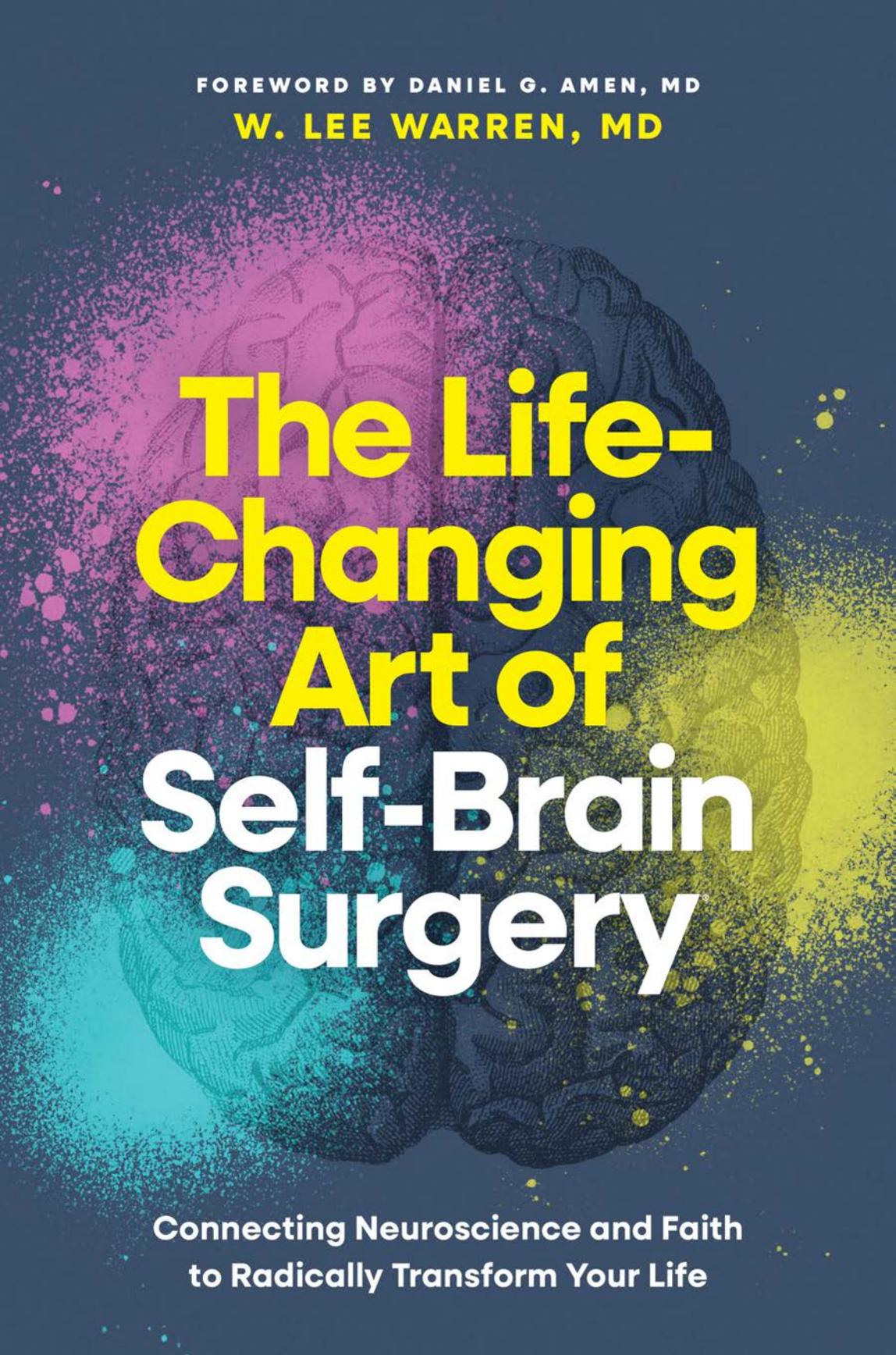


FOREWORD BY DANIEL G. AMEN, MD

**W. LEE WARREN, MD**



# The Life- Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery

Connecting Neuroscience and Faith  
to Radically Transform Your Life

*The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* is a brilliant synthesis of neuroscience and practical wisdom, grounded in Dr. Warren's decades of experience as a brain surgeon. This book makes the revolutionary principles of neuroplasticity accessible, showing readers how to enhance their mental health by becoming, in effect, their own brain surgeons. This important resource can bring lasting hope and healing for anyone seeking freedom from negative thinking. It offers readers powerful tools to reshape their thoughts and transform their lives.

**JEFFREY M. SCHWARTZ, MD**, author of *Brain Lock* and coauthor of *You Are Not Your Brain* and *The Mind and the Brain*

As a brain surgeon, Dr. Lee Warren has spent decades transforming lives in the operating room. Now, in *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery*, he hands the scalpel to you. Combining cutting-edge neuroscience with practical tools, Dr. Warren shows how to rewire your thinking, overcome toxic patterns, and build a healthier, more abundant life.

**DR. JOSH AXE**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Think This, Not That* and cofounder of Ancient Nutrition

I've been waiting for a book like this! The perfect blend of science, therapy, and faith. In these days of mental anguish, my good friend Dr. Lee Warren is perfectly suited as a neurosurgeon and a man of faith to help us manage our minds. Practical and powerful, *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* is a gift!

**MAX LUCADO**, pastor and *New York Times* bestselling author of *What Happens Next* and *Tame Your Thoughts*

What Dr. Lee Warren has done to equip us for change in *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* cannot be overstated. His wisdom and insights are thorough yet accessible, thought-provoking yet practical, physical yet spiritual. If I'd had these tools much earlier in life, I could have saved myself and my family a lot of heartache. But you do have them. Don't ignore them. Use them. Again and again.

**JONATHON M. SEIDL**, author of *Confessions of a Christian Alcoholic*

Dr. Warren is a brilliant neurosurgeon who treats *structural* problems of the brain like tumors, aneurysms, and traumatic brain injuries every day. But in this book he has woven not only his professional but also his personal and spiritual experiences into a masterpiece Rx on how to perform "self-brain surgery" to overcome the epidemic of *functional* problems of the brain like anxiety, depression, loneliness, and grief. A must-read "prescription" for us all!

**JOSEPH C. MAROON, MD**, professor of neurosurgery, Heindl Scholar in Neuroscience, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center; consultant neurosurgeon for the Pittsburgh Steelers

In *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery*, Dr. Warren hands us back our power, showing us how to harness the incredible plasticity of our brains to lead happier, healthier, and more joyful lives. Dr. Warren gives us the ultimate gift: the practical tools to operate on our own brains and come out the other side the best and most whole versions of ourselves.

**ANNIE GRACE**, author of *This Naked Mind*

The human mind is nothing short of miraculous, and I can't think of anyone more qualified to help you tap its potential than Dr. Lee Warren. This book will stretch your thinking about thinking and help you change your mind, which is the quintessence of repentance. With so many people struggling with mental health, this is the right book at the right time.

**MARK BATTERSON**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker*

Dr. Lee Warren combines scriptural truth, neuroscience, and practical advice to help you transform your life by changing the way you think. No one can do this for you. If you need some revelatory insights on how to frame and practice a healing perspective, take the time to work through these pages. It will change your life.

**SUSIE LARSON**, bestselling author, national speaker, and talk radio host

We are more than simply bodies and brains. We are *soulish* creatures who actively use our *minds* to navigate, understand, and respond to the world around us. In his book, Dr. Warren describes the power you have to change the way you see yourself and chart your future. As a believer and a neurosurgeon, Dr. Warren is perfectly suited to help you “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2, ESV).

**J. WARNER WALLACE**, *Dateline* featured cold-case detective, senior fellow at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview, adjunct professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology, and author of *Cold-Case Christianity* and *The Truth in True Crime*

I lost count of the number of *aha!* moments I experienced while reading this extraordinary book. Written by one of the most trusted global voices at the intersection of neuroscience and faith, *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* connects the latest scientific discoveries about the brain's neuroplasticity with ancient wisdom about the power of prayer and the methodologies of spiritual formation. I believe it will help you find the answers, the strategies, and the life you've longed to find.

**PETE GREIG**, 24-7 Prayer International

*The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* is a step-by-step guide to healing from the inside out that is practical, hopeful, and genuinely life-changing.

**CAROLINE BEIDLER, MSW**, author of *When You Love Someone in Recovery*

Lee Warren makes the neuroscience of change accessible, actionable, and deeply human. If you're facing something that feels impossible, this book won't give you platitudes. It will give you process, presence, and a path forward.

**STEVE MESLER**, executive and performance coach, Hall of Fame Olympic gold medalist, and founder of Classroom Champions

Only Lee Warren could write this book. A world-class neurosurgeon with a pastor's heart, he fuses brain science, personal tragedy, and deep faith into a gripping, no-fluff guide to real transformation. *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* isn't just smart—it's raw, wise, and bursting with hard-won hope. You won't just read it. You'll feel it.

**IAN MORGAN CRON**, author of *The Road Back to You*

Dr. Lee Warren delivers an incisive master class, merging neuroscience, faith, and clinical precision to help readers reclaim agency over their thought lives. *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* doesn't offer fluff or pop-psych slogans. It's a rigorous, hope-filled invitation to become a steward of your own mind. Rooted in science, anchored in Scripture, and loaded with practical tools, this book is a game changer for anyone ready to heal from the inside out.

**CHRISTOPHER COOK**, author of *Healing What You Can't Erase* and podcast host of *Win Today: Your Roadmap to Wholeness*

We desperately need the strength and healing Dr. Warren prescribes so powerfully and so clearly. He brings together neuroscience, practical wisdom, and faith in God as a remedy for all that is crippling our souls. He explains why we need to take action to heal ourselves, how to use science to do it, and how to ask God for his grace to heal us. Dr. Warren shows us the truth that will set us free.

**MICHAEL EGNOR, MD**, professor of neurological surgery, Stony Brook University, and author of *The Immortal Mind*

Dr. Warren invites us into the fascinating world of neurosurgery to demonstrate how scientific breakthroughs in neuroplasticity align with what God has revealed about the power of our thoughts to transform our lives, physically altering our brains in much the same way a neurosurgeon uses a scalpel. I have personally experienced what Dr. Warren teaches about being a self-brain surgeon and how it can lead you from a very stuck, hopeless place to a new season of joy.

**JOHN BURKE**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Imagine Heaven*

Packed with neurosurgical and spiritual insight as well as practical strategies, *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* highlights the steps we can take toward our own growth and recovery. Dr. Warren doesn't simply offer us the theory; he

leads by example, showing how this approach was pivotal when he was walking his own road of deep pain and loss.

**DR. SHARON DIRCKX**, speaker, broadcaster, and author of *Broken Planet* and *Am I Just My Brain?*

Since reading this book, I'm proud to say I've officially begun my amateur (but deeply personal) pursuit of becoming my own brain surgeon. If you're like me—excessively curious about how science strengthens our faith in a God who fearfully and wonderfully makes human beings—this book is for you. It's spiritual nourishment with a heaping side of neuroscience. Get ready to indulge . . . in the best way.

**ALISA KEETON**, founder of Revelation Wellness and author of *The Body Revelation*

Self-brain surgery is not another self-help prescription. It is an invitation for lasting change from a neurosurgeon who has the skills, experience, and empathy, not just to lead you out of self-defeating thinking but also to equip you to fight for the true mental freedom that can be yours.

**MATTIE JACKSON**, bestselling author of *Lemons on Friday*

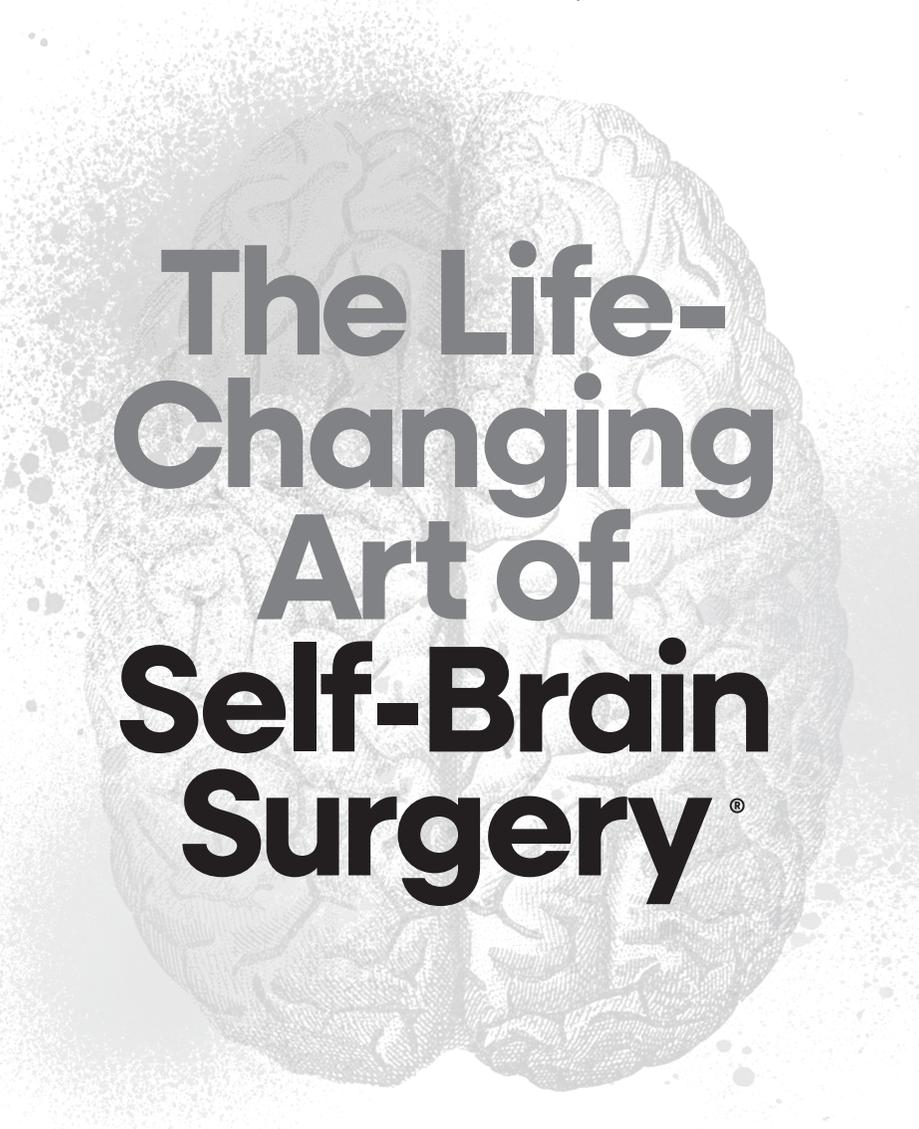
This unputdownable book is a stunning, faith-filled guide to rewiring your mind with conviction, clarity, and hope. It's a brilliant manual rich in personal courage, clinical wisdom, and theological insight with transformative power for all who are ready to change their thoughts—and their life.

**ANN VOSKAMP**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *One Thousand Gifts*, *WayMaker*, and *Loved to Life*

Dr. Lee Warren's credentials as an accomplished neurosurgeon with strong Christian convictions are extraordinarily unique. His life makes a compelling case for the compatibility of faith and science and the power of self-brain surgery. You'll be captivated by his latest work!

**LEE STROBEL**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Case for Christ* and *Seeing the Supernatural*

**FOREWORD BY DANIEL G. AMEN, MD  
W. LEE WARREN, MD**



# **The Life- Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery®**

**Connecting Neuroscience and Faith  
to Radically Transform Your Life**



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*The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery: Connecting Neuroscience and Faith to Radically Transform Your Life*

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While the medical stories in this book are based on actual events, pseudonyms have been used and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. The names and details of characters applying the principles of self-brain surgery are fictional composites based on hundreds of people the author has met or interacted with over the years. Any resemblance to real people is coincidental.

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# Medical Disclaimer

Self-brain surgery is one tool you can use to responsibly operate your own mind-brain-body interface and better manage your life. Please note, though, that the information in this book is of a general nature and is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider or mental health professional. Do not forget that medical problems can create or complicate mental health issues. They can also cause physiological symptoms that you may misinterpret as anxiety or other mental struggles. There may be a problem with your thyroid gland or some other medical issue going on. You may need therapy, medication, or some other treatment that you cannot provide for yourself. So if you're having trouble getting better or making progress in some area, *check in with your doctor or seek professional help.*

Self-brain surgery puts you in the position of the specialist whose primary job is to make sure your patient (you) gets better. Part of that job is to know when to call in a consultant. When I, as a trained and empowered neurosurgeon, encounter a problem with my patient that is outside of my area of expertise, I consult a colleague with the training and knowledge to assist me. Getting that help is part of my responsibility to my patient. Your therapist or provider will welcome you taking this level of control over your own progress and will encourage you to stay involved in your own care.

One other note: While the medical stories in this book are based on actual events, I've used pseudonyms and changed identifying details to protect the privacy of individuals.



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# Foreword

Daniel G. Amen, MD  
Author of *Change Your Brain Every Day*

In over forty years of studying, treating, and scanning brains, I've learned a vital truth: Your brain is the most complex, miraculous, and misunderstood organ in the universe. When it works right, you work right. When it is troubled, every area of your life suffers.

Yet as powerful as this organ is, its function is not fixed. Your brain responds to how you live, what you think, and how you interact with the world. And the most exciting revelation? You can intentionally guide this process, creating lasting change. That's what makes Dr. W. Lee Warren's *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* so groundbreaking.

This book is not just a collection of techniques; it's a call to action. Dr. Warren boldly declares that we are all surgeons of our own brains, capable of reshaping neural pathways and creating healthier, more vibrant lives. As someone who has examined over three hundred thousand brain scans and authored books on topics ranging from memory to emotional health, I am thrilled to endorse his scientifically grounded yet deeply human approach.

Dr. Warren invites readers to embrace what I've long championed in my own work: the integration of faith, science, and self-discipline. The power to heal, grow, and transform lies in your hands—and your thoughts. Through neuroscience, he shows us that faith and science are not in conflict but are complementary forces, capable of enhancing our capacity for love, resilience, and purpose.

In this era of skepticism and division, many people feel forced to choose between science and faith. Dr. Warren rejects this false dichotomy. He demonstrates how prayer, gratitude, and aligning one's mind with God's design are not only spiritually enriching but also scientifically valid practices for improving brain health. Modern neuroscience validates what Scripture has taught for centuries: "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

## The Power of Self–Brain Surgery

I was captivated by Dr. Warren’s concept of self–brain surgery, which moves beyond metaphor to a literal application of neuroplasticity. This process—the brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections—is the foundation of the techniques he presents in this book. Self–brain surgery isn’t a catchy phrase or a fleeting idea; it’s a concrete, evidence-based strategy for making intentional changes in your thoughts to alter the physical structure and function of your brain.

Dr. Warren provides practical tools to take charge of this process. His ten commandments of self–brain surgery are not just a road map for mental health—they’re a manifesto for a life well-lived. By rejecting harmful habits, embracing healthier patterns, and relentlessly pursuing the truth about ourselves, we can rewire our brains for peace, clarity, and purpose.

### *Empowering Change*

As someone who has seen patients overcome immense adversity through brain-directed strategies, I can confirm that Dr. Warren’s techniques are more than theoretical. From battling trauma to managing chronic stress, the steps outlined in this book have the potential to change lives. One of the book’s most powerful ideas is what Dr. Warren calls the patient-to-doctor switch: the transformation from passively waiting for someone else to fix you to actively taking charge of your own healing.

This switch is crucial in a world where too many people feel stuck. Whether it’s depression, anxiety, or generational trauma, we often believe our circumstances or biology are unchangeable. Dr. Warren reminds us that while therapy and medication have their place, the ultimate power to change rests within each of us. When you understand that every thought you entertain is either helping or hurting your brain, you’ll realize the urgency of becoming an intentional “surgeon” of your own mind.

### *A Unique Contribution to the Field*

But what makes this book especially unique is its spiritual dimension. In a world increasingly divided between faith and science, Dr. Warren builds a bridge. He argues—persuasively—that aligning our minds with God’s design is not only rational but transformative. Neuroscience validates the benefits of prayer, gratitude, and purpose. Dr. Warren elegantly integrates these truths into his method.

As a psychiatrist who has spent decades advocating for a brain health revolution, I resonate deeply with Dr. Warren’s approach. Like my own efforts to redefine mental health as brain health, he challenges outdated paradigms and encourages a proactive, hopeful approach to personal growth. This book empowers readers to take control of their mental, emotional, and spiritual lives.

For readers who are struggling—whether with depression, anxiety, chronic illness, or simply the weight of daily life—this book is a lifeline. It doesn't promise quick fixes or give superficial advice. Instead, it offers a deep understanding of how your thoughts shape your brain and, by extension, your world.

### *Practical, Actionable, and Life-Changing*

The beauty of Dr. Warren's work lies in its practicality. He doesn't leave readers with abstract concepts or lofty goals. Instead, he equips you with clear, actionable steps that you can start applying today. His analogies, like the idea of treating your mind as both the patient and the surgeon, make the material accessible and empowering.

Whether you're learning how to overcome chronic pain, silence the negative self-talk that keeps you stuck, or recover from grief, the techniques in this book are designed to address real-life struggles. By combining cutting-edge neuroscience with timeless spiritual principles, Dr. Warren provides a framework that works for everyone, regardless of their starting point.

### **A Call to Action**

This book is also a call to action for clinicians, coaches, and educators. The insights and techniques presented here are not only transformative for individuals but also invaluable for professionals helping others unlock their potential. As someone who has trained hundreds of therapists and reviewed tens of thousands of cases, I see tremendous value in incorporating these principles into practice.

For anyone who doubts their ability to change, I leave you with this: Science has shown us that the brain is a dynamic organ, capable of remarkable transformation at any age. Change is possible, no matter how stuck you feel. As Dr. Warren has told me, "Self-brain surgery is not optional—it's just a question of whether you'll direct the process for your good or let the default mode run the show." Those words resonate deeply with me because I've seen the profound impact of intentional brain care. I hope, as you read this book, you'll feel the same spark of possibility.

It's an honor to write this foreword. Dr. Warren's wisdom, compassion, and expertise shine through every page. His story, both personal and professional, is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of faith-infused science. *The Life-Changing Art of Self-Brain Surgery* is a masterwork of empowerment, and I can't wait to see the lives it transforms.

So turn the page. Start the journey. And remember: Your brain is always listening. Let's make sure it hears the right message.



## INTRODUCTION

# How Self–Brain Surgery Will Change— and Maybe Save—Your Life

If you're like most people, you find life to be more difficult than you want it to be, and you'd love to discover a way to make it better. Something is keeping you sad, sick, stressed, stuck, or constantly settling, and you want to get past it. But so far nothing has given you a reason to believe that things can be significantly better, especially if you struggle with anxiety, depression, grief, ongoing relationship issues, dissatisfaction at work, chronic pain, or a nagging sense of meaninglessness.

I hope to convince you that, while you can't control everything that happens to you, you have a lot more power over how you experience your circumstances than you might think. And often you can begin changing your situation once you learn how to use your mind to alter your brain. Doing so can radically transform your life.

I'm going to show you how, through a process called self–brain surgery.

It's not as crazy as it sounds; it's something you are already doing, every second of every day. Rather than the painful, delicate procedures neurosurgeons like me perform in operating rooms, self–brain surgery happens inside your head with every thought you think, whether or not you are aware of or consciously directing it.

Modern brain imaging and neuroscience have revealed that your brain is constantly breaking and remaking connections between its estimated eighty to one hundred billion neurons. Incredibly, a growing body of research demonstrates that you can control most of those connections when you determine what you pay attention to and how you deliberate about those things. It turns out that you can direct structural changes in your brain by thinking different thoughts, and those brain changes can benefit your body through improved physiology, reduced stress hormone production, and even alterations in the ways your genes are expressed.

Some of these changes can be passed on to the next generation through a process called epigenetics. This stunning truth raises the stakes because when you decide to practice self-brain surgery and command your brain in ways that improve your life, you may also boost your future children's baseline resilience, happiness, and ability to feel comfortable in their own skin. Self-brain surgery is never just about us. This is what I call the two-patient rule: When we change our minds, it has an immediate and future impact on others.

This lies in stark contrast to the message you've likely heard in school, in the media, and in society. Most of us have believed, at least to some extent, the ubiquitous idea that we are the product of the genes we inherit, the family in which we were raised, and the circumstances we face. This reflects a school of thought called determinism (closely related to materialism and reductionism). This theory, which stretches back to seventeenth-century physicist and mathematician Isaac Newton, teaches that once you understand the stuff from which something is made, you can predict how that thing—including you—will behave. In the determinist worldview, then, every decision you'll ever make is determined by undirected biological processes. I call that theory "brain-out" because it says that everything about "you" happens between neurons apart from any agency on your part. The belief that you are just your brain, your genes, or your trauma creates frustration, helplessness, and a feeling that you require outside help to feel better, perform at a higher level, or find hope in your suffering.

It is my intention in the coming pages to teach you how to command the power of self-brain surgery to take mind-down (or top-down) control of your brain. Once you recognize that your mind is separate from your brain and has the creative, restorative power to change and direct the structure and function of your brain, you can use self-brain surgery to help manage chronic pain, heal old emotional wounds, and change how you respond to any challenge. I will show you how to follow a rational, scientific approach to discover the truth of how your mind and brain are designed to function optimally, and how to operate them to your advantage.

Finally, I will explain how modern neuroscience is revealing the surprising role that faith plays in achieving an almost superpower level of emotional resilience and stability no matter what you face. You'll see how this lines up with concepts written about in the Bible thousands of years ago. Rather than science and faith being enemies, then, I will illustrate how they complement each other to help you become the version of yourself that has always felt out of reach.

## **What Difference Does It Make?**

Why did I, a neurosurgeon who addresses acute brain and spinal injuries and diseases in the operating room, become interested in learning how to address the

desperation, dread, and defeat that cannot be solved with a scalpel? As intriguing as I found the neuroscience, it took what I've referred to elsewhere as The Massive Thing to test the limits of my capacity to navigate tragedy and overcome the toxic thinking it produced in my life. When our son Mitchell died horrifically in 2013, my wife Lisa and I were plunged into despair. I tell the story more fully in a previous book, *I've Seen the End of You*.<sup>1</sup> As we battled daily bouts of desperation, I slowly realized that my brain and body offered a lot of input and chatter, but I didn't have to accept or act on all of it. Instead, I could take control of my thoughts and outlook. While our Christian faith and loved ones provided life-giving support, only I could change my mind. In my book *Hope Is the First Dose*<sup>2</sup> I explain how Lisa and I learned to live expectantly again by transforming the way we think—lessons that I now try to pass on to others.

Once I saw how neuroscience, life experience, and faith align, I found my specific calling and purpose. Before I put all of this together, I thought my only job was to perform neurosurgery. Now I see more clearly that I am here to help people figure out what's hurting them and how self-brain surgery can enable them to overcome the thoughts, attitudes, and habits that are holding them back.

If that sounds outlandish, scary, or impossible, consider this: Since we now know that people can change their brains by changing their minds, you are already a surgeon. The only question is whether you will take charge of your thoughts or allow your brain to repeat old, unhelpful scripts. If you take a passive approach, defaulting to reinforcing limiting beliefs and negative stories about your capabilities, you will continue to feel stuck. There is a better way, and I intend to help you see that learning to use your mind to enhance your brain's function, gene expression, and physical health is a type of surgical practice as real as the one I perform in the OR with scalpels and other instruments!

To be clear: You can benefit from self-brain surgery whether you feel that your life so far is relatively normal with no major hardship or you come to this book beaten, bloodied, or bullied by a life full of trauma, drama, tragedy, or other massive things. We are all constantly bombarded by thoughts and feelings that lead to moods, decisions, and actions that we didn't ask for and wouldn't have chosen. The problem comes when we assume we're helpless and give up.

Furthermore, self-brain surgery is a viable option whether you believe that science alone can answer life's questions—even if it hasn't answered all of yours yet—or you draw hope from your faith despite the fact that life right now looks anything but flourishing.

In the early twentieth century, physicists wanted to understand the fundamental particles that make up everything in the universe—including our own bodies. This research led to breakthroughs that changed history, from the atomic bomb

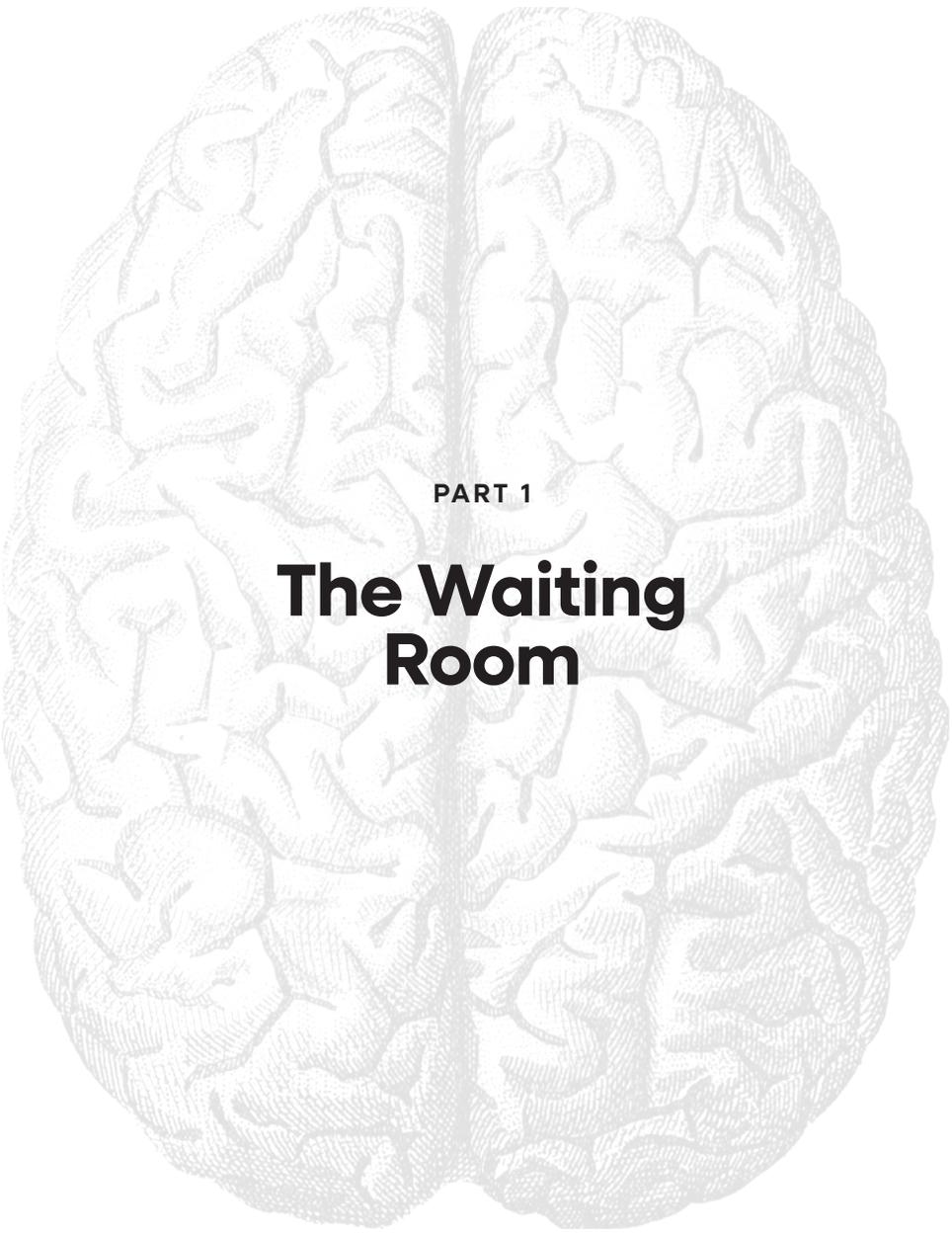
and nuclear reactors to an astonishing array of technologies we rely on today. But the true power hidden within atoms could not be fully unleashed until they were accelerated to nearly the speed of light and made to collide. These high-energy collisions forced atoms to reveal their deepest secrets—the subatomic forces and interactions that shape reality—and in doing so, they released incredible energy that transformed the world.

In the same way, when we smash together psychology, neuroscience, neurosurgery, theology, and quantum physics—rather than studying them in isolation—the energy that is released is seismic and transformational. As I'll show you, when taken together, these disciplines reveal how we gain the power to change literally any aspect of our lives by first changing our minds. This book reveals how these disciplines are converging at exactly the right moment in history to bring hope in an era of crisis. Despite the abundance of mental health resources, therapies, medications, and providers, rates of depression, anxiety, suicide, and identity struggles are at all-time highs. People around the world are searching for an answer. The time has come to unlock the full power of how we were designed to think, heal, and flourish.

I'm inviting you into a lifelong practice that will provide you with that answer. Self-brain surgery is not another self-help program or a new take on positivity bias training. It's not a buffet of available techniques to pick and choose from when you want to tweak some aspect of your life. It's not therapy, although many therapists are teaching it to their clients around the world. It's not brain surgery as I perform in the operating room.

Once you master self-brain surgery, everything changes. You will gain profound mental clarity and power for your life and develop a resilience you never knew you had that will equip you for whatever challenges lie ahead. The hope-oriented journey we will take to get from *here* to *there* starts in Antarctica and winds its way through Oklahoma, Iraq, and other places. But it's not just a trip; it's a transformation. Self-brain surgery is not a metaphor; it's the mechanism of personal change. And it just might save your life.

To begin showing you how, let me introduce you to a man who saved his.



PART 1

# **The Waiting Room**



*The problem is not so much to see  
what nobody has yet seen,  
as to think what nobody has yet thought  
concerning that which everybody sees.*

**ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER**

# Out of Options?

*As long as you remain unaware of what your brain is doing or believe that there is no way to alter how your brain functions, you are essentially powerless.*

**JEFFREY M. SCHWARTZ AND REBECCA GLADDING**  
*You Are Not Your Brain*

The pain had become unbearable.

On April 30, 1961, Leonid Rogozov was the only physician on the sixth Soviet Antarctic expedition, and he had an immense problem. His abdominal discomfort had been steadily worsening for a few days, and the young surgeon had grown convinced that he was suffering from acute appendicitis.

Rogozov was in trouble, and he knew it. A dark winter was closing in on the southern hemisphere, the ocean was full of treacherous ice, and the ship he'd journeyed on had already left his team of a dozen explorers alone in Antarctica and could not return for months. The weather made it impossible to fly Rogozov away for help, and he seemingly had no options.

No one was coming to save him. If his appendix burst, he would almost certainly die.

Faced with an impossible situation, Rogozov decided his only chance to live was to perform surgery on himself. It sounded absurd, even to him. But the alternative was death, his life fading away in the polar winter, and he would never see his family or home again.

Rogozov's diary entries from those days make his internal struggle clear. At first he perceived himself to be a sick and potentially dying man, and from that

position his situation could have become overwhelmingly hopeless. When you read his words, the desperation is palpable: “An oppressive feeling of foreboding hangs over me. . . . This is it.”<sup>1</sup>

But that’s not the end of the story because Rogozov did not allow perception to become reality. Faced with this impossible and absurd scenario, he chose to broaden his perspective. When he did, he realized that he was not completely unprepared. He had the knowledge to diagnose the problem and the training to repair it. The only thing he had to do was shift his thinking from that of a sick and scared man alone in the most desperate circumstances imaginable to that of a skilled and compassionate physician who could step in and take action.

“I have to think through the only possible way out—to operate on myself. . . . It’s almost impossible . . . but I can’t just fold my arms and give up.”<sup>2</sup>

If he was going to survive, Rogozov had to stop contemplating and start operating. So, assisted by a meteorologist and a driver whom the surgeon-turned-patient had trained to revive him if he passed out during the surgery, Leonid Rogozov removed his own appendix, saving his life. He had learned the technical skills to perform the procedure from professors and honed those techniques through practice, but don’t miss the most important part of the story: Long before the actual surgery, Dr. Rogozov had changed his mind. Before he could even conceive the notion of performing major abdominal surgery on his own body, he first had to become a self-brain surgeon.<sup>3</sup>

And the same is true for you, my friend.

## The Tools Are Already in Your Hands

You’ll almost certainly never be in the same situation Rogozov was—forced to remove your own inflamed organ on a frozen polar base. But perhaps, if your perception of life presents you with similarly desperate thoughts—*I’m sad, I’m*

***Perception immobilizes,  
but perspective empowers  
you to see and respond  
to your situation from  
a different point of view.***

*stressed, I’m sick, I’m stuck, I’m out of options*—you need to realize that while perception immobilizes, perspective empowers you to see and respond to your situation from a different point of view.

Like an inflamed appendix, disordered thoughts, feelings, and beliefs can cause trouble in several ways.

- You react to them as if they are always trustworthy, when in fact often they are not. Research shows that a huge percentage of our automatic feelings and thoughts are false.
- You pay excessive attention to them or believe that you are obligated to allow them to direct your decisions rather than inform them.
- You have to spend time and energy redirecting your feelings if you later discover them to have been untrue.

Whether or not you're doing so deliberately, you are practicing self-brain surgery every moment. The good news is that your brain wants to heal, change, and grow. It is designed to operate in a way that helps and doesn't hurt you, but that process requires a specific kind of attention and mental direction.

Rogozov's professors taught him how to be a surgeon, and this book will train you to be intentional in the practice of what I call self-brain surgery. In some sense, then, I want to walk alongside you, just as I would do with patients *and* medical students. Here in part 1, you're in "The Waiting Room." It's important that as you begin, you acknowledge the two roles you play in your physical and mental well-being—that of patient and doctor. This is also the place to answer the question, "Why am I here?" Finally, it is the place to begin filling out paperwork, which includes listing the symptoms that are bothering you.

It's crucial to keep track of where you start and how you change by diligent record-keeping. That's why—after you've learned to identify what brought you here—I'll teach you a simple but powerful tool that most medical students and health care providers use to document patient encounters. Writing down what you're thinking, feeling, and believing as you go along helps build hope so you can measure and share your improvement. If you don't write it down, then you can convince yourself that nothing is changing. (As one of my professors in medical school said, "What didn't get documented didn't happen.") Finally, just as medical students start by learning foundational procedures like making an incision and inserting an IV, I'll offer you basic tips on learning to notice and reframe your thinking in this first part.

In part 2, "The Office," you will learn the scientific, philosophical, and even theological principles of what happens in your brain when you use your mind to pay attention to the right things in the right way. This is how you take charge of those mental processes that are supposed to help but can badly hurt you if you let

them run amok like the infection in Leonid Rogozov's appendix. We'll look at what neuroscience research reveals about how your brain is constantly undergoing structural changes and your role in determining whether you direct those changes or simply allow them to happen, perpetuating a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

The answer will largely depend on how deliberately you select your approach. In the second part, I'm going to teach you several ways you can use your mind and your brain to improve (and maybe save) your life. The first three approaches don't require you to believe anything other than the science, while the fourth approach dares you to face the big questions about meaning and purpose.

Once you understand the neuroscience behind and possible approaches to self-brain surgery, you'll be introduced in part 3 to the guiding principles, or what I call "The Ten Commandments of Self-Brain Surgery," which will serve as guardrails as you begin to practice managing your mind as a lifestyle. These are truths about how your mind, brain, and life are designed to work best, as well as how they can fail to do so because of disordered thinking.

In part 4, "The Operating Room," you'll learn some specific ways to assess how your body and brain interact with your mind. Here you'll master the basic self-brain surgery operation to handle troubles brought on either by your life experiences or the way you've been taught to see the world.

Part 5, "The Practice," is a guide to moving out of training and into the regular habit of performing self-brain surgery. Here you are no longer a sick and scared patient; now you are a skilled and compassionate physician who operates from a renewed perspective—informed by what you've been taught, able to see things more accurately, and ready to adapt to whatever life throws at you.

While the basic self-brain surgery procedure is designed as an all-purpose technique to correct distorted thinking, appendix A contains tactical self-brain surgery operations you can use for fifteen common and specific issues. This is the part you'll come back to whenever you want to address a particular problem. When you struggle with, say, anxiety, grief, depression, or even just a lousy attitude, you'll find operations to help you overcome those troubles. Just as I choose different instruments to help me accomplish specific goals in surgery, these operations—such as journaling, breath work, and grounding—employ therapeutic techniques that are proven to help overcome particular problems you may face.

In the back of the book, I've provided some other tools you can use as you become skilled in self-brain surgery. Appendix B includes templates and

examples of how to document your progress. Because improving the way you use your mind never stops with you, appendices C and D will show you how to take the skills you learn to help other people—from children to seniors—think and operate like self-brain surgeons too. The final two appendices include the books and Scriptures I recommend you read if you want to learn more about how science and faith go together beautifully.

## First Things First

Taking mind-down control begins by answering one of the first and most important questions your medical team asks you: “Why are you here?” They are listening for what they call the chief complaint—a one-sentence summary of what the patient thinks is wrong, like, “My back hurts” or “My arm is weak.” It’s not a diagnosis; it is a statement of *what feels wrong and what the patient hopes to achieve by seeing the doctor*.

You’re reading this book because something isn’t working. What’s going on in your life that led you to read a book about self-brain surgery? Here are some possibilities:

- You are struggling with your emotional health, and you want to feel better. Your chief complaint might be, “I feel sad, and I want to become happier.”
- You are dealing with chronic pain or an irreversible situation, and you want to learn better ways to handle it. You may say, “I feel sick, but I can’t change the underlying issue. I want to learn a healthier way to process it and feel better.”
- You are under a lot of pressure in some parts of your life, so you might report, “I always feel stressed, and I need some new ways to manage my anxiety.”
- You have gone through something difficult that you’re having trouble moving past. You might explain, “I feel stuck since this happened, and I want some tools to help me get moving again.”
- You have developed some habits that are holding you back, and you want to overcome them. You might say, “I am repeating some things that are not serving me well, and I want to become healthier.”

- You feel a lack of purpose or meaning in your life. You could write, “I need to understand why I’m here and where I’m going.”
- You can’t seem to break through to a higher level of performance, so you report, “I am tired of settling for less than I believe my life is supposed to be.”
- You’ve never been a believer, but now life is making you ask deeper questions. You could write, “I keep feeling like there’s something missing in my life, and I need to find out what it is.”
- You have gone through something that has made you question your beliefs or doubt God’s love or care for you. You might write, “I’m not sure what I believe anymore, and I need to find hope and faith again.”

Identifying your chief complaint is the first step in your transition from patient to doctor. You no longer see yourself as a passive, powerless patient who must wait for someone to come along and “fix you.” Like Leonid Rogozov, you realize that while you are a patient who needs something to be addressed, you are *also* a surgeon who is capable of operating on yourself. This attention and perspective shift allows you to take a sober look at your situation so you can begin to draw on the resources that are already inside you.

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***You can’t fix something until you know what’s broken! Before you can perform self-brain surgery, you need to identify your chief complaint—the problem or mindset that brought you to this book and that you hope to address. In the next chapter, you’ll be invited to document it; for now, just begin to consider what it is.***

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## **It’s Up to You**

Recent discoveries in neuroscience make it clear that you don’t need to remain stuck. Your brain is undergoing structural changes every second of your life, and you can direct most of those changes by changing how you think.

The problem is that if you do not learn to direct those changes purposefully, they will still happen. And in most cases, passive processes simply direct the brain

to continue operating in the same way. Default often leads to decline, building the perception that things can never change. The result of this passive perpetuation of sameness is that we begin to believe, *This is just how I am.*

If what you've been doing has left you searching for a path forward, remember Leonid Rogozov.

He realized that the ship was gone and wasn't coming back anytime soon.

He realized that the weather was too poor for anyone to fly him away for help.

He knew that he was sick and getting sicker, and that he was out of options.

He knew the diagnosis, and he knew the treatment.

All that was left for him to realize was that he wasn't just the patient; he was also the surgeon. And to do that, he had to change his mind.

Once he changed his mind, he had to stop contemplating and start operating.

You're reading this book because something hurts, something doesn't feel right, or you realize that what got you *here* won't get you *there*—"there" being the place your heart is telling you will finally close the gap between the life you're living and the one you're supposed to be living.<sup>4</sup>

You can't just fold your arms and give up.

It's time to change your mind. It's time to change your life.

Surgery starts soon, and you're the surgeon. You're not alone, though, because I'm going to help. By the time you're finished with this book, you will have the knowledge to diagnose and understand the problems you're facing, and the training to repair them.

I've never been to Antarctica, and I've never removed my own appendix. But I've been desperately lost in disordered thinking, in despair over the hard things I'd experienced and asking myself whether life could ever feel okay again. Self-brain surgery saved my life, just like it saved Leonid Rogozov's by revealing that his path to healing would come when he changed his perspective from patient to doctor.

The pages ahead hold hope and healing if you're ready to reorder your mind, rewire your brain, and radically transform your life.

You're in the waiting room, and it's almost your turn.

*It's time to stop contemplating and prepare to start operating.*