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## Wonder at Overcoming Anxiety: Feelings of Self, Negative Emotions and Encounters with the Ugly in Wonder Experiences

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Wonder at Overcoming Anxiety: Feelings of Self, Negative Emotions and Encounters With the Ugly in Wonder Experiences

Kate O'Neil

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## **Abstract**

Fuller (2012) defines wonder experiences from a positive perspective, with an added emphasis to the beauty of life, the unexpectedness of life, and the inexplicable nature of life itself. He distinguishes wonder from awe when he states: “wonder differs from awe, however, in that it isn’t accompanied by fear or submission. Wonder diminishes the sense of self, yet does so without inducing interpersonal submissiveness” (p. 70). However, my experiences addressing anxiety experiences suggested to me how movement away from negative experiences can allow one to see the good from those ‘bad’ experiences, which in turn emits wonder. In order to explore this insight, I used sociological introspection. I contemplated the emotions and feelings I had when journaling about my negative anxiety experiences, and how those may be a source of wonder today. I journaled consistently for two weeks, and then continued to check in with my progress once every couple of weeks after the initial period. This was such a transformative process for me that I can hear the excitement in the words I shared. I experience wonder through the knowledge that I can make it out of some of the worst days I face, and because I know I have completely accepted myself for all I am.

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Fuller (2012) describes wonder experiences from a positive perspective, one that emphasizes the beauty of life, the unexpectedness of life, and the inexplicable nature of life itself. However, based on my personal experience, I believe that the movement away from negative experiences allows one to see the good from those “bad” experiences, which in turn emits wonder. Fuller focuses on the positive experiences that are associated with wonder, but he should include some discussion on the complexity of negative emotions that could potentially turn into positive experiences. My experiences provide a different insight into Fuller’s definitions of positive and negative emotions, the diminishment of the self through wonder, and his emphasis on the beauty of wonder.

Fuller (2012) explains that wonder experiences are derived from positive emotions, rather than negative emotions. Fuller is offering the idea that wonder experiences are based on positive emotions, therefore negative emotions do not contribute to wonder experiences. In his discussion of wonder, Fuller does not only describe wonder, but he also distinguishes between positive and negative emotions. He defines negative emotions, like fear or anger, as emotions that are triggered when experiences don't meet one's expectations, thereby frustrating the individual. He defines positive emotions, like joy or wonder, as emotions that are triggered when experiences exceed expectations (Fuller, 2012). This is an important distinction to make because in defining the difference between negative and positive emotions, Fuller identifies wonder to strictly be a positive experience.

Fuller proposes that wonder experiences are derived from positive emotions, though he also mentions how wonder diminishes one's sense of self. Fuller (2012) states, "wonder differs from awe, however, in that it isn't accompanied by fear or submission. Wonder diminishes the sense of self, yet does so without inducing interpersonal submissiveness" (Fuller, 2012). This point is important because it explains another difference between wonder and other emotional experiences. Wonder experiences are larger than the self, but do not require one's sense of self to be submissive, unlike fear, which is why it is so inexplicable. Fuller supports this thought by stating, "yet wonder differs from other startle-induced emotions in terms of its specific motivational effect on perception, cognition and behavior" (Fuller, 2012). He includes this with the intent that wonder experiences alter one's perception, cognition, and behavior, thus diminishing their sense of self. Wonder experiences change the way an individual thinks and behaves, which alters their overall sense of identity.

Fuller's focus on the distinction between positive and negative emotions complements his argument that wonder experiences contain beauty. Fuller (2012) attempts to explain wonder by suggesting that wonder experiences "make possible the quiet contemplation of a grander scheme of life that strikes us as responsible for life's beauty, order, and vitality" (Fuller, 2012). Fuller proposes that wonder is responsible for life's beauty, order, and vitality, and our experiences with wonder open our lives up to these characteristics. Wonder experiences allow us to see the beauty of everything, which allows us to look for beauty in our lives. According to Fuller, wonder prompts a spiritual stance which makes us want to connect to the source of beauty and truth (Fuller, 2012). Throughout the discussion of beauty, Fuller describes the relationship between beauty and truth, which allows wonder experiences to be enjoyable. Although wonder experiences are positive, they can be derived from negative experiences, as well.

In order to explore how negative anxiety experiences could be a source of wonder today, I used the method of sociological introspection. I contemplated the emotions and feelings I had when journaling about my anxiety experiences. I journaled consistently for two weeks and then continued to check in with my progress once every couple of weeks after the initial period. I analyzed these journal entries, reflecting on the emotional experiences I was going through during this time. These journal entries

will be used and analyzed in this paper. In my journal entries, I was focused on my anxiety being presented in two ways: picking the skin around my nails, and picking at my scalp. By considering specific implications of my own anxiety, it allowed me to pay close attention to the negative physical effects anxiety was having on my body. By first allowing myself to free-write, I can let all of my initial thoughts and feelings be heard without judgment.

Although Fuller (2012) is right, that wonder is typically found in beautiful experiences, I think that going through something that is bad, but powering through that experience to have it result in a good outcome can also be a source of wonder. Initially, I started journaling about my anxiety experiences because I have had a lot of self-esteem issues due to the picked skin around my nails and my bloody scalp. I was worried about how other people might perceive me based on my picked skin, which were often covered in blood. When I feel anxious, I feel out of control. I start to spiral, hyperventilating so it feels as if I am suffocating myself. My throat starts to tighten, my breathing begins to waver, I suddenly feel faint and lightheaded, all because of a test, an assignment due in a week, or even something as little as the socks on my feet. This is why having such debilitating anxiety, while maintaining a highly functional life, is so aggravating. I internalize all of the anxious thoughts I have, until they start to tumble out of my head uncontrollably, like a ball rolling downhill, all while everyone believes I have everything together. I started picking at the skin around my nails and at my scalp in order to feel in control over a situation where I felt out of control. Oftentimes, I don't realize I am picking until after my anxiety has subsided. This topic is one that is still sensitive to me, even though I have discussed it many times. In one of my first entries, I note: "I started picking my pinky finger because I was anxious and was not able to take my hands away from myself quick enough." Feeling like I have to take my hands away from myself makes me feel out of control and weak. The overwhelming temptation to pick, even when I know it is not a healthy way to relieve stress, can be unbearable at times. Journaling was especially difficult for me on days where I took a step backward: "During this process, I really regret the picking that I have done because my scalp hurts most of the time, and it is hard to resist the urge of itching." I was met with regret and disappointment when I would pick the skin around my nails or scalp knowing that I was keeping track of my progress.

Although the experience of journaling was defeating at times, I am able to see the good that came out of it, as well. Towards the end of the two weeks, I felt more confident in myself and the power I had over my picking. I mentioned,

Overall, I would say that doing this 'experiment' I learned that breaking a habit takes time, and to not beat myself up over the setbacks that I faced. I understand that in some circumstances, I am going to be stressed and anxious, and I have to learn a new behavior that helps me with that other than skin picking.

By the end of the two weeks, I was grateful that I had maintained my journaling practices, as having that expectation that I would be journaling my progress daily allowed me to be more aware of the harmful actions I was committing. By rereading my journal entries and analyzing them, I was moved to tears when I read my final sentences:

I was able to get my nails done over the weekend! This is something that is very meaningful and exciting to me because I only get my nails done when I don't have any spots where I picked at my nails. Which means I have no picks started and all of my skin around my nails has healed!

This was such a transformative process for me, and I can hear the excitement in the words I shared. To me, this proves that although I view my anxiety experiences as something that is negative, I am also able to experience wonder through the positive outcomes that I associate with them. Fuller (2012) suggests that wonder experiences are always beautiful and unexpected, but by analyzing my negative anxiety experiences, I can see how something difficult can also emit wonder. Wonder is more than a beautiful, breathtaking experience. I experience wonder through the knowledge that I can make it out of some of the worst days I face, and because I know I have completely accepted myself for all I am, bloody fingers and scalp included.

These findings are generalizable to the public due to the experiences that I described are relatable. Although many people may not pick at the skin around their fingers, most, if not all people experience anxiety at some point. I think that this topic can be generalized to the public because it shows that anxiety experiences can also be transformed into wonder experiences. Wonder experiences are normally described as something beautiful, out-of-body experiences that bring a sense of joy but through my experiences, I think that wonder experiences can also be derived from the "bad." Believing that my anxiety experiences bring me wonder helps me to view my anxiety not as something that is negative and scary, but something that proves my strength and power. This sociological introspection can be improved by using documentary evidence to see if others have similar experiences as myself. I would look up people's experiences of having anxiety, and how they view overcoming that anxious behavior, and see if they experience wonder coming out of the "bad" situation. I would use Fuller's (2012) definition of wonder for this exercise, something that is joyful and beautiful because that is how I see the wonder experiences described above.

Fuller (2012) rightly describes wonder as a beautiful, transformative, unexpected, and inexplicable experience. He views wonder from a positive perspective, focusing only on the positive emotions that are typically associated with wonder experiences. I, however, add to his definition of wonder by proposing, and demonstrating, how wonder experiences can be derived from negative emotions. By viewing my anxiety with the same positive perspective as Fuller views wonder, I am able to experience wonder extensively.

## References

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