

Linda's Tai Chi Weekly Handout
October 11, 2020
Awe Walks' Boost Emotional Well-Being
By [Nicholas Weiler](#)



I have written about Shinrin-Yoku, or “Forest Bathing”, a Japanese practice of being with and in nature. Forest Bathing has become a part of the global health network and has been proven to improve health and wellbeing. I have also written about the importance of “awe” to our soul; embracing a waterfall, sunset, full moon, comet, the ocean, music, dance, art, and the mist rising on a clear lake in the early morning. All of these are calming, peaceful and inspirational.

Now we have more research from the UC San Francisco Memory and Aging Center, and the Global Brain Health Institute, a partnership between UCSF and Trinity College Dublin to improve brain health worldwide that suggests a “regular dose of awe is a simple way to boost healthy ‘prosocial’ emotions such as compassion and

gratitude.” I am once again grateful to you, my students, who often bring these interesting articles and research to me.

“The new study was inspired by a call from GBHI for research proposals to identify simple, low-cost interventions to improve brain health. Virginia Sturm, PhD, an associate professor of in the departments of Neurology and of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and the John Douglas French Alzheimer's Foundation Endowed Professor in the [UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences](#) says she immediately began to think about how to improve emotional well-being in older adults, and partnered with UC Berkeley psychologist Dacher Keltner, PhD, an expert in emotion, to develop a simple intervention.”

‘Awe is a positive emotion triggered by awareness of something vastly larger than the self and not immediately understandable — such as nature, art, music, or being caught up in a collective act such as a ceremony, concert or political march,’ Keltner said. ‘Experiencing awe can contribute to a host of benefits including an expanded sense of time and enhanced feelings of generosity, well-being and humility.’

The study question to be tested: Does the experience of awe increase and improve an individual’s emotional wellbeing and connectedness to the world?

How the Study was conducted

The researchers recruited 52 healthy adults and divided them into 2 groups - a study group and a control group. The study group was referred to as the “awe” group. Both groups were told to take at least one 15- minute walk a week for eight weeks and take selfies along the way. Both groups completed a brief survey after each walk detailing characteristics of the walk, and the emotions they had experienced. The only difference between the groups is that awe group were given information about the emotion of awe, what awe was and suggested that they try to experience awe during their walks (about 3 minute instruction). So, 2 groups- one went for a walk. The study group had a mission- to try and experience awe during their walk.

Findings of the Study

1. “Answers to the open ended questions revealed that the awe group had a growing awareness and appreciation for the world around them. For example, one participant reflected on ‘the beautiful fall colors and the absence of them amidst the evergreen forest... how the leaves were no longer crunchy underfoot because of the rain and how the walk was more spongy now... the wonder that a small child feels as they explore their expanding world.’

In contrast, participants from the control walk group tended to be more inwardly focused. For example: ‘I thought about our vacation in Hawaii coming up this next Thursday. Thought about all the things I had to do before we leave.’ Another

reflected on ‘what a beautiful day it was and that later I was going to go see my great granddaughter.’ [Note the study was conducted prior to COVID-19.]

2. “Analysis of the selfie photos revealed a parallel, visible shift in how participants portrayed themselves: people in the awe group increasingly made themselves smaller in their photos over the course of the study, preferring to feature the landscapes around them. At the same time, the smiles on participants’ faces grew measurably more intense.”
3. “The researchers also sent participants in both groups daily surveys throughout the eight-week study to assess their day-by-day emotional state. The responses revealed that those in the awe group experienced significant boosts in their daily experience of positive prosocial emotions such as compassion and gratitude over the course of the study. “
4. “Participants in the awe group actually took more frequent walks during the study, the researchers found, perhaps because some of them suspected that the study was focused on exercise. However, this did not result in significant shifts in emotional well-being – or in the composition of their selfies. This suggests the results in the awe group were really due to the experience of awe, and not just time spent exercising outside.”
5. “The effects the researchers observed were relatively moderate but were easy to evoke and grew stronger over time, suggesting the benefits could continue to grow with longer practice.”
6. “In the study, published Sept. 21 in the journal *Emotion*, older adults who took weekly 15-minute “awe walks” for eight weeks reported increased positive emotions and less distress in their daily lives. This shift was reflected in “selfies” participants took on their weekly walks, in which an increasing focus on their surroundings rather than themselves was paralleled by measurably broader smiles by the end of the study.”
7. “I find it remarkable that the simplest intervention in the world – just a three-minute conversation at the beginning of the study suggesting that participants practice feeling awe on their weekly walks – was able to drive significant shifts in their daily emotional experience,” Sturm said. “This suggests promoting the experience of awe could be an extremely low-cost tool for improving the emotional health of older adults through a simple shift in mindset.”
8. “Experiencing awe is such a simple practice – just taking a moment to look out the window or pausing to consider the technological marvels that surround us – and we now show it can have measurable effects on our emotional well-being,” Sturm added. “A little more joy and a little more connectedness with the world around us is something all of us could use these days.”
9. ‘Negative emotions, particularly loneliness, have well-documented negative effects on the health of older adults, particularly those over age 75,’ said Virginia Sturm. ‘What we show here is that a very simple intervention – essentially a reminder to occasionally shift our energy and attention outward

instead of inward – can lead to significant improvements in emotional well-being.”

10. “One of the key features of awe is that it promotes what we call ‘small self,’ a healthy sense of proportion between your own self and the bigger picture of the world around you,” Sturm said. “To be honest, we had decided to do this particular analysis of participants’ selfies on a lark — I never really expected we’d be able to document awe’s ability to create an emotionally healthy small self literally on camera!”

T’ai Chi uses all of the body movements of walking. T’ai Chi does not require extraordinary movements of the body, instead, the body moves naturally—stepping heel to toe, quieting the shoulders and hips, relaxing, softening of the joints, tall posture and breathing naturally. In addition, T’ai Chi is guided by nature. And, you are in constant motion. I know many of you perform T’ai Chi, Shibashi, Qigong outside on your patios and porches. Some of you stop on your walks and perform T’ai Chi. This is good for your body, mind and soul.

Authors: Study authors were Virginia Sturm, Samir Datta, Ashlin Roy, Isabel Sible, Eena Kosik, Christina Veziris, Tiffany Chow, Nathaniel Morris, John Neuhaus, Joel Kramer, and Bruce Miller of UCSF; Sarah Holley, of UCSF and San Francisco State University; and Dacher Keltner of UC Berkeley.

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Thank you to Max and Carol for bringing this interesting article to my attention.

Peace,

Linda

