

An Exercise in Personal Exploration:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

by Bob Poston, CST

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a valuable assessment tool that is used in many different professions, particularly those in the fields of education and health care. The ideas of needs are addressed in order, as the body resolves the most basic needs for survival before moving on to more complex needs.

Many educational programs in the health care field teach Maslow's hierarchy in order to address the needs of patients and where they are in their life from a psychological perspective, simply because it helps identify and address the needs of those particular patients.

The idea of using a hierarchy pyramid helps us to lay out the stages of need, starting with the base of the pyramid, which looks at physiological needs. As we work our way up the pyramid, the needs start to become more complex, and include safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and finally, at the very top, we have self-actualization. This article explores the theories of Abraham Maslow in detail, as well as addresses the controversies that have been questioned in his theory. This article will also evaluate the impact of these theories on human behavior and assess each of the components comprised within Maslow's Hierarchy Pyramid.

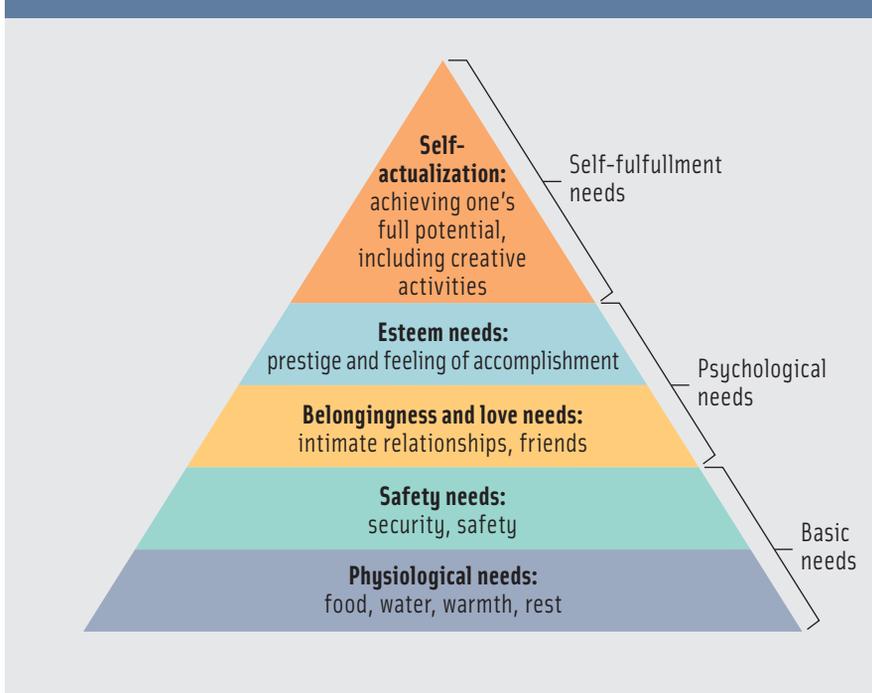
BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

Born on April 1, 1908, in Brooklyn, New York, Abraham Maslow was the first of seven children.¹ The son of under-educated Jewish immigrants, Maslow didn't have many friends as a young

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ▲ Identify the different levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
- ▲ Compare and contrast the differences between being needs and deficit needs
- ▲ Explain the process of self-actualization
- ▲ Examine how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs impacts patient care
- ▲ Consider the challenges to Maslow's theories and formulate a response

FIGURE 1: MASLOW'S HIERARCHY PYRAMID



food and play, they would in more cases choose the food. The same was true when it came to the monkeys' choice between water and food. The water would always be chosen as the priority over food.

As the observations continued, a pattern emerged. Maslow could see, on a physiological level, that if the monkeys didn't have food, but had water, the group was less aggressive than those that had the water taken away from them.¹ The same held true with safety needs. If all of the physiological needs were met, then the monkeys' behavior became more profound when it came to establishing social roles and dominance.

Maslow later transitioned this idea over to human behavior and was able to establish physiological needs over

child, but found his sense of self by reading books. He began his college journey by attending City College of New York, and later transferred to Cornell University, before going back to City College of New York. After realizing a keen interest in psychology, he moved to Wisconsin, where he studied at the University of Wisconsin. Throughout the 1930s, Maslow earned his BA, MA and PhD.¹ Later, he returned to New York, where he not only taught full time at Brooklyn College, but he also became interested in human sexuality.

Maslow served as chair of the Department of Psychology at Brandeis from 1951-61.¹ While there, he met a well-established researcher named Kurt Goldstein, who developed the idea of "self-actualization." This concept fascinated Maslow, and it was through this notion that he pursued the idea of humanistic psychology, which he ultimately valued more than his own research. Maslow died on June 8, 1970.¹

CREATING THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Abraham Maslow is well known for the creation of the hierarchy of needs. The way he came up with this idea was by studying and observing monkeys. During observation, he noticed that they displayed a very unusual pattern of behavior that addressed priorities based on individual needs. If, for example, the monkeys had a choice between

safety needs, safety needs over belongingness needs, belongingness needs over esteem needs, and esteem needs. The needs, in turn, form the first four components of the pyramid, and are addressed as deficit needs. Self-actualization, the fifth component, addresses the need of being, which defines one's own place in the universe.

When an individual does not have enough of something, he or she has a deficit, ultimately creating what Maslow has termed "deficit needs."¹ When individuals eat and drink, for example, the need for water and food is met, so there is no longer a motivating factor to obtain water or food, and the deficit need has temporarily been satisfied. Deficit needs comprise or make up the four lower components of Maslow's hierarchy pyramid.

On the other hand, Maslow also mentions the idea of "being needs." Being needs have nothing to do with deficit needs. Being needs are internal, and are at the very top of Maslow's hierarchy pyramid, which ties into self-actualization.² An example here might be drawing one's own conclusions of where and who he or she is spiritually. This internal concept is addressed as self-actualization.

The following sections of this article will address each level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in more detail in an effort to see how they apply to individuals, and how they can define who and where an individual is in his or her life.

PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS

With so many different capabilities, from the regulation of temperature and hormones to the processing of water, food and the elimination of waste, the living body is the most unique machine in the universe. Despite its relative fragility, the human body can live for many years. Every single detail is so integral, from how the body processes oxygen through millions and millions of tissue cells, to the thousands of miles of arteries that carry blood and nutrients to those tissues. With this being said, there is still the need to meet the very basic essentials of life: the body must take on oxygen, water and food. Before any further growth can take place, this very basic need has to be met. This is what Maslow addresses as a physiological need—the need for the body to work in unison to accomplish the task of basic survival.

Physiological needs are influenced generally through the cravings that we have. If a person is thirsty, he or she finds a drinking fountain. Similarly, if the individual is hungry, he or she will find food. If the body is being deprived of

oxygen, it will surely react. If there is a vitamin deficiency, the body has subtle ways of fulfilling that need.

One example of how the body regulates itself on a physiological level is by homeostasis. Homeostasis simply means to regulate. A part of the human brain, called the hypothalamus, plays an important role in keeping the body regulated by controlling the body's thermostat, which is controlled by the release of several hormones called gonadotropins.

If a female produces too much estrogen, the hypothalamus releases a hormone called luteinizing hormone that triggers ovulation, therefore acting like a shut-off switch for the amount of estrogen present. If the thyroid gland produces too much thyroxin, the hypothalamus produces a hormone to switch off the flow of the thyroxin. These are

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The basic principles of Maslow's hierarchy have been observed in primates.

just a few examples of homeostasis at work, however, there are many circulatory hormones that are needed to maintain normal bodily functions.

Another prime example is the release of the “fight or flight” hormones that are secreted by the adrenal medulla of the adrenal glands. If there is a need for the body to defend itself, these hormones will surge into action to prepare the body for fight or flight. These hormones, although they play an important role, are kept in compliance by regulatory mechanisms within the brain.³

Throughout life, the idea of physiological needs remains consistent. The need to maintain adequate physiological balance will always be essential, and may kick into action in very different ways at various different times, whether the individuals experiencing it are aware of it or not. For example, how would anyone ever get a good night's sleep if they had to literally think about their breathing pattern, heart rate or blood pressure on a conscious level? Sure some people may have to get up during the night to use the restroom or grab a glass of water, but remember that this is all part of how the body regulates itself.

The notion that physiological needs tie into other, more complex needs of the hierarchy is very relevant. Maslow

believed that once the physiological needs are met in sufficient detail, people move on to address these more complex needs. Safety and security make up the next platform of the pyramid.

SAFETY NEEDS

Much like physiological needs require maintenance throughout life, so does the need to feel secure. This need is more psychological. With that being said, safety needs may be different for each individual, depending on where he or she is in life. For a child, this need may manifest as the need

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for a safe family environment.⁴ There has to be security in the home, with warmth and love. When a family is dysfunctional, it makes it difficult for that child to move up to the next level of social needs because fear is often present.

For adults, this need may be economic in nature. If a person loses his or her job, for example, fear and anxiety will have an impact on that person's social life, and may cause him or her to regress.⁵ Additionally, adults are not immune to the need of safety. In some parts of the world, where there is chaos, people are stuck at this level of needing to feel safe. The goal of consistently meeting the need for safety is to have stability in one's life. It is the idea of being able to walk around the block at night without the worry of being mugged. It is the idea of feeling secure in the workplace. It is conclusive that fear hinders one's ability to move on to the more advanced platforms of Maslow's pyramid.

BELONGING NEEDS

Advancing up the hierarchy pyramid, the next level represents the need to belong on a social level. The social level generally becomes the priority only after the physiological and safety needs have been sufficiently met and maintained. A sense of belonging can be felt when an individual becomes more focused on the desire to build relationships with others. This includes the desire for a romantic partner, to have close friends, and maybe to get married and have children.¹

Again, this need will change depending on where an individual is in his or her life. For a young child, approval-seeking behaviors may become more commonplace. The child may engage in activities to get his or her parents' attention by exploring or asking lots of questions. In a sense, the child needs to feel an emotional or social connection with his or her parents. As the child evolves into a teenager, he or she will more than likely become more socially active in peer groups. Generally, whatever gets reinforced, supported, or accepted by these peer groups will often determine which type of group the adolescent will affiliate him or herself

with. This idea can be noticed at any point throughout an individual's life. As youths mature into adulthood, they tend to affiliate with those individuals or groups who accept them.

A sense or a need to belong, at any stage, is influenced by several factors. Some of these influences, for example, are socio-economic influences: the education level of parents and family,

the neighborhood in which the child grows up and the type of schools where they are educated, as well as the children who attend those schools. Whatever type of behavior is learned and accepted, based on these variables, is likely the behavior that will form a particular individual's character and self-esteem.

The level of belonging must be established because of its effect on one's self-esteem. If the level of belonging in the hierarchy model is low, or an individual is viewed negatively by peers in that group, he or she may develop social anxiety and may withdraw toward a level of people in which he or she fits in socially. If a child grows up in a neighborhood where there are street gangs, and attends schools in that neighborhood with the families of those street gangs, then the likelihood of the child to adapt and take on that form of character becomes more likely. According to Maslow, the reason for this behavioral pattern is likely due to the peer groups that the child grew up with.

This is not meant to imply that all children who grow up in this type of neighborhood will join a gang, simply that there is a higher likelihood of that outcome. On the other hand, if a child is brought up in a more affluent neighborhood, it is likely that the parents will also be more educated. In this scenario, it is more likely that the child will develop and adapt to the peer groups in which education is more of a priority. The influence in a child's upbringing starts

with a home and family that secures the previous levels of Maslow's hierarchy by meeting and maintaining the foundation levels of needs. Relieving any anxiety or fear will help put more emphasis on social development, and with this will come a healthier self-esteem.

ESTEEM NEEDS

Once the needs of physiology, safety and belonging have been met, the individual will now move on to the needs of their self-esteem. Self-esteem, like all the prior needs, must also be maintained. This is the highest platform in the category of deficit needs.¹ The process of growth, when addressing one's self-esteem, builds the bridge to one's awareness. Self-esteem begins to establish itself in life as early as age two. Maslow's hierarchy addresses two levels of self-esteem. One of those is a lower level and the other is a higher level.

The higher form of self-esteem that Maslow addresses is that of self-respect. This higher form of self-esteem requires less maintenance because through accomplishment, it becomes a permanent part of who the individual is. We can say that once a person has gained respect for himself or herself, it is much harder to lose that respect or to have it taken away. People on the higher end of self-esteem generally like who they are. The idea of confidence in ability, the mastery of something, or the competence that is established in what these people do, supports this higher form of self-esteem.

These forms of self-esteem should not be confused with an individual *having* high or low self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem often have a low opinion of themselves and their self-image. As a result, inferiority complexes are present in the individual. With this idea in mind, Maslow

contends that the majority of people's psychological problems are due to low self-esteem. The realism here is that if a person doesn't like himself or herself, or who he or she is or what he or she has accomplished, then that person will be more critical of himself or herself. Through that process, negative self talk is born, and can create a barrier to achieving personal success.

How does low self-esteem impact these lower and higher forms of self-esteem in general? If an individual has low self-esteem, the lower form of self-esteem affects the individual on a social level. The individual may, for example, constantly attempt to seek or validate feedback and acceptance on a social level from his or her peers. With regard to the higher form of self-esteem, in the individual with low self-

esteem may display a lack of respect for himself or herself and the expectations that they place upon themselves would be unrealistic, or perhaps in some cases these expectations would be placed by others rather than being placed by the individuals themselves.

It is amazing that all of the prior needs within Maslow's hierarchy, including physiological, safety, and even belongingness needs are frequently met, especially in modern society and developed countries. Imagine if more people just had a little respect for themselves in the grand scheme of things.



Maslow's hierarchy is a two-way street. A person can spend a lifetime traveling between the two extremes.

The lower form of self-esteem is directly related to an individual's ego, meaning that there is a strong need to be respected by others.⁴ Within this lower form, the individual still remains focused on acceptance by others. This lower form of self-esteem is met when an individual has established a level of status, recognition, fame, reputation and appreciation, just to name a few. These areas in a person's life take work to maintain. They may also require some reinforcement or validation of some kind in order for this lower form of self-esteem to be maintained.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Self-actualization is defined by Maslow as the single component of being within the hierarchy model. Being, in this sense, means not being a part of the deficit needs as they appear within the lower chain of the hierarchy.¹ This need is independent—there must be some accomplishment of all the other deficit needs, which are best defined as what we appear to be, according to the standards of society. Self-actualization is the internal dialogue that everyone establishes at some point in their lives. In order to do that, there must be some establishment or satisfaction of the prior needs. Once all of the previous needs have been met, an individual can direct his or her focus toward a true calling. Usually when a person is hungry, or they don't feel safe, or they feel unloved, the focal point leans towards resolving those issues, therefore disrupting the focus on self-actualizing. With self-actualization, being able to pinpoint how one truly feels about something is often a little more challenging

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to figure out, or it can be the determining factor of how well he or she is connected with his or her self and abilities.

People who are self-actualizers are focused on what matters most in defining who they are. Once self-respect is gained, the individual can take a more proactive approach to bettering themselves, as well as being able to remain focused on resolving any dilemmas that may arise regarding the deficit stages. Self-actualizers may be more generative in the sense that the focus is no longer as much about pleasing others as it is giving back or sharing this part of who they are.⁶ In other aspects, it can also appear to be spiritual. Looking at one's life as to who he or she is in the universe is a good example. Once a person is able to come to terms with who they are, and they are ultimately satisfied with that, then they have truly reached the point of being able to self-actualize.

With this level of intuition comes a sense of peace, which in turn serves as a motivator to focus on more advanced tasks in life, such as supporting the moral and ethical stan-

dards in life. There is a more in-depth focus on bettering oneself and expanding one's knowledge and talents. The real definition to self-actualizing is getting to know oneself, while being okay and unconditionally accepting of whatever it is that he or she discovers. The question every individual must face is, do you like and accept who you are? Once that question is answered, then self-respect is gained. Once an individual establishes that respect for his or herself, no one can take that away. In this context, Abraham Maslow is justified in establishing self-actualization in a category by itself that quantifies the need of *being* separately from the need of *deficit*.

THE CONTROVERSY

As we take a look at Abraham Maslow's hierarchy pyramid, there is some controversy as to how it relates directly to humanistic psychology. Is there enough evidence to support this hierarchy when it comes right down to how people develop emotionally? Maslow set forth with the notion that these stages along the course of development match up with how people experience psychological growth.

The primary contention is that anyone in society can regress back to, or value an alternative aspect of the hierarchy pyramid in a way that is not parallel with Maslow's model. For

example, some cultures may be more fixated on belonging over safety, or esteem over belonging.⁵ To answer these challenges, many experts believe that Abraham Maslow's hierarchy doesn't always follow in sequence with how it was intended. If the notion of self-esteem, for example, is thought to develop in children as early as two years of age, then why does Maslow address esteem needs so high up in the hierarchy pyramid? Humanistic psychology does challenge some of these notions, even though Maslow was a believer in humanistic psychology.

Another oft-challenged aspect of his work is that Maslow himself defined self-actualizers as people of great accomplishment, such as former presidents, dignitaries and great discoverers. With that being said, it is very difficult to place an emphasis on the concept of self-actualization. How significant is the concept of the self-actualizer? The only way that to answer that question is to say that all people are at different stages of development, and all of them are self-actualizers in some form.

OVERVIEW

When looking at Maslow's hierarchy pyramid, an important concept to remember is that anyone at anytime can regress back to any point within the hierarchy structure that Maslow addresses. How does this impact human behavior? Looking back at the very basics of physiological needs for example, people need to feel good. It does not matter if a person is employed as a janitor or a top-notch cardiac surgeon, if he or she is diagnosed with a disease that impacts them physically, he or she is likely to regress back towards satisfying any physiological needs that may come about. The affected individual's attitude towards the prognosis of this disease will likely contribute towards a shift in his or her priorities. Emotionally, the feelings of love and belonging may be impacted in the sense that they may want to ensure that their loved ones are safe when they pass.

With regard to esteem, for some, there may be a great sense of loss, while others may come to terms with the fact. With that being said, there are circumstances that affect each individual with regard to where he or she stands in the hierarchy pyramid.

Is everyone a self-actualizer? Yes. For each individual, this experience is different. It is experienced at different depths depending on individual life experiences. The more in touch one is with one's inner self, the better he or she can control, and often master, one's self-talk. It is also important to remember that all individuals are constantly impacted by the forces of life, some of which are far beyond personal control. When the opportunity arises to experience this hierarchy, and the needs of deficit are fully met, it allows the individual to make a closer connection with the concept of self-actualization. Also, when these deficit needs are met, self-actualization, in a sense, is likely to become even more enhanced.

The bottom line is that everyone is effected emotionally at every level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. If early life experiences as a child are positive, and needs are being met, that individual will excel in the area of self-confidence and self-esteem at much faster rate. It helps to establish a strong foundation for life. Later, the individual is able to establish a much stronger set of coping mechanisms when one of the deficit needs isn't being met. Additionally, when adverse circumstances confront the individual, he or she is often better-equipped with the ability to problem solve and confront the challenge confidently.

Conversely, if early life experiences as a child are negative, and needs are not met, that individual's foundation

isn't as secure, and he or she is not as likely to excel in self-confidence and self-esteem, rather, he or she is likely to get trapped a state of constantly seeking approval from peers. He or she may develop a fear of making mistakes.

The majority falls somewhere in between what is positive in life and what is negative. Ultimately, individuals who develop a strong, well-established foundation are likely to be emotionally strong and can exercise a stronger sense of self control. Those whose foundation is shaky and not very stable will focus more on protecting it, therefore having less confidence in that foundation.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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