

Awe is the most healing emotion (and “Yirah” may not be what you think)

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Live Well, No Matter What - How to thrive with life's most difficult challenges. Including mindfulness tools from secular and Jewish sources

If you're a fan of gratitude practice, you may be interested in awe. Gratitude practice has been found to be a deeply effective way to improve your mood. Taking a few minutes every day to make a short list of the blessings in your life has been known to cure people of dread and sadness, gently and over time.

Awe is now being found to be even more powerful for emotional healing and for our bodies as well.

Awe is an altered state of consciousness that shifts one's focus away from the self and towards universality and connectedness. We experience awe when we notice something vast and we're in some way surprised by this. Awe takes us out of our regular way of understanding. When we're awed, something makes us stop in our tracks and say “Whoa!”. We're aware of something that we can't understand, that feels beyond us. Awe produces many emotional and cognitive effects, even improving our ability to think. [Psychologist Anna Mikulak](#) writes that the experience of awe leads us to evaluate ideas more rigorously. Other [researchers](#) found that the experience of awe leads us to be less focused on ourselves and so feel ourselves part of a greater whole. Perhaps because of this, awe has been found to be a powerful catalyst for kindness, patience and generosity, as well as enhancing a greater sense of wellbeing.

Awe also affects and even heals our bodies. When we experience awe, the body shows it. In contrast to other pleasant emotions which make us smile, the facial imprint of awe is raised eyebrows, wide eyes and a dropped jaw, as well as a visible intake of breath. Physiologically, awe has been found to activate the parasympathetic nervous system which calms us. It's been associated with decreased markers of chronic inflammation, which are linked to various chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes. In this way, awe may limit disease.

As Jews, awe is a familiar concept to us. Judaism speaks of two pillars of connection to God and to the commandments. Ahava which is love, and Yirah. Yirah is ambiguous. It can be translated as fear or as awe. This duality parallels modern research in which awe is separated into [threat-based](#), which can be terrifying and unpleasant, and other kinds of awe such as great natural beauty, which are experienced as pleasant and positive. The pleasant type of awe is more common than the terror-inducing variety. This

could be a modern cultural shift resulting from scientific progress and less sense of threat in everyday life.

So is fear the original, more authentic experience of awe? As a therapist it's difficult for me to believe that fear is a positive emotion that we wish to promote. It seems though, that Judaism encourages us to fear God. Or does it? An illuminating [article](#) by Rabbi Shai Held teaches that many honored Jewish thinkers understood awe to be the true meaning of the word Yirah, or at least the better of the two kinds. The Ramchal taught that awe of God is superior to fear of punishment and is accessible only through "deep thought and wisdom".

Awe of God, rather than fear of God's punishment, takes us beyond ourselves. We're not focusing on what will happen to us if we follow commandments or if we don't. We're immersed in something bigger than ourselves rather than fearing possibilities in our own small future. This is true also of positive awe when compared to threat-based awe. We forget ourselves at that moment. In this way awe is a naturally occurring moment of mindfulness, connecting us intensely to a present moment experience.

You can bring more moments of awe into your day simply by briefly contemplating something that you admire but don't understand. Not unlike gratitude practice, you can practice awe. Notice what you see in front of you and contemplate the fact that your eyes can see shape and color and that your mind can instantly differentiate between items that it sees. Nature, even in the small doses that we get in the city, can be an opportunity for awe. It is awesome and awe-inspiring that there is sky above us. That the moon shines and the sun warms. That the plant in my window somehow grows from the soil in its pot.

Closer to our Jewish roots, the Hebrew "Baruch" is an awe practice in one word. Baruch is the first word of most blessings, which are appropriately called "brachot". Typically understood as "blessed", it is actually derived from the word Berech, knee, which is part of the Hebrew phrase to kneel (Lichro'a berech). When we experience awe, we are metaphorically brought to our knees. We experience an inner bowing before the Infinite or before anything awe-inducing. Daily practice of bowing internally before the countless wonders around us, whether by opening our eyes to wonder or by connecting to reverence when we say "Baruch", is a pathway to profound wellbeing.