Maslow's hierarchy of needs is psychological theory developed in 1943 by Abraham Maslow in his essay “A Theory of Human Motivation.” His theory shares similarities with many other theories of human developmental psychology, which focus on explaining the stages of human growth and development. The Hierarchy of Needs suggests that impetus for human behavior stems from the drive to fulfill certain needs in a definite, hierarchical order.

Maslow’s Theory takes the shape of a pyramid, or triangle with the most basic and pressing needs at the bottom. The five motivational needs covered in the theory, from the most basic to the most complex are: Physiological, Safety, Love/Belonging, Esteem, and Self-actualization. The bottom four layers of the pyramid contain what Maslow described as "deficiency needs" or "d-needs." These needs prompt the individual to act with the motivation of fulfilling the need when a lack is detected. With the exception of the most basic (physiological) needs, if these "deficiency needs" are not met, the body will not react, but the individual will get a feeling of restlessness. The highest need – self-actualization – can only be fulfilled once the other needs are met. This higher level need motivates and individual to seek involvement in activities that will contribute to the perfection of his or her ideal self.

Generally, physiological needs are apparent biological needs. If these requirements are not met, the human body simply cannot continue to function effectively. Air, water, and food are vital for survival and if these needs are not being met individuals will act in ways that bring them closer to fulfilling these biological needs.

The next group of needs in Maslow’s hierarchy is safety needs. Saying that an individual is motivated by the need for safety suggests that an individual is acting with the goal of maintaining a semblance of a predictable orderly world. In the working world this is seen as a desire for job security and benefits, among other things. These needs also encompass financial security and the desire for good health.

Love and belonging needs comprise the middle portion of Maslow’s pyramid. These needs include our desire to be part of a social group, such as a family, circle of friend or group of co-workers. This need also illustrates our desire to belong to society as a whole, including contributing to the community in a meaningful way.

Esteem needs stem from our desire to be respected by our peers and other individuals, also
from our need for self-respect. We might be motivated by a need to be accepted or sometimes to be noticed and recognized for our achievements. Maslow theorized that there are two kinds of esteem needs: a lower need and a higher need. The lower of the two is the need for the respect of others, the need for status, recognition, fame, prestige or attention. The higher of the two is the need for self-respect, the need for strength, competence, mastery, self-confidence, independence, and freedom. Deprivation of these needs can lead to an inferiority complex, weakness or helplessness.

The final need topping off Maslow’s Hierarchy is a need for Self-actualization. A person can only be motivated to work towards Self-actualization when all of his other needs are being met successfully. A person who is motivated by Self-actualization will strive to accomplish goals that lead towards the perfection of his ideal self. An example of a person who is acting from the desire to achieve self-actualization might go back to college later in life to become an expert in a new subject that he finds meaningful.

Some critics have argued that Maslow’s theory is too simplistic and many other psychologists have built upon his initial work. As a whole though, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is a beneficial way of exploring the variety of influencing factors that can motivate our behavior, giving us a clearer understanding of what drives our actions.