

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

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An interpretation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, represented as a pyramid with the more basic needs at the bottom.^[1]

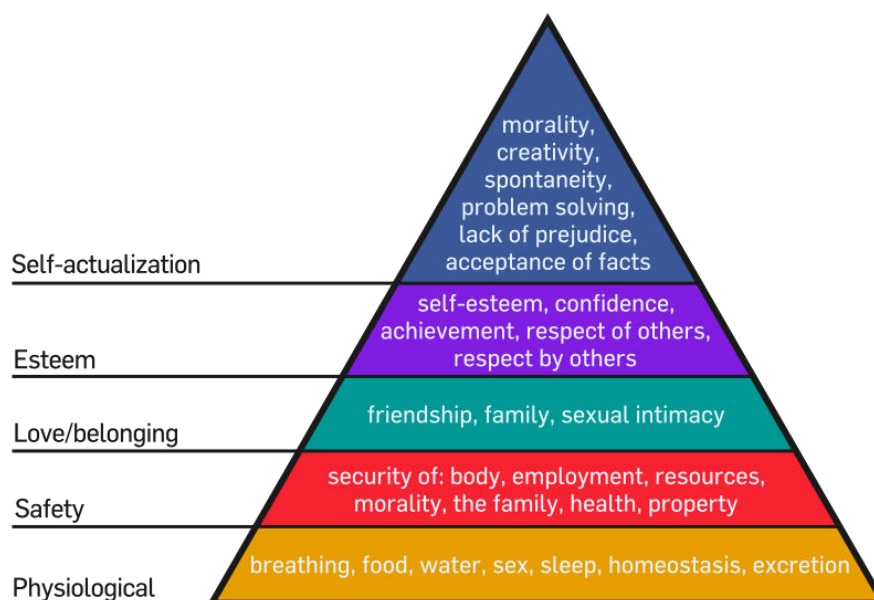
Maslow's hierarchy of needs is an idea in psychology, proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*.^[2] Maslow subsequently extended the idea to include his observations of humans' innate curiosity. His theories parallel many other theories of human developmental psychology, all of which focus on describing the stages of growth in humans. The theory is a classification system intended to reflect the universal needs of society as its base, then proceeding to more acquired emotions. The hierarchy of needs is split between deficiency needs and growth needs, with two key themes involved within the theory being individualism and the prioritization of needs.

Methodology: Maslow studied what he called exemplary people such as Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Frederick Douglass rather than mentally ill or neurotic people, writing that "the study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy." Maslow studied the healthiest 1% of the college student population.^{[4] [18]}

Maslow's theory was fully expressed in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*.^[3]

Hierarchy

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often portrayed in the shape of a pyramid, with the largest and most fundamental levels of needs at the bottom, and the need for self-actualization and transcendence at the top.^{[1][19]}



The most fundamental and basic four levels of the pyramid contain what Maslow called "deficiency needs" or "d-needs": esteem, friendship and love, security, and physical needs. With the exception of the most fundamental (physiological) needs, if these "deficiency needs" are not met, the body gives no physical indication, but the individual feels anxious and tense.

Maslow's theory suggests that the most basic level of needs must be met before the individual will strongly desire (or focus motivation upon) the secondary or higher-level needs. Maslow also coined the term [Metamotivation](#) to describe the motivation of people who go beyond the scope of the basic needs and strive for constant betterment.^[7] [Metamotivated](#) people are driven by B-needs (Being Needs), instead of deficiency needs (D-Needs).

Level 1: Physiological needs

Physiological needs are the base of the hierarchy. For the most part, physiological needs are obvious — they are the literal requirements for human survival. If these requirements are not met, the human body simply cannot continue to function.

Air, for example, is a physiological need; a human being requires air more urgently than higher-level needs, such as a sense of social belonging. Physiological needs are critical to "meet the very basic essentials of life".^[5] This allows for cravings such as hunger and thirst to be satisfied and not disrupt the regulation of the body.

Level 2: Safety needs

With their physical needs relatively satisfied, the individual's safety needs take precedence and dominate behavior. These needs have to do with people's yearning for a predictable orderly world in which perceived unfairness and inconsistency are under control, the familiar frequent and the unfamiliar rare. In the world of work, these safety needs manifest themselves in such things as a preference for job security, grievance procedures for protecting the individual from unilateral authority, savings accounts, insurance policies, reasonable disability accommodations, and the like.

Safety and Security needs include:

- Personal security
- Financial security
- Health and well-being
- Emotional security

Level 3: Love and belonging

After physiological and safety needs are fulfilled, the third layer of human needs are social and involve feelings of [belongingness](#). This aspect of Maslow's hierarchy involves emotionally based relationships in general, such as:

- Friendship
- Intimacy
- Family
- Trust
- Acceptance
- Receiving and giving love and affection

Humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, whether it comes from a large social group, such as clubs, office culture, religious groups, professional organizations, sports teams, gangs, or small social connections (family members, intimate partners, mentors, close colleagues, confidants). They need to love and be loved (sexually and non-sexually) by others. In the absence of these elements, many people become susceptible to loneliness, [social anxiety](#), and [clinical depression](#).

This need for belonging can often overcome the physiological and security needs, depending on the strength of the peer pressure; an anorexic, for example, may ignore the need to eat and the security of health for a feeling of control and belonging.

Level 4: Esteem

All humans have a need to be respected and to have self-esteem and self-respect. Also known as the *belonging need*, esteem presents the normal human desire to be accepted and valued by others. People need to engage themselves to gain recognition and have an activity or activities that give the person a sense of contribution, to feel accepted and self-valued, be it in a profession or hobby. Imbalances at this level can result in low self-esteem or an [inferiority complex](#). People with low self-esteem need respect from others. They may seek fame or glory, which again depends on others. Note, however, that many people with low self-esteem will not be able to improve their view of themselves simply by receiving fame, respect, and glory externally, but must first accept themselves internally. Psychological imbalances such as [depression](#) can also prevent one from obtaining self-esteem on both levels.

Most people have a need for a stable self-respect and self-esteem. Maslow noted two versions of esteem needs, a lower one and a higher one. The lower one is the need for the respect of others, the need for status, recognition, fame, prestige, and attention. The higher one is the need for self-respect, the need for strength, competence, mastery, self-confidence, independence and freedom. The latter one ranks higher because it rests more on inner competence won through experience. Deprivation of these needs can lead to an inferiority complex, weakness and helplessness.

Maslow also states that even though these are examples of how the quest for knowledge is separate from basic needs he warns that these “two hierarchies are interrelated rather than sharply separated” [\[3\]](#) This means that this level of need, as well as the next and highest level, are not strict, separate levels but closely related to others, and this is possibly the reason that these two levels of need are left out of most textbooks.

Level 5: Self-actualization

“What a man can be, he must be.”^[3] This forms the basis of the perceived need for self-actualization. This level of need pertains to what a person's full potential is and realizing that potential. Maslow describes this desire as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.^[3] This is a broad definition of the need for self-actualization, but when applied to individuals the need is specific. For example one individual may have the strong desire to become an ideal parent, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in another it may be expressed in painting, pictures, or inventions.^[10] As mentioned before, in order to reach a clear understanding of this level of need one must first not only achieve the previous needs, physiological, safety, love, and esteem, but master these needs.

Self-transcendence

Maslow later added [Self-transcendence](#).^[16] In philosophy, transcendence is the basic ground concept from the word's literal meaning (from Latin), of climbing or going beyond, albeit with varying connotations in its different historical and cultural stages. The concept of transcendence represents the drive to move beyond the self and individual concerns. In doing so, you connect with something greater, such as the greater good, or a higher purpose.

Self-transcendence is about feeling connected to the universe and finding meaning that goes beyond personal gain. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it's seen as a higher-level goal that people pursue once their basic needs are met. At this stage, individuals look for a deeper understanding of their role in the world, building stronger connections with others, nature, and the universe.^[15]

Criticisms

In their extensive review of research based on Maslow's theory, Wahba and Bridgwell found little evidence for the ranking of needs Maslow described, or even for the existence of a definite hierarchy at all.^[6] Chilean economist and philosopher [Manfred Max-Neef](#) has also argued [fundamental human needs](#) are non-hierarchical, and are [ontologically](#) universal and invariant in nature—part of the condition of being human; [poverty](#), he argues, may result from any one of these needs being frustrated, denied or unfulfilled.

Neglects Individual Differences: The most common criticism is the expectation that different individuals, with similar backgrounds and at similar junctures in their respective lives, when faced with the same situation, would end up taking the same decision. Instead of that, a common observation is that humans are driven by a unique set of motivations, and their behavior cannot be reliably predicted based on the Maslowian principles.

Limited Cross-Cultural Applicability: The order in which the hierarchy is arranged (with self-actualization as the highest order need) has a Western bias and has been criticized as being ethnocentric by [Geert Hofstede](#).^[7] Hofstede's criticism of Maslow's pyramid as ethnocentric may stem from the fact that Maslow's hierarchy of needs neglects to illustrate and expand upon the difference between the social and intellectual needs of those raised in [individualistic](#) societies and those raised in [collectivist](#) societies.

Linear Progression: Maslow has also been criticized for originally theorizing that people generally move from the bottom of the pyramid to the top during their lifetime, when in fact, most people move up and down the pyramid constantly. However, Maslow later revised this model, proposing that the pyramid is

not the same for each individual, that it is not a rigid linear process and that individuals can have various needs at the same time or shift between levels.

Oversimplification of Sex as Basic Physiological Need: Maslow's hierarchy has also been criticized as being individualistic because of the position and value of sex on the pyramid. Maslow's pyramid puts sex on the bottom rung of physiological needs, along with breathing and food. Critics argue this is overly simplistic because sex isn't just physical – it also plays important emotional, social, and psychological roles. In many cases, sex is tied to intimacy, love, and self-esteem, which could make it more connected to higher-level needs like belonging or personal growth. This view overlooks the deeper meaning and complexity of sexual relationships.

Business

Marketing

In marketing, Maslow's hierarchy is one of the first theories introduced to help understand consumer behavior. Marketers use this model to identify consumer needs and design products that fulfill them. When products effectively meet these needs, consumers are more likely to choose them over competing options, leading to increased sales. This makes Maslow's model particularly relevant to understanding consumer motives in business contexts.

International Business

In international business, understanding Maslow's hierarchy is essential for navigating cross-cultural differences. By assessing the needs, values, and priorities of people from various countries, businesses can improve communication and workplace dynamics. For example, individualistic cultures like the U.S. may have an edge in innovation and research, while collectivist cultures like Japan often excel in workforce organization, quality control, and building strong relationships with suppliers and customers.

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