

Faith, the Brain & “Self-Brain Surgery” with Dr. Lee Warren and Dr. Ben Carson

Source video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zj7HItANEeU>

1. Our brains are designed to change

- The brain contains billions of neurons, processing more than two million bits of information per second.
- Adult brains can continue to change, heal, and grow.
- Approximately 10 minutes of prayer/meditation per day for six weeks showed a 22% increase in hippocampal size (memory, emotional regulation and resilience).
- Thoughts create electrical impulses which convert to chemical signals and then affect biology.
- Up to 80% of our automatic or baseline thoughts are either negatively biased or inaccurate.
- Repeated thinking can make either fear or healthier responses increasingly automatic.
- You can train your brain with prayer, gratitude, Scripture, mental rehearsal, purposeful action and even voluntarily doing difficult things.
- Suffering cannot always be avoided, but our response to suffering can be changed.

2. Major Points

A. The brain is not fixed—it can be “rewired.”

Warren says the older medical assumption was that the adult brain was largely fixed: once damaged or programmed in a particular direction, relatively little could be done. Neuroplasticity has changed that picture.

The brain continually adapts to what we repeatedly think, practice and experience. Therefore:

- repeated fearful thinking strengthens fearful responses;
- repeated negative rumination makes negative thinking increasingly familiar;
- repeatedly choosing a healthier response makes that response easier to access later;
- thoughts can influence emotions, behavior and physiological responses.

Warren sees a striking parallel between this and the biblical commands to renew the mind and take thoughts captive.

Thought → Brain Activity → Body Response → Behavior → Repetition → Stronger Pattern

Neuroplasticity therefore gives Warren a biological framework for something Scripture has long commanded spiritually: do not simply accept every thought that enters the mind—examine and redirect it.

B. Feelings are real, but feelings are not necessarily facts.

One of Warren's recurring warnings is against automatically believing whatever we think or feel. The brain possesses powerful protective systems designed to identify danger. Those systems are essential when genuine danger exists. But the same machinery can generate anxiety, fear and defensive reactions when danger is merely anticipated or remembered.

- What am I feeling?
- What am I thinking?
- Is that thought actually true?

- What does God say is true?
- What response do I want my brain to learn?

The objective is not emotional denial. It is preventing a temporary emotion from automatically becoming a controlling belief.

C. The mind can influence the body's physiological (physical) response.

Interpretation of events affects our biology. If we perceive something as a threat, our minds and bodies kick into gear, even if that threat is not real. Our interpretation of an event can activate or calm neurological and physiological systems. Chronic anxiety can therefore keep the body repeatedly responding as though danger were present.

D. We can prepare the brain before difficulty arrives: PRACTICAL ADVICE

An hour of morning quiet time, including Scripture, prayer, worship and preparation for the coming day. An especially practical part is mental rehearsal. If he knows he will encounter a difficult person or stressful situation, he mentally practices the response he wants beforehand:

- “When that person says this, I will respond kindly.”
- “When pressure rises, I will not lash out.”
- “When this thought appears, I will redirect it.”

Rehearse peace, love, calm, and rest neurological pathways before they are needed. This creates a physical response calling for the brain (amygdala/fear-emotion) systems to remain steady instead of activated.

Carson says he uses a humorous version when dealing with unpleasant people: “That used to be a cute little baby. I wonder what happened to them.” The circumstances haven’t changed—but the perspective has.

E. Hardship can produce resilience rather than merely damage.

Warren strongly rejects the idea that human beings are necessarily psychologically fragile. He uses the term “anti-fragile”: under appropriate circumstances, confronting difficulty can actually strengthen the ability to handle future difficulty.

Suffering → Endurance → Character → Hope

The implication is not that suffering is good or that trauma should be sought. Rather, what happens after suffering matters.

- Each time a person chooses to get out of bed, exercise instead of drink, forgive rather than retaliate, pray instead of surrender to despair, or simply take the next necessary step, Warren believes the brain is practicing resilience.

F. Faith does not eliminate suffering; it changes how suffering is processed.

Warren's own theology changed profoundly through Iraq and the death of his son. His earlier faith contained an implicit formula: Do right → please God → things should work out. War and tragedy destroyed that formula.

God does not promise that terrible things will not happen. He promises His presence, purpose and the possibility that suffering can eventually produce something redemptive.

G. “Self-brain surgery” does not mean rejecting professional help.

He compares this to a neurosurgeon calling a cardiologist when his surgical patient develops a heart problem. Seeking expertise is not surrendering responsibility.

Get help when you need help—but recognize that another person cannot make every internal choice for you.

3. Key Statements & Quotes

“It changes everything because it gives us hope and power again.”

- That is his response to discovering that the brain is capable of change.

“If you change the stuff you think about, your brain will become a different brain.”

- This summarizes his neuroplasticity argument.

“You be in charge of your brain and it will respond.”

- Warren connects intentional thought with the biblical discipline of taking thoughts captive.

You don't have to believe everything you think.

- Automatic thoughts should be examined rather than automatically obeyed.

Two things can be true at the same time.

- A person can be heartbroken and hopeful; grieving and grateful; experiencing darkness while still recognizing light. Healing does not necessarily mean grief disappears; it means grief gradually stops occupying the entire field of vision.

4. Scripture Backing

Scripture	Brain/Mind Connection
2 Corinthians 10:5	“Take every thought captive.” Thoughts should be examined rather than automatically accepted.
Romans 12:2	“Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Changing habitual thinking can transform responses and behavior.
Ephesians 4:17–23	Destructive behavior begins with distorted/futile thinking; renewal therefore begins in the mind.
1 Corinthians 2:16	“We have the mind of Christ.” Mental renewal is not presented merely as self-help but cooperation with God.
Philippians 4:6–8	Anxiety is answered with prayer, gratitude and deliberate attention to what is true, honorable, just, pure and worthy.
Romans 5:3–5	Suffering → endurance → character → hope. Warren sees a parallel with resilience being developed through difficulty.
Isaiah 48:10	The “furnace” of affliction/refining illustrates growth through hardship.
John 10:10	Abundant life can exist even while stealing, killing and destruction remain present in the world.
Psalms 51	“Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation.” Carson connects restored godly joy with redirecting the brain's reward-seeking.
Romans 8:28	God can ultimately work even terrible circumstances toward good, although Warren warns this can be a painful verse to quote prematurely to someone in fresh grief.
Romans 8:37	“More than conquerors through him who loved us”—Carson's closing encouragement.

Take thoughts captive — 2 Corinthians 10:5... Renew the mind — Romans 12:2

Think deliberately about what is true and good — Philippians 4:6–8

The desired result is not merely feeling better. It is developing a different habitual way of thinking and responding.

5. Physiology: What Is Happening in the Brain?

Brain Structure/System	Basic Function Discussed	Application in the Interview
Amygdala	Threat/fear and emotional processing	Becomes highly active during frightening thoughts; can initiate bodily stress responses.
Hippocampus	Memory and contextual processing; involved in emotional regulation	Warren connects it with resilience and reports research associating prayer/meditation with hippocampal changes.
Frontal Lobes	Reasoning, planning, judgment and regulation	Greater engagement allows a person to respond deliberately rather than simply react fearfully.
Anterior Cingulate Cortex	Attention, regulation, conflict/error processing and behavioral flexibility	Warren associates it with the capacity to stop remaining “stuck” and to do difficult things despite emotion.
Insular Cortex	Integrates bodily sensations, emotion and internal awareness	Mentioned among the regions becoming active when the fMRI subject shifted away from fear.
Default Mode Network	Background/internal mental activity	Can become dominated by self-focused rumination—past hurts and anticipated future problems.
Reward System	Motivation and reinforcement	Addiction can train the brain to seek a substance or behavior repeatedly for reward.
Reticular Activating System	Helps regulate attention and alertness	Warren uses it to explain why expectations and repeated focus influence what we notice.

The basic process when we don’t think things through

- Something happens
- I interpret what it means
- Brain systems respond
- Body responds — heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, tension
- I choose/react
- Repeated responses strengthen familiar pathways

A better way: “SELF BRAIN SURGERY”

- Trigger
- Recognize automatic thought
- “Take the thought captive”
- Compare it with truth/Scripture
- Choose and practice a different response
- Repeat; the healthier response becomes increasingly familiar

6. Anecdotal Stories & Testimonies

- The fMRI experience after Mitch's death: chosen memories affect us physically.
- His patients taught him that response matters: same diagnosis, different outlooks.
- Carson's glioblastoma patient: attitude of the heart is potent.
- Wartime experience: not being in control required a shift in faith.
- His faith shifted from: "If I do everything correctly, God will protect me from bad outcomes" to: "Whatever happens, God will be with me and can eventually use what I endure."
- Operating on the enemy and having to make them the priority.
- The darkest day also contained new life.
- Darkness and light can exist simultaneously. "Two things can be true at the same time."

7. PRACTICAL STEPS: "Self-Brain Surgery"

The interview ultimately becomes very practical. Warren's approach can be condensed into seven habits:

- **Take thoughts captive.** Don't assume an automatic thought is true simply because it occurred.
- **Renew the mind with Scripture.** Give the brain truthful material to rehearse repeatedly.
- **Practice prayer and gratitude.** Philippians 4 becomes both a spiritual and mental discipline.
- **Prepare before pressure arrives.** Mentally rehearse how you want to respond to predictable triggers.
- **Do difficult healthy things.** Getting out of bed, exercising, resisting an addictive behavior, forgiving, serving and continuing forward train resilience.
- **Direct attention deliberately.** What we continually look for strongly influences what we notice and rehearse.
- **Get professional help when necessary.** Counseling or psychiatric/medical help is compatible with personal responsibility and faith.

The Big Idea

Warren is not arguing that faithful Christians should never experience depression, grief, fear, anxiety or trauma. Nor does he say that thinking correctly prevents suffering. His argument is more specific:

We cannot always choose what happens to us. We can increasingly choose what we repeatedly think about, what meaning we assign to circumstances, what truth we rehearse, and how we respond. Because the brain is plastic, those repeated choices can gradually change the brain that responds the next time.

For Warren, neuroscience and Scripture therefore converge around one central principle:

- What occupies the mind helps shape the person.
- Take the thought captive.
- Renew the mind.
- Practice truth.
- Choose the response.
- Repeat it until the healthier pathway becomes familiar.

Two things can be true at once.

- You can grieve and still hope.
- You can be wounded and still heal.
- You can experience darkness and still recognize light.

Detailed Summary: Dr. Lee Warren on the Brain, Faith, and Rewiring Through God

On *Common Sense* with Dr. Ben Carson, neurosurgeon and author Dr. Lee Warren explains how God designed the brain to change, giving us hope for healing from trauma, anxiety, and grief through the renewal of our minds in Christ. Dr. Carson opens by marveling at the brain's complexity: "It can process more than two million bits of information in one second, contains billions of neurons, remembers everything you've ever seen, everything you've ever heard. You can't really overload it." He believes God gave us this tool "for a reason because He expects us to use it and to apply logic to joyful living and find answers to questions and most importantly to seek Him and to know Him." Yet when trials come—"when we lose a loved one or face a horrendous diagnosis or endure other trauma"—or in a world of "comparison, negative news, busyness, and chaos," many messages in culture say "our brains are weak, frail, and in need of constant counseling and safe neighborhoods." Dr. Carson counters, "I believe that our minds and more importantly, the God who created our minds [are] stronger than all of that."

Dr. Warren's central message: The brain is not fixed; it can be rewired. "It changes everything because it gives us hope and power again." We were taught that the adult brain doesn't make new neurons and is "pretty much fixed," so if you mess it up, you'll struggle. Society tells us we can "break your brain," but if you had the wrong genes, parents, or went through the wrong stuff, you'll just have to manage it. But "21st century neuroscience is teaching us a different story." Scripture "has said all along" that we can "actively change what [our brain] is structurally," and "the thing that drives that change is the stuff we think about." The Bible calls this "taking your thoughts captive" (2 Corinthians 10:5) and "renewing the mind" (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23). Change what you think about, and "your brain will become a different brain." This creates a "new neurochemical environment," so "you don't have to be as anxious or depressed or stressed as you were." When you "take God seriously... take your thoughts captive, change what you think about, you create a new brain." It's "very countercultural, but it gives us hope." He notes, "Before people commit a crime, they always think about it first... It doesn't just spontaneously jump out and happen."

Science and spirituality intersect. "There is not one square millimeter of your brain that is not affected by your spiritual life." He has seen "hundreds of patients" whose repeated negative thinking fires "negative neurochemicals" that create physical changes and "entropy" in the brain. But when they turn to God: "Prayer literally reduces anxiety... Depression lifts... the brain becomes healthier." Brain scans show "significant changes in functional activity" during prayer and meditation, and "significant physical changes in the thickness of the cortex" in areas tied to attention, empathy, and emotional regulation (prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate).

To understand trauma and healing, know the brain's three systems. Using a simple hand model: the fingertips = "thinking brain" (cortex); the palm = "emotional-sensory system" (limbic system, especially the amygdala); the wrist = "brain stem" (automatic survival functions). Trauma dysregulates these systems; healing targets all three.

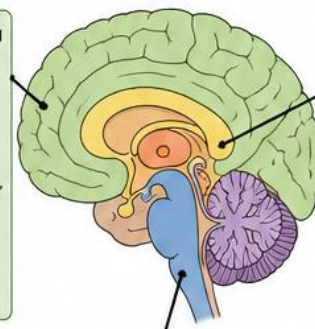
God designed us to heal. "It's a lie from the pit of hell that you're just a victim... God did not design you to be a victim." He built in "protective mechanisms," and the church should be "the best trauma center in the world." Worship should engage "your mind, your heart, your body, and your spirit" through "music, movement, sensory, artistic" expression—how "we've been designed."

THE BRAIN'S THREE SYSTEMS: FUNCTIONS, EFFECTS OF TRAUMA, AND PATH TO HEALING

Brain System (Hand Model)	Key Parts	Primary Functions	How Trauma Affects It	Path to Healing (Worship & Renewal)
1. Thinking Brain (Cortex) = Fingertips	Prefrontal cortex (especially front parts)	- Thinking, reasoning, planning - Attention & focus - Decision making - Self-control - Perspective taking	- Goes "offline" when amygdala is on high alert - Hard to think clearly, plan, or make good decisions	- Truth-filled thoughts - Scripture meditation - Teaching - Journaling, learning - Rest & reflection
2. Emotional-Sensory System (Limbic System) = Palm (especially Amygdala)	Amygdala ("smoke alarm") Hippocampus	- Emotion processing - Detects danger - Fight, flight, freeze - Forms memories (Hippocampus)	- Amygdala stays on high alert - Overreacts to threats - Floods body with stress chemicals	- Worship (music) - Breath/relaxation - Safe relationships - Expressive arts - Gratitude - Soothing the body
3. Survival Brain (Brain Stem) = Wrist	Brain stem	- Automatic survival functions - Heart rate, breathing, sleep cycles - Keeps us alive	- Stuck in survival mode - Poor sleep - Physical tension - Fatigue	- Rhythmic movement - Exercise - Healthy sleep - Deep breathing - Grounding
All three systems must be addressed for lasting healing—mind, emotions, and body.				

THE BRAIN: A SIMPLE OVERVIEW

1. THINKING BRAIN (CORTEX)
= Fingertips
Location: Outer layer (front/top)
Role: Thinking, reasoning, planning, focus, decisions, self-control. Helps us consider consequences and see the big picture.



2. EMOTIONAL-SENSORY SYSTEM (LIMBIC SYSTEM)
= Palm
Location: Deep inside the brain
Role: Processes emotions, detects threats, stores emotional memories. Amygdala = "smoke alarm" for danger.

3. SURVIVAL BRAIN (BRAIN STEM) = Wrist
Location: Base of the brain
Role: Controls automatic survival functions like breathing, heart rate, and sleep. Keeps us alive even when we're not thinking.

When trauma activates the amygdala (palm), it sends a danger signal that can shut down the thinking brain (fingertips) and push the body into survival mode (wrist). Healing happens when we calm the alarm, restore safety, and renew our minds in truth.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES USED

- 2 Corinthians 10:5 – "Take every thought captive to obey Christ."
- Romans 12:2 – "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."
- Ephesians 4:23 – "Be made new in the attitude of your minds."

KEY STATISTICS & RESEARCH (From the Conversation)

- The brain can process more than 2 million bits of information in one second.
- The brain contains billions of neurons.
- Dr. Warren mentioned seeing "hundreds of patients" whose brains changed for the better through prayer and spiritual change.
- Modern studies show prayer/meditation lead to "significant changes in functional activity" in the brain.
- Studies also show "significant physical changes in the thickness of the cortex" in areas of attention, empathy, and emotional regulation.

(Note: The "2 million bits per second" figure is from Dr. Carson's opening comments and is a general illustration, not a precise scientific measurement.)

KEY QUOTES FROM DR. LEE WARREN

- "It changes everything because it gives us hope and power again."
- "21st century neuroscience is teaching us a different story."
- "You really can actively change what your brain is structurally, and the thing that drives that change is the stuff we think about."
- "Change what you think about, and your brain will become a different brain."
- "All when you decide to take God seriously, take your thoughts captive, change what you think about, you create a new brain."
- "Before people commit a crime, they always think about it first... It doesn't just spontaneously jump out and happen."
- "There is not one square millimeter of your brain that is not affected by your spiritual life."
- "Prayer literally reduces anxiety... Depression lifts... the brain becomes healthier."
- "It's a lie from the pit of hell that you're just a victim... God did not design you to be a victim."
- "The church should be the best trauma center in the world."
- "Worship should engage your mind, your heart, your body, and your spirit."

THE BIG TAKEAWAY

God designed your brain to change. Trauma, anxiety, and grief can dysregulate your thinking, emotions, and body—but through the renewal of your mind in Christ, prayer, worship, truth, and healthy practices, your brain can be rewired. You are not a victim of your past—God has given you the power, through His Spirit and His Word, to become a new creation.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" – 2 Corinthians 5:17