

# THE HUMAN NEEDS SPHERE

A non-hierarchy of needs

## A Misguided Metaphor

In 1960, a funny thing happened to the famous American psychologist Abraham Maslow (b. 1908 – d. 1970), who created the theory known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>1</sup>. That year, psychologist Charles McDermid published an essay in *Business Horizons* magazine titled “How Money Motivates Men”, in which he argued that Maslow's theory could be used to generate maximum motivation at the lowest cost<sup>2</sup>. To illustrate Maslow's work, McDermid used a pyramidal diagram of human needs, which had first appeared in a 1957 book on business management by Keith Davis.<sup>3</sup>

Even though Maslow had never depicted his theory as a pyramid, from that time on the theory was known as “Maslow's Pyramid”.

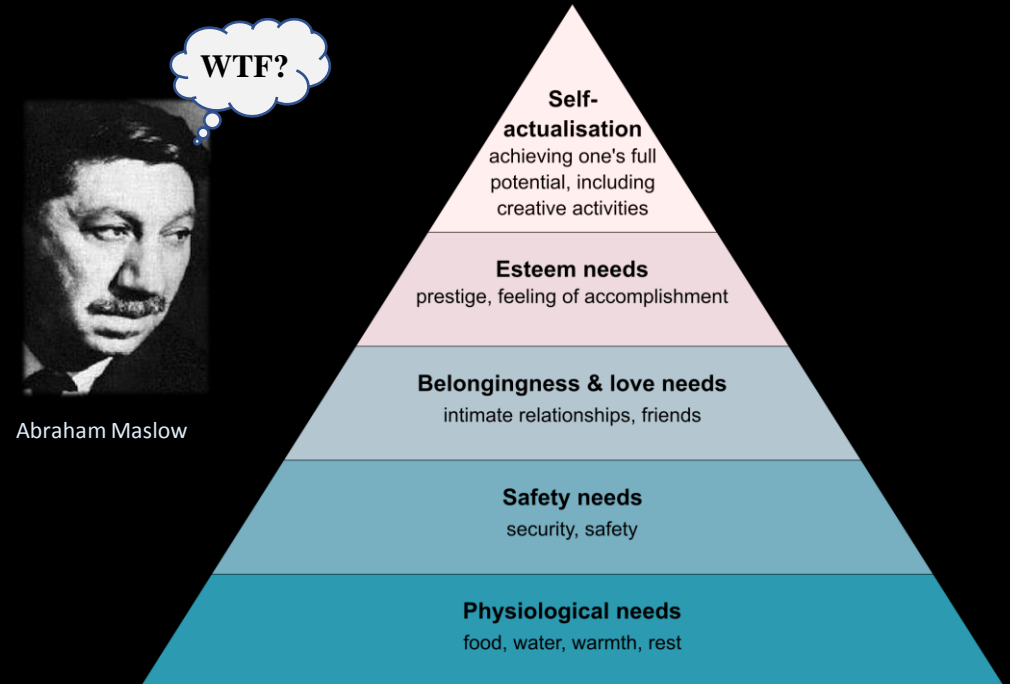
It appears Maslow never intended his theory to be viewed as a rigid hierarchy. Maslow described human needs in relative terms, such as “general” and “primarily”. He identified the basic types of motivation and the order in which they would tend to be met while acknowledging that different levels of motivation could occur at any time.<sup>4</sup>

But it also seems Maslow never tried to dispel the notion that his hierarchy of needs fits neatly into a pyramid with physiological needs at the broad bottom and self-actualization at the narrow apex.

Perhaps he felt the diagram was an effective way to visually explain his concepts to a wide audience. Or perhaps it seemed like too much trouble to refute what had become an instantly popular way to diagrammatically explain human needs and motivations. We'll never know.

But what we do know is that Davis, McDermid and many others picked the wrong shape.

I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail. – Abraham Maslow, 1966



The main attraction of Maslow's Pyramid is its orderly simplicity, which is also its main weakness. Human needs are not strictly hierarchical. Nor are they linear. Nor do they move from a broad base to a narrow top. They are not pyramidal in any way, shape or form.<sup>5</sup>

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs)

2. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0007681360800341>

3. <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amle.2017.0351>

4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs)

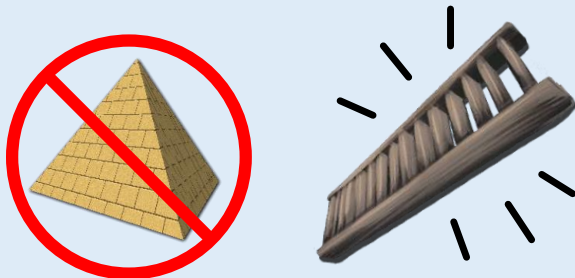
5. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/positively-media/201111/social-networks-what-maslow-misses-0>

## If Not a Pyramid, then What?

It's likely the originators of the human needs pyramid model and the legions of marketing, sales and management professionals who adopted it later never considered the impact metaphorical depiction has on understanding, both at a conscious and subconscious level.

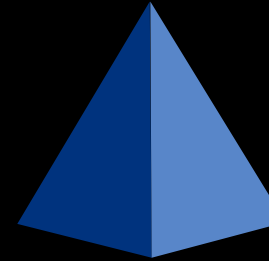
Ironically, in a recent paper<sup>1</sup>, which explores the origins of the Maslow Pyramid diagram, three business management professors propose a new metaphor for human needs:

*"We are recommending, as some have before us, that a ladder is a better visual representation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The pyramid is shown with horizontal lines demarcating the different levels. This makes it difficult to imagine a person simultaneously being affected by different needs. When one is on a ladder, multiple rungs are occupied by the feet and hands. Other rungs may be leaned on as well. Also, a ladder does a better job of conveying Maslow's idea that people can move up and down the hierarchy."*<sup>2</sup>

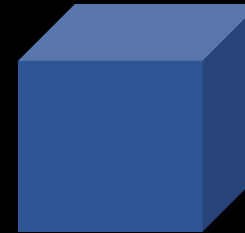


Really? Human needs are organized and operate like a ladder? Could it be those contemporary researchers are also failing to deeply understand how metaphors influence thought and action?

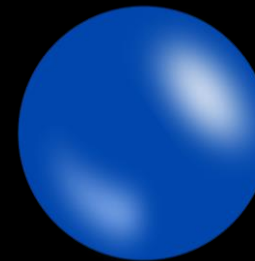
## Different shapes convey different concepts and characteristics



Linearity. Hierarchy. Top-to-bottom. Broad-to-narrow. Fixed. Rigid. Unchanging.



Solid. Controlled. Orderly. Restrictive. Contained. Secure. Building block.



Systemic. Holistic. Integral. Non-linear. Non-hierarchical. Flexible. Multi-directional.

1. <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amle.2017.0351>

2. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/beautiful-minds/who-created-maslows-iconic-pyramid/>

# The Human Needs Sphere

In this experimental depiction of the range of human needs identified by Maslow, there is no hierarchy or rigid demarcation between needs.

In 2D, the needs are arrayed around a circle. In 3D, the needs are dispersed across the surface of the sphere.

Human needs are displayed as an adaptive, complex system that is interconnected, interdependent, tensegral and self-organizing.

Instead of the five-layered pyramid, the need categories, such as self-actualization, appear as five areas or sectors.

The boundaries between sectors are loosely defined to reflect the overlapping nature of human needs.

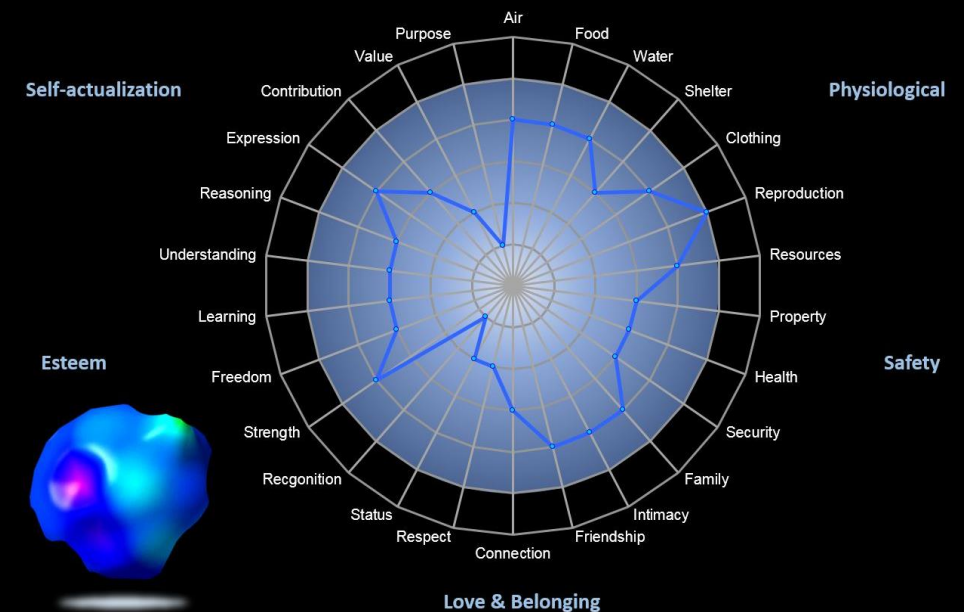
The model portrays well-roundedness, rather than reaching the apex, as the aspirational human state.

The degree of roundness represents the degree of wholeness, harmony and integrity in the sphere of the individual.

The sphere image is non-static. It depicts the dynamic nature of human needs, emotions, motivations and actions as a changing sphere with deformations that represent the degree to which needs are being met.

The human needs sphere is flexible and adaptable. Sectors and nodes can be added or changed to more accurately reflect the specific needs and condition (shape) of the individual.

Importantly, the nodes and sectors are not standardized. In practice, they are co-creatively customized to represent the whole person.





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