

August 2003

[Book Review of] Change Your Brain, Change Your Life: The Breakthrough Program for Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Anger, and Impulsiveness, Daniel G. Amen

Paul Flaman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Flaman, Paul (2003) "[Book Review of] Change Your Brain, Change Your Life: The Breakthrough Program for Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Anger, and Impulsiveness, Daniel G. Amen," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 70: No. 3, Article 11.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol70/iss3/11>

theologians, physicians, and other health care professionals ought honestly to confront, because the challenges of contemporary high-technology medicine to Christian integrity cannot be ignored.

**-Mark J. Cherry
St. Edward's University
Austin, Texas**

Change Your Brain, Change Your Life: The Breakthrough Program for Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Anger, and Impulsiveness, Daniel G. Amen, M.D., New York: Three Rivers Press (Random House) 2000 ed., 337 pages, USA \$15, Canada \$22.50

This book is a valuable resource for health care professionals, social workers, teachers, pastors and others including non-professionals. It can help one to understand better human behavior and how one's own brain functions. Complex information is made easy to understand and apply to daily life.

Dr. Daniel Amen is a clinical neuroscientist, psychiatrist, and director of the Amen Clinic for Behavioral Medicine in Fairfield, California (website: www.amenclinic.com). He is a recognized expert in the field of the brain and behavior. Dr. Amen has pioneered the use of brain imagery, especially SPECT (Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography), in psychiatry and has published many professional articles and several books. The Amen Clinic has an international reputation for diagnosing and treating ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), aggression, head injuries, anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Until recently scientists did not have the technology for evaluating a working brain. While EEGs and MRI and CAT scans serve useful purposes, they do not provide the sophisticated information into the workings of the deep structures in the brain which SPECT imaging provides. With this tool, Dr. Amen and other colleagues in the United States have been able to understand better how abnormal brain patterns cause specific mental and emotional problems such as depression, over-anxiety, ADD and impulsivity, obsessiveness, and problems with memory and anger. These correlate roughly to five major areas of the brain: the Limbic System, Basal Ganglia, Prefrontal Cortex, the Cingulate System and the Temporal Lobes. Recognizing abnormal patterns of brain activity and relating them to patients' symptoms and histories has proven helpful in providing more effective treatment, with both behavioral and medical prescriptions, in many cases. While protecting patient confidentiality, the book includes a summary of many actual cases with illustrations of some of the related brain scans.

According to Dr. Amen, when our brain chemistry and activity patterns are normal and balanced we are generally able to be the kind of people we want to be – warm, kind, loving and reasonable, with meaningful relationships and success in our daily lives. While realizing that human behavior is related to a complex of factors including biological, psychological and social, in Dr. Amen’s experience, “abnormal” behavior is often related to problems in the brain’s functioning. Although most people do not suffer from a psychiatric illness, Dr. Amen thinks that very few people are completely without the problems discussed in the book.

Dr. Amen takes a holistic approach. He discusses a whole range of prescriptions which include, among others: appropriate medications and therapy when necessary, certain herbal remedies, – to be taken under a physician’s supervision, a healthy diet, adjusting protein and carbohydrate levels to correspond to the needs of one’s brain, physical exercise, deep breathing, various mental and writing exercises, meditation, Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer, clear goal setting, and exposing oneself to rich life experiences such as great smells, dancing, singing and listening to a variety of good music. For example, studies have shown that listening to Mozart and playing a musical instrument can improve moods, brain function and learning. Among other things, Dr. Amen points out that every thought “you have sends electrical signals throughout your brain ... They have significant influence on every cell in your body... Teaching yourself to control and direct thoughts in a positive way is one of the most effective ways to feel better.”(57) The last chapter of the book provides a 100 point summary of ways to optimize brain function and break bad brain habits.

Some serious behavior and relationship problems are resistant to other forms of therapy until the person’s biological brain functioning is made more normal with appropriate medication. Often these only need to be taken for a limited time to stabilize brain functions to assist the healing process. Today, many people who could be helped by taking appropriate medications to normalize brain functioning are reluctant to do so. In Dr. Amen’s experience, showing the person his or her brain SPECT images, which reveal overactive and/or underactive areas of the brain, can often be helpful to convince the person and others (e.g., a parent, a spouse, some professionals) that there is a biological problem.

Showing alcoholics and drug addicts their own brain SPECT images, which clearly reveal brain damage, in Dr. Amen’s experience, can also be helpful to break through their denial and to motivate them to abstain. Not only drugs like heroin and cocaine damage the brain. Brain SPECT images of brains affected by marijuana look “as though areas are eaten away, especially in the temporal lobe, the seat of language and learning.”(243) Dr. Amen has developed an effective drug education poster, “Which Brain Do You want?” (see website: www.amenclinic.com), which is now in

many prisons and schools. It compares brain SPECT images of a normal brain with those of brains damaged by heroin, cocaine, alcohol and marijuana. Caffeine and nicotine also decrease blood flow in the brain. Smoking and heavy caffeine usage (e.g. more than three cups of coffee a day) need to be stopped to maintain a healthy brain.

The book also discusses violence, suicidal tendencies, Alzheimer's disease, strokes, brain injuries, PMS, brain patterns that interfere with intimacy, how to relate to persons including a spouse and children with certain problems, when and how to seek professional care, and some questions about the essence of our humanity. A bibliography of a number of related professional articles and books, an appendix on medication notes, and a thorough index, are included as well.

This book distills much of what Dr. Amen and a number of other neuroscientists have learned in their research and clinical practice. I think both the new knowledge and practical wisdom presented in this book have significant implications not only for health care, but also for others such as social workers, counselors, marital therapists, teachers, parents, and pastors. For example, are there not many people who are inclined to judge a person with serious behavior problems as not really trying? Some professionals may also judge a child's problem to be primarily a problem in the child's environment, with one or both of the parents. The work of Dr. Amen and others using the best brain imaging technology, however, shows that serious behavior problems are often linked to certain dysfunctions in one or more areas of the person's brain. This new finding is in line with the tradition in law, morality, and Catholic teaching, for example, that certain factors beyond a person's control can sometimes mitigate or eliminate the culpability of a person whose behavior is harmful. The finding, too, that once the functioning of these areas of the person's brain is improved with appropriate medication or other means, then other forms of therapy and self-help can play their role, is also relevant to how we treat many people.

Besides the practical implications for many professionals and other people, I think such findings also have relevance for theology and ethics including virtue and relational ethics. Among other things, Dr. Amen notes that it is probably easier to relate to a kind, loving and involved God, and to make better choices, when our brains work right. (299) He is correct in advocating that more knowledge and understanding are needed. This book provides an important contribution. I highly recommend it.

**-Paul Flaman
St. Joseph's College,
University of Alberta**