

Abraham Maslow: Understanding the Human Potential

Authored by
mohammad looti

June 17, 2026

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2026). *Abraham Maslow: Understanding the Human Potential*.
PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38543>



Abraham Harold Maslow

Abraham Harold Maslow (April 1, 1908 - June 8, 1970) was an American professor of psychology at Brandeis University, Brooklyn College, New School for Social Research and Columbia University who founded humanistic psychology and created Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He stressed the importance of focusing on the positive qualities in people, as opposed to treating them as a 'bag of symptoms.'

Biography

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Maslow was the oldest of seven children. His parents were first generation Jewish immigrants from Russia who were not intellectually oriented but valued education. Maslow described himself as shy, timid, and awkward during his childhood. It was a tough time for Maslow, as he experienced Anti-semitism from his teachers and from other children around the neighborhood. He had various encounters with anti-semitic gangs who would chase and throw rocks at him. The tension outside of his home was also felt within it, he never got along with his mother, and actually developed a strong revulsion towards her. He is quoted as saying "What I had reacted to and totally hated and rejected was not only her physical appearance, but also her values and world view, her stinginess, her total selfishness, her lack of love for anyone else in the world -- even her own husband and children -- her narcissism, her Negro prejudice, her exploitation of everyone, her assumption that anyone was wrong who disagreed with her, her lack of friends, her sloppiness and dirtiness..." He also grew up with few friends other than his cousin

Will, and as a result "... grew up in libraries and among books." It was here that he developed his love for reading and learning. He went to Boys High School, one of the top high schools in Brooklyn. Here, he served as the officer to many academic clubs, and became editor of the Latin Magazine. He also edited Principia, the school's Physics paper, for a year.

After graduating from High School Maslow went to the City College of New York. In 1926 he began taking legal studies classes at night in addition to his undergraduate course load. He hated it and almost immediately dropped out. In 1927 he transferred to Cornell, but due to poor grades and the high cost of the education, he left after just one semester. He re-enrolled at city college and upon graduation went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin to study psychology. In 1928, he married his first cousin Bertha, whom he had met in Brooklyn years earlier and who was still in High School at the time. Maslow's psychology training at UW was decidedly experimental-behaviorist. At Wisconsin he pursued a line of research which included, investigating primate dominance behaviour and sexuality. Maslow, upon the recommendation of Professor Hulsey Cason wrote his master's thesis on 'learning, retention, and reproduction of verbal material.' Maslow regarded the research as embarrassingly trivial, but he completed his thesis the summer of 1931 and was awarded his master's degree in Psychology. Afterward, he was so ashamed of the thesis that he removed it from the psychology library and tore out its catalog listing. Ironically, Professor Carson admired the research enough to urge Maslow to submit it for publication. Much to Maslow's surprise, his thesis was published as two articles in 1934.

He went on to further research at Columbia University, continuing similar studies; there he found another mentor in Alfred Adler, one of Sigmund Freud's early colleagues. From 1937 to 1951, Maslow was on the faculty of Brooklyn College. In New York he found two more mentors, anthropologist Ruth Benedict and Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer, whom he admired both professionally and personally. These two were so accomplished in both realms, and such "wonderful human beings" as well, that Maslow began taking notes about them and their behaviour. This would be the basis of his lifelong research and thinking about mental health and human potential. He wrote extensively on the subject, borrowing ideas from other psychologists but adding significantly to them, especially the concepts of a hierarchy of needs, metaneeds, metamotivation, self-actualizing persons, and peak experiences. Maslow became the leader of the humanistic school of psychology that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, which he referred to as the "third force" -- beyond Freudian theory and behaviourism. In 1967, the American Humanist Association named him Humanist of the Year.

Death

Maslow was a professor at Brandeis University from 1951 to 1969, and then became a resident fellow of the Laughlin Institute in California. He died of a heart attack on June 8, 1970.

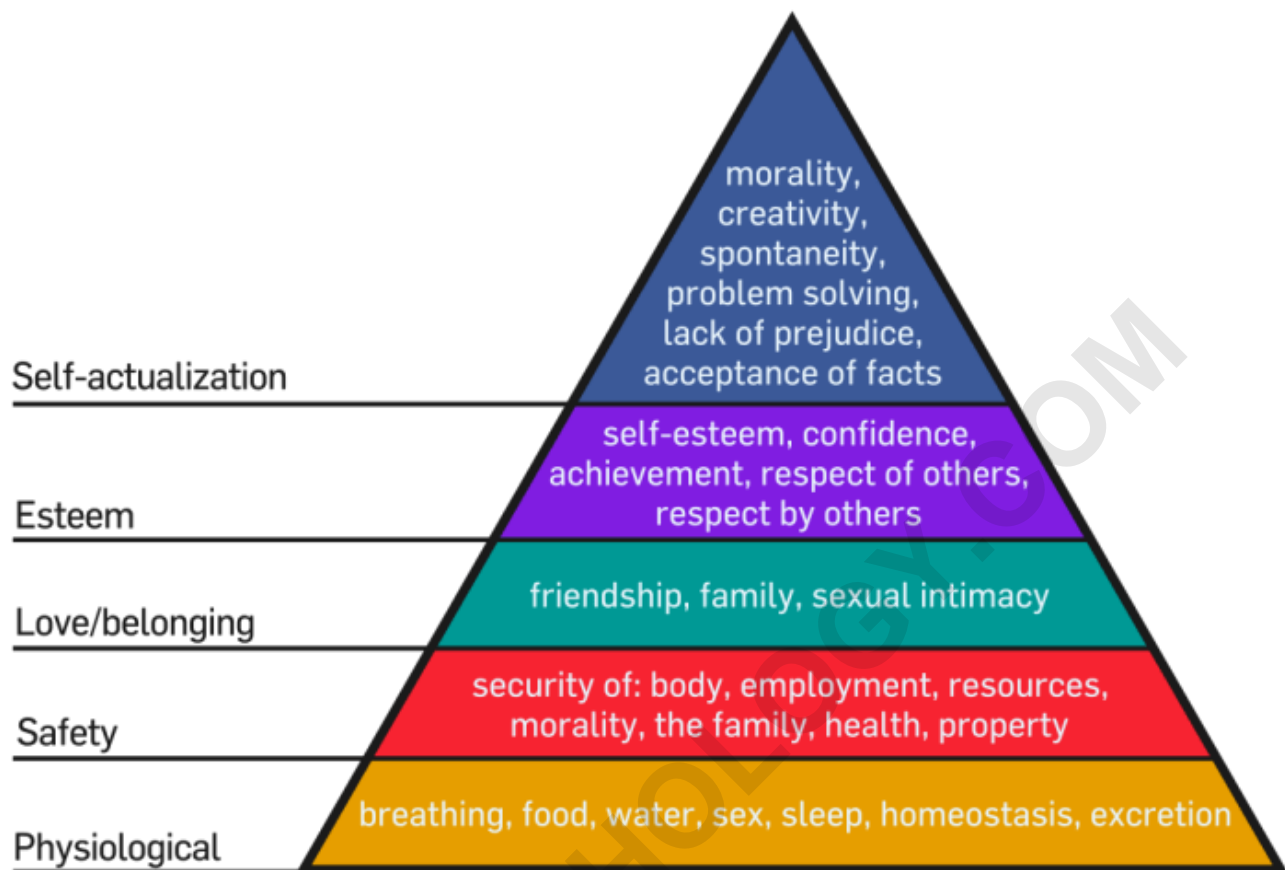
Humanistic theories of self-actualization

Many psychologists have made impacts on society's understanding of the world. Abraham Maslow was one of these; he brought a new face to the study of human behavior. He called his new discipline, "Humanistic Psychology."

His family life and his experiences influenced his psychological ideas. After World War II, Maslow began to question the way psychologists had come to their conclusions, and though he didn't completely disagree, he had his own ideas on how to understand the human mind.

Humanistic psychologists believe that every person has a strong desire to realize his or her full potential, to reach a level of "self-actualization". To prove that humans are not simply blindly reacting to situations, but trying to accomplish something greater, Maslow studied mentally healthy individuals instead of people with serious psychological issues. This informed his theory that people experience "peak experiences", high points in life when the individual is in harmony with himself and his surroundings. In Maslow's view, self-actualized people can have many peak experiences throughout a day while others have those experiences less frequently.

Hierarchy of needs



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

A visual aid Maslow created to explain his theory, which he called the Hierarchy of Needs, is a pyramid depicting the levels of human needs, psychological and physical. When a human being ascends the steps of the pyramid he reaches self actualization. At the bottom of the pyramid are the "Basic needs or Physiological needs" of a human being, food and water and sex. The next level is "Safety Needs: Security, Order, and Stability." These two steps are important to the physical survival of the person. Once individuals have basic nutrition, shelter and safety, they attempt to accomplish more. The third level of need is "Love and Belonging," which are psychological needs; when individuals have taken care of themselves physically, they are ready to share themselves with others. The fourth level is achieved when individuals feel comfortable with what they have accomplished. This is the "Esteem" level, the level of success and status (from self and others). The top of the pyramid, "Need for Self-actualization," occurs when individuals reach a state of harmony and understanding. (The Developing Person through the Life Span, (1983) pg. 44)

Maslow based his study on the writings of other psychologists, Albert Einstein and people he knew who clearly met the standard of self actualization. Maslow used Einstein's writings and accomplishments to exemplify the characteristics of the self actualized person. He realized that all the individuals he studied had similar personality traits. All were "reality centered", able to differentiate what was fraudulent from what was genuine. They were also "problem centered", meaning that they treated life's difficulties as problems that demanded solutions. These individuals also were comfortable being alone and had healthy personal relationships. They had only a few close friends and family rather than a large number of shallow relationships. One historical figure Maslow found to be helpful in his journey to understanding self actualization was Lao Tzu, The Father of Taoism. A tenet of Taoism is that people do not obtain personal meaning or pleasure by seeking material possessions.

When Maslow introduced these ideas some weren't ready to understand them; others dismissed them as unscientific. Sometimes viewed as disagreeing with Freud and psychoanalytic theory, Maslow actually positioned his work as a vital complement to that of Freud. Maslow stated in his book, "It is as if Freud supplied us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half." (Toward a psychology of being, 1968) There are two faces of human nature--the sick and the healthy--so there should be two faces of psychology.

Consequently, Maslow argued, the way in which essential needs are fulfilled is just as important as the needs themselves. Together, these define the human experience. To the extent a person finds cooperative social fulfillment, he establishes meaningful relationships with other people and the larger world. In other words, he establishes meaningful connections to an external reality--an essential component of self-actualization. In contrast, to the extent that vital needs find selfish and competitive fulfillment, a person acquires hostile emotions and limited external relationships--his awareness remains internal and limited.

Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer were Maslow's models of self-actualization. From them he generalized that, among other characteristics, self-actualizing people tend to focus on problems outside themselves; have a clear sense of what is true and what is false; are spontaneous and creative; and are not bound too strictly by social conventions.

Beyond the routine of needs fulfillment, Maslow envisioned moments of extraordinary experience, known as Peak experiences, which are profound moments of love, understanding, happiness, or rapture, during which a person feels more whole, alive, self-sufficient and yet a part of the world, more aware of truth, justice, harmony, goodness, and so on. Self-actualizing people have many such peak experiences.

Maslow used the term Metamotivation to describe self actualized people who are driven by innate forces beyond their basic needs, so that they may explore and reach their full human potential

B-values

In studying accounts of peak experiences, Maslow identified a manner of thought he called "Being-cognition" (or "B-cognition", which is holistic and accepting, as opposed to the evaluative "Deficiency-cognition" or "D-cognition") and values he called "Being-values". He listed the B-values as:

WHOLENESS (unity; integration; tendency to one-ness; interconnectedness; simplicity; organization; structure; dichotomy-transcendence; order);

PERFECTION (necessity; just-right-ness; just-so-ness; inevitability; suitability; justice; completeness; "oughtness");

COMPLETION (ending; finality; justice; "it's finished"; fulfillment; finis and telos; destiny; fate);

JUSTICE (fairness; orderliness; lawfulness; "oughtness");

ALIVENESS (process; non-deadness; spontaneity; self-regulation; full-functioning);

RICHNESS (differentiation, complexity; intricacy);

SIMPLICITY (honesty; nakedness; essentiality; abstract, essential, skeletal structure);

BEAUTY (rightness; form; aliveness; simplicity; richness; wholeness; perfection; completion; uniqueness; honesty);

GOODNESS (rightness; desirability; oughtness; justice; benevolence; honesty);

UNIQUENESS (idiosyncrasy; individuality; non-comparability; novelty);

EFFORTLESSNESS (ease; lack of strain, striving or difficulty; grace; perfect, beautiful functioning);

PLAYFULNESS (fun; joy; amusement; gaiety; humor; exuberance; effortlessness);

TRUTH (honesty; reality; nakedness; simplicity; richness; oughtness; beauty; pure, clean and unadulterated; completeness; essentiality).

SELF-SUFFICIENCY (autonomy; independence; not-needing-other-than-itself-in-order-to-be-itself; self-determining; environment-transcendence; separateness; living by its own laws).

Legacy

Maslow's thinking was original -- most psychologists before him had been concerned with the abnormal and the ill. He wanted to know what constituted positive mental health. Humanistic psychology gave rise to several different therapies, all guided by the idea that people possess the inner resources for growth and healing and that the point of therapy is to help remove obstacles to individuals' achieving them. The most famous of these was client-centered therapy developed by Carl Rogers.

Maslow's influence extended beyond psychology - his work on peak experiences is relevant to religious studies, while his work on management is applicable to transpersonal business studies.

In 2006, conservative social critic Christina Hoff Sommers and practicing psychiatrist Sally Satel asserted that due to lack of empirical support for his theories, Maslow's ideas have fallen out of

fashion and are "no longer taken seriously in the world of academic psychology." However, Maslow's work has enjoyed a revival of interest and influence among leaders of the positive psychology movement such as Martin Seligman.

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM