

January 2022 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Keeping Your Aging Brain Sharp

Are you a SuperAger? “A SuperAger is someone in their 80s or older who exhibits cognitive function that is comparable to that of an average middle-aged individual. Additionally, this group has been shown to exhibit less brain volume loss.” Some factors in being a superager are genetic but other factors are within our control. “Using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), scientists measured the thickness of the cortex in 24 SuperAgers and 12 members of a control group. Normally aging adults lose roughly 2.24 percent in brain volume per year, but the SuperAgers lost around 1.06 percent.” Because SuperAgers lose brain volume more slowly than their peers, they may be better protected from dementia.

Things to do to keep our aging brains sharp!

- **STAY POSITIVE.** In these times of pandemic distress, it may sound like a cliché but staying positive is important. How we think about aging has an impact on our mental age. Shelbie Turner at Oregon State University’s College of Public Health and Human Sciences found that how we think about who we’re going to be in old age is very predictive of exactly how we will be. Stress associated with a negative outlook seems to trigger real changes in our bodies that can accelerate aging by causing cell damage. It is not too late to be positive! Get rid of negative stereotypes about aging. For example, when you forget something or lose something and say, “I’m having a senior moment.” Stop. Get rid of that thought.
- **KEEP GOOD COMPANY.** Loneliness and isolation cause a lot of physically damaging stress. Make it a priority to keep in touch with friends, whether you prefer a wide circle of acquaintances or a few intimate relationships. Emily Rogalski of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine notes that one of the distinctive things about “individuals who are free of dementia, free of cognitive problems, and really thriving in their community as well” is their endorsement of stronger positive relationships with others. “Super-agers who maintain strong social relationships have four to five times as many of a particular type of neuron in the brain thought to play a role in awareness and social processing.”
- **STAY IN SHAPE.** Sleep, exercise, and diet have been well studied as to their contributions to healthful aging. Aerobic exercise and resistance training have been shown to improve cognitive abilities regardless of frequency. As for food, consider this example of dietitians recommended list of the top vegetables to eat. In alphabetical order: asparagus, broccoli, brussels sprouts, carrots, collard greens, garlic, ginger, green peas, kale, kohlrabi, red cabbage, spinach, sweet potatoes, and swiss chard. Also, take advantage of the fact that Whatcom is a major blueberry county!
- **MEDITATE.** Various researchers have shown that meditation helps protect brains from damage caused by stress. Check the National Institute on Aging suggestions for relaxation techniques that include meditation and mindfulness to reduce stress and lower blood pressure.
- **LEARN SOMETHING NEW.** Whether finding a new hobby or reading a good book, there are clear cognitive benefits to exploring new things. “Research even shows that video games don’t actually rot your brain — they may preserve it.”

Question: What enables superagers to persevere in the face of unpleasantness? It is an open question, but “scientists have found that if they electrically stimulate one of the regions of the superager ensemble – the midcingulate cortex – subjects report a feeling of motivation to overcome difficult challenges.” Duckworth calls this feeling “grit”.

Sources: <https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/4-habits-super-agers>
<https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/other/5-secrets-of-seniors-who-keep-their-minds-young/ar-AAS96XN?ocid=msedgdhp&pc=U531>
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