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Experiencing Awe Builds Mental Resiliency

By Michael A. Yansick, MPA



It is well-established that finding an enjoyable exercise is one of the keys to physical well-being.¹ Similarly, identifying a practical resiliency technique is essential for strong mental health. There are many different types of resiliency techniques that have proven beneficial in maintaining mental health, including yoga,² meditation,³ and breathing exercises.⁴ A growing body of research suggests adding another technique to this list: experiencing a sense of awe.

Scientists have begun empirical study of this complex and little understood emotion.⁵ Awe comes in response to encountering an extraordinary person or experience, and it challenges a person's current mode of thinking.⁶ It is primarily a positive emotion; however, it can include negative elements such as fear or horror.⁷

A sense of awe can be prompted by various settings and experiences, including nature, space, music and the arts, spiritual and religious expression, interpersonal relationships, and one's own accomplishments or those of others.⁸ Awe can be elicited through direct, in-person experiences, as well as through

using both augmented and virtual reality to share and read narratives, photos, videos, and audio recordings.⁹ The latest research suggests that taking time to experience awe may be a pathway to improving one's life and relationships.¹⁰

The FBI National Academy is known as one of the premier law enforcement training programs in the world.¹¹ Between July 2022 and December 2023, the potential benefit of experiencing awe was a topic in the Essentials of Leadership courses. Participants were given a lecture on awe followed by additional reading assignments. Then, they were required to write about a specific personal experience of awe.

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Family Ties

Of the 160 participants who submitted papers discussing experiences of awe, 50.63% (81) wrote essays that spoke about people in their lives, mainly family and friends.

One example comes from a California Highway Patrol captain who wrote about his children.

If you’re a parent, you will understand that there are times in life when your children can trigger a moment of awe. When I look at my 8-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter, I often contemplate the beauty of life. I am taken aback by how perfectly they were created, their intricacies, their uniqueness. Sometimes at night I will come into their rooms and watch them sleep. Because it is quiet, it is a great time to admire them and think about what lies ahead for them. I think about all the funny things they say and do, the stresses and worries they cause, and how much adventure lies ahead.

Another example that highlights the conflicting emotions that can make up the experience of awe was provided by an officer who wrote about his daughter’s wedding day. The officer simultaneously experienced both a positive emotion (pride) and a negative emotion (sadness) from the same event (seeing his daughter walk down the stairs).

My daughter was finishing up some things with her dress and makeup, and I was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. I had not even seen her that day. Suddenly, she appeared at the top of the stairs. She looked beautiful. Hair, makeup, dress all perfect. Yet, all I saw was my 5-year-old little princess. I broke down and started to cry. It was a weird mix of feelings because I was proud and sad at the same time. Of course, my crying caused her to cry. She gave me a big hug, and we cried together. I cherish that moment with her. A few minutes later, I gave her away to another man who will hopefully love her as much as I do.

For a different officer, the experience of awe hit on the day of his college graduation, a great personal achievement. Seeing his parents in the audience caused him to reflect on his journey to reach that day and the support and encouragement his parents had given him.

Sitting there, I was in awe just thinking about the journey I had undertaken to reach this pinnacle of my scholastic endeavors. It was as though time slowed down, and I experienced a vivid replay of all the times my parents had talked with me and guided me to this point. I remembered school-age days, when my father was helping me with my math homework and my mother with science projects, moving into my adolescent years of having to adjust to the multiple classes that I had. I remembered my high school days, taking honors classes, joining the Future Business Leaders of America club, and preparing for my SAT. Then moving forward to my college days and the

preparing for my exam, then meeting friends to my college days and the many long days and hours I spent studying for mid-terms, finals, and submitting papers. The multiple calls I made just to hear the supportive voices of my parents tell me, "You can do it."

All of that had led up to this point. As I scanned through the crowd, I could see my mother and father sitting there as proud parents. Upon seeing them, I immediately felt an overwhelming sense of pride and accomplishment. My eyes welled with tears, and I felt a lump in my throat.

When I stood up from my seat and began to make my way up to the stage, I had a sense of elation but also of gratitude. The university president called my name and handed me my diploma. Without hesitation, I pointed to my parents and shouted, "We did it!" I was overcome with so many emotions. When I finally made it over to my mother and father, I gave them the sincerest hug of affection, and we all began to cry.

Great Outdoors

"Things in nature" represented 23.75% (38) of the responses. This broad category of experiences includes animals, landscapes, and space.

A captain with the New York City Police Department felt awe when she left the city and saw the world from the top of a mountain, which offered her an unexpected point of view.

Have you ever experienced that visual moment that made you lose your breath? I have! It was the first time I went hiking. I never knew what the attraction was to climbing mountains. It was not until I had done so myself and I reached the top of the mountain that I understood that feeling. It was a feeling of relaxation, peace, and serenity. It was not the climb that brought on the feeling—it was the scenery. The view that rolls out in front of you gives you a deep sense of connection to nature and the desire for more encounters.

There is a beauty in the world when you see it from the top of a mountain. It allows you to gaze out and look beyond your normal view. I was also taken aback by the disconnection from the stresses of my normal life and contentment I instantaneously felt.

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Community Connections

Closely following the previous category, "Other Law Enforcement Officers" made up 23.13% (37) of responses.

One officer from Alabama found awe in one of the most unusual places for a police officer—during the funeral procession of a fallen colleague. This murdered officer, Daniel, was killed in the line of duty in Alabama but transported back to his home state of Tennessee for burial. The experience gave the officer a new perspective on his sense of purpose and his ties to the greater law enforcement community.

This moment of awe began at seeing the miles and miles of police cars, all with their blue lights turned on. It looked like a sea of blue. As we entered the small town of Fayetteville, Tennessee, little children and elder citizens were at the side of the road holding signs of support and hope. Business owners and employees stopped business to come out by the road and show support. Truck drivers pulled over and took their hats off as we passed. People saluted and covered their hearts. This moment of awe led me to see the positive in one of the saddest days in our city. Instead of asking "Why Daniel?" I cherished the good memories that he left behind.

Daniel: I cherished the good memories that he left behind.

Seeing this show of support from surrounding agencies and citizens was overwhelming and helped ease the burden of his loss. I had to pause to think about what Daniel would want out of this. He would want us to put our polyester uniforms and leather gun belts back on and go out and continue to do "the Lord's work," as he would say.

My most powerful moment of awe was not the loss of Daniel but the display of support from so many people in two different states and communities. That day, you weren't from Alabama, or from Tennessee, or from another police agency. That day, we were one. United in protecting the freedoms of our communities through the work of our law enforcement. Daniel is still with us through that support. This was my most powerful moment of awe.

Universal Truths

The categories mentioned in the remainder of the 160 responses were all statistically under 6% and included religion (9), history (8), and works of art (6).

An example that captures all three of these latter categories comes from an officer who wrote about his experience while touring the Vatican and Saint Peter's Basilica. Whether it was the beauty of the artwork, historical significance of the location, or religious relevance of the chapel, his experience caused both an emotional and physical response that he could not deny.

The conditions were hot, humid, and overcrowded, which made the initial experience less than pleasant. We crammed our way into the door and fell into a world of silence as soon as we crossed the threshold into the Sistine Chapel. Nobody had a word to say. We were all just looking around, our mouths hanging open. Some began to cry. I strained my neck up to get a good look, and there it was: The Creation of Adam, by Michelangelo. Every single hair on my body stood up. My throat was dry, and I could feel my eyes well up with tears. I couldn't speak. Even if I could, I wouldn't have had anything to say. I stood there transfixed. I was basking in the power of awe.

Conclusion

Experiences of awe can be easily found in everyday life if people open their minds and take a moment to recognize them. Experiencing awe can aid with mental fortitude and is a readily available coping mechanism to help law enforcement personnel deal with the stress and anxiety inherent in the profession.

Albert Einstein, the German-born theoretical physicist, winner of the 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics, and widely regarded as one of the most influential scientists of all time whose genius continues to shape modern understanding of the cosmos, had a healthy respect for the sense of awe. The quintessential man of science

understood the necessity of making space to experience wonder to give people a sense of their place in the universe and a vantage from which to contemplate the miraculous nature of existence.

Einstein referred to awe with these words:

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.¹²