

Helping others helps us find meaning

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Philosophers have long pondered the question of what constitutes a meaningful life. Generally, ordinary folks believe they live meaningful lives unless unfortunately they suffer from deep depression, extreme anxiety, or painful physical illness. For many of us, the question of meaning requires further serious thought.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) identified some necessary conditions for meaningfulness. We need a sense of security about food, shelter and protection from harm.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs the most basic necessities were called physiological needs. Water, clean air, warmth, shelter, nourishing food, and security are among the basic needs we require before it is even possible to think about having a meaningful life.

These basic needs are so crucial that unless we have won a lottery or inherited a fortune, many of us will devote half of our lifetime working hard to make sufficient money to ensure basic survival needs are met.

Before we can begin to consider higher order needs, we also have basic social needs that allow us to feel good about ourselves. Being part of a family or receiving love from a partner we trust makes us feel accepted and valued.

Satisfying our social needs brings confidence and feelings of esteem and belonging. It helps us believe we are worthwhile when others reinforce our sense of belonging and approval within our social groups.

A further step in accepting our value involves understanding the ways we can improve our self-image and our feelings of self-worth. For example, after we have achieved our most basic needs, we can become more involved in things that will improve our cognitive and creative development. We will be free to develop through reading and studying. We can learn new skills and grow in self-confidence. If we are curious enough to learn about new areas of knowledge such

as learning a second language, or pursuing new interests in genealogy, travelling or new skills in the arts, we will increase our self-esteem and become more acceptable to others and we will feel better about ourselves.

Maslow called these secondary levels of self-improvement self-actualization. People can enrich their own lives by further developing aesthetic interests. These higher-order needs can improve one's life by an appreciation for fine music, and beautiful art, and balancing one's physical activities with healthy habits for eating, exercising, and developing fuller involvement in social relationships.

Often involvement in larger social groups leads to better and more creative approaches that help us consider solutions for problems characteristically found within larger societies. Better understanding of how society functions in large groupings can develop improvements in social adhesion and mutual co-operation and lead us to better self-awareness.

Some social psychologists have extended the basic ideas of Maslow to include levels of higher human development. Only after our most basic needs are satisfied will people have freedom to look beyond basic everyday demands for food and water and security.

When people feel comfortable within themselves they worry less about satisfying their everyday needs. They are able to think about transcending their own needs and begin to consider how they can help others. They develop a strong moral compass and direct their attention towards caring and helping others meet their basic needs for good food, healthy living, and other basic daily requirements.

Exceptional moral leaders like Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi did not devote much of their energy or interests toward meeting their own basic needs. Instead they put a great deal of commitment into helping others achieve their basic requirements.

They lived their lives as moral leaders who knew how to find meaning and purpose by caring for others.

While most of us will not attain the moral perspectives of Mother Teresa or Gandhi we can move toward better moral goals. For example, good parents are often willing to put aside their own personal needs in order that their offspring will be free to pursue meaningful goals.

When we are asked if we live meaningful lives we may already say “yes” but we can progress to fuller lives when we learn how to respond more meaningfully by helping those in need.

In the end, meaningful life is not given to us but we can develop and enhance it through our own efforts and by helping others.