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The term self-actualization has various definitions depending on the context of usage, but in generic terms, it simply means the realization of one's full potential. Self-actualization is synonymous with the terms self-realization, self-reflection, or self-exploration. The term self-actualization was originally coined by the neurologist Kurt Goldstein. He claimed that every organism had a master motive or a unique innate drive, and the realization of this inner drive is what he termed self-actualization. The concept of self-actualization was further explored and brought into prominence within the domain of psychology by Abraham Maslow. Today, most of the literature on the topic of self-actualization follows Maslow's concept and vision of the term. Maslow's concept of self-actualization gave rise to the fields of humanistic psychology and positive psychology, which are used extensively in counseling, education, organizational creativity, and facilitating social and political change. This entry describes the concept of self-actualization, how one measures it, how self-actualization develops across the life span, and how the concept of self-actualization has shaped the fields of humanistic and positive psychology.

Maslow's Concept of Self-Actualization

Maslow conceived his theory on the hierarchy of human needs in his landmark 1943 article titled "A Theory of Human Motivation." He enlisted a set of human needs and argued that humans more or less satisfied their needs by following a path or hierarchy. The five needs he originally enlisted were physiological needs, safety needs, love/belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. In his later writings, he replaced self-actualization needs with cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, self-actualization needs, and self-transcendent needs. He classified the first four needs as *deficiency* or lower needs and the latter four as *being* or higher needs.

Physiological needs include needs for basic survival like food, water, shelter, and clothing. Safety needs include needs for personal safety, financial security, health and well-being, and so on. Love/belonging needs include social needs like friendship, family, romantic partner, intimacy, and affiliation with a club or organization. Esteem needs include needs for recognition, attention, fame, competence, mastery, and self-confidence. Cognitive needs include the need to pursue knowledge, meaning, morality, truth, and in general to understand the universe through reason, thought, and learning. Aesthetic needs include the need for beauty, art, order, and symmetry. Maslow argued that once individuals satisfied the aforementioned six needs they were primed to truly realize their full potential through introspection, contemplation, and self-discovery. He called this need the self-actualization need. Maslow went on to claim that the final need is the self-transcendence need, which is the need to go beyond one's self. This need could manifest itself through spirituality, deep meditation, peak experiences, flow, social activism, or using one's fully realized potential to make the world a better place.

Maslow claimed that humans are typically motivated to satisfy their lower deficiency needs before embarking on their higher growth needs, though he admitted that there were exceptions. He suggested that one must satisfy one's deficiency needs before truly realizing one's full potential and self-actualizing. He termed this kind of deficiency-free motivation as *meta-motivation*. Self-actualized individuals do not ignore their deficiency needs but rather spend much less time and effort pursuing them because they are mostly satisfied. Ignoring deficiency needs in pursuit of higher needs is not advisable because it could lead to frustration and/or depression.

Self-actualizing people who are meta-motivated exhibit characteristics like liveliness, spontaneity, autonomy, independent thinking, self-exploration, compassion, tolerance, and altruism. They tend to pursue knowledge, meaningfulness, justice, truth, science, beauty, goodness, and wholeness. They are not slaves to their biological needs and their ego and are free to explore themselves and the universe with clarity and without any subjective bias. Maslow believed that self-actualizing people spent significant amounts of time in understanding themselves and figuring out their true innate potential. Once they figured this drive, they typically concentrated on using their potential on tasks outside of themselves thus rendering the world a better place. He believed that the self-actualization of an individual is a very positive outcome for society but was disappointed by the fact that very few individuals are truly self-actualized.

Measuring Self-Actualization

Maslow estimated that approximately 1% of people truly self-actualize in their lifetime. He never conducted in-depth evaluations of self-actualization. Instead, he based his conclusions on case studies and personal convictions. He studied exceptional people like Albert Einstein, Frederick Douglass, and Eleanor Roosevelt and deemed them self-actualized based on their convictions, actions, views, and beliefs. Through his case studies and interviews, he also noted that there were many people who had their deficiency needs satisfied but failed to truly self-actualize and grow. He never fully understood the reason for this and left these findings to social scientists as indicators to conduct future research.

Because self-actualization is a subjective concept, measuring it has posed hurdles for many psychologists and social scientists. The two most popular instruments used for measuring self-actualization are the Personal Orientation Inventory and the Short Index of Self-Actualization. Both these inventories try to estimate one's level of self-actualization by questioning the subject's views, beliefs, and values. Lately, there have been attempts to measure self-actualization based on one's actions rather than beliefs. These methods try to eliminate social desirability bias and increase the reliability of self-actualization measurement.

Self-Actualization and the Life Span

Maslow's concept of self-actualization differs from Goldstein's view. Goldstein believed that every organism has an innate driving force that is active throughout its life span, propelling it toward self-realization and discovering its potential. Maslow, however, believed that one could self-actualize only after its deficiency needs were met or satisfied. Based on Maslow's concept, true self-actualization manifests itself in middle or late adulthood. It is rare for children or young adults to self-actualize because during these stages in their life span, they are generally more focused on their deficiency needs.

As humans self-actualize and self-transcend, they tend to concentrate less on themselves and more on tasks outside of themselves. As they grow in age and wisdom, they tend to move from selfishness to selflessness. The concept of self-actualization can be correlated with other psychological theories that involve the human life span, namely, Erik H. Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, and Sigmund Freud's concept of the id, ego, and superego. All these theories suggest that as mentally healthy individuals pass through different stages of life they tend to follow a path of growth that makes them less selfish and more selfless. Maslow coined a term, *meta-pathology*, for individuals that failed to reach self-actualization during late adulthood. Some possible reasons

for meta-pathology are genetics, poor attachment styles, low socioeconomic status, anxieties and fears, social marginalization, and poor education.

The Importance of Self-Actualization

Although the traditional definition of self-actualization is synonymous with self-realization, most self-actualized people tend to become selfless or self-transcendent and concentrate on altruistic tasks beyond themselves because their basic needs are met. Maslow argued that self-actualization brings more peace, compassion, harmony, care, political activism, and scientific advancement to the world. Given the reasons that lead to meta-pathology, or thwart self-actualization, many social scientists advocate public policies that alleviate poverty, improve education, enforce positive ontogenesis, and increase social acceptance.

Although psychology historically concentrated on pathologies, deficiencies, and mental illness, Maslow's concept of self-actualization gave rise to the field of humanistic psychology in the 1960s, which shifted the focus from human pathologies to positive human attributes. Humanistic psychology focuses on existentialism, phenomenology, happiness, mindfulness, and flourishing. Eventually, humanistic psychology gave rise to the field of positive psychology, which has expanded tremendously since its inception in the late 1990s. Today positive psychologists conduct research on happiness and subjective well-being, and the research findings are used extensively in education, youth development, clinical psychology, the workplace, coaching, and rehabilitation.

See also [Flow](#)

- self-actualization
- the self
- self-concept
- positive psychology
- self-realization
- pathology
- need for belonging

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Further Readings

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