

## The Happiness Advantage Research at Salem Health

### Public Media Version

*“When we connect ourselves with the pleasure of the means, as opposed to focusing only on the ends, we adopt a mindset which is more conducive not only to our enjoyment in life but also results in greater achievement. Allowing ourselves to engage in activities we enjoy enhances our performance at work. If we consider taking part in a family dinner, or Sudoku, or a phone call with a friend as a waste of time, we will impede ourselves from reaping the full benefits of these activities. But if we conceive of such free time as a chance to learn and practice new things, to recharge our batteries, and connect with others, we will be able to leverage the power of that rest time and return stronger than before.”*

*Summary from Shawn Achor (audio reading) – author of The Happiness Advantage*

### **Why Should Health care Workers Care About Happiness?**

Health care workers (HCWs) have struggled with compassion fatigue and burnout for decades. When their own health or well-being becomes compromised, a dilemma appears. COVID-19 brought this conflict to the forefront of medical practices. Imagine a world where caring for our caregivers enhance care to patients – how might health care change for all?

Our caregivers, those on the frontlines of healing, have long battled “work-life balance”; when pouring energy into the well-being of others, a line emerges...compassion fatigue and burnout creep in due to relentless exposure to trauma, understaffing, and challenging systems. COVID19 laid bare the toll: emotional exhaustion, a shift from empathy to sympathy, and an exodus of caregivers; with younger professionals hit the hardest, rates of burnout reached 55%. Our systems suffer as our caregivers feel depleted.

The good news is that, in contrast to these alarming figures, those HCWs who practiced some level of self-care showed greater emotional recovery and overall resilience. Self-care, an elusive term in the lives of HCWs, becomes an art form; something practiced with rigor, creating revelation in emotional discovery, recovery and for some, emotional thriving.

### **The Growing Science of Happiness**

Positive psychology and neuroscience have made significant strides in recent years, particularly in health care. Research shows that the expression of positive emotions and related behaviors are capable of boosting resilience and coping skills for any human. Evidence demonstrates the benefits of daily practice with small, consistent behaviors (such as gratitude, listing "three good things," self-compassion) throughout the day. Some offer longer format sessions like resilience classes or mindfulness training. Overall, studies in positive psychology unveiled the intrinsic potential within individuals to achieve success and well-being through awareness of the positive emotions that reside in our hearts and minds. When harnessed:

- Positive emotions augment resilience and elucidate healthy coping from our external environment.
- Cultural positivity insulates entire organizations, and for health care specifically, a positive culture can counter the pressures of understaffing and vicarious trauma in the workplace.

In summary, the simplest tactics result in positive personal and organizational transformation.

## ***From Backstory to Innovation***

The American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) has designated Salem Health as Magnet since 2010. Magnet is the highest credential a health care organization can earn for nursing excellence, quality patient care, and positive outcomes. Nancy Dunn, Clinical Practice Advisor, and Sara Nash, Infection Preventionist, both of Salem Health Hospitals and Clinics, attended the annual ANCC conference in 2018 and learned about "The Happiness Advantage" (*THA*) by Shawn Achor. Nancy and Sara attended a session about a nursing unit that improved patient satisfaction scores while the nurses read *THA* and practicing related behaviors. Inspired by this potential, Nancy and Sara's decided to implement the book club and 21-day challenge to measure this intervention's direct impact on caregivers, assuming their improved happiness then ripples out to the patients they serve.

In June 2019, Nancy and Sara formed a group to add structure and measurement to the book club concept. They tracked subjective happiness before and after a 21-day challenge, including daily journaling on behaviors known to increase happiness (i.e., gratitude, meditation, exercise). Results demonstrated statistically significant improvements in happiness. The team then led two other groups, one for frontline nurses in the medical surgical oncology unit and another for clinical leaders. They both resulted in similar happiness improvements.

## ***Our Research: A New Approach***

During the pandemic, Salem Health sought a convenient and easy-to-complete intervention that would not overburden HCWs already overextended with work-life balance. Researchers designed a systematic investigation to scientifically evaluate this innovative approach that uses advances in positive psychology and neuroscience. We hypothesized that this intervention that combines self-directed learning (knowledge gained from reading *THA*) with practicing and journaling evidence-based behaviors (experiential learning) would improve HCW subjective happiness as measured by a validate tool. The overall aim was to advance existing knowledge and fill an important gap in scientific knowledge. If results were favorable, researchers hoped to spread the intervention to health care organizations, as well as other organizations and the public at large.

## ***Happiness Advantage Research Questions***

In March 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nancy recruited Sara, as well as Paul Howard, System Librarian, and Frieda Ryan Anzur, Oncology unit Assistant Nurse Manager, as co-investigators to help launch the research study and produce empirical data. The team then invited Elizabeth Whitney Loa, Data Analyst, Margo Halm, Nurse Scientist, and Jeff Gau, Statistician, to join their research team.

Researchers explored three powerful questions:

1. Do HCWs who participate in the positive psychology intervention become happier than those who do not?
2. Does practicing happiness-related behaviors and feeling confident in one's ability to change their level of happiness affect the results?
3. Will the happiness gain last over time (measured at 6- and 18-month follow-up assessments)?

Arising in the early 2000s, the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) became a renowned and reliable tool within the field of positive psychology, especially in health care. Dunn et al. (2020) used the SHS, which is four

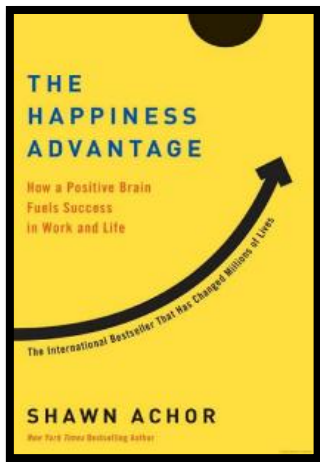
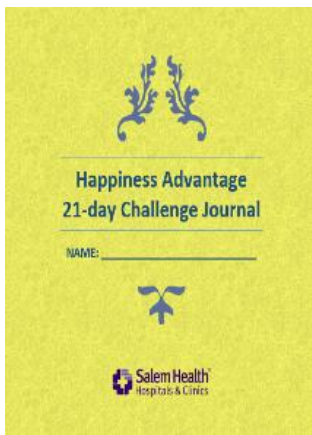
questions to assess an individual's overall happiness on a 7-point scale. The SHS relies on self-report of an individual's overall level of happiness. The questions include:

1. In general, I consider myself: 1-7 scale ranges from not a very happy person to a very happy person.
2. Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself: 1-7 scale ranges from less happy to happier.
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you? 1-7 scale ranges from not at all to a great deal.
4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you? 1-7 scale ranges from not at all to a great deal.

### Study Design

Investigators designed the study as a randomized control trial, the gold standard for research, to evaluate the effects of an intervention such as positive psychology. Each participant received a 50/50 chance of receiving the intervention or being a participant in the control group; both groups received the SHS.

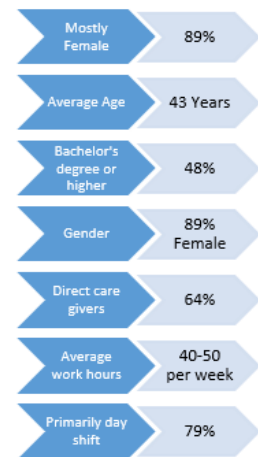
### Research Intervention: Knowledge and Action in Sequential Order

Knowledge	Action or Experiential Learning
<p>1. Investigators selected the first activity, reading of <i>THA</i> by Shawn Achor, because Shawn summarizes positive psychology and neuroscience evidence in an easy-to-read format with examples to make concepts actionable in a reasonable read time. Shawn’s book also reinforces seven basic principles that inspire the reader to activate a behavior change known to improve happiness. Investigators decided this book could appeal to a broad spectrum of disciplines and education levels which represented the desired HCWs they intended to recruit.</p> 	<p>2. The second activity involved a journaling exercise for twenty-one consecutive days. Investigators chose the following evidence-based behaviors known to improve happiness for the 21-day challenge: 7-8 hours of sleep, gratitude, meditation, exercise, nutritious meals, listing “three good things,” connecting with loved ones, and random acts of kindness. Studies show that these behaviors are more accessible and that other researchers use these interventions in positive psychology studies.</p> 

**Who were the Study Participants?**

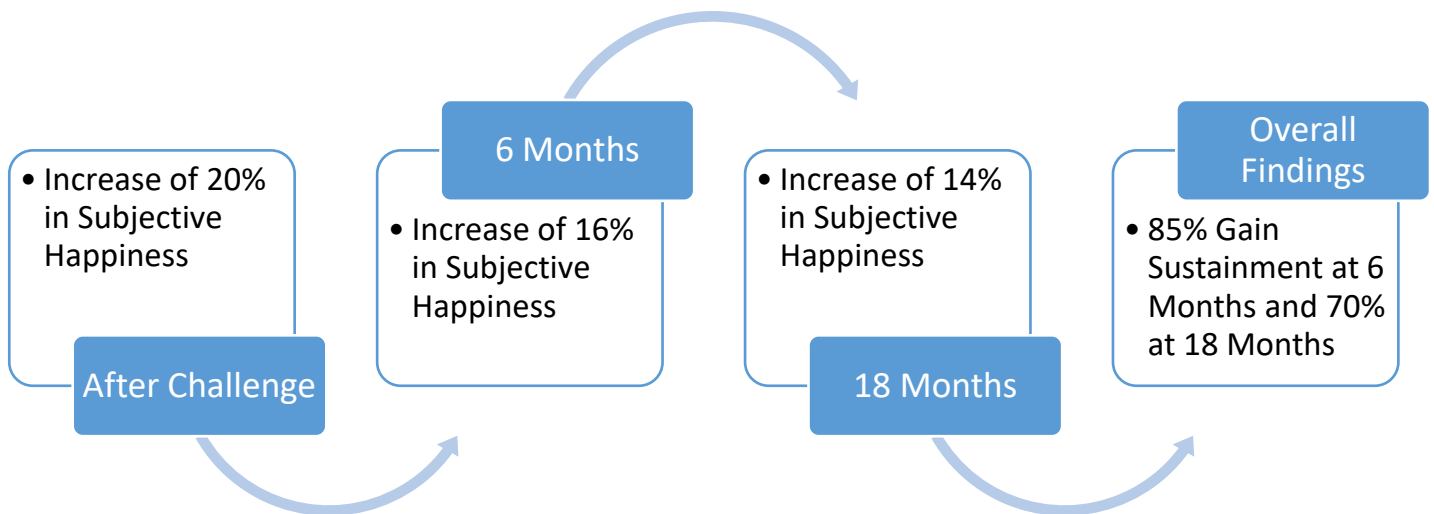
A total of 183 HCWs volunteered to participate in the study. They were randomized into the intervention group (94 participants) and control group (89 participants). All participants were quite confident in their ability to become happier (averaging 5.6-5.7 on a 7-point scale), suggesting they were open to improving their well-being.

In research, control participants are often placed on a waitlist to receive the intervention once the study is completed. In our study, once the control group participants completed their final SHS and behavior change data in the research study, 20 asked to do the intervention and were placed in a Case Study group.



**Key Findings**

Compared to baseline, results showed a significant increase in subjective happiness and sustainment in the intervention group.



The control group scores declined by a small percentage yet were not statistically significant. The 20 Case Study participants also generated results comparable to the intervention group.

**Behavior Change for both Research Groups**

Before the challenge, most participants frequently practiced connecting with loved ones, expressing gratitude, and exercising. At six months, the intervention group significantly improved their nutrition and regularly listed

“three good things” each day. The control group demonstrated positive shifts, including increased gratitude, random acts of kindness, and expressing “three good things.”

Satisfaction with the intervention was high (average score was 4.56 out of 5), with 96% of comments being positive. Participants openly shared their experiences with study investigators and peers.

- A physician and his brother completed the intervention together, strengthening their relationship. The physician stated, “my brother was my accountability partner and my relationship with my teenage son improved dramatically.”
- Several nurses continued to express gratitude daily, even after completing the study, helping them focus on the positive during the pandemic.
- One participant created a family tradition, “we now share three good things at dinner, leading to more positive conversations.”
- A control group participant who then entered the case study group stated, “I used Shawn Achor's principle of the Zorro Circle to break down both professional and personal problems into smaller, manageable steps.”
- Participants discovered helpful apps and podcasts to support their continued practice of happiness-boosting behaviors.
- One participant used Shawn’s first principle “the happiness advantage,” which argues that happiness is not just a result of success. It is a precursor to it. When we are positive, our brains are more engaged, creative, motivated, and resilient, leading to better performance in all areas of life. By cultivating happiness, we unlock our potential for greater achievement and overall well-being. The participant stated, “I stopped taking antidepressants and looked into the mirror and asked, how will you make yourself happier today?”
- Another participant used Shawn’s 20-second rule to start a new positive habit - and eliminate a negative habit - by simply replacing a candy bowl with fresh fruit on his kitchen counter.
- Two participants disclosed how Shawn’s principle of the “fulcrum and the lever” (how we respond to setbacks) allowed them to focus on the teamwork and innovative new processes staff developed to counter the negative consequences of the pandemic.
- The most popular commentary was about Shawn’s principle of “social investment.” HCWs reported using Zoom on iPads gave patients an ability to see their family and friends while hospitalized during the pandemic period when hospital restricted visitors, resulting in happier patients. This in turn led to nurses also feeling deep positive emotions witnessing this, especially for the patients who were dying.
- 

Within the intervention group, satisfaction with the research intervention was high (mean 4.56; range 1-5). Participants openly disclosed their experience from being in the study, both with study investigators and their peers. This reinforces Shawn’s advocacy for social connections to enhance well-being and happiness. Strong social ties contribute significantly to mental health, increased productivity, and overall life satisfaction. Achor emphasizes that fostering relationships can lead to a more positive mindset and improved resilience, arguing that social interactions are vital for personal and professional success.

### ***What Does it all Mean?***

The findings demonstrate the value of reading *THA* and the importance of experiential learning for 21 consecutive days. Both done sequentially led to a 16% increase in subjective happiness.

Researchers recommend that future research could assess the degree of behavior change more precisely to better understand the intervention's long-term impact. Furthermore, additional research with similar or even stronger results could lead to greater translation of this evidence-based practice in health care settings.

### ***Conclusion and Implications for Health care Workers***

This study demonstrated the value of 1) Reading “The Happiness Advantage” by Shawn Achor, and 2) doing a 21-consecutive day challenge to start or improve behaviors known to boost happiness. to potentially decrease burnout and improve emotional recovery of HCWs. For health care organizations, strategies that focus on staff wellbeing are crucial to retain caregivers in their respective professions. A recent survey showed that 23% of HCWs are expected to leave their jobs in the immediate future. Additionally, a shortage of nine million nurses is projected internationally by 2030. The health care environment must address deficiencies in the status quo and provide HCWs with the tools and resources to improve their happiness and overall emotional recovery. Reading *THA* and participating in the 21-day challenge is one potential method to accomplish this.

### ***A Gift from Magnet to Reach a Wider Health care Audience***

In late February 2023, the Magnet Conference Planning Committee accepted Nancy and Sara’s research abstract and invited them to present their work at the prestigious 2023 Magnet conference; because of the remarkable impact on participants at Salem Health, they accepted without reticence. Coincidentally, the committee invited Shawn Achor to be the opening keynote speaker for the conference, with over 13,000 attendees. Following these events, more than 20 hospitals and health care organizations contacted Nancy and Sara to explore implementing Salem Health’s study intervention or replicating the research.

### ***A Gift from the Journal of Nursing Administration to Disseminate Research Worldwide***

The research team published their findings in the *Journal of Nursing Administration (JONA)*, in January 2025. As a result, conference organizers for the 8th Annual International Nursing Science and Practice Conference invited Nancy to do an oral presentation in April 2025. Since then, Nancy has received four additional invitations to present at international conferences.

### ***Spread of The Happiness Advantage to North Salem High School Seniors***

Heather Rayhorn, an English teacher at North Salem High School in Salem, Oregon, invited Nancy to implement *THA* interventions for her seniors in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Personal and Professional Skills (PPS) program. IB PPS aims to develop transferable intrapersonal (self-management) and interpersonal (communication, ethics, intercultural understanding) skills to prepare students for higher education, employment, and global citizenship. The program was extraordinarily successful starting in 2023 and again in 2024, so Heather will now offer it to two classes in 2025. Student responses proved nothing short of revelatory:

- “This assignment was one of the best we have done throughout IB PPS. One principle in the book that had an influence was social investment. I often spend all my extra time working to save up for college, but this book allowed me to learn it is okay to set certain things aside to create happiness within yourself.”

- “Combining the book lessons for keeping a positive mindset will help in dealing with college life and the continuing future. Especially for the big step for going to college, I will practice the Zorro circle lesson and the Tetris mode to help me.”
- “The 21-day challenge is a new activity that I haven't tried before, but after having a chance to read *THA* by Shawn Achor, this challenge helped me to make connections related to the book.”
- “After reading the book, my mind shifted, and I began to appreciate everything more. At first, it started with appreciating the weather, but after two weeks, I felt like it was helping me flashback to my days and making me feel more appreciative of people in my life.”

### ***Implications for Everyone Regardless of Occupation or Work and Home Environments***

When asked about her biggest “ah-ha” moment, Nancy said “everyone benefits from doing this self-improvement work, not just HCWs. You can retrain your brain to feel happier. First, understand that the brain is malleable and can develop new predominant neural pathways for a new mindset. Next, do something new—something you *like* to do -- 21 days in a row, and you end up with a new habit. It’s contagious!”



The combination of knowledge about how to retrain the brain to see the world through a positive lens coupled with behavior changes that appeal to one’s heart and emotions is applicable to anyone. Shawn’s formula challenges the traditional view that working harder leads to success which then results in happiness. Instead, he proposes that by prioritizing and actively working on our happiness, we unlock our potential for greater achievement in all areas of our lives. A positive mindset boosts brain function, making us more productive, resilient, and innovative, which then leads to better outcomes and a greater sense of accomplishment. Happiness, then, is a critical element to the sustainability of productive, healthy workers in any field. Researchers advocate for any employer to offer this intervention as a crucial strategy to retain resilient and productive workers in these stressful times.

### **Reference Available upon Request**

**Principal Investigator:** Nancy Dunn, MS, RN, Clinical Practice Advisor, Salem Health

#### **Co-Investigators:**

- Sara Nash, MSN, RN, , NE-BC, CIC Infection Preventionist, Salem Health
- Paul Howard, PhD, MLIS, Community Health Education Center (CHEC) Librarian, Salem Health
- Frieda Ryan Anzur, BSN, RN, OCN, CHPN, Assistant Nurse Manager, Medical Surgical Oncology, Salem Health

#### **Additional authors:**

- Margo Halm, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, Nurse Scientist, Salem Health
- Elizabeth Whitney Lora, BA, Data Analyst, Salem Health
- Jeff Gau, MS, Statistician, Gau Consulting

Hyperlink to JONA article:

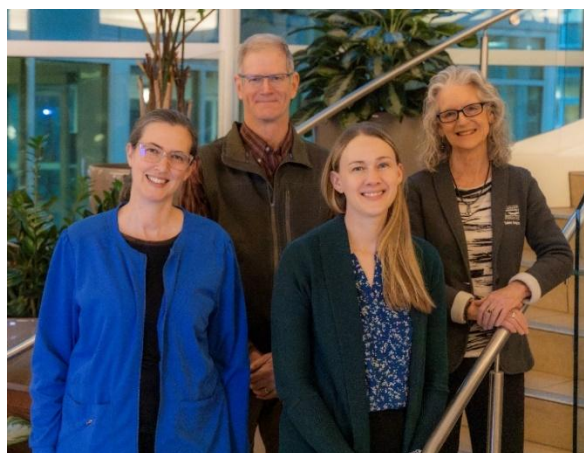
[https://journals.lww.com/jonajournal/abstract/2025/01000/exploring\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_a\\_targeted\\_positive.8.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/jonajournal/abstract/2025/01000/exploring_the_impact_of_a_targeted_positive.8.aspx)



Sara and Nancy delivering The Happiness Advantage research study at the 2023 Magnet Conference



Nancy, Shawn and Sara at the 2023 Magnet Conference



Frieda Ryan Anzur, Paul Howard, Sara Nash and Nancy Dunn, The Happiness Advantage Research Investigators. Photo taken in January 2025 after the JONA article was published.



Sara Nash, Nancy Dunn, Shawn Achor and Paul Howard. The investigators gave Shawn a copy of JONA, which published the research manuscript in their January 2025 issue. Photo taken in May 2025 at the Elsinore Theatre in Salem, Oregon, just prior to Shawn’s Happiness Advantage presentation to the community.