

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Self-Actualizers — Making the Most of Life \*

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Abraham Maslow, one of the leaders of the Humanistic movement in psychology, has theorized that we all follow a **hierarchy of needs**. These needs begin with basic needs such as **physiological needs** (air, food, water, sleep, etc.) and **safety and security**. Once these basic needs have been relatively satisfied, higher growth needs can be sought. First, we try to find **love and belonging** through family, friendships and other mutually caring relationships. Once these are relatively secure, we seek **self-esteem** by obtaining goals which foster recognition and self-respect. The ultimate need or motive can only be met once all of these needs have been relatively satisfied.

Maslow originally found this ultimate need by studying famous people who lived unusually effective lives — Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and others. However, along the way, Maslow's thinking changed radically. It became clear to Maslow that carpenters, housewives, clerks, or students could live creatively and make the most of their potentials. He realized that *any* person — famous or unknown, academically distinguished or uneducated, rich or poor, man or woman — could demonstrate continued personal growth, which Maslow called **self-actualization**.

In his studies, Maslow found that self-actualizers tend to have enough similarities to fit a specific personality profile, which involves the qualities listed below. Do any of these qualities apply to you?

**1. Efficient perceptions of reality.** Maslow's self-actualizers were able to judge situations correctly and honestly. They were very sensitive to what is fake and dishonest. (Whether we have this quality or not, most of us think we have accurate perceptions of our world.)

**2. Comfortable acceptance of self, others, and nature.** Self-actualizers are able to accept their own nature — including their shortcomings. The shortcomings of others and the contradictions of the human condition are also accepted with humor and tolerance.

**3. Spontaneity.** Maslow's subjects extended their creativity into everyday activities. They tended to be unusually alive, engaged, and spontaneous.

**4. Task-centering.** Most self-actualizers have a mission to fulfill in life or some task or problem to pursue. Humanitarians like Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa exceptionally represent this quality, but many others follow similar paths without being in the limelight.

**5. Autonomy.** Self-actualizers are free from dependence on external authority or other people. Although they may consider the feelings and opinions of others, they tended to be resourceful and independent.

**6. Continued freshness of appreciation.** Maslow's subjects seemed to constantly renew their appreciation of life's basic qualities. A sunset or a flower will be experienced almost as intensely the one-thousandth time as it was the first. Essentially, they have an "*innocence of vision*" similar to that of a child or an artist.

**7. Fellowship with humanity.** Self-actualizers feel a deep identification with people and the human situation in general. They are not likely to limit their concern on the basis of race, religion, or ethnic group.

**8. Profound interpersonal relationships.** The interpersonal relationships of self-actualizers are marked by deep, loving bonds.

**9. Unhostile sense of humor.** This refers to the wonderful capacity to laugh at one's self. It tends to reflect the kind of humor that Abraham Lincoln had. Lincoln probably never made a joke that hurt anybody. However, his indirect comments were gentle proddings at human shortcomings.

**10. Peak experiences.** All of Maslow's subjects reported the frequent occurrence of "peak experiences." These are temporary moments of self-actualization marked by strong feelings of ecstasy, harmony, and deep meaning. Subjects reported "*being one with the universe*," "*stronger and calmer than ever before*," "*filled with light, beauty, and goodness*," and so forth. These "*life highs*" are obtained from personal experiences *without* the use of drugs. (Some people, who have not reached self-actualization, may try an unsuccessful shortcut to peak experiences by the use of drugs.)

In short, self-actualizers feel relatively safe, accepted, loved, loving, and alive. With these qualities, it is easy to see why all the other needs of Maslow's hierarchy have to be met before becoming a self-actualizer. Failing to satisfy any of the lower needs in the hierarchy will leave that person "*stuck*" at that level — never being able to reach self-actualization.

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**Self-actualization is a continuing process,  
not a destination.  
You can never become self-actualized.**

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However, self-actualization is a continually ongoing process. It is not a simple end point. In other words, nobody is ever "*self-actualized*." We can only be "*self-actualizing*." Just as reach the peak of one mountain reveals other mountains to climb, as soon as we obtain one goal in fulfilling our potentials, it opens up many other possibilities.

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- Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 426-427, 538-539.

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