

# AWE OUTING

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **1X/WEEK** | Duration: **15 MINS**

## WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Sometimes it can feel like we're at the center of our own universe, fixated on our personal concerns without much regard for other people. Experiencing awe can jolt us out of this self-focused mindset, stirring feelings of wonder and inspiration by reminding us that we're a part of something larger than ourselves.

Researchers define awe as a response to things that we perceive as vast and that transcend the way we understand the world. Research suggests that experiencing awe not only enhances happiness and physical health but also reduces feelings of entitlement and increases generosity.

By seeking and tracking your experiences of awe, which stir humility and wonder, you may discover that they point you toward what you're supposed to do while you're here on Earth.

Experiencing awe may seem like something that requires travel to distant lands, but there are many opportunities closer to home—we just need to seek them out and notice them. This practice helps you do just that.

## TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes

## HOW TO DO IT

With the right outlook, awe can be found in almost any environment, turning an everyday experience into a flight of inspiration and wonder.

Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something incredible that challenges our understanding of the world, like a full moon brimming over the horizon, crashing waves in front of an endless sea, or someone's extraordinary creativity, courage, or kindness. When people feel awe, they may use other words to describe the experience, such as wonder, amazement, surprise, or transcendence.

Awe is most likely to occur in places that have two key features: **physical vastness** and **novelty**. These could include natural settings, like a hiking trail lined with tall trees, or urban settings, like at the top of a skyscraper. You're more likely to feel awe in a new place, where the sights and sounds are unfamiliar to you. That said, some places never seem to get old.

No matter where you are, the key is to be in the right frame of mind. This practice is designed to help you get there—to turn an ordinary outing into a series of awe-inspiring moments filled with delightful surprises.

To get started, turn off your cell phone. Cell phones (and other devices) can be distracting and draw your attention away from what's happening around you. Even better, don't bring your phone with you at all so that you won't be tempted to check it. Then, set off on your outing to a place of your choosing (see below for ideas).

During your outing, try to approach what you see, hear, smell, or otherwise sense with fresh eyes, imagining that you're experiencing it for the first time. Then, follow these steps:

1. Take a deep breath in. Count to six as you inhale and seven as you exhale. Feel the air move through your nasal passages and hear the sound of your breath. Come back to this breath throughout your outing.
2. As you get going, feel the ground beneath you and the air on your skin, listen to surrounding sounds, and smell what is wafting from anything nearby.
3. Shift your awareness so that you are open to what is around you, to things that are vast, impressively complex, unexpected, or unexplainable, or that surprise and delight you.
4. Take another deep breath in. Again, count to six as you inhale and seven as you exhale
5. Let your attention be open in exploration for what inspires awe. Is it a wide landscape? The tiny patterns of light and shadow? An appliance or piece of furniture? Let your attention move from the vast to the small.
6. Ask yourself far-fetched questions: What is new, unknown, or unexplored about what is around you?
7. Continue your outing and, every so often, bring your attention back to your breath. Count to six as you inhale and seven as you exhale. Notice—really notice—the many sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations that are dancing through your awareness, usually undetected

Once you get in the habit of taking outings like this, you may be surprised by how often you have opportunities to experience awe—they are practically infinite.

As you move through your day, take note of the moments that bring you wonder, that give you goosebumps or make your chest feel more broad: These are your opportunities for awe. They may be in your neighborhood, in front of art, listening to music, or doing something together with other people.

Here are some specific ideas for awe outing destinations:

Natural settings:

- A local park or garden
- A mountain or hilltop with panoramic views
- A trail lined with tall trees
- The shore of an ocean, lake, river, or waterfall
- A clear night when you can see the stars
- A place where you can watch a sunset or sunrise

Urban settings:

- A yard, low-traffic sidewalk, or school playground
- The top of a skyscraper... or looking up in an area dense with tall buildings
- A historic monument
- A part of your city that you've never explored before
- A large ballpark or stadium
- Botanical gardens or a zoo with plants and animal species you've never seen before
- No destination; see where the outing takes you

Indoor settings:

- A library
- A gallery or hallway with art on the walls
- A planetarium or aquarium
- A historic mansion, cathedral, or opera house
- A museum

To do an online version of this exercise, check out this [360° virtual Awe Walk practice](#) through Muir Woods National Monument, guided by the Greater Good Science Center's Dacher Keltner.

## EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Sturm, V. E., Datta, S., Roy, A. R. K., Sible, I. J., Kosik, E. L., Veziris, C. R., Chow, T. E., Morris, N. A., Neuhaus, J., Kramer, J. H., Miller, B. L., Holley, S. R., & Keltner, D. (2020). [Big smile, small self: Awe walks promote prosocial positive emotions in older adults](#). *Emotion*.

A group of mostly Caucasian, older adults took 15-minute Awe Walks every week for eight weeks. Compared to people who took normal walks, the awe walkers felt more joy, compassion, and appreciation during their walks and felt more compassionate and less distressed in daily life. Selfies they took during their walks indicated that they were happier but also exhibited a smaller self, which is associated with kind and helpful behavior.

Piff, P. K., Dietze, P., Feinberg, M., Stancato, D. M., & Keltner, D. (2015). [Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108(6), 883-899.

One group of American college students stood in a grove of towering eucalyptus trees and gazed up for one minute; another group looked up at a building (not a particularly awe-inspiring one). Afterward, someone working with the researchers “accidentally” spilled a bunch of pens on the ground. Those who had looked at the trees subsequently offered more help (they picked up more pens); they also seemed less inclined to behave in unethical ways and felt less strongly that they were entitled to preferential treatment. Around 30% of participants were white, 40% were Asian American, and 30% were African American, Latino, Indigenous American, or of another ethnicity.

### Who Has Tried The Practice?

The 2015 study led by Piff included a racially diverse group of undergraduate students, and additional research on awe in nature has engaged members of other groups:

- [Adults in Portugal](#) who took a walk in a garden experienced lower negative emotions and greater positive emotions than those who took a walk on an urban street.
- [Military veterans and youth from underserved communities](#) who went whitewater rafting sustained week-long improvements in well-being and stress-related symptoms due to the awe they experienced in nature.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

## WHY TO TRY IT

Research suggests that awe has a way of lifting people outside of their usual routine and connecting them with something larger and more significant. This sense of broader connectedness and purpose can help relieve negative moods and improve happiness, and it can also make people more generous as they become less focused on themselves. Evoking feelings of awe may be especially helpful when you are feeling bogged down by day-to-day concerns.

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This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

