

THE MINDSET

TOTALLY AWE-SOME

Studies show that cultivating this wondrous emotion can help you relax, have more fun, improve your health, and so on. And it's easy to find some anytime, anywhere.

BY ELENI N. GAGE



“Awe is calming, settling, and grounding, but it also awakens and activates us. It makes us more open, curious, playful, and humorous.”

WHEN MY KIDS were little, surprise, delight, and awe crossed their faces a dozen times a day. Any number of occurrences would leave them wide-eyed with amazement—a sudden rain-storm, a squirrel running up a tree, the sunset. I recall my son’s entire pre-K class staring, slack-jawed, as their teacher released butterflies they’d grown from caterpillars into the gray New York sky.

Today, when I suggest we head to the same park where they once marveled at the ducks, my tweens shrug and turn back to their books or video games. I’m not much better. When I wander through spaces that once brought me awe, like the park or a museum, I’m often making mental to-do lists or answering emails on my phone. The only emotion I’m aware of in those moments is anxiety. It’s funny when you think about it: “Awesome” is a word grown-ups throw around all the time, like after a dreaded meeting is canceled. But how many of us regularly feel actual awe?

Positive psychology researchers want us to find it again. They’re making the case for the power of awe—the physical, psychological, and emotional benefits it offers. Even if you’re long past the age of 6, you can cultivate it in your mind (which is absolutely still fertile ground for awe!) and reap its rewards. The key, for those of us with myriad responsibilities and an earned world-weariness that can inure us to the charms of our surroundings, is to seek it out in big, amazing experiences *and* learn to find it in small ones. According to research, you can and should make a habit of that second one. Yep, every day.

The Basics of Awe

In 2003, Dacher Keltner, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, who’s now widely regarded as a pioneer of “awe studies,” noticed that while thousands of articles in psych journals discussed fear, anger, surprise, and joy, only a handful looked at awe. In his first crack at studying the emotion, he and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, PhD, coauthored a paper identifying awe’s two primary components—vastness and mystery—and its role in our lives. In 2015, Keltner’s lab collected 2,600 stories from people all over the world about a time they felt awe, which the study defined as “being in the presence of something vast and mysterious that transcends your understanding of the world.”

Through reading the stories, Keltner and his staff determined that awe can be triggered by any of what they’ve named the eight wonders of life: moral beauty (feeling moved by the kindness or bravery of others); collective effervescence (being swept up in a group event, whether it’s a theater performance or a quinceañera); nature (looking up at a towering redwood); visual design (marveling at a beautiful painting, sculpture, or structure like the pyramids); music (hearing a song that moves you); life and death (witnessing or just pondering birth, or experiencing loss); spirituality (feeling a sense of the sublime from a meditation session or religious service); and epiphanies (gaining sudden understanding, maybe from gazing at the face of your date and realizing you’ve fallen in love).

Why It’s Important

Over the years, Keltner uncovered the positive physical, intellectual, emotional, and social benefits of awe. (His book about his findings, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, came out this year.) Feeling awe promotes concentration and rigorous thinking, encourages community and connection, relieves depression and anxiety, and can reduce inflammation, aiding our cardiovascular health. It lifts us out of the daily race and, Keltner says, gives us “the sense that we have more time in the day.”

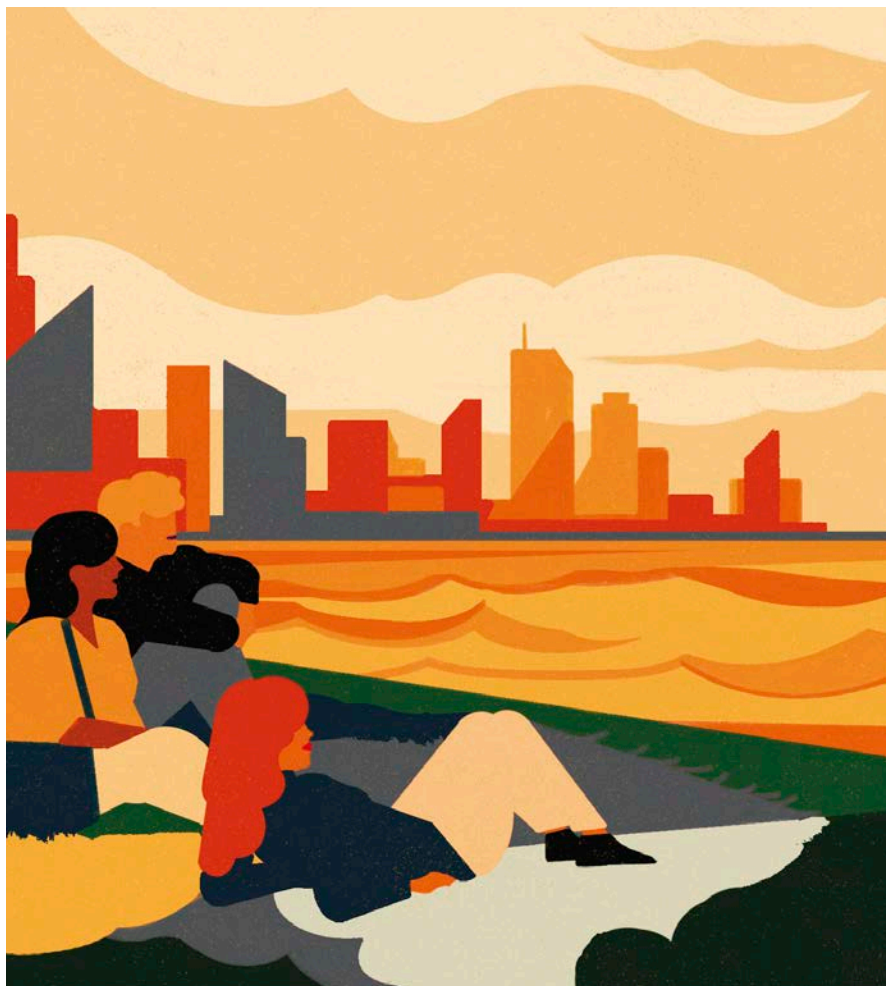
Researchers have learned through brain imaging that experiencing awe activates our parasympathetic nervous system, shutting down the fight-or-flight stress response, and spurs our bodies to produce inflammation-fighting substances called cytokines. Awe also promotes what scientists call modest sympathetic arousal. In this state, we’re somewhere between fully relaxed and on guard, and we feel energized to connect with others, says physician Michael Amster, MD, who wrote *The Power of Awe* with Jake Eagle, a licensed professional counselor. “Awe is calming, settling, and grounding, but it also awakens and activates us,” Amster explains. “It makes us more open, curious, playful, and humorous.”

Why We've Lost It

If awe, a universal experience across cultures, does such incredible things for us, why did we stop feeling it? Mostly because we've forgotten how. As kids, we want to figure out the world, and we keep an open mind so we can better understand it. By the time we reach adulthood, we feel like we've been to this rodeo, and we're just trying to get from point A to point B efficiently. Say we're caught in a rainstorm. We already know from experience that our hair will frizz if it gets wet, so we scramble to find shelter instead of stopping to notice the shape and iridescence of the raindrops. "Awe is everywhere around us," Amster says. "It's just that we've lost the ability to see the wonder and beauty of everyday life."

If you're reading this in the U.S., here's another roadblock for you: Apparently Americans don't do awe that well. In cross-cultural studies measuring people's natural propensity for it, "we're the lowest on the planet," Amster says. He attributes our national deficit to a couple of factors. First, our culture is individualistic, and awe is tied up with connection to the community and the natural world. Also, we live in a country of relative wealth, another awe dampener. Wealthier people tend to be more self-absorbed, Amster explains. "Research shows that those who have less are more reliant on their networks, they're more connected, and they care more about other people and their plight."

Given the state of our world, seeking awe may be more challenging than ever—but now may be the best moment to embrace it. "Awe suits bad times as well as good ones," says



Monica C. Parker, author of *The Power of Wonder*. Unlike happiness, awe is what scientists call a dually valent emotion, allowing us to experience the positive and the negative simultaneously. Standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, looking into the chasm below, we're able to think both *This is beautiful* and *This is terrifying*. Holding a parent's hand as they pass away, we can grieve deeply as well as find solace in our closeness. Cradling a newborn, we feel joy and pride, but also terror, wondering, *Can I take care of someone so vulnerable?* or *Will I ever be able to watch Law & Order again without thinking about how that victim was someone's child?*

Even everyday moments—the kindness of a stranger who lets you go first in line, unexpectedly harmonizing with the person next to you on the church pew while you sing a hymn—can remind us we're part of something bigger. "We have so many crises going on: isolation, narcissism, overconsumption, climate change, polarization," Keltner says. "People want to connect to something meaningful. Awe could be the cure for our times."

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How to Find It

Opportunities for awe are already all around us, and we can start feeling it right away. To open ourselves to awe, Keltner says, “every person should look at those eight wonders of life and think, *What are some that are easy for me?* Is it seeking community, immersing yourself in art, listening to music? Then do more of that.” One simple—and altruistic—way of finding awe is to experience the wonder of “moral beauty” by giving back to your community. When you volunteer, you’re a front-and-center witness to two awe-inspiring things: other people’s acts of kindness, and people overcoming adversity. Imagine a formerly struggling student acing the SAT after you tutor them, or a devoted gardener doing park cleanup with you despite their arthritis.

The more you seek awe, the more you’ll feel it. Keltner and neuroscientist Virginia Sturm, PhD, conducted an experiment that asked people ages 75 and over to go on a vigorous walk once a week for eight weeks. One group simply walked. The other group was instructed to do an “awe walk” and try to “tap into a childlike sense of wonder” and “take in the vastness of things” by doing stuff like looking at a panoramic view or the details on a leaf or flower. Both groups were told to take selfies on their walks.

The people in the second group reported that they felt less distress each week. And their selfies included more of the environment around them than the other group’s. Keltner’s take-away? “If you cultivate everyday awe, you will become more open.”

Even if you don’t have time to take an awe walk, chances are you have at least a few seconds to spare each day. That’s all Amster and Eagle say you need to practice their AWE method, which they describe as a kind of “microdosing mindfulness.” The A stands for “attention”: Focus on something you value or find amazing, whether it’s a leaf, a ladybug, a pudgy baby hand, or an inspiring book. W is for “wait”: Pause to inhale deeply while you are fully present with whatever you’ve chosen. And E means “exhale” and “expand”: As you breathe out, make the exhale slightly longer

than the inhale, concentrating on whatever feelings come up and letting those sensations fill you. In *The Power of Awe*, they write, “Did you smile? Did you relax? Did you feel a warmth in your belly? Did your vision soften, your eyes moisten with gratitude for this precious item you are observing? Did you feel a surge or release of energy? Congratulations. You have just experienced awe.”

The authors recommend practicing the AWE method three to five times a day, for up to 15 seconds each go. “We’re giving people training wheels to learn how to access moments of awe on demand, to build that muscle, so they can begin to find awe in the ordinary moments of life, without looking for some extraordinary peak experience,” Amster says.

In a study Amster and Eagle conducted at UC Berkeley in the early stages of the pandemic, they asked medical workers and members of the general population to practice the method. Both groups reduced their symptoms of depression by at least 35%, and their anxiety by more than 20%. “What’s really cool is that there was a dose response, meaning the more times you dosed these brief moments throughout the day, the greater the benefit,” Amster says. “At least three times a day seems to be the magic number to get the brain rewiring. Then, within 21 days, we see lasting changes.”

So find a focus for your admiration, take a deep breath, and marvel. Keep at it, and the next time you say “awesome,” you might actually mean it. ■

