeps returning to despite the harm it does. That definition lets him set his patients' stories beside his own compulsive buying of classical music CDs. He draws on brain research about how early environment shapes the systems of reward and self-control, criticises the war on drugs, and makes the case for harm reduction services such as Vancouver's supervised injection site, Insite.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The question that helps is not why the addiction, but what pain it is answering.

Maté asks his patients what a substance or habit does for them, and the answers are rarely about pleasure. People describe relief, calm, warmth or a few hours without fear. Seen that way, the addiction is a solution to a problem, and the problem is where healing has to start.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Addiction is defined by what a behaviour does to you, not by what the behaviour is.

In the book, addiction is any repeated behaviour a person craves, finds short-term relief in, and keeps returning to despite the harm. Drugs fit that description, but so can shopping, work, eating, gambling or screens. The line runs through most of us, not between us and them.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The hungry ghost is a picture of wanting that can never be filled.

The title comes from the Buddhist Wheel of Life, where hungry ghosts have huge, empty bellies and mouths or throats far too narrow to feed them. Maté uses the image for anyone who keeps looking outside themselves for something to fill an inner emptiness.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The doctor writing the book is not standing outside the problem.

Maté describes his own compulsive buying of classical music CDs, the money it cost and the way it pulled him from his work and family. He does not claim it equals his patients' suffering. He uses it to show that the same pattern of craving, relief and regret runs through a respected professional life.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The brain's systems for reward and self-control are shaped by the care a child receives.

Maté draws on research showing that early stress and the quality of early attachment affect how the brain's reward, motivation and self-regulation circuits develop. A child who grows up frightened or alone can be left with a nervous system that is more hungry for relief later in life. That is a reason for compassion, not a verdict.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Punishing people for their pain adds to the pain that drives the habit.

The book argues that the war on drugs mostly falls on people who were already hurt early in life. Prison, stigma and a criminal record deepen their isolation and stress, which are the very conditions that keep addiction going.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Harm reduction starts by keeping people alive and treating them with respect.

Maté defends services like Insite, Vancouver's supervised injection site, and the housing work of the Portland Hotel Society. They meet people where they are instead of asking them to be well before they get help. A person who is alive and treated with dignity still has a chance to change.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Lost connection is as much a cause as any chemical.

Maté draws on the psychologist Bruce Alexander's idea of dislocation: when people lose their ties to family, community and meaning, they reach for whatever soothes the loss. Recovery, in this view, needs belonging as well as abstinence.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Compassion toward yourself is not an excuse; it is the ground that change grows in.

The book's practical chapters suggest looking at your own cravings with curiosity instead of shame. Shame tends to send people back to the habit that numbs it. Noticing a craving, naming it and asking what it wants is slower, but it leaves you more room to choose.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Name the behaviour you keep going back to
- [ ] Write what it gives you
- [ ] Write what it costs you
- [ ] Map the moments the craving arrives
- [ ] Choose one person or service you could tell

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Call the craving by its name
- ◯ Wait, and do something you value
- ◯ Ask what you are really hungry for

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Name the behaviour you keep going back to

Pick one habit, substance or activity you return to more than you want.

Write down when you last did it, and whether it brought short-term relief, long-term cost and trouble stopping.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Write what it gives you

List what the behaviour does for you, honestly: calm, escape, company, a sense of control, a break from boredom.

Treat each answer as a real need, not a weakness.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Write what it costs you

Next to the first list, write the costs: sleep, money, health, time, trust, the way you feel about yourself afterwards.

Keep it factual, as if you were writing about a friend.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Map the moments the craving arrives

Recall three times in the past week the urge came.

Note the hour, where you were, who you had just spoken to and how you felt. Look for the pattern underneath, such as tiredness, loneliness or conflict.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Choose one person or service you could tell

Write down one person, doctor, counsellor or peer group you could talk to about this, and how you would reach them.

If the behaviour is putting you or someone else in danger, contact them this week.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Call the craving by its name

When the urge comes, say to yourself: this is a craving, and it will pass.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Wait, and do something you value

Before you act on an urge, wait a few minutes and spend them on something you have chosen in advance: a walk, a call, a glass of water, a page of a book.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Ask what you are really hungry for

Once a day, ask yourself what you needed today and whether you got it: rest, company, quiet, being seen.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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December 2026

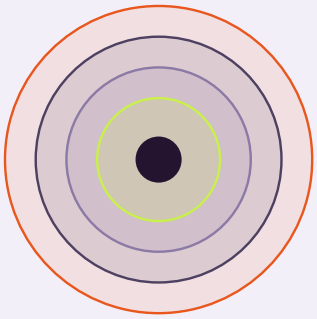
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Under the craving there is a need, and the need deserves kindness before it can change.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER GABOR MATÉ