

**DANIEL G. AMEN, M.D.**

*NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
CHANGE YOUR BRAIN, CHANGE YOUR BODY*

unleash the  
**power**  
of the **female**  
**brain**

**SUPERCHARGING YOURS FOR**

**BETTER HEALTH, ENERGY,**

**MOOD, FOCUS, AND SEX**

## **BOOKS BY DR. AMEN**

USE YOUR BRAIN TO CHANGE YOUR AGE (Crown Archetype, 2012)

THE AMEN SOLUTION (Crown Archetype, 2011)

END EMOTIONAL OVEREATING NOW (written with Larry Momaya, M.S. M.D.,  
MindWorks, 2011)

UNCHAIN YOUR BRAIN (MindWorks, 2010)

WIRED FOR SUCCESS (MindWorks, 2010)

CHANGE YOUR BRAIN, CHANGE YOUR BODY (Harmony Books, 2010)

MAGNIFICENT MIND AT ANY AGE (Harmony Books, 2009)

THE BRAIN IN LOVE (Three Rivers Press, 2007)

MAKING A GOOD BRAIN GREAT (Harmony Books, 2005)

PREVENTING ALZHEIMER'S (written with neurologist William R. Shankle, Putnam, 2004)

HEALING ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION (written with Lisa Routh, M.S. M.D., Putnam,  
2003)

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The information presented in this book is the result of years of practical experience and clinical research by the author. The information here, 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 interventions, please see a medical practitioner as soon as possible. The stories in this book are true. The names and circumstances of the stories have been changed to protect the anonymity of patients.

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v3.1

*To the powerful women in my life!*

*My wife, Tana*

*My daughters, Breanne, Kaitlyn, and Chloe*

*My granddaughters, Angelina and Emmy*

*My mother, Dorie*

*My sisters, Chris, Jeanne, Mary, Renee, and Joanne*

*And my many aunts, nieces, grandnieces, and female cousins*

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## Introduction

### THE FEMALE BRAIN UNLEASHED

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*I have an idea that the phrase “the weaker sex” was coined by some woman to disarm the man she was preparing to overwhelm.*

—OGDEN NASH

**M**y thought exactly. I have been surrounded by powerful women my whole life.

Growing up, there were so many women in my life that when my mother brought my fifth sister, Joanne, home from the hospital in December 1962, my older brother, Jimmy, and I ran away. Jimmy was nine and I was eight, and we were only gone for forty-five minutes, but, as the only boys, we had had enough! The girls had taken over and they were everywhere. I often joke that I never saw a bathroom until I was fourteen years old and that once I actually got in, there was unusual and frightening stuff scattered everywhere.

Not only was I raised by a very powerful mother, who at eighty-one years old and five feet tall is still in charge everywhere she goes, but I have five strong-willed sisters, three incredible daughters, two granddaughters, and fourteen nieces and grandnieces. My wife says I came housebroken when it came to dealing with women, but it was not an easy process. As we will see, the female brain is very different from the male brain.

As I came to understand the complexity and power of the female brain, I marveled at what a difference this information could make to the experience of millions of women and to the men and children in their lives.

When a woman understands the uniqueness of the female brain—how to care for it, how to make the most of its strengths, how to overcome its challenges, how to fall in love with it, and ultimately, how to unleash its full power—there is no stopping her. In her personal development, at work, and in her relationships, she can bring the best of herself to her family, her community, and her planet.

By contrast, a woman who is not caring optimally for her brain, who is not giving it the full range of nutrients, exercise, sleep, and emotional support that it needs, is squandering her most valuable resource. If you are not taking good care of your brain, you are at a significantly higher risk of brain fog, memory problems, low energy, distractibility, poor decisions, obesity, heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. You can't have the vitality you need to get through the day with all the calm, focus, energy, and joy of which you are capable. You are most certainly going to age faster and become ill both more

often and more seriously.

Those are the risks that both men and women share—but as a woman, you face some unique additional challenges. You are far more likely than a man to suffer from anxiety and depression and, in some studies, Alzheimer’s disease. You are far more susceptible to recurring negative thoughts you just can’t dismiss, to body image struggles that all too frequently morph into eating disorders, and to excessive self-criticism for not being perfect. You are also more prone to pouring yourself into the care of your loved ones and the demands of your job, your family, and your community, finding it ever more difficult to take the time you need to care for yourself.

These are the risks you face, but you don’t have to fall prey to them. Caring for your female brain and learning how to unleash its power can free you to reach your full potential to be healthy, loving, successful, and strong. It can allow you to have more satisfying intimate relationships and make you a better partner. And it can make you a more effective person at your chosen work. For women who choose to have children, it also prepares you for a successful pregnancy and equips you to help your children fully unleash the power of *their* brains.

*Unleashing the power of your female brain is your key to finally having the life you’ve dreamed of and deserve.*

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## THE FEMALE BRAIN CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

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With the epidemic escalation of obesity, diabetes, depression, and dementia, the health of Western society is going the wrong way at an ever more rapid pace. Now more than ever, we need thoughtful, intelligent, powerful, “brain smart” women to guide and redirect our families, communities, churches, workplaces, nation, and world. And women are in a unique position to make a dramatic difference.

One of the reasons I decided to write this book now is that I know what an enormous difference women can make. Growing up, my mother was the health leader in our home, and today my wife, Tana, plays the same role. I have seen this pattern repeat over and over in the families I treat as a physician. When the adult females take better care of themselves, it tends to positively affect those around them.

As a neuroscientist, psychiatrist, and brain imaging specialist, I have known for decades that women typically take their physical and mental health more seriously than men do. That is one of the reasons, I’m convinced, that they also live longer on average than men. In 2010, U.S. women lived an average of eighty years, as opposed to only seventy-three years for U.S. men. In Russia, women live twelve years longer than men—so, men, if you’re reading this to better understand women, you might want to cut back on the vodka.

Women also worry more about their health, which, ironically, is one of the major factors associated with longevity. The “don’t worry, be happy” people—more often men drinking at bars or four-wheeling in the desert—are more

likely to die earlier from accidents or preventable illnesses, such as alcoholism, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Those who are appropriately concerned about their health ultimately take better care of themselves and live longer, healthier, and happier lives.

***Maybe we should change the phrase from “Don’t worry, be happy” to “Be concerned, live longer, be happy!”***

Women also engage in fewer behaviors that damage the “executive control center” in the front part of their brains, where decisions are made, self-control is exerted, and forward thinking takes place. Girls are less likely to engage in brain-damaging behaviors such as hitting soccer balls with their heads, or playing tackle football ... at least they used to be, until the explosion of soccer among young girls.

Women may also live longer than men because they exhibit greater empathy and ability to forgive, which helps them do a better job at weathering the inevitable storms of injustice that rain down on us all.

In our own patient outcome studies at Amen Clinics, both men and women improve their health at very high rates. Yet our female patients tend to do better, because they are more compliant and take our treatment recommendations more seriously.

Empathic, concerned women aren’t just thinking of themselves. They’re also thinking about their husbands, which may very well be one reason why married men live longer than unmarried men. I often hear wives nagging their husbands to take better care of themselves. They set out their fish oil capsules and vitamins and encourage them to go to the doctor. Yet, in some studies, married women do not live longer than unmarried women, and they may even have shorter lives. I think the stress of taking care of stubbornly resistant males can wear them out. Here’s an example:

*Nabil and his wife, Monica, were both physicians who worked together. One day Nabil called his wife saying he vomited and had a bad headache and was not coming to work. Alarmed, Monica told Nabil to go to the hospital. Nabil said he would be okay and that he just needed a nap and hung up the phone. Knowing the symptoms could be serious, Monica called Nabil back and pleaded with him to seek immediate help. Nabil again told his wife he would be okay and not to worry about him. Knowing how much more significant the symptoms could be for people in their early sixties, Monica’s worry skyrocketed. She raced home and took Nabil to the emergency room where it was discovered that he had a brain aneurysm. Without immediate medical help, the neurosurgeon told the couple, Nabil would have been dead within an hour.*

Women often become the health monitors in their families because they tend to realize and admit problems faster than men. They typically reach out for help and community support years or even decades before their male

counterparts. At Amen Clinics, we see that when a couple is struggling in their relationship, the woman is most often the one who calls for help. Eight out of ten times, when a child is having problems, the mother is the one who calls us, even when both parents work full-time.

Everywhere I look, I see women acting as the health leaders in their families and communities. As one of the co-creators of the Daniel Plan—Pastor Rick Warren and Saddleback Church’s program to get the world healthy through religious organizations—I have seen, not surprisingly, that 85 percent of the people who signed up to get healthy in their churches were women.

As a male psychiatrist and physician, I’m increasingly troubled about the way such large numbers of men are falling behind. I remember the day I read that statistic from our research team at Saddleback Church—and had an absolute tantrum! Men have to do better, but it is often at the insistence of our mothers and wives.

In my experience, women are most often the ones who pull the lever for change. They’re typically the ones who plan the meals, and they are often the ones who coordinate household activities and oversee the children. Growing up with a powerful matriarch, I learned firsthand that when Mom gets health right, everybody else has the best opportunity to get it right too. And when Mom *doesn’t* get it right, that can have a truly devastating effect on both the physical and mental healths of the whole family.

During my psychiatric residency training, I studied children and grandchildren of alcoholics. One of my best friends grew up in a severely abusive alcoholic home. One of my research findings was that if your father was an alcoholic, it had a significant negative effect on your emotional development. But if your mother was the alcoholic, the devastating effects were much more profound. It is essential to keep the female brain healthy.

Most of this book is devoted to helping you unleash the power of your own female brain. Once you fall in love with your brain and learn how to take care of it, and do the steps I recommend, you’ll be able to influence your loved ones and create a brain-healthy community around you, further supporting your own efforts to be well.

In my last book, *Use Your Brain to Change Your Age*, I wrote about Marianne, the western regional director for Franklin Covey, the highly successful training and consulting company. At fifty-nine years old, she felt that her mind was beginning to deteriorate. Physically, she hurt all over and her head felt foggy most of the day. At first she thought that she was just getting older, that she was experiencing something that eventually happens to everyone. But as she got worse, she thought it was unfair to her co-workers that she wasn’t at the top of her game, and she considered resigning. She believed her best days were behind her. Then, fortuitously, one of her daughters gave her a copy of one of my programs, which she immediately started. To her amazement, within two months she felt much better. Her pain was gone and the brain fog had lifted. And by staying on the program, within a year she had lost 60 pounds, and her brain felt younger, sharper, and more energized than

it had in decades. “I have a fast-acting brain with the wisdom of experience,” she told me. “I feel like I am at the peak of my life and my best is no longer behind me.”

Recently, Marianne and I were together at a Franklin Covey conference where I was speaking. She told me that as she had gotten healthier one of her daughters got healthier as well. Her daughter had been 140 pounds overweight. But seeing her mother’s remarkable progress, she wanted the same health benefits for herself and over the next two years lost the 140 pounds. Marianne’s remarkable change also inspired her husband to get healthy. In fact, everything at her workplace changed as well. She changed the food at work and was amazed at how much more energy her team had and how much more they accomplished during meetings. “We used to be worn out toward the end of the day. But since we started serving *only* brain-healthy food at work, everyone’s energy is up and we are much more productive.”

Marianne is the poster female for change in her family, in her business, and her community. My hope is that you will be like Marianne and change your world too.

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### YET THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT THE FEMALE BRAIN MAY BE IN TROUBLE

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According to a recent study, women’s life spans in the United States are improving at a slower pace than men’s and are actually shorter in many areas than they were two decades ago! Even though women are still expected to outlive men, the study from the University of Washington is cause for concern. The study is based on mortality data by age, sex, and county from 1989 to 2009. In this study, life expectancy for men improved by an average of 4.6 years, but only by 2.7 years for women. The director of the research team expressed his concern, “A gain in life expectancy should be equal among men and women. This is a wake-up call for all of us. It’s tragic that in a country as wealthy as the United States, and with all the medical expertise we have, *so many girls will live shorter lives than their mothers.*”

Life expectancy stopped improving, or even shortened, since 1999 for women in 661 U.S. counties and for men in 166 counties. These declining rates also appear in 84 percent of Oklahoma counties, 58 percent of Tennessee counties, and 33 percent of Georgia counties. According to the research, a larger percentage of women than men are not adequately treating high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Researchers reported that many physicians do not treat women with heart risk factors as aggressively as they do men. Preventable causes, such as tobacco, alcohol, and obesity seem to be at the heart of the lower life expectancies for women.

Across the United States, there is nearly a twelve-year gap in women’s life spans. Women live the longest in Collier County, Florida (85.8), but have the shortest life spans in McDowell County, West Virginia (74.1). In 1989, the gap

was only 8.7 years. In Australia, life expectancy improved twelve years in both men and women from 1989 to 2009. We can do better. We can improve longevity if you and your family and friends follow the program in this book.

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## THE FEMALE BRAIN UNLEASHED

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In my family, community, and medical practice, I have seen over and over the amazing change that can result when women understand and take steps to optimize their unique strengths and response to challenges. I have also seen the negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, that can result when women do *not* understand their own brains or take the necessary steps to take care of them. In this book I show you, step-by-step, exactly how to unleash the power of the female brain. You'll learn the following:

- How to fall in love with your brain, so that caring for it becomes a joy and not a burden. It becomes something you *have* to do and a habit you'll love having. It is the expression of a logical mind and self-love.
- How to harness the unique strengths of the female brain, such as empathy, intuition, collaboration, self-control, and a little worry, and how to overcome some of its special vulnerabilities, such as depression, perfectionism, and an inability to let go of negative thoughts
- How to naturally balance the hormones that govern energy, mood, relaxation, power, trust, and lust, and how to make your hormones work for you, instead of against you. You will also learn how to successfully navigate such hormone-related issues as thyroid imbalance, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), polycystic ovary syndrome, perimenopause, and menopause.
- About the different brain types, find out which brain type is yours, and how to use the Amen Clinics Method to optimize your brain
- How to soothe your brain with natural treatments in order to successfully tackle anxiety, worry, depression, perfectionism, and eating disorders. You'll also learn how to turn your brain off, so you're not always bombarded by thoughts of what you have to do next, what might go wrong, or what you fear might be wrong with you.
- How to feed your female brain so that you can flatten your tummy, permanently lose unwanted pounds, get healthy and fit, and stop feeding irritable bowel syndrome, depression, Alzheimer's, and even cancer
- How to get your cravings under control, and boost your decision-making skills to improve your health and weight
- About attention-deficit disorder (ADD) in women, and how, if you

have it, it can be sabotaging your success

- About the connection between brain health and beauty, and how taking care of your brain can help you look more vital and younger
  - How to optimize your brain for love, sex, and intimacy in relationships. All of these are better when your brain is better!
- How to get your brain ready for babies, raise them in a brain-healthy way, and unleash the power of your daughters' brains
  - How to create a brain-healthy community and how doing so can change your world

As a psychiatrist, brain imaging researcher, husband, father of three girls, and brother to five sisters, *I know that women have a unique capability to optimize the potential of their brain*, and I will share the stories of many women, some just like you, who have. Once you unleash the power of your female brain, you can be healthier, live longer, and slow or even reverse the aging process. You can also discover unsuspected reserves of serenity, power, vitality, and love.

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### **DO YOU HAVE TWELVE HOURS TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE?**

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Everywhere I go people tell me how my work on revitalizing brain health has changed their lives. I know the extraordinary power that can be unleashed when you fall in love with your brain and start loving it and treating it right. I want that success for you, and I know you can have it if you do the right things. To facilitate your success, I will give you twelve simple one-hour exercises to put these brain-healthy principles into your life. These exercises will radically change your life if you do them just as they are outlined. You will see the difference and feel it in your mood, energy, weight, appearance, and mental abilities. Rather than continuing to make decisions that undermine your health, you will know the joy of making great decisions that support your brain and your life. You will experience the benefit of thinking clearly and acting powerfully in a way that follows from healthy, disciplined thought patterns. You will feel the freedom from cravings, worry, depression, and perfectionism, opening up whole new possibilities for every aspect of your life.

Can you get all of this in twelve hours? Yes, you absolutely can.

And then ... it's up to you. Do you want to keep going in this new, positive direction, falling a little bit more in love with your brain each day? Do you want to keep losing weight, looking great, feeling energized, thinking clearly, acting powerfully? Do you want your life to keep getting better? You *are* on your way. Just keep implementing these twelve simple principles ... over and over and over. The program will keep getting easier, your life will keep getting better, and you will finally be unleashing the full power of *your* extraordinary female brain.

## FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR FEMALE BRAIN

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CARE ABOUT YOUR BRAIN MORE THAN ANY OTHER BODY PART

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Brain envy is the first step to unleashing the power of the female brain.

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*My best men are women.*

—WILLIAM BOOTH, THE FOUNDER OF THE SALVATION ARMY  
(overheard comment)

Susan was a forty-five-year-old mother of four and the CEO of a nonprofit company that created educational materials for learning-disabled children. She loved her husband and her family, and she had a strong sense of mission for her work. She was active in her local church and was a respected member of her community. Viewed from the outside, Susan seemed to “have it all.”

But when Susan came into my office, she told a very different story. “I’m just not feeling good,” she said. “I’m tired all the time, whether I sleep in on the weekends or not! I can’t remember the simplest things, and it seems like I can’t keep my mind on anything for more than a minute before something distracts me. I am feeling very overwhelmed.” She sighed. “And it’s getting worse. Stuff I used to be able to do easily I now really have to struggle through. I know people say they slow down as they get older, but I never thought it would happen to me at this age! I wonder if I have early symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. I picked up one of your books and you had such a positive message, that even when we get older, we don’t have to *feel* old. That’s what I want! But all sorts of things in my body seem to be breaking down. I’m gaining weight. My skin is breaking out—that *never* used to happen! And my cycles feel more jagged and intense. But the worst of it is how crabby and short-tempered I am. My husband keeps telling me I’m always snapping at the children, and at him, and sometimes I don’t even realize it!”

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### THE STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF THE FEMALE BRAIN

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Susan is like so many women I see. She thought she ate a healthy diet but

started most days with coffee and a bagel and had a terrible sweet tooth throughout the day. She wanted to work out but could not find the time and consistently drank two glasses of wine at night to relax. There was one major part of her body that she never gave any thought to—her brain. This is ironic, because Susan’s brain governs every aspect of her life. Her brain decides what she eats and how much she sleeps. Her brain decides whether to snap at her children or to take a deep breath and try a different approach. And her brain decides whether Susan is going to live a long and vital life looking and feeling her best or whether she is going to age rapidly, look years older than she is, and perhaps even face a serious disorder like cancer, diabetes, heart disease, or Alzheimer’s.

Of course, none of these decisions was necessarily conscious. But they were made by Susan’s brain nonetheless. And if Susan knew how to take care of her brain, how to give it the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual care it required, then she would be more likely to have a healthy, beautiful brain, which, in turn, would help Susan feel terrific and have the energy she needed to enjoy and be effective in her life.

Brain health is crucial for all my patients: men, women, and children alike. But I have noticed, over many years of practice, that my female patients face special challenges. As we will see in [chapter 2](#), women’s brains have five special strengths: intuition, empathy, collaboration, self-control, and a little worry. Empathy allows women to be loving and nurturing. Intuition enables them to quickly grasp information that may not be obvious or easy to justify through logic. Self-control gives them better control over their impulses. Their collaborative gifts help them to work with others. And their tendency to worry, when it’s in the right proportions, keeps them focused on possible problems and alert to potential solutions.

So far, so good. But like all gifts, these have their dark sides. Empathy can morph into an overwhelming sense of the world riding on your shoulders, the feeling that you have to take care of everyone before your own needs ever get met. Intuition can awaken anxiety-provoking fears as you “know” something is not right without making sure to check it out or get more information. The brain frequently can misperceive things. Self-control can turn into trying to overcontrol others. Being collaborative can all too easily turn into the feeling that you aren’t allowed to do anything until you’ve gotten agreement from everyone else, such as your co-workers, family, or spouse. And the worry that is so useful in small doses can stress you to the point where it hurts your brain and your body and won’t allow you to rest.

Susan too struggled with both the strengths and the challenges of the female brain. Like many women, she felt guilty no matter what she did. If she was home, she was thinking about work; if she was at work, she was thinking about home. A deeply empathetic and caring person, Susan took on everybody’s problems as if they were her own. She worried about her personal assistant, who was caring for an elderly mother; her husband, who had come back from the doctor with news of his high blood sugar; and her

children, one of whom had just started to date. Susan worried about the learning-disabled students for whom her company produced educational materials. And she worried about her own parents; her mother seemed more forgetful and her father less engaged. Wherever she looked, Susan felt as though there was another demand she should be meeting, another problem she should be solving, another person to whom she could be giving just a little bit more. She just felt as though whatever she did, she could never win. So of course when her husband approached her for sex or even for an affectionate night of cuddling in front of the TV, Susan couldn't stay in the moment and enjoy their time together. She just couldn't turn off her busy brain.

"Susan," I said to her after hearing about her concerns, "it sounds like you are taking care of everyone in your life. But it is time to start taking much better care of yourself. Everyone you care about will be better if you are at your best."

Susan looked at me and asked, "How do I start?"

#### WHY YOUR BRAIN MATTERS!

##### **Your Brain Is Involved in Everything You Do**

It makes the healthy choices or the unhealthy choices that make you feel good or bad.

##### **When Your Brain Works Right, *You* Work Right**

Your healthy reactions and decisions benefit you.

##### **When Your Brain Is Troubled, *You* Have Trouble in Your Life**

Your bad choices complicate everything.

##### **You Can Change Your Brain and Enhance Your Life!**

Following brain-healthy guidelines can give you a fresh start.

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#### THE FOUR CIRCLES APPROACH TO YOUR FEMALE BRAIN

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At Amen Clinics, we have developed our Four Circles Approach, which is a "brain smart" comprehensive approach to evaluating and treating our patients. You are always more than your symptoms, and to be well, it is critical to take into account all aspects of your biology, psychology, social connections, and spiritual health. Our success rates with patients are very high because we take an integrated approach to understanding and healing the brain. If any one of these areas is not optimized, your brain will suffer, and so will your health, well-being, appearance, mood, and relationships.

With Susan, I went to the whiteboard in my office and drew four big circles. In the first circle I wrote *Biology* and began with a set of questions to look at the biological factors influencing her brain. I discovered that no one in her extended family had a history of Alzheimer’s disease or other dementia-like processes, but there was a family history of depression. Susan wasn’t on any medications. Her diet was not great, which, as we’ll see in [chapter 5](#), is a terrible thing to do to your brain. She also tended to eat a lot on the run, because she was so busy—also not good for the brain.

Another big biological problem in Susan’s profile was the five or fewer hours of sleep she got each night. I understood her dilemma. With four children and a high-powered job, it was hard to get everything done in a day. But not getting enough sleep is one of the worst things you can do for your brain, so this was a big concern.

As you’ll learn in [chapter 4](#), hormones play a huge role in your brain’s health, and Susan’s hormones were not in the best shape. Her lab results showed that her thyroid levels were low, as were the hormones produced by her adrenal glands (cortisol and DHEA, or dehydroepiandrosterone), likely from chronic stress. Susan basically relied on coffee to get herself going during the day. Then she had a couple of glasses of wine each night to help her relax, which didn’t help her hormones, blood sugar, weight, sleep, or brain. Restoring and balancing Susan’s hormones was going to be a key aspect of improving her brain’s biological health. I was eager to look at her brain scans (I’ll tell you more about this soon) to see what was going on.

First, though, I wanted to see what was happening in the other three circles. In the second circle I wrote the word *Psychology*. Psychologically, Susan was thinking in undisciplined and negative ways; her busy brain kept returning to the same worries, anxieties, and self-criticisms: *I should have done that differently. She probably doesn’t like me. I’m not doing enough for him. What is wrong with me, anyway?* Like many female brains, Susan’s was prone to a kind of perfectionism in which she magnified her flaws and minimized her good points. In Susan’s mind, the few extra pounds she had put on felt like the ultimate proof that she was old and ugly. Her children’s normal childhood crises were clear evidence of Susan’s not being a good enough mother. And her husband’s frustration with Susan’s short temper seemed like a sign (completely incorrectly, as it turned out) that their marriage was in trouble.

These psychological issues were both the result of Susan’s poor brain health and a contributing factor to it. Thinking in undisciplined, negative ways is just not good for the health of your brain, which is why, in [chapter 6](#), I teach you how not to believe every stupid thought you have. I refer to these “automatic negative thoughts” as ANTs, and I’ll show you several simple, effective ways of ridding yourself of them.

In the third circle I wrote *Social Connections*. There too Susan’s brain was facing a number of challenges. Susan felt separated from the most important people in her life, distant from her husband and irritable with her kids. At work, she felt overwhelmed. The support she might have gotten from friends

or from her community at church seemed out of reach, because Susan felt too exhausted to reach out.

In the last circle I wrote *Spiritual Health*. As it happened, Susan's brain was in good shape in this circle. She had a deep sense of meaning and purpose in her life that sustained her, even in this challenging time. She felt her work mattered to others, and she knew that her presence at home was crucial for her husband and children. She had a deep sense of connection to God, the planet, and the future. Susan's brain definitely benefited from her sense of meaning and purpose.

Having evaluated each of Susan's four circles, I moved on to look at Susan's brain SPECT scans. One of the unique aspects of our work that differentiates us from most psychiatrists is our belief that we should actually look at and evaluate the organ we treat. We do a brain imaging study called SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) that evaluates brain blood flow and activity patterns. It looks at how the brain works. At Amen Clinics we have been performing SPECT scans for twenty-two years and have a database of over 78,000 scans, giving us a significant edge on how to use them. SPECT scans basically show us three things: areas of the brain that work well and display good activity, areas of the brain that are low in activity, and areas of the brain that are high in activity.

Susan's SPECT scans helped me get an even clearer picture of what was going on with her. I could see that she had low activity in her temporal lobes, the memory areas of her brain, which explained her forgetfulness. She also had low activity in an area of her prefrontal cortex (PFC)—the “executive control” center in the front third of her brain, associated with focus, concentration, and impulse control. The low activity in her temporal lobes and PFC are common in low thyroid states. I suspected that these problems would improve significantly as soon as Susan started taking better care of her brain: balancing her hormones, getting the food, supplements, sleep, exercise, and psychological help she needed, as well as getting more social support from her loved ones and her community.

Susan was also experiencing problems in her limbic system, her “emotional brain.” There was increased activity there, probably from the chronic stress that she felt at work, at home, and every place else. Driving out the ANTs would help calm this part of Susan's brain, as would meditation, self-hypnosis, and other relaxation techniques. Healthy food, sleep, a multiple vitamin, fish oil, optimizing her vitamin D level, other targeted supplements, and exercise would help too.

I showed Susan her scan and a healthy one for comparison and pointed out each one of the areas that could use help. As soon as Susan saw her scan and understood what it meant, she asked if it could be made better. This is a question I love answering. The last twenty-two years of my life have been focused on changing my patients' brains and changing their lives. “Yes,” I said. “If you follow the program I give you, your brain can become much healthier and you will feel much better.” That got her excited.