



Psychology » Motivation

Maslow's Hierarchy Of Needs

By [Saul McLeod, PhD](#) | Updated on October 23, 2025

 Reviewed by [Olivia Guy-Evans, MSc](#)

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Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid.

From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are: physiological (food and clothing), safety (job security), love and belonging needs (friendship), esteem, and self-actualization.

Needs lower down in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up.



Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Key Takeaways

- **Needs Hierarchy:** The original hierarchy includes physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Later expansions add cognitive, aesthetic, and transcendence needs.
- **Not Strictly Linear:** While Maslow initially proposed that lower needs must be relatively satisfied before higher ones, modern research suggests people often pursue multiple needs simultaneously.
- **Cultural Variations:** Different societies may prioritize needs differently. Individualistic vs. collectivist cultures, for example, can shape which needs take precedence.

- **Practical Applications:** In fields like education, healthcare, and workplace management, Maslow's framework helps identify barriers to motivation and guides strategies to fulfill various needs.
- **Criticisms:** Maslow's biographical approach, cultural biases, and the debate over rigid vs. flexible ordering highlight the importance of viewing his theory as a starting point rather than an absolute rule.

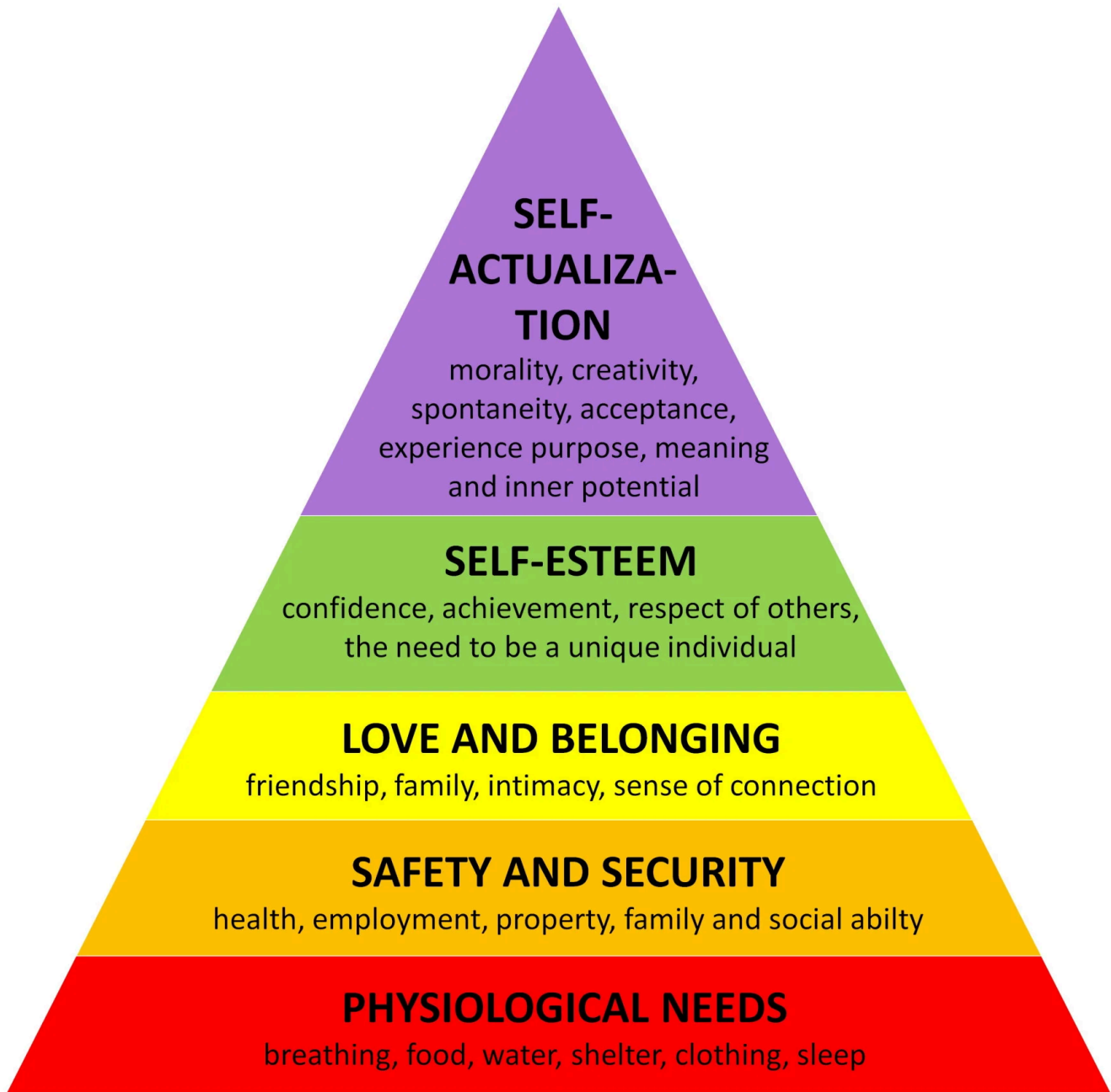
What Is Maslow's Hierarchy Of Needs?

According to Maslow, human needs were arranged in a hierarchy, with physiological (survival) needs at the bottom, and the more creative and intellectually oriented 'self-actualization' needs at the top.

Maslow argued that survival needs must be satisfied before the individual can satisfy the higher needs.

The higher up the hierarchy, the more difficult it is to satisfy the needs associated with that stage, because of the interpersonal and environmental barriers that inevitably frustrate us.

Higher needs become increasingly psychological and long-term rather than physiological and short-term, as in the lower survival-related needs.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a motivational theory in psychology proposed by **Abraham Maslow**. It organizes human needs into five levels: **physiological**, **safety**, **love and belonging**, **esteem**, and **self-actualization**. Often visualized as a **pyramid**, this hierarchy suggests that **human motivation** progresses from basic survival needs to complex psychological and self-fulfillment goals



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food, drink, shelter, clothing, sleep, and homeostasis.

Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this will be the first thing that motivates our behavior.

Once that level is fulfilled, the next level up is what motivates us, and so on.

The human body cannot function optimally if physiological needs are not satisfied.

Maslow considered physiological needs the most important as all the other needs become secondary until these needs are met.

Once an individual's physiological needs are satisfied, the need for security and safety becomes salient.

2. Safety needs involve predictability, order, and control. These include job security, health, financial security, and freedom from harm.

Safety needs can be fulfilled by the family and societal structures, such as law enforcement and medical care.

For example, emotional security, physical safety, financial security (e.g., employment, social welfare), law and order, freedom from fear, social stability, property, health, and well-being (e.g., safety against accidents and injury).

After physiological and safety needs have been fulfilled, the third level of human needs is social and involves feelings of belongingness.

3. Love and belongingness reflects the human need for social connection, including friendship, family, and romantic relationships. A sense of belonging and acceptance is essential for psychological well-being and can even override safety needs in some cases.

Examples of belongingness needs include friendship, family, intimacy, trust, acceptance, receiving and giving affection, and love.

This need is especially **strong in childhood** and can override the need for safety, as witnessed in children who cling to abusive parents.

4. Esteem needs include self-respect, achievement, and recognition from others.

Maslow classified esteem needs into two categories: (i) esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and (ii) the desire for reputation or respect from others (e.g., status, recognition, and prestige).

Esteem is the typical human desire to be accepted and valued by others.

People often engage in a profession or hobby to gain recognition, which gives them a sense of contribution or value.

Low self-esteem or an inferiority complex may result from imbalances during this level in the hierarchy.

Maslow indicated that the need for respect or reputation is most important for children and adolescents and precedes real self-esteem or dignity.

5. Self-actualization needs is the pursuit of realizing one's full potential through personal growth, creativity, or achieving meaningful goals. Maslow described it as the desire 'to become everything one is capable of becoming'.

This level of need refers to what a person's full potential is and the realization of that potential.

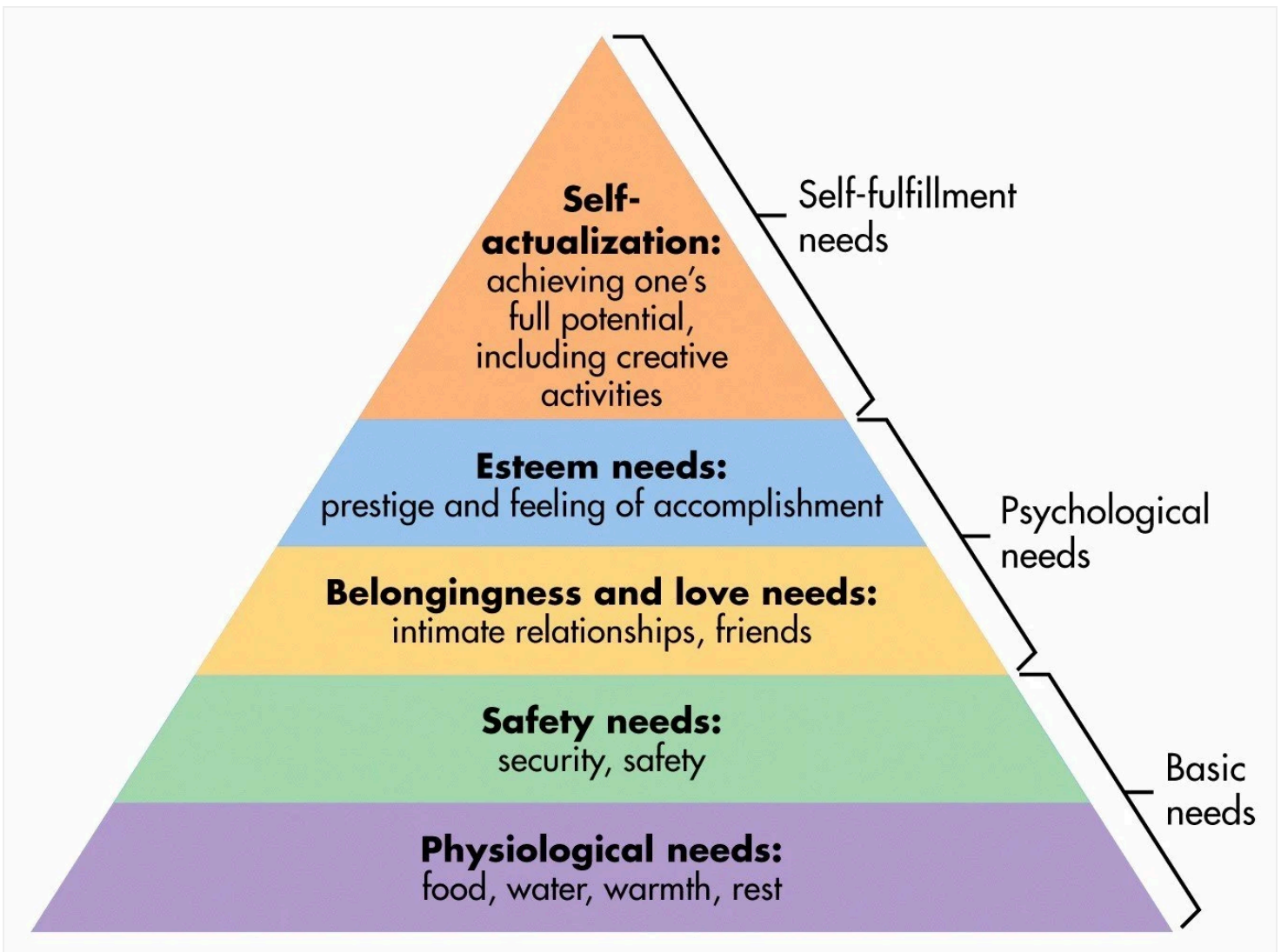
This need manifests uniquely in each person.

For one, it might involve becoming an ideal parent; for another, it may be fulfilled through work, artistic expression, or invention.

It reflects a commitment to authenticity and the pursuit of purpose.

Although Maslow did not believe that many of us could achieve true self-actualization, he did believe that all of us experience transitory moments (known as 'peak experiences') of self-actualization.

Such moments, associated with personally significant events such as childbirth, sporting achievement and examination success), are difficult to achieve and maintain consistently.



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*).

Key Point: Keep in mind that Maslow’s hierarchy of needs doesn't follow a strict linear progression. Individuals can feel various needs at the same time or shift between levels.

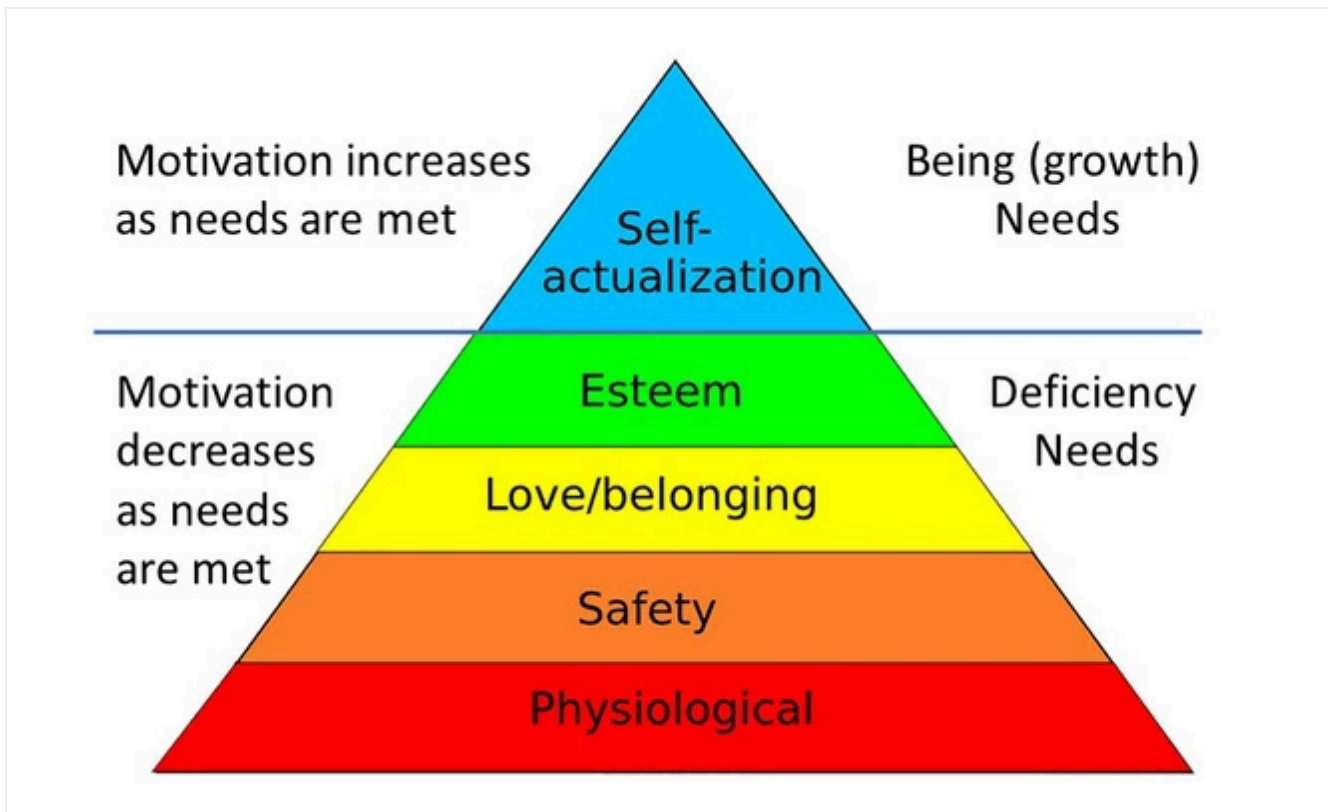
Maslow continued to refine his theory based on the concept of a hierarchy of needs over several decades (Maslow, 1943, 1962, 1987).

Regarding the structure of his hierarchy, Maslow (1987) proposed that the order in the hierarchy “is not nearly as rigid” (p. 68) as he may have implied in his earlier description.

Maslow noted that the order of needs might be flexible based on external circumstances or individual differences. For example, he notes that for some individuals, the need for self-esteem is more important than the need for love. For others, the need for creative fulfillment may supersede even the most basic needs.

Maslow (1987) also pointed out that most behavior is multi-motivated and noted that “any behavior tends to be determined by several or all of the basic needs simultaneously rather than by only one of them” (p. 71).

Maslow (1954) proposed that human beings possess two sets of needs. This five-stage model can be divided into deficiency needs and growth needs. The first four levels are often referred to as deficiency needs (*D-needs*), and the top level is known as growth or being needs (*B-needs*).



Deficiency needs

Deficiency needs concern basic survival and include physiological needs (such as the need for food, sex, and sleep) and safety needs (such as the need for security and freedom from danger).

Behaviors associated with these needs are seen as 'deficiency' motivated, as they are a means to an end.

Deficiency needs arise due to deprivation and are said to motivate people when they are unmet.

Also, the motivation to fulfill such needs will become stronger the longer they are denied. For example, the longer a person goes without food, the more hungry they will become.

Maslow (1943) initially stated that individuals must satisfy lower-level deficit needs before progressing to meet higher-level growth needs.

However, he later clarified that satisfaction of a need is not an "all-or-none" phenomenon, admitting that his earlier statements may have given "the false impression that a need must be satisfied 100 percent before the next need emerges" (1987, p. 69).

When a deficit need has been “more or less” satisfied, it will go away, and our activities become habitually directed toward meeting the next set of needs we have yet to satisfy.

These then become our salient needs. However, growth needs continue to be felt and may even become stronger once engaged.

Growth needs

Growth needs are more psychological and are associated with realizing an individual’s full potential and needing to ‘self-actualize’. These needs are achieved more through intellectual and creative behaviors.

Growth needs do not stem from a lack of something but rather from a desire to grow as a person.

Once these growth needs have been reasonably satisfied, one may be able to reach the highest level, called self-actualization. Growth needs are achieved more through intellectual and creative behaviors.

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 a failure to meet lower-level needs.

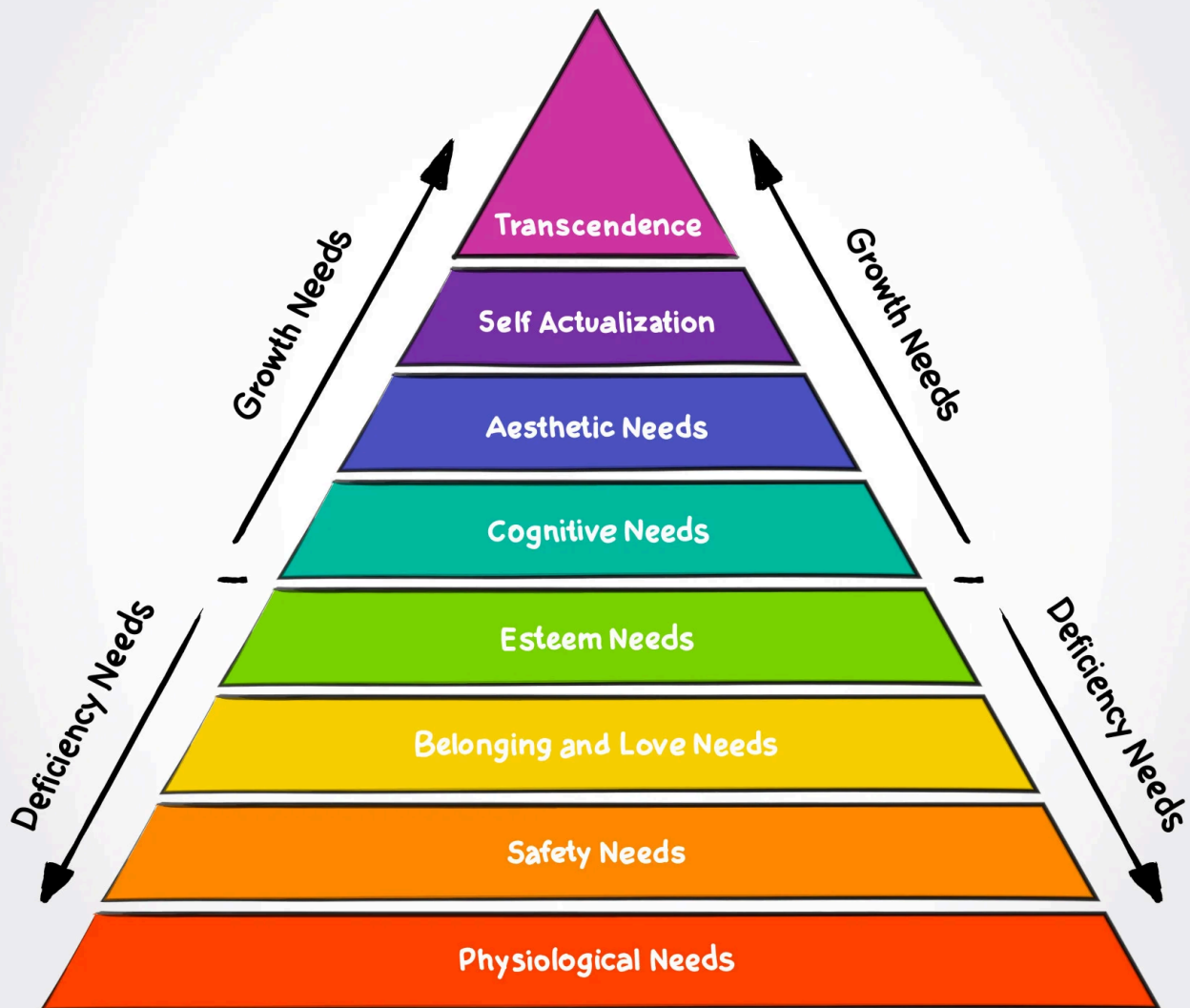
Life experiences, including divorce and the loss of a job, may cause an individual to fluctuate between levels of the hierarchy.

Therefore, not everyone will move through the hierarchy in a uni-directional manner but may move back and forth between the different types of needs.

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).

MASLOW'S MOTIVATION MODEL



Changes to the original five-stage model are highlighted and include a seven-stage model and an eight-stage model; both developed during the 1960s 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, freedom from fear.

3. **Love and belongingness needs** – friendship, intimacy, trust, and acceptance, receiving and giving affection and love. Affiliating, being part of a group (family, friends, work).
4. **Esteem needs** – which Maslow classified into two categories: (i) esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and (ii) the need to be accepted and valued by others (e.g., status, prestige).

5. **Cognitive needs** – knowledge and understanding, curiosity, exploration, need for meaning and predictability.

Cognitive needs drive our pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

For instance, a student's desire to understand complex mathematical theories, a traveler's curiosity about diverse cultures, or an individual's quest for life's deeper meanings all exemplify these needs.

Meeting these needs facilitates personal growth, comprehension, and a deeper understanding of life and its complexities.

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

Fulfilling these needs leads to a deeper sense of satisfaction and harmony in life, as individuals seek environments and experiences that are pleasing and resonant with their sense of beauty.

This involves the appreciation and pursuit of art, music, nature, and other forms of aesthetic expression.

Fulfilling these needs isn't just about physical beauty but also the emotional and psychological satisfaction derived from experiencing order and elegance.

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

8. **Transcendence needs** – A person is motivated by values that transcend beyond the personal self. Beyond self-actualization, they represent the human desire to connect with a higher reality, purpose, or the universe.

This level emphasizes altruism, spiritual connection, and helping others achieve their potential.

Individuals seek experiences that move beyond personal concerns, aiming to achieve a deep sense of unity, understanding, and belonging within the vast expanse of existence.

Examples of transcendence needs include mystical experiences and certain experiences with nature, aesthetic experiences, sexual experiences, service to others, the pursuit of science, religious faith, etc.).

Self-Actualization Needs

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 are fulfilled and doing all they are 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 in life that is important to them.

As each individual 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 sports, 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).

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 would reach the state of self-actualization.

He was especially interested in the characteristics of people whom he considered to have achieved their potential as individuals.

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:

1. Experiencing life like a child, with full absorption and concentration;

2. Trying new things instead of sticking to safe paths;
3. Listening to your own feelings in evaluating experiences instead of the voice of tradition, authority or the majority;
4. Avoiding pretense (“game playing”) and being honest;
5. Being prepared to be unpopular if your views do not coincide with those of the majority;
6. Taking responsibility and working hard;
7. 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 one’s potential.

Thus, someone can be silly, wasteful, vain and impolite, and still self-actualize. Less than two percent of the population achieve self-actualization.

Applications & Examples

Workplace organizations and employee motivation

The theory applies to organizational structures and the motivation of employees.

To enhance performance, the organizational culture and HR strategies must address and fulfill the needs of employees.

HR strategies, including compensation, benefits, job design, training, cultural development, and performance evaluations, can be tailored to cater to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Jerome, 2013).

1. What can managers do to motivate employees with physiological needs?

At the foundational physiological level, organizations should provide wages that sustain a decent standard of living and comprehensive benefits, ensuring employees can comfortably cater to necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care.

- **Offer comprehensive healthcare benefits** – Quality health insurance, dental, vision, mental health coverage, and wellness programs demonstrate you care about employees' overall health and ability to afford care.
- **Subsidize gym memberships** – Some companies offer monthly gym subsidies or onsite fitness centers to support physical health and stress management.
- **Make the space ergonomic** – Ensure workstations, chairs, keyboards, etc. are height adjustable and comfortable to work at for extended periods to prevent bodily strain or injury.
- **Pay for wellness services** – Some companies offer perks like free annual flu shots, smoking cessation programs, or biometric screenings to proactively address health.

2. What can managers do to motivate employees with safety needs?

For the safety tier, offering job stability, secure working conditions, and equitable compensation is essential.

Employees are more motivated when they feel both financially stable and physically safe within their workplace.

- **Establish anti-harassment policies and reporting procedures** – Ensure strong systems are in place for reporting issues confidentially and without retaliation.
- **Cultivate psychological safety** – Foster an environment where people feel safe to take risks, make mistakes, and speak up without fear of embarrassment or punishment.
- **Define and reinforce ethical standards** – Clearly establish and model expected conduct to prevent ethical lapses that undermine security.

- **Promote transparency in pay and promotion practices** – Clearly communicate compensation structure, advancement criteria, and salary negotiation options to build trust.



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3. What can managers do to motivate employees with social needs?

Addressing social needs involves cultivating an inclusive community within the organization.

Team-building exercises, social gatherings, mentorship initiatives, and transparent communication can foster a sense of belonging.

Motivation is heightened when employees feel appreciated and integrated within their teams.

- **Develop mother's rooms** – Providing clean, private lactation rooms supports new mothers' needs to pump breast milk during work hours.
- **Train supervisors in mental health first aid** – Equip leaders to recognize signs of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and properly intervene or connect employees with help.
- **Develop a mentorship program** – Allow experienced employees to mentor newer ones to establish interpersonal bonds and a sense of support.
- **Model inclusive language and behavior** – Use words and actions that are welcoming and respectful to all groups.
- **Share vulnerability and imperfections** – Leaders should open up on mistakes, challenges, and lessons learned to humanize the workplace.

4. What can managers do to motivate employees with esteem needs?

To cater to esteem needs, organizations should implement recognition systems, merit-based promotions, and leadership roles.

- **Leverage unique talents** – Properly designated titles that reflect an individual's role and status can also be beneficial.
- **Make the most of performance reviews** – Regular performance evaluations not only offer recognition but also highlight areas for growth, feeding into the employees' need for esteem. Thoroughly highlight strengths, progress made, and areas of influence.
- **Entrust employees with mentoring roles** – Having them share knowledge and coach others recognizes their expertise.

What can managers do to motivate employees with self-actualization needs?

For self-actualization, organizations should ensure that job roles align with employees' talents and passions.

By empowering employees, presenting them with challenges, and fostering an environment that encourages innovation, organizations can facilitate their journey toward self-actualization.

- **Foster innovation** – Dedicate time and resources for experimenting with new ideas without pressure.
- **Sponsor continuing education** – Provide tuition reimbursement or subsidies for advanced courses and certificate programs. Offer paid time for relevant reading, online courses, conferences, and seminars.

Workplace Motivation

A recent quantitative study by McConnell and Metz (2024) examined how different work arrangements (on-site, remote, hybrid) fulfill employees' needs.

Surveying full-time U.S. employees, they found that those in hybrid work settings reported significantly higher satisfaction of all five need levels, compared to employees working exclusively on-site or exclusively remotely

The hybrid arrangement, which offers flexibility along with in-person collaboration, appears to satisfy basic needs (job security, comfort) while also supporting social connection and personal growth, more so than the other arrangements

This finding suggests that workplaces which balance remote flexibility with opportunities for face-to-face interaction can better motivate employees by addressing the full spectrum of human needs.

The research by Ihensekien and Joel (2023) compares Maslow's hierarchy with [Herzberg's two-factor theory](#), finding clear alignment between the frameworks.

Maslow's lower-level needs correspond to Herzberg's "hygiene" factors, while higher-level needs match his intrinsic motivators.

Their review concludes that organizations must address both basic extrinsic needs (salary, job security) and higher intrinsic needs (recognition, growth opportunities) simultaneously to develop a motivated, high-performing workforce.

Effective management requires recognizing employees' diverse needs and creating conditions that satisfy both fundamental necessities and growth needs, resulting in more engaged and productive employees.

Nursing

The hierarchy provides a framework for understanding patients as multifaceted human beings.

Patient care should be holistic, not just medical. Nurses must assess and address the spectrum of patient needs – physical, mental, emotional, and social (Jackson et al., 2014; Toney-Butler & Thayer, 2023).

Doing so motivates greater engagement in care, faster healing, and improved outcomes.

- 1. Physiological needs (ABC + D)** – Ensure patients have adequate nutrition, hydration, pain control, sleep, and physical comfort. Address pain that hinders sleep and recovery.
 - **A** – Airway: Ensure the patient has an open airway.

- **B – Breathing:** Assess and support adequate breathing and gas exchange.
 - **C – Circulation:** Evaluate and maintain proper blood circulation.
 - **D – Decreased level of consciousness:** Monitor for any changes in behavior or mental status.
2. **Safety needs** – Maintain a clean, quiet environment with call bells for assistance. Prevent injuries through fall precautions, blood clot prevention, and pressure ulcer avoidance. Explain tests, treatments, and medications to patients to relieve anxiety. Keep patient info confidential. Foster a climate of trust through compassionate listening. Prevent medication errors.
 3. **Belongingness** – Loneliness impedes healing. Make patients feel welcomed and included. Introduce them to other patients. Allow for family visitation and spiritual practices.
 4. **Esteem** – Show respect through courteous communication and cultural sensitivity. Maintain dignity and privacy. Empower patients in care decisions. Explain care in an easy-to-understand way. Listen attentively to their concerns. Make them feel valued.
 5. **Self-actualization**— Align care with patient values and aspirations. Perhaps share motivational stories of those with similar diagnoses who stayed active or provide resources on coping with grief over health changes.

Special Considerations

- **Pain Management:** While pain is typically considered a physiological need, its priority can vary. Acute, severe pain or pain indicating a life-threatening condition should be addressed immediately.
- **Hospice Care:** For end-of-life care patients, comfort and quality of life may take precedence over addressing physiological needs.

Education

Maslow's (1962) 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 examines an individual's complete physical, emotional, social, and intellectual qualities and how they impact learning.

Applying Maslow's hierarchy theory to the work of the classroom teacher is obvious. Before a student's cognitive needs can be met, they must first fulfill 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.

Maslow's hierarchy provides a humanistic lens for teaching the whole child.

Maslow (1971, p. 195) argued that a humanistic educational approach would develop people who are "stronger, healthier, and would take their own lives into their hands to a greater extent. With increased personal responsibility for one's personal life, and with a rational set of values to guide one's choosing, people would begin to actively change the society in which they lived".

Here are some ways a teacher can apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the classroom:

- 1. Physiological** – Ensure students have access to water, food, restroom breaks, and movement. Allow snacks, flexible seating, and adequate breaks.
- 2. Safety** – Maintain an orderly classroom with clear expectations. Prevent bullying. Build trust through consistency and fairness. Allow students to make mistakes safely.

3. **Belongingness** – Facilitate community and collaboration. Foster teamwork through group projects. Learn student names and backgrounds. Appreciate diversity.
4. **Esteem** – Recognize student strengths and progress. Display student work. Empower leadership roles like line leader or tech helper. Praise efforts, not just achievement.
5. **Self-Actualization** – Help students pursue interests creatively. Assign passion projects. Encourage goal-setting. Provide enrichment opportunities. Support challenging oneself.

When these foundational needs are met, students are more motivated to learn and perform well academically. But needs fluctuate. Be observant and nurture needs as they arise.

Modern Applications in Technology and Society

1. AI and Ethics:

With the rapid rise of artificial intelligence in everyday life, scholars have started using Maslow's human-centric perspective to guide AI design and ethics.

For example, Montag et al. (2025) discuss how AI could *foster or hinder* human well-being at each level of need.

By adopting Maslow's hierarchy as a design framework, they argue we can ensure AI systems remain "needs-aware" – i.e. technology should support humans' physiological needs (e.g. health monitoring), safety needs (e.g. privacy and security), social needs (e.g. facilitating meaningful connection rather than isolation), esteem (e.g. supporting learning and achievement), and even self-actualization (e.g. creative AI tools).

This approach reframes AI's role as not just efficiency or profit, but promoting human flourishing.

It also raises ethical concerns: if AI algorithms manipulate our needs (for instance, social media AI drawing on our esteem or belonging needs to keep us hooked), we must govern technology in line with human values.

2. Digital Wellness and Social Media:

Digital technology has made satisfying certain needs easier *while* introducing new pitfalls.

Physiological and safety needs can now be met through digital conveniences: online grocery and food delivery, telemedicine, smart home devices for security, etc., meaning people can secure food, shelter, and safety without leaving their home.

Yet this convenience brings vulnerabilities – e.g. over-reliance on internet and supply chains (what happens to food and warmth if the power or network goes out?) and new threats like cyber-security risks that Maslow never had to consider

Love, belonging and esteem needs are profoundly affected by social media and online life.

Digital platforms make it easier to connect with friends, find communities, and gain recognition (likes, followers) – potentially fulfilling social and esteem needs virtually.

However, they also create *illusions* of connection and unhealthy validation loops: people may become addicted to chasing “likes” as a proxy for esteem, or feel lonelier despite being constantly connected, due to shallow online interactions.

The dopamine-driven feedback loops on social media can hijack our belonging and esteem needs, leading to anxiety and comparison rather than true fulfillment.

3. Climate Change and Disaster Preparedness:

Researchers in the 2020s have started reframing environmental issues through the hierarchy of needs.

For example, Adepoju (2025) argues that in an era of frequent climate-related disasters, disaster preparedness itself should be viewed as a basic human need, on par with food, water, and shelter.

In vulnerable communities (often low-income and historically marginalized areas hit hardest by floods, hurricanes, wildfires, etc.), being prepared for disasters – having evacuation plans, emergency supplies, resilient infrastructure – is literally a matter of survival.

Adepoju uses Maslow’s framework to illustrate that without this “preparedness” level secured (which falls under safety needs), people cannot easily progress to higher aspirations when they are continually knocked down by crises.

Furthermore, climate psychology researchers note that if society wants individuals to engage in pro-environmental behaviors (a higher-order concern, related to self-actualization or transcendence in

wanting to protect the planet), we must ensure their basic economic and safety needs are met first.

A person preoccupied with daily survival will understandably care less about recycling or carbon footprints.

On the flip side, when people do have stability, appealing to higher needs like purpose and legacy can motivate climate action – framing environmental stewardship as a path to meaning or community belonging.

Critical Evaluation

Before exploring each critique in detail, here are the main concerns raised about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:

- 1. Subjective Methodology:** Maslow's biographical analysis (based on a small, primarily Western sample) risks researcher bias and limited generalizability.
- 2. Cultural Bias:** Critics argue the hierarchy reflects Western, individualistic values and does not always apply uniformly across cultures.
- 3. Lack of Empirical Rigor:** Testing self-actualization and proving a strict stepwise sequence is challenging, making parts of the theory more speculative than scientifically proven.
- 4. Rigid Progression:** Real-world examples show people often meet higher-order needs (like belonging or creativity) even when some basic needs remain unmet.
- 5. Modern Pluralistic View of Motivation:** Contemporary psychologists often see motivation as multidimensional—people can experience and pursue several needs at once rather than progressing linearly from lower to higher needs.
- 6. Mental Health Contexts:** Research on homelessness, serious mental illness, and recovery suggests individuals continue striving for self-actualization or personal growth despite unmet basic needs, challenging the notion that one must fully satisfy lower needs first.
- 7. Overlooked Alternatives:** Other models (e.g., Alderfer's ERG, Self-Determination Theory) suggest more flexible or universal principles of motivation that do not rely on a linear structure.



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1. Subjective Biographical Analysis

The most significant limitation of Maslow's theory concerns his methodology. Maslow formulated the characteristics of self-actualized individuals by 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.

2. Biased Sample and Limited Generalizability

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, and 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.

Critics have often pointed out that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs reflects Western, **individualistic values**.

In many **collectivist** or non-Western cultures, community, spirituality, and family obligations may rank as foundational priorities, sometimes appearing at or near the base of the "pyramid" rather than being relegated to higher tiers.

Some cultures integrate spiritual fulfillment or communal welfare into their core survival needs, suggesting that people might see the entire group's well-being as inseparable from their own.

In these settings, "belongingness" isn't just a step toward individual esteem—it's often woven into everyday life.

3. Difficulty in Empirical Testing

A primary criticism is that Maslow himself did not provide empirical work to support his hierarchy of needs.

This absence of empirical foundation from the originator made it inherently difficult for subsequent researchers to operationalise his theory effectively.

Consequently, much of the widespread adoption and dissemination of his theory, often through the iconic pyramid, has occurred without a robust empirical basis for its claims.

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

Critics argue that his theory is more speculative than empirically proven, with a tendency to substitute rhetoric for rigorous research.

4. Rigid Progression of Needs?

Another criticism concerns Maslow's assumption that lower needs must be satisfied before a person can achieve self-actualization.

Real-world observations show this is not always the case, leading some to claim parts of the hierarchy have been falsified.

In practice, lower-order deficiency needs are often negated to accomplish higher-order being or growth needs. Examples include athletes overtraining, individuals foregoing sleep for work deadlines, or teachers enduring cold classrooms to maintain learning (Rojas, 2023).

These examples underscore that human motivation is far more dynamic and complex than the linear progression Maslow initially proposed.

Rather than ascending a fixed ladder, individuals often simultaneously address multiple needs across different levels, influenced heavily by personal aspirations and situational demands.

Montag et al. (2020) provided empirical support for this flexibility by demonstrating through a large-scale survey that many individuals prioritize social and esteem needs highly, even in situations where lower-level physiological and safety needs were not fully satisfied.

Furthermore, cross-cultural evidence from Tay and Diener (2011) indicates that individuals in poverty-stricken regions frequently pursue and fulfill higher-order social needs such as love, belonging, and esteem despite unresolved basic physiological or safety needs.

This research challenges Maslow's claim of a universal sequential hierarchy.

Additionally, historical examples of prominent creative individuals, including artists like Rembrandt and Van Gogh, demonstrate that self-actualization or profound creative expression can flourish even amidst severe material deprivation.

These observations and studies challenge the rigidity of Maslow's hierarchy, suggesting that human needs and motivations are better understood as interrelated and overlapping rather than strictly hierarchical.

5. Modern Pluralistic View of Motivation

Psychologists now conceptualize motivation as pluralistic, people can experience multiple needs simultaneously (Wahba & Bridwell, 1973).

Contemporary research by Tay and Diener (2011) supports the idea that universal human needs do exist, but they do not necessarily follow Maslow's strict order.

Tay and Diener 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.

Their large-scale study found that although basic needs tend to receive the most attention when unmet, people still benefit from meeting higher needs (e.g., social connections, respect) even when lower needs remain unfulfilled.

Diener compares needs to “vitamins”: we can experience well-being from multiple needs at once, even if some remain only partially satisfied.

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.”

6. Mental Health Contexts

Maslow’s hierarchy has proven valuable in mental health research and practice, offering insight into patient goals and system priorities.

A 2015 mixed-methods study by Derejko et al. applied Maslow’s theory to homeless adults with serious mental illness entering housing programs.

Quantitatively, the researchers found a counterintuitive result: individuals who still lacked basic necessities were often *more* likely to voice self-actualization goals (such as pursuing education or creative ambitions), rather than focusing exclusively on securing food and shelter.

Qualitative interviews revealed a complex interplay between basic and higher needs – many participants continued striving for meaning and personal growth even while some fundamental needs were unmet.

These findings suggest that, in the context of extreme hardship, people do not always follow a strict stepwise needs progression.

The authors argue that recovery-oriented care should be highly person-centered, helping clients pursue higher goals *alongside* efforts to meet basic needs.

In other words, mental health services should not assume that no self-improvement goals exist until housing and food are secured; often, the aspiration for purpose and self-worth persists and can be harnessed as part of the recovery process.

Zheng et al. (2016), using neuropsychological evidence, proposed a reordering of Maslow's hierarchy for mental disorders.

They prioritize safety needs above physiological needs.

This is because chronic insecurity is a key factor in anxiety, depression, and trauma-related disorders.

The brain's safety circuitry (**amygdala** and **stress response**) demonstrates how a lack of safety triggers severe distress.

Essentially, they suggest “flipping” Maslow's bottom two layers, making safety (absence of violence, financial stability, health security) the primary need for mental well-being.

This implies that mental health interventions and social policies should prioritize establishing safety as a foundation for other interventions (healthcare, social support, therapy).

7. Alternate Motivation Theories

Alderfer's ERG Theory

ERG theory offers a more flexible and dynamic model, allowing for overlapping needs and acknowledging that people often navigate back and forth between need levels based on circumstances -something Maslow hinted at but never emphasized as strongly.

Alderfer (1969) proposed three core categories of needs: Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (ERG):

- **Existence Needs (E)** – covering basic material and physiological requirements (food, water, shelter, safety).
- **Relatedness Needs (R)** – encompassing interpersonal relationships and social connections (love, belonging).
- **Growth Needs (G)** – focusing on personal development and self-fulfillment (parallels self-actualization).

How It Compares to Maslow:

- **Simultaneous vs. Sequential:** Unlike Maslow's largely sequential framework, ERG theory posits that individuals can pursue multiple levels of needs at the same time.
- **Frustration-Regression Hypothesis:** If higher-level needs (Growth) are not met, people may refocus on lower-level (Existence or Relatedness) needs with renewed intensity, rather than simply stalling.
- **Flexibility:** Because ERG theory does not require that one need be “fully satisfied” before addressing another, it can accommodate cultural and personal variations more readily.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg's theory parallels Maslow's distinction between basic (deficiency) needs and growth (fulfillment) needs but emphasizes that satisfying lower needs only neutralizes dissatisfaction.

True motivation emerges from meeting “higher” motivators.

- **Hygiene Factors:** Elements like salary, job security, and working conditions, which, if missing, cause dissatisfaction but do not necessarily motivate people when present.

- **Motivators (Satisfiers):** Factors such as recognition, responsibility, and personal growth, which genuinely drive motivation and satisfaction when they are fulfilled.

How It Compares to Maslow:

- **Overlap with Lower vs. Higher Needs:** Hygiene factors resemble Maslow's lower-level needs (physiological and safety), while motivators align with higher-level needs (esteem, self-actualization).
- **Importance of Elimination of Dissatisfaction:** Herzberg argues that removing negative conditions (e.g., poor work environment) does not automatically result in motivation—workers need motivators for true engagement.
- **Focus on Workplace:** Herzberg's theory is often applied in organizational settings, whereas Maslow's model has broader applications, from education to personal development.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan)

Deci and Ryan (1985) proposed that individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness:

- **Autonomy:** Feeling in control of one's actions and decisions.
- **Competence:** Feeling capable and effective in interacting with the environment.
- **Relatedness:** Feeling connected and supported by others.

SDT shifts attention from a layered progression to a **holistic** view of motivation, suggesting that personal growth and well-being arise from the constant interplay of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—regardless of one's stage in a hierarchy.

How It Compares to Maslow:

- **Not Strictly Hierarchical:** Deci and Ryan propose that humans continuously seek autonomy, competence, and relatedness; no single need must be fully addressed before another becomes important.

- **Intrinsic Motivation Focus:** Self-Determination Theory (SDT) spotlights how internal drives (e.g., genuine interest, personal values) fuel learning, well-being, and performance, rather than prioritizing external factors like pay or status.
- **Cross-Cultural Flexibility:** SDT has been explored extensively across different cultures, suggesting these three needs are universal and can be pursued simultaneously, an idea that overlaps with and expands Maslow's "growth" dimensions.

Kaufman's Sailboat Metaphor (2020)

Psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman, in his book "Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization," proposed replacing Maslow's pyramid with a sailboat metaphor to represent human needs.

Kaufman differentiates between two core categories of needs: security and growth.



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- **Security Needs (Hull):** These combine Maslow's foundational needs—safety, connection/belonging, and self-esteem—forming the stable "hull" that keeps individuals afloat and secure.
- **Growth Needs (Sail):** These include exploration, love, and purpose, represented as a "sail" that propels individuals forward once their foundational security needs are stable.

How It Compares to Maslow:

- **Overlap with Lower vs. Higher Needs:** Kaufman's security needs directly align with Maslow's lower-level needs (physiological, safety, social connection, and self-esteem). His growth needs parallel Maslow's higher-order needs, specifically self-actualization and transcendence.

- **Dynamic and Non-Linear Approach:** Unlike Maslow's hierarchical pyramid, Kaufman emphasizes a continuous balance between security and growth rather than sequential steps. Individuals constantly manage foundational security while pursuing personal and meaningful growth.
- **Inclusion of Self-Transcendence:** Kaufman explicitly includes self-transcendence (pursuing purpose beyond oneself), reflecting Maslow's later thoughts and extending the original hierarchy by integrating modern positive psychology and evolutionary research.

Kaufman's sailboat metaphor serves as a practical, contemporary visualization of human motivation, addressing Maslow's limitations by highlighting the fluid and interconnected nature of human needs.

Summary of Comparisons

1. Hierarchy vs. Overlap:

- **Maslow** mainly argued a loose progression (lower to higher needs).
- **Alderfer** and **SDT** allow multiple needs to coexist, granting greater flexibility.
- **Herzberg** splits conditions into hygiene factors (removing dissatisfaction) and motivators (driving satisfaction).

2. Deficiency vs. Growth:

- **Maslow** and **Herzberg** both highlight the difference between meeting basic needs (preventing dissatisfaction) and pursuing higher-level fulfillment.
- **Alderfer's Growth** and **SDT's Competence/Autonomy** similarly emphasize advanced, self-directed pursuits.

3. Cultural & Individual Variations:

- **Alderfer** and **SDT** more explicitly account for individual and cultural differences in the order or prominence of needs.
- **Maslow** acknowledged flexibility but still proposed a somewhat universal pattern.

Conclusion

Maslow's theory differs from more purely physiological representations of human motivation because motivation is seen as being not just concerned with tension reduction and survival but also with human growth and development.

While Maslow's work was indeed relatively informal and clinically descriptive, it did provide a rich source of ideas, and as such, a framework for discussing the richness and complexity of human motivation that goes beyond homeostatic models and other biological models.

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Hierarchy of Needs in the Workplace

- [Organizational Culture, Human Resource and Employee's Performance](#)

- [Improving Workplace Productivity: Applications of Maslow's Need Theory and Locke's Goal-Setting](#)

Keep Learning

Here are questions specifically designed to guide students through critically evaluating Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, ranked from lower-level (basic comprehension and recall) to higher-level (critical analysis, synthesis, and evaluation):

Low-Level Questions (Recall & Understanding)

1. What are the five main stages in Maslow's original hierarchy?
 2. Can you give an example of physiological needs and safety needs from your own life or environment?
 3. How does Maslow suggest the hierarchy works regarding the progression of needs?
-

Medium-Level Questions (Application & Analysis)

4. According to Maslow, why might someone focus on love and belongingness before completely satisfying safety needs? Provide an example.
 5. Maslow's hierarchy has been expanded to include cognitive and aesthetic needs. Why might these needs be important for individuals even before reaching self-actualization?
 6. In your opinion, how might cultural differences impact the prioritization of these needs? Provide a specific example from a non-Western culture.
-

High-Level Questions (Synthesis & Evaluation)

7. Critically evaluate whether Maslow's hierarchy accurately represents the complexity of human motivation based on what you've read. What are its strengths and weaknesses?
8. Can you compare Maslow's theory with Alderfer's ERG theory or Self-Determination Theory? How does Maslow's model differ, and what implications does this have for understanding human motivation?
9. How might you improve Maslow's theory to make it more universally applicable to different cultures.
10. Maslow suggests self-actualization is rare, achievable by fewer than 2% of people. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? How might societal changes (like increased educational access or technological advancements) alter the likelihood of achieving self-actualization?

Reviewer

Author

Olivia Guy-Evans, MSc**BSc (Hons) Psychology, MSc Psychology of Education**

Associate Editor for Simply Psychology



Olivia Guy-Evans is a writer and associate editor for Simply Psychology, where she contributes accessible content on psychological topics. She is also an autistic PhD student at the University of Birmingham, researching autistic camouflaging in higher education.

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+447438296273

contact@simplypsychology.org

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