

ABRAHAM MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Recently I had total knee replacement surgery. I noticed during the first few weeks after the surgery that my normal ability to pray and meditate disappeared. I attributed this alarming diminishment of my normal ability to quiet my mind and relax my body to post-surgical pain and discomfort.

This reminded me of Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation labeled "Hierarchy of Needs," first postulated in 1943 while teaching at Brooklyn College. The theory is graphically presented as a Christmas tree shaped triangle. The most basic human needs are at the base of the triangular tree with higher level needs toward the tip of the tree.

In this article we will examine Maslow's hierarchy of human needs from individual and societal perspectives as well as paths to becoming the best we are capable of being. Unless our lower level needs are met to some degree, higher level needs are largely unattainable. This is a pivotal point to keep in mind, as we consider our own and other's self-actualizations.

Physiological Needs

Our most basic, non-negotiable human needs are drinkable water, pathogen-free air, food, shelter, sleep and clothing. For most of us this is a non-issue. But for 42 million Americans who struggle with chronic hunger and 821 million people globally who lack enough food to live active, healthy lives, food insecurity is paramount. (www.mercycorps.org) One-fourth of all Americans drink water from systems that do not meet safety laws. Worldwide, 2.1 billion of 7.6 billion lack access to safe drinking water systems. (National Geographic, March 2019)

Safety Needs

What do we need to feel safe? Are we worried about terrorist attacks, mass killings in schools, churches, mosques, synagogues, and entertainment centers? Do we need to live in gated communities to feel safe? Besides our need for personal, body security we have needs to feel safe that we will have our employment and health care needs met.

In our country we are very fortunate to have a very low rate of unemployment but we have many employed citizens without traditional job benefits such as retirement pensions and medical insurance. It is most difficult to attain higher level needs if our most basic needs are not met. Some people do it. Most of us do not.

Love and Belonging

Wow! What would we do without friendship, intimacy, family and connecting with one another? Many people achieve this level of need without total possession of the two earlier, foundational need levels. Some people living in the most wretched imaginable situations, for example, Nazi concentration camps are able to be generous, kind and caring. See Man's Search for meaning by Victor Frankl.

Esteem

When the preceding three need levels are fulfilled, we are better positioned to enjoy self-respect, self-esteem, status, prestige and feelings of accomplishment. Some of our esteem needs come from others and some are hopefully self-generated. How fragile and frail we are in valuing ourselves!

Self-Actualization

In Maslow's original theoretical model self-actualization was the end point or epitome of need fulfillment and human growth. Self-actualization encompasses the desire and energy to become the most that one can be. It entails achieving one's full potential within one's uniqueness. It requires self-awareness and self-acceptance as well as adequate time and resources to engage in creative activities while activating our Homo Sapiens' innate curiosity. For many years the U.S. Army had a slogan, "Be all you can be!"

Self-Transcendence

Maslow was 35 years old when he completed his hierarchy of needs. During the second half of his life he awakened to our human need to transcend our individual self-absorption. In self-transcendence we see ourselves as part of the broader universe. We see beyond our individual wellbeing to the needs of us all. Our life becomes meaningful and purposeful as we feel part of something bigger. We develop joint strategies to fight climate change, hunger and poverty locally, nationally and globally.

Steps to Self-Transcendence

Each of us hopefully has developed our own personal path to self-transcendence. Some examples are walking in the woods, quiet time or reading with time to reflect. Maslow taught that the way to reach transcendence is mindfulness or flow. It requires quieting the mind to achieve observing without judging, experiencing without thinking. This is done to achieve a broader perspective that curtails "either-or", black and white thinking. It opens the mind to new perspectives, creativity, and love. It basks in "both-and" thinking where each

opposing stance has some validity and compromise plus consensus is achieved. It reduces judging and blaming while seeking to understand. This activates our ability to not only look after ourselves but to see we are part of something bigger.

Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD. Visit his website at www.askdrdavidnow.com or email at jimsue63@gmail.com.