



# YOU, HAPPIER

THE 7 NEUROSCIENCE SECRETS OF FEELING GOOD  
BASED ON YOUR BRAIN TYPE

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**DANIEL G. AMEN, MD**

Dr. Daniel Amen is not only a great friend, but he is also one of the kindest people I know, and this kindness comes out in his tireless search for answers to help people manage their mental health. His latest book is a testament to this and, combined with his extensive research studying more than 200,000 brain scans of people from over 155 countries, is guaranteed to give insight to all who read it!

**DR. CAROLINE LEAF**, clinical neuroscientist, mental health researcher, and author of *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*

Dr. Amen eloquently reveals the simple and yet profound notion that happiness can be cultivated. We've long had the tools to achieve important goals like losing weight and gaining strength, but the science underlying how we can bring about brain changes to create and enhance happiness has remained obscure until now. *You, Happier* is your guide to make happiness manifest in your life. And why not?

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Dr. Daniel Amen does it again—another amazing book with all the science-backed evidence he is known for. If doctors wrote as many prescriptions for happiness the way they hand out medications for physical or mental health issues, this book would be the nation's number one script! So if you're feeling down, anxious, or stressed, read *You, Happier*!

**DR. UMA NAIDOO**, Harvard nutritional psychiatrist, chef, nutrition specialist, and author of the national bestseller *This Is Your Brain on Food*



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*You, Happier: The 7 Neuroscience Secrets of Feeling Good Based on Your Brain Type*

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# Introduction

I am writing this book at a time when the world is in turmoil and Americans are the unhappiest they've been in 50 years.<sup>1</sup> There is a lot to be unhappy about: As of July 2021, more than 30 million people in the United States have contracted the COVID-19 virus, and more than 600,000 Americans have died in the global pandemic that brought social isolation, grief, and fear to almost every household in the country. Add that to subsequent high unemployment rates, an economy in tatters, and the ongoing political divide, and you can see why we have been brought to our emotional knees. As a nation, we are feeling so stressed and unhappy that it has sparked a dramatic rise in the number of new prescriptions for antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, and sleep aids.<sup>2</sup> In early 2020, rates of depression—the opposite of being happy—tripled from 8.5 percent, which was already at record highs, to a horrifying 27.8 percent just a few months later.<sup>3</sup> The statistics may seem grim, but you deserve to be happy, and you can cultivate happiness even when it seems like the world is crumbling around you.

I've seen it happen. In 2021, I knew people were hurting emotionally in the wake of the pandemic, so I launched an online 30-Day Happiness Challenge that attracted an astounding 32,000 participants. (You can do the challenge at [30DayHappinessChallenge.com](https://30DayHappinessChallenge.com).) On each day of the challenge, I shared science-backed tips and strategies—some of the same ones you will find in this book—that ramp up happiness and positivity. I wanted to see how much the participants could improve over the course of the challenge, so I asked them to take the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, a well-respected assessment that provides a score on a scale of 1 to 6.<sup>4</sup> (See page 35 for more information on this questionnaire, which you can take as part of my 30-Day Happiness Challenge.) People took the quiz twice, once at the beginning of the program and once at the end. The average happiness score for participants on Day 1 was 3.58, which correlates to being “not particularly happy.” Among people who completed the course, the average score on Day 30 had jumped to 4.36, a 22 percent improvement, which correlates with being “rather happy; pretty happy”! Even more impressive, their self-reported happiness levels increased by 32 percent. And they did it in just about 10 to

15 minutes a day. This shows that not only can you develop happiness, but also that you can do it quickly. Take it from one of the participants who wrote in a post, “Thirty days ago I was so miserable, so hopeless, and so depressed! This has literally transformed my life and made my life not only bearable but JOYFUL.”

I want the same for you. In the following pages, you will discover how to do it.

## CHAPTER 1

# THE SEVEN SECRETS TO HAPPINESS NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT

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*Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success.*

ALBERT SCHWEITZER, MISSIONARY SURGEON  
TO AFRICA AND NOBEL PRIZE WINNER

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Contrary to what most people believe, happiness is not reserved for the rich, famous, fortunate, or beautiful. I've treated many of these people, and they are some of the unhappiest people I know. You don't have to win the genetic lottery to be blessed with a happy disposition, and you aren't doomed to always feel down when life doesn't go your way. You can learn how to consistently generate positive feelings no matter your age, income, or situation by using practical neuroscience and knowing the seven secrets to happiness no one is talking about.

Why should we focus on being happy? As a psychiatrist, I've written about anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), aging, violence, obesity, memory loss, love, parenting, and other important topics. Yet underlying the reasons most people come to see us at Amen Clinics is the fact that they are unhappy. Helping people be happier day to day is at the core of getting and staying mentally and physically healthy. Extensive research has shown that happiness is associated with a lower heart rate, lower blood pressure, and overall heart health. Happier people get fewer infections, have lower cortisol levels (the hormone of stress), and fewer aches and pains. Happy people tend to live longer, have better relationships, and be more successful in their careers. Plus happiness is contagious because happier people tend to make others happier.<sup>1</sup>

One of my favorite short videos that I encourage all of my patients to watch is by Dennis Prager. In "Why Be Happy," he suggests that happiness is a moral obligation. He says:

Whether or not you're happy, and most importantly, whether or not you act happy is about altruism, not selfishness—because it is about how we affect others' lives. . . . Ask anybody who was raised by an unhappy parent whether or not happiness is a moral issue, and I assure you the answer will be “yes.” It is no fun being raised by an unhappy parent or being married to an unhappy person or being the parent of an unhappy child or working with an unhappy coworker.<sup>2</sup>

## THE LIES OF HAPPINESS

Before discussing how to use neuroscience to be happier and unveiling the seven secrets no one is talking about, it's important to recognize the lies of happiness. For financial gain, marketers have been brainwashing populations for decades into believing happiness is based on things that actually damage our brains, ruin our minds, increase depression, and make us unhappy.

*Lie #1: Having more and more of something (love, sex, fame, drugs, etc.) will make you happy.* Unfortunately, if you are not careful, the more pleasure you get, the more you will need in the future to continue making you happy, something called hedonic adaptation. Your brain will adapt to high-pleasure experiences, so you'll need more each time to get the same effect, much like cocaine. Seeking more and more of a pleasure high often leads to depression because it wears out the pleasure centers in your brain, which we will discuss. I have seen this phenomenon repeatedly in Olympic and professional athletes, movie stars, and recording artists who never learned to manage their minds.

*Lie #2: A “Don't Worry, Be Happy” mindset, promoted by the popular 1988 Grammy Song of the Year of the same name by Bobby McFerrin, will make you happy.* In fact, this mindset will make you unhappy and kill you early. According to one of the longest longevity studies ever published, the “don't worry, be happy people” die early from accidents and preventable illnesses.<sup>3</sup> You need some anxiety to be happy. Appropriate anxiety helps us make better decisions. It prevents us from running into the street as children, risking broken bodies, and running headlong into toxic relationships as adults, risking broken hearts.

*Lie #3: Advertisers and fast-food restaurants know what will make you happy.* Take McDonald's Happy Meals (and kids' meals on most restaurant menus), for example. They certainly will not make children happy. These meals should be called Unhappy Meals as the low-quality, nutrient-sparse,

processed food-like substances increase inflammation and have been linked with depression, ADHD, obesity, cancer, and a lower IQ.<sup>4</sup>

*Lie #4: Someplace else will make you happy.* The notion that happiness lies elsewhere is wrong. A prime example is Disneyland, which claims to be “the happiest place on earth.” I grew up in Southern California, and Disneyland opened in 1955 when I was just a year old. I’ve been many times. Depending on whom I’m with, it can be fun or it can be stressful and exhausting because of the large crowds, long lines, crying children, and expensive trinkets. I’m hoping it’s not the happiest place on earth, as stress can shrink the major mood and memory centers in the brain.<sup>5</sup>

*Lie #5: You need a smartphone, watch, tablet, or the latest technology to make you happy.* Technology can be addictive; gadgets and apps grab our attention and distract us from more important things such as family, friends, fitness, or faith. Many people eat at the same table but engage with their phones rather than with each other. Current research has found that many teens spend more hours on social media (average 9 hours) than they do sleeping.<sup>6</sup> Children 8 to 12 are online 6 hours a day. Technology has hijacked developing brains, with potentially serious consequences for many.

*Lie #6: Video games make you happy.* Depression and obesity rise for people who spend more and more time on video games and technology. Ian Bogost, famed video game designer (*Cow Clicker* and *Cruel 2 B Kind*) and chair of media studies and professor of interactive computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology, deemed habit-forming technologies as “the cigarettes of this century,” cautioning about their equally addictive and potentially destructive side effects.<sup>7</sup> The World Health Organization added gaming disorder to the ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases) in 2018.<sup>8</sup>

*Lie #7: Constantly being “in the know” by following your favorite news outlet will make you happy.* News outlets repeatedly and purposely pour toxic thoughts into our brains, making us see terror or disaster around every corner—all in an effort to boost their ratings and profits. Seeing repeated scary images activates our brains’ primitive fear circuits (in the amygdala) that are meant to ensure our survival but are now obsolete.

The news always highlights scandalous and terrifying stories to keep you hooked on their channels or websites. Unless you purposefully monitor your news intake, these companies succeed in raising your stress hormones, which you now know shrink the major mood and memory centers in your brain and may put excessive fat around your waist.

Do you pick up your phone or tablet when you first wake up to see the latest world news? You might not know that just a few minutes of negative news in the morning can lower your happiness later in the day by 27 percent,<sup>9</sup> but now you do. I was on the *Dr. Phil* show when writing this book and evaluated a woman who had a brief psychotic episode around the 2020 election, thinking one of the candidates had brainwashed her daughter and was out to get her. She had never been political but started watching the news 24-7, and it contributed to her briefly losing her mind.

*Lie #8: Alcohol makes you happy.* Not so fast. The American Cancer Society links any alcohol consumption to seven types of cancer. Cancer is not a happiness maker. Alcohol can help you feel better quickly, but it can also damage your brain, decrease the quality of your decisions, and harm your relationships. If you are vulnerable to addiction, alcohol can hijack your pleasure centers and ruin your life.

*Lie #9: Marijuana makes you happy.* Maybe in the short run, but over time, marijuana prematurely ages the brain and lowers overall blood flow, which is not associated with a happy brain.<sup>10</sup> Plus, teens who use marijuana have a 450 percent increased risk of psychosis<sup>11</sup> as well as a heightened risk of depression and suicide in young adulthood.<sup>12</sup>

*Lie #10: Sweet treats and desserts—any sugar—make you happy.* Yes, sweets can provide a brief moment of bliss but definitely not long-term happiness. Sugar is addictive, pro-inflammatory, and associated with depression, obesity, diabetes, and dementia. As an example of this lie, just look at Coca-Cola's soft drink, which has the slogan "Open happiness." The slogan should actually read, "Open depression, obesity, diabetes, addiction, dementia, and early death."<sup>13</sup> When you drink a Coke or other soft drinks, you are drinking sugar water that is pro-inflammatory (inflammation increases depression, cancer, diabetes, and dementia), salt that makes you thirsty, and caffeine that brings your energy up then drops you like a rock and can negatively impact sleep.

*Lie #11: Money makes you happy.* This is true but only up to about \$75,000 a year in the US; then the relationship completely falls off. Anyone who says money is irrelevant should look at the homeless; anyone who says money buys happiness should look at the suicides of the beautiful, wealthy, and famous. Neither is true. Money can change your circumstances to a certain point, but money doesn't help much once you have your basic needs met. When wealthy people were asked what they needed to be a perfect 10 in happiness, most said 2 to 10 times more.<sup>14</sup> The need for more makes many people unhappy

because it can never be fully satisfied. Interestingly, a recent study about some very poor nations found that those citizens experienced happiness by being connected to their community and family and spending time in nature. For them, money played a minimal role in their subjective sense of well-being.<sup>15</sup> We can learn from their example. At the same time, if you shift the focus of your money toward giving to causes and people that matter to you, money can contribute to happiness. Likewise, spending money to have experiences with others actually gives us greater happiness than buying stuff. So, instead of going on a shopping spree at the mall, use that money to enhance your happiness quotient by catching a game, going to a concert, or having a delicious meal with people you enjoy.<sup>16</sup>

## THE SEVEN SECRETS TO HAPPINESS NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT

For decades, social scientists have been searching for the roots of happiness. Based on their research, it is generally accepted that happiness is about 40 percent genetic (you inherit it from your ancestors), 10 percent your situation in life or what happens to you, and 50 percent habits and mindset. This means you have a higher degree of control over happiness than most people think.

Researchers typically report happiness being associated with novelty, fun experiences, positive relationships, laughter, gratitude, anticipation, helping others, staying away from comparisons, meditation, nature, living in the moment (rather than the past with regret or the future with fear), productive work, a sense of purpose, spiritual beliefs, and wanting what you have as opposed to wanting more. Yet most happiness research completely misses seven important aspects:

1. It is critical to target happiness strategies to your unique brain type—a one-size-fits-all approach will never work.
2. Brain health (the actual physical functioning of the organ) is the most important foundational requirement of happiness.
3. Your brain needs targeted nutrients every day to boost happiness.
4. The foods you choose to eat either elevate happiness or steal it.
5. Mastering your mind and gaining separation or psychological distance from the noise in your head is essential to protecting happiness.

6. Noticing what you like about others more than what you don't is a recipe for happy relationships and happiness overall.
7. Having clearly defined values, purpose, and goals are essential to a strong foundation for happiness.

Consistently making high-quality decisions will give you a high-quality life. In researching happiness, together with my clinical experience over the last 40 years, I've summarized seven questions to ask yourself on a regular basis. *You, Happier: The 7 Neuroscience Secrets of Feeling Good Based on Your Brain Type* will explore each of the seven secrets and seven questions to help you be happier and more successful in everything you do.



**HAPPINESS  
TRANSFORMATION  
IN 30 DAYS**

*How can 30 days pass  
so quickly? I am so  
glad to be learning  
how to apply the seven  
secrets and develop  
good habits these past  
30 days.*

—WMC

***Secret 1: Know your brain type.***

*Question 1: Am I focused on what makes me uniquely happy?*

In the late eighties, when I started looking at the brain, I was searching for tools to help me be more effective with my patients. I loved being a psychiatrist but quickly realized psychiatrists were handicapped compared to other medical specialists. Making diagnoses solely based on symptom clusters—such as anxiety, depression, addiction, or a short attention span—was inadequate. Symptoms didn't tell us anything about the underlying biology of the problems. All other medical professionals look at the organs they treat, but as psychiatrists, we were taught to guess and assume the underlying biological mechanisms for issues such as depression, ADHD, bipolar disorder, and addiction without ever looking at the brain, even though our patients were every bit as sick as those with heart disease, diabetes, or cancer.

My colleagues and I started looking at the brain with a study called quantitative EEG (qEEG), which evaluates electrical activity. Once we knew an individual's brain pattern, we could then teach patients to change it using medications, nutraceuticals (nutritional supplements with a pharmaceutical effect), and techniques such as neurofeedback (using the mind to control your physiology). This is where I first got the inspiration for my book *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*. You are not stuck with the brain you have; you can make it better, and we could prove it.

In 1991, we added brain SPECT imaging to our toolbox. SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) scans evaluate blood flow and activity patterns in the brain. Structural CT or MRI scans, which you've probably heard of, only assess brain anatomy. SPECT looks at how the brain functions and basically tells us three things about brain activity: if it is healthy, underactive, or overactive. Initially, my team started by naively looking for unique electrical or blood flow signature patterns for each of the major psychiatric issues—such as depression, anxiety disorders, addictions, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), autism, and ADD/ADHD (attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)—but we soon discovered there was not one brain pattern associated with any of these illnesses. They all had multiple types that required their own treatments, which made sense because there will never be just one pattern for depression given that not all depressed people are the same. Some are withdrawn, others are angry, and still others are anxious or obsessive. Taking a one-size-fits-all approach to people with any mental health issue based solely on their symptoms invites failure and frustration.

The SPECT scans helped us understand the type of depression, anxiety, ADHD, obesity, or addiction a person had so we could better target treatment to their individual brain. This one idea led to a dramatic breakthrough in our effectiveness with patients and opened up a new world of understanding and hope for more than 100,000 people who have come to see us and the millions of people who have read my books or seen my public television programs. In previously published books, I have written about seven types of anxiety and depression, seven types of ADD/ADHD, six types of addicts, and five types of overeaters. Understanding your type of brain is critical to getting the right help.

When I first started performing SPECT scans, I would often read them blindly without any information on the patient. I came to realize that the scans all by themselves could tell us a lot about a person. Of course, whenever we evaluate a new patient, we gather detailed information about their lives. Still, it was fun to say, “I wonder if you tend to act this way . . .” solely based on their scans.

I once saw the head of the local Alzheimer's association, Jim, who wanted to learn more about our process in helping people with memory problems. He asked to be scanned as part of his due diligence. When I asked Jim about his history, he refused to give me any information, saying he only wanted me to tell him about himself from looking at the scans. I told him that was not how we practiced. We always try to put the scans in the context of a

person's life. Again, he refused. The front part of his brain worked way too hard (compared to our healthy group), which correlated with a brain type we call Persistent.

In front of his wife, I said, "Okay, you tend to be persistent and goal-oriented and to follow through with whatever you start."

Jim nodded I was correct.

"At the same time," I continued, "you can be worried, rigid, inflexible, and if things don't go your way, you can be easily upset. You also tend to hold grudges, take the opposite position in arguments whether you believe them or not, and can be argumentative and oppositional."

While I was reporting my observations, his wife was nodding her head: yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . and yes. Jim's scan gave me so many clues about his brain type and personality.

As we clinicians were working on understanding brain type and psychiatric issues, we also began to realize we were seeing features of personality in the scans.

- If your brain showed full, even, symmetrical activity overall, we called it **Balanced**.
- If the front part of your brain was sleepy or lower in activity compared to others, you were more likely to be creative, impulsive, and **Spontaneous**.
- If the front part of your brain was much more active than average, like Jim's, you tended to worry and be more **Persistent**.
- If your emotional or limbic brain was more active than average, you tended to be more vulnerable to sadness and be more **Sensitive**.
- If your amygdala and basal ganglia were more active than average, you tended to be more anxious and **Cautious**.

The scans began to tell an important story about who people are, how they think, how they act, how they interact with other human brains, and what makes them happy. For example, when my wife, Tana, was a child, her mother, Mary, took her to see R-rated horror movies, such as *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Silent Scream*. Mary has the Spontaneous brain type and loves excitement and stimulation. She loves horror movies. They turn on her sleepy brain. Tana has a combination of a Spontaneous-Persistent-Cautious Brain Type and found the movies disturbing and had trouble letting go of the horrific images. Knowing your specific brain type and the brain types of your loved ones can help you feel better and get along better with those around you.

Consider 11-year-old Anna and 16-year-old Amber, two sisters who share the same room. Anna has the Persistent brain type (the front part of her brain is very active), loves a neat and orderly space, and becomes unhappy when items are out of place. Amber has the Spontaneous brain type (with low activity in the front part of her brain), is always looking for the next social engagement, and doesn't notice anything out of place. She has to work very hard to keep her room clean. This led to conflict and unhappiness for both of them. Balancing their brains helped them get along better without having to criticize and judge each other.

***Secret 2: Optimize the physical functioning of your brain.***

*Question 2: Is this good for my brain or bad for it?*

Your brain is involved in everything you do and everything you are. After looking at more than 200,000 brains scans on patients from over 155 countries, it is very clear to me that when your brain works right, you work right; and when it doesn't, you are much more likely to have trouble in your life. Your brain is the organ of happiness. With a healthy brain, you are happier (because you've made better decisions), healthier (also better decisions), wealthier (better decisions), and more successful in relationships, work, and everything else you do. The quality of your decisions (a brain function) is the common denominator of happiness and success in every area of life.

What most happiness researchers and writers are not talking about is that when the brain is troubled, for whatever reason, people tend to make poorer decisions, which leads to them being sadder, sicker, poorer, and less successful, which leads to depression and unhappiness. If the brain is not healthy, you can have all the features of a happy life mentioned above and still want to end your life. Having all the things that "should" make you happy only accentuates your unhappiness. If you want to be happy, it is critical to assess and optimize the physical functioning of your brain like my patient Stephen did.

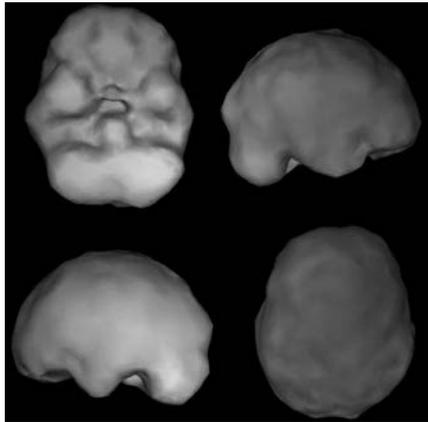
Stephen Hilton, 46, suffered with depression for most of his life. He remembers often feeling sad for no reason when he was a child. He also struggled with weight issues and began to use food to help him cope with sadness. At school, Stephen often felt disconnected, and just the thought of going made him feel anxious. He tended to skip school and dropped out early to pursue music. At 16, he found methamphetamines and said it was like "the light in his head came on." This is a common statement among my patients with ADHD, although this was not the case here.

By the age of 18, he stopped using methamphetamines and switched to

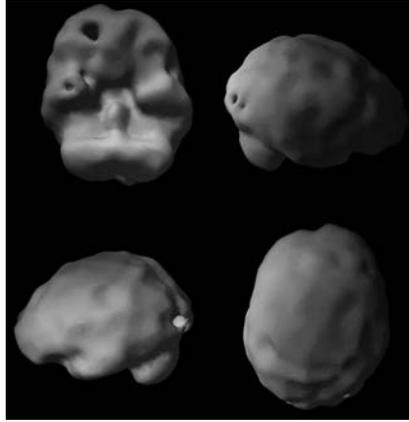
alcohol to cope with his depression and anxiety. Stephen immediately became a heavy user, and throughout his young adulthood, he continued to heavily consume alcohol on a near daily basis. During these years, his depression persisted despite using alcohol. And although he was able to function and grow in his music career—working on many blockbuster movies, such as *Die Another Day*, *Ocean's Eleven*, and *The World Is Not Enough*—he would often feel very low, hopeless, and “shut down.” Eventually, Stephen entered a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program and was sober for 10 years. However, after moving from England to Los Angeles, he lost contact with his sponsor and stopped attending AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings. He soon began abusing prescription medications and entered another rehab program. He had been sober for six years before coming to Amen Clinics.

I met Stephen after evaluating his wife, actress and comedian Laura Clery, who came to see us for trouble focusing, anxiety, and dark thoughts. Laura filmed her evaluation with me and posted the videos online, where they received more than 10 million views. As part of the clinical evaluation of Stephen, we took a detailed history to understand the story of his life, ran a complete set of laboratory tests, and did a SPECT scan. The following image represents a healthy SPECT scan, showing full, even, symmetrical activity.

#### HEALTHY SURFACE SPECT SCAN



Top left view: looking up from bottom of brain  
 Top right image: looking at right side of the brain  
 Bottom left image: looking at left side of brain  
 Bottom right image: looking down from top of brain  
 Healthy = full, even symmetrical activity

**STEPHEN'S SURFACE SPECT SCAN**

Top left view: holes indicate low blood flow in prefrontal cortex and right temporal lobe  
 Top right and bottom left views: decreases in left and right occipital lobes

Stephen's SPECT scan showed clear evidence of a prior head injury with low blood flow in the right prefrontal cortex, right temporal lobe, and the left and right occipital lobes. In his history, he told us that when he was very young, he had fallen down a flight of stairs and been knocked unconscious.

Could the early fall have caused a lifetime of sadness? Absolutely. Undiagnosed brain injuries are a major contributing factor to depression, anxiety, ADHD, addictions, homelessness, and suicide. Despite seeing psychiatrists, psychologists, and other therapists, Stephen's brain history had never been addressed because no one had ever looked at his brain. After just two months of repairing his brain by using bright light therapy and targeted nutraceuticals geared to his brain type and by learning not to believe every bad thought he had, Stephen felt happier, more hopeful, and more in control of his emotions.

While I was writing this book, we at Amen Clinics administered the Oxford Happiness Questionnaires to 344 of our patients who also had SPECT scans. From the scan data, it became clear that with a healthier brain comes a happier life. You'll learn more about this fascinating study in chapter 2.

***Secret 3: Nourish your unique brain.***

*Question 3: Am I nourishing my unique brain?*

Prior to going to medical school, I was interested in natural ways to heal. My grandfather, Dan, after whom I was named and who was my best friend growing up, had a heart attack when I was a teenager. As part of his recovery,

my mother took him to natural health practitioners who changed his diet and started him on natural supplements. Health was a common discussion with my mother. Yet in medical school and five years of my psychiatric residency and fellowship, there was very little education on the impact of diet on mental health and virtually nothing on natural supplements, which unfortunately is still the case today. To my surprise there was already an extensive literature in 1991 about nutraceuticals and health, including mental health, which has since grown exponentially. For example, a search of PubMed.gov from the National Library of Medicine will return over 2,400 scientific abstracts on omega-3s and mood,<sup>17</sup> over 3,900 on vitamin D and mood,<sup>18</sup> and over 3,500 on St. John's Wort, a commonly used nutraceutical for mood issues.<sup>19</sup>

New research suggests we can produce up to 700 new brain cells a day if we put them in a nourishing environment (meaning good nutrition, omega-3 fatty acids, oxygen, blood flow, and stimulation).<sup>20</sup> If we nourish our brain and body, the hippocampi (which resemble seahorses) can grow stronger. We have two hippocampi, one in our left temporal lobe and another in our right temporal lobe. They are critical for learning, memory, and mood (happiness). If you hurt your biology, they shrink.

With a few basic nutrients and targeted supplements, you can improve the health of your brain, support the brain chemicals involved in your happiness, and balance the specific needs for your brain type.

#### ***Secret 4: Choose foods you love that love you back.***

*Question 4: Do I choose foods today I love that love me back?*

Scientists in the fields of psychiatry and psychology are increasingly finding that food is tightly linked to mood and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. In a 2017 study in *BMC Medicine*, researchers found that when people with moderate to severe depression received nutritional counseling and ate a more healthful diet for 12 weeks, their symptoms improved significantly.<sup>21</sup> In fact, depressive symptoms got so much better that over 32 percent of the participants achieved what psychiatrists call “remission criteria.” This means they no longer qualified as having a mood disorder. Based on these results, the research team suggested that dietary changes could be an effective treatment strategy for depression. It is becoming abundantly clear that if you want to feel good, you need to eat well.

Think back to the “Lies of Happiness.” Coca-Cola’s “Open happiness” campaign and McDonald’s “Happy Meals” are made with low-quality ingredients that taste good going down but that downgrade your happiness over time.

As a general rule, fast food is sad food. Just look at the findings of this study on food and depression from two small islands in the Torres Strait located between Australia and New Guinea.<sup>22</sup> One of the islands is dotted with fast-food joints, while the other more remote island doesn't have a single fast-food outlet. On the fast-food island, residents reported lower fish consumption, while those living on the other island said they had higher fish consumption. When the researchers screened the residents for depression, 16 people from the fast-food island reported moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms, compared to only three people from the other island. This represents a 500 percent increase in the incidence of depression based on food consumption.

What you eat and drink has a direct effect on your brain and its ability to balance chemicals, promote health, and operate optimally—all factors in your happiness.

***Secret 5: Master your mind and gain psychological distance from the noise in your head.***

*Question 5: Is it true? What went well today?*

Your mind can be a troublemaker. Mine often is. Thoughts and feelings come from many sources, such as:

- How your brain is working at any given moment (which is influenced by your diet, gut health, immunity, inflammation, exposure to toxins, and sleep)
- Experiences from your ancestors that have been written in your genetic code
- Genetic tendencies. For example, my oldest daughter was shy when she was very young and would often hide behind my leg whenever a new person came by, while her younger sister said, “Hi, my name is Kaitlyn,” to everyone she met, and Chloe, our youngest, came out of the womb extremely verbal (12-word sentences at the age of 2), claiming, “I’m the leader; I am the boss” as a toddler.
- Personal experiences (conscious and unconscious) and memories
- Your interpretation of the words and body gestures of your parents, siblings, friends, enemies, and acquaintances
- The news, music, and social media you’re exposed to, and much more

You are not your mind. Your ability to separate from, manage, and not be a victim of your mind is essential to feeling happy. Yet it was not until I was 28 years old, starting my psychiatric residency, that I learned I was not my mind and I did not have to believe every stupid thought that came into my awareness. I learned that my thoughts create my feelings; my feelings create my behaviors; and eventually my behaviors create my outcomes in relationships, work, finances, and how healthy I am physically and emotionally. If I could separate myself from my thoughts and look at them dispassionately, then I could feel and act in a more consistently happy way over time.

One helpful psychological distancing technique, found in chapter 12, is to give your mind a name. This allows for separation, and you choose whether to listen to it. As you'll learn, I named my mind Hermie after the pet raccoon I had when I was 16 years old. I loved her, but she was a troublemaker, like my mind, and got me into hot water with my parents, siblings, and girlfriend. (I'll tell you more about Hermie later.) I often imagine Hermie holding up signs in my head with random negative thoughts, such as:

- You're a failure.
- You're a fool.
- You'll get sued.
- You're not enough.
- Others are better than you.



Knowing that I am not my mind, I can choose to ignore Hermie—metaphorically putting her in her cage. Always ask yourself whether your thoughts help you or hurt you. When Hermie is causing trouble, I often imagine petting her, playing with her, or putting the little troublemaker on her back and tickling her. I don't have to take Hermie, or my mind, seriously. I can gain psychological distance, and so can you. Hermie will show up throughout the book to illustrate how psychologically distancing yourself can contribute to your happiness.

***Secret 6: Notice what you like about others more than what you don't.***

*Question 6: Am I reinforcing the behaviors I like or dislike in others today?*

One day my patient Jessie, 16, stormed into my office, sat on a couch, and told me that she hated her mother, was running away from home, and I

couldn't stop her. She was clearly unhappy. In the few years I had been seeing Jessie, I had gotten to know her family well. It was clear to me that her mother had untreated ADD and tended to pick on Jessie as a way to stimulate her own brain. Conflict-seeking behavior is very common among people with untreated ADD. I tried to convince her mother to get help, but she wouldn't have it . . . and now she was driving her daughter away.

In the middle of the rant, Jessie turned her anger on me. "Tell me, Dr. Amen. Why does a grown man collect penguins?" she asked.

In my office at the time were hundreds of penguins . . . pretty much any type of penguin that you could imagine: penguin pens, dolls, and puppets; a penguin vacuum; and even a penguin weather vane. I laughed and said, "I've seen you for two years, and you're just now noticing the penguins? Let me tell you the story.

"A long time ago, when my son was seven, he was difficult for me. As a way to work on our relationship, I took him to a sea animal park. We had fun at the whale show and the sea lion show, and at the end of the day my son wanted to see the penguin show. The penguin's name was Fat Freddy. He was an amazing chubby little penguin. He dove off a high diving board, bowled with his nose, counted with his flippers, and jumped through a hoop of fire. Then, toward the end of the show, the trainer asked Freddy to go get something, and Freddy went and brought the item right back.

*Wow, I thought to myself. I ask this kid to get something for me, and he wants to have a discussion for twenty minutes, and then he doesn't want to do it. I knew my son was smarter than the penguin.*

"So, after the show, I went up to the trainer and asked her how she got Freddy to do all of those really cool things. The trainer looked at my son and then at me and said, 'Unlike parents, whenever Freddy does anything I want him to do, I notice him. I give him a hug, and I give him a fish.'

"Even though my son didn't like whole raw fish like my sushi-loving daughter Chloe did, a light turned on in my head. Whenever my son did things that I liked, I paid no attention to him at all because, like my own father, I was a busy guy. But when he didn't do what I wanted him to do, I gave him a ton of attention because I didn't want to raise bad children. I was inadvertently teaching him to act badly in order to get my attention. So now I collect penguins as a way to remind myself to notice the good things about the people in my life a lot more than the bad things."<sup>23</sup>

As I finished telling the story, I told Jessie that I had this really crazy idea. "What if we trained your mother to be less angry and less likely to pick on you?" I began.

“I’m listening,” she said.

“I know this will be hard, but whenever your mother starts in on you, I want you not to overreact. Don’t challenge her or get emotional.”

At this point, Jessie’s eyes got big. “I don’t think I can do that,” she said, her voice trailing off.

“Hold on,” I said. “Here’s what I’m asking you to do. Whenever she is nice to you, listens to you, or is more appropriate with you, I want you to tell her how much you love and appreciate her.”

Jessie was starting to understand. Like the trainer who shaped Freddy’s behavior, she could influence her mother’s behavior by noticing what she liked a lot more than what she didn’t like. I was teaching Jessie personal power.

Clearly, Jessie knew how to push her mother’s buttons. With a look or a word, she could send her mother into orbit. But if she had that power, she also had the power to calm things down and make life better.

That night, I got a text from Jessie saying that she decided not to run away from home. A week later, she said our plan was working. Two weeks after that, when I saw her again, she said things were much better at home, and she brought me a penguin to add to my collection.

I know you’ve heard the phrase “It takes two to make a relationship better.” It’s just not my experience as a psychiatrist. When I teach my patients how powerful they are, they realize they can clearly make things better with their loved ones or they can make things worse.

***Secret 7: Live each day based on your clearly defined values, purpose, and goals.***

*Question 7: Does it fit? Does my behavior today fit the goals I have for my life?*

Over the years, I’ve seen many patients who feel disconnected and insignificant. They lack a sense of meaning and purpose. They lack a relationship with God or something bigger than themselves. Regardless of religion, denomination, or even personal belief in God, without a spiritual connection, many people experience an underlying sense of despair or meaninglessness. At their core, they are unhappy. It doesn’t have to be that way.

We are all spiritual beings created with divine purpose, whether or not we believe in God. Each person has a role to play in the lives of those around them and a mission to fulfill. Having a deep sense of meaning and purpose gives you a reason to get up and take great care of your brain. Purpose gives you a sense of what matters most in the grand scheme of life and eternity, and it is essential for happiness. Without knowing your purpose, it’s hard to have

values and goals that matter. When you make decisions based on your purpose, it shifts your focus away from self and onto others. I like to ask people the following question to help them discover why their life matters: Why is the world a better place because you breathe? If you don't know the answer to this question, think it over. Ask those closest to you for their insights. What skills do you have that could be helpful to someone today? What can you do to make the world a better place?

Knowing your purpose guides your goals and decisions in what I call the Four Circles—the four areas of your life that make up the essence of who you are. Let me explain.

In evaluating and treating patients, I never think of them as their symptoms but rather as whole people in four big circles: biological, psychological, social, and spiritual (underlying meaning and purpose). This book will be divided into sections that honor these circles, as they all contribute to happiness or unhappiness.

If you were one of my patients, I'd ask you to do my Four Circles of Happiness exercise to identify what makes you happy in each of the Four Circles.

- **Biological Circle:** how your physical body and brain function
- **Psychological Circle:** developmental issues and how you think
- **Social Circle:** social support, your current life situation, and societal influences
- **Spiritual Circle:** your connection to God, the planet, past and future generations, and your deepest sense of meaning and purpose



### HAPPINESS TRANSFORMATION IN 30 DAYS

*I am so happy that I did the challenge. I loved all the interventions. My husband also took this challenge. We asked each other the seven questions each night, and I believe doing this challenge has brought us closer together. I feel so much more motivated to live my life differently so I can be happier.*

—MT

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## ***Look for the Micro-Moments of Happiness***

Keep in mind that the big “H” doesn't require major life-changing events, accomplishments, or milestones. Start finding joy in the smallest things you can: hearing a bird sing outside your window, feeling the warmth of the sun on your face when you step outside,

petting your dog or cat, taking that first sip of your favorite brain healthy smoothie, or cracking open a new book (like this one!). I call these micro-moments of happiness. Most of us gloss over these little things, searching instead for the big experiences. I want you to savor these precious times because, when your brain pays attention to them, they add up to more overall contentment and satisfaction with your life. The more micro-moments you cherish, the greater your sense of joy. Throughout this book, I will introduce you to some of my own micro-moments of happiness and will offer suggestions to look for your own based on your brain type. (Just look for the smiley face icons.) Let's get happier, one micro-moment at a time!

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Let me show you what this looks like when I do this exercise:

#### DR. AMEN'S FOUR CIRCLES OF HAPPINESS

##### Biological

A great night's sleep

Waking up feeling rested

Feeling mentally sharp

Great health numbers, such as: BMI, blood pressure, vitamin D, omega-3 index, C-reactive protein, HbA1C, fasting blood sugar, ferritin, etc.

Exercises I love, especially table tennis, lifting weights to feel strong, and walks on the beach with Aslan, my white shepherd

Warm weather

Foods I love that love me back: my brain-healthy shake in the morning, perfectly cooked eggs, Copper River salmon

Physical affection with Tana

Being in nature: the beach, woods, and mountains, especially Muir Woods, a redwood forest north of San Francisco

Being pain-free

- ☺ **Biological Micro-Moments:** the first sip of a brain-healthy cappuccino or hot chocolate, the first bite of an orange from my father's ranch, guacamole made from his avocados, Aslan getting excited when I put on my sneakers, holding Tana's hand when we walk, having eye contact with her, seeing the fireplace come on or watching it, hearing a song I love

## Psychological

Healthy routines

Starting my days with “Today is going to be a great day”

Ending each day with the treasure hunt of “What went well today?”

Happy memories, such as giving the graduation commencement speech at my university 40 years (almost to the day) after graduating with an undergraduate degree

Correcting negative thought patterns

Writing and creating new ideas

Feeling productive

New learning

Listening to great audiobooks

Movies, especially comedies

Fun TV series

Working toward achieving our goals

- ☺ **Psychological Micro-Moments:** making a great play in a Sudoku puzzle, laughing at a joke or funny scene in a movie or TV show, listening to a cool plot twist in an audiobook, putting words together to make someone laugh

## Social

Being connected to Tana

Being connected to my kids and grandkids on a regular basis

Spending time with my mother

Being connected to siblings, friends, and coworkers

Smooth-functioning executive team at work with people I care about

Great conversations

Speaking and teaching

Financial security; being a value spender

Watching sports (Lakers, Dodgers, tennis, especially Rafael Nadal)

Recognition for doing a good job

Being with our dog and cat

- ☺ **Social Micro-Moments:** hearing my mother’s voice on the phone when she first recognizes it’s me, thinking of the grandkids, getting a fun text from a friend or patient, petting/cuddling the dog and cat

## Spiritual

Being close to God

Attending religious services with people I care about

Caring for the planet (recycling)

Being connected to the past (especially my grandfather and father who are both dead but live in me)

Being connected to the future (my grandchildren and the future of Amen Clinics and BrainMD)

Doing work that matters

Living a life that matters and changing how mental health care is practiced worldwide

Feeling purposeful

Making a difference in the lives of others

Not being afraid to die

- ☺ **Spiritual Micro-Moments:** saying a prayer each night, randomly remembering a Bible verse that applies to a situation I am in, being grateful for another day, remembering my grandfather and father

Now it's your turn. I urge you to do your own Four Circles of Happiness on a sheet of paper or on your smart device right now. Inside each of the circles, write the following titles:

**FOUR CIRCLES OF HAPPINESS**

**BIOLOGICAL**

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☺ *Biological Micro-Moments*

**PSYCHOLOGICAL**

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☺ *Psychological Micro-Moments*

**SOCIAL**

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☺ *Social Micro-Moments*

**SPIRITUAL**

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☺ *Spiritual Micro-Moments*

Within each circle, write down what makes you happy while keeping these questions in mind:

- What brings a smile to your face?
- What makes you feel good about life?
- What do you value most?

Don't forget to add a section for micro-moments in each circle. When you have finished, look at how many things you have listed in each circle. Does one circle have a much shorter list? Are you out of balance in any of these areas? If so, you may be neglecting one of your circles. Be sure to look at your Four Circles of Happiness every day as a way to remind yourself about the things that bring you joy. Focusing on doing what you love to do is a surefire way to make you happier.

Now that you know the seven secrets of happiness no one is talking about, let's get serious about helping you and your loved ones become and stay happier.



PART 1

THE  
NEUROSCIENCE  
OF BRAIN TYPES  
AND HAPPINESS





## CHAPTER 2

# FINDING HAPPINESS IN THE BRAIN

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*Being able to instantly respond to sarcasm is a sign of a healthy brain.*

ANONYMOUS

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Your brain is the organ of happiness. Your brain is the organ of liking, wanting, and learning—all essential ingredients that go into happiness. Your brain is also the organ of sadness, anxiety, panic, anger, and storing past emotional trauma—the enemies of happiness. Deciding to assess and optimize the three pounds of tissue between your ears is the first foundational decision to a happier life. Yet most people never think about their brains, which is a huge mistake, because success and happiness start in the physical functioning of the brain.

Evidence that most people never think about their brains is everywhere. Adults still let kids play football despite all the evidence of brain damage, hit soccer balls with their heads, and do dangerous gymnastics routines. Head trauma, as we saw with Stephen in the first chapter, is a major cause of unhappiness. I live in Newport Beach, California, where there are more plastic surgeons than most places in the world, and I often think that as a society we care more about our faces, breasts, bellies, and butts than we do our brains. The thinking among many people is that if you look perfect, you will be happy. Of course, that is a lie. Looking perfect will *not* make you happy—just remember the stunning actress Marilyn Monroe and supermodel Margaux Hemingway, who took their own lives.

Why do most people never think about the health of their own brains? Because you can't see the brain. You can see the wrinkles in your skin or the fat around your belly, and you can do something when you're unhappy with how you look. Yet, since most people never see their brains, they just don't care until it is showing signs of real trouble. Physicians screen hearts, bones, cervixes, and prostate glands, but it is rare for them to assess brain health

unless you have a significant problem, such as migraines, dizziness, seizures, or memory issues.

When I first started looking at the brain in 1991 using SPECT imaging, I didn't care about my own brain, even though I was the top neuroscience student at my medical school and, at the time, was a double board-certified psychiatrist (general psychiatry, and child and adolescent psychiatry). I don't remember one lecture on brain health during my five-year psychiatric training program. As embarrassing as it sounds now, I hadn't thought about the physical health of my brain, even though the brain is the main target organ in psychiatry. That all changed in an instant.

Shortly after I started ordering SPECT scans, I scanned my 60-year-old mother as part of a healthy database project. I discovered that she had a stunningly beautiful brain, which looked much younger than her 60 years.<sup>1</sup> Her scan reflected her life. At the time, she had seven children, dozens of grandchildren, and was an active, positive presence in everyone's life. She also played golf and was the Newport Beach Golf Club Women's Champion in 1976. After seeing her brain, I worked up the courage to scan my own brain. It was not healthy, looking significantly older than my 37 years. As I wondered why, I remembered I had played football in high school (bad for the brain), had meningitis twice as a young Army soldier (also bad for the brain), and had bad brain habits. Although I was never one to drink alcohol (I hate being out of control), smoke, or use drugs, at the time I was under chronic stress at home and work, often didn't sleep more than four hours a night, was about 30 pounds overweight, and ate mostly fast food on the run.

Seeing my SPECT scan compared to my mother's scan, I developed brain envy. I wanted a healthy brain like hers, so I began working to improve it. My brain became healthier quickly and stayed that way. Decades later, my scan was fuller, fatter, and healthier, which became the foundational principle behind our work at Amen Clinics: "You are not stuck with the brain you have. You can make it better, and we can prove it." We saw this not only in me but also in the tens of thousands of patients we treated. With a better brain comes a better, happier, and more successful life.