

Maslow: Human Motivation—A Hierarchical Theory

Abraham Maslow believed that human beings are interested in growing rather than simply restoring balance or avoiding frustration. He described the human being as a “wanting animal” who is almost always desiring something. Indeed, as one human desire is satisfied, another arises to take its place. In the drive to self-actualize, the individual moves forward toward growth, happiness, and satisfaction.

Maslow (1970) distinguished between motivation and metamotivation. **Motivation** refers to reducing tension by satisfying deficit states or lacks. It entails **D-needs** or deficiency needs, which arise out of the organism’s requirements for physiological survival or safety, such as the need for food or rest, and motivate the individual to engage in activities that will reduce these drives. Motivation and the D-needs are powerful determinants of behavior. **Metamotivation** refers to growth tendencies. It entails **B-needs** or being needs, which arise out of the organism’s drive to self-actualize and fulfill its inherent potential. B-needs do not stem from a lack or deficiency; rather, they push forward to self-fulfillment. Their goal is to enhance life by enriching it. Rather than reduce tension, they frequently heighten it in their quest for ever-increasing stimuli that will bring a life lived to the fullest.

Motivation and the D-needs take precedence over metamotivation and the B-needs. The deficiency needs must be satisfied first. An individual who is wondering where the next mouthful of food is going to come from can hardly be concerned with spiritual goals like truth or beauty. Thus, the needs may be conceived as arranged in a hierarchy, in that the needs at the bottom must be satisfied before those at the top can be fulfilled.

In his **hierarchy of needs**, Maslow (1970) described five basic needs. In order of their strength they are: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. Each lower need must be satisfied before an individual can become aware of or develop the capacity to fulfill the needs above it. As each need is satisfied, the next higher order need attains importance. Some individuals, because of their circumstances, find it very difficult to satisfy even the lowest needs. The higher one is able to go, however, the greater psychological health and self-actualization one will demonstrate.

1. *Physiological needs* The strongest needs of all are the physiological ones that pertain to the physical survival and biological maintenance of the organism. They include the need for food, drink, sleep, oxygen, shelter, and sex. For many Americans, physiological needs are satisfied almost automatically. However, if biological needs are not met for a protracted period of time, an individual will not be motivated to fulfill any other needs. The person who is really starving has no other interest than obtaining food. Several experiments and real-life experiences have demonstrated the overwhelming behavioral effects produced by a lack of food, sleep, or other life-sustaining needs. Gratification of these needs renders them less important and permits other needs to appear (1970).
2. *Safety needs* Safety needs refer to the organism’s requirements for an orderly, stable, and predictable world. Most normal, healthy adults have satisfied these needs, but they can be seen clearly in young children, neurotics or individuals who live in unsafe environments. The young child, who is helpless and dependent, prefers a certain amount of structured routine and discipline. The absence of these elements makes the child anxious and insecure. Too

much freedom is threatening because a child does not know what to do with it. The neurotic frequently behaves like the insecure child compulsively organizing the world and avoiding strange or different experiences. Individuals who live in unsafe environments need to spend a great deal of time and energy trying to protect themselves and their possessions. In general, the mature adult, assured of the basic stability of the world, is open to the new and unexpected.

3. *Belonging and love needs* Once the physiological and safety needs are met, needs for love and belonging arise. The individual seeks affectionate and intimate relationships with other people, needing to feel part of various reference groups, such as the family, neighborhood, gang, or a professional association. Maslow noted that such needs are increasingly more difficult to meet in our technological, fluid, and mobile society. Such problems may account for the rising interest in support groups and new styles of living together. Love, rather than being physiological or simply sexual, involves a healthy, mutual relationship of trust, in which each person is deeply understood and accepted.
4. *Self-esteem needs* Maslow described two kinds of esteem needs—the need for respect from others and the need for self-respect. Self-esteem entails competence, confidence, mastery, achievement, independence, and freedom. Respect from others entails recognition, acceptance, status, and appreciation. When these needs are not met an individual feels discouraged, weak, and inferior. Healthy self-esteem is a realistic appraisal of one’s capacities and has its roots in deserved respect from others. For most people, the need for regard from others diminishes with age because it has been fulfilled and the need for self-regard becomes more important.
5. *Self-actualization needs* If the foregoing needs have been met, the needs for self-actualization may emerge if the individual has the courage to choose it. These needs are difficult to describe because they are unique and vary from person to person. In general, self-actualization refers to the desire to fulfill one’s highest potential. The individual on this level who does not fully exploit his or her talents and capacities is discontented and restless. In Maslow’s words, “a musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at peace with himself” (1970). Each of us has different potentialities and capacities. There is no standard format for self-actualization; thus, specific forms of self-actualization differ from individual to individual.

Self-actualization is possible only if the lower needs have been sufficiently met so that they do not detract from or engross a person’s basic energies rather than organize their behavior toward tension reduction, individuals whose deficiency needs are satisfied may, in fact, seek states of increased optimal tension in order to enhance their opportunities for self-actualization. Higher needs may become as compelling as food to the hungry. In short, those who are living on a B-level have a radically different motivation from those who are still striving to satisfy deficit states.

A number of prerequisites are necessary for a person to be motivated on the B-level. Cultural, economic, and social conditions must be such that the individual does not need

to be preoccupied with physiological or safety needs. Employment settings must consider the growth needs of employees. Emotional needs for interpersonal relationships and self-esteem must be met. This may be very difficult in periods of economic recession or in a climate that emphasizes productivity over human relations. Astute industries and organizations have taken Maslow's ideas into account and recognized that consideration must be given to workers' B-needs as well as their D-needs.

In addition to the hierarchy just outlined, Maslow posited the important human needs to *know* and *understand* (1970). These form a small but powerful hierarchy of their own, in which the need to know is more potent than and prior to the need to understand. Children, by nature, are curious; when their cognitive impulses are satisfied, they seek further comprehension and understanding. Clinical studies also convinced Maslow that in some individuals aesthetic needs are very important: "They get sick [in special ways] from ugliness, and are cured by beautiful surroundings; they *crave* actively, and their cravings can be satisfied *only* by beauty" (1970). Some people actually become ill when they are confronted by ugliness. These needs are not sharply delineated from the needs of the earlier hierarchy; they overlap with them and are interrelated.

Maslow described all human needs as *instinctoid*, or inherent in human nature (1970). He recognized that human beings cannot be said to have instincts in the same sense that animals do because whatever "instincts" humans possess are heavily overlaid with learning. Still, humans have tendencies that need to be nourished and cultivated. They are instinctoid or basic in that unless the needs are met, illness develops, just as a lack of vitamin C leads to illness. Xu (1985) has reviewed genetic and psychological research that directly or indirectly supports the concept of instinctoid needs.

A number of clinical experiments have demonstrated that the needs that Maslow described are essential for optimal human life and development studies of children in institutions who do not receive adequate love and attention show that these children do not develop normally, although all of their physical needs are met (Spitz, 1951). Maslow's own clinical experience showed that individuals who satisfy their basic needs are happier, healthier, and more effective, whereas those whose needs are frustrated display neurotic symptoms (1970). Furthermore, other clinicians, such as Karen Horney and Carl Rogers, have pointed out that given the appropriate conditions, the individual chooses to move forward and grow. From where does such a choice or impulse come, unless it is inherent in the individual? Psychologists speak of **species-specific behavior**, that is, an inborn tendency for members of a biological subgroup to behave in a certain way. Chickens tend to scratch for their food, whereas pigs root for it. Maslow suggests that the species-specific characteristics of human beings include the hierarchical needs and a drive toward self-actualization. Of course, for an adequate test of Maslow's theory that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy in which the satisfaction of lower needs leads to the emergence of higher needs, we would have to conduct extensive longitudinal studies (Maddi and Costa, 1972). Such studies have not yet been conducted

Characteristics of Self-Actualizers

Maslow listed several characteristics of self-actualized persons that emerged out of his study (1970). For simplicity, these characteristics may be grouped under

four key dimensions: awareness, honesty, freedom, and trust (1969).

Awareness Self-actualizers are characterized by awareness. They are aware of the inner rightness of themselves, of nature, and of the peak experiences of life.

This awareness emerges in an *efficient perception of reality*. Self-actualizers are accurate in their perception of the world and comfortable in it. They can see through phoniness and assess the real motives of other people. They have a clearer perception of reality and realism in areas such as politics and religion, which permits them to cut through extraneous issues and recognize true ones. They have a higher acuity or sharpness of perception. Colors appear brighter and more vibrant to them than to the average person. They have a more efficient sense of smell. Their hearing is more precise.

Self-actualizers display a continued *freshness of appreciation*. They can appreciate again and again the basics of life. Each sunrise and sunset refreshes them anew, and each new flower is an event that never loses its miraculous quality. Familiarization does not lessen the miracle. Self-actualizers have no preconceptions of what things ought to be. They are open to experience and let each experience speak for itself. The self-actualized person frequently experiences what Maslow called a peak experience. A **peak experience** is an intensification of any experience to the degree that there is a loss or transcendence of self. These kinds of experiences are often termed mystical or religious, but Maslow emphasized that they do not necessarily entail traditional religious labels or interpretations a peak experience may be provoked by a secular event as well. Events that may be mundane and ordinary to others, such as viewing a work of art or reaching a sexual climax, may be the sparks that trigger a peak experience.

During a peak experience, the individual experiences not only an expansion of self but also a sense of unity and meaningfulness in life. For that moment, the world appears to be complete and the person is at one with it. After the experience is over, and the person has returned to the routine of everyday living, the experience lingers on. It has an illuminating quality that transforms one's understanding so that things do not seem to be quite the same afterwards. Research using a questionnaire about peak experiences has confirmed the characteristics Maslow described (Privette, 1986). Maslow believed that *all* human beings, not only self-actualizers, are potential peakers. People at any stage can have peak experiences, though they are what Maslow considered a moment of self-actualization. Maslow distinguished between "transcenders" and the "merely healthy": transcenders are inclined to have peaks; the merely healthy tend not to. Some people have peak experiences but they suppress them and therefore do not recognize them when they occur. In other cases, one may inhibit a peak experience, thereby preventing its occurrence.

Self-actualizers show a high degree of *ethical awareness*. They are clear about the distinction between good and evil. Self-actualizers have definite ethical standards, although their standards are not necessarily the conventional ones; rather, they know what for them is right and do it.

Self-actualizers are able to distinguish between the goal that they are striving for and the means by which they are accomplishing it. For the most part, they are focused on ends rather than means. At the same time, they often consider as ends activities that are simply means for other people. They can enjoy and appreciate the journey as well as the destination.

Honesty Self-actualizers are characterized by honesty, which permits them to know their feelings and to trust them. They can trust the wide range of feelings—love, anger, and humor—present in interpersonal relations.

Self-actualizers have a *philosophical sense of humor* rather than an ordinary one. Most common jokes and wisecracks express hostility, superiority, or rebellion against authority. The self-actualizer's humor is more closely allied to philosophy. It is essentially an ability to laugh at the ridiculousness of the human situation and to poke fun at our shared human pretensions. Such humor was characteristic of Abraham Lincoln, whose jokes were not at other people's expense. Such humor is spontaneous rather than planned. Often it cannot be repeated or retold. Maslow suggests that he once felt this humor in a room full of kinetic art, sculptures having mechanical parts that can be set into motion it seemed to him to be a "humorous parody of human life, with the noise, movement, turmoil, hurry and bustle, all of it going no place" (1970). Self-actualizers experience *social interest* or a deep feeling of kinship with humanity. Maslow borrowed Adler's term *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, which means "community feeling," to describe the identification with humanity that is experienced. Although on occasions they may experience feelings of anger, impatience, or disgust, self-actualizers have a general sense of identification, sympathy, and affection for the human race and all its members.

Self-actualizers form deep *interpersonal relations*. However, they are highly selective and therefore have a small but close circle of friends. They have no need for admirers or large groups of disciples although at times they may attract such followers, creating a situation that they try to handle with tact. Their love of others involves the being of the other person rather than having the love of a person who cares for them. This love stems from a fullness of being rather than a state of deprivation and need.

Their love is not indiscriminate. At times they are quick to anger; they can speak harshly to others and express righteous indignation where a situation calls for it; yet their attitude is one of pity rather than attack. They react to the behavior rather than to the person.

Self-actualizers display a *democratic character structure*. They are free of prejudice, tolerant, and accepting of all people regardless of their background. They listen and they learn from those who are able to teach them. They react to others on the basis of character rather than on the basis of race, creed, or social status.

Freedom Self-actualizers experience a high degree of freedom, which permits them to withdraw from the chaos that surrounds others. They are free to be independent, creative, and spontaneous.

Self-actualizers show a high degree of *detachment* and a *need for privacy*. They enjoy solitude and like to be alone. Many of us avoid being alone and compulsively seek the company of other people. Self-actualizers relish and require times when they can be by themselves. They are not secretive but they often stand apart from other people. Maslow discovered that many of them did not particularly welcome his questions because they considered such activities a violation of their privacy.

This ability to be detached extends to other areas as well. It permits the self-actualizer to concentrate to a greater degree than the average person. Whereas others may become excited and involved in the storm of things around them, self-actualizers remain above the battle, calm and unruffled.

Free to be themselves, self-actualizers are also free to let other people be. They are not afraid of letting other people be who they are. As parents, this means they have the ability to refrain from meddling with a child, because

they like the way the child is growing. They do not feel that they have to interfere when it is not necessary. They do not need to make decisions for the child. They can permit the child to experience the consequences of behavior without overprotecting.

Self-actualizers are *autonomous and independent* of their physical and social environment. Motivated by growth rather than by deficiency, they do not need to depend on the world or others for their real satisfaction. Their basic needs and gratifications have been met; therefore, they are free to depend on their own development.

Autonomy also entails the ability to choose freely and to govern oneself. Maslow suggests that self-actualizers have more free will than other people. Their activity stems from themselves rather than from their physical or social environment. Many people let other people such as salesmen or advertisers make up their minds, but self-actualizers come to their own decisions and assume responsibility for them. Maslow found that without exception all of his self-actualizers demonstrated *creativity*, *originality*, or *inventiveness*. This is not to say that they possess a special talent akin to that of a Mozart or a Picasso, but that they have a drive and a capacity to be creative. They do not necessarily write books, compose music, or produce art; instead, their creativeness is projected onto and touches whatever activity they undertake. The carpenter or clerk works creatively, adding a personalized touch to whatever she or he does. Self-actualizers even perceive the world creatively, as a child does, envisioning new and different possibilities.

Self-actualizers are *spontaneous*, simple, and natural. They are free to what they are at any given moment. Although their behavior is often conventional, they do not allow conventionality to hamper or prevent them from doing the things that they deem important. They are acutely aware of the feelings, thoughts, and impulses and do not hide them unless their expression would hurt others. Their codes of ethics are autonomous and individual, based on fundamentally accepted principles rather than on social prescriptions.

Trust Self-actualizers demonstrate a high degree of trust. They trust themselves, their mission in life, others, and nature.

Self-actualizers are generally *problem centered* rather than focused on themselves. They have a high sense of mission in life. They are task oriented and commit themselves to important tasks that must be done. They live and work within a wide frame of reference that does not permit them to get bogged down in what is petty or trivial. Problems outside themselves enlist most of their attention

Self-actualizers demonstrate *acceptance of self, others, and nature*. They accept themselves without disappointment or regret. They recognize but are not particularly bothered by their shortcomings. This is not to say that they are smug or self-satisfied but rather that they accept their weaknesses and frailties as given. They are not embarrassed about the bodily processes that humans share with animals. The needs to eat, defecate, and express their sexuality do not distress them. They feel guilty about characteristics that they could and should improve on, but they are not overrun with neurotic guilt. Since they can respect their own limitations, their guilt arises from realistic sources. In the same way, they can accept the necessities of reality and human life. As Maslow pointed out, they are not disturbed by the shortcomings of human nature but accept them in the way that one accepts other natural things, such as the fact that water is wet, rocks are hard, and grass is green. Healthy people do not feel bad about what is *per se* but about differences between what is and what might realistically be.

Self-actualizers are not well adjusted in the normal sense of the term, which entails conformity with one's culture: they show *resistance to enculturation*. Essentially, they live in harmony with their culture, yet they remain somewhat detached from it. Often they are labeled "oddball," as they do not always react in the expected fashion. They generally conform in matters of dress, speech, and food, and other matters that are not of primary concern to them. But where an issue is important they are independent in their thought and behavior. This resistance to enculturation leads to their transcendence of any one particular culture. Thus their identification is with humanity as a whole rather than with any one particular group.

Maslow acknowledged that the picture he drew of the self-actualized person is a composite. No one person that he studied possessed all of the above qualities. Each of them demonstrated the characteristics to varying degrees. Furthermore, Maslow emphasizes that self-actualizers are not perfect. They show many lesser human failings. They frequently have silly, wasteful, or thoughtless habits. At times they are vain and take too much pride in their achievements. They may sometimes lose their tempers. Because of their concentration on their work, they may appear absent minded, humorless, or impolite. At times their kindness toward others leads them to permit others to take undue advantage of them. At other times they may appear to be ruthless and inconsiderate in their relations with other people. Sometimes they are boring, even irritating. In short, they are not perfect; yet, Maslow's definition of self-actualization did not imply perfection but a higher level of functioning.

The principles and values of self-actualizers differ from those of the average person. Perceiving the world in an essentially different manner, they are not threatened by it and do not need to adopt a morality of self-protection. Maslow suggests that a great deal of that which passes for moral and ethical standards may simply be "by-products of the pervasive pathology of the average" (1970). The conflicts and anxieties that threaten the average person are simply not present. Self-actualizers can welcome differences and need not be afraid of them. Their value systems are not organized around the values of the deficiency needs. Maintenance at the level of self-actualization requires meeting the previous needs continuously, but self-actualizers are able to satisfy them routinely so that they can devote themselves to the values that concur with the B-needs. Thus, at one and the same

time, their values are universal and reflect shared humanity but are also distinct, individual, and unique.

Maslow concluded that self-actualization entails the ability to transcend and resolve dichotomies. The usual oppositions between heart and head, reason and emotion, body and mind, work and play that fragment most of us do not exist as antagonists, because they are seen as functioning together simultaneously. For example, the distinction between being selfish and unselfish is no longer bothersome. Self-actualizers can recognize that every act is at one and the same time selfish and unselfish. That which is done for the benefit of others is frequently that which benefits the self. Maslow suggested that in the self-actualized individual the id, ego, and superego work cooperatively together.

Maslow suggested that the number of people who achieve self-actualization is relatively small, less than 1 percent of the entire population. Concepts such as "the self-actualized person" may apply to only a select few. Obviously, the possibility of self-actualization is limited or even closed to large numbers of the human population, whose environment and life-style have yet to meet the lesser needs depicted in Maslow's hierarchy, let alone the higher needs. However, Maslow did point out that some people can be healthier than their environment. He concluded that they have some kind of inner freedom but did not specify how or why. Contemporary research on competent children from high-risk environments is seeking to clarify why children are more or less vulnerable to the effects of their environment.

It is to Maslow's credit that he has turned the attention of psychologists to those qualities that constitute optimal human health and functioning rather than represent human life gone awry. The example of the self-actualized individual suggests and inspires us to improve our human condition.

—*Personality Theories: An Introduction*
Barabara Engler (Houghton, Mifflin Co.)