

## **On Exceptions to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

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## Introduction

Ever since the introduction of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, both educational and business institutions have cheerfully picked this concept up and raised it to the level of dogma. However, do human needs always follow the order outlined by Abraham Maslow? Real life is much more complex and chaotic than even the most respectful and sophisticated theory can predict. In this paper, I will show that the needs in Maslow's hierarchy sometimes become reversed.

## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – What's the Buzz?

Abraham Maslow was an American psychologist of the mid-20th century. In 1943 he published his famous paper, "The Theory of Human Motivation", which he later expanded with a more profound book "Motivation and Personality." Both of these works talk about human needs, however, what's so prominent about them? Dozens of other psychologists and behavioral scientists had talked about human motivations and needs before Abraham Maslow, but they didn't get such close attention from the public.

The key point of attraction in Maslow's works is a simple and accessible view of the system of human needs. He had grouped them in an accurate and holistic pyramid, starting with the very basic needs at the very bottom, and moving all the way up to the higher, more sophisticated needs.

In a nutshell, his pyramid contains 5 levels:

- **5 – Self-Actualization Needs.** This highest level is about the desire to become a better personality;
- **4 – Esteem Needs.** This level is about status, recognition, self-esteem, respect by others, freedom, etc.;
- **3 – Love and Relationships Needs.** Includes friendship, family, love, intimacy, sense of connection;
- **2 – Safety Needs.** Personal safety, health and property, security, employment.

- **1 – Physiological Needs.** The very basic needs of food, water, air, shelter, sleep, clothing, and reproduction.

I can see how this graceful system has gained huge popularity among the public. It is universally appealing as it relates to all humans, irrespective of their nationality, age, sex, or religious beliefs. It also takes a holistic approach to all human needs by ranging them into an easy-to-comprehend pyramid. Graphically represented theories are usually highly appealing to wide audiences, that's why Maslow's system became cheerfully welcomed and widely discussed and implemented in educational institutions, businesses, motivational trainings, personal development, and psychological programs.

Also, the key success factor for Maslow's Pyramid of Needs was the timing of its publication. It was the time when organizations, academia, and business alike started to emphasize the importance of personal growth, the unlocking of human potential, and self-actualization. His theory aligns well with the general humanistic principles and the humanistic psychology movements all across the globe.

## **Examples of How the Needs in Maslow's Hierarchy Become Reversed**

However, just as with many other theories, no matter how good or popular they may be, things start to get tricky with time. Not that Maslow's approach is wrong, but it became slightly outdated, starting to show cracks and voids with time. In other words, because of it being somewhat overly simplistic, it has started to accumulate errors or exceptions. People began noticing a reversal of Maslow's order of needs, as more and more empirical evidence was accumulated.

I would also like to add to that body of evidence of how the needs in Maslow's hierarchy can be reversed. Hopefully, my observations and conclusions will be unique – not resembling anyone else's ideas (at least the ones expressed in public).

**Example #1.** I am Ukrainian. In February 2022, I had to flee Kyiv to escape the horrors of the Russian attack on my native city. With respect to Maslow's pyramid of needs, I

sacrificed some of my physiological needs for the sake of security, that is, being a refugee, I was deprived of good sleep, and had fewer food and water supplies. All for the sake of my safety and the safety of my loved ones.

**Example #2.** The addiction of the modern generation to electronic gadgets and the social communications that they provide is ubiquitous (Lanier). In Maslow's hierarchy, the "benefits" of gadgets fit into the upper stages, resonating with friendship and a sense of connection, freedom, respect, and recognition. Such gadgets enhance our communication capabilities like nothing else has ever been able to.

According to Abraham Maslow, those needs are preceded by safety needs (e.g., health, security) and physiological needs (e.g., sleep, reproduction). Yet, teenagers often "trade" the quality of their sleep, their physical and mental health, and even their personal security for the communication and self-actualization needs that those gadgets help to satisfy. I'm sure every one of you at least once has got yourself thinking how terribly overused the gadgets are by teenagers, how addicted they are to their smartphones. These things are causing health problems more than they are doing any good.

**Example #3.** Consider all those college graduates and young specialists who take on their first office job, and engage in writing, painting, and composing music activities. What do they do? They turn Maslow's pyramid upside down! They transform their basic instincts into something culturally and socially valuable (Lorenz et al.) before they even buy their first house, make a family, and have kids. Self-actualization and self-esteem needs become a priority for them long before they satisfy their physiological, safety and the need to make love and form lasting connections.

## **Conclusion**

According to my deepest belief and personal experience, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is just a guideline; not a dogma. For me, self-actualization began a long time ago. I realized it ever since I started my first job, and that realization stays with me now in my

training and development career. More and more often, I see examples of exceptions to Maslow's Hierarchy, and hear the same stories from my colleagues and friends.

That said, the importance of Abraham Maslow's work is hard to overestimate. It has left a profound impact on the educational programs and learning and development materials in the academic, private, and corporate world. Millions of enthusiasts have successfully applied the principles and the ideas behind Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for their own and collective good.

## **Works Cited**

Lanier, Jaron. *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. Vintage, 2019.

Lorenz, Konrad, et al. *On Aggression*. Methuen, 1979.