Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often portrayed in the shape of a pyramid with the largest, most fundamental needs at the bottom and the need for self-actualization and transcendence at the top. In other words, the theory is that individuals’ most basic needs must be met before they become motivated to achieve higher level needs.

The most fundamental and basic four layers of the pyramid contain what Maslow called "deficiency needs" or "d-needs": esteem, friendship and love, security, and physical needs. If these "deficiency needs" are not met – with the exception of the most fundamental (physiological) need – there may not be a physical indication, but the individual will feel 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.

The human brain is a complex system and has parallel processes running at the same time, thus many different motivations from various levels of Maslow's hierarchy can occur at the same time. Maslow spoke clearly about these levels and their satisfaction in terms such as "relative", "general", and "primarily". Instead of stating that the individual focuses on a certain need at any given time, Maslow stated that a certain need "dominates" the human organism. Thus Maslow acknowledged the likelihood that the different levels of motivation could occur at any time in the human mind, but he focused on identifying the basic types of motivation and the order in which they would tend to be met.

Physiological needs

Physiological need is a concept that was derived to explain and cultivate the foundation for motivation. This concept is the main physical requirement for human survival. This means that physiological needs are universal human needs. Physiological needs are considered in internal motivation according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This theory states that humans are compelled to fulfill these physiological needs first in order to pursue intrinsic satisfaction on a higher level. If these needs are not achieved, it leads to an increase in displeasure within an individual. In return, when individuals feel this increase in displeasure, the motivation to decrease these discrepancies increases. Physiological needs can be defined as both traits and a state. Physiological needs as traits allude to long-term, unchanging demands that are required of basic human life. Physiological needs as a state allude to the unpleasant decrease in pleasure and the increase for an incentive to fulfill a necessity. In order to pursue intrinsic motivation higher up Maslow's hierarchy, Physiological needs must be met first. This means that if a human is struggling to meet their physiological needs, then they are unlikely to intrinsically pursue safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization.

Physiological needs include:

Homeostasis

Health

Food and water

Sleep

Clothes

Shelter

Safety needs

Once a person's physiological needs are relatively satisfied, their safety needs take precedence and dominate behavior. In the absence of physical safety – due to war, natural disaster, family violence, childhood abuse, institutional racism etc. – people may (re-)experience post-traumatic stress disorder or transgenerational trauma. In the absence of economic safety – due to an economic crisis and lack of work opportunities – these safety needs manifest themselves in ways such as a preference for job security, grievance procedures for protecting the individual from unilateral authority, savings accounts, insurance policies, disability accommodations, etc. This level is more likely to predominate in children as they generally have a greater need to feel safe. Safety and security needs are about keeping us safe from harm. These include shelter, job security, health, and safe environments. If a person does not feel safe in an environment, they will seek to find safety before they attempt to meet any higher level of survival, but the need for safety is not as important as basic physiological needs.

Safety and Security needs include:

Personal security

Emotional security

Financial security

Health and well-being

Safety needs against accidents/illness and their adverse impacts

Social belonging

After physiological and safety needs are fulfilled, the third level of human needs are seen to be interpersonal and involves feelings of belongingness. This need is especially strong in childhood and it can override the need for safety as witnessed in children who cling to abusive parents. Deficiencies within this level of Maslow's hierarchy – due to hospitalism, neglect, shunning, ostracism, etc. – can adversely affect the individual's ability to form and maintain emotionally significant relationships in general.

Social Belonging needs include:

Friendships

Intimacy

Family

According to Maslow, humans possess an affective need for a sense of belonging and acceptance among social groups, regardless of whether these groups are large or small. For example, some large social groups may include clubs, co-workers, religious groups, professional organizations, sports teams, gangs, and online communities. Some examples of small social connections include family members, intimate partners, mentors, colleagues, and confidants. Humans need to love and be loved – both sexually and non-sexually – by others. Many people become susceptible to loneliness, social anxiety, and clinical depression in the absence of this love or belonging element.

This need for belonging may overcome the physiological and security needs, depending on the strength of the peer pressure. In contrast, for some individuals, the need for self-esteem is more important than the need for belonging; and for others, the need for creative fulfillment may supersede even the most basic needs.

Self-esteem

Esteem needs are ego needs or status needs. People develop a concern with getting recognition, status, importance, and respect from others. Most humans have a need to feel respected; this includes the need to have self-esteem and self-respect. Esteem presents the typical human desire to be accepted and valued by others. People often engage in a profession or hobby to gain recognition. These activities give the person a sense of contribution or value. Low self-esteem or an inferiority complex may result from imbalances during this level in the hierarchy. People with low self-esteem often need respect from others; they may feel the need to seek fame or glory. However, fame or glory will not help the person to build their self-esteem until they accept who they are internally. Psychological imbalances such as depression can distract the person from obtaining a higher level of self-esteem.

Most people have a need for stable self-respect and self-esteem. Maslow noted two versions of esteem needs: a "lower" version and a "higher" version. The "lower" version of esteem is the need for respect from others, and may include a need for status, recognition, fame, prestige, and attention. The "higher" version manifests itself as the need for self-respect, and can include a need for strength, competence, mastery, self-confidence, independence, and freedom. This "higher" version takes guidelines, the "hierarchies are interrelated rather than sharply separated".This means that esteem and the subsequent levels are not strictly separated; instead, the levels are closely related.

Self-actualization

"What a man can be, he must be." This quotation forms the basis of the perceived need for self-actualization. This level of need refers to the realization of one's full potential. Maslow describes this as the desire to accomplish everything that one can, to become the most that one can be. Individuals perceive or focus on this need very specifically. People may have a strong, particular desire to become an ideal parent, succeed athletically, or create paintings, pictures, or inventions.

Maslow believed that to understand this level of need, the person must not only succeed in the previous needs but master them. Self-actualization can be described as a value-based system when discussing its role in motivation; self-actualization is understood as the goal-or explicit motive, and the previous stages in Maslow's Hierarchy fall in line to become the step-by-step process by which self-actualization is achievable; an explicit motive is the objective of a reward-based system that is used to intrinsically drive completion of certain values or goals.

Individuals who are motivated to pursue this goal seek and understand how their needs, relationships, and sense of self are expressed through their behavior. Self-actualization can include:

Partner Acquisition

Parenting

Utilizing & Developing Talents & Abilities

Pursuing goals