



EDITORIAL

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Human Flourishing: Application in Nursing Education

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High stress, burnout, and mental health issues are common themes we hear during these post-pandemic times. Another topic that comes up is human flourishing. Where does human flourishing fit in the scheme of Maslow's hierarchy? Does it even matter? How do these align in nursing care? What is the role of nursing educators (Faculty) in this?

According to Maslow's theory of motivation (Maslow, 1943) meeting our needs will motivate our actions and our needs can be categorized. According to Maslow, our needs form a hierarchy, and lower levels of needs must be met first to advance to the next level of needs. Nursing schools usually teach these concepts in the foundational courses. Maslow (1943; 1954) has identified 7 needs for human beings: Physiological (breathing, food, water, shelter, clothing, sleep), safety and security (health, employment, property, family and social stability), love and belonging (friendship, family, intimacy, sense of connection), self-esteem (confidence, achievement, respect of others, the need to be a unique individual), and self-actualization (morality, creativity, spontaneity, acceptance, experience purpose, meaning and inner potential). According to Maslow (1943), need for food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably be stronger than needs for anything else. McLeod (2024) further describes that as each need is met the next need in the hierarchy becomes important.

Maslow (1954) further categorized these into two sets of needs. The first four as deficiency needs and the top level is the growth need. McLeod (2024) reported further clustering by Maslow in 1954. The physiological and

safety needs constitute basic needs, belongingness and esteem needs establish psychological needs, and self-actualization represents self-fulfillment needs. In the 1960s and 1970s, Maslow expanded the needs to a seven-stage model where he added cognitive needs (knowledge and understanding, curiosity, exploration, need for meaning and predictability) and aesthetic needs (appreciation and search for beauty, balance, form, etc.) prior to self-actualization and a stage of transcendence after self-actualization (Hires, 2021; Maslow, 1970; McLeod, 2024). Meeting the cognitive needs assists personal growth, comprehension, and a deeper understanding of life and its complexities. Fulfilling aesthetic needs isn't just about physical beauty but the emotional and psychological satisfaction derived from experiencing organization and style (McLeod, 2024). The transcendence needs include altruism, spiritual connection, and helping others to achieve their potential, and this includes mystical experience, service, and faith (McLeod, 2024). Hires (2021) describes that because self-transcendence is primarily related to spiritual concerns that go beyond the individual and society, this is commonly ignored and not included as part of the basic model. Hires (2021) added that "thirty years after outlining the theory of the hierarchy of needs, in his last years, Maslow dealt with self-transcendence, which he described as the missing element of his theory, the top of the pyramid". Self-transcendence is usually omitted from the pyramid because it is the highest holistic aspect and has a spiritual component.

Do human needs appear in a longitudinal progression

model? Bridgman et al (2019) stated that Maslow never created a pyramid, and the pyramid can be misleading. Mcleod (2024) reminds us that Maslow's hierarchy of needs doesn't have to follow a strict linear progression because individuals can feel various needs at the same time or shift between levels. This hierarchy of needs may change based on the context, age, and stage of the person in their life. Sometimes people are willing to sacrifice lower-level needs for a higher-level goal. The pandemic, disasters, and wars are primary examples where the priorities change.

Can the self-transcendence of Maslow's model be compared to human flourishing? What is human flourishing? According to Perkins et al. (2010), the achievement of human flourishing is a lifelong existential journey of self-actualization that continues till a person dies. Aristotle calls this 'Eudaimonia', the process of leading meaningful lives, and discovering the good (Athanasoulis, 2012). Sometimes 'Eudaimonia' is translated as 'happiness'; however, it does not capture the proper meaning. According to Aristotle, Eudaimonia' is a persistent feeling of contentment or fulfillment with one's life; it captures the idea of a flourishing life, a life well lived (Athanasoulis, 2012). Flourishing also is in a continuum in that people when exposed to a new situation survive, then adapt and thrive in that new situation, and eventually flourish.

Can flourishing be measured? Currently, there are validated tools that measure flourishing. One such tool measured six domains of well-being which include happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial stability (Chen, 2022). Chen, a research scientist at Harvard University's human flourishing program, found that the flourishing scores increased with age (Harvard, 2025a). VanderWeele (2020), has developed evidence-based activities that can be used to promote human flourishing. The aspects of human flourishing, according to the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard include happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships (Harvard, 2025b). This also constitutes activities such as religious community, family, work, and education. Thus, one can say that human flourishing can be equated to the self-transcendence phase of Maslow's hierarchy.

How can these concepts be integrated in nursing? The

National League of Nursing (NLN) describes that it "encompasses the uniqueness, dignity, diversity, freedom, happiness, and holistic well-being of the individual within the larger family, community, and population. Achieving human flourishing is a life-long existential journey of hopes, achievements, regrets, losses, illness, suffering, and coping" (NLN, 2014). Perkins et al. (2012) explained that human flourishing can be one of the program outcomes. Toney-Butler and Thayer (2023) adapted Maslow's hierarchy of needs to nursing to prioritize patient care. Nurses can implement concepts of flourishing into care plans, concept maps, and all other assessment strategies. However, these must be adapted to nurses, nursing students, and faculty as well to promote a flourishing community.

Does the faculty know about flourishing and know how to implement this? The NLN documents and model can be helpful. They can identify resources from the Harvard Flourishing Program. Educators have the unique responsibility to support the flourishing of students, coworkers, and patients. NLN (2014) developed course learning outcomes and competencies to accomplish this task. The flourishing of one person can influence the flourishing of others since humans are social beings.

Applying Maslow's hierarchy into the nursing education context includes fulfilling the students' basic physiological needs before meeting their cognitive needs. They must be valued and respected before focusing on the study where they can flourish as stronger, healthier nurses. As the needs fluctuate the faculty must observe, adapt, and nurture the students. The students must be taught that an inverted triangle may offer Maslow's pyramid a true representation of an elder person's needs i.e., an older person's needs are built upon self-actualization—not physiological needs (Liotta, 2020). New faculty also may survive, then thrive, before they flourish. The administration must also foster their growth to flourish so that they can support their students and in turn patients. The new global flourishing study with about 200,000 participants from 22 geographical locations will improve our understanding of human flourishing and identify new evidence for human flourishing (Harvard, 2025c). Having attended the two global flourishing conferences, I am personally interested in this topic. Let the global nursing community flourish and support their students and patients to flourish as well.

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