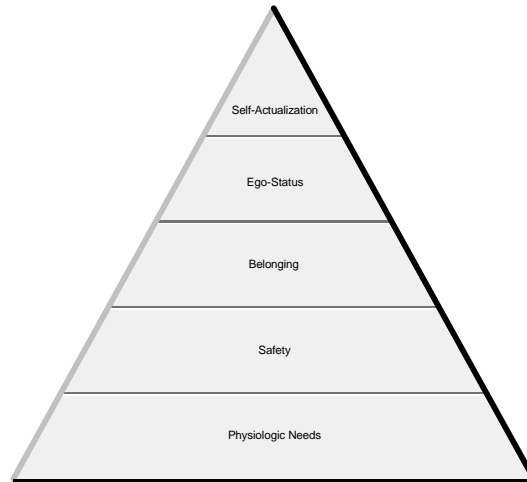


Sliding Down Mazlow's Hierarchy??

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We are all familiar with Abraham Mazlow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. This theory suggests that only unfulfilled needs are real sources of motivation. Mazlow identified five need levels that are hierarchical in nature, i.e. they range from primitive and immature (physiologic and safety) to civilized and mature (Ego-Status and Self-Actualization). This means that people become aware of and are concurrently motivated by each of the unfulfilled needs in ascending order as shown in the figure. The lower levels are concerned with basic survival needs and the higher levels with the realization of human potential.

We all know that the implication for physical therapy managers of hierarchy of needs theory is that managers should attempt to recognize the appropriate motivating level for each individual worker and develop systems and supports to assist them in achieving the specific need satisfaction that they seek. Of course, we should try to structure the work to allow workers to seek need satisfaction from their work.

Mazlow was not a PT. Possibly, he never met a PT - or even heard of physical therapy. But there is much more going on in physical therapy these days that Mazlow's theory can explain. So let's step back a bit from the daily grind. Let's look at what is happening in our industry from the eyes of the great motivation theorist - Mazlow.

Our Recent Past

In the past 20 - 30 years, physical therapy, as a profession, has seen rapid growth and incredible development. Physical therapists are well regarded in our communities, we have been well paid for very interesting work, and all of the groups that monitor such things have endorsed PT as a great profession. Certainly, getting into PT school was difficult, getting out even more challenging, but once we had that license - we had a ticket to the profession. With jobs aplenty, great salaries, good working conditions, and employers who, at least at times, treated us with respect and reverence.

In Mazlow's language, our physiologic and safety needs were pretty well covered. Level 1 and 2 on the hierarchy. We had food on the table and good living conditions thanks to the high demand for therapists and plentiful salaries. We were able to take care of the first two of Mazlow's levels just by having that license and doing our jobs well.

One of the other advantages to being a PT is that the people we work with -our peers - are generally very nice, caring, hardworking folks. We quickly found a strong sense of community among other therapists and people we worked with. We were proud to be physical therapists. In Mazlow's terms, we were satisfying our need for "belonging" - Level three in the hierarchy.

When we think about the work that we do as therapists, we are truly blessed. We have the privilege of working with patients and clients who

really need us, and they usually appreciate us too. We certainly work hard, but we make a difference. Not all professionals can say that the work that they do EVERY DAY matters - ours does. Because we make a difference, we take great pride in our work. Maslow refers to this as satisfying our need for ego and status. Level 4 of the hierarchy.

So were did this leave us? At the top level of Maslow's hierarchy - Self-Actualization. Maslow defines self actualization as "the need for fulfillment, for realizing one's own potential, for using totally one's talents and capabilities". As the US Army say, "Be all that you can be!" Self actualization is pretty heady stuff. There are not a lot of rules of how to maximize your potential. We spent a lot of time developing ourselves. Our patients, our employers and ourselves all benefitted from these lofty aspirations.

"Oops, I slipped on a pile of self actualization"

Self actualization seeking feels pretty good. In fact, many consider it intoxicating. At the very least, seeking our highest levels of functioning consumes our time, our thoughts and our energies. We have pursued our high-minded goals for quite some time now. However, several key things have changed.

We probably no longer have more jobs than therapists - at least in many parts of the country. Our salaries no longer automatically rise just because we have lasted another year on the job. Many outside our profession seem to be questioning our value to the health care system and to our patients. Instead of calls from recruiters looking to give us jobs, we get calls from colleagues who are looking for a "good" job. We seem to spend as much time on the business side of the physical therapy as we do on the clinical care of our patients. Everyone seems a bit crabbiest and less fun to be around at work, too.

The US health care industry has changed and we are being changed with it. We don't usually like having change imposed on us - and this time is no different. We struggle with all these changes. They all seem so distracting - from our patients, from our work, from our pursuit of personal enhancement.

As we stood at the pinnacle of Maslow's pyramid, we rarely realized how precariously we were perched. It did not take a lot to dislodge us and down we slid. First we were dislodged from our high esteem, then our co-workers were angry and we lost our sense of belonging. Next friends or co-workers took pay cuts or lost jobs. All of a sudden we are back at the bottom levels of the hierarchy. As Dave

Barry would say, "We are back to being bottom feeders, again." Or are we?

Maslow describes what happens in typical situations. But maybe Maslow never met a physical therapist - intelligent, creative, resilient, hard working, right minded, and caring. Although we have taken some hits in the pocket book and prestige arena lately, we need to focus on some of the things that still remain. Our patients are still benefitting from what we do. We still can find ways to enjoy what we do so well. We have tremendous resources to learn alternative ways to provide incredibly high quality of care to those who need us so much.

I think we have some choices that need to be made immediately. Are we going to be victims of our environment or are we going to find ways to work together to make this work? The choices are ours. The choice is yours.

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