The connection between nutrition and good brain function?
Daniel G. Amen, MD is a physician, child and adult psychiatrist, brain imaging specialist, bestselling author, Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and the CEO and medical director of Amen Clinics, Inc. (ACI) in Newport Beach and Fairfield, California, Tacoma, Washington and Reston, Virginia. Dr. Amen is also an Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine.

His written contributions are best described as prolific: He is the author of 35 professional articles, four book chapters, and 23 books. His books include the New York Times bestsellers Change Your Brain, Change Your Life and Magnificent Mind at Any Age. He is also the author of Healing ADD, Healing the Hardware of the Soul, Making a Good Brain Great, The Brain in Love, and the co-author of Healing Anxiety and Depression and Preventing Alzheimer’s. This February (2010), Harmony Books will publish Dr. Amen’s new book, Change Your Brain, Change Your Body.

Dr. Amen’s accomplishments span across other media platforms as well. He has written and produced three blockbuster fundraising shows for public television, which raised more than 16 million dollars. Together, with the United Paramount Network and Leeza Gibbons, Dr. Amen produced a show entitled The Truth about Drinking. The show, which provided alcohol education for teenagers, won an Emmy Award for the Best Educational Television Show. Together, with his son-in-law Jesse Payne, Dr. Amen developed a 12 week high school course on practical neuroscience called “Making a Good Brain Great.” The course is now taught in 40 states and seven different countries.

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Dr. Amen has spoken for several organizations, including the National Security Agency (NSA), the National Science Foundation (NSF), Harvard’s Learning and the Brain Conference, the Million Dollar Round Table, and the Supreme Courts of Delaware, Ohio and Wyoming. He is married, the father of four children, a grandfather, and an avid table tennis player.

Please join us this month for an interview with Daniel Amen, MD.
The brain is such an important organ, yet many of us don’t seem to give it much attention. Why do you think that is?

We get no education in school about how to take care of our brain, even though it’s more important than any subject. It’s your brain that helps you to be happy or sad. It’s your brain that gets you through school. It’s your brain that helps you fall and stay in love. But you can’t see it like you can see your skin or the fat on your hips. My whole professional life changed when I started to look at the brain, because very shortly thereafter I developed good-brain envy and I wanted my brain to be better, and I wanted my patients’ brains to be better. It’s really put me on a path of optimizing peoples’ brains.

How important is the connection between nutrition and good brain function?

Bill Cosby once said, “I am what I ate, and I’m frightened.” You are in many ways what you eat. Your body’s cells make themselves new repeatedly through your nutrition. If you have a fast food diet, you’re likely to have a fast food mind and a body that has been super-sized. You want to be very careful with what you put in your body.

It’s funny: I was just at the clinic, and we had a patient who came to see us from Vancouver, Canada. He was very sweet, and he brought me a present of maple sugar candy. I thought, “I’m grateful, but this is not a good brain present.” Sugar is toxic to your body. It enhances inflammation. I have a new book coming out in February called Change Your Brain, Change Your Life. One of the studies in that I quote is a study from UCLA where researchers found that overweight and obese people have dramatically decreased brain tissue when they are compared them to healthy people.

You don’t want a smaller brain. With a smaller brain comes less money, less love, less longevity. If your brain controls everything that you do, you don’t want it deteriorating.

Are there one or two vitamins or supplements that every American should be taking now, but may not be? We realize there may be many, but is there one or two that you emphasize?

Everyone should take a good multiple vitamin-mineral supplement each day. Most Americans are not eating five servings of fruits and vegetables per day—the minimum required to get the nutrition you need. Everyone, I believe, should be taking an Omega-3 Fatty Acid supplements, because Omega-3 Fatty Acids have found to be low in depression, low in Alzheimer’s disease, low in ADD, and low in people who are suicidal.

How does a person know when it’s time to enlist the help of a doctor, whether that is a psychiatrist, a psychologist, or both? When is a good time to stop with the self-help books and seminars and enlist some professional help?

If your mood, thinking, or your behavior is interfering with your ability to be your best, and you’ve read books like mine and done what we say to do and you are still struggling. It’s a sign of mental health that when you are struggling you ask for help. It’s a sign of mental illness to be in denial, because your family suffers, your employer suffers, and your community suffers.

What can you tell us about the work you do with SPECT imaging and how you determine if it’s appropriate for an individual to incorporate that into treatment?

I think of imaging like radar. If the problem is really clear—like it’s a clear day and you can land the plane without radar—you go ahead and treat the problem. If it’s not clear—say it’s stormy out and you really don’t understand what’s going on—imaging can be so helpful to clarify things.

You have written so many books. For someone who reads this interview and wants to learn more, is there a certain book that you recommend he or she start with?

For most people, Change Your Brain, Change Your Life is a great book to start with. The other book would be Magnificent Mind at Any Age. Those two books would give anyone a good sense of my work and my thinking on how to treat brain problems and optimize brain function.

What is new right now, with you and your work?
“We really need to be **THINKING** about optimizing brain function, and using what we know about the **BRAIN** to help with this horrible crisis of obesity. Two thirds of Americans are now overweight, and our society is going the **WRONG WAY.**”

The thing that is newest for me, is that in my new book Change Your Brain, Change Your Body, I really take on the issue of obesity and brain function. I talk about total connection: That if you’re obese, it’s an eating disorder; and it needs to be thought of a brain disorder. In order to get healthy, the first organ is your brain, not stapling your stomach. It’s your brain that pushes you away from the table. It’s your brain that decides whether or not to have the second bowl of ice cream.

We really need to be thinking about optimizing brain function, and using what we know about the brain to help with this horrible crisis of obesity. Two thirds of Americans are now overweight, and our society is going the wrong way. It’s estimated that my grandson’s generation is not likely to outlive its parents. We have to stop that. It’s an emergency, especially when you have fast food restaurants on every corner. What many people don’t know is that the combination of sugar, salt, and fat works on the morphine or heroine centers of the brain. These companies know how to get you addicted. More people die every year from obesity than alcoholism. Obesity is the third leading preventable cause of death.

Are there any hobbies that you particularly enjoy besides table tennis?

I’m a new grandpa… I’m totally in love with my three month old grandbaby. I love to write. Even though I do it as part of my profession, I love to write. I also love hanging out with my kids and my wife.

Thanks to Dr. Amen for his interview with us this month. If you would like to learn more about Dr. Amen and his work, please visit www.amenclinics.com