



Cleaning Up  
**YOUR  
MENTAL  
MESS**

**5 Simple, Scientifically  
Proven Steps**

**to Reduce Anxiety, Stress,  
and Toxic Thinking**

**DR. CAROLINE LEAF**

“Dr. Caroline Leaf is a brilliant and prolific communication pathologist and cognitive neuroscientist. With over thirty years in research and study, she delves into *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess* with these five simple steps to help reduce our anxieties, stress, and toxic thinking. There is no better time to introduce these strategies than now. She brings a wealth of scientific information to the table while breaking it down into layperson’s terms to help you live life to the fullest, free from the struggles and the pain that may have plagued you for years. This book will read like a manual to guide you through the vicissitudes of life to a better and healthier place.”

Bishop T. D. Jakes, *New York Times* bestselling author

“In this wonderful new book, Dr. Caroline Leaf will change your healthspan forever by empowering you with a simple five-part plan, guided by three decades of clinical practice, that will make you more mindful of maintaining your mental and physical health. Start reading and let the transformation begin!”

Dr. Rudolph E. Tanzi, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Healing Self* and professor of neurology, Harvard Medical School

“For years I’ve taught leaders to guard their thinking above all else in life, because *how* a leader thinks determines *what* a leader will accomplish. Healthy discipline of the mind is essential for success in life, and Dr. Caroline Leaf provides a five-step roadmap for developing truly helpful mental discipline. Her new book, *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, is rooted in decades of research and shows how the journey to healthier thinking is shorter than you might think—and available to anyone willing to take it.”

Dr. John C. Maxwell, leadership and personal growth expert

“One of the things I love about Caroline is her help in understanding the difference in our ‘brains’ and our ‘minds.’ In this book

she takes us the next step in making both of them work better, leading us to feeling and performing better. Thanks, Caroline.”

Dr. Henry Cloud, *New York Times* bestselling author and clinical psychologist

“*Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess* is a powerful new book that can change your life. Learning how to manage your mind is a critical skill that should be taught in school, yet rarely is. This book can help decrease suffering and help your overall outlook and mood. I highly recommend it.”

Daniel G. Amen, MD, founder of Amen Clinics and author of *The End of Mental Illness*

“As someone who appreciates the human brain and its infinite capacity for growth and change, I was very excited to read Dr. Leaf’s new book. In *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, she teaches you how to make the most of your powerful mind and take back control over your thinking to live your best life and reach your full potential.”

Jim Kwik, CEO of Kwik Learning, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Limitless*, and host of the *Kwik Brain* podcast; [www.JimKwik.com](http://www.JimKwik.com)

“*Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess* is an amazing new book that will teach you to change your mind, and your life, for the better. It offers easy to follow, scientifically based steps that will help you regain control of your thinking and mental health, empowering you to take back control and clean up that mental mess!”

Dr. Josh Axe, founder of Ancient Nutrition and DrAxe.com, author of the bestselling books *Keto Diet* and *Collagen Diet* and upcoming book *Ancient Remedies*, and host of *The Dr. Axe Show*

“Our mental health is being threatened like never before. Unfortunately, the pharmaceutical fixes that represent the central tools

of modern medicine fall far short when it comes to such pervasive issues as anxiety, depression, and other challenges to mood and mental wellness. But there is a north star. In *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, Dr. Caroline Leaf leverages over thirty years of clinical experience to offer us empowering, effective, and time-tested guidance for unraveling toxic stress and regaining control of our mental state, paving the way for happiness, satisfaction, and contentment. From both preventive and treatment perspectives, this book delivers on its promise.”

David Perlmutter, MD, author of the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *Grain Brain* and *Brain Wash*

“Ours is a society plagued by a lack of reflection and an overabundance of destructive, quick-fix answers. In her new book, Dr. Caroline Leaf offers an antidote to these caustic thought patterns. By focusing on five practical steps to brain change, Dr. Leaf provides a pragmatic approach to sustainable wellness.”

Austin Perlmutter, MD, coauthor of *New York Times* bestseller *Brain Wash*

“In times like these, *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess* is a true gift. With a rise of anxiety, depression, and intrusive thoughts, Dr. Caroline Leaf delivers a scientifically tested system to navigate today’s uncertain world. This book gives you paradigm-shifting insight on the brain, how it works, and how you can become an empowered participant in creating new neural pathways. Dr. Leaf is a pioneer in neuroscience and mental health, and I recommend this for everyone interested in creating their own destiny.”

Dr. Nicole LePera, The Holistic Psychologist;  
yourholisticpsychologist.com; @the.holistic.psychologist

“*Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess* is an incredible new book that will teach you how to take back control over your thinking. Using her decades of research and clinical experience, Dr. Leaf shows the

reader how they can, no matter where they are in life, harness the power in their mind to change their mental health and their life.”

Frank Lipman, MD, Integrative Medicine

“In *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, Dr. Caroline Leaf masterfully weaves the latest brain science and practical tips to help you take back control of your health and life. Not only will this book help you clean up the mess in your mind but it will help you start living your best life—so that you can start being all that you want to be.”

Jason Wachob, founder and co-CEO, mindbodygreen

“As important as time management may be, the art of mind management is a lost ability that very few study and even fewer are able to teach. Dr. Leaf is one of the few who is able to teach this lost art.”

Patrick Bet-David, author of #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestseller *Your Next Five Moves*

“My friend and esteemed colleague Dr. Caroline Leaf’s *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess* is the paradigm-breaking resource that will redefine the way we look at and address mental health. So many of us are perpetually stressed and anxious, and it plays out negatively in all areas of our lives, including our relationships and physical health. By utilizing over thirty years of clinical experience, Dr. Leaf provides us with a comprehensive yet practical guide to finally managing the clutter in our minds with science-based tools that actually work. Here’s to cleaning up all of our mental mess!”

Dr. Will Cole, leading functional medicine expert and bestselling author of *The Inflammation Spectrum* and *Ketotarian*

“Dr. Caroline Leaf has truly impacted my life, helping me change my life one thought at a time!”

Michelle Williams, singer, actress, author

“During these trying emotional times, Dr. Caroline Leaf offers a helpful and sustainable mind management program that transcends standard self-help. Her book offers a five-step plan to discern and rid ourselves of anxiety and depression to improve our overall health. She is a thought leader to watch.”

Dr. Lisa Mosconi, *New York Times*  
bestselling author of *The XX Brain*

“Caroline’s new book is a lovely chance for us to learn a new modality of healing. The techniques taught in Caroline’s work have allowed me to work on myself in new ways that allow me to be more calm, clear, and compassionate.”

Jonathan Van Ness, Emmy-nominated television  
personality, hairstylist, self-care guru, *New York*  
*Times* bestselling author, and host of the *Getting*  
*Curious with Jonathan Van Ness* podcast

“In *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, Dr. Leaf discusses her search for answers to perplexing questions concerning mental health—and shows how our psyche and emotions release physiological chemicals that negatively affect us cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally. She sets out to prove that although we must live in a world filled with stressors that keep us in perpetual states of anxiety, we can mitigate these negative effects through self-awareness and simple practices. By understanding the nature of such stressors, which are major contributing factors to mental illness, we will find a remedy stronger than any pharmaceutical—a strategy I call ‘mind over matter.’”

Dr. Cindy Trimm, former Bermuda senator,  
psychotherapist, author, and humanitarian

“Mental health and illness exist on a continuum. We all move back and forth between the two, sometimes from day to day. It’s so important to be aware of our thoughts in order to improve and

protect our mental health. Some mental illnesses can be prevented, so efforts to increase our sense of psychological well-being are worthy efforts indeed! Countless readers have come to trust Dr. Leaf's guidance in helping them do just that, and she is at it again with *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*. This book is everything we've come to expect from Dr. Leaf's work and more!"

Dr. Anita Phillips, trauma therapist, minister,  
and mental health advocate

"Dr. Caroline Leaf delivers concrete and scientifically proven answers to the common question, Can I master my mind? If you're ready to take back control in any area of your life, this book will support your journey. A must-read for anyone who is ready for change!"

Vienna Pharaon, licensed marriage and family therapist and  
founder of Mindful Marriage & Family Therapy

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**DR. CAROLINE LEAF**



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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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This book is dedicated to *you*—to helping you benefit from the research I've done over the past thirty-eight years; the clinical trials recently done with my incredible team of neuroscientists, neurosurgeons, and neurologists; *and* what I have observed in my private practice and around the world.

I want to help you learn how to make the most of your mind and brain, taking your thinking to new heights and transforming your mental landscape through mind-management. This book won't only teach you how to manage your anxiety, depression, stress, and fears but also teach you how to manage your life—from the sad moments to the happy ones to the traumatic ones to the times when you don't even know who you are.

For over three decades, my objective has been to teach individuals, corporations, and institutions what mind-management is and to create easy-to-use and accessible tools that will help people manage their thoughts and lifestyles in more effective ways that bring peace and the ability to live life to its fullest. I hope you'll find these tools helpful in your own life and realize that you have it within yourself to take back control of your mental health and your life!

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*We can go three weeks without food, three days without water, three minutes without oxygen—but we can't even go for three seconds without thinking.*

## PREFACE

*Do you ever feel like your brain has just been “switched off”?*

*Have you ever felt discouraged, unfocused, or overwhelmed?*

*Are there unhealthy patterns in your life or your family that  
you just can’t seem to break?*

*Do you start your day exhausted and depressed?*

*Are you anxious about the future?*

*Are you haunted by your past?*

*Do you feel lost and uncertain?*

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you’re not alone. More and more of us are suffering from anxiety, depression, and burnout.

But this doesn’t mean that there’s something wrong with you or that you have a mental illness. Anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress are all ways of describing natural human responses to adversity and the experiences of life. And we all face adversity in many different ways: challenging events and circumstances are as much a part of modern existence as they were a part of human history.

Calling these mental and emotional responses *diseases* misses the point entirely. Anxiety, depression, burnout, frustration, angst,

anger, grief, and so on are emotional and physical warning signals telling us we need to face and deal with something that's happened or is happening in our life. This pain, which is very *real*, is a sign that there's something wrong: you are in a state of disequilibrium. It's not a sign of a defective brain. Your experience doesn't need to be validated by a medical label. Mental health struggles are not your identity. They're normal and need to be addressed, not suppressed, or things will get worse.

Yet this is often what happens. Modern psychological and psychiatric approaches to mental health, particularly the use of drugs like antidepressants and antipsychotics, don't address the complexity of the human mind. Indeed, they haven't reduced the prevalence of mental health issues—major depression, for example, has remained at around 4 percent between 1990 and 2010.

Population studies indicate that something is going terribly wrong: people ages twenty-four to sixty-five are dying eight to fifteen years younger than previous generations from preventable lifestyle diseases. There's a pressing need to change the way we approach health care, including mental health.

We must shift our focus from a symptom-centered approach to one centered around each person's complex story and unique experiences. This is the approach I've taken in this book.

You are uniquely, wonderfully you—your quest for optimal health and well-being should be just as singular as you are.



If there is one thing I have learned from my work in this field, it's that we all have to learn how to catch and alter our thoughts and reactions before they become toxic neural networks and habits. How? That's what this book will teach you. In this book, I'll show you *how* to become the interior designer of your mind and brain in five simple steps, using the principles of neuroplasticity. In my clinical practice and research, I developed my Switch On Your

Brain 5-Step Learning Process, and in the years since, I've continued to research and refine these powerful steps toward healthy mind-management, which I now call the Neurocycle.

In this book, we'll apply the simple, practical, and scientifically researched and clinically applied 5 Steps of the Neurocycle to such issues as anxiety, stress, and toxic thinking. We'll also learn how to build brain and mind health and resilience. You'll find the 5 Steps are sustainable because they'll help you learn how to use your mind and brain in a way that directs the neuroplasticity of your brain to your benefit, improving your mental and physical health in the process.

Mental mess is something we all experience often, and it isn't something we should be ashamed of. This is my profession, and I still have to clean up my mind daily—neurocycling is a lifestyle! The events and circumstances of life aren't going anywhere; people make a lot of decisions every day that affect us all, and suffering of some sort for you and your loved ones is inevitable. That said, I wholeheartedly believe that although events and circumstances can't be controlled, we can control our *reactions* to these events and circumstances. This is mind-management in action.

In fact, managing the mind is more than a lifestyle—it's a necessity because you don't even go three seconds without thinking. If we don't mind-manage our mental mess, our life will feel like a mess. We can spend lots of money and time on self-help books and seminars, wellness fads, great teachings, and podcasts. But all this will simply become nice-to-know information if we can't apply it—more notches on our belt, more knowledge gathering dust.

Mind-management through using the 5 Steps of the Neurocycle, on the other hand, can transform all this great information into *applied* information. When we apply mind-management, we'll learn how to actually use the advice and information we gather as we go through life. When we learn how to manage our

mind, we can go from posting inspiring quotes on social media to inspiring others through the way *we actually live* our own life.



Part 1 of this book discusses what the mind is, what happens when we don't use our minds properly, and why mind-management using the 5 Steps is the solution to *cleaning up our mental mess*, including the results of my recent research. Part 2 provides my clinically applied and scientifically researched mind-management plan—the Neurocycle.

If our minds are messy, we mess up our lifestyles, and when our lifestyles are messed up, our mental and physical health suffer. The 5 Steps are a way to harness our thinking power—any task that requires thinking can use a neurocycle, which means everything can use a neurocycle because we are always thinking! So, are you ready to begin cleaning up your mental mess?

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge two very special people who have been so instrumental at every level in the writing of this book: my daughters Jessica and Dominique. Dominique is my producer and runs my social media and marketing; Jessica is my research assistant and in-house editor and runs customer service. They have immersed themselves in this project from the creation phase all the way through to the final stages—they were brilliant, supportive, and honest, and I couldn't have done it without them.

A lot of my inspiration, drive, and insight for the work and research I do has also come from my other two children, Jeffrey and Alexandria, who have faced many challenges with resilience.

I also want to acknowledge my husband, Mac, whose endless love is my anchor.

My research team was incredible, and without them this research could not have run like it did, nor could it have been the success that it was. Dr. Robert Turner, neurologist and neuroscientist, approached me a few years ago about the impact of my work with his patients. We ran the research in his neurology clinic, and he oversaw the technical and practical details, along with Charlie Wasserman, his qEEG technologist. Charlie outstandingly handled so many of the practical, on-the-ground details that arise in a research study of this nature. Dr. Jason Littleton, a primary care

physician, did a great job advising on the physiological measures and related practicalities. Nick, a phlebotomist, drove tirelessly back and forth between Florida and North Carolina multiple times at each testing point of the study to make sure the bloodwork was done properly. Dr. Darlene Mayo, a neurosurgeon, assisted in the analysis of the results, specifically with the qEEG analysis and graphic displays, and was an incredible help in this complicated process. Elite Research handled the technical side of the proposal and the study, providing statistical analyses and assisting with the preparation for publication. Dr. Rene Paulson, owner of Elite, spent hours walking me through the finer details of the complex statistical analyses and their applications in this study with great insight and wisdom.

And finally, I want to acknowledge the wonderful team at Baker Books, with whom I have worked for eight years! From my amazing editor, Brian Vos, to the teams led by Mark Rice and Lindsey Spoolstra that make things happen—thank you!

PART ONE

# THE WHY AND HOW

## Chapter 1

# What Happens When We Don't Use Our Minds Correctly

*Whatever we plant in our minds and nourish with repetition and emotion will one day become a reality.*

EARL NIGHTINGALE

### Overview

- If our minds are messed up, our lifestyles are messed up, and when our lifestyles are messed up, our mental and physical health suffer.
- Mind-management is a skill that needs to be *learned and constantly upgraded* as we grow from childhood into adulthood. For every new experience we need a new set of mind-management tools.
- There's no secret quick fix or uniform formula to healing and happiness.
- Feeling guilty because you “failed to think positively enough,” “didn't have enough faith,” or didn't reach some “ideal” is damaging to your psyche and your physical body.
- For the first time in decades, the trend of people living longer has been *reversed* due to lifestyle-related diseases. Yes, we are

in control of our lifestyle choices, but it doesn't seem like we are doing a very good job at this!

- Everything in our society seems to convey the message of “now!” It's almost as if we've entered an era where we have sacrificed the processing of knowledge for the gathering of data.
- Mental distress and ill-health are not new. Humans have always battled mental health issues.
- Mental health has been subsumed into the biomedical model. It has become something we fear and stigmatize, and fear, in itself, is damaging to the brain and body. Our story is not an “it” to be diagnosed and labeled. Depression and anxiety are not labels but rather warning signals.
- We can't control the events and circumstances of life but we can learn to control our reactions, which help us deal with and manage the many challenges we face.

Sometimes it feels like we live in a world characterized by fear. People are fearful about their health, the economy, their jobs, the future, corruption, crime, and their feelings of powerlessness. The cost of this fear is toxic thoughts, toxic stress, anxiety, and depression, which in turn increase our vulnerability to disease. The end result of this fear, anxiety, and illness cycle, if we don't manage it with our minds, is a society dependent on external factors such as painkillers, medications, wellness fads, and skyrocketing health costs to fix us.

But what if there was another way? What if the answer lay inside of you? What if you held the key?

Most people understand the need to live a healthy lifestyle, even if they don't fully understand the impact of their lifestyle choices on disease processes. What many people don't recognize is the need for proper mind-management and how it both supports and sustains a healthy lifestyle.

When our thinking is toxic, it can mess up the stress response, which then starts working against us instead of for us. This, in turn, can make us more vulnerable to disease, which is why many researchers now believe that toxic stress is responsible for up to approximately 90 percent of illness, including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Only 5–10 percent of disease is said to come from genetic factors alone.<sup>1</sup>

Why? When an individual is in a toxic thinking state, the release of stress hormones such as cortisol and homocysteine can significantly affect the immune system, cardiovascular system, and neurological system. In fact, excessive stress hormones are so effective at compromising the immune system that physicians therapeutically provide recipients of organ transplants with stress hormones to prevent their immune system from rejecting the foreign implant.

Despite a more widespread understanding of the importance of healthy lifestyle choices, and many incredible resources out there on making good lifestyle choices, many people lack the necessary mind-management skills they need to apply this knowledge to everyday life. This isn't a one-off thing. Mind-management is a skill that needs to be learned; used all day long, every day; and constantly upgraded as we grow from childhood into adulthood. For every new experience we need a new set of mind-management tools.

Now, before you start panicking and thinking that it's impossible, stop, breathe, and read on. I don't want you to get stuck thinking it's hopeless, that you have caused all your own problems, and that you cannot change. This will only make you feel worse

What many people do not recognize is the need for proper mind-management and how it both supports and sustains a healthy lifestyle.

about yourself, and it really isn't the case. You can't blame yourself for something you didn't know—but you can empower yourself and shift into change mode when you learn how to manage your thinking. This is a skill that needs to be learned and constantly upgraded—I do this daily, and will continue to do so until I pass on from this world.

Most of what I share in this book hasn't been taught to you before because it's an area that isn't well understood. We're only beginning to understand mind and consciousness, which is exciting. If we've come this far without good mind-management skills, imagine where we can go when we've learned how to control our thinking.

## Mind-Management Must Be a Priority

*You are your mind*, you are always using your mind, and your mind is always with you. You can go three weeks without food, three days without water, and three minutes without air, but you cannot go three seconds without thinking. So, understanding how the mind works and what mind-management is should be your top priority. Mind-managing your thoughts is a skill that needs to be learned and made into a habit, or, to be more scientifically accurate, *automatized*, much like you learn how to swim or ride a bicycle.

This is what you will be learning in this book. Mind-management is key to the kind of mental peace that sustains us through tough times and happy times. It is the place where you can find your *own* measure of success, instead of comparing yourself to the unrealistic “industry standards” often presented by popular wellness industry and faith movements.

To what and whom are you comparing yourself? Who defines success and says what it looks like for you? *You do*. No one else has the right to define your purpose. We often set ourselves up for failure when we try to copy someone else's healing journey or

when we are told the healing process is linear and standard. That's one reason the wellness industry can be so dangerous: it asserts that healing and health come only when certain rules (created by someone else) are followed.

Holding ourselves to a competitive mentality fostered by influencers on social media or by someone offering the elixir of a wellness trend puts impossible demands on our psyche and can be destructive, damaging not only how we see our body image but also how we judge our own worth. Unless we define our wellness within the narrative of accepting that life will always have some mystery, we will drive ourselves crazy with guilt and shame every time our body breaks down or our mind plays up. We'll constantly feel the need to measure up. Instead, we need to validate what we are going through with self-compassion by managing our minds *through* the process of guilt, shame, and sickness, letting these become springboards and not deadweights.

Of course, there's so much great evidence-based information in the fields of positive psychology, the wellness movement, and integrative medicine about the mind-brain connection, and I'm excited that it's talked about now more than it ever has been in my many years of experience. We now know more than we ever have how what we think, feel, and choose directly and indirectly affects our brain and body.

I do, however, have concerns about how some of the research is interpreted, and how it can make some people feel. For example, some people have argued that "Good people don't get sick," or "If I think enough good thoughts or positive affirmations or change my attitude, I will make all the bad stuff go away." This is, often inevitably, followed by a series of toxic guilt or shame thoughts that make us feel worse when our problems don't just disappear. *This is supposed to work! Why isn't it working? What's wrong with me? Why do they get it right and not me?*