Take a step back from yourself to better realize the benefits of awe

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Religion and nature can both lead to awe, and turning to one or the other is a common coping strategy for the stress that might accompany an upcoming presentation, exam or performance.

But an awe-inspiring experience can have negative consequences as well as benefits, according to a novel University at Buffalo-led study that uses cardiovascular responses to stress to take a broad look at awe and the critical role perspective plays when considering the effects of encountering awe.

"We found that spontaneous self-distancing predicted whether awe benefited or had a negative effect on people," explains Mark Seery, an associate professor in the UB Department of Psychology and co-author of the paper published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Spontaneous self-distancing refers to people's tendencies to take a distanced versus an immersed perspective when considering their own experiences, especially their own emotionally laden experiences.

To be self-immersed is to see an experience through your own eyes. It's a first-person perspective. Self-distancing, meantime, is a third-person perspective. It's like watching something as a bystander.

For people who tend to self-distance, the study's findings suggest that after experiencing awe, personal obstacles associated with a stressful situation seem insignificant compared to the vastness of the awe-inspiring experience. However, those who self-immerse are more likely to see their capabilities, not their obstacles, as insignificant after awe, a perception that can make a stressor seem unmanageable.

The findings represent an important step toward understanding how people can better cope with stressful events and how popular stress management strategies, whether appealing to the sacred or sublime, depend on the underlying processes to work.

We experience the emotion of awe when exposed to something larger than the self. Awe can arise from the practices of a particular faith

tradition or a grand natural vista, but it does not necessarily have to be dramatic.

Most research on awe has focused on the benefits of the experience. Previous studies suggest that awe has a variety of positive effects, essentially related to feeling connected and helping others.

A key mechanism of these benefits is the sense of "small self."

"Creating that sense of 'small self' is to feel small relative to some awe-inspiring thing, whether it's the idea of a divinity or a natural landscape," says Seery. "I feel small, albeit connected to humanity."

But to pivot from those benefits back to a performance stressor—an activity that requires work in order to reach a goal—is to see how that "small self" that comes from awe gets more complicated.

"We wanted to understand how that feeling of smallness affects someone facing their own stressful situation," says Seery, whose research team includes former UB undergraduate Phuong Le, UB graduate students Thomas Saltsman and Deborah Ward, and former graduate students Cheryl Kondrak and Veronica Lamarche, who currently serves as a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Essex.

"If I feel small, then whatever I have to deal with may seem all the more overwhelming. That was our starting point," says Seery. "And it hadn't been previously explored."

To get at the question, Seery and his colleagues used the biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat. This model uses cardiovascular measures to reveal psychological experience during a performance stressor, such as giving a speech.

The model allows the researchers to measure responses to stress, such as heart rate, the amount of blood pumped by the heart per minute, and the flow of blood into blood vessels. This provides insight into psychological experience without interrupting the participants.

Challenge is a positive state, reflecting evaluating a stressor as manageable. It leads to dilated arteries, which help the heart pump more blood to the body. A threat response, a negative state corresponding to evaluating a stressor as unmanageable, constricts the arteries, which hinders blood flow.

The researchers had 182 participants complete a measure of spontaneous self-distancing. They were then exposed to either an awe-inducing nature video or a neutral documentary on small sea creatures and later asked to prepare and deliver a two-minute speech on a setback or obstacle they experienced.

The results showed that for people likely to adopt a self-distanced perspective, being exposed to the awe-inducing video led to a challenge response during the following speech, relative to exposure to the neutral video. In contrast, for people who adopted a self-immersed perspective, the awe-inducing video led to a relative threat response.

"To maximally benefit from awe when facing subsequent stressors, we may need to take a step back from ourselves before we take it all in," says Seery.

More information: Phuong Q. Le et al, When a small self means manageable obstacles: Spontaneous self-distancing predicts divergent effects of awe during a subsequent performance stressor, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2018.07.010 , dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.07.010

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