

The Annual Thanks-Giving 4th Aim Edition:
Awe, Gratitude, Gastronomic Restraint

From Emerging Science – The Power of Awe

1) Could Your Life Be More Awesome?

An experience of awe involves the feeling that you're in the presence of something that transcends, challenges, or deepens your understanding and/or appreciation of the world. This might be found in nature, art, a mind-stretching idea, or an impressive feat, including acts of great skill or virtue. The experience can also occur in the subtle, less dramatic moments of life, such as gaining a new appreciation for the complexity of life (staring at a flower or the stars) or the beauty of life (being in the presence of a newborn baby). It is often described as a sense that you/we are part of something much bigger.

The study of awe is a young science, but it appears that the experience of awe has an important purpose in binding us to social collectives and enabling us to act in more collaborative ways that promotes stronger groups and improves our odds for survival. Studies have linked the experience of awe to better emotional health, clearer thinking and increased generosity. And research is zeroing in on how to cultivate more of it in our everyday lives.

How much awe do you experience in your life and how can you experience it more often? The [brief quiz under “references”](#) below will help you find out. It includes items from three scientifically validated scales, along with some new items created for this quiz by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. When you're done, you'll receive your “awe score,” along with feedback interpreting this score and tips for experiencing more awe.

If you would like to experience even more awe, here are some ideas:

- **Take an “Awe Walk.”** This involves going somewhere that has the potential to evoke awe—even if it's your own backyard—and taking in the scenery as if seeing it for the first time. Even well-worn routes can reveal unexpected sources of awe if you're paying attention. Simply gazing up at tall trees for two minutes has been shown to be a powerful elicitor of awe.
- **Consume awe-inspiring media.** Computers and phones often distract us from our surroundings, limiting opportunities for awe, but these devices can become sources of awe themselves. The Internet is replete with captivating images, moving videos, and inspiring stories. Research suggests that watching videos or reading stories that convey a sense of vastness and possibility can increase our feelings of awe, slow our perception of time, and even boost our life satisfaction.
- **Write about or tell a story about awe.** Our own memories can be a valuable source of awe. Writing and/or sharing a detailed awe narrative has been shown to increase awe, reduce time pressure, and make people more generous.

My Comment:

This past year has been a particularly “awe-filled” one for me as I regularly spent time stand-up paddleboarding on a stretch of water near my home that I fondly call the “riverlake,” including many sunrise paddles. Doing so has re-awoken my awe-sensor, and I am regularly filled with “wow!” when I am on the water.

As a gift to yourself, please take a few moments to complete the “Awe Quiz” and then reflect as to how you might welcome more awe into your life. You’ll be glad you did. And if you want to experience some “instant awe,” check out the link to the brief “People are Awesome” video at the link below.

References:

- Keltner D. Why Do We Feel Awe? Greater Good Magazine. May 10, 2016. [Article](#)
 - The Power of Awe Quiz: [Quiz Link](#)
 - People are Awesome – Best of 2019 So Far: [4 Minute Video](#)
-

Practicing the “4th Aim” – Sustainability, Resilience, and Well-Being

2) Embracing Gratitude and Expressing Thanksgiving

“What we see depends mainly on what we look for.”
Sir John Lubbock (British Statesman)

The season of Thanksgiving always provides a wonderful backdrop for reflection on the place of gratitude in our lives. Studies show that the feeling of gratitude is an important ingredient for overall well-being and will increase with regular practice (it’s a skill!). Below are some proven ways to become more grateful.

1. Keep a Gratitude Journal. Establish a daily practice, preferably in the evening, during which you remind yourself of the gifts, grace, benefits, and good things in your life. It can be done in less than 5 minutes. Recall moments of gratitude associated with ordinary events, your personal attributes, or valued people in your life, including your patients and those with whom you work. A “3 Blessings” exercise has specifically been shown to increase gratitude. It is done by taking time each evening (can do this as at other times as well) for 2 weeks and; 1) Thinking of three good things that happened that day. 2) Writing them down. 3) Reflecting on why they happened. It can be your daily personal “Gratitude Take 3!”

2. Take a Quiz. The gratitude quiz from Rick Hanson, PhD, provides a great way to reflect on your awareness of the things you’ve been given – from the kindness of friends to the gift of life itself. See the [quiz link](#) in the references. Note: This is not an endorsement of his programs, though I do find his work to be very helpful.

3. Use Visual Reminders. Because the two primary obstacles to gratitude are forgetfulness and a lack of mindful awareness (entropy!), visual reminders can serve as cues to trigger thoughts of gratitude. Often, the best visual reminders are other people.

4. Make a Vow to Practice Gratitude. Research shows that making an oath to perform a behavior increases the likelihood that the action will be executed. Therefore, write your own gratitude vow, which could be as simple as “I vow to count my blessings each day,” and post it somewhere where you will be regularly reminded.

5. Watch your Language. Grateful people have a particular linguistic style that uses the language of gifts, blessings, good fortune, thanksgiving, and abundance. The focus is not self-centric, but rather on the inherently good things that others have done on your behalf and that are occurring in your life. Regularly expressing appreciation for the important people in your life is a wonderful and powerful way to practice this language.

6. Go Through the Motions. If you go through grateful motions, the emotion of gratitude should be triggered. Grateful motions include smiling, saying thank you, wishing others well, and writing letters of gratitude.

My Comment:

Why not choose one or two of these and give them a try between now and January 1st? Many people (including yourself) will be grateful you did! I've incorporated gratitude in my journaling for many years, and the benefits continue to be substantial. Regularly sharing your "3 Blessings" from the day with a loved one (an instant answer to the "how was your day?" question) can quickly transform the conversation. This doesn't mean you don't share your struggles and frustrations as well. It does, however, provide some important context! And it will likely be something you'll look forward to sharing, even after a "long day."

References:

- Robert Emmons, PhD. Ten Ways to Become More Grateful. [Article](#)
 - Rick Hanson, PhD. Gratitude Quiz: [Gratitude Quiz](#)
 - Martin Seligman, PhD. Three Blessings (Also known as "Three Good Things"): [Link](#)
-

From the Literature and in Preparation for Thanksgiving!

3) Changing Your Environment to Promote Gastronomic Restraint

Overeating and harmful alcohol and tobacco use have been linked to the etiology of many diseases which are among the leading global causes of morbidity and premature mortality. Because of this, there is much public health policy interest in product size and shape as potential targets for intervention. This systematic review analyzed studies that examined how the size of things like cereal bowls and snack bags influences the number of calories people take in. The authors found evidence that both adults and children consistently ate more food or drank more non-alcoholic drinks when offered larger-sized portions, packages or items of tableware than when offered smaller-sized versions. Combined, these brief experiments suggest that smaller containers, dishes and cutlery might help adults consume up to 16% fewer calories in the U.K. and 29% less in the U.S.

This review provides the most conclusive evidence to date that reducing the size, availability and appeal of larger-sized portions, packages and tableware has potential to reduce the quantities of food that people select and consume by meaningful amounts.

The authors acknowledge that most of the studies reviewed didn't follow people for long periods and researchers lacked data to assess whether sustained changes in container and plate sizes over time might contribute to weight loss or maintaining a healthy weight. They also note that they lacked data on the impact of bottle, can or glass size on alcohol consumption.

My Comment:

While the obesity epidemic is a result of a number of different and complex influences, recommending smaller plates can serve as one piece of a very large puzzle. Since my wife and I made the change to 8.5 inch plates at our home from 10" (while acknowledging other factors are involved as well), I have consistently weighed 10+ pounds less than previously. I've had many patients try this, and they have consistently noted a much greater awareness of portion size. For some, this change alone has contributed to substantial weight loss. It sure seems worth a try!

References:

- Hollands G. et al. Portion, package or tableware size for changing selection and consumption of food, alcohol and tobacco. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2015, Issue 9. 14 September, 2015. [Article](#)
- More Educational Information for patients can be found at: [Choose My Plate](#)

Final Thought:

Thanksgiving has always been one of my favorite Holidays, and with family coming in from "all over," this year will be no exception. So in this season of Thanks-Giving and in recognition of the many Gifts and Blessings in our lives, a specific "Thank you!" and "You are appreciated!" to each of you. And be sure to pass it on

Feel free to forward Take 3 (and in particular, this edition) to your colleagues, friends, and loved ones. I'm happy to add them to the distribution list.

Mark

Carilion Clinic Department of Family and Community Medicine