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Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

by [Saul McLeod](#) published 2007, updated 2014

Maslow wanted to understand what motivates people. He believed that people possess a set of motivation systems unrelated to [rewards](#) or [unconscious desires](#).

Maslow (1943) stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs. When one need is fulfilled a person seeks to fulfill the next one, and so on.



The earliest and most widespread version of Maslow's (1943, 1954) *hierarchy of needs* includes five motivational needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid.

This five stage model can be divided into basic (or deficiency) needs (e.g. physiological, safety, love, and esteem) and growth needs (self-actualization).

The deficiency, or basic needs are said to motivate people when they are unmet. Also, the need to fulfil such needs will become stronger the longer the duration they are denied. For example, the longer a person goes without food the more hungry they will become.



One must satisfy lower level basic needs before progressing on to meet higher level growth needs. Once these needs have been reasonably satisfied, one may be able to reach the highest level called self-actualization.

Every person is capable and has the desire to move up the hierarchy toward a level of self-actualization. Unfortunately, progress is often disrupted by failure to meet lower level needs. Life experiences, including divorce and loss of job may cause an individual to fluctuate between levels of the hierarchy.

Maslow noted only one in a hundred people become fully self-actualized because our society rewards motivation primarily based on esteem, love and other social needs.

The original hierarchy of needs five-stage model includes:

1. *Biological and Physiological needs - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep.*
2. *Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear.*
3. *Love and belongingness needs - friendship, intimacy, affection and love, - from work group, family, friends, romantic relationships.*
4. *Esteem needs - achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, self-respect, respect from others.*
5. *Self-Actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.*



Maslow posited that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy:

'It is quite true that man lives by bread alone — when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled?

At once other (and "higher") needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still "higher") needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency' (Maslow, 1943, p. 375).

The expanded hierarchy of needs:

It is important to note that Maslow's (1943, 1954) five stage model has been expanded to include cognitive and aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1970a) and later transcendence needs (Maslow, 1970b).

Expanded Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Human Needs,...



Changes to the original five-stage model are indented and include a seven-stage model and a eight-stage model, both developed during the 1960's and 1970s.

1. *Biological and Physiological needs - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep, etc.*
2. *Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, etc.*
3. *Love and belongingness needs - friendship, intimacy, affection and love, - from work group, family, friends, romantic relationships.*
4. *Esteem needs - self-esteem, achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, managerial responsibility, etc.*

5. *Cognitive needs - knowledge, meaning, etc.*

6. *Aesthetic needs - appreciation and search for beauty, balance, form, etc.*

7. *Self-Actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.*

8. *Transcendence needs - helping others to achieve self actualization.*

Self-actualization

Instead of focusing on [psychopathology](#) and what goes wrong with people, Maslow (1943) formulated a more positive account of human behavior which focused on what goes right. He was interested in human potential, and how we fulfill that potential.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943, 1954) stated that human motivation is based on people seeking fulfillment and change through personal growth. Self-actualized people are those who were fulfilled and doing all they were capable of.

The growth of self-actualization (Maslow, 1962) refers to the need for personal growth and discovery that is present throughout a person's life. For Maslow, a person is always 'becoming' and never remains static in these terms. In self-actualization a person comes to find a meaning to life that is important to them.

As each person is unique the motivation for self-actualization leads people in different directions (Kenrick et al., 2010). For some people self-actualization can be achieved through creating works of art or literature, for others through sport, in the classroom, or within a corporate setting.

Maslow (1962) believed self-actualization could be measured through the concept of peak experiences. This occurs when a person experiences the world totally for what it is, and there are feelings of euphoria, joy and wonder.

It is important to note that self-actualization is a continual process of becoming rather than a perfect state one reaches of a 'happy ever after' (Hoffman, 1988).

Maslow offers the following description of self-actualization:

'It refers to the person's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially.

The specific form that these needs will take will of course vary greatly from person to person. In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions' (Maslow, 1943, p. 382–383).

Abraham Maslow and Self Actualization (1968)



[Are you self-actualized?](#)

Maslow (1968): Some of the characteristics of self-actualized people

Although we are all, theoretically, capable of self-actualizing, most of us will not do so, or only to a limited degree. Maslow (1970) estimated that only two percent of people will reach the state of self actualization. He was particularly interested in the characteristics of people whom he considered to have achieved their potential as persons.

By studying 18 people he considered to be self-actualized (including Abraham Lincoln and Albert Einstein) Maslow (1970) identified 15 characteristics of a self-actualized person.

Characteristics of self-actualizers:

1. They perceive reality efficiently and can tolerate uncertainty;
2. Accept themselves and others for what they are;
3. Spontaneous in thought and action;
4. Problem-centered (not self-centered);
5. Unusual sense of humor;
6. Able to look at life objectively;
7. Highly creative;
8. Resistant to enculturation, but not purposely unconventional;
9. Concerned for the welfare of humanity;
10. Capable of deep appreciation of basic life-experience;
11. Establish deep satisfying interpersonal relationships with a few people;
12. Peak experiences;
13. Need for privacy;
14. Democratic attitudes;
15. Strong moral/ethical standards.

Behavior leading to self-actualization:

- (a) Experiencing life like a child, with full absorption and concentration;
- (b) Trying new things instead of sticking to safe paths;
- (c) Listening to your own feelings in evaluating experiences instead of the voice of tradition, authority or the majority;
- (d) Avoiding pretense ('game playing') and being honest;
- (e) Being prepared to be unpopular if your views do not coincide with those of the majority;
- (f) Taking responsibility and working hard;
- (g) Trying to identify your defenses and having the courage to give them up.

The characteristics of self-actualizers and the behaviors leading to self-actualization are shown in the list above.

Although people achieve self-actualization in their own unique way, they tend to share certain characteristics. However, self-actualization is a matter of degree, 'There are no perfect human beings' (Maslow, 1970a, p. 176).

It is not necessary to display all 15 characteristics to become self-actualized, and not only self-actualized people will display them. Maslow did not equate self-actualization with perfection. Self-actualization merely involves achieving ones potential. Thus, someone can be silly, wasteful, vain and impolite, and still self-actualize. Less than two percent of the population achieve self-actualization.

Educational applications

Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs theory has made a major contribution to teaching and classroom management in schools. Rather than reducing behavior to a [response in the environment](#), Maslow (1970a) adopts a holistic approach to

education and learning. Maslow looks at the entire physical, emotional, social, and intellectual qualities of an individual and how they impact on learning.

Applications of Maslow's hierarchy theory to the work of the classroom teacher are obvious. Before a student's cognitive needs can be met they must first fulfil their basic physiological needs. For example a tired and hungry student will find it difficult to focus on learning. Students need to feel emotionally and physically safe and accepted within the classroom to progress and reach their full potential.

Maslow suggests students must be shown that they are valued and respected in the classroom and the teacher should create a supportive environment. Students with a [low self-esteem](#) will not progress academically at an optimum rate until their self-esteem is strengthened.

Critical evaluation

The most significant limitation of Maslow's theory concerns his methodology. Maslow formulated the characteristics of self-actualized individuals from undertaking a qualitative method called biographical analysis.

He looked at the biographies and writings of 18 people he identified as being self-actualized. From these sources he developed a list of qualities that seemed characteristic of this specific group of people, as opposed to humanity in general.

From a [scientific perspective](#) there are numerous problems with this particular approach. First, it could be argued that biographical analysis as a method is extremely subjective as it is based entirely on the opinion of the researcher. Personal opinion is always prone to bias, which reduces the [validity](#) of any data obtained. Therefore Maslow's operational definition of self-actualization must not be blindly accepted as scientific fact.

Furthermore, Maslow's biographical analysis focused on a biased sample of self-actualized individuals, prominently limited to highly educated white males (such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, William James, Aldous Huxley, Gandhi, Beethoven).

Although Maslow (1970) did study self-actualized females, such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Mother Teresa, they comprised a small proportion of his [sample](#). This makes it difficult to generalize his theory to females and individuals from lower social classes or different ethnicity. Thus questioning the population validity of Maslow's findings.

Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to [empirically test](#) Maslow's concept of self-actualization in a way that causal relationships can be established.

Another criticism concerns Maslow's assumption that the lower needs must be satisfied before a person can achieve their potential and self-actualize. This is not always the case, and therefore Maslow's hierarchy of needs in some aspects has been falsified.

Through examining cultures in which large numbers of people live in poverty (such as India) it is clear that people are still capable of higher order needs such as love and belongingness. However, this should not occur, as according to Maslow, people who have difficulty achieving very basic physiological needs (such as food, shelter etc.) are not capable of meeting higher growth needs.

Also, many creative people, such as authors and artists (e.g. Rembrandt and Van Gogh) lived in poverty throughout their lifetime, yet it could be argued that they achieved self-actualization.

Contemporary research by Tay & Diener (2011) has tested Maslow's theory by analyzing the data of 60,865 participants from 123 countries, representing every major region of the world. The survey was conducted from 2005 to 2010.

Respondents answered questions about six needs that closely resemble those in Maslow's model: basic needs (food, shelter); safety; social needs (love, support); respect; mastery; and autonomy. They also rated their well-being across three discrete measures: life evaluation (a person's view of his or her life as a whole), positive feelings (day-to-day instances of joy or pleasure), and negative feelings (everyday experiences of sorrow, anger, or stress).

The results of the study support the view that universal human needs appear to exist regardless of cultural differences. However, the ordering of the needs within the hierarchy was not correct.

"Although the most basic needs might get the most attention when you don't have them," Diener explains, "you don't need to fulfill them in order to get benefits [from the others]." Even when we are hungry, for instance, we can be happy with our friends. "They're like vitamins," Diener says about how the needs work independently. "We need them all."

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