

Neuroscience Says Awe Makes Us Nicer, Happier, and More Connected. These '8 Wonders of Life' Help You Experience More of It

Awe is like a wonder drug for your mental and physical health. A top awe researcher explains where to get your daily dose.

By Jessica Stillman

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There are many things we know we need to get regularly to maintain our mental and physical health: [2,000 calories](#) or so of nutritious food a day, 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week, seven to eight hours or so of sleep, and [regular social contact](#).

But according to new neuroscience research, there is one key ingredient to healthy functioning you are probably not getting enough of — [awe](#).

Awe is basically a wonder drug

Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at UC Berkeley and author of [*Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*](#), defines awe as “an emotion, a brief experience we have in response to vast and mysterious things we don’t understand.” It’s that shiver you get [looking at an eclipse](#) or contemplating some of history’s greatest thinkers and heroes.

Most of us have experienced this fleeting zing of curiosity and wonder and enjoyed it as a pleasant dusting of emotion spicing up the everyday. But science says awe is much more than sprinkles on the sundae of life. It’s [more like a vitamin that we need to get regularly](#) to maintain our mental health.

Awe, studies show, breaks us out of the constricting confines of our usual thought patterns. It makes the world seem big, expanding possibilities, as well

as our sense of time and scale. This larger perspective helps reduce anxiety, loneliness, and depression and connects us more fully with our fellow humans, leading to greater happiness.

By making us feel small, awe also trims our egos, making us nicer and less selfish. One recent study showed that [awe increases generosity](#). Other science has found awe reduces narcissistic thinking. There are even physical benefits to awe. It seems to reduce inflammation, slow our heart rate, and even decrease physical pain in older people.

How to get your daily dose of awe

All of which hopefully convinced you that you need a regular dose of awe in your life, just like you need a regular dose of vitamin C. But awe doesn't come in pill form. How do you make sure you're getting enough, particularly in a modern world full of hustle, routines, [bland conformity](#), and [cookie-cutter landscapes](#)?

In several [recent interviews](#), Keltner explained what his research taught him

about how to inject a little more awe into the everyday. High-powered telescopes or a trip to the Louvre are not required (though if you can get them, certainly enjoy). Instead, he lays out the “8 wonders of life” where people can go looking for their daily injection of awe:

1. **Moral beauty.** This is the type of awe you experience when contemplating the courageous or selfless acts of others — and not just world-moving heroes like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela. In [an interview with Big Think](#), Keltner offers the example of a guy “going to a bar his dad ran in Pittsburgh in 1973. He went with his African American friend, and one of the patrons called his friend the N-word. The guy’s dad — who’s this bartender in this working-class bar — just kicked the racist out. And the guy was awash with awe over this act of courage and kindness.”
2. **Collective movement.** This is the type of oneness and awe you feel when “you’re in a yoga class together, you’re dancing, you’re at a

musical or sporting event” and everyone is in sync, [Keltner explained to HuffPo](#).

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Nature. This is a classic source of awe, but again you don’t need to head to Yellowstone to experience the emotion. One recent study showed just paying attention to small details like a drop of dew or the color of a fall leaf [on short a walk near your home](#) can inspire awe.

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Music. “Even when you listen to a piece of music by yourself, you feel less lonely, right? Wow!” enthuses Keltner. (Musicologists have looked into [which type of music is most likely to give us goosebumps](#), if that’s helpful).

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Visual design. A trip to an art museum can be an accessible route to instant awe. “I just recently saw Monet’s water lilies. You look at his water, and you don’t know where the horizon is. You don’t know what’s reflection or real. They’re vast. It’s almost like hallucinating looking at these paintings,” Keltner recalls.

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Spirituality. It's no shock that contemplating a higher power or the overarching meaning of life is likely to nudge us towards awe.

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Big ideas. "People feel awe about big ideas," Keltner explains. "Like, God, when I first read Karl Marx's 'Economic Theory of Consciousness,' I was just like, 'I can't believe it. This guy can explain thought patterns and class struggles.' "

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Life and death. "The life cycle makes us feel awe," according to Keltner. "It propels us to try to understand this great mystery of life."

Taken together, this list proves awe isn't just a rare emotion reserved for exceptional events and once-in-a-lifetime happenings. It's a feeling we can cultivate in our everyday lives if we make just a little effort. Given the impressive benefits of awe, it's worth asking: Which of these eight "wonders of life" can you connect with each day?

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