

# How Awe Can Improve Your Health

The following is excerpted from the article, “How a Bit of Awe Can Improve Your Health,” by Hope Reese of The New York Times, January 3, 2023

Awe can mean many things. It can be witnessing a total solar eclipse. Or seeing your child take her first steps. Or hearing Lizzo perform live. But, while many of us know it when we feel it, awe is not easy to define.

“Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world,” said Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley.

It’s vast, yes. But awe is also simpler than we think — and accessible to everyone, he writes in his book “Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life.”

While many of us associate awe with dramatic, life-changing events, the truth is that awe can be part of everyday life.

In his book, Dr. Keltner writes that awe is critical to our well-being — just like joy, contentment and love. His research suggests it has tremendous health benefits that include [calming down our nervous system](#) and triggering the release of oxytocin, the “love” hormone that promotes trust and bonding.

Dr. Keltner found that awe [activates the vagal nerves](#), clusters of neurons in the spinal cord that regulate various bodily functions, and slows our heart rate, relieves digestion [and deepens breathing](#).

It also has psychological benefits. Many of us have a critical voice in our head, telling us we’re not smart, beautiful or rich enough. Awe seems to quiet this negative self-talk, Dr. Keltner said, by [deactivating](#) the default mode network, the part of the cortex involved in how we perceive ourselves.

Sharon Salzberg, a leading mindfulness teacher and author, also sees awe as a vehicle to quiet our inner critic. Awe, she believes, is “the absence of self-preoccupation.” This, Dr. Keltner said, is especially critical in the age of social media. With so much self-shame and criticism and entitlement, awe gets us out of that.” It does this by helping us get out of our own heads and “realize our place in the larger context, and in our communities.”

The good news? Awe is something you can develop, with practice. Here’s how.

## Pay attention.

In 2016, Dr. Keltner visited San Quentin State Prison in California, where he heard inmates speak about finding awe in “the air, light, the imagined sound of a child, reading, spiritual practice.” The experience changed the way he thought about awe.

## Focus on the ‘moral beauty’ of others.

A reliable way to experience awe is in the simple act of witnessing the goodness of others. When we see others doing small gestures, like walking an older person across the street, we start feeling better and are also more likely to perform good deeds.

Ms. Salzberg also believes in the importance of this interpersonal wonder. She recommended paying attention to your neighborhood bus driver or grocery clerk, looking for those daily moments of kindness.

Another tool to experience awe is to spend time learning about inspiring people. [Research suggests](#) that watching videos of people like Mother Teresa or Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, can trigger awe. “Remind yourself of what they’ve written. Have quotes of them, have photos of them,” he said. “Make them part of your life.”

## Practice mindfulness.

“We cultivate awe through interest and curiosity,” Ms. Salzberg said. “And if we’re distracted too much, we’re not really paying attention.”

Mindfulness helps us focus and lessens the power of distractions. “If you work on mindfulness, awe will come.” So spending time slowing down, breathing deeply and reflecting — on top of their own benefits — have the added advantage of priming us for awe.

## Choose the unfamiliar path.

Awe often comes from novelty. So gravitating toward the unexpected can set us up to experience awe. Some people do this more than others, a personality trait that experts have called an “openness to experience,” Dr. Keltner said.

We can work on developing this openness through everyday choices. Choose a restaurant you don’t usually visit, take a different route to work or check out some music you aren’t familiar with.

People who find awe all around them are more open to new ideas.