



# Police well-being interventions: Using awe narratives to promote resilience

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*This article is related directly to the First European Conference on Law Enforcement and Public Health (LEPH) held in Umea, Sweden in May 2023.*

## ABSTRACT

The well-being of the police workforce needs to be a priority as law enforcement agencies continue to adapt to emerging issues while serving their communities. Reflecting and sharing awe narratives, as well as being exposed to the awe stories of others, can enhance their resilience and support their overall well-being. This article, which is based on a special lecture given during the Law Enforcement and Public Health Conference held May 21–24, 2023, at Umea University in Umea, Sweden, uses phenomenology to examine the awe stories and experiences of police participants who took part in a resilience program as well as feedback during the conference discussion. The analysis demonstrates that awe narratives can serve as a gateway to other resilience practices including cognitive reappraisal, emotional intelligence, gratitude, humility, finding meaning and purpose in life, mindfulness, optimism and hope, self-compassion, self-efficacy, social connection, and managing uncertainty and ambiguity. Based on the findings, awe narratives should be considered for implementation in future police mental health and resilience training as an evidence-based practice to support the police workforce.

**Key Words** narrative psychology; wellness; story-telling; phenomenology.

## INTRODUCTION

Police personnel across the world are facing an increasing number of issues, ranging from mandated reforms to short-staffing and overwork (Barron, 2022; Charlalambous, 2023; Westervelt, 2021). These agency-wide issues can have a detrimental impact on individual officers, contributing to moral injury, cynicism, burnout, mental health conditions, and suicide (Barron, 2022; The Crime Report Staff, 2022; McAward, 2022; NAMI, n.d.; Papazoglou et al., 2019). It is therefore necessary that throughout officers' careers, they are provided with evidence-based, practical wellness and resilience programs to support their well-being.

This article, which is adapted from an invited special lecture given during the Law Enforcement and Public Health Conference held in Umea, Sweden, May 21–24, 2023, addresses these concerns and discusses one such resilience program, The Awe Project, created based on the existing literature, that is minimally time-consuming (Thompson, 2022a). The results indicate that the program can have a positive influence on the

resilience of the general public, including police personnel (uniformed and civilian) and their overall well-being. This paper specifically addresses and advances the argument that experiencing awe, through sharing and being exposed to awe narratives, can serve as a gateway to other resilience practices. This concept of awe narratives is part of a broader approach of supporting people's well-being. It is described as narrative health (Thompson, 2023a; 2023b), which is adapted from narrative medicine. Narrative medicine is a model to engage in an effective and humane medical practice (Charon, 2001). The type of narrative health described in this article expands on this medical professional approach of narrative medicine and suggests it is applicable and adaptable to a wider audience, including policing.

## AWE

Awe is a complex emotion, and its definition continues to evolve based on the emerging literature. Currently, awe is described as an emotion that is experienced in the presence of

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someone or something extraordinary that challenges people's current thinking and perspectives (Stellar, 2021; Thompson, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c). When awe is viewed as a positive experience, it can be described as a gateway to other positive emotions as well as resilience practices (Thompson, 2023a). Positive emotions can include joy, happiness, contentment, and calmness. With respect to other resilience practices, awe has been connected to many, including (and for the scope of this paper) cognitive reappraisal, emotional intelligence, gratitude, humility, meaning and purpose in life, mindfulness, optimism and hope, self-compassion, self-efficacy, social connectedness, and (managing) uncertainty and ambiguity (for example, see Thompson et al., 2022; Thompson, 2023a).

The positive implications of experiencing awe extend beyond the emotional elements, as it can positively impact individuals' neurobiology (Chirico et al., 2017; Stellar et al., 2015; Tabibnia, 2020; van Elk et al., 2019). The benefits of awe are not limited to individuals, as it has also been described as a self-transcendent experience that can promote prosocial behaviours (Chirico & Yaden, 2018; Jiang & Sedikides, 2021; Li et al., 2019; Thompson, 2022a; 2023a; 2023c; Yaden et al., 2017). This is particularly relevant in policing, as supporting the public, often when they are in crisis, is critical to doing police work effectively.

Although, ostensibly, the nexus between awe, resilience, and police work might seem counterintuitive and not established, numerous studies have recently examined this with respect to police leadership (Thompson, 2022b), hostage negotiators (Thompson & Jensen, 2023), homicide and special victim investigators (Thompson, 2023c), and the general police force (Thompson & Drew, 2020). The results indicate how experiencing awe, and specifically both sharing and being exposed to awe narratives, can support police in their work and, importantly, in their personal well-being.

## RESILIENCE

Resilience involves engaging in proactive practices to manage adverse moments in life effectively, and it also includes engaging in those practices in the midst of those moments and afterwards as part of recovery (Tabibnia, 2020; Thompson, 2023a; 2023b; Thompson & Jensen, 2023). It is necessary for individuals to engage in a variety of practices based on the context of the situation (Bonanno, 2005). Importantly, resilience is not limited to preparation for, and response to, negative moments.

Resilience also involves engaging in, and reflecting on, positive life-moments (Thompson, 2020). For the purpose of this article, the following evidence-based resilience practices are examined: cognitive reappraisal, emotional intelligence, gratitude, humility, meaning and purpose in life, mindfulness, optimism and hope, self-compassion, self-efficacy, social connectedness, and managing uncertainty and ambiguity (for a review of these skills, see Thompson et al., 2022).

## NARRATIVES AND WELL-BEING

Sharing and reflecting on narratives have been established as practices that can support individuals' overall well-being (Adler et al., 2016; Agnew, 2022; Frattaroli, 2006; Koshy et al., 2017; Peterson & Boris, 2017; Strumm, 2022; Tarragona, 2019;

Thompson, 2023a; Zak et al., 2015). Recent research has explored how awe narratives, specifically in relation to supporting individuals' resilience, have shown that both sharing and being exposed to awe stories can support individual well-being (Thompson, 2022b; 2022c; Thompson & Jensen, 2023; Thompson, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c). Importantly, many of these studies specifically examined the impact the awe narratives had on police members.

## THE AWE PROJECT

During the Law Enforcement and Public Health (LEPH) lecture, the author shared police-specific data and findings that were extracted from two recent, larger awe narrative research studies (Thompson, 2022a; 2023c). The purpose of the lecture was to examine whether the same positive results and resilience-related themes from the larger studies were also relevant to the police participants.<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, the police data were collected and analyzed using qualitative methodologies, including phenomenology and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Importantly, and consistent with those methodologies, the aim of the lecture and the studies was to gain insight into participants' understanding of the phenomenon under study (awe), and when the researcher analyzed the stories collectively, to identify the meaningful themes that emerged (Frechette et al., 2020; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

The police participants took part in The Awe Project, an online resilience program they accessed on their cellphones via a private, password-protected classroom in the Google Classroom application. The program involved a pre-survey in which they provided basic demographic data, their definition of awe, and a personal awe story.

During the 5-day program, each morning and evening, participants engaged in a 1-minute breathing practice, watched a short awe-related video, and then were asked to answer two questions that were shared with the group in the virtual classroom. The first question was related to the video, while the second question connected the video with another resilience-related practice (for a comprehensive review of the program, see Thompson, 2022a).

The Awe Project has been implemented and adapted in various formats in policing, including training for newly promoted supervisors, executive leadership, suicide prevention, peer support, hostage and crisis negotiation, criminal investigators (including homicide and special victim crimes), police recruits, and students in college studying to become police officers.

## POLICE AWE NARRATIVE RESILIENCE THEMES

The LEPH lecture and this paper used the findings and themes that emerged from the two larger studies as a guide and framework to examine the police participants' experiences of being exposed to awe narratives and sharing their own stories. Based on the review, the following resilience- and well-being-related themes were shared during the LEPH

<sup>1</sup>For a more in-depth review of the procedures and methodology used to examine the police-specific data for this social innovation article, see Thompson (2022a) and Thompson (2023a).

presentation. It is important to mention, again, and consistent with qualitative research, that the purpose was to examine individual experiences of the phenomenon, awe, and then, based on the researcher's interpretation of the data, to develop themes. This type of qualitative research is concerned with quality rather than quantity, as meaning and themes are derived from the thick descriptions of participants (for more on this approach, see Thompson, 2023b).

The multiple themes that emerged from analyzing the data are presented in Table I. Each of the themes demonstrates how awe can serve as a gateway to these other resilience practices, in addition to the complexity and interconnectedness of each theme with others. For example, one police participant example of mindfulness also includes that this officer was humbled (humility) by the experience.

Although a purpose of phenomenological research, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis, is the development of themes based on the collective analysis of individual accounts and experiences of the phenomenon under study, individuals' experiences are not diminished or reduced to a collective narrative (Thompson, 2022a). Therefore, the following sections examine a selection of the themes listed in Table I and provide specific narratives shared by different participants to show the thickness of the data (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Gubba, 1985; Mills et al., 2010),

**TABLE I** Police awe narrative resilience themes

Resilience Practice	The Awe Project Participant Example
Cognitive reappraisal	A moment in your life that shocks you into appreciation of simple or extraordinary incidents.
Emotional intelligence	(Terms shared) Beauty, amazement, happiness, gratitude, humbled, calming, soothing, increased positivity, inspirational, admire, wonder, calm.
Gratitude	My heart felt so full, and I could not stop smiling and feeling immense gratitude.
Humility	We are just a tiny speck on this planet.
Meaning and purpose in life	A great feeling inside that makes me feel like I am fulfilling my purpose.
Mindfulness	Being present enough in life to notice the details and be present enough to be impressed and humbled by them.
Optimism and hope	Feels great. Can be inspiring but can also make me feel insignificant. It can make me proud and filled with hope at the same time.
Self-compassion	It's a time that captivates you away from everything else around you. I use these moments to reflect on what's valuable to me and as a stress reducer.
Self-efficacy	I was so proud to be his dad and almost brought to tears.
Social connectedness	Awe is recognizing that you are part of so much of a bigger picture in the world.
(Managing) Uncertainty and ambiguity	An unexplainable feeling that is overwhelming.

further revealing awe's complexity and interconnectedness with other resilience practices.

### Cognitive Reappraisal (Negative Events)

It was a very negative job—we were responding to the hospital because a person was sexually assaulted. The weather was terrible and it was a difficult day [to] patrol getting in and out into the snow and navigating the streets and traffic.

We arrived at the hospital and stepped into the slush to go hear about the worst possible category of crimes. As I stepped out of the car, I noticed how beautiful and peaceful the falling snow was.

I told the rookie I was training to take a moment. Stop. And take in the beauty of the falling snow. We stood there for about 1 minute and made a point of taking it in before getting on with the ugly nature of police work. We both found it restorative and reflected on [it] during the following days.

### Cognitive Reappraisal (Ordinary Moments)

I was once stopped in my footsteps—by a buttercup. I was working a [police] beat in a very tough inner-city area. Concrete and filth all around. This buttercup decided this was its home and it broke through the concrete. Maybe it was the situation—but I was so taken aback by its strength and its drive to LIVE.

It distracted me for a moment from what I was there for and it's stayed with me—the image of this buttercup breaking through the concrete under the most impossible set of circumstances—for more than 15 years.

### Gratitude

I was driving to pick up my son from school. I reflected on how much I have been blessed: my home, marriage, job, family, education, etc. Despite the difficulties I was still facing, it was a moment where I felt at peace and sheer joy.

### Humility (Through a Sense of Smallness)

A time I was in awe was when I was in the Bahamas on a boat in the middle of the ocean watching the sunset, and it just made me realize how beautiful the world is and how small we really are.

### Meaning and Purpose in Life

The moment I experienced awe, I felt amazing inside. I knew that we are all here for a purpose. I felt enthusiastic and encouraged. That moment I felt that no matter how difficult it may get to go through an everyday routine, there is a reward at the end. The reward is not something physical, but rather a feeling of happiness and balance that comes when you realize all the beauty that surrounds us.

### Optimism and Hope

Sadly, my experience will revolve around police funerals, and having attended so many at this point in my career, the feeling of sadness but also that overwhelming feeling of awe as well: police members coming together in solidarity to offer condolences and support to families

that we may never have met and quite possibly to honour the life of an officer that we've never met.

We come together in that one instance because of the commonality we share, a life of service that we've all chosen brings us together ... no matter the colours of their skin, no matter their religion, no matter their political views, and in some instances from other police departments and countries.

In sadness there is comfort and, in that comfort, there is my awe. We are part of something bigger than ourselves, and that also gives me hope.

### Social Connection

My last experience of awe was returning home from a training in which I was away from my two boys and wife. I missed them, but I did not know how much till I saw them. As we arrived home from the airport, my two little boys were wild. As I watched them be silly, I had a wonderful sense of appreciation. I recalled other men in my life, particularly fathers, who advised me to soak up these moments. The kids will grow up fast. I continued watching them be goofs, laughing, and saying some pretty hilarious things.

Although Keltner and Haidt's seminal work (2003) on awe posits that experiencing awe involves a "need for accommodation" (NFA), or developing a new mental schema to comprehend what is occurring, recent awe research suggests that is not necessarily always the case (Thompson, 2023a). The police participants support this notion of NFA not being present in each story, as some stated they could not fully comprehend their awe experiences yet did not make further attempts to grasp the meaning of what was occurring. This suggests awe can serve as a practice to potentially support the participants' ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty both in the moment as well as in future situations.

Learning how to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty could be helpful to police given that their work often involves situations in which they are not completely aware of what they are responding to and, when arriving on the scene, they further need to determine exactly what is occurring, especially when attempting to discern ambiguities such as the differences between (or overlapping of) who is in crisis, which persons are victims or perpetrators, and/or whether the matter is criminal or a mental health crisis.

Although this article is limited in scope, it is worthwhile briefly to delve further into how police personnel explained how awe experiences involve both uncertainty and ambiguity:

I would define awe as a moment where I'm completely taken aback by something or someone, at a loss for words.

To me, awe means being in a state of disbelief while witnessing something to be true.

I would describe awe like a feeling of shock, disbelief, like, "wow I can't believe this happened."

Being in amazement. Not being able to understand what I'm witnessing or experiencing.

As demonstrated in these comments, the police participants explained the complexity of awe experiences, which

can include both uncertainty and ambiguity. These moments have the potential to support police officers in their work, as previous awe research has suggested that awe has had a continuing impact after the awe experience concluded (Bai et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019; Piff et al., 2015; Rudd et al., 2012; Thompson, 2023a).

### THE IMPACT OF OTHERS' AWE NARRATIVES

During the LEPH lecture, attendees had an opportunity to engage in an example of an awe narrative video titled *A Walk in a Parking Lot*. The video begins with a 1-minute breathing exercise<sup>2</sup> in which participants could follow along with a visual graphic on screen. Immediately after the breathing exercise, the awe narrative video started. This portion of the video, lasting just under 4 minutes, consisted of a colour-blind young boy walking around a parking lot being filmed by his mother on her cellphone. The video begins with her giving him specially made glasses that allow him to see in colour.

During the video, the young boy walks around the parking lot in awe, identifying various colours he can now see, and at various moments, the boy and his mother briefly exchange comments. As detailed in previous sections, research has shown that personal awe stories can include numerous other resilience practices (for example, see Figure 1; Thompson, 2023a). Table II demonstrates how attendees at the lecture watched this specific awe narrative and had similar reactions. Being exposed to the awe stories of other people can have a profound impact on a person (Peterson & Boris, 2017; Thompson, 2022a; 2023a; 2023c).

The reflections in Table II demonstrate that the viewer can be impacted by the story of another person while it unfolds, just as the story can be transformative for the person experiencing it. The viewer becomes captivated in the moment, and a rippling, self-reflective process is created as the viewer "turns the story into their own idea and experience" (Widrich, 2012, 6th paragraph).

The following sections further demonstrate the positive impression that being exposed to awe narratives can have on police personnel.

### AWE NARRATIVES AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

Recent research has suggested that being exposed to narratives, including awe, can be supportive of suicide prevention efforts (Franz et al., 2022; Thompson, 2023c), while awe experiences can also have the potential to support countering mental health conditions (Chirico & Gaggioli, 2021). This is particularly important in policing due to concerns over suicide rates and mental health conditions (Brooks, 2022; Bourke, 2023; Stanton, 2022).

An examination of these police participant stories and themes through the lens of suicide prevention efforts shows that the results are promising due to their potential for enhancing suicide prevention protective factors as well as countering risk factors and identifying warning signs.

Suicide prevention protective factors include being proactive about mental health, social connectedness, developing

<sup>2</sup>See the breathing exercise at <https://www.warrior21.com/breathe>.

**TABLE II** The impact of others' awe narratives on the viewer

Resilience Skill	Lecture Participant Example
Cognitive reappraisal	Discussions included how important it is to not overlook the "little" positive things and the people in their lives.
Empathy	Participants reflected on what the boy was thinking and feeling while walking through the parking lot.
Emotional intelligence	Participants shared and discussed the various emotions they felt while watching the story.
Gratitude	Multiple participants expressed having gratitude for what they have, including seeing colour.
Hope and optimism	Participants explained that the video motivated them to try and practice more of the other mentioned resilience practices; the story reminded them of how it is important to take moments to reflect on the good things in life.
Humility	Based on the comments related to the other skills, participants expressed a sense of feeling humbled as well.
Meaning and purpose in life	Participants expressed that the video reminded them that there is more to their lives than the important police work they do (such as being parents).
Social connectedness	The conversation included discussing how powerful the bond seemed between the boy and his mother and how fortunate it was for him to have her in his life. More broadly, the discussions included how other people have helped us throughout our lives.
(Managing) Uncertainty and ambiguity	Some participants shared that they could not understand some parts of the video, including how, if he was colour blind, he was then able to identify colours.

problem-solving and coping skills, and creating a strong sense of purpose and self-esteem (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, n.d.; Centers for Disease Control, 2022; Suicide Prevention Resource Center & Rodgers, 2011).

Table III gives a brief snapshot of police participant responses to the awe stories and to taking part in a program that supports these suicide prevention protective factors.

As shown in some of the responses in Table III, participants demonstrated having optimism and hope in response to being exposed to awe stories and their overall participation in The Awe Project. This is noteworthy, as suicide prevention, anxiety, and depression research have demonstrated that having hope and optimism are critical protective factors (Huen et al., 2015; Laranjeira & Querido, 2022; Tucker et al., 2013).

## FINDING AWE IN NATURE AND WATER

Finally, although not listed previously as a theme, it is important to highlight the prevalence of awe narratives that were shared relating to nature—and specifically water. A vast body of research has established a beneficial relationship between being in nature (for a review, see Monroy & Keltner, 2023) and around water and well-being (for a review, see White et al., 2020), while emerging awe studies involving water have also shows positive results (Thompson, 2022a; 2023a).

**TABLE III** Police awe-related comments supporting suicide prevention protective factors

Awe Experience Topic	The Awe Project Participant Reflection
Reflecting on awe experiences	[Awe is] a reminder of the beauty in the world in which we live. This was a reminder to me of what's most important in life. I felt grateful ... for the things I take for granted. And inspired to not let challenges hold me back.
Responding to watching awe stories (during The Awe Project)	This is what inspiration looks like; it does not boast, it just exudes and radiates authenticity. His message is real and should be our mantra daily, "Don't give up, never give up, stay in the fight, you are braver than you think." Watching the video makes me realize the world isn't all ugly and violent. Beauty exists and in the scheme of things how small we really are. I felt a lot of emotions. I felt inspired by his courage. I also felt hopeful because of his determination. And I felt joy. The first thought that went into my head while I watched this video was the fact that time will always move forward. Whatever uncomfortable situation we find ourselves in, it will soon pass into a new moment of time. The struggles we may face now teach us resilience for the future. ... A bad moment or feeling won't last forever.
Participating in The Awe Project	What I like most ... I started and ended my day thinking about amazing things. I was surprised by how calming just a few minutes of time to watch something new could be. I want to share my gratitude with the group for this special journey. It's been so interesting hearing the wide range of perspectives on these videos. I like that the Awe Project has been making me take time out for myself. I was surprised how relaxing the videos have been, and how the breathing exercises really calm me down.

Increasingly, police wellness programs include nature and, specifically, water-based programs.<sup>3</sup>

The following Awe Project police participants shared the positive impact nature, and specifically water, had on their awe narratives:

The vast Pacific Ocean seemed endless, and monstrous waves were hitting the beaches. A lot of people were enjoying the beach along the way.

Standing on that beach with my wife just watching the waves crash in made a warm peacefulness wash over me. In that moment, I was able to truly appreciate the natural

<sup>3</sup>For an example, see <http://www.revitalcolorado.org>.

beauty of where I was. I was also able to appreciate being in that place with the woman I love.

I experienced awe while vacationing in Hawaii. I felt so grateful to have been able to finally make it to one of my top destinations. Looking at the mountains nearby, looking at the clear blue water and sky while being on a boat felt amazing. After sightseeing for a couple of hours, I felt so refreshed. I felt at peace. I was humbled by the natural beauty that was all around me.

Police participants in The Awe Project shared the following after watching two brief, water-related awe videos:

The second video, if you noticed, no drop falls the same, just like no person is the same. We are all unique and the impact we have in life and the people that are around us is unlike anyone else.

The water drops are mesmerizing. Makes me think how a small change can directly impact the output.

The rainfall video was amazing. The power of weather is amazing to see. The droplet video was my favourite. The video had so much detail in it and showed beauty that we miss from just a raindrop.

Wow. I found both videos fascinating ... seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

These comments only briefly show the effects of water and its relationship with eliciting awe and supporting other resilience practices. Future research studies should further examine this, while the author is currently in the process of developing a new version of The Awe Project that specifically explores the awe–water relationship.

## CONCLUSION

The results show that The Awe Project, and specifically sharing and being exposed to awe narratives, is supportive of the overall resilience and well-being of police participants in a practical, easily accessible manner. It may also be supportive of suicide prevention efforts.

Based on the results, it is suggested that sharing and reflecting on awe experiences be considered for implementation in police agencies at various points of police officers' careers. It is suggested that additional quantitative and qualitative studies be conducted to further examine both The Awe Project's efficacy and awe experiences in general.

Much like modern policing needs to adapt and evolve due to emerging concerns, mental health, well-being, and resilience practices need to change as well. For example, as there is no single cause of suicide, policing agency approaches to prevent it in the workforce must be multifaceted and occur throughout police officers' careers. The LEPH lecture and this corresponding article have shown that awe practices, including sharing and reflecting on narratives, can be implemented practically in a variety of ways. What has remained constant is the results: awe narratives are increasingly becoming a practical, evidence-based practice that can enhance police resilience and support overall police well-being.

As the LEPH conference examined public health and policing, it must not be forgotten that the police are part of the public as well, and equally deserving of support. As future conferences will rightfully continue the conversation on how the police can better support the health of the public, it is imperative that the question is equally turned inward. After all, it is fellow humans who serve in the noble role of policing as servants, protectors, and guardians to their brothers and sisters in the public. Before they are police officers, they are humans; they are men and women, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, partners, brothers and sisters, and friends and neighbours. These awe narratives and practices can ensure that this element of the humanity in policing is not lost.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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