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Book Review: *Change your brain change your life*- Daniel Amen

“Your brain is the hardware of your soul. You cannot be who you really want to be unless your brain is working right.” A thought provoking quote from Dr. Daniel Amen’s New York Times best seller, *Change your brain change your life*. Daniel G. Amen, M.D., is a clinical neuroscientist, child and adolescent psychiatrist, and medical director of the Amen Clinic for Behavioral Medicine in Fairfield, California. Dr. Amen has received numerous awards from the American Psychiatric Association, the Baltimore DC Institute for Psychoanalysis, and the U.S. Army. Dr. Amen is a nationally recognized expert on the relationship between the brain and behavior, and attention deficit disorder. He is also the author of several other books, including *Windows into the ADD Mind* and *Firestorms in the Brain*.

*Change your brain change your life* provides evidence that many of the major psychological disorders are related to how specific structures operate in the brain. Amen argues that not only can we change our brain to become healthier; change can be achieved on our own. Though he is not advocating the obliteration of current institutions of psychiatry for self help books, he simply is arguing that for moderate problems and as a prevention measure against devolving problems, proper self-help techniques and healthy lifestyles changes can be very effective treatment. Amen argues what is most important in developing a healthy mind, is living a healthy lifestyle. One can adapt their life to reverse or prevent a problem before it happens and before significant medical help is needed. This idea is what is so revolutionary about Amen’s book, he advocates a true “health care” philosophy rather than our culture’s traditional “sick

care” philosophy. A healthy brain must be kept up through proactive approaches, not reactive approaches.

I put forth a thought experiment to demonstrate the significance of having a proactive versus a reactive approach to one’s health. Imagine if the automobile industry never invented seatbelts, airbags, anti-lock brakes, stronger steel frames, ect. But instead they focused all of their funding and resources into rehabilitating the passengers *after* the crash has happened. Relentlessly trying to perfect skull fracture repair surgeries, spinal cord realignments, more effective blood transfusions, limb replacements, motor rehabilitation techniques, ect. To most, this approach would seem absurd and backwards. Yet this is pretty much the model for our current psychiatric practice. So far we have not really discovered ways to prevent and protect the mind from becoming dysfunctional. All of our focus is on trying to fix the mind after it is fallen into psychosis. Just as trying to fix a person after a car crash would be very difficult, it is just as difficult to fix the mind after it is broken. Here is where Amen proposes some ideas of “seatbelts” and “airbags” for the mind that can prevent the devastations to the brain in the first place. Perhaps even reverse a current lifestyle path that is leading to the destruction of the mind.

Dr. Amen’s research and therapy is backed up by state of the art brain scanning technology that he uses to assess the health of an individual’s brain. Throughout the book, Amen provides “prescriptions” to treat disorders that include psychological techniques and adjustments in life style and diet. The brain scans he performs are called SPECT scans, (Single photon emission computed tomography) that enables one to peer into the health of the brain. If specific areas are not functioning correctly, tailored treatments can be done to specifically correct only

what needs to be corrected. Dr. Amen explains how you can "optimize" your brain to achieve your fullest potential. He explains which brain systems are associated with particular problems, gives detailed checklists to help pinpoint problems, and offers specific yet simple "brain prescriptions" (cognitive exercises, nutrition medication, and more) to enhance brain function and heal each problem. Dr. Amen focuses on five areas the brain that when are not working properly can cause many of the difficulties associated with anxiety, depression, excessive worrying, anger, and distraction. These five areas are the deep limbic system, the basal ganglia, the cingulate system, the temporal lobes, and the prefrontal cortex.

The deep limbic system of the brain is involved in bonding and mood control. When this part of the brain isn't working correctly people may struggle with moodiness and negativity. SPECT scans may show that if activity in this area is decreased, depression and decreased motivation can occur. Amen explains simple steps to help activate this brain area including thought exercises, physical exercise, and a diet high in omega3-fatty acids, low- saturated fat, and high carbohydrates.

The basal ganglia are large structures in the brain involved with movement and emotions that when overactive can lead to anxiety, panic, fear, and conflict avoidance tendencies. When this area is overactive, disorders such as ADD, Parkinson's disease, panic attacks, and anxiety can occur. Amen proposes mental exercises, meditation, imagery, and a diet without alcohol, lots of kava extract, valerian root, and B vitamins.

The prefrontal cortex is the supervisor of the brain that is responsible for keeping you focused, making plans, impulse control, and decision making. When this part of the brain is under

active people will have problems with attention, focus, and organization. Such disorders that can occur are ADD, schizophrenia, and drug addictions. Ways to improve the prefrontal cortex's function, is creating goals in one's life, adding stimulating activities and excitement in your daily routine, having a high protein diet low carbohydrate low fat, as well as seeking professional help and prescription medication at the same time.

The cingulate system is a part of the brain that Amen calls the "gear shifter". It allows you to shift attention from one thought to another and between behaviors. When this part is overactive, people get stuck in thought loops or behaviors. Disorders in this area are addictions, obsessive compulsive disorders, eating disorders, rage, and chronic pain. Amen proposes a number of mental exercises to correct thoughts and behaviors, prescription medications, and exercise.

The temporal lobes are involved in memory, language, facial recognition, and temper control. When problems arise in these areas people are more prone to temper flare ups, rapid mood shifts, and learning problems. Disorders from this area can include memory problems (amnesia), emotional stability (fear and anxiety), and sensory processing (hallucinations). "Prescriptions" to help correct the temporal lobes include involving one's self in music, prescription medication recommendations, adequate sleep, elimination of caffeine and nicotine, and a diet balanced in protein and carbohydrates.

*Change your brain change your life* attempts to demonstrate we can change our selves to have a better way of life. The brain scans of the thousands of patients that have been successfully treated at the Amen Clinic provide visual proof that the right treatment can help people. While

it's not necessary to have your own brain scan to understand your problems, for Dr. Amen's book provides ways to understand the basis of a problem and the correct path for healing. These techniques are backed up by before and after scans of every disorder and treatment suggested in the book showing meaningful and effective changes do occur. It is a simple, easy program that practically any one can do to train the brain to work more optimally, and help in make lasting changes.