What Is a Super Ager?

9 MIN READ

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BY HEATHER HURLOCK

Super agers stay mentally sharp, physically strong, and socially connected well into their 80s and beyond.

You don’t want to wait until your 80s to become a super ager. Most of what we know about **super agers** comes from clinical research studies, so while the term has become aspirational, it’s rooted in a very specific scientific framework. The habits that help people become Super Agers are accessible now, and they’re rooted in both data and real life.

What Is a Super Ager?

Super ager is a scientific designation for adults, typically over 80, who maintain the memory, strength, and mobility of someone decades younger. The term was coined by neuroscientist **Emily Rogalski, PhD**, at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine, to describe people whose memory performance rivals that of much younger individuals. Since then, the research has expanded.

Super Agers have great recall, greater emotional resilience, stronger social ties, and healthier physical profiles than their peers.

Interestingly, the research shows that the brains of super agers are structurally distinct in ways that scientists are just beginning to understand. These aren’t subtle shifts, either. Super agers appear to preserve the physical architecture that supports memory, decision-making, and connection well into their 80s and beyond.

What's Different About Super Ager Brains?

1. **Thicker Gray Matter:** Gray matter is responsible for processing information and controlling functions like movement, memory, and emotions. According to a study published in ***Cerebral Cortex***, super agers have thicker cortical brain regions, especially in the anterior cingulate cortex. This reflects preserved gray matter, specifically the outer layers of the brain involved in processing and higher cognitive functions. While this is a promising marker, it's important to recognize that gray matter thickness is just one of several brain aging indicators and doesn't capture the full complexity of cognitive resilience.
2. **More Social Brain Cells:** (Yes, those are a thing) The **National Institute on Aging** notes that some super agers' brains contained a much higher density of a particular type of cell called von Economo neurons, which are linked to social intelligence and awareness.
3. **Less White Matter Atrophy:** White matter is the communication highway between different brain regions and between the brain and the spinal cord. A 2024 study in the ***Journal of Neuroscience*** found that super agers show significantly less white matter atrophy (thinning or shrinkage) over time compared to typical older adults. Preserving white matter supports better overall brain connectivity and coordination.

5 Science-Backed Habits That Support Super Aging

The good news? You don't have to win the genetic lottery to become a super ager. In fact, lifestyle and mindset matter more than you think.

1. Deliberately Challenge Your Brain

Super Agers actively seek out cognitive effort. They don’t let their minds coast.

- Learn a new language or instrument
- Play strategy games like chess or bridge
- Engage in storytelling, writing, or public speaking

According to **Northwestern researchers**, super agers are often lifelong learners who embrace mental effort. This is how you promote neuroplasticity, helping your brain build new pathways as you age.

2. Move with Intention

Building muscle and increasing your aerobic capacity not only strengthens your body but also fuels your brain. Physical activity improves blood flow, lowers inflammation, and boosts cognitive function.

According to **Harvard Health**, preserving your exercise capacity, especially your **VO? max,** is critical to aging well. How much you retain depends on the intensity, duration, and frequency of your workouts. F

- **Aim to elevate your heart rate** to 50% of your max (calculated as 220 minus your age), and work up to 60–70% over time. At that level, you’ll be breathing heavily and unable to talk easily while exercising.
- **Get 20 to 40 minutes of aerobic activity**, 3 to 5 days a week.
- **Incorporate strength training** to support **mobility and metabolic health**
- **Check out our guide to building muscle safely**.

Your exercise plan should be tailored to your physical ability and health status, especially if you’re managing mobility limitations or chronic conditions.

3. Find Your People

Super agers often maintain close relationships and **meaningful interactions**. Strong social connections are **protective against cognitive decline** and depression.

According to a study published in **PLOS ONE**, super agers reported higher psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and stronger social networks than typical older adults, suggesting that emotional resilience and interpersonal engagement play a significant role in memory preservation and quality of life.

- **Schedule regular calls** or walks with friends
- **Play a racquet sport** for fun (**They're linked to longevity**)
- **Join a club,** class, or **volunteer group**
- **Sign up for an art class**
- **Prioritize presence** over perfection in your relationships

At a loss for how to **find your people**? Try something new, something you're interested in but haven't done before, maybe something that feels a little risky, so you need to stoke some courage (it's good to flex your courage muscles with *healthy* risks).

4. Align With Your Purpose

Having a reason to get up in the morning matters. Whether it's volunteering, mentoring, or pursuing creative projects, knowing your why is key.

A 2024 study published in ***Innovation in Aging*** found that older adults with a stronger sense of purpose in daily life had better cognitive function throughout the day, suggesting that purpose may help maintain attention, memory, and executive functioning even in advanced age. Additional research in ***Alzheimer's Research &***

Therapy supports these findings, showing that a strong sense of purpose promotes resilience to brain aging by reducing the cognitive burden of structural brain changes in midlife.

Whether it's mentoring, volunteering, caregiving, or activism, purpose stabilizes your attention, supports your memory, boosts executive functioning, increases motivation, and **improves overall well-being**.

5. Tell Yourself A Good Story

If you want to live a long, healthy life, one tool people overlook: stories. Super Agers don't just move more, think harder, or connect better; they also **tell themselves a different story** about what's possible and about aging itself. Their secret? Mindset.

We now know that how we perceive aging can directly affect how we experience it. In fact, multiple studies, including pioneering work from Yale researcher Becca Levy, PhD, have found that people with more **positive beliefs** about aging live significantly longer than those with negative views. The takeaway: the stories we tell ourselves about getting older shape our biology.

Instead of bracing for decline, super agers lean into growth. They expect meaning, vitality, and relevance, no matter the number on the calendar. This mindset shift rewires how we respond to challenges, how we care for our bodies, and even how our brains age.

At *Super Age*, we believe the future is shaped not just by what you *do*, but by **what you *believe is possible***. Yes, exercise, nutrition, sleep, and purpose matter, but so does rejecting outdated narratives about aging and replacing them with something bolder, more empowering, and more true to who you are now.

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WRITTEN BY:



Heather Hurlock