Defining psychological health is not an easy task. Often one is able to intuit a sense of what seems healthy, but attempts to devise a concrete working definition tend to generate more dispute than consensus. Yet for Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), such a foundation not only was possible but also necessary for psychologists to understand the richness, the dimensionality, and the inherent beauty in human nature—and how its truncation manifests as struggles to function in everyday life.

In a previous AHP Perspective article (What Would a Humanistic DSM-V Look Like?, October/November 2012), I suggested that humanistic psychologists can make a unique contribution to a meaningful diagnostic guide by offering, in part, an introductory outline of characteristics of psychological health such as that formulated by Maslow. In this article, I provide an overview of Maslow’s vision of psychological health. Then I trace the development of Maslow’s conceptualization as it unfolded over the course of his career—beginning with the inventory he used to lead off a conventional abnormal psychology text, through his subsequent writings on self-actualizing and self-transcendence.

**TOWARD AN EMERGING VISION OF GROWTH AND HEALTH**

Just as we consult an accomplished guitarist for music lessons or a master carpenter to build a home, Maslow believed that meaningful inquiry into the human condition necessarily involves creating an impression of people at their best. According to Edward Hoffman (The Right to Be Human: A Biography of Abraham Maslow, 1988), while compiling notes for a textbook intended to explore psychology’s developments since William James’ 1891 Principles of Psychology, Maslow became concerned. While remarkable discoveries had been made in some areas, others (e.g., consciousness, imagination, creativity, perceptions of reality, necessary truths, etc.) had been at best ignored, or worse atomistically reduced.

Yet, Maslow pondered, these are the things that make us characteristically human—those that give meaning to our lives and voice to our identities, that we admire in others and which reciprocally inspire our own desire to grow, and that draw out the best in us. So, is it possible to create an impression of growth—and therefore of health—by studying those who embody these aspects and have made such an impact? What can we learn from them? How can we become more like them? In turn, Maslow asserted, we may come to better understand not so much what is wrong in those who appear unhealthy, but what is not right. In this project, he believed, was the key to helping motivate, on both personal and societal levels, an emergence from stuckness in fixed patterns of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and experiencing, and to inspire the development of a more sustainable world.

**ESSENTIALS FOR GROWTH: THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

Often we do not comprehend what is most important in life unless or until we are faced with its absence. Maslow believed that, just as we require vitamins for our physical health, we also have basic emotional and social needs that sustain our psychological health. He offered
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a pyramid-shaped hierarchy to help students understand the organization of these needs: “[Our] higher nature rests upon [our] lower nature, needing it as a foundation and collapsing without it.” At the base of the pyramid are our physiological needs. Assuming these are satisfied, our attention shifts to our need for safety and security, which serves as prerequisite for our need to love and be loved by others, and then our ability to love ourselves. For the most part, these needs are satisfied by external sources. They can also be suppressed by inconsistent and/or overly authoritarian or permissive parenting, social forces, etc.

Deficiency (Basic) Needs
When one of the basic needs remains left unfulfilled in one’s development, one’s attention becomes consumed by it and one’s behavior reflects its deficiency in an effort to communicate this need to others—i.e. a cry for help and engagement. In his writings, Maslow referred to the basic needs as the Deficiency- (D-) needs, and the attitudes and actions driven by their dearth as D-cognition, D-motivation, D-love, and so forth.

Being Needs
However, when these basic needs are satisfied, we become able to focus our attention on our need to self-actualize—to be “more easily ourselves, . . . to express rather than cope” (The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, 1971:290), to fully, creatively, and joyfully direct our energies toward the best uses of our talents and abilities. In contrast to the Deficiency mode, Maslow referred to the motivations and ways of knowing and behaving associated with self-actualizing as aspects of the Being (B) mode of human existence. Our “development . . . becomes more determined from within than from without” (Toward a Psychology of Being, third edition, 1999:39). We become able to face, endure, and grapple with the “real” problems of life—the intrinsically and ultimately human problems, the unavoidable, the “existential” problems to which there is no perfect solution. (Toward a Psychology of Being, third edition, 1999:129)

Maslow’s choice of the term self-actualizing was twofold. First, he preferred it to self-realizing insofar as it implies tangible action as opposed to mere insight. Second, Maslow adopted the term from the biologist Kurt Goldstein, who coined it in reference to a process of resilience in organisms (e.g., adaptively and unselfconsciously re-learning to run or fly after having injured a limb or wing—see Hoffman’s The Right to Be Human: A Biography of Abraham Maslow, 1988). Applied to human motivation, Maslow adapted the term to describe the process of living authentically despite one’s personal, environmental, and historical shortcomings and of overcoming obstacles (real and perceived) notwithstanding the inherent healthy risks.

Maslow affirmed that self-actualizing serves a viable purpose:

It does not mean doing some far-out thing, [It] means [people devotedly] working to do well the thing that [they want] to do, . . . something that is very precious to them—some calling or vocation in the old sense. (The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, 1971:42/46)

Though self-actualizing is often associated with artists, leaders, scholars, etc., it is equally expressed by parents responsibly caring for their children, teachers innovatively instructing their students, engineers sensibly planning their cities, and clerks conscientiously assisting their customers.

The Person: Process versus Product
It is important to emphasize that Maslow regarded self-actualization as a verb, not a noun:

I do not seek perfection in human nature. To do so is . . . a sure path toward disillusionment and unhappiness in life. (Future Visions: The Unpublished Papers of Abraham Maslow, 1996:63)

Self-actualizing people do not live without problems, but in being “strongly focused on problems outside themselves” (Motivation and Personality, second edition, 1970:159), their focus may become broadened to include matters reflecting a desire for truth, justice, beauty, etc. These may be regarded as “healthy indications that in spite of a high degree of basic satisfaction, people are striving for still greater improvement and growth” (cited in Fadiman & Frager, Personality and Personal Growth, 1976:336).

B-Love
For example, Maslow emphasized understanding love as a verb. In the process of self-actualizing,
A greater sense of meaning in our existence and the contributions we make in our daily encounters. Along the way, undiscovered and/or forgotten talents may become detected:

[One] who belies [one’s] talent, the born painter who sells stockings instead, the intelligent [person] who lives a stupid life, the [person] who sees truth and keeps his mouth shut, the coward who gives up [one’s] manliness, all these people perceive in a deep way that they have done wrong to themselves and despise themselves for it. Out of this self-punishment may come only neurosis—but there may equally well come renewed courage, righteous indignation, increased self-respect, because of thereafter doing the right thing. (Toward a Psychology of Being, third edition, 1999:8–9)

Maslow regarded personal responsibility, in the truest sense of the word, as the ability to respond. In a paper entitled “Neurosis as a Failure of Human Growth” (included in The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, 1971), Maslow described pathology as stagnation, brought on by “the fear of one’s own greatness or the evasion of one’s destiny or the running away from one’s best talents” (p. 34). Maslow regarded human life as an ongoing creative project, one which necessarily involved birthing pains:

Growth and improvement can come through pain and conflict. . . . The classical approach to personality problems considers them to be problems in an undesirable sense . . . and they get “cured” away as soon as possible. . . . But all these symptoms are found in . . . people growing toward health. . . . Perhaps adjustment and stabilization, while good because it cuts your pain, is also bad because development toward a higher ideal ceases? (Toward a Psychology of Being, third edition, 1999:62/68)

Finally, Maslow believed that tragedy is particularly conducive to growth:

Tragedy is different from other life situations because it takes us out of the Deficiency-realm and into the Being-realm. That is, it confronts us with the ultimate values, questions, and problems that we ordinarily forget about in everyday existence. . . . The key issue is the sense of being called to great, important, and eternal things, away from the mundane and trivial. In this way, tragedy can give us the same feeling of inner cleansing and inspiration as entering a gallery of fine art, seeing a very beautiful person, or hearing about a very inspiring action of some sort. (Future Visions: The Unpublished Papers of Abraham Maslow, 1996:56–57)

CONCLUSION
How practical is Maslow’s vision of psychological health? While it may be easy to criticize Maslow as naïvely idealistic, he actually was quite a realist. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs may serve as a template for therapists to better understand their clients’ behavior on a fundamental level and in turn best meet and reach them on their terms. In addition, Maslow provided practical applications of his ideas in education (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences, second edition, 1994), in organizational development (Maslow on Management, 1998), and in the media (see Future Visions: The Unpublished Papers of Abraham Maslow, 1996), as well.
as their role in creating societal conditions for growth—rather than maintaining the status quo.

Maslow believed that systemic change comes from within. According to Anne Richards (a student of Maslow’s), in his classes Maslow advocated for the development of reduced-price meals in schools (now a given in most communities in the U.S.) as a means of minimizing obstacles to growth—i.e. children from impoverished families may become empowered and equipped with the social and practical skills necessary to work toward sustainability and in turn break down societal differentials of and struggles with power.

Self-actualizing people live in, but not of, the world. They are able to roll gracefully along with conventions—in contrast with the “authority-rebel who makes great issues of trivial things” (Motivation and Personality, second edition, 1970:157). Mike Arons explained, Maslow recognized some of his own concepts being misinterpreted, reified, and misused. He leveled criticisms at his students about the directions some of [the counterculture] revolution was taking, including expressions of narcissism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-science. (Abraham Maslow: Yesterday, Tomorrow, and Yesteryear, in D. Moss, Editor, Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology: A Historical and Biographical Sourcebook, 1999:340)

Perhaps Maslow’s greatest accomplishment was his construction of a meta-model that demonstrates human commonalities “in cultures as diverse as the Japanese and the Blackfoot Native American” (Future Visions: The Unpublished Papers of Abraham Maslow, 1996:28). For Maslow, human nature encompasses a dialectic between growth and fear of pain and disappointment. Growth is contingent upon one’s courage to address crucial yet often unresolvable perennial human questions as they pertain to the everyday situations one encounters. Frustration and stagnation occur when one is unable to recognize what is “on the other hand” of this dialectic (to use the parlance of Tevia’s character in Fiddler on the Roof). Consequently, to promote one’s participation in this eternal conversation may evoke a greater sense of participation in global human citizenship. Embracing the unity in human diversity may serve as the key to a better sense of integration and sustainability and may help individuals appreciate the varied expressions as a means of validating and enriching their own perspectives, experience, and existence.

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APPENDIX
The Evolution of Maslow’s Conceptualization of Psychological Health

According to Mike Arons, although Maslow is best known for his needs hierarchy, ironically that was what he focused on least in person. Indeed, his writings spoke of it mainly in passing. Rather, Maslow’s principal focus was describing in practical terms the ideal fulfillment of human nature and functioning—which he succinctly yet eloquently catalogued over the course of his career.

In this appendix I present Maslow’s conceptualization of psychological health as it unfolded over the course of 30 years. The majority of the text is Maslow’s words verbatim. In areas where his narrative became too lengthy for the scope of this article, I took the liberty of summarizing the main points using language that resembles Maslow’s original as closely as possible.

In 1941, Maslow published an abnormal psychology textbook with his colleague Bela Mittelmann. Unlike the majority of such texts before or since, Maslow led his off with an inventory of “Manifestations of Psychological Health (Normality).” This list was slightly expanded for the revised edition of Principles of Abnormal Psychology: The Dynamics of Psychic Illness (1951:14–15) and is presented below. It formed the basis of Maslow’s needs hierarchy, a concept which he introduced in Motivation and Personality (1954). For each characteristic, I provided a number to identify the corresponding psychological need(s): 1 = physiological needs, 2 = security needs, 3 = belongingness needs, 4 = self-esteem needs, 5 = self-actualizing needs. The list is re-ordered numerically.
Adequate Bodily Desires and Ability to Gratify Them. Accepting bodily functions without preoccupation. Ability to enjoy physical activities such as eating and sleeping. Healthy sexual desire and gratification without fear/guilt. Ability to perform excretory functions without shame/conflict. Ability to work. Absence of excessive need to indulge in these activities. Ability to temporarily withstand a reasonable degree of deprivation.

Adequate Feelings of Security. Feeling safe in contact with others in occupational, social, and family settings.

Integration and Consistency of Personality. Versatility and interest in several activities. Morals and conscience not too inflexible from the group’s perspective. Ability to concentrate. No conflicting trends within or dissociation of the personality.

Ability to Satisfy the Requirements of the Group. Ability to fulfill ethical and moral expectations of one’s culture/society.

Adequate Life Goals. Achievable, realistic, and compatible goals which involve some good to society, and reasonable persistence of effort to achieve them.

Adequate Spontaneity and Emotionality. Ability to form sustainable emotional ties, to express resentment without losing control, to empathize, and to enjoy oneself and laugh. Having valid reasons for being unhappy.

Adequate Self-Evaluation. Adequate self-esteem (i.e. feeling of value proportionate to one’s individuality and achievement) and worthwhile-ness (i.e. feeling morally sound and absence of severe guilt; able to recognize socially/personally unacceptable common human desires which will always be present as long as one lives in a society).

Adequate Self-Knowledge. Realistic appraisal of one’s strengths and limitations and of one’s motivations, desires, goals, ambitions, inhibitions, compensations, defenses, inferiority feelings, etc. Ability to accept oneself as natural and not repudiate desires/thoughts regardless of their social/personal appropriateness.

Efficient Contact with Reality. Absence of excessive fantasy. A realistic and broad outlook on the world. Able to withstand the ordinary shocks of life such as illness and setbacks. Ability to adapt when circumstances cannot be modified (i.e. cooperation with the inevitable).

Ability to Learn from Experience. Flexibility and ability to learn spontaneously. Avoiding repeating mistakes.

Adequate Emancipation from the Group/Culture. Some originality, individuality, independence from group opinions. Able to differentiate for oneself some things good/some things bad. Absence of excessive need for reassurance/approval. Tolerance and appreciation of cultural differences.

According to Mike Arons, when Maslow did speak of his needs hierarchy in his classes, he utilized the pyramid on the back of the dollar bill to illustrate the process of human growth. Individuals’ biological and interpersonal needs form the foundation, and existential and transpersonal (i.e. self-actualizing and self-transcending) needs appear at the peak (i.e. peak experience). As the eye (the “I”) opens, a greater sense of self-identity emerges and the process repeats infinitum through the course of human development.

With this in mind, in Toward a Psychology of Being (1962), Maslow extended his focus on the characteristics of optimal human growth—including B-cognition, B-motivation, B-values, and creativity. In Chapter Four, he provided two lists that pick up where the latter half of the previous list left off. First, he outlined 13 “Clinically Observed Characteristics of Healthy People” (third edition, 1999:32):

- Superior perception of reality.
- Increased acceptance of self, of others, and of nature.
- Increased spontaneity.
- Increase in problem-centering.
- Increased detachment and desire for privacy.
- Increased autonomy and resistance to enculturation.
- Greater freshness of appreciation and richness of emotional reaction.
- Higher frequency of peak experiences.
- Increased identification with the human species.
- Changed/improved interpersonal relations.
- More democratic character structure.
- Greater increased creativeness.
- Certain changes in the value system.
Maslow then followed with a profile of “differences between deficiency-motivated and self-actualizing individuals” (third edition, 1999:33–47). To summarize:

- Accepting a range of human impulses (vs. rejecting them in the interest of reducing tension).
- Enjoying life as a process (vs. enjoying only fleeting moments of triumph, of achievement, of climax, or of peak experience).
- Living fully (vs. preparing to do so).
- Able to enjoy more while having/acquiring less (i.e. wealth vs. money).
- Increasing self-sufficiency (i.e. comfort in one's own skin. Behavior is determined by inner rather than social/environmental determinants. One is less ambivalent/anxious about and hostile toward others and less needful of others' praise/affection).
- Self-consciousness left behind as one deals with the objective world.
- Behavior is unlearned, created, and released (vs. acquired) and expressive (vs. coping).
- Self-identity (i.e. “me” and “not-me”) interpenetrate and are one. A person is simultaneously good and bad, male and female, adult and child.

Finally, toward the end of his life, Maslow’s focus broadened from the humanistic and existential to the transpersonal dimensions of human nature. His final papers offered extensions of his ideas on creativity, values, and self-actualizing as a biological tendency as well as explorations into topics such as the good society, education, spirituality, and the psychology of transcendence. These were compiled by Maslow’s wife in a posthumous collection, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971). In Chapter Nine (pp. 121–129), Maslow introduced characteristics of self-transcendence—those that extend beyond self-actualizing—as further manifestations of psychological growth and health. To summarize:

- Dealing with ends (vs. means)—Here–now states in which the present is experienced fully, not as repetition of the past or prelude to the future.
- States of desirelessness (vs. striving to get “there”).
- Courageous, freely flowing, uninhibited, unchecked human nature.
- Pure creativeness and fusion of the person and the situation/problem.
- Fulfillment of one's promise, destiny, vocation, fate, or calling.
- Perspicuous penetration to the essence of things and people.
- Transcendence of time and space—states of fusion of temporal and eternal, of local and universal, of relative and absolute, of fact and value.
- Naturalistic religious states—seeing the everyday world, objects, and people under the aspect of unitary consciousness.
- States of innocence (i.e. beginner's mind).
- States tending toward ultimate holism—approaching something as if it were all there ever was, recognizing the totality of its characteristics (vs. abstracting in terms of usefulness, danger, convenience, etc.).
- Transcendence of separateness, discreteness, mutual exclusiveness, etc. Dichotomies resolved into a synergy (e.g., selfishness/unselfishness, reason/emotion, impulse/control, trust/will, conscious/unconscious, happiness/sadness, tragic/comic, Apollonian/Dionysian, etc.).
- Existential dilemmas are transiently resolved via living according to B-values—truth, goodness, beauty, wholeness, dichotomy-transcendence, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection (i.e. just-rightness), necessity (acceptance of things as they are), completion, justice, order, simplicity, richness, effortlessness, playfulness, self-sufficiency.

Accompanying this final list was a series of “testable hypotheses” for further research and elaboration. Arguably, therein lay Maslow’s genius. At each phase of his career, Maslow suggested radical “next steps” for psychologists (often far ahead of his time) couched in the familiar and acceptable parlance of the day. Although some of his writings may consequently appear rudimentary in retrospect, it is important to consider the degree to which his enriched and enriching insights inspired and influenced paradigm shifts within the field that now are assumed as given. It is worth noting the degree to which today’s “emerging” therapies (e.g., acceptance-and-commitment therapy and other mindfulness-based and third wave treatments, positive psychology, motivational interviewing, relational–cultural therapy, constructivist and narrative therapies, etc.) are essentially “re-packagings” of aspects of Maslow’s third and fourth forces in psychology.