

6 Human Needs

All human beings share the same 6 basic human needs. These needs underlie all the choices we make in our lives.

CERTAINTY

The first need is for Certainty. We want to feel safe, avoid pain and feel comfortable in our environment and our relationships. Every individual needs to have some sense of certainty and security – a roof over one's head, knowing where the next meal will come from, knowing how to obtain care when one is sick, knowing that a neighbor won't attack us. These are just a few examples of what constitutes a basic sense of certainty.

Everyone needs Certainty but the degree to which certainty is needed or desired varies from person to person. Some people feel secure living in one room and collecting an unemployment check. Others can feel Certainty only if they make a million dollars each year. Even though some Certainty is necessary to all of us, what constitutes Certainty varies from individual to individual. Code words for Certainty are comfort, security, safety, stability, feeling grounded predictability and protection.

UNCERTAINTY/VARIETY

The second need is for Uncertainty – for variety and challenges that exercise our emotional and physical range. Everyone needs some variety in life. Our bodies, our minds, our emotional well-being all require uncertainty, exercise, suspense and surprise.

Just as a sense of security is reassuring, so the excitement that comes from variety is necessary to feel alive. For some, variety may be satisfied by watching the news on television; others may seek extreme high-risk activities such as extreme sports. Code words for Uncertainty/Variety are: fear, thrills, instability, change, entertainment, suspense, exertion, surprise, conflict, crisis.

SIGNIFICANCE

The third need is for Significance. Every person needs to feel

important, needed, wanted. Significance comes from comparing ourselves to others – in our quest for significance, we are always involved in questions of superiority and inferiority. We can feel significant because we have achieved something, built something, succeeded at something, or we can seek significance by tearing down something or somebody.

In its positive aspect, significance leads us to raise our standards. But if we are overly focused on significance, we will have trouble truly connecting with others – comparisons focus on differences rather than commonalities. For some, significance comes from providing for the family; for others, from doing meaningful work; some need to make a major contribution to the community; some require considerable wealth. Some people achieve a sense of significance by failure, by being the worst at something, or by having low self-esteem. Whatever the measure of significance, a sense of being important is necessary to all human beings. Code words for significance are: pride, importance, standards, achievement, performance, perfection, evaluation, discipline, competition, respect, and rejection.

LOVE/CONNECTION

The fourth need is for the experience of Love and Connection. Everyone needs connection with other human beings and everyone strives for and hopes for love. An infant needs to be loved and cared for during a long period of time if it is to develop normally. Infants who are not held and touched will die. This need for love continues throughout our lives. It is epitomized by the concept of romantic love, the one person who will devote their life to us and make us feel complete. In some cultures, romantic love doesn't exist; it's replaced by the love of relatives, friends and tribe. Some people rarely experience love, but they have many ways of feeling connection with others – in the community or in the workplace. The need to be loved is characteristic of all human beings. Code words for love/connection are: togetherness, passion, unity, warmth, tenderness and desire.

GROWTH

The fifth need is for Growth. When we stop growing, we die. We

need to constantly develop emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. We grow and change physically as we develop from infancy to adulthood and old age. We grow and change emotionally with every experience, and we grow intellectually as we respond to events and to the world around us. Anything that you want to remain in your life – your money, your health, your relationship, your happiness, love – must be cultivated, developed, expanded. Otherwise, it will degenerate. Some people satisfy the need to grow by working out physically or by reading a book. Others need to study and learn constantly in order to feel that they are truly growing. Code words for growth are: developing, learning, self-improvement, studying, and understanding.

CONTRIBUTION

The sixth need is for Contribution – to go beyond our own needs and to give to others. A life is incomplete without the sense that one is making a contribution to others or to a cause. It is in the nature of human beings to want to give back, to leave a mark on the world. Giving to others may mean giving time to community service, making a charitable donation, planting trees, or giving to one's children. Not only can everyone contribute in some way, but contribution is essential to a sense of fulfillment and to happiness. Code words for contribution are: giving, sharing, helping, supporting, guiding, teaching and making a difference.

Exercise:

Revisit the 6 Human Needs and make a list of your needs with the most important first, the second most important next and so on (please be gentle with yourself on this exercise. Many people over think it. For instance, it would be easy to think that ones highest need is certainty when in actually their highest need is love and they use certainty to feel that love.)

Now look at your list and think about whether there are contradictions in the experience of your needs. You may have Certainty at the top of the list and Uncertainty/Variety may be second. If this is the case, you might constantly suffer an inner conflict as to which need is most important to satisfy. By the same

token, the need for Significance is often contradictory with the need for Love. It's difficult to love someone who always has to feel significantly important. That is why so many successful people, who satisfy their need for significance, have trouble in their close relationships and often feel that they are not truly loved.

Now let's look again at the 6 Human Needs. The first four needs – certainty, variety, love/connection, and significance – are essential for human survival. They are the fundamental needs of the personality – everyone must feel that they have met them on some level. The last two needs, growth and contribution, are the needs of the spirit and not everyone finds a way to satisfy them.

Everyone experiences the same six human needs. However, everyone finds different ways of satisfying these needs. Each of these needs can be met in ways that are positive or negative, easy to fulfill or difficult to fulfill. Some ways of satisfying these needs are good for the person, good for others, and good for society; and some are bad for everyone.

The need for certainty can be met by going to school and obtaining a degree that will ensure the possibility of making a good living. Or it can be met by doing as little as possible and avoiding challenges. It can be met by stealing from others and hoarding money and material possessions. Or it can be satisfied by holding rigidly to a dogma or doctrine.

The need for uncertainty/variety can be met by reading on different subjects and meeting different kinds of people. Or it can be met by engaging in high-risk sports or by risking one's life through violent behavior. Or it can be met by watching television or going to a movie.

The need for significance can be met by being the best at something – or by being the worst. For instance, one could feel significant by donating all of their free time to a favorite charity or conversely, one could feel significant by holding a gun to someone's head.

The need for love and connection can be satisfied through performing good deeds and being kind, or by dominating others who are forced to show appreciation.

One can grow into becoming a better person – or a despicable human being.

One can contribute to the destruction of others – or to the well-being of many.

What we do in order to fulfill each of the 6 Human Needs, what has to happen in order for us to feel that each need has been fulfilled, is what we call the vehicles for fulfilling a need.

Now take the two most important needs on your list and write down two or three things that have to happen for you to feel that that need is fulfilled. What do you do in order to fulfill those needs, what has to happen for you to feel, for example, that you fulfilled your need for certainty or for love/connection. Take a few minutes to do this.

My hope is that this exercise will help you to understand why we do some of the things we do. And also to help you understand those around you and what's underneath their behavior.

I have found that just knowing what someone's highest need is can help me be more compassionate and understanding. It can also help shed light on their behavior so I can see how they are meeting their needs and perhaps show them a more constructive or gentler way of meeting that need.