

Love Your Brain to Great Health

• BY SUMYA ANANI •

According to Dr. Daniel Amen, you are not stuck with the brain you have. At any age, you can improve your brain's health, memory, and ability to focus. His goal: inspire everyone to become a brain warrior. It all starts, he says, with loving your brain. After all, it is the CEO of your body.

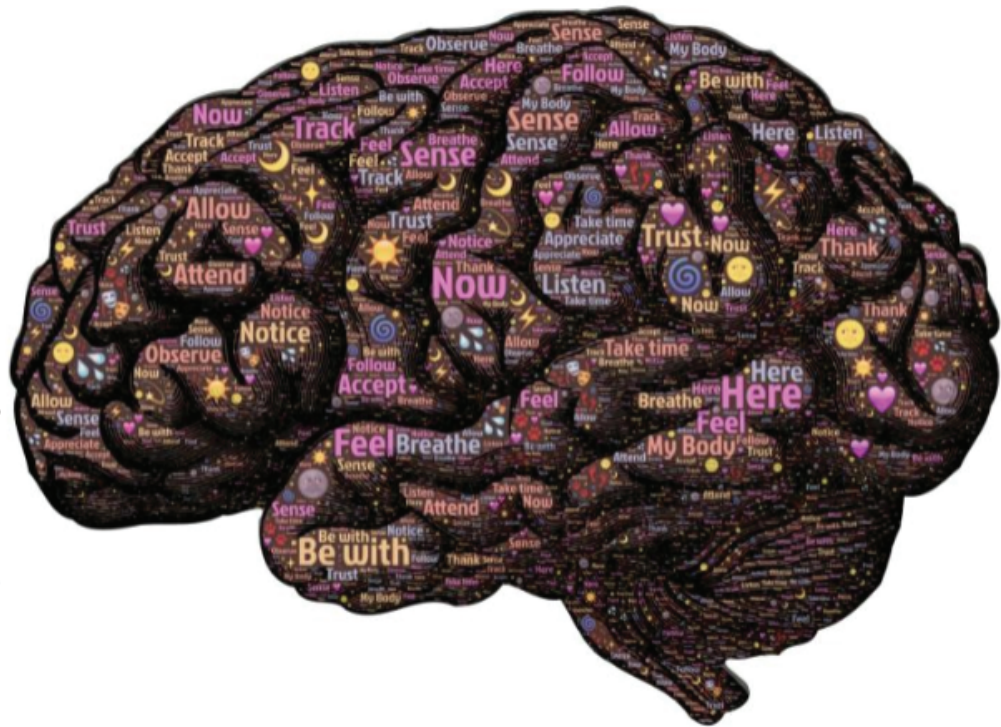
I first learned about Dr. Daniel Amen in his interview in the *Re-gain Your Brain* series. He knows brains. He is a clinical neuroscientist, double board-certified psychiatrist, and medical director of The Amen Clinics. But he's an educator at heart. He has written more than 30 New York Times best-selling books, including *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life* and *The Brain Warrior's Way*. He has compiled a comprehensive database of more than 150,000 SPECT brain scans in the world. His easy to remember mnemonic, Bright Minds, lists his 11 memory-loss risk factors. How would you rate yourself?

B - Blood flow.

Low blood flow is the number one brain imaging indicator for Alzheimer's disease. Exercise is essential for brain health. Any high-intensity interval training like weight training or hitting heavy bags should be in your exercise program. Coordination exercises like dancing give a powerful boost to the cerebellum. Remember that caffeine and nicotine restrict blood flow to the brain.

R - Retirement and Aging.

Keep learning new things. When you stop learning, your brain starts dying. My son has memorized the first 100 digits of pi. When you retire, find new hobbies to keep you engaged. Practice using your non-dominant hand. Each side of the body lights up the opposite side of the brain, which means new neurons firing and rewiring. I am ambidextrous now. The study of



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neuroplasticity has revealed that our brains can continue to grow at every stage of our life. Turns out you can teach old dogs new tricks.

I - Inflammation.

Eliminate foods and irritants that cause low-level fires in the body. The biggest one is white, refined sugar. It's just as addictive as heroine, and it's in just about everything. Watch Katie Couric's documentary on sugar called *Fed Up*. It's alarming to see fast food companies working their way into our school systems. Read labels on products, not the advertising slogans. Dr. Amen says, "Don't eat highly processed, pesticide sprayed, high-glycemic, low-fiber food-like substances stored in plasticized containers,"

because they do not support optimal brain development. Take Omega-3 fatty acids to lower inflammation.

G - Genetics.

Studies show that genetics predict about 20-30 percent of our longevity. If you have a history of any type of dementia in your family, look seriously at these other risk factors and think prevention in your 20s and 30s. Don't wait until you start having symptoms. Fortunately, our habits and lifestyle choices predict the rest. Start creating positive habits that nourish your brain.

H - Head Trauma.

Boxing, football, car accidents, bike wrecks—any trauma to the skull—impacts the soft brain in-

side. Wear helmets when riding bicycles. Your brain weighs roughly three pounds, yet it is the master controller of the body. As a former boxer with more than 30 bouts and hundreds, maybe even thousands of sparring rounds, potential head trauma is reason I went to the Amen Clinic for a SPECT brain scan. Take your precautions, too.

T - Toxins.

Alcohol is a toxin for the brain. Size matters when it comes to the brain, and the more you drink, the smaller your brain. Instead of social drinking, gather your friends for social exercising. Drugs are also not good for the brain, and this includes misusing over the counter drugs. Moreover, many of the ingredients in

common products we use every day like deodorant and lotions have known endocrine disruptors. Other toxins to be mindful of are mold, lead, and excessive smoke inhalation.

M - Mental Health.

Learn techniques that help you deal with ANTs—**Automatic Negative Thoughts**. Studies show the powerful brain-enhancing effects of a regular prayer and/or meditation practice, including growth of grey matter. Nature is also a powerful healer and rejuvenator for cognitive health. Get sunshine on your skin every day to boost Vitamin D levels. Most Americans are chronically low in the sunshine vitamin. Get your levels tested and take a supplement if necessary.

I - Infection and Immunity.

Infections are major causes of dementia. Get an infectious disease lab panel done if you're concerned. Lyme disease, herpes, and Epstein-Barr virus are a few common infections. Having a strong immune system, most notably by improving your gut health, is going to help you stay healthy in body, mind, and brain, too.

N - Neurohormonal levels.

Have your hormone levels checked periodically. After age 40, these tests are extremely helpful if done every 3-5 years. Arm yourself with the knowledge needed to discover things you can do to tweak your nutritional plan. There are natural ways you can improve optimal levels to reenergize your brain.

D - Diabetes.

Excessive weight decreases the size of your brain. You can get those extra pounds off and reduce blood sugar levels with the habits of health, nutrition, and exercise. Follow Michael Pollan's seven

words of wisdom, "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants." Plants have all the fiber, vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals we need for ultimate health.

S - Sleep.

Your brain needs 7-8 hours of quality sleep a night. Develop nightly rituals to calm yourself in preparation for a good night's sleep. Shut down electronics several hours before bed. Get in bed with a book by 9 p.m., and ideally be asleep by 10 p.m. Chinese medicine and the Indian Ayurvedic science agree that sleeping between 11 p.m.-3 a.m. restores the liver, which is so important for maintaining health as we age. Your liver is involved with more than 500 functions. If you want to live a healthier life, nourish your Liver.

Of all these risk factors, I was most concerned about the impact of my 10-year boxing career on my brain. That's why I am happy I went to the Amen Clinic in New York clinic to get the SPECT scan. It's the most accurate measure for brain activity and blood flow. Dr. Amen himself Skyped in to read my scan. He was surprised by how healthy my brain looked, given the length of boxing career. Thanks to Barry Becker, the best boxing trainer in the world, I never got hit, which likely helped protect me. But I also love my brain with these 11 tips.

If you're concerned about your brain's health, pick up one of Dr. Amen's books. Check out his TEDx talks. Call the Amen Clinic to schedule a SPECT scan. He and his team are absolutely devoted to improving people's brain health. You can start now to love your brain to great health.

Sumya Anani is a four-time World Champion boxer, International Women's Boxing Hall of Fame inductee, owns Learning2Fly - aerial fitness, party, K-12 field trip center, and boxing classes for people with Parkinson's 2x/week. She shares health tips on KCTV-5 regularly. Come visit the white geodesic dome at I-35 and Lamar. www.iAMLearning2Fly.com

