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Born to Flourish

How New Science and Ancient Wisdom

Reveal a Simple Path to Thriving

Richard J. Davidson, PhD
and Cortland Dahl, PhD

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*To our teachers,
who offered us a glimpse of
what it means to truly flourish.*

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Part One

The Foundations of Flourishing

Chapter 1

What Flourishing Is and Why It Matters

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Imagine you're walking along a wooded trail, your mind cluttered with the usual thoughts about work, relationships, and endless to-do lists. Suddenly, something catches your attention—perhaps a cluster of wildflowers swaying in the breeze or a shaft of sunlight breaking through the canopy. In that moment, everything shifts. Your mental chatter falls quiet. You feel deeply present, connected not just to the natural beauty around you but also to something larger than yourself. Time seems to pause, and you experience a profound sense of peace and purpose.

Most of us have experienced fleeting moments like these, moments when we break free from our constant doing and slip into a state of pure being. Maybe it happened during a heartfelt conversation where you felt truly seen and heard. Or perhaps while watching a sunset that took your breath away. In these rare moments, we catch a glimpse of what it means to truly flourish.

But here's the radical truth that decades of neuroscience research has revealed: these precious states don't have to be temporary. We can learn to flourish, even in the midst of our busy, modern lives. Even as depression rates soar, loneliness reaches epidemic levels, and attention spans dwindle in our hyperconnected world, we carry within us an innate capacity for profound well-being.

As longtime meditation practitioners, the two of us have discovered that flourishing isn't a matter of luck or circumstance—it's a skill that can be developed through practice, just like learning a language or playing a musical instrument. As scientists, we have discovered that you do not have to practice meditation to make this kind of lasting change. Through our work at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, we've identified four core dimensions, four core skills, that can be strengthened and enable us to thrive even in the face of life's greatest challenges.

Richie founded the Center for Healthy Minds in 2009 and the Dalai Lama visited Madison in 2010 to help inaugurate the Center. The mission of the Center is to cultivate well-being and relieve suffering through a scientific understanding of the mind. In 2014, Richie also founded Humin, a nonprofit company affiliated with the Center that has a mission to glean insights from the science to create tools to measure and disseminate well-being. Across these two organizations, there are about 100 people working to bring about a kinder, wiser, and more compassionate world. Both organizations working closely together is what fuels our secret sauce and allows us to uniquely contribute both fundamental science and practical tools that have impact.

Our research shows that just five minutes a day of practice can rewire your brain for greater resilience, focus, and well-being. In this book, we'll show you exactly how.

Humanity at a Tipping Point

The human species is experiencing a massive mental health crisis. Depression is now the leading cause of disease globally. Loneliness has been shown to be more dangerous to our health than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Suicide rates among different groups in some parts of the world are skyrocketing and cut across social class and income. Distractibility and impairments of concentration are also at an all-time high, and teens are spending more time on social media than they do sleeping. For the first time in US history, life expectancy is actually declining in parts of the population. Simply put, we are suffering.

How did we get here? Soon we will share the story of how we met, but for now, we arrived here through parallel complementary routes that included, for Richie, decades of scientific research and a sufficient taste of meditation to be convinced that it offers a powerful tool that can improve well-being; and for Cort, years in the Himalayas in Tibetan communities, learning Tibetan and Tibetan Buddhist practices, and thousands of hours on the meditation cushion. Together, as scientists and meditation practitioners, we've reached the simple yet powerful conclusion that flourishing needs to be nurtured, and from both the science and our personal experience, we have the strong conviction that it can be.

Richie is a neuroscientist and psychologist who began his career nearly fifty years ago with this question: Why is it that some people respond to life's slings and arrows with resilience, while others succumb to depression, stress-related disorders, and other forms of pathology? But it wasn't until 1992, when Richie first met the Dalai Lama, that he turned his attention fully to the study of the positive qualities in people, qualities such as compassion and wisdom.

Inspired by the Dalai Lama's advice and encouragement, in 2001,

Richie began a series of experiments in his lab with a group of very advanced meditation practitioners who had spent a significant portion of their adult lives in formal meditation retreats. One of the early visitors to his lab was Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, then a very young Tibetan lama who had already logged more than 50,000 hours in formal meditation practice and had completed more than six years of retreat, meditating at least eight hours a day every day throughout those years. And it is largely because of Mingyur Rinpoche that we first met.

Cort's meditation journey began in the early 1990s when he was a college student struggling to cope with stress and anxiety. His passion for meditation led him on a journey around the world. He spent long periods in solitary retreat in the Himalayan foothills of Nepal, studied ancient meditation manuals with some of the most revered teachers of Tibetan Buddhism, and eventually cofounded Tergar, a global network of meditation centers spanning six continents, with Mingyur Rinpoche.

Despite our shared connection to Mingyur Rinpoche, we did not meet until 2010, when we attended a meeting with the Dalai Lama on "Altruism and Compassion in Economic Systems," hosted by the Mind & Life Institute in Zurich, Switzerland. Cort was attending with Mingyur Rinpoche, who had a deep interest in Western science and its connection to Buddhism. We heard about each other before we met, and we each sort of knew that we were destined to connect. When we first met, Cort was in the process of returning to the US after living in Asia for a decade. Our conversation rekindled his interest in science. Cort had studied psychology as an undergraduate, and he began to see how his background in both psychology and Buddhism could be combined in a doctoral study at the Center for Healthy Minds. By the end of the Zurich meeting, he'd decided to pursue his doctorate with Richie at the Center for Healthy Minds.

Our encounter in Zurich not only changed the course of Cort's life but also set the stage for a deep friendship and fruitful collaboration that continues to nourish us both and our joint commitment to work together on behalf of the well-being of others.

Beyond Mindfulness

Our very first conversations were filled with dreams of all the things we could explore together through the lens of scientific research. We were especially interested in broadening the scope of research beyond mindfulness, which was emerging as a hot topic in scientific circles at the time. The prevailing view was that mindfulness practice alone is the antidote to our stress and anxiety in an increasingly turbulent world. The basic idea is that by training the mind to stay in the present moment and develop greater calm and equanimity, we can weather life's storms with more resilience and feel better. Our intuition, however, was that while mindfulness skills are indeed critical for navigating the stress of the modern world, they would be even more impactful when paired with a broader range of contemplative principles.

This intuition has been borne out by our research. At the Center for Healthy Minds, we've found that mindfulness practice alone is not enough to reverse the trends we are seeing in people's mental health. As one of the premier centers for research into how meditation improves lives and the first to show that it actually changes the brain, the Center examines the effects of mindfulness and meditation—but our newest research has shown that something more is needed.

For the past four decades, we've investigated deeply the science of emotions and contemplative practice. We've studied attention, resilience, equanimity, kindness, compassion, gratitude, empathy, and wisdom, exploring how these qualities affect the mind, brain, and body.

Though we are scientists, we are also fathers, partners, and citizens who are not immune to the effects of the stress we are all experiencing. The suffering is all around us. As such, we developed a lofty goal. We wanted to see if we could help people achieve something concrete with this research, a path to thriving that would endure throughout their lives. We wanted to help people truly *flourish*.

In recent years, we have focused on two central questions: What skills do we need to flourish in the face of the increasing challenges of today's world? And is it possible to build our capacity to thrive when things are going well and to learn and grow and still be well when faced with enormous challenges? We've seen that flourishing comes about when:

1. we are fully present and aware,
2. we experience positive connections with the people in our lives and with the natural environment in which we reside,
3. we have insight into our thoughts and emotions, and
4. we feel that our lives have meaning and purpose.

And all this can still happen amid difficulty and stress.

Over the years, we've worked with thousands of people, from those struggling with depression and anxiety to stressed-out college students, from police officers to schoolteachers, and from newborn infants to aging adults. We've also studied the full range of psychopathology, from autism to depression, social anxiety, and PTSD, and we've explored the further reaches of human flourishing in very long-term meditation practitioners.

All along, we tracked the emotional lives of all these people, using the most cutting-edge research tools available, while giving them "behavioral tasks" (simple games) to study their behavior and well-being over time. We used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), functional

MRI (fMRI), positron emission tomography (PET), and electroencephalography (EEG) to study their brains and found that meditation and other forms of mental training not only boost well-being but also alter the function and structure of the human brain, even how the brain responds to physical pain.

These measures helped us see that learning skills to cultivate flourishing makes us both feel better and behave more altruistically. Moreover, practices for flourishing help us stay more focused and can reduce unconscious biases. We used questionnaires and quizzes to see how skills for flourishing transform the way people think and feel about themselves. We also implemented biological measures that gave us insights into how training the mind can change how the physical body responds to stress—for example, decreasing the release of stress hormones during a challenging event.

These findings were surprising at times—and tremendously hopeful.

Our results showed that although the current trends around mental health are alarming, they *can* be reversed. Flourishing is possible amid a rapidly changing and busy world. What's more, we found that we all have the innate capacity to develop the skills and habits necessary to flourish. Learning to flourish is similar to learning language. But to actually do so, we need to be trained. Our big discovery is that flourishing consists of four skills. They can steer us away from depression and anxiety and toward fulfillment and connection. We can train ourselves to navigate life's ups and downs with far more resilience, calmness, and even a hopeful outlook. We can train our minds and rewire our brains to flourish.

The Four Skills of Flourishing

In this book, we give you practical steps for learning how to flourish in our everyday lives based on decades of research both in the lab and out in the world. We've examined brain scans and gene expression changes in the laboratory but also worked with people in real life who report profound shifts in well-being. We've worked with teachers, health care providers, police and firefighters, veterans, formerly incarcerated people, people suffering from mood and anxiety disorders, and many more. These skills are for all of us who are overwhelmed, stressed, or lonely in today's world or who simply sense they have untapped potential to lead a more fulfilling life. While our stress reactions are normal in a world of extraordinary challenge, it doesn't mean we can't train ourselves to thrive. Many of the people we have worked with reported feeling more depressed and anxious than ever before. Some said they no longer recognized themselves as the people they thought they were. Whether you live with chronic stress or mental health challenges are a new development for you, our book will illuminate the path from chronic stress, distraction, and anxiety to a life that feels balanced, rich, and rewarding.

We will share our groundbreaking scientific model—the Healthy Minds Framework—which highlights the *four core skills of human flourishing*. Each skill translates into practices that all of us can do in simple ways, every day, with enormous positive results.

Awareness: the skill of attending to the present moment and being with our own thoughts and emotions in a healthy way.

Connection: the skill of being present with others and our surroundings and the cultivation of qualities like appreciation and kindness that help us have healthy interactions and relationships.

Insight: the skill of building self-knowledge through self-inquiry, exploring how our thoughts, emotions, and sense of self shape our experience.

Purpose: the skill of feeling connected to the core values and guiding motivations that lend meaning to our lives and pursuits.

Our research on awareness, for instance, has shown that it plays a critical role in human flourishing by giving us the tools to manage our thoughts, emotions, and impulses in a healthy way—what scientists call “self-regulation.” Our research on social connection has also led to striking results, including the finding that novice meditators can alter the functioning of their brains in ways that promote altruistic behavior. We found extraordinary examples of insight in advanced meditators, who could trigger and sustain high-amplitude gamma oscillations, a form of brain activity often associated with the experience of having an “aha” moment.

But by far, one of the most interesting aspects of our research is the role we learned purpose plays in flourishing. We would have thought that awareness, insight, and connection alone were enough to carry someone in times of great struggle—but, in fact, purpose plays a critical role. Purpose connects us to feeling needed and helps us keep our eye on creating a future we want to live in, which seems to lift us out of sadness and depression. While awareness, insight, and connection will keep us connected to our feelings and related capacities in the present moment, purpose pulls us into action. We’ve found that a healthy sense of purpose helps us recover more easily when we get emotionally reactive. People with more purpose are more emotionally resilient. If we translate this finding to a real-world setting, it means that on a day when you have more of a sense of meaning and purpose, you will more easily regain your emotional balance when you get upset or reactive.

Two Kinds of Learning

The four elements of flourishing we just introduced you to are called skills for a reason. For each of them, learning the skill requires not only conceptual learning about the skill but also practicing the skill to embody it. Consider kindness. You can read books about kindness and attend lectures about kindness. This is what's called didactic learning. It's how most of us were taught in school. But we all have a general intuition that while beneficial, just hearing about kindness is not sufficient to produce the feeling or act of kindness. For that we need *procedural learning*.

We've heard so many instances of people saying to us that they "know" they would benefit from meditating, but they still can't get themselves to do it. We see this pattern with other health-related behavioral changes we "know" would be good for us—better diets, more physical exercise, not smoking, etc. But we don't apply what we've learned to an effort to make the changes. Scientists call this the "declarative-procedural gap." Procedural learning is acquired through practice and it's procedural learning that enables us to establish a habit because it is governed by brain systems that are totally different from those that govern declarative learning.

Flourishing Is Easier Than You Think

Initially, we supposed that for the average person, cultivating the four skills would take hours of daily practice over the course of months and years. But when we studied the brains of both Buddhist monks who have meditated for tens of thousands of hours and those of everyday people just learning to meditate, we discovered our supposition was far from accurate. In fact, we don't even need to sit down to meditate for half an hour every day. According to our groundbreaking research, it

only takes *a few minutes a day* of guided or unguided meditation, reflective writing, or short contemplation to rewire the brain to flourish.

To give just one of many examples, a study we did with hundreds of school employees at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic showed that doing the practices we teach in this book for just five minutes a day was enough to make substantial improvements in the participants' levels of stress and anxiety. Further, everyone reported an increase in positive thoughts and emotions, like feeling more aware and socially connected. What's more, these benefits started to show up after just one week of practice and were still present when we tested for them again three months after the program ended. And we now have very new data that show the benefits actually grow over time. In our six-month follow-ups, we've seen that the effects of the training are even more pronounced.

While our framework has been supportive for people during times of extreme stress, such as the Covid pandemic, it has also proven to help people with long-term mental health challenges. When we first met John, he was struggling with clinical levels of anxiety and depression and on the verge of quitting his job with the sales team at a big company. He enrolled in one of our studies at the Center for Healthy Minds and began to learn simple skills to work with his mind and emotions in a positive way. As early as the first week, he shared that he was feeling more hopeful and uplifted than he had in years. After a month, he started to feel more dramatic changes, and the data backed it up. His symptoms, including toxic levels of rumination and a lack of motivation to stay engaged at work, had decreased by nearly 30 percent. John reported higher levels of focus and mindfulness, more feelings of positive social connection, and a greater sense of meaning and purpose at work, all of which we were measuring weekly. The positive changes John experienced were still there three months later, and he shared that the training had transformed his life.

In other research using the most rigorous clinical research methods, we taught people who had never done any form of meditation training a simple compassion practice, which is important for both the awareness and connection aspects of flourishing and which we'll share in this book. This compassion practice asks participants to bring into their minds and hearts someone they know and to reflect on a difficulty that person is experiencing. The practitioner then cultivates a sincere wish that this person find happiness and be relieved of that difficulty. Participants are encouraged to begin this practice first by thinking of a loved one (a spouse, family member, even a pet), then they move on to someone they don't know very well, and, finally, to a challenging person in their lives. We tested participants before and after two weeks of this compassion training, with each person engaging in only seven hours total of practice.

What was most surprising is that we found evidence that the brain changed from pre- to post-training. Brain circuits critical for positive emotion became more activated. We also found that compared with a control group that did no compassion training, those trained in compassion acted more altruistically by giving generously to victims in an economic decision-making task. Altruism activates brain circuits and engages biological mechanisms of caring that contribute to our ability to flourish by helping us forge stronger connections with others. Together, these findings again confirmed that it doesn't take much training to measurably impact the brain circuits that underlie kindness and compassion.

The simplicity and accessibility of these practices are a seismic shift in our understanding of mental health and emotional well-being. If people adopt these habits and skills in the coming years, we can pave the way for huge reversals in declining mental health. We've seen that, like physical exercise, the four skills of flourishing are accessible to many, from kids in kindergarten to the elderly in

nursing homes. Although we are taught to believe that people of a certain age are “too set in their ways” to change, this is simply not true. Research shows people can radically transform at any age. In one recent study, Anne Malaktaris and her colleagues at the University of California, San Diego, found that the compassion training we used in our studies produced substantial improvements in participants 66 years and older, showing significant gains in measures of well-being and decreases in measures of stress, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed. Anyone can cultivate the skills of flourishing.

The four skills of flourishing can even influence how we respond to physical pain. In one of our studies, which we describe in detail later in the book, we found that cultivating awareness, connection, and insight changed the brain’s pain network. Advanced meditators had much less activity in the pain network before and after a painful stimulus, while a group of nonmeditators experienced just the opposite. The takeaway is that we can train our minds to experience pain with less suffering. Imagine what the world would look like if we all learned the four skills of flourishing and applied them to the countless painful moments in our lives, both physical and otherwise.

All that is needed is a commitment to practice and a little bit of discipline for a few minutes each day. Brief daily rituals that help us calm our minds and live with more balance may one day be as common as brushing our teeth. Think about it. A few thousand years ago, humans were not brushing their teeth every day. This is something we learned to do. Now, virtually every person on the planet engages in this daily ritual. Consider what could happen if everyone cared for their minds daily the way we do for our bodies and physical hygiene. If each of us begins to incorporate these skills and habits into our daily lives, we imagine the alarming trends we are seeing will reverse, health will improve, and the effects will cascade to the flourishing of others in our communities and around the globe.

Flourishing Is Not Happiness

It is important to note that flourishing is not the same as being happy all the time. If you are helping a friend through a personal challenge, flourishing might look like empathy and being a present, caring listener. When you're at work, it might show up as mental focus, creativity, or staying connected to the deeper purpose of your job. And if you yourself are having a hard time, flourishing might look more like resilience, your capacity to adapt and adjust to an unexpected loss or a setback. Flourishing is the ability to see the forest from the trees and to remain buoyant, uplifted, and moving forward even during times of turbulence. In short, when we are flourishing, we bring the best of ourselves to whatever life throws our way.

The key insight from our pioneering research is the simple idea that flourishing is a skill. *Born to Flourish* will take you through a clear path that both explains the skills and the research behind them and that provides information on how you can nurture the skills in everyday life. When we take people through all four skills of the Healthy Minds Framework, the results are often life-changing.

For example, when we first started working with Jennifer, a forty-year-old public school teacher who was doing her best to help her class of unruly fifth-graders learn, she was on the edge of burnout. She loved teaching and her kids, but the daily grind of working in a large school system had created a feeling of chronic stress. Jennifer knew things were getting bad when she lost her ability to get a good night's sleep. She had always been a sound sleeper, but many nights she found herself lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. Her mind was caught in a swirl of thoughts, replaying stressful events from her day or imagining some unwelcome future scenario. Jennifer was exhausted yet couldn't fall asleep for hours, and when she did, she would

wake up in the middle of the night with even more restless energy. Her fatigue started to spill over into her work and relationships. She couldn't stay focused in the classroom, and she was more irritable with her students. At home, the smallest chores started to feel like an overwhelming burden, and she lost the motivation to do things she normally enjoyed.

Jennifer had zero free time and was out of options, so based on a friend's recommendation, she downloaded our Healthy Minds Program app (produced by our nonprofit Humin), a step-by-step training in the four skills we cover in this book. Jennifer quickly discovered that the practices were much easier than she expected. She learned about "active meditations" she could do while folding the laundry or walking to the bus stop, and she learned she could practice while lying in bed, too. As she began integrating the skills into her life, things started to change.

In particular, the awareness practices helped her step back from the powerful current of her restless thoughts, emotions, and reactions. She learned how bringing awareness to the sensations of her body and breath as she lay in bed would bring a sense of peace and calm she'd never known before. She experimented with connection practices that taught her how to shift from frustration and apathy to empathy and appreciation. Insight meditation helped her explore her expectations and reactions with curiosity, and she started to feel much more in control of her emotions. She even learned some new skills to clarify her most cherished values and apply them when she was with her kids in the classroom, which helped her rediscover her passion for teaching. It was not an overnight process, but seeing that she could use the ups and downs of her daily routine to consciously strengthen awareness, connection, insight, and purpose transformed Jennifer's life at work and at home. Her story shows that it can take

as little as five minutes a day to strengthen the four components of human flourishing.

The framework we founded and present in this book is the basis for the Healthy Minds Program app, which we developed together. The app has been selected as one of the top three meditation apps by *The New York Times/Wirecutter* for four years running and is being used in scientific research by some of the world's top scientists, including groups at MIT, NYU, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Arizona, and other premier universities. As of this writing it has been downloaded by more than one million people despite the fact that it was produced by a nonprofit organization that has spent nothing on advertising.

Unlike the app, however, this book isn't about practice alone. It brings stories, our research findings, and practices together in a single place to help you understand why we all struggle at times and how we can turn things around. Why do we handle a stressful work situation like a pro and then lose it sitting in traffic? Why do we feel a deep sense of purpose with some activities and not others? We've learned that variations in awareness, connection, insight, and purpose underlie all these fluctuations.

We are facing a crisis in our collective well-being today. Distractibility, addiction, loneliness, depression, suicide, and life expectancy are getting worse by the day. We need a reset! This is why the two of us consider ourselves “activist scientists.” Seeing the growing scale of the mental health crisis and knowing what we know about simple skills that can help anyone flourish, we can no longer carry on with our research without acting. The world needs to know what the research is showing us: that simple practices to hone the four skills of flourishing can help us reverse the perilous course we are currently following as a society.

What Flourishing Is and Why It Matters

Born to Flourish aims to help each of us navigate the highs and lows of our individual lives and thereby thrive at work, at home, and everywhere in between. As we continue to face the stress and challenges around us, we ourselves can continue to change and increase our capacity to contribute good to the world.

Chapter 2

Rewiring Your Brain to Flourish

The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are.

—Carl Jung

It was 7:30 a.m. on a crisp September morning when Cort pulled up to the drop-off line at Shorewood Elementary School with his eight-year-old son, CJ, sitting quietly in the back seat. As he watched CJ gather his oversized backpack and lunch box, Cort felt the familiar tightness in his chest—that mixture of love, worry, and determination that had become his constant companion over the past few months. Just a few months earlier, their lives had been completely upended. Now, here they were, starting an entirely new chapter in Madison, Wisconsin.

“Have a great day, hon,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “Remember, Mrs. Johnson will take you to after-school care, and I’ll pick you up at six after my classes.” CJ nodded, gave him a quick hug, and disappeared into the stream of children flowing through the school’s front doors. Cort sat there for a moment, watching him go, remembering how, just a year earlier, this whole routine would have played out back in Minneapolis, where Cort himself grew up and where all their family and friends were just a few minutes’ drive away.

On this particular morning, the usual swirl of feelings Cort

experienced when dropping off his son held an edge of something sharper—an awareness of just how much his life had changed in a matter of months. A difficult divorce had left him single-parenting CJ full-time, he'd just moved to a new city, and in a few days, he would be starting an intensive doctoral program. And then, just as he was adjusting to this new reality, came the news that his father had been diagnosed with cancer.

As he drove to campus for class, his phone buzzed. His father was calling with an update about his latest oncology appointment. The news wasn't good. It was stage 4 prostate cancer. The words still felt surreal, as if they belonged to someone else's story. Cort pulled into the parking lot on campus but couldn't bring himself to get out of the car just yet. The weight of everything—single parenting, the doctoral program's demanding schedule, his father's declining health, the geographic distance from their support system—felt as if it might crush him.

But sitting there in his car, he did what had become an essential part of his daily routine. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to feel the full weight of the moment. Some days, that meant tears. Other days, it meant feeling the anxiety course through his body like electricity. By bringing awareness to these feelings and feeling them fully, he'd discovered they would eventually pass on their own, leaving him better able to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

There were other supports Cort leaned on to get through this challenging time. He and CJ lived in family housing on campus, which was filled with kids and families who were also transplants, some much farther afield than Minneapolis. Seeing CJ play outside with new friends seemed to erase all of Cort's stress. But the most profound shifts happened in quiet moments—when CJ was missing his old room, his mom, or his friends. Instead of rushing to fix everything, Cort would simply be there with him. He learned that