

Hello, everyone my name is Ross Whitehead and today I want to talk to you about something that is often overlooked in our daily lives: AWE

We often say or hear the word “awesome” and it gets applied to many mundane things each day, but I want to talk about the powerful, primitive and overwhelming sense of Awe that as humans we are lucky enough to experience.

Have you ever encountered a moment that left you completely awe-struck? Maybe it was witnessing a beautiful sunset, standing at the base of a towering mountain, or hearing a piece of music that moved you to tears.

Awe is that feeling of wonder and amazement that comes from encountering something that is vast, beautiful, or transcendent.

I want to take you back to one of my most enduring memories of experiencing Awe. This wasn't out in nature experiencing a vast landscape, but rather sat in year 7 physics class on a rainy autumn afternoon. It was our first lesson on the solar system; back then Pluto was still a blurry dot was still a planet, the space shuttle was still flying, and we had just begun assembling the space station. In that lesson, we learnt about the size and scale of the solar system and the Universe. I was emotionally overwhelmed in the face of such vastness. To this day I can still re-create that same feeling every time I sit and think about what exists beyond the small floating watery rock that we inhabit.

Take a moment to look at this photo.

This is one of the first images produced by the James Webb Deep Space telescope, the largest and most powerful space telescope ever assembled. To put the size of this image into context, hold your arm out at arm's length, and imagine you are holding up a single grain of sand. This image is the size of the patch of sky that the grain of sand obscures from your view. There is light in this image that took over 13 billion years to reach the camera that captured it. Every point of light you see is a galaxy, some no longer exist. Each galaxy contains hundreds of millions of stars, trillions of planets, endless possibilities. We are a very tiny part of a vast, old and beautiful universe

I'm here to tell you that forgetting to find awe is a mistake. It's a mistake because Awe is such a powerful emotion that enhances our lives in so many ways. It is the most single sensation that does the most to boost our overall sense of wellbeing. The absence of Awe will make your experience of life poorer.

From a psychological perspective, Awe can: -

- Give you a sense of more time
- Improves mood
- Makes you kinder and more generous
- Increases your cognitive function; you can be more open minded, curious and more likely to engage in creative thinking and problem solving.

And it doesn't stop there, awe delivers profound physiological improvements:

- It reduces cortisol levels, making you less stressed
- Increases immune function, making you more resilient to illness and disease
- Reduces inflammation
- Lowers your blood pressure

And to top it off the effects of Awe do not diminish with repetition; but rather get more powerful with exposure and practice. When we experience awe, we feel small in comparison to the vastness of the world, but at the same time we are able to connect to something greater than ourselves.

Our days can often feel like we are going through the motions, forgetting to appreciate the beauty and wonder that exists around us. Not so long ago, that was me. Getting through each day, busy, rushing from task to task, place to place, blank stares at computer screens, waiting for the next opportunity to escape on holiday and to find some joy.

I want to tell you my story, of how I rediscovered the ability to find awe each and every day.

A year ago, thanks to humanities ability to harness the power of science and medicine, I became a dad. And don't worry this isn't a talk about the joys and struggles of parenting, but a story of how, as we grow, we forget how to appreciate the beauty and complexity of the world we live in. My daughter, through being present in each moment, unencumbered by her past experience or future worry, has taught me that wonder and amazement can be found in every moment of the day. From the simplicity of blowing bubbles, the first exquisite taste of a fresh strawberry, the pure unadulterated joy of a game

of peek-a-boo; you can find wonder and amazement in small actions every day. She has taught me to seek awe each and every day. She has made me re-think how I approach my day and how I can structure our lives around the discovery of Awe to benefit my family.

Now, I'm sure that you're thinking. "But Ross, I don't have a baby!" Don't worry, you don't need to have a baby to teach you how to find awe in the world. Just take a stroll outside, and you'll see that the world is full of wonder and surprise. From the chirping of birds to towering trees or if you're lucky you might stumble upon a lady bird or butterfly and get to marvel at the intricate patterns on their tiny bodies.

Working in the National Health Service can often feel overwhelming, demand outstrips capacity, each and every minute there is someone or something that needs your attention. It's easy to go for days, weeks, and years without taking a breath; a moment to appreciate what you are part of. But if you only took that moment there are many wonders to see so I urge you to:

- Observe the dedication and resilience of your colleagues dealing each day with the challenges of healthcare. See it in yourself.
- Appreciate the knowledge, skills and capability you bring to your job. Be it controlling human physiology using medicine, putting a distressed patient at ease, or spotting that really sick patient in a crowded room.
- Witness the incredible strength and courage which patients display in the face of adversity.

You can cultivate a sense of Awe and appreciation each day.

I hope by now, I have persuaded you of all the benefits that awe can bring to your life, and I want to give you a framework to help you find it:-

First – Cultivate mindfulness – be fully present and aware of your surroundings, take notice of the beauty and wonder around you.

Second – Look for the extraordinary in the ordinary – you can find awe in the smallest of things.

Third – Be curious – ask questions, explore new places, try new things.

Fourth – Get outside – spend time in nature, as much time as you can.

Fifth – practice gratitude – take some time each day to reflect on things you are thankful for. Focusing on the positive aspects of your life will open your mind to awe in the everyday.

So, I encourage you to take that first step today, and see where the sense of Awe can take you.

I want to finish by hopefully letting you all find a small piece of awe to carry you through the rest of your day: -

- Take a deep breath and close your eyes
- Imagine yourself standing in front of a beautiful landscape, a mountain vista, river valley, or the coast
- Observe the details, pay attention to the colours, the textures of the land, the smells, feel the wind.
- Try and notice the smallest details that makes this a unique and beautiful place
- Take it all in and let the beauty of the scene fill you up.
- Be fully present in the moment.
- Let that sense of wonder and amazement wash over you.
- Take another deep breath and open your eyes.