

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DANIEL G. AMEN, MD

YOUR BRAIN IS ALWAYS LISTENING

**TAME THE HIDDEN DRAGONS
THAT CONTROL YOUR HAPPINESS,
HABITS, AND HANG-UPS**



This book is needed now more than ever! Dr. Amen has written a powerful, user-friendly guide for anyone struggling with anxiety, depression, trauma, grief, or loss that will help them take control of their emotions, moods, and life. Get this book today if you want to start feeling better now.

MARIA MENOUNOS, Emmy-winning journalist, *New York Times* bestselling author, and host of *Better Together with Maria Menounos* podcast

In my opinion, Dr. Daniel Amen is an undisputed leader in psychiatry by bringing forth the unique integration of neuroscience, brain imaging, and lifestyle and dietary factors as an evidence-based solution for mental illness. He has done so his entire career, and we are fortunate to have such a giant in our field. Dr. Amen's empathic brilliance shines through in all that he writes, does, and teaches. I highly recommend his new book, *Your Brain Is Always Listening*, and suggest you pick up a copy today.

UMA NAIDOO, MD, director of nutritional and lifestyle psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital

Your Brain Is Always Listening blesses us with powerful, helpful strategies developed not only from Dr. Amen's decades of professional experience but also from his own recent emotional challenges. These are strategies that help us explore the deepest reaches of what underlie our moment-to-moment perceptions of the world around us and, perhaps more importantly, help us contextualize these influences and reframe how our past affects our present. This is fundamental and empowering information that we all need to embrace.

DAVID PERLMUTTER, MD, author of *Brain Wash* and the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Grain Brain*

In *Your Brain Is Always Listening*, Dr. Amen introduces a new 12-step brain-based recovery program that addresses the missing link to breaking any addiction. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has struggled with an addiction or has had trouble breaking bad habits.

MARK HYMAN, MD, head of strategy and innovation, Cleveland Clinic Center for Functional Medicine; *New York Times* bestselling author of *Food Fix*

I have been a longtime fan of Dr. Amen's amazing work on the brain and recently had the honor of interviewing him on my podcast, which was a hit! He is incredibly knowledgeable, wise, and compassionate, which is exactly how I would describe his new book, *Your Brain Is Always Listening*. In a way that is both understanding and enlightening, Dr. Amen describes

the many thought dragons that haunt us all and explains how changing our habits and finding true, lasting success and happiness is not only possible but achievable. I absolutely loved this book. It helped me, and I know it will help you too! I highly recommend it!

CAROLINE LEAF, PHD, cognitive neuroscientist and author of *Switch On Your Brain*

Dr. Amen is our most popular guest on *New Life Live!* He has helped me overcome the dragons that were attacking me and my brain. *Your Brain Is Always Listening* will help you conquer the dragons before they eat up your life.

STEPHEN ARTERBURN, founder of New Life Ministries and author of *Every Man's Battle*

Dr. Daniel Amen continues to support each of us with our brain health. Once again in *Your Brain Is Always Listening*, he brings us new, practical skills to support ourselves and the ones we love!

TOM FERRY, #1 real estate educator, bestselling author

In this book, Dr. Amen brilliantly explains why you keep doing things you don't like and exactly how to make your brain behave so it can bring you joy, peace, and fun. Read this book. Your brain is worth it!

DAVE ASPREY, creator of Bulletproof Coffee, three-time *New York Times* bestselling author

Dr. Amen's research into brain health and overall mental wellness is unmatched. In our rapidly changing world, it's easy to overlook how much our health, happiness, and success are controlled by the function of our brain and our associated inner dialogue. We *can* slay the dragons that limit us. But we need the right tools to do it. Everyone needs to get *Your Brain Is Always Listening* into their hands.

SHAWN STEVENSON, author of the international bestselling book *Sleep Smarter*

I have been associated with Dr. Amen for close to 30 years and have had the opportunity to utilize SPECT brain imaging to help so many individuals, couples, families, businesses, and ministries. *Your Brain Is Always Listening* will help you learn principles of applied neuroscience that will assist you in finding the answers you are searching for to change your brain and your life. Experienced medical and clinical psychology professionals will gain new insights into how applied neuroscience helps transform lives.

Dr. Amen has 30-plus years of brain-imaging experience that has been foundational in changing how we look at symptoms and the practical steps to take to help transform lives. Learn new insights in bringing about the desired changes in your life from a pioneer in neuroscience!

EARL R. HENSLIN, PHD, psychotherapist, author

A SAMPLE OF OTHER BOOKS BY DANIEL AMEN

The End of Mental Illness, Tyndale, 2020

Conquer Worry and Anxiety, Tyndale, 2020

Feel Better Fast and Make It Last, Tyndale, 2018

Memory Rescue, Tyndale, 2017

Stones of Remembrance, Tyndale, 2017

Captain Snout and the Super Power Questions, Zonderkidz, 2017

The Brain Warrior's Way, with Tana Amen, New American Library, 2016

The Brain Warrior's Way Cookbook, with Tana Amen, New American Library, 2016

Time for Bed, Sleepyhead, Zonderkidz, 2016

Change Your Brain, Change Your Life (revised), Harmony Books, 2015, *New York Times* Bestseller

Healing ADD (revised), Berkley, 2013, *New York Times* Bestseller

The Daniel Plan, with Rick Warren, DMin, and Mark Hyman, MD, Zondervan, 2013, #1 *New York Times* Bestseller

Unleash the Power of the Female Brain, Harmony Books, 2013

Use Your Brain to Change Your Age, Crown Archetype, 2012, *New York Times* Bestseller

Unchain Your Brain, with David E. Smith, MD, MindWorks, 2010

Change Your Brain, Change Your Body, Harmony Books, 2010, *New York Times* Bestseller

Magnificent Mind at Any Age, Harmony Books, 2008, *New York Times* Bestseller

The Brain in Love, Three Rivers Press, 2007

Making a Good Brain Great, Harmony Books, 2005, Amazon Book of the Year

ADD in Intimate Relationships, MindWorks, 2005

New Skills for Frazzled Parents, MindWorks, 2000

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Your Brain Is Always Listening: Tame the Hidden Dragons That Control Your Happiness, Habits, and Hang-Ups

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MEDICAL DISCLAIMER

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

YOUR BRAIN IS ALWAYS LISTENING TO HIDDEN DRAGONS

It's simply not an adventure worth telling if there aren't any dragons.

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

In March 2020 as I was writing this book, I got a call from superstar Miley Cyrus. I could tell from the sound of her voice that she was freaking out. I'd been working with her since she was 18, when she first came to me filled with anxiety and fear. She used to worry nonstop that she would get sick or that her mom might get sick. She worried about the awful things that might happen if she didn't have a boyfriend. She even thought she would die if she wasn't in a relationship. As we worked together, Miley learned some powerful strategies to help her control these negative thoughts. But on this day, the anxiety had come roaring back, and I knew exactly why.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, which had already killed thousands in China, was now spreading like wildfire around the globe, and it was starting to hit the US hard. On the phone, Miley rattled off so many questions about things that were terrifying her—like “How long does the virus live on packages?”—that I could hardly get a word in edgewise.

I finally managed to get Miley to take a few deep breaths with me to help her calm down. It was obvious to me that this new pandemic had unleashed Miley's dragons from the past. These long-hidden dragons were now breathing fire on the fear centers of her brain, fueling her anxiety, worry, and negative thinking patterns. I let her know that in these unprecedented times, she needed to become a dragon tamer to soothe the savage beasts within.

As we worked through the dragon taming process—the same strategies I will share with you in this book—Miley went from feeling scared and helpless to feeling empowered and in control. She couldn't wait to share what she'd learned in an Instagram Live series with her 105 million followers. She called the series *Bright Minded*, putting her own spin on my BRIGHT MINDS

program for better brain health, which I wrote about in *The End of Mental Illness*. I was honored to be Miley's first guest on the show, where we talked about ways to deal with the rampant stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness, as well as the feelings of grief and loss, that were skyrocketing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ From the comments her followers posted—such as “This is making me feel much better” and “Didn't know how helpful this would be. THANK YOU!”—it was clear that Miley wasn't the only one whose dragons from the past had been triggered as people were being forced to shelter at home and as the virus started crippling our economy and claiming American lives. It seemed as if everyone was feeling traumatized and mourning the loss of something—a job, a sense of security, a daily routine, a sport (playing or watching), a favorite restaurant, physical connections (no hugs!), or the death of a family member.

I had no idea at the time that COVID-19 was about to strike in my own family or that I would be suffering the devastating loss of a loved one just a few weeks later.

“She put on lipstick, wore sunglasses, packed a suitcase and, as the ambulance was arriving, she told some family members she was on her way to die.” That was the opening line from an April 16, 2020, article in the *Orange County Register* about my parents and their experience with the deadly coronavirus.² It fit my mother perfectly. In March, my mom (Dori Amen), who was 88 at the time, and my dad (Louis Amen), who was 90, both contracted pneumonia and tested positive for COVID-19. After getting the diagnosis, medical personnel wrapped my parents in yellow tarps, loaded them into separate ambulances, and whisked them away to the hospital. I thought the future was grim. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 10 to 27 percent of seniors over the age of 85 who develop the illness will die.³ I was afraid my parents might be among them.

My parents' doctor, also the hospital's infectious disease director, admitted in the *Register* article that when my parents arrived at the hospital, he was petrified. But he had not met my mom and dad. Five days later, my parents left the hospital COVID-free and went home. It appeared they had beaten the illness. Over the next few weeks, my mom recovered quickly and really wanted to get back to playing golf, but my father continued to struggle. He had been suffering from a cough for weeks prior to testing positive for COVID-19, and he had recently been in the hospital for a gastrointestinal bleed that caused him to lose one-quarter of his blood.

On May 5, 2020, as I was getting ready to pick him up for a follow-up appointment, my mom called me in a panic saying he wasn't breathing. I

dialled 911 and raced over to their home. The paramedics did their best, but they couldn't get him breathing again.

My dad joined the angels that day.

And suddenly the Grief and Loss Dragons that I had been helping so many of my patients and social media followers cope with during the pandemic unleashed a fireball in my brain. Fortunately, as a psychiatrist who has spent decades helping people deal with death and loss, I knew that I needed to start the healing process as soon as possible. Some people think you need to wallow in suffering following the death of a loved one, but I always ask, "If you broke your arm, would you wait six weeks to get the bone set?" One of the most important steps in healthy grieving—I'll go over all of the steps in more detail in section 1 on the Death Dragons and the Grief and Loss Dragons—is to express your feelings rather than bottling them up. So I decided to share my pain with my followers on social media.

In a series of nightly live chats during the pandemic, I explained that during the mourning process—and at all times—your brain is always listening and responding to the hidden influences that act on it. This became even more evident in May 2020 when the heartbreaking and senseless death of George Floyd—a black man from Minneapolis who was killed when a white police officer knelt on his neck for over eight minutes despite his cries of "I can't breathe"—led to rage and destruction. This social injustice on top of the rampant stress of the pandemic triggered the release of Angry, Judgmental, and Ancestral Dragons (which you will learn more about in this book) that drove some people into the streets to protest peacefully while spurring others to loot, vandalize, and set fires. The powerful influences on your brain include:

- *Dragons from the Past*—memories and events that still breathe fire on your emotional centers, driving your behavior
- *They, Them, and Other Dragons*—other people in your life—past and present—who each have their own set of dragons
- *ANTs*—automatic negative thoughts that link, stack, and attack you, providing the fuel for anxiety and depression
- *Bad Habit Dragons*—habits that result from dragon influences and increase the chances you'll be overweight and depressed, and have brain fog

- *Scheming Dragons*—advertisers, news feeds, social media sites, and the gadgets in your pocket that steal your mind and money
- *Addicted Dragons*—repetitive behaviors that damage your health, wealth, or relationships

Unless you recognize and redirect these influences, they can steal your happiness, damage your relationships, pilfer your health, rob your ability to cope with stress (like the coronavirus pandemic), and limit your destiny. The good news is that once you become aware and tame these dragons and eliminate the ANTs, you can break bad habits, shut down self-defeating thoughts, shore up your capacity to cope with uncertainty, reduce your vulnerability to schemers, and heal addictions. In fact, taming your dragons is essential for good mental health because when they control your brain, your entire life suffers.

JIMMY'S HIDDEN DRAGONS

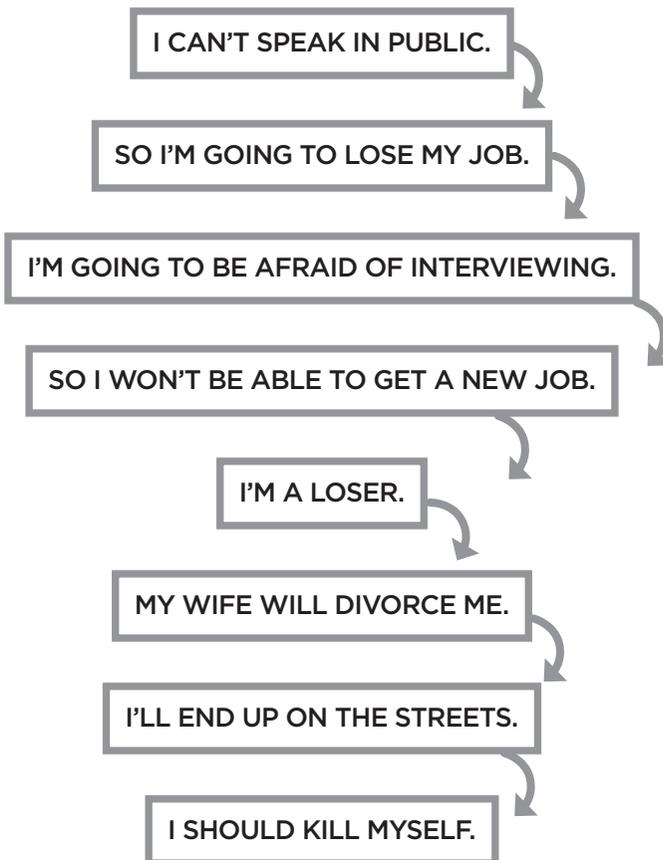
The afternoon I met Jimmy, 39, a high-level business executive, he sat next to his wife on the soft burgundy leather sofa in my office. He had just been released from a psychiatric hospital that morning and looked anxious and worn-out. A week prior he'd told an emergency room doctor he had thought of killing himself to end the feelings of dread, panic, anxiety, and hopelessness that just wouldn't go away. His Anxious Dragon, one of the 13 Dragons from the Past, was running rampant in his brain.

Jimmy had been seeing another psychiatrist for years to refill medication for anxiety and depression, which was explained as “working to fix a chemical imbalance.” The medication took the edge off his negative feelings, but it also took the edge off his positive feelings. While seeing the psychiatrist, he never learned any skills to deal with his Anxious Dragons or the 12 other ones that fueled his dark thoughts and mood swings.

The current “episode” that brought Jimmy to the ER started two weeks before when he found out he had to give a presentation to one of his company's largest customers. It filled him with dread. He told me, “If I had to describe the fear, it's like you're on death row and the clock's run out. The guard opens the door and you must take the first step—that kind of fear runs through my bones.” Jimmy had struggled with glossophobia (the fear of public speaking) since middle school. Through an exercise called Break the Bonds of the Past, which I will explain later, we learned that this fear started when he was 12, the day his grandmother made him give an “impact statement”

at the Los Angeles County Superior Court about why his father, one of the leaders of a violent street gang, should not get the death penalty for a double homicide. Jimmy's Anxious Dragons breathed fire on the fear centers in his young brain, and he was attacked by ANTs (automatic negative thoughts), including, *What if I cannot speak in court and end up killing my father?*

Even though Jimmy had repressed the memory, his Anxious Dragons haunted him throughout the rest of middle school, high school, and college, and into his adult life. He went to great lengths to avoid waking these dragons by dodging any presentations until about six years before when his supervisor asked him to give a brief talk at work about his role in the company. He loved his job but ruminated for days about how he would be unable to put his thoughts into words. Even after giving the presentation, the ANTs multiplied, stacked on top of one another, and attacked him, linking to many other catastrophic thoughts, such as:



That is when Jimmy started to see his original psychiatrist, went on medication, and made a conscious decision to overcome his fear, which worked for a while. He gave tours at work, traveled, and met with clients. He also gave his life to God and became an active member of his church, which he found incredibly helpful. However, the Anxious Dragons and other Dragons from the Past reappeared when he was given new responsibility at work, and once again his anxiety spiraled out of control.

Growing up, Jimmy had experienced intense, persistent psychological trauma (Wounded Dragons). He saw his father dealing drugs and beating up people. His father was incarcerated when Jimmy was a small child, and he went with his grandmother to visit his dad, who made him introduce himself to other gang leaders, which filled Jimmy with dread. He witnessed drive-by shootings and was in car chases before age nine. He was kidnapped twice by feuding family members, and he feared for his life on many occasions. Once a dozen SWAT officers crashed through his family's front door with weapons drawn while Jimmy was lying on the couch in his father's arms during a rare time when his father was home on parole. After his father's rearrest, his mother sent Jimmy to live with his grandparents, even though she kept his two younger siblings. His Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons told his brain that he was alone and unloved. He also witnessed his grandmother being sexually assaulted, and the perpetrator asked Jimmy if he wanted to have sex with her too, which filled him with a sense of shame and hopelessness (Should and Shaming Dragons).

Jimmy's brain was always listening to his Ancestral Dragons from his family history and genetics. His mother took medication for anxiety, and there was a family history of anxiety and alcohol abuse. His father's side of the family had rampant psychiatric issues, including panic attacks, depression, and drug abuse, and his siblings had similar problems.

Jimmy's brain was also always listening to his Bad Habit Dragons that had formed from listening to the other dragons in his life. One of Jimmy's bad habits particularly disturbed his wife. He loved to watch violent movies, boxing and UFC matches, animal attacks, and execution documentaries, which he had watched with his father. Being exposed to intense, life-threatening violence as a young child had set his "arousal template" (what gave him the most powerful emotional rush) to these disturbing images, but they only perpetuated the stress inside his brain and body.

Not only was Jimmy's brain run by these dragons, he'd also had a number of head injuries from playing football (he was a high school all-conference linebacker), boxing until he was 18, and being involved in a number of bar

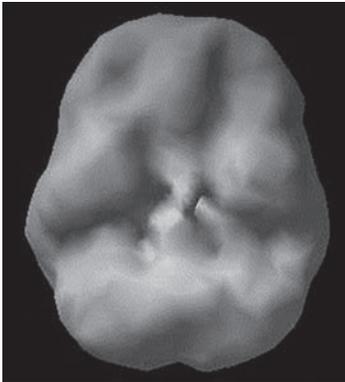
fight. When he was 15, he fell eight feet onto his head; he convulsed, lost consciousness for about 10 minutes, and lost the hearing in his right ear. He was hospitalized for four days, and that whole summer he had to relearn how to walk. To quiet his Anxious and Wounded Dragons, Jimmy used drugs and alcohol as a teenager and young adult, but they gave him only temporary relief.

Jimmy had no idea that dragons were running his brain and his life. The only messages his brain could hear were that he was hopeless, messed up, and a failure. Jimmy's dragons told him many stories—such as *You were abandoned*, *You are unlovable*, *The world is dangerous*, and *You can't speak in public*—which eventually caused his downward spiral and his belief that he'd be better off dead. Most of us did not have trauma as intense as Jimmy's growing up, but unless we are consciously taught how to identify the voices of our dragons, we may still create horror stories based on erroneous or incomplete inputs that can cause us to feel or act in self-defeating ways.

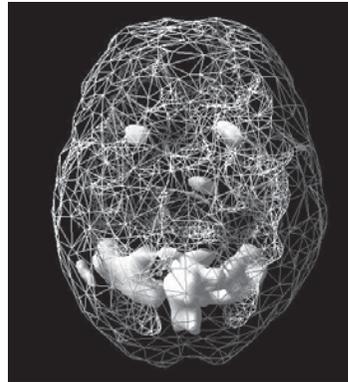
As part of our evaluation of Jimmy, we took a detailed history to understand the story of his life, reviewed the records from his prior doctor and the hospital, ran a complete set of laboratory tests, and did a sophisticated 3D brain imaging study called SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography), which is a nuclear medicine study that evaluates brain blood flow and activity. SPECT is different from the structural CT or MRI scans, which both assess brain anatomy. SPECT looks at how the brain functions and basically tells us three things about brain activity: whether it is healthy, underactive, or overactive. At Amen Clinics we have been performing SPECT scans for 30 years and have built the world's largest database of brain scans related to mental health issues, totaling more than 175,000 scans on patients from 155 countries.

The images on the following page represent a healthy SPECT scan. The image on the left looks at the outside surface of the brain, which shows full, even, symmetrical activity. It's called a surface scan. In the image on the right, white shows the most active areas. In a healthy scan these are typically in the cerebellum (the back, bottom part of the brain), which contains half the brain's neurons. The image on the right is called an active scan.

REPRESENTATIVE HEALTHY SPECT SCANS

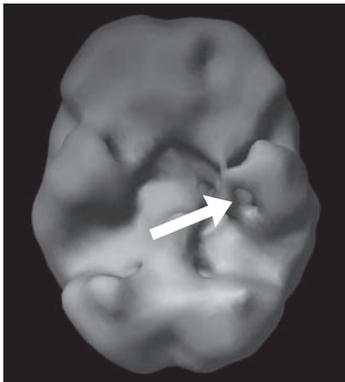


Underside surface scan
Full, even, symmetrical activity

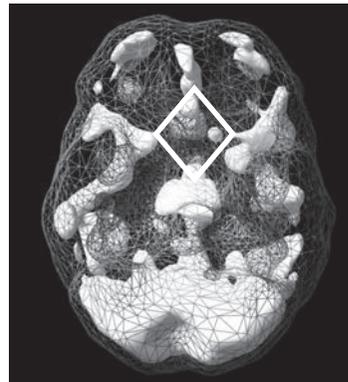


Underside active scan
White equals most active parts
of the brain, typically in the
cerebellum in back, bottom area

JIMMY'S SPECT SCANS



Underside surface scan
Damage to left temporal lobe



Active scan
Diamond pattern of activation in
emotional areas of brain

Jimmy's SPECT scan showed two significant findings:

1. Low activity in his left temporal lobe on the surface scan, in a pattern consistent with past brain trauma. This part of the brain is involved with mood stability, irritability, expressive language difficulties (finding the right words), memory issues, anxiety, and dark thoughts. When hurt, this area can send interruption signals to the rest of the brain.

2. Increased activity in a diamond pattern in the limbic or emotional part of the brain, consistent with past emotional trauma that became stuck in his brain, so it is always listening to painful inputs from the past.

By diligently using the strategies in this book, by understanding and taming the hidden dragons and eliminating the ANTs, and by getting his diet, nutrients, and brain healthy, Jimmy thrived. Over the next six months, his mood stabilized and his anxiety lessened. He was able to become an even more important part of his team at work and a happier and more loving husband and father. In addition, he lost 37 pounds, felt stronger, and had more energy than he'd had in years. He also started to help others in his family get well. Continuing to use these strategies during the pandemic helped him and his family cope in healthy ways that kept them emotionally strong in spite of the added stress.

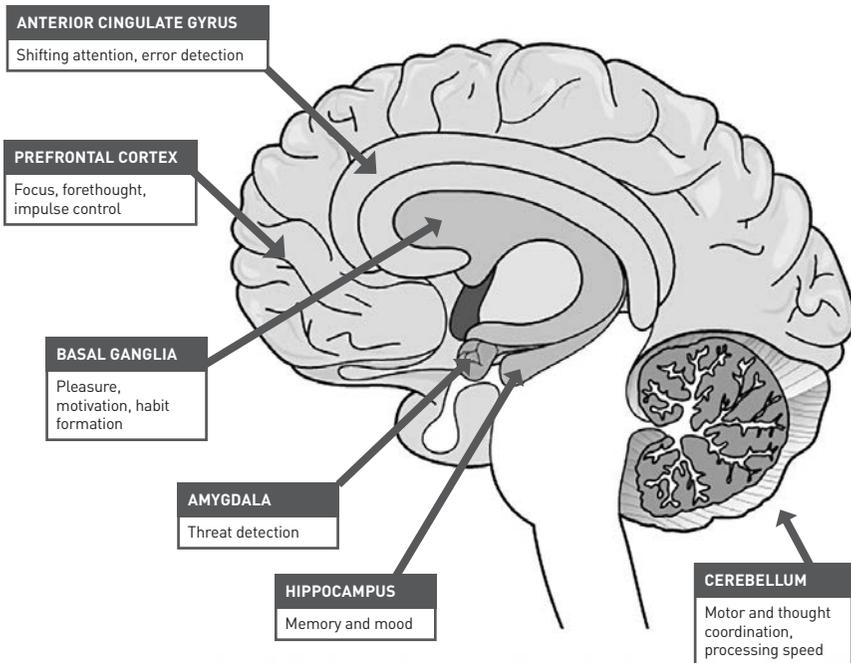
This book will explore the many reasons—some hidden and some obvious (like the pandemic)—that dragons and ANTs are constantly talking to your brain, making you feel sad, anxious, worried, depressed, mad, or out of control. With practical strategies to tame your dragons, you will take control of your brain and be able to choose what it listens to. You'll no longer give in to negative thinking or let bad habits derail your health and relationships even in times of trauma, extreme stress, or grief. You'll be able to recognize what's true, build your self-confidence, discipline your mind, and feel happier, calmer, and in more control of your own destiny. In order to get and stay well, once you understand and use this information, share it with loved ones; that way you are also creating your own support group, making it more likely you will keep these new habits for the rest of your life.

Your Brain

A Very Brief Primer

As we embark on this journey together, it's important to briefly get acquainted with six brain systems involved in running your life. I will refer to them many times throughout this book, and I want you to have a quick reference for them here. Obviously, your brain is complicated and involves many structures, but these are particularly important as they work in concert to create your moods, anxieties, memory, and behavior.

INSIDE VIEW OF THE BRAIN



Prefrontal cortex (PFC): Found in the front third of the brain, the PFC plays a major role in executive functions (like the boss at work), such as focus, forethought, judgment, planning, decision making, and impulse control. When it is low in activity from head trauma, toxins, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or other causes, people tend to struggle with attention, distractibility, disorganization, procrastination, and impulsive behavior. It is like the boss went on vacation.

Anterior cingulate gyrus (ACG): Found deep within the frontal lobes, it is involved with shifting attention and error detection. When the ACG is overactive, people tend to struggle with getting stuck on negative thoughts or behaviors, worrying, being oppositional or argumentative, or seeing too many errors in themselves or others.

Amygdala (AMY): This almond-shaped structure is found underneath the temples and behind the eyes; there is one on each side of the brain. They are involved in emotion, threat detection, and aggression. They tend to be overactive in people who have past emotional trauma, are hypervigilant (always watching for something bad to happen), and are socially anxious. When the AMY are underactive, people tend to have less fear, like the rock climber in *Free Solo*, and be risk-takers.

Hippocampus (HC): Greek for “seahorse” (*hippo*—horse; *kampos*—sea monster), your two hippocampi are about the size of your thumbs and found deep in the brain on the inside of your left and right temporal lobes, just behind the amygdala. 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. If the hippocampi (plural) are damaged, you cannot store new information. In the movie *50 First Dates*, Lucy, Drew Barrymore’s character, had a severe car accident that damaged her left and right hippocampi. After she falls asleep, memories of the prior day are wiped out. Memory problems are associated with low activity in the HC, and it is one of the first areas of the brain that dies in Alzheimer’s disease. The HC also can produce up to 700 new stem cells a day if put in a nourishing environment (think good nutrition, omega-3 fatty acids, oxygen levels, blood flow, and mental stimulation).¹

Basal ganglia (BG): These large structures deep in the brain are involved in habit formation. The BG also contain the nucleus accumbens (NA), which is part of your reward system (motivates you to go toward pleasure and away

from pain), and is exquisitely responsive to the feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine, involved in addictions. The NA is involved with cravings, and if it is underactive, people tend to feel flat and depressed, and they are more vulnerable to addiction and craving substances that activate it, such as drugs, alcohol, sex, or high-calorie sugary foods.

Cerebellum (CB): Latin for “little brain,” it is 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, language, cognitive processing, and language.

THE FOUR CIRCLES OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

These biological systems of the brain represent one of four circles of overall physical and mental health, which I think about whenever I evaluate or treat any patient. I first wrote about them in my book *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*.²

B **Biological:** how the physical aspects of your brain and body function. One of the major principles of my work is that if you want to keep the physical functioning of your brain healthy or rescue it if it is headed for trouble, you have to prevent or treat the 11 major risk factors that steal your mind. My team created the mnemonic BRIGHT MINDS to summarize them: blood flow, retirement/aging, inflammation, genetics, head trauma, toxins, mind storms (abnormal electrical activity), immunity and infections (relevant for a pandemic), neurohormones, diabetes (a combination of being overweight and having high blood sugar), and sleep disturbances.³ The biological circle also encompasses diet and exercise.

P **Psychological:** how you think and talk to yourself, as well as self-concept, body image, emotional trauma, upbringing, and significant life events (such as enduring months of self-isolation during the coronavirus pandemic). Dragons influence your psychological health by saying whether you are enough—good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough, and so on. When you’ve tamed your dragons and believe that you are enough, you will be happier and more confident. When you feel less than enough, your brain can give in to sadness, anxiety, and failure.

S

Social: the quality of your relationships and any current life stresses. When you have solid relationships, a healthy family, a role or career you enjoy, and financial stability, your brain tends to do much better than when any of these areas are troubled. Dragons can become unhinged when difficult life situations, such as a global pandemic, relationship breakup or divorce, layoff, or death of a loved one, elevate stress hormone levels. When this circle is unhealthy, you are more vulnerable to illnesses, including infections like COVID-19, as well as depression, anxiety disorders, and more.

SP

Spiritual: your connection to God, the planet, and past and future generations; and your deepest sense of meaning and purpose. You are more than just your brain cells, thoughts, and connections. I believe we are all created with divine purpose. When your brain listens to dragons or ANTs, it's easy to forget that your life matters and you have a role and a calling to fulfill.

When any one circle is unhealthy, your brain is more likely to listen to your Dragons from the Past, from others, and from society, and then let them take control.

Jimmy's biological circle included prior head traumas, genetic vulnerability inherited from his parents, toxins from past substance abuse, mind storms (abnormal temporal lobes), and diabetes (high blood sugar plus excess weight). His psychological circle was loaded with Dragons from the Past, ANTs, and developmental trauma. His social circle struggled with abandonment issues and work-related stress (expectation to speak in public). His spiritual circle was a source of strength that helped ameliorate his pain. With steps to improve his health in the four circles, we were able to heal his brain, tame his dragons, and help his brain start listening to healthier messages. I'll help you do the same.

SECTION 1

TAME THE DRAGONS FROM THE PAST

YOUR HISTORY IS NOT YOUR DESTINY

*People who deny the existence of dragons are often
eaten by dragons from within.*

URSULA K. LE GUIN, *THE WAVE IN THE MIND*



Since the beginning of time, we have communicated with each other through stories. They help us understand our place in the world and teach us how to act or not act. They shape our perceptions and pass down knowledge and morals. Personal stories guide and direct our lives. How we interpret our experiences is one of the driving forces behind happiness or depression, exhilaration or disappointment, rage or peace. Telling our personal stories is something we do every day by how we think, feel, behave, and interact with others. Every conversation we have is, in some way or another, a reflection of the stories we've created over time. These stories create the movies that are constantly playing in our heads—"I am a good mother . . . a bad father . . . an alcoholic . . . a success . . . a victim . . . a fool."

THE DRAGONS FROM THE PAST

My friend Dr. Sharon May, a world-renowned relationship psychologist, calls the stories that interfere with our lives Dragons from the Past that are still breathing fire on our amygdala (the almond-shaped structure on the inside of your temporal lobes involved in emotional reactions), driving anxiety, anger, irrational behavior, and automatic negative reactions. On an episode of *The Brain Warrior's Way Podcast* that I cohost with my wife, Tana, Dr. May said, "All of us have Dragons from the Past influencing our present feelings and actions."¹ Unless you recognize and tame them, and consciously calm and protect your amygdala from overfiring, these dragons will haunt your unconscious mind and drive emotional pain for the rest of your life. What blows from an ember, or a small action of another, can turn into a destructive fire of anxiety and rage.

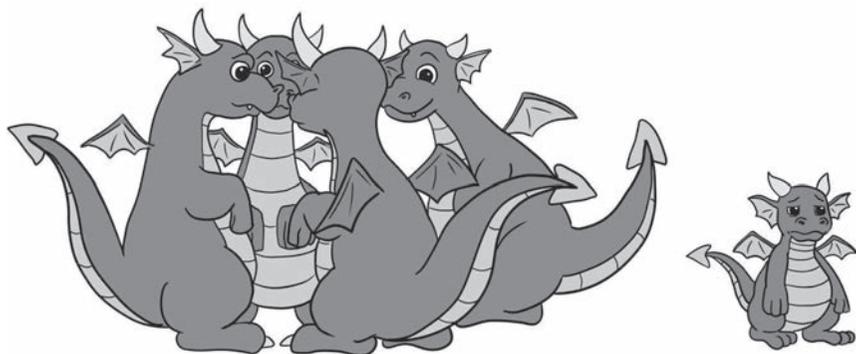
After learning from Dr. May, I started using this concept with my patients, including Jimmy. Over time I identified 13 Dragons from the Past, including their origins, triggers that make them overpowering, and how they cause us to react. All of us have more than one Dragon from the Past driving our behavior, and they are always interacting with the Dragons from the Past of others, causing both internal and external battles—a modern-day *Game of Thrones*. All of us have primary and secondary dragons driving our behavior. Primary ones are present most of the time, while secondary ones come out during times of stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. You'll learn which ones apply to you. (You can also take the Hidden Dragons quiz at KnowYourDragons.com.)

DRAGONS FROM THE PAST

1. Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons—feel alone, unseen, or unimportant
2. Inferior or Flawed Dragons—feel inferior to others
3. Anxious Dragons—feel fearful and overwhelmed
4. Wounded Dragons—bruised by past trauma
5. Should and Shaming Dragons—racked with guilt
6. Special, Spoiled, or Entitled Dragons—feel more special than others
7. Responsible Dragons—need to take care of others
8. Angry Dragons—harbor hurts and rage
9. Judgmental Dragons—hold harsh or critical opinions of others due to past injustices
10. Death Dragons—fear the future and lack of a meaningful life
11. Grief and Loss Dragons—feel loss and fear of loss
12. Hopeless and Helpless Dragons—have pervasive sense of despair and discouragement
13. Ancestral Dragons—affected by issues from past generations

I will show you how to tame your dragons with four specific strategies and rewrite the stories they've been telling you. You'll learn to recognize where they came from, what triggers them, and how they react. I'll show you upsides if there are any, and I'll give you a group of affirmations to say or meditate on each day to soothe and calm the dragons. I'll share some of my own Dragons from the Past and how they've tortured me, influenced me, and fueled some of my success. Self-disclosure has been a useful tool in helping my patients so they know that I see myself as a fellow traveler and guide in the "mind" fields of our lives. Plus, as a fun exercise, I imagine the type of movies each dragon species might like and give some examples.

ABANDONED, INVISIBLE, OR INSIGNIFICANT DRAGONS



Origin: Others did not see or recognize you, or you felt unimportant, abandoned, and lonely. These dragons are common in children whose parents were unable or unavailable to raise them. They are also common in middle children from large families and those whose parents or siblings were dysfunctional, narcissistic (all about them), or sick. These dragons also occur in families where one of the parents or siblings was a high achiever or famous. The other spouse or children often felt invisible or unloved by comparison.

Triggers: When you perceive that others ignore or belittle you; when others are recognized and you are not; when you get laid off from work but your colleagues don't.

Reactions: These dragons fire up loneliness, worthlessness, or feeling small. They can also lead to an inflated sense of importance to make up for feeling insignificant. They are associated with abandonment issues and cause people to commit to relationships too quickly before taking time to assess the health of a relationship. They can also cause jealousy and unwarranted insecurities and pain. Many relationship issues happen when your Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons breathe fire on your emotional brain regions, causing you to overreact. If you are dealing with another person who has these same dragons, it can cause a war that destroys the relationship.

Movies: These dragons love underdog movies, such as *Rocky*, *Rudy*, *Gladiator*, *300*, *The Karate Kid*, *The Blind Side*, or *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Daniel's Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons: This is my primary dragon. I'm the third of seven children, with an older sister and brother, and four younger sisters. My wife, Tana, grew up with a lot of drama and trauma, and by

her estimation, my home was akin to the television shows of the fifties and sixties: *Donna Reed*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*. Yet many of the stories or dragons I developed for myself as a child were distressing and unhelpful.

Being a middle child and the second son in a Lebanese family meant I often felt insignificant. My father owned a chain of grocery stores, and in Middle Eastern families, the oldest son is expected to go into the family business. That meant my brother was “the chosen one,” and I was not.

With so many children, our parents had little time for individual attention. My father worked 80 or more hours a week, driven by his Anxious Dragons that were born during the Great Depression. I didn’t see much of him until I was 10 years old and could go to work with him on weekends. But at work, he wasn’t my dad; he was my boss. My mother was always busy cooking, cleaning, and getting us from place to place. I coveted the 20 minutes a week I read with her, but I often felt invisible.

My Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons drove me to want to be connected, seen, and significant. I’ve worked hard over the course of my life to make a difference in others, and I love sharing what I have learned in front of large crowds. One of my favorite lectures ever was at the American Airlines Arena in front of 20,000 people. In large part, these dragons are why I am writing this book.

Tools to tame your Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons

1. **Do you recognize Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons in your life?** Do you feel overlooked, unimportant, or lonely? Did you grow up in a large family? Did your parents divorce when you were young, were they absent or neglectful, were you adopted, or did you bounce around in foster care?
2. **Find the upside:** These dragons may drive you to be significant and help others, to become part of a group that brings positive energy to the world. The upside of these dragons for me was freedom. Since I was not the oldest male child in my Lebanese family, I had the choice to do anything I wanted with my life. I didn’t love the grocery business, but I have loved being a psychiatrist and author for the last 40 years. Rather than being jealous of my older brother, I have immense gratitude for him.

3. Strategies:

Know your life's purpose. You will feel more significant, happy, and connected. Business executive Adam Leipzig gives one of my favorite online talks about finding your purpose in just five minutes.² He starts by telling a story about his 25th college reunion from Yale University where he made an astounding discovery: 80 percent of his privileged, well-off, powerful friends were unhappy with their lives, despite being on their second spouses and second houses. The difference between them and those who were happy was “knowing their purpose.” To know your purpose, he says, you have to know the answers to five simple questions:

1. Who are you? What is your name?
2. What do you love to do? Examples include writing, cooking, designing, creating, speaking, teaching, crunching numbers, etc. To get clarity of purpose, ask yourself, *What is the one thing I do that I feel qualified to teach others?*
3. Whom do you do it for? Or how does your work connect you to others?
4. What do those people want or need from you?
5. How do they change as a result of what you do?

When I answer these questions, it looks like this:

1. My name is Daniel.
2. I love optimizing people's brains and inspiring them to care about brain health.
3. I do it for my family and for those who come to our clinics, read my books, follow our social media channels, or watch our public television shows.
4. The people I touch want to suffer less, feel better, be sharper, and have greater control over their lives. They want better brains and better lives.
5. As a result of what I do, people change by having better brains and better lives; they suffer less and become happier, and they pass on what they've learned about brain health to others.

Notice that only two of the five questions are about you; three are about others. A wise Chinese saying is: “If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.” Happiness is found in helping others.

When you’re at a gathering and someone asks you, “What do you do?” give them the answer to question number five. In my example, when people ask me what I do, I say, “I help people have better brains and better lives, so they suffer less, become happier, and pass it on to others.” By answering that simple question, I get to share my life purpose and quiet my Abandoned, Invisible, or Insignificant Dragons. What is your purpose?

Work toward making a difference in the lives of others. Volunteering actually helps to grow the hippocampus (memory and mood) and improves a person’s sense of achievement and productivity over a two-year period.³

Become part of a group (church, civic, environmental, etc.). Being socially connected is critical to staying healthy. Humans are not polar bears; we are a species that needs one another. Find creative ways to connect if you can’t meet in person. At the start of the pandemic, government officials began talking about the need for social distancing. I knew immediately it was a bad term. The term should have been physical distancing, which is what is needed to stop spreading the virus. In such a crisis, we need to be socially connected more than ever before, and the accurate use of language matters, as we will see in the chapter on taming our thoughts.

Psychotherapy can be very helpful, especially for abandonment issues. Be careful not to run away from therapy too soon. When you get close to the therapist, it may make you nervous and want to run, which may also be a pattern in relationships.

4. Affirmations to say or meditate on every day:

I am loved.

I am unique.

I am significant.

I am seen by . . . [name the people who see you].

I am making a difference in the lives of . . . [name them].