

# Dealing with Difficult Behavior & The Maslow Need Hierarchy



Understanding why some clients engage in difficult behavior helps choose strategies to deal with the behavior effectively. Psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1908 - 1970) need hierarchy suggests that unmet needs help explain difficult behavior patterns.

While doing research, Maslow noticed that some needs took precedence over others. For example, if hungry and thirsty, most people deal with thirst first, a “stronger” need than hunger. And even if extremely thirsty, but unable to breathe, everyone would agree that breathing trumps thirst.

Maslow's theory holds that human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs; lower needs take precedence over higher needs and must be satisfied first. When a need is mostly satisfied it no longer motivates and the next higher need takes its place.

Maslow's theory offers insight about the motivations behind "difficult" behaviors. Many of our clients have unsatisfied needs in the hierarchy's first four levels. People who are homeless, for example, are focused at the most basic physiological needs. Many other clients are focused on safety needs. Their level of need has implications for what kind of information clients need from us, how we might deliver that information, and how they might react when we don't or can't deliver what they need.

## Physiological Needs

Physiological needs are the very basic needs such as air, water, food, sleep, sex. When unsatisfied we may feel sick, irritated, uncomfortable. These feelings motivate us to alleviate

them as soon as possible to reestablish our equilibrium. Once alleviated, we are able focus on other things.

Physiological Needs:

- can affect perception - when on a diet, we are preoccupied with food;
- can be satisfied, *e.g.*, by getting enough to eat, drink;
- at work, focuses us on the next pay check;
- if deprived, can cause illness, *e.g.*, lack of Vitamin D can result in rickets;
- if pathological, we can eat, drink too much or engage in hoarding behaviors.

### **Safety Needs**

When physiological needs are largely satisfied, we become increasingly interested in finding safe circumstances, stability, and protection. We might develop a need for structure, order, some limits. In many American adults, this needs set manifests itself in wanting a home in a safe neighborhood, some job security, or a good retirement plan.

When safety needs are not met, we can't move to the next level. If one partner in a relationship is abusive to the other for example, the abused partner cannot move to the next level because of constant concern for safety. Love and belongingness have to wait until fear subsides.

Safety needs:

- can affect our perception, *e.g.*, paranoia;
- can be satisfied, *e.g.*, getting a stable job;
- at work, focuses us on getting fringe benefits, dental insurance;
- if deprived, can lead to neurosis, insecurity;
- if pathological, can develop phobias such as agoraphobia.

### **Belonging - Love Needs**

When physiological needs and safety needs mostly are met, we begin to feel the need for friends, a partner, children, affectionate relationships, a sense of community. Humans have a desire to live and belong to groups including clubs, work groups, religious groups, family, gangs. We need to feel loved and accepted by others. Viewed negatively, we become increasingly susceptible to loneliness and social anxieties.

Belonging - Love Needs:

- can affect our perception, *e.g.*, singles vs. couples;
- can be satisfied; *e.g.*, good partnership or marriage;
- at work, we focus on getting a good boss and good working conditions
- if deprived, can lead to loneliness
- if pathological, can lead to antisocial behavior.

## **Esteem Needs**

Maslow posed two versions -- lower and higher esteem needs. Lower form needs are respect from others, for status, fame, glory, recognition, attention, reputation, appreciation, dignity, even dominance. Higher form involves the need for self-respect, including such feelings as confidence, competence, achievement, mastery, independence, and freedom. Maslow considers this latter version a "higher" form because he considers self-respect as harder to lose than respect from others.

Low self-esteem and an inferiority complex are negative versions of these needs. Maslow agreed with psychologist Alfred Adler's theory that self-esteem needs are at the root of many, if not most, psychological problems. This theory also assumes that the more basic physiological, safety and love-belonging needs are mostly satisfied.

Esteem needs:

can affect our perception, *e.g.*, "I get no respect;"

- can be satisfied, *e.g.*, doing a job well;
- at work, can focus us on "employee of the month" awards;
- if deprived, can lead to feelings of inferiority;
- if pathological, can lead to depression.

## **Self-Actualization Needs**

The need for self-actualization is "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming." People can seek knowledge, peace, esthetic experiences, self-fulfillment.

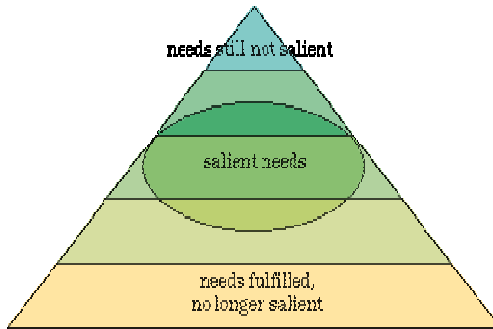
Self-actualization needs:

- do not distort our perception as do other needs; when self-actualized, we more accurately perceive what exists;
- can never be satisfied -- when can you have enough truth, beauty, or justice?
- at work, focus on creativity, fulfillment; ways to increase employee enjoyment and satisfaction;
- if deprived, can cause feelings on lack of meaning in life, boredom;
- if pathological, metapathologies such as boredom, cynicism, alienation.

## **Deficit Needs**

The first four levels -- physiological, safety, belonging, self-esteem -- Maslow calls deficit needs, or D-needs. If you don't have enough of something, *i.e.*, you have a deficit -- you feel the need. But if needs are met, they are no longer salient and you feel nothing at all. Consequently, these needs don't motivate. As the old blues song goes, "you don't miss your water 'til your well runs dry."

Maslow extends to needs the principle of homeostasis or dynamic equilibrium. When lacking a certain substance, our bodies develop a hunger for it; when the body gets enough of that substance, hunger stops.



Maslow sees all these needs as essentially survival needs. Even love and esteem are needed for maintaining health. Humans have these needs built in genetically, like instincts.

Maslow conceived overall human development as sequentially satisfying these basic needs. As newborns, our focus -- if not our entire set of needs -- is on the physiological. Soon, we begin to recognize that we need to be safe. Soon after that, we crave attention and affection. A bit later, we look for self-esteem.

### **Regression and Neurosis**

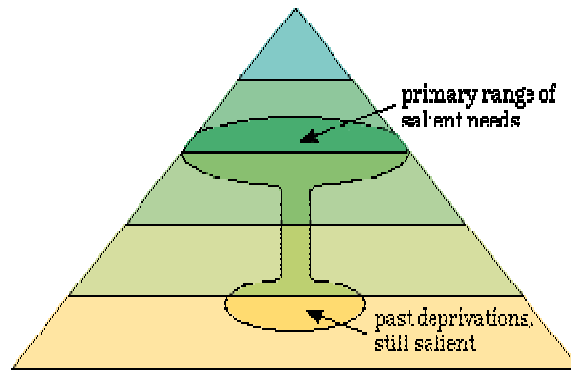
Under stressful conditions, or when survival is threatened, we can “regress” to a lower need level. When our great career falls flat, we might seek some attention. When we have family problems, it seems that love is again all we ever wanted. When we face bankruptcy even after a long and happy life, we suddenly can’t think of anything except money.

Regression can occur on a society-wide basis as well. When society suddenly flounders, people start clamoring for a strong leader to make things right. When planes start flying into buildings, they look for safety. When food stops coming into the stores, needs become even more basic.

Maslow suggested that we can ask people for their “philosophy of the future” -- what would their ideal life or world be like -- and get significant information as to what needs they do or do not have covered.

If we have significant problems along our development -- a period of extreme insecurity or hunger, loss of a family member, or significant neglect or abuse -- we may “fixate” on that needs set for the rest of our lives.

Maslow understands neurosis as fixation at a certain needs level. If people grew up poor but now have everything they need and yet still find themselves obsessing over having enough money and keeping the pantry well-stocked. Or perhaps parents divorced when a person was young and now despite a wonderful partner, she gets insanely jealous or worries that her partner will leave because she's not “good enough.”



### Being Needs or Self-Actualization

Maslow referred to the highest level as growth motivation, being needs (B-needs) or self-actualization.

B-needs do not involve balance or homeostasis. Once engaged, they continue to be felt, becoming stronger as we feed them. They involve the continuous desire to fulfill potential, to “be all that you can be.” They are a matter of becoming the most complete, the fullest “you” -- hence the term, self-actualization.

According to Maslow, if we want to be truly self-actualizing, we need to have our lower needs mostly satisfied. In other words, if hungry, we scramble for food; if unsafe, we are continuously on guard; if isolated and unloved, we constantly are seeking love from other people or groups; if a low sense of self-esteem, we can be defensive or seek other ways to compensate. When lower needs are unmet, we can't fully devote ourselves to fulfilling our potential.

Maslow posited that as we become more self-actualized and self-transcendent we become wiser, knowing what to do in a wide variety of situations. At one point he suggested only about two percent of the world's population is truly, self-actualizing.

### Needs Theory: Maslow & Beyond

Maslow first published his theory 50 years ago (Maslow 1943) and it has become one of the most popular and often cited human motivation theories. In spite of a lack of hard research to support the model, it enjoys wide acceptance (Wahba & Bridgewell, 1976; Soper, Milford & Rosenthal, 1995).

John Burton in *Deviance, Terrorism and War* (1979) points out that Maslow's hierarchy of developmental needs is rooted in unacknowledged Western and bourgeois cultural values.

Norwood (1999) proposes that Maslow's hierarchy can be used to describe the kinds of information that individuals seek at different levels. For example, people at the physiological level seek "coping" information to meet their basic needs. Information not directly connected to helping meet these needs will be ignored. People at the safety level need "helping" information on how they can be safe and secure. People seeking to meet their belongingness needs seek "enlightening" information on relationship development. At the esteem level, people seek "empowering" information on how to develop their ego. People in self-actualization seek "edifying" information -- how to connect to something beyond themselves.

The few major studies that have been completed on the hierarchy seem to support the proposals of William James (1892/1962) and Mathes (1981) that there are three levels of human needs. James hypothesized the levels of material (physiological, safety), social (belongingness, esteem), and spiritual. Mathes proposed the three levels were physiological, belongingness, and self-

actualization; he considered security and self-esteem as unwarranted. Alderfer (1972) developed a comparable hierarchy with his ERG (existence, relatedness, and growth) theory. His approach modified Maslow's theory based on the work of Gordon Allport (1960, 1961) who incorporated concepts from systems theory into his work on personality.

At this point there is little agreement about the identification of basic human needs and how they are ordered. For example, Deci and Ryan (1991) also suggest three needs, although they are not necessarily arranged hierarchically: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness. Thompson, Grace and Cohen (2001) state the most important needs for children are connection, recognition, and power. Nohria, Lawrence, and Wilson (2001) provide evidence from a sociobiology theory of motivation that humans have four basic needs: (1) acquire objects and experiences; (2) bond with others in long-term relationships of mutual care and commitment; (3) learn and make sense of the world and of ourselves; and (4) to defend ourselves, our loved ones, beliefs and resources from harm.

Bonding and relatedness needs are the only ones that are a component of every theory. Franken (2001) suggests this lack of accord may be a result of different philosophies of researchers rather than differences among human beings. In addition, he reviews research that shows a person's explanatory or attributional style will modify the list of basic needs. Therefore, it seems appropriate to ask people what they want and how their needs could be met rather than relying on an unsupported theory. For example, Waitley (1996) advises having a person imagine what life would be like if time and money were not an object in a person's life. That is, what would the person do this week, this month, next month, if you had all the money and time needed to engage in the activities and were secure that both would be available again next year. With some follow-up questions to identify what is keeping the person from happening now, this open-ended approach is likely to identify the most important needs of the individual.

There is much work still to be done in this area before we can rely on a theory to be more informative than simply collecting and analyzing data. However, this body of research can be very important to concerned with developing and using human potential. It provides an outline of some important issues that must be addressed if human beings are to achieve the levels of character and competencies necessary to be successful in the information age.

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**Maslow's publications are listed at** [www.maslow.com/](http://www.maslow.com/)

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