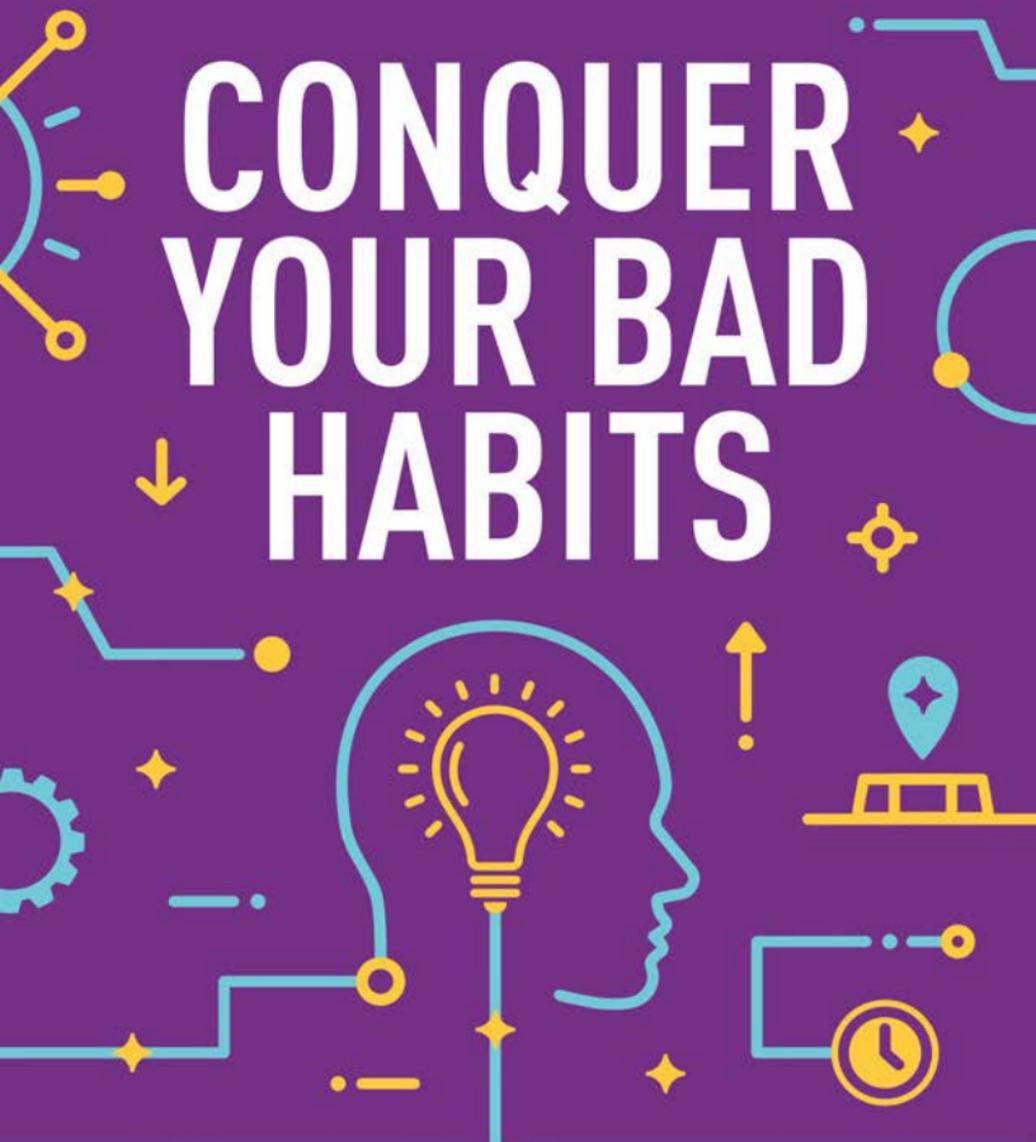


**DANIEL G. AMEN, MD**  
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# CONQUER YOUR BAD HABITS



SECRETS TO  
LONG-LASTING CHANGE

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*Conquer Your Bad Habits: Secrets to Long-Lasting Change*

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The information presented in this book is the result of years of practice experience and clinical research by the author. The information in this book, by necessity, is of a general nature and not a substitute for an evaluation or treatment by a competent medical specialist. If you believe you are in need of medical intervention, please see a medical practitioner as soon as possible. The case studies in this book are true. The names and circumstances of many of those profiled have been changed to protect the anonymity of patients.



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## INTRODUCTION

# AS EASY AS CHANGING A LIGHT BULB

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*Until you make the unconscious conscious,  
it will direct your life and you will call it fate.*

ATTRIBUTED TO CARL JUNG

HABITS PRETTY MUCH RUN OUR LIVES. Whether it's telling our children we love them at the end of phone calls; making our spouse an unsweetened, almond milk decaf cappuccino in the morning (I do this for my wife every morning to show her I love her); brushing our teeth; flossing; shaving; blow-drying our hair (well . . . not me); showering; feeding our pets; putting away the dishes; closing cabinet doors; taking out the trash; or doing the laundry a certain way, habits are behaviors that have become so automated, we barely need to think about them.

Some habits—like exercising regularly, eating healthy, and carving out time to spend with loved ones—move our lives forward in good ways, while others—like overindulging, procrastinating, interrupting, and incessant nitpicking—can lead to trouble with our health, our relationships, and our careers.

Odds are, you've tried to change your bad habits before and failed (possibly more than once), leading you to believe that you *can't* change—at this point you simply are who you are and that's that. In fact, there's a classic joke in psychiatric circles. Maybe you've heard it. It goes, "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? The answer: One, but the light bulb really has to *want* to change."

The good news is . . . it *is* possible to change your behavior and conquer your bad habits once and for all—and the secret lies within the three pounds of tissue nestled between your ears—that's right, your brain.

Let me explain.

Most people think of habits as a single task, but they are generally made up of many smaller behaviors through a process called long-term

potentiation. Long-term potentiation occurs when the brain learns something new, causing networks of brain cells to make new connections.

Early in the learning process (say, the first time you reach for a sugary snack during a stressful moment or drum your fingers on the table when bored), the connections are weak, but over time, as those behaviors are repeated, the networks in your brain become stronger, until eventually, they become automatic, reflexive, or—you guessed it—*habitual*.

However, because your brain does what you train it to do, just as you trained your brain to normalize bad behaviors, you can also train it to turn those bad habits into good ones by creating new, healthier connections. And over the course of the next several chapters, I'm going to show you how to do just that!

Helping people change their bad behaviors has been my passion as a psychiatrist for the past four decades. And since 1991, my team at Amen Clinics and I have built the world's largest database of single photon emission computed tomography or SPECT (which is basically a fancy way of saying we create 3D images that highlight

blood flow and activity within the brain), totaling more than 250,000 scans on patients from 155 countries. We have seen patients as young as nine months and as old as 105 years, and our SPECT brain imaging work has taught us many important lessons about the daily practices and habits that lead to healthy brains and healthy lifestyles.

And now I'm going to pass some of that learning on to you, so you can retrain your brain and eliminate your negative behaviors once and for all, and live a happier, healthier life.

Ready? Good.

Let's get started.

*Daniel G. Amen, MD*

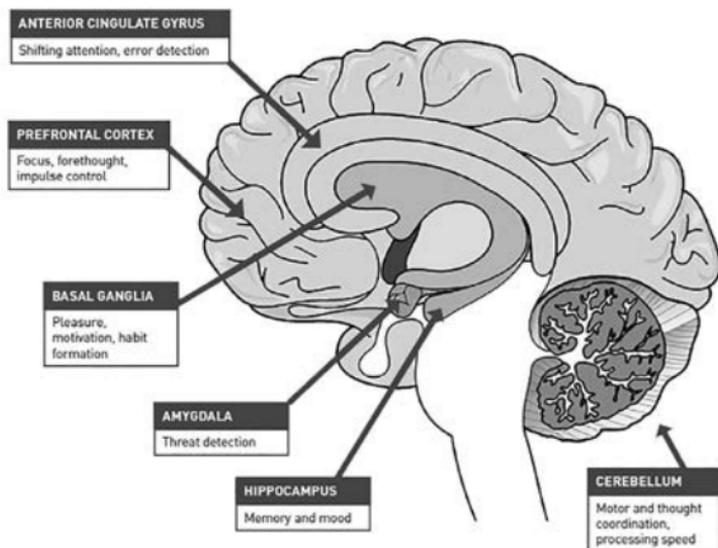
## CHAPTER 1

# YOUR BRAIN— A VERY BRIEF PRIMER

BEFORE WE EMBARK on this life-changing journey together, it's important to briefly get acquainted with the six brain systems involved in running your life. Obviously, your brain is complicated and involves many different structures, but these six areas are particularly important as they work in concert to determine your behavior.

**Cerebellum:** Located at the back, bottom portion of the brain, it is only 10 percent of the brain's volume, yet it contains half of the brain's neurons or cells. It is involved in coordination, processing speed, cognitive processing, and language.

## Inside View of the Brain



**Hippocampus:** About the size of your thumbs, your two hippocampi are found deep in the brain on the inside of your left and right temporal lobes. They are part of your emotional brain and help you feel happy or sad and are central to memory. They retain new information and store it for up to several weeks; if it is reinforced, you keep it longer.

**Amygdala:** This almond-shaped structure is found underneath the temples and behind the eyes; there is one on each side of the brain. Our amygdala is involved in emotion, threat

detection, and aggression. When we get our feelings hurt, when we feel invisible, inadequate, angry, or ashamed, our amygdala activates, and we feel anxious, irritated, and out of sorts. Our amygdala is constantly scanning the world to protect us from danger, but our amygdala doesn't know the difference between danger in the present and danger in the past, a child in danger and a critical comment made by a coworker.

**Anterior cingulate gyrus (ACG):** Found deep within the frontal lobes, the anterior cingulate gyrus allows us to shift our attention, go from thought to thought, move from idea to idea, see options, go with the flow, and cooperate, which involves getting outside ourselves to help others. The ACG is also involved in error detection. If you come home and see the front door wide open, for example, even though you know you locked it, it triggers an appropriate danger reaction in your mind.

So how do you know when your anterior cingulate gyrus is in overdrive? Just for fun, put a checkmark next to the questions in the following list that apply to you.

- Do you dislike change?
- Do you tend to get stuck in loops of thinking?
- Do you struggle with repetitive, negative thoughts?
- Do you have difficulty seeing options in stressful situations?
- Do you tend to hold on to your own opinions and not listen to others?
- Do you get locked into a course of action, even though it may not be good for you?
- Do you tend to automatically say no without thinking?
- Do you get upset if you are surprised or if things don't go the way you expect they should?
- Do you struggle with compulsive behaviors, such as handwashing, checking locks, counting, or spelling?
- Do you tend to be oppositional or argumentative?

The more questions you checked, the more likely you have an ACG that is working too hard!

**Basal ganglia (BG):** Deep in the brain, the basal ganglia are involved with integrating thoughts, emotions, and movement, which is why we jump when we get excited or freeze when we become scared. The BG also help to shift and smooth motor behavior and are involved in habit formation.

Our research and that of others suggests that when the BG are overactive, people struggle with generalized anxiety, dislike uncertainty, and avoid conflict.<sup>1</sup> When the BG are underactive, people tend to have low motivation, poor handwriting, and trouble feeling pleasure.

**Prefrontal cortex (PFC):** Found in the front third of the brain, the prefrontal cortex plays a major role in executive functions, such as focus, forethought, judgment, planning, decision-making, and impulse control.

The PFC is larger in humans than any other animal, and it is the last part of the brain to develop. It is generally not finished maturing until people are in their mid- to late twenties. Knowing this, it is easier to understand why

kids, teens, and young adults have lower executive function.

The prefrontal cortex acts as the brain's conscience, helping you match your behavior over time to reach your goals in a manner consistent with your morals and beliefs. It also sends signals to other parts of the brain to calm them down. When the PFC is healthy, it is like a conductor in an orchestra that gets the musicians to play together to create beautiful music.

Unless you are asleep, your prefrontal cortex is always watching over you, protecting you from your impulses and the first thoughts that come into your head. Sleep causes the prefrontal cortex to go offline, which is why your dreams are often unconstrained and wild.

Low activity causes the PFC to take a break and go on vacation, leaving you easily distracted, with low impulse control and empathy, or poor judgment. When your prefrontal cortex is hyperactive (the scientific term is *hyperfrontality*), you are always on guard, worrying, obsessively thinking, micromanaging, and being upset when things don't go your way. Hyperfrontality has been associated with obsessive-compulsive

disorder, obsessive-compulsive personality trait (being rigid and inflexible, and having excessive self-control), and some forms of depression<sup>2</sup>—all psychological and social issues that make your relationships more difficult.

### **Take Care of Your Prefrontal Cortex So It Can Take Care of You**

There is a constant dance between your prefrontal cortex (the boss that keeps everyone else on task), your amygdala (the part of your emotional brain that responds to threats), and your basal ganglia (where habits are shaped and stored). When your prefrontal cortex is weak, your impulses can take over, causing bad habits to form. That's why you must protect the part of the brain that protects you and pay attention to the following problems:

- 1. Anything that lowers blood flow to the brain.** Blood is essential to life. It brings nourishment to every cell in your body and takes away waste. Research suggests that brain cells don't age; rather, it's your blood vessels that age!<sup>3</sup> Anything that damages blood vessels damages

your brain and starves it of the nutrients it needs. Low blood flow is the number one predictor of Alzheimer's disease and is associated with ADD/ADHD, depression, and schizophrenia, a serious psychotic disorder. Things that decrease blood flow—such as high blood pressure, any form of vascular or heart disease, lack of exercise, and substances such as caffeine and nicotine—lower the function of the prefrontal cortex.

2. **Aging.** The older you get, the lower blood flow is to the prefrontal cortex. Brain imaging clearly shows that your brain typically becomes less active with age. This is why the older you get, the more serious you need to be about taking care of your brain.
3. **Inflammation,** which comes from the Latin word meaning to set a fire, is like having a low-level fire destroying your organs. Having low levels of the omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA in your bloodstream is associated with inflammation and linked to ADD/ADHD, a sign of prefrontal cortex dysfunction.

4. **Head trauma.** This is the most common cause of prefrontal cortex problems. In one study my team published, 94 percent of head injuries affected the frontal lobes.<sup>4</sup> The brain is soft, about the consistency of soft butter, and your skull is really hard with multiple sharp bony ridges. So protect your brain from injury by avoiding any activities that could cause you to hit your head. (Note: Do not let your children play tackle football or hit soccer balls with their heads.)
5. **Toxins,** including mold, heavy metals like lead, or other environmental toxins can damage the prefrontal cortex. Drugs and alcohol lower blood flow and function to the prefrontal cortex, which is why people tend to make poorer decisions when they are high, stoned, or drunk.
6. **Obesity** has been shown to lower prefrontal cortex function because it causes inflammation in your body; protect your weight.
7. **High or low blood sugar** can hurt the prefrontal cortex. High blood sugar (prediabetes

and diabetes) damages blood vessels and lowers function of the prefrontal cortex. Low blood sugar, from fasting or hypoglycemia, also lowers blood flow to the brain. The quality of your diet is critical to the health of your prefrontal cortex.

8. **Poor sleep**, including insomnia, sleep apnea, and sleeping pills can take the prefrontal cortex offline. An estimated 50 to 70 million Americans have sleep-related issues, according to the National Institutes of Health.<sup>5</sup> When you sleep, your brain cleans or washes itself. If sleep is disrupted, trash builds up in your brain, which damages your memory. Getting less than seven hours of sleep at night decreases the strength of your prefrontal cortex and is associated with weight issues, hypertension, and accidents. It may also cause trouble in your marriage because you are more likely to say something you wish you hadn't.

When your prefrontal cortex is healthy and strong, it can—like a good boss or supervisor—help direct and supervise the addition of healthy habits.