



WHEN THE BODY SAYS NO

THE COST OF HIDDEN STRESS

By: Dr Gabor Maté
Book Excerpt

When the Body Says No is an accessible and groundbreaking book — filled with the moving stories of real people — medical doctor and bestselling author of *Scattered Minds*, Gabor Maté, shows that emotion and psychological stress play a powerful role in the onset of chronic illness.

Western medicine achieves spectacular triumphs when dealing with acute conditions such as fractured bones or life-threatening infections. It is less successful against ailments not susceptible to the ministrations of scalpel, antibiotic or miracle drug. Trained to consider mind and body separately, physicians are often helpless in arresting the advance of most of the chronic diseases, such as breast cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, and even Alzheimer's disease.

“When we have been prevented from learning how to say no, our bodies may end up saying it for us.” – Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No*

Gabor Maté has found that in all of these chronic conditions, there is a common thread: people afflicted by these diseases have led lives of excessive stress, often invisible to the individuals themselves. From an early age, many of us develop a psychological coping style that keeps us out of touch with the signs of stress. So-called negative emotions, particularly anger, are suppressed. Dr. Maté writes with great conviction that knowledge of how stress and disease are connected is essential to prevent illness in the first place, or to facilitate healing.

When the Body Says No is an impressive contribution to current research on the physiological connection between life's stresses and emotions and the body systems governing nerves, immune apparatus and hormones. With great compassion and erudition, Gabor Maté demystifies medical science and, as he did in *Scattered Minds*, invites us all to be our own health advocates.

Maté: To say that we shouldn't have anger is like saying that we shouldn't have rain: we may not like getting wet, but without it there's no irrigation. Healthy anger is a necessary response to a boundary invasion. It's our way of saying: *You're in my space. Get out.* You see this behavior in animals, too. It's not a question of should or shouldn't; it's a part of our makeup. The role of emotion is to keep out that which is dangerous or unhealthy and allow in that which is helpful and healing. So, we have anger and revulsion, and we have love and attraction.

Now, rage is always unhealthy. Rage is anger that is disproportionate to the situation. It usually arises from past experiences, not present boundary issues, and it keeps going on and on. It's not discharged once you've protected your boundaries. It's the result of frustration that's built up for many years, like a pressure cooker that explodes.

Anger that is repressed can also turn inward. People who repress their anger can actually suppress their immune system, making it turn against itself. When that happens, you're going to get autoimmune disease. Anger and the immune system have the same purpose: to protect boundaries. The immune system does its job of attacking foreign particles, and anger does its job of keeping out human invasions.

When you suppress your response to a boundary invasion, you're going to become stressed. If I started rifling through your purse, for instance, and you didn't object but instead repressed your anger, you'd feel very stressed, because you'd be worried I'd take your money. It takes tremendous energy to suppress emotions. The act itself is stress producing.

Self-suppression is not innate. It's a learned coping style. When you're a child and your parents can't handle your feelings, you learn to suppress them to maintain your relationship with your parents. But what was a coping response in the child becomes a source of illness in the adult.

