

A Formula for Happiness and Low Depression Discovered: Happiness Quotient (HQ) Factors Predicted Happiness with 75% Accuracy

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In a world where so many people are facing difficult circumstances, what can they do to overcome negative emotions and find happiness? For decades psychologists have been identifying key factors associated with happiness and with depression. However, researchers have rarely looked for a comprehensive formula that can predict happiness and depression accurately. In my study of 3,446 people I discovered a formula I call our Happiness Quotient (HQ) that could predict people's happiness with 75% accuracy.¹ This degree of predictive power is unusually high for this type of research. The HQ formula is based upon three types of internal personal factors--our ultimate values, core beliefs and fears, and life skills. Since learning can change all these factors, people can improve their HQ and their chances of being happy. This research also supports the idea that a person with internal strength can overcome difficult circumstances to be happy.

The *Success and Happiness Questionnaire* (SHAQ) is a unique questionnaire that asks questions about beliefs, skills, and habits that are much more specific than other questionnaires. It is easy for users to relate the questions to their own thoughts and behaviors in ways most questionnaires don't. The results of our research show that these specific factors add up to be powerful correlates of happiness and other life success outcomes. The good news for users is that they can use these results to get clear feedback about which beliefs, skills, and habits they need to modify to improve their happiness and life success.

What are these HQ factors? The first HQ factor type is what we value most in our lives. My research showed that "time-honored, internally centered values are among the most important contributors to happiness. The more people valued mental or internally centered values such as happiness and health for self and others; loving all people unconditionally; contributing to the world; integrity; self-development; seeking truth and knowledge; mental challenge; living a balanced life; and loving God (or a Higher Power), the happier and more successful they tended to be." Other values such as social and family values and accomplishment were also positive factors. The second factor type is best described as our core beliefs and fears. The core belief scales most strongly associated with happiness and low depression were Positive World View (optimism), Self-Worth, Internal Control, and Low Greatest Fears. In other words, having core positive beliefs about the world, other people, and oneself; believing in the unconditional value of everyone; and having beliefs that support internal control over one's life (as opposed to believing you are controlled by fate, your environment, or other people) were powerful factors associated with happiness and low depression. People's greatest fears are often the flip side of their top values and beliefs, and having low fears of death, poverty, rejection, failure, and illness are good predictors of happiness.

The third factor type, life skill areas, was also highly associated with people's happiness. The first area, self-oriented skills, included skills like life planning, time-management, emotional coping, self-motivation, and learning. Interpersonal skills, especially skills like intimacy, conflict resolution, collaborative, and assertive skills were associated with interpersonal success, happiness, and low depression. Self-confidence in one's skills in key life areas was also a strong predictor of happiness and low depression.

What was actually being measured in this study? Questions on the Overall Happiness Scale asked users to rate "Overall happiness during the past year" and happiness in the different life areas such as career, self, romantic relationship, family, friendships, spiritual life, and recreation. The Depression Scale questions were based upon the official psychiatric definition of clinical depression. The HQ formula also successfully predicted how much medication and treatment people had used for depression. In addition to its success predicting happiness and depression, the HQ formula also was a good predictor of people's overall anxiety, anger and aggression, relationship success, health, and even their income.

I designed SHAQ and this study to test ideas in my book, *You Can Choose To Be Happy: "Rise Above" Anxiety, Anger, and Depression*. The revised book provides a detailed examination of these HQ factors, describes how the reader can self-develop them, and provides a layman's summary of the SHAQ research results. It is based upon 30+ years of personal and clinical experience seeing people overcome negative emotions by modifying these HQ factors. For example people can usually overcome their worst fears by exploring them and developing plans for internally or externally coping with them. For outcomes beyond our control such as death, we may need to develop a philosophical view that helps us overcome our fears.

Visit my website, www.csulb.edu/~tstevens, to take SHAQ or get copies of my book, research, and self-help materials on self-esteem, positive thinking, cognitive therapy, emotions, motivation, assertiveness, interpersonal skills, dating and relationships, academic success, career planning, and many other topics (all free).

Overview of SHAQ HQ Research Data Results

SHAQ has 11 main scales and many subscales consisting of specific beliefs, skills, and habits reflect key cognitive areas influencing happiness and success. Our research shows that SHAQ's scales are reliable and have moderate to high correlations with almost all of the *outcome scales* which are: Overall Happiness, Depression, Anxiety, Anger, Health, Relationship Outcomes, Highest Personal Income, Academic Achievement, and other factors which proved to be reliable and face valid.

SHAQ's main scales/subscales had surprisingly high correlations with the **emotional outcomes**: with Overall Happiness, $R = .87$ (effect-size= .75); with Low Depression, $R = .73$; with Low Anxiety, $R = .68$; with Low Anger-Aggression, $R = .70$. For the subjects who completed all 70 subscales—including the academic scales, $R = .90$, EffectSize = .81 for Overall Happiness. These are very high correlations for this type of research with a large subject group.

In addition, the 56 SHAQ subscales correlated with the **Relationship Outcomes scale**, $R = .70$; with the **Health Outcomes scale**, $R = .82$; with **Highest Income**, $R = .49$; and with **Educational Attainment**, $R = .46$.

Behavioral measures used as outcomes also yielded good results. For example, for a Major Depression Checklist, $R = .60$; Amount of Therapy for Depression, $R = .45$; and Amount of Medication for Depression, $R = .41$.

A strong Higher Self Cognitive System, Positive World View, Self-Worth, and Internal Control are important factors related to happiness and other positive outcomes. These four factors are the titles of four SHAQ main scales. These factors are intimately related to choice of top values; but also need supportive cognitive belief-skill systems. For example, a person who makes happiness for self and others an ultimate concern will love himself/herself and others (self-worth), will tend to develop a more positive and optimistic world view, and will tend to focus on those goals despite outside pressure to do otherwise (internal control). Finally, this ultimate concern will be the center of developing a strong—Higher Self executive cognitive system. Over time with persistent, active learning and self-development, those cognitive centers will become stronger. The SHAQ research shows strong correlations between these four scales and happiness and low negative emotions. They also correlate significantly with health, good relationships, income, and academic success.

Overcoming generalized fears such as fears of poverty, failure, rejection, illness, and death. These fears are often the flip-side of one's top values and goals. For example people whose most important value is *family* may have the greatest fear of losing their family. Since our top values have both emotional and behavioral control over us, it is important to choose them carefully. *Internally-centered values* such as happiness, love, integrity, and learning usually provide us with more control over their satisfaction. *Externally-centered values* such as career success, being loved, or wealth are less controllable, and our lack of control over them increases uncertainty and anxiety. For example, we can control our loving someone and being kind to them, but we cannot control their loving us back or treating us well. In this sense, it is often better to give than receive. The SHAQ results show sizable correlations between these low fears and emotions (happiness and low negative emotions).

Life Skills: self-management, emotional coping, learning, and interpersonal skills are very important. SHAQ research results strongly support the importance of these key life skill areas. SHAQ results showed greater happiness, lower negative emotions, better relationships, and better health associated with each of the following skill areas. The areas discussed in detail were:

Self-management Skills: Values clarification and change, goal-setting, and time-management

Emotional coping skills: Positive thinking, communication, action, and adjusting goals-expectations are some important types of positive coping skills examined.

Learning skills: Learning skills were not only associated with academic success, being happier, and having lower negative emotions but were among the best predictors of personal income. Many business leaders say continued learning and self-development were key factors in their success.

Interpersonal skills: Key assertive intimacy and conflict-resolution are skills that our data show are important in all kinds of relationships—especially intimate ones.

Personal competency and self-confidence are important. The SHAQ research shows strong correlations between people's estimates of their competencies and outcome measures. This relationship was true for almost every type of

¹ $R=0.87$ (Regression coefficient = correlation between multiple weighted variables predicting one outcome); R^2 (Effect-size)= 0.75 [Note: Understanding the meaning of the Regression Coefficient (R) and Effect-size (R^2): Example: The SHAQ-based HQ regression equation is an equation using weighted scale scores (eg. Internal Control, Coping Skills, etc) to predict outcomes (eg. Overall Happiness, Treatment for Depression, Relationship Success, Income, Academic Achievement, etc.). The Effect size is measured by squaring R (eg. $0.87 \times 0.87 = 0.75$). R and R^2 both can range from 0 to 1.00. Zero means no relationship between two variables and 1.00 means a perfect relationship. For example the correlation between flipping a switch and the light going on would be near 1.00, because when the switch is up, the light is on and when down, off.]

competency measured. Self-confidence/competence is important for higher happiness and lower negative emotions. Life skills can affect emotions (1) via increased *knowledge and confidence*, (2) via *goal success*, and (3) via creating more *positive living environments* (including work and social environments). Strengthen the *university in your head* (all areas of knowledge). **The rich get richer—good correlates with good.** The overwhelming majority of SHAQ scales and subscales had significant positive correlations with each other. If a person has one functional factor, it spreads its influence to other factors (possibly by generalization and reinforcement).

Happiness and other emotions are determined directly by complex internal cognitive dynamics—the Harmonious Functioning Model. The *Harmonious Functioning (HF) Model* is my model of how complex cognitive and emotional factors work together. The HF model proposes that the goal of the cognitive system is to maximize learning, development, internal harmony, efficiency, and control. The brain uses emotions as feedback and motivators to obtain these goals. If the cognitive system is processing harmoniously, then it produces positive emotions—if not, negative emotions.

Cognitive subsystems constantly attempt to understand inputs by matching expectancies to them. If there is *too much mismatch*, then the cognitive subsystem searches for other understandings to match against the inputs. The cognitive system's search for answers creates stimulation.

Too much confusion/stimulation produces overarousal emotions such as **anxiety**.

On the other hand, if inputs contain **too little new information**, then the cognitive system is *understimulated* and produces underarousal emotions such as **apathy, boredom, or depression**. These dynamics are complex. For example a person may be overwhelmed (producing anxiety), then ignore or avoid the situation. The result might be understimulation, apathy, and/or depression.

In this model the emotions are vital functional aspects of the cognitive system. Anxiety provides us with valuable feedback that our understandings, expectations, goals, or plans are confused or invalid and not able to adequately cope with the input situation. *We need to find new ways to cope with the input.* For example we may have inadequate plans to cope with an unexpected or difficult situation. Developing a good plan can immediately reduce anxiety. A lost and anxious driver who gets a good map can suddenly feel much better. On the other hand, boredom, apathy, or depression tells us we are underchallenged. The underchallenge may be because we have too much routine and too little challenge. The underchallenge could be because we failed or even completed an important goal and are now *goalless*. Alternatively, we may have lost an important person, job, or other part of our life and feel empty.

Depression tells us we need to set new, optimally-challenging goals and/or create more optimally-challenging situations. Finding new interests, new people, new ways of thinking, or other new goals or situations can immediately reduce boredom, apathy, and depression. It may seem amazing how a depressed person can watch a good movie, listen to beautiful music, take on a challenging task, or get into a good conversation; and suddenly their depression lifts during that activity. The depression is a wake-up call that we need to make changes. Anxiety or depression can be catalysts for major life turning points. Anxiety and depression can be very uncomfortable; but that is their value. They motivate us to change our cognitions and life so that we can be happy.

My data is consistent with the Harmonious Functioning Model. I have also shown how the HF model (1) integrates ideas from the field of learning with the field of motivation and emotions and (2) provides a simple way to think about both good learning strategies and powerful emotion-altering tactics. For example, in my book Chapter 7 describes cognitive learning strategies and Chapter 8 describes methods for adjusting your arousal and emotions. SHAQ data supports the effectiveness of these cognitive emotional control methods. Aristotle understood the close connection between our cognitive system and our emotions. About mental harmony, long ago he said,

Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation...

He who exercises his intellect and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state and most dear to the gods... so that in this way too the wise man will more than any other be happy.

Conclusion: How Can We Be Happy and Successful?

Religions have taught millions of people how to be happy. Philosophers, psychologists, books, self-help groups, and others have taught millions more. People can learn to be happier! Maslow (1954, 1962) led a movement focusing on positive human factors and self-actualization. American Psychological Association (APA) president Martin Seligman edited the classic *American Psychologist* Special Issue on happiness and positive psychology (2000) launching the new millennium in a positive direction. The resulting positive psychology research is partially incorporated in this edition.

The SHAQ data did not find any single earthshaking factor that creates happiness alone; instead, my data paints a comprehensive picture of the *multitude of cognitive factors involved*. A person scoring high on these factors--a high *Happiness Quotient (HQ)*--will have a high chance of being happy. The good news: if only one factor were involved, our happiness would be entirely tied to that factor. The more factors involved, the less we are affected if something goes wrong with one. Thus, the more strengths we have, the greater our chances for happiness--no matter what happens to us.

A higher HQ increases our ability to rise above negative emotions or to avoid them altogether. SHAQ data supports the conclusion that this robust multitude of cognitions are not only important for achieving a good emotional life, they are important for achieving health, good relationships, and academic and career success. Because of their specificity, most of these cognitions are *learnable* and *teachable* beliefs and skills, and not general, heritable traits. I have described many in detail in my book *You Can Choose To Be Happy: "Rise Above" Anxiety, Anger, and Depression* (with Research Results). You can complete SHAQ (free) on my website to test yourself.

These *controllable factors* are associated with happiness and success. The key factors are not money, status, or other external factors; they are what's inside—your values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and habits. Top values such as happiness for self and others, love, truth, knowledge, growth, health, beauty, integrity, achievement, and productivity are central. Developing them increase your chances for rising above difficulty to find happiness. These positive internal factors can also help you create or gravitate toward environments and people who will contribute to your happiness and success.

When I was 16, I made a decision to make happiness a top goal in my life and wrote my first "How to be Happy" guidelines. I am very grateful for a happy, blessed life, and I am convinced that almost anyone can develop the beliefs and skills suggested by my HQ research, and that they can be happier and help the others become a little happier.

This paper documents the research results of the SHAQ questionnaire; which was developed primarily from ideas in my book, *You Can Choose To Be Happy: "Rise Above" Anxiety, Anger, and Depression*. It assumes a cognitive systems model of human personality and behavior and emphasizes the importance of cognitions (values, beliefs, knowledge, thoughts, skills, etc.) for influencing both emotions and behavior. Happiness and success (personal, relationship, academic, career, etc.) are a function of cognitive, environmental/conditional, and hereditary/genetic factors. Of these three classes of factors controlling our happiness and success, we can currently exert ~~some~~ control primarily over two--cognitive and environmental. In the book I called these two internal and external routes to happiness. However, even our control over our environment stems ultimately from our cognitions that give us the knowledge, skills, and motivation to affect our environment (including our social environment).

The research results ~~clearly~~ support ~~SHAQ's~~ reliability, validity, and utility ~~of SHAQ~~. They also support ~~the~~ the-main ideas in the book and the idea-proposition that a host of key cognitions are the most important determinants of happiness and other emotions, and increase chances of success in other life areas. They also show how these positive happiness and success-producing factors tend to correlate with each other and ~~may probably~~ support the development of each other. The implication is that when people begin a self-development program, they can use SHAQ to get a profile of the factors ~~they~~ need to improve in order to increase their happiness (and decrease depression, anxiety, and anger) and increase life/ success. The results also suggests that starting almost anywhere can begin a positive change process that can improve many other factors.

Main References

A detailed report on all SHAQ results data for all SHAQ scales and descriptions of their meanings.

Stevens, Tom G. (2009). *Development of the success and happiness attributes questionnaire (SHAQ) to validate a cognitive model of happiness, depression, and anxiety*. Monograph:Published on website, <http://www.csulb.edu/~tstevens>. AND www.academia.edu/5886104/Development_of_the_Success_and_Happiness_Attributes_Questionnaire_SHAQ_To_Validate_a_Cognitive_Model_of_Happiness_Depression_and_Anxiety

The book that describes the key beliefs and skill in the HQ formula in detail with suggestions how to learn them

Stevens, Tom G. (2010). *You Can Choose To Be Happy: "Rise Above" Anxiety, Anger, and Depression (with Research Results)*, Seal Beach, CA: Wheeler-Sutton, 324 pages; www.csulb.edu/~tstevens (free) Also see Amazon.com and books.google.com (free)

The administration manual including questions, answers, scoring, meaning, etc. for manually administering SHAQ.

Stevens, Tom G. (2003). *Success and Happiness Attributes Questionnaire (SHAQ) Administration and Scoring Manual*. <http://www.csulb.edu/~tstevens> AND www.academia.edu/38181379/Success_and_Happiness_Attributes_Questionnaire_SHAQ_Administration_and_Scoring_Manual

The computer administered, scored, and interpreted version of SHAQ. It includes suggestions for improvement It provides a saveable printout of all scales, answers, scores, and recommendations (SHAQ + is completely anonymous and free.)

To download the SHAQ PC app, go to: <https://home.csulb.edu/~tstevens/success/index.htm>