

Researcher discusses link between positive emotions and physical health

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Can having good feelings be good for your health? A new study by U of T Mississauga researcher Jennifer Stellar is investigating the effects that positive emotions might have on our physical well-being.

Stellar joined UTM's Department of Psychology as an assistant professor in September 2016. She studies [positive emotions](#), such as compassion, happiness, awe and gratitude, and how those feelings elicit reliable physiological changes. Her findings shed light on the link between emotions and immunity, stress, and overall physical and mental health.

While much research in the field has focused on [negative emotions](#), such as embarrassment, disgust or shame, Stellar is interested in the flip-side of those feelings. "Gratitude, compassion and awe may be the most important of the positive emotions," she says. "Those feelings bind us to other people, strengthen our relationships and help us behave in prosocial ways. These emotions can also have some of the most powerful effects on health and well-being."

"When we're stressed, injured or ill, the body releases proinflammatory cytokines, which regulate our immune systems," she says. "I'm curious about how we might reduce this effect, and how positive emotions could minimize the inflammation response and potentially the cortisol response," she says.

To prove that point, Stellar is putting hard data behind the ephemeral feeling of awe. "Awe is a grand emotion with powerful outcomes. Art,

nature, people and music are just some of the things that can elicit that feeling," she says. "People who feel a lot of awe seem to have lower levels of proinflammatory cytokines, but we need to measure that in a controlled way."

In a study launching this fall, Stellar's Health, Emotions, & Altruism Laboratory (HEALTH Lab) will study the biological and emotional responses of 300 people recruited to view a Toronto art exhibit. The team will collect data on heart and respiration rates, along with cortisol levels and proinflammatory cytokines in saliva samples. Stellar hopes the information will shed light on how positive emotions affect us physically and their potential impacts on immunity, stress, and overall physical and mental health.

"My research examines whether feeling these positive emotions has positive measurable outcomes for markers of health," she says. "The hope is that we will see that feeling awe leads to lower levels of inflammation and cortisol, and that we will see the body calm down, too."

"These outcomes will help us to understand or legitimize these emotions and show that positive emotions have a relationship with physical health," Stellar says. "They are doing a lot of heavy lifting in ways we don't realize."

The results could impact how we approach physical and mental health. "We could prioritize cultivating positive emotions like awe and gratitude," Stellar says. "Go walk in the woods. Go to a symphony. See some art. Devote time to these emotions because they aren't luxuries. It could be good for your own health."

Provided by University of Toronto

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