



SEEKING CONNECTION TO VASTNESS

“Do not look at stars as bright spots only. Try to take in the vastness of the universe.”

–Maria Mitchell

OVERVIEW

Students watch a short video about humans’ connection to the universe, then reflect on the magnitude of the universe and their place within it.

LEVELS

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College
- Adult

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To increase students’ sense of connection to each other and the world around them
- To offer students an opportunity to gain perspective and disconnect from stressors for a brief moment
- To encourage prosocial behavior
- To support student well-being

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤30 minutes

MATERIALS

- Video: [“The Most Astounding Fact”](#) by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson (3:33)
- Projector
- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Optional: Art supplies (e.g., markers, construction paper, clay)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Consider the vastness of the universe and what it might mean for their own existence
- Reflect on the interconnectedness of all living things
- Share, listen to, and discuss each other's responses

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Awe
- Humility
- Wonder
- Purpose

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Open Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to watch this [video](#) (3:33) and reflect on the following questions:
 - What thoughts and emotions did the video evoke in you?
 - What do you think is your role in this universe, or what would you like your role to be?
 - When do you feel most connected to others, to Earth, and/or to our larger universe?
 - What might we, including our students, gain from reflecting on the vastness of the universe and our connection to it?

INSTRUCTIONS

[Awe](#) is the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world at that moment. Such an experience can make us feel small and shift our focus from ourselves

to others. This shift in focus can help students cope better with stress by making current problems not seem as big, and it can encourage greater prosocial behavior.

This practice encourages students to contemplate the vastness of the universe and their place within it.

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

- Ask students:
 - *When you look at the night sky filled with billions of stars—even if you can only see a few of them—what kind of thoughts or feelings do you experience?*
 - *If you think about how massive our universe is and how small we are in comparison, what comes to mind?*

WATCHING THE VIDEO

- Introduce the video, [The Most Astounding Fact](#) (3:33) by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. Explain that this video contains a powerful message that encourages reflection on the vastness of the cosmos and our connection to it.
- Invite students to notice what thoughts and emotions come up for them as they watch the video.
- Play the video.

DEBRIEFING THE VIDEO

- After the video has ended, invite students to write a short reflection on the following questions:
 - *What thoughts and emotions did the video evoke in you?*
 - *Did you feel a sense of vastness? Did it shift your perspective on the world and your place in it?*
 - *What do you think is your role in this universe or what would you like your role to be?*
 - *When do you feel most connected to others, to Earth, and/or to our larger universe?*
- In partners, small groups, or as a whole class, invite students to share and discuss their responses to these questions.
- **Optional:** Allow students to create an art piece depicting their relationship to the universe. Encourage them to use symbols or colors that remind them of the emotions they experience when watching the video.

CLOSURE

- Invite students to comment on what they think humans might gain from reflecting on their connection to the universe?

SOURCE

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REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- What kinds of experiences did students describe after seeing the video? Awe? Wonder? A sense of connection?
- Did you notice a change in students' behavior, either toward each other or perhaps with regards to how stressed or anxious they seemed?
- Did anything surprise you or stand out to you about your students' comments?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one study, [researchers](#) had 353 youth from the Netherlands, ages 8-13, watch a video clip that prompted either joy, awe, or a neutral response. Those who watched the awe video showed greater prosocial behavior, donating their experimental earnings to refugee families. In addition, they had greater parasympathetic nervous system activation—the system that calms us down.

In another [study](#) of 72 veterans and 52 youth from underserved communities, the experience of awe during whitewater rafting predicted improvements in well-being and stress levels, responding to statements such as “I am unable to control the important things in life” and “I am unable to cope with all the things I have to do.”

Finally, in a series of [studies](#) including 2,078 adult participants, researchers found that awe can increase prosocial behavior, ethical decision-making, generosity, and helping behavior, and reduce feelings of entitlement, partly by making us feel small amidst vastness. These findings suggest that awe may help broaden our perspective and help us to notice the needs of larger society.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Students can often feel overwhelmed by daily routines and worries about [belonging](#) and [academic performance](#). Such stress has been associated with various negative outcomes, including [lower academic performance, poor sleep, and decreased mental health](#). Reflecting on the vastness of the universe can elicit awe and help students gain a new perspective, thus making everyday stressors seem more manageable.

Furthermore, awe is considered a [self-transcendent](#) emotion (one that helps us see beyond ourselves) that can shift our attention from our own needs to the needs of others. Thus, awe can help create classroom environments in which children are more [welcoming and supportive](#) of one another.

TERMS OF USE

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