

Awe Experiences: Benefits and Examples

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Defining the Construct of Awe

The emotion of awe, long studied in philosophical and religious contexts, has recently garnered significant attention within empirical psychology. Defined broadly, **awe is an emotional state characterized by profound wonder and reverence**, typically experienced when encountering something perceived as vast, powerful, or transcendent, which challenges one's existing mental schema. Unlike simpler, valence-specific emotions such as joy or sadness, awe is often considered a complex, multifaceted emotion that can incorporate both positive and negative elements, ranging from feelings of profound elevation and connection to subtle undertones of fear or existential smallness. Historically, awe was frequently conflated with fear or terror, particularly in classical philosophical definitions focusing on the sublime, but modern psychological research distinguishes awe as a primarily positive, approach-oriented emotion, provided the vastness encountered does not pose an immediate, overwhelming threat to the individual's physical safety. This nuanced understanding highlights the critical role of cognitive appraisal in determining the quality and intensity of the awe experience, moving it beyond a mere sensory reaction into a sophisticated emotional transaction with the environment.

Psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt provided a seminal definition for awe, positing that it involves two primary appraisals: the perception of **vastness** and the need for **accommodation**. Vastness refers to the perceived immensity of the stimulus, whether physical (like a massive canyon or the night sky), temporal (like ancient history), or conceptual (like a complex scientific theory or moral exemplar). This perceived vastness immediately dwarfs the individual's normal frame of reference, forcing a shift in perspective. The second component, accommodation, describes the cognitive process required to integrate this vast new information. When faced with something that cannot be easily categorized or understood using current mental models, the mind must stretch, revise, or create new schemata to make sense of the experience. This dual-component structure is crucial because it differentiates awe from similar emotions like surprise or wonder, which may involve vastness but do not necessarily trigger the deep cognitive restructuring characteristic of genuine awe.

The functional significance of awe lies primarily in its capacity to shift attention away from the self and toward the broader context of the world, promoting a sense of interconnectedness and humility. While other emotions might focus attention inward, magnifying personal concerns and goals, awe compels an external focus, often leading to a temporary reduction in the salience of the individual ego. This self-diminishment, often referred to as the "small self," is not inherently negative; rather, it allows the individual to feel part of something much larger than themselves, fostering what researchers call an "epistemic openness." This openness facilitates learning, creativity, and a reduction in psychological biases. Understanding awe as a powerful mechanism for self-transcendence is key to appreciating its role not only in individual well-being but also in social cohesion and ethical behavior, areas where ongoing research continues to reveal

compelling correlations.

Core Features: Vastness and Accommodation

The appraisal of **vastness** serves as the foundational trigger for the awe experience. This vastness is not merely a measure of physical size; it encompasses anything that substantially exceeds the individual's normal scale of experience or comprehension. Examples range from encountering monumental natural phenomena, such as viewing Earth from space or standing before a colossal waterfall, to appreciating extraordinary human achievements, like the complexity of a symphony or an act of profound moral courage. Crucially, the perception of vastness is subjective and relative; what induces awe in one person, based on their existing knowledge and exposure, may not affect another. However, the common thread is the feeling that the stimulus is so immense, powerful, or intricate that it momentarily overwhelms the observer's sensory and cognitive capacities, demanding immediate attention and cognitive resources.

Following the perception of vastness, the critical cognitive process of **accommodation** ensues. Accommodation, borrowed from Piagetian theory, refers to the modification of existing cognitive frameworks, or schemata, to integrate novel information that conflicts with or cannot be explained by prior knowledge. When awe is elicited, the vast stimulus challenges the individual's worldview, forcing a recognition of limitations in their current understanding. If the stimulus were easily digestible, the emotion would likely be surprise or interest, but the requirement for accommodation is what elevates the experience to awe. This cognitive labor, although potentially uncomfortable, is highly adaptive, promoting intellectual flexibility and a willingness to revise core beliefs. The intensity of the awe experience is often directly correlated with the degree of cognitive restructuring required; the more profoundly the vastness challenges the existing mental models, the stronger the subsequent feeling of awe.

The interplay between vastness and accommodation dictates the specific phenomenology of the awe experience. If vastness is perceived without the necessary accommodation--perhaps because the stimulus is too overwhelming or threatening--the experience might shift toward fear or distress. Conversely, if accommodation is achieved too easily, the resulting emotion may be closer to admiration or interest rather than awe. A state of optimal awe involves a delicate balance where the vastness is challenging enough to necessitate cognitive change but manageable enough to allow for successful integration. This balance results in the characteristic feeling of being humbled yet simultaneously elevated, recognizing one's smallness in the face of the universe while feeling connected to its grandeur. This mechanism underscores the profound capacity of awe to act as an emotional catalyst for personal growth and shifts in perspective regarding one's place in the world.

Elicitors of Awe: From Nature to the Sublime

A diverse array of stimuli reliably elicits the emotion of awe, though researchers often categorize them into several key domains based on their source. The most frequently cited and potent category involves **natural phenomena**. Encounters with sublime elements of nature, such as expansive ocean views, towering mountain ranges, or powerful thunderstorms, are classic elicitors. These environments provide inherent vastness, both physically and temporally, reminding observers of forces far greater than human control. Studies consistently show that exposure to natural beauty, particularly environments characterized by complexity and scale, leads to higher self-reported levels of awe and corresponding increases in prosocial behavior and positive affect. The predictability and benign nature of most natural awe experiences ensure that the vastness is perceived as non-threatening, facilitating the positive emotional valence often associated with the state.

Beyond the natural world, **art, music, and architectural grandeur** represent significant cultural elicitors of awe. Masterpieces in painting, sculpture, or architecture, particularly those demonstrating exceptional skill, complexity, or historical significance, can evoke the required sense of vastness--in this context, often conceptual or skill-based vastness. Similarly, powerful musical compositions, especially those featuring dynamic shifts, harmonic complexity, or choral elements, frequently trigger awe. The structure of music can overwhelm the auditory system in a pleasurable way, demanding cognitive accommodation to process the intricate patterns and emotional depth. These aesthetic elicitors demonstrate that awe is not solely tied to physical immensity but also to the perceived transcendence of human capability or the profound expression of universal human experience, forcing the observer to revise their understanding of human potential.

Other significant domains of awe elicitation include **social and collective experiences**, such as witnessing acts of extraordinary moral beauty, participating in large-scale ceremonies or rituals, or observing demonstrations of exceptional talent or genius. When individuals witness profound moral courage or self-sacrifice, they experience a vastness related to the scope of human goodness, prompting accommodation regarding the limits of ethical behavior. Collective awe, often experienced during mass gatherings like concerts, protests, or religious ceremonies, enhances the feeling of connection and shared identity, leveraging the vastness of the group itself to diminish individual focus and promote collective goals. Finally, **epistemological or intellectual awe** arises when confronting profound scientific discoveries or complex mathematical truths, where the vastness is purely conceptual, requiring the mind to accommodate abstract understandings of the universe's complexity.

Cognitive and Perceptual Transformations During Awe

One of the most immediate and defining cognitive effects of awe is the alteration of **time perception**. Research suggests that when individuals experience awe, they perceive time as moving more slowly, leading to a feeling that the present moment is elongated. This subjective

expansion of time is thought to result from the intense focus and the high degree of cognitive processing (accommodation) required to integrate the vast stimulus. By slowing perceived time, awe effectively allows the individual to feel more present and less rushed, enhancing the sensory and emotional depth of the experience. This effect contrasts sharply with states of anxiety or boredom, where time often seems to drag or speed up unsatisfactorily, respectively. The temporal expansion associated with awe contributes significantly to the feeling of having profound, memorable experiences that seem to transcend ordinary daily life.

A second critical transformation is the phenomenon of **self-diminishment**, or the "small self." Awe inherently shifts attention away from the individual ego and toward the vast external context. This reduction in self-focus involves a decrease in the salience of personal concerns, goals, and daily stressors. Psychologically, this is often measured as a decrease in the centrality of the self in cognitive tasks or narratives. Rather than focusing on internal rumination, the mind is occupied with processing the overwhelming external stimulus. While the term "diminishment" might imply a negative valence, the experience is typically positive, as it relieves the burden of self-preoccupation and fosters a sense of humility and interconnectedness. This cognitive shift is highly beneficial, as excessive self-focus is often linked to psychological distress, including anxiety and depression.

Furthermore, awe is strongly linked to **epistemic curiosity and intellectual openness**. The necessity for accommodation means that the experience inherently involves learning and schema adjustment. Individuals in a state of awe are more likely to exhibit a greater willingness to consider new information, challenge existing assumptions, and seek complex explanations rather than relying on simplistic heuristics. This increased openness extends to moral and political domains, suggesting that awe can temporarily reduce dogmatism and increase tolerance for ambiguity. This cognitive flexibility is a profound consequence of awe, demonstrating its role as a powerful emotional catalyst for intellectual growth and the expansion of personal worldview, moving the individual toward a more nuanced and complex understanding of reality.

Physiological and Neural Correlates of Awe

The intense subjective experience of awe is mirrored by distinct physiological and neurological signatures, suggesting it is a robust and measurable emotional state. Physiologically, awe is often associated with the activation of the **parasympathetic nervous system (PNS)**, particularly the vagus nerve. Studies monitoring heart rate variability (HRV) have shown that awe experiences correlate with increased vagal tone, a marker of PNS activity that promotes calmness, social engagement, and emotional regulation. This finding is crucial because it distinguishes awe from high-arousal negative emotions like fear or excitement, which typically activate the sympathetic nervous system ("fight or flight"). The physiological profile of awe suggests a state of relaxed yet highly attentive engagement, conducive to cognitive processing rather than immediate defensive

reaction.

Neuroscientifically, research employing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) suggests that awe engages several key brain networks. Awe experiences are often linked to decreased activity in the **Default Mode Network (DMN)**, the network responsible for self-referential thought, planning, and mind-wandering. This reduction in DMN activity aligns perfectly with the psychological finding of self-diminishment. When the DMN quiets, the focus shifts away from the internal self. Simultaneously, increased activity is often observed in brain regions associated with emotional regulation and integration, such as the medial prefrontal cortex and areas involved in processing aesthetic stimuli and reward, reinforcing the positive and motivational aspects of the emotion.

The neurochemical landscape of awe is less fully mapped but likely involves several key neurotransmitters. The feeling of elevation and well-being often associated with positive awe suggests the involvement of **dopamine** in the reward pathways, reinforcing the seeking of future awe experiences. Furthermore, the profound feeling of social connection and trust sometimes elicited by collective awe suggests a potential role for **oxytocin**, particularly when awe is experienced in a shared context, such as a religious ceremony or a group nature excursion. Ongoing research continues to clarify how the simultaneous quieting of self-focused networks and the activation of expansive, integrative networks work together to produce the unique subjective and behavioral outcomes of the awe experience.

The Social and Ethical Consequences of Awe

Perhaps the most significant functional consequence of awe is its powerful ability to foster **prosocial behavior**. By diminishing the focus on the self and emphasizing interconnectedness, awe motivates individuals to act in ways that benefit the collective good. Studies have demonstrated that experiencing awe makes people more generous, cooperative, and willing to volunteer their time. The mechanism is rooted in the cognitive shift from an individualistic perspective to a more holistic, group-oriented view. When the vastness of the world is appreciated, the relative importance of personal, material concerns decreases, making it easier to prioritize the needs of others and the community. This prosocial drive suggests that awe serves a critical evolutionary function in promoting social bonding and community resilience.

Awe also plays a crucial role in promoting **humility and reducing entitlement**. When individuals are confronted with something vastly superior--whether a natural wonder or a moral exemplar--they recognize the limitations of their own knowledge and capacity. This humility is not debilitating; rather, it is an adaptive form of self-awareness that reduces arrogance and the tendency toward petty grievances. Research indicates that individuals who frequently experience awe report lower levels of materialism and narcissism. This ethical consequence suggests that awe acts as a moral

compass, encouraging people to adopt a more grounded, realistic assessment of their place in the social and ecological hierarchy, thereby mitigating behaviors driven by excessive self-interest or perceived superiority.

Finally, awe has been linked to increased **life satisfaction and meaning**. By facilitating self-transcendence, awe helps individuals connect their personal narratives to something larger than themselves, whether it be humanity, nature, or the cosmos. This connection provides a framework for meaning-making, particularly during times of existential uncertainty. The feeling of being part of a grand, intricate system, even if one is small within it, combats feelings of isolation and purposelessness. Therefore, the long-term social and psychological utility of awe lies in its capacity to broaden the individual's scope of concern, enhancing empathy, promoting collective welfare, and ultimately contributing to a richer, more meaningful existence.

Theoretical Frameworks and Models of Awe

The most influential theoretical framework for understanding awe is the **Two-Factor Model proposed by Keltner and Haidt (2003)**, which posits that awe is elicited by the simultaneous presence of perceived vastness and the need for accommodation. This model provides the baseline for most contemporary research, emphasizing the cognitive appraisal necessary for the emotion to manifest. Keltner later expanded on this, integrating the "small self" concept as the primary outcome, suggesting that awe functions specifically to orient the individual toward collective concerns by reducing self-focus. This perspective frames awe as a fundamentally adaptive mechanism, designed to interrupt habitual, self-centered cognition and facilitate integration into larger social and environmental contexts.

Another significant contribution comes from research focusing on the specific behavioral outcomes, such as the work by Piff and colleagues, which emphasizes the role of awe in promoting generosity and ethical decision-making. These models often highlight the **social functionalist perspective**, arguing that awe evolved precisely because it suppresses self-interest and promotes prosociality, thereby stabilizing group dynamics. This framework views awe as a psychological tool that shifts resources--both cognitive and physical--away from immediate personal gain and toward communal investment, solidifying its importance in human social evolution and cultural development.

More recent theoretical developments incorporate neuroscientific findings, leading to **Integrative Neural Models** of awe. These models attempt to map the two-factor appraisal process onto specific neural circuits, linking the perception of vastness to sensory processing areas and the accommodation requirement to prefrontal regions involved in schema updating and cognitive control. They also incorporate the role of the PNS activation, suggesting that the physiological signature of relaxed alertness is essential for allowing the deep cognitive work of accommodation to occur effectively, without triggering a threat response. These evolving models aim to provide a

comprehensive understanding of awe, integrating subjective experience, cognitive processing, physiological responses, and ultimate behavioral outcomes into a cohesive framework.

Applications and Future Directions in Awe Research

Given its profound cognitive and emotional benefits, the experience of awe is increasingly being explored for its therapeutic and applied potential. Interventions designed to intentionally cultivate awe, often through exposure to nature or immersive virtual reality experiences, are showing promise in clinical settings. For instance, studies have found that "awe walks"--structured walks designed to encourage participants to focus on vast or complex stimuli--can significantly reduce symptoms of psychological distress, including stress and negative affect, particularly in older adults. The intentional induction of awe provides a powerful, non-pharmacological means of shifting perspective, reducing rumination, and increasing positive emotionality, suggesting practical applications in mental health maintenance and resilience building.

Future research directions are focused on several key areas. First, there is a strong push to understand **individual differences** in awe susceptibility and response. Why do certain individuals report awe more frequently or intensely than others? This involves exploring personality traits (e.g., openness to experience), cultural background, and environmental factors. Second, researchers are striving to better understand the **negative or challenging aspects of awe**, such as the potential for existential dread or terror when vastness is perceived as overwhelming or threatening, moving beyond the predominantly positive focus of current literature.

Finally, the application of awe in areas such as education and organizational leadership is gaining traction. By structuring learning environments to induce intellectual awe, educators hope to foster deeper conceptual understanding and greater curiosity among students. Similarly, leaders are exploring how to use collective awe experiences to build stronger team cohesion, promote ethical behavior, and encourage innovative thinking. As technology allows for more precise measurement and controlled induction of this complex emotion, awe is poised to become a central focus in the study of human flourishing and self-transcendence.