Life

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Birdbrained Science:

My God, it's full of stars

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I've been a casual stargazer ever since high school when I first watched a meteor shower with some of my friends. The stars often (and rightfully, in my opinion) get romanticized; countless people have waxed poetic about them and there are so many songs about them (speaking of, you should totally listen to "Stars" by Rainbow Kitten Surprise and "Space Talk" by The Native Architects).

But stargazing isn't just for the dreamy-eyed and the space nerds among us. It actually has multiple psychological and physical health benefits. Part of these benefits might have less to do with stargazing itself, and more to do with the circumstances of stargazing: it can only really take place in the dark.

You might've heard that nocturnal light exposure causes damage to our health (one of many reasons to shut off the lights at night, UConn). But even disregarding that, darkness itself is actually good for us.

Darkness prompts the pineal gland to produces melatonin. In addition to helping us sleep, melatonin repairs DNA damage (which helps prevent cancer) and regulates our circadian rhythm, which reduces anxiety and depression.

Darkness also boosts creativity. A 2013 paper published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology found that darkness helps people think outside of the box; something about it makes people feel freer and take more creative risks.

But it's not just the darkness that's good for us. The night sky itself does wonders for us.

Feeling connected to the sky can improve our mental health. A 2023 study found a positive association between feeling night sky connectedness and mental wellbeing. Participants who reported feeling more connected to the night sky scored higher on happiness and emotional resilience scales. They also reported fewer difficulties with emotional regulation.

Additionally, a 2025 study found that viewing imagery of dark night skies seemed to boost physiological healing by reducing physical stress. Participants also reported experiencing greater levels of psychological healing after watching the skies. Although spending time outdoors positively impacts our health in several ways, this particular study took place in a planetarium, where there wasn't really any chance of getting outdoor benefits from the experience.

So it's not just the act of being outside that's beneficial; it's something to do with the stars and sky itself. And that "something" might be the power of awe.

Awe has its own benefits. Physically, it calms down our nervous systems, reduces stress and produces oxytocin, which boosts positive emotions. Awe also lowers the body's levels of proinflammatory cytokines, which produce and worsen disease.

Psychologically, awe is also good for us. Awe deactivates the middle temporal gyrus in our brains, which is part of the default mode network, a network of brain regions that become more active when people get lost in their thoughts. The default mode network is also associated with thinking about yourself. This means that if you're like me and have a vocal inner critic or spend a lot of time replaying your worst moments in your head, awe seems to be able to shut all of that down.

Essentially, awe makes us get out of our heads and more in the present moment. Being awed draws our focus away from ourselves and instead helps us remember that there is something beyond our problems. And I think when you're stargazing, it's hard not to experience awe. Looking at the stars, thinking about how many people before you have gazed up at those same lights, how many civilizations have risen and fallen under those same starry skies, how huge and mysterious and ancient the universe is — you can't help but be reminded of how small we really are. We're all part of something so much bigger. And personally, I find that comforting.

As a graduating senior, this is the last edition of Birdbrained Science I'm penning by myself, and it's bittersweet. Probably I editorialize way too much in this column already, but allow me to do it one last time, before I go "dark" on all of you.

If you take anything away from my time writing this column: Touch grass. Go stargazing. Listen to the birds and watch the skies. Above all else, pay attention.

And don't forget to wonder.



A woman sleeps in bed with her phone beside her. Circadian rhythm is primarily determined by melatonin, which helps the body enter a state of sleep. PHOTO COURTESY OF PEXELS.COM



A night sky full of stars beyond trees. Studies have shown that feeling connected to the night sky can improve mental wellbeing. PHOTO COURTESY OF CREAZILLA.COM