

Awe Makes You Feel Better. Here's a Surprising Way to Find It.

Most of us associate the ‘wow!’ emotion with something rare and beautiful: nature, music or a spiritual experience. But people in our daily lives can make us feel awe, too.

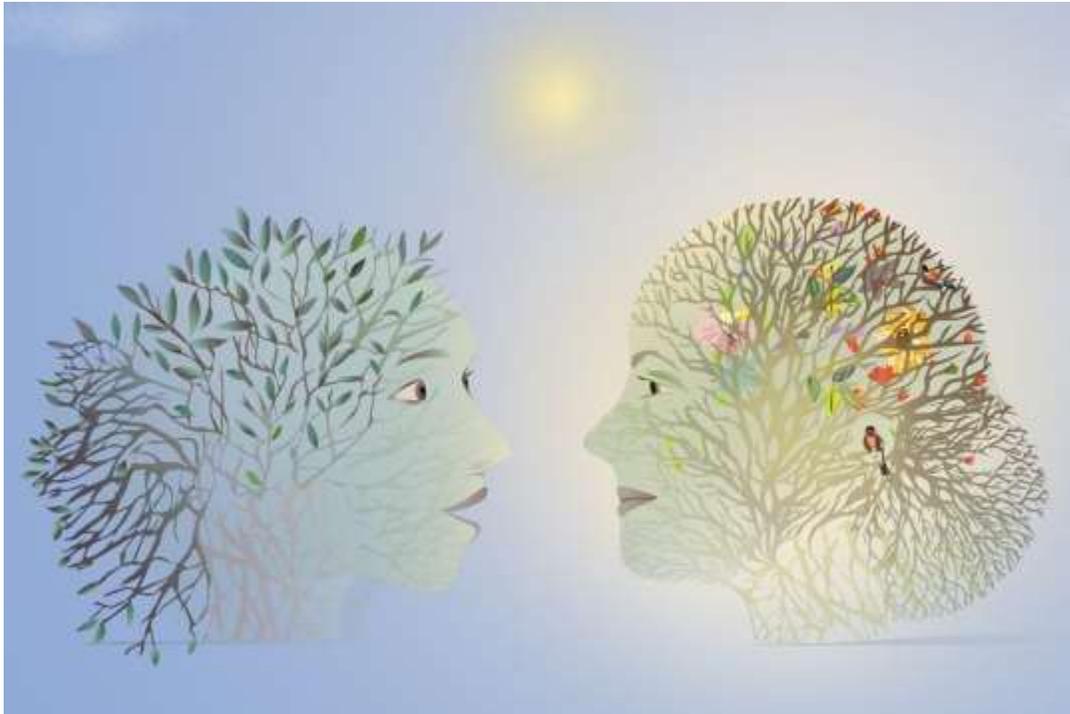


Illustration: Efi Chalikopoulou

By Elizabeth Bernstein
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This summer, Beverly Wax had an experience that [filled her with awe](#). It wasn't a gorgeous sunset, a sweeping mountain vista or the sound of waves gently lapping on a beach that got to her.

It was the sight of her son Justin, 35 years old, lugging an 80-pound portable air conditioner up three flights of stairs to her Boston-area condo.

Ms. Wax's central air conditioning had conked out the day before—in the middle of a 90-plus degree heat wave. She'd mentioned to her son that she was having trouble finding someone to come fix it quickly. He'd shown up with the new unit as a surprise.

As she watched her oldest child sweat and struggle while hauling the unit up the stairs and installing it in her bedroom, Ms. Wax says she felt a wave of gratitude and appreciation for her son. Then a funny thing happened—the feeling kept expanding, and soon she felt warm and fuzzy toward, well, everyone.

“The AC touched me greatly,” says Ms. Wax, 66, a writer and administrative assistant for a nonprofit that helps seniors, who lives in Brockton, Mass.

We’re living through trying times. Almost every day, it seems, we’re presented with new evidence of how annoying, inconsiderate or downright awful others can be.

And yet people can be awesome, too. (I know, I know. Hear me out.)

Awe is the “Wow!” emotion, that feeling we get when something is so vast it stops us in our tracks. Often, it challenges or expands our thinking. Research shows that awe experiences decrease stress and anxiety and increase positive emotions and overall satisfaction in life, according to Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and faculty director of the university’s Greater Good Science Center, who studies awe. It can also help our relationships, making us feel more compassionate and less greedy, more supported by and more likely to help others.

Most of us associate awe with something rare and beautiful: [nature](#), music or a spiritual experience. But people can trigger awe, too. And not just people we think of as public heroes—first responders or front-line workers—or famous people, such as athletes or astronauts. [Research](#) shows that we can be awed by our nearest and dearest—the people sitting next to us on the couch, chatting on the other end of the phone, gazing back at us over Zoom. Psychologists call this interpersonal awe.

“You don’t need to go into orbit, or to a museum or a national park,” says David B. Yaden, a research fellow at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine’s Center for Psychedelic & Consciousness Research, who studies self-transcendent experiences, including awe. “It’s in your home.”

Often, this interpersonal awe is a response to life’s big, sweeping changes: witnessing a baby’s first steps, watching someone take care of a sick loved one, seeing parents cope bravely with the challenges of aging. For Lynn Heady, 74, a retired educator in Nashville, Tenn., it’s watching a friend fight ovarian cancer and still relish life. For Scott BeVier, a national sales manager in Waxahachie, Texas, it’s seeing a friend remain cheerful and upbeat while taking care of her husband, who has a genetic lung disease and just had a lung transplant. Jeffrey Davis, 56, a business consultant in Accord, N.Y., says the awe he felt watching his mom reunite with her estranged mother and take care of her as she struggled with dementia made him think more carefully about his own relationships.

But interpersonal awe happens in smaller moments, too. John Bargh, 66, a psychologist and professor who lives in Guilford, Conn., said he was “truly awe-struck—the jaw-dropping, mouth-open, semi-stunned effect”—by his then-5-year-old daughter while dining with her in a [McDonald’s](#) several years ago. When she heard another child crying across the restaurant, she grabbed the toy from her Happy Meal, walked over to the boy and handed it to him, he says.

Ted Meek, 71, a retired printing-equipment salesman from Indianapolis, described feeling awe watching a young nurse tidy up his wife’s bed—and reassure him with her calm presence—after

she was hospitalized with acute pancreatitis in 2019. Rich Melheim, 66, an educator and publisher in Stillwater, Minn., says he was blown away when his father, who had Alzheimer's, suddenly remembered his name and gave him a blessing shortly before he died. I was awed recently by a good friend who took a day off work to deal with the painters working on my house so I could help my mom out with my dad, who is ill.

We can't make someone else behave in a way that's awesome. But we can prime ourselves to notice it when they do—and take steps to boost the emotion's positive effects. Here's how.

Start by questioning the assumptions you have about the people in your life.

For example, do you believe your partner is insensitive or your sibling is selfish? There may be a little truth to that, but it's never the whole tale. "The story you tell yourself gets in the way of catching people at their best," says Marianna Graziosi, an assistant instructor of positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, who studies interpersonal awe.

To increase your chances of feeling awed by the other person, Ms. Graziosi suggests you ask yourself what's going on in his or her life that you don't know about. Can you come up with examples of how that person is helping others or doing something positive?

"Become a field scientist, like Jane Goodall," she says.

Name awe when you see it.

("Wow, that was awesome!") This will help you identify it and remember the experience. Savor it in the moment—pay attention to all the details. Tell others about it; this will reinforce your positive emotions and help others feel good, as well, says Johns Hopkins' Dr. Yaden. And recall it or write about it in detail later. Studies show that awe can be elicited again simply by remembering an awe experience.

Thank the person who awed you.

This makes the other person feel good and can give your relationship a boost. And it will help you, too: Studies show that people who [practice gratitude](#) have significantly higher levels of happiness and psychological well-being than those who don't.

Ms. Wax thanked her son for the air conditioner and told him how his actions affected her. "I've learned to be grateful for the simple, daily things," she says.