# 2.1: Purposes of Interpersonal Communication

**◖◗ Learning Outcomes**

1. Explain Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and its relationship to communication.
2. Describe the relationship between self, others, and communication.
3. Understand building and maintaining relationships.

## Meeting Personal Needs

Communication fulfills our physical, personal, and social needs. Research has shown a powerful link between happiness and communication.[1] In this particular study that included over 200 college students, they found that the ones who reported the highest levels of happiness also had a very active social life. The noted there were no differences between the happiest people and other similar peers in terms of how much they exercised, participated in religion, or engaged in other activities. The results from the study noted that having a social life can help people connect with others. We can connect with others through effective communication. Overall, communication is essential to our emotional wellbeing and perceptions about life.

Everyone has dreams that they want to achieve. What would happen if you never told anyone about your dreams? Would it really be possible to achieve your dreams without communication? To make your dreams a reality, you will have to interact with several people along the way who can help you fulfill your dreams and personal needs. The most famous people in history, who were actors, musicians, politicians, and business leaders, all started with a vision and were able to articulate those ideas to someone else who could help them launch their careers.

There are practical needs for communication. In every profession, excellent communication skills are a necessity. Doctors, nurses, and other health professionals need to be able to listen to their patients to understand their concerns and medical issues. In turn, these health professionals have to be able to communicate the right type of treatment and procedures so that their patients will feel confident that it is the best type of outcome, and they will comply with these medical orders.

Research has shown that couples who engage in effective communication report more happiness than couples who do not.[2] Communication is not an easy skill for everyone. As you read further, you will see that there are a lot of considerations and variables that can affect how a message is relayed and received. As the arrow in Figure 2.1.1 indicates, Maslow believed that human needs emerge in order starting from the bottom of the pyramid. At the basic level, humans must have *physiological* needs met, such as breathing, food, water, sex, homeostasis, sleep, and excretion. Once the physiological needs have been met, humans can attempt to meet *safety* needs, which include the safety of the body, family, resources, morality, health, and employment. A higher-order need that must be met is *love and belonging*, which encompasses friendship, sexual intimacy, and family. Another higher-order need that must be met before self-actualization is *esteem*, which includes self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, and respect by others. Maslow argued that all of the lower needs were necessary to help us achieve psychological health and eventually self-actualization.[3] Self-actualization leads to creativity, morality, spontaneity, problem-solving, lack of prejudice, and acceptance of facts.
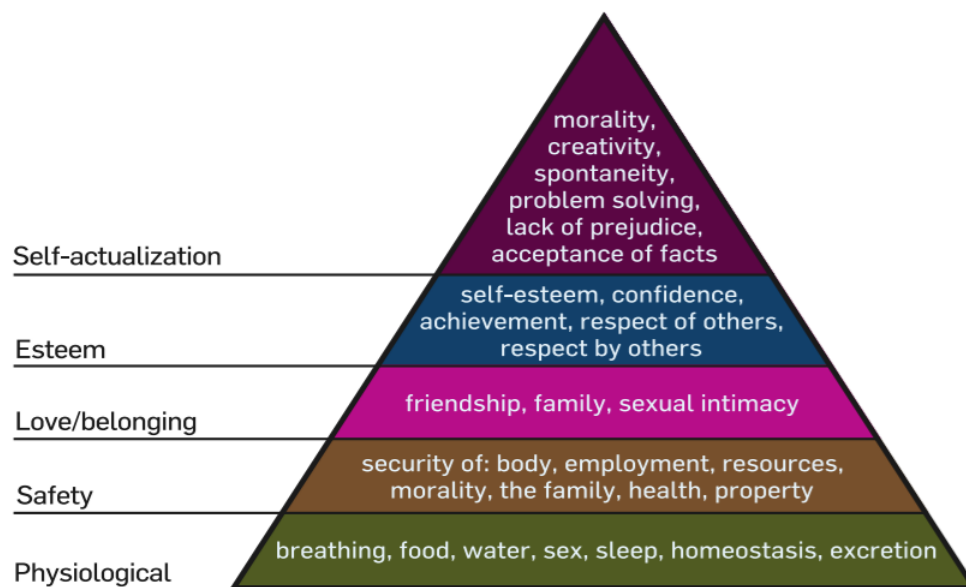
Figure 2.1.1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

## Communicating and Meeting Personal Needs

As you will learn reading this chapter, it is important to understand people and know that people often communicate to satisfy their needs, but each person's need level is different. To survive, physiological and safety needs must be met. Through communication, humans can work together to grow food, produce food, build shelter, create safe environments, and engage in protective behaviors. Once physiological and safety needs have been met, communication can then shift to love and belonging. Instead of focusing on living to see the next day, humans can focus on building relationships by discussing perhaps the value of a friendship or the desire for sexual intimacy. After creating a sense of love and belonging, humans can move forward to working on "esteem." Communication may involve sharing praise, working toward goals, and discussion of strengths, which may lead to positive self-esteem. When esteem has been addressed and met, humans can achieve self-actualization. Communication will be about making life better, sharing innovative ideas, contributions to society, compassion and understanding, and providing insight to others. Imagine trying to communicate creatively about a novel or express compassion for others while starving and feeling unprotected. The problem of starving must be resolved before communication can shift to areas addressed within self-actualization.

Critics of Maslow's theory argue that the hierarchy may not be absolute because it could be possible to achieve self-actualization without meeting the lower needs.[4] For example, a parent/guardian might put before the needs of the child first if food is scarce. In this case, the need for food has not been fully met, and yet the parent/guardian is able to engage in self-actualized behavior. Other critics point out that Maslow's hierarchy is rather Western-centric and focused on more individualistic cultures (focus is on the individual needs and desires) and not applicable to cultures that are collectivistic (focus is on the family, group, or culture's needs and desires).[5]

It is important to understand needs because other people may have different needs. This can influence how a message is received. For instance, Shaun and Dee have been dating for some time. Dee wants to talk about wedding plans and the possibility of having children. However, Shaun is struggling to make ends meet. He is focused on his paycheck and where he will get money to cover his rent and what his next meal will be due to his tight income. It is very hard for Shaun to talk about their future together and future plans, when he is so focused on his basic physiological needs for food and water. Dee is on a different level, love and belonging, because she doesn't have to worry about finances. Communicate can be difficult when two people have very drastic needs that are not being met. This can be frustrating to both Dee and Shaun. Dee feels like Shaun doesn't love her because he refuses to talk about their future together. Shaun is upset with Dee, because she doesn't seem to understand how hard it is for him to deal with such a tight budget. If we are not able to understand the other person's needs, then we won't be able to have meaningful conversations.

## Learning About Self and Others

Communication is powerful, and sometimes words can affect us in ways that we might not imagine. Think back to a time when someone said something hurtful or insightful to you. How did it make you feel? Did you feel empowered to prove that person wrong or right? Even in a classroom, peers can say things that might make you reconsider how to feel about yourself.

Classmates provide a great deal of feedback to each other. They may comment on how well one particular student does, and this contributes to the student's self-concept. The student might think, "People think I am a good student, so I must be." When we interact with others, how they perceive and relate to us impacts our overall self-concept. According to Reńe M. Dailey,[6] adolescents' self-concepts were impacted by daily conversations when acceptance and challenges were present.

In high school, peers can be more influential than family members. Some peers can say very hurtful things and make you think poorly of yourself. And then, some peers believe in you and make you feel supported in your ideas. These interactions shape us in the person we are today. On a job interview, if someone asks you to tell them about yourself, how would you describe yourself? The words that you use are related to your self-concept. Self-concept refers to the perceptions that you view about yourself. These perceptions are relatively stable. These might include your preferences, talents, emotional states, pet peeves, and beliefs.

Self-esteem is a part of self-concept. Self-esteem includes judgments of self-worth. A person can vary on high to low evaluations of self-esteem. People with high self-esteem will feel positive about themselves and others. They will mainly focus on their successes and believe that others' comments are helpful.

> ### 🧠 Discovering Self-Concept - Who are you?
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> As a means to determine your self-concept, address the following questions, and ask others to answer the question about you.
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> Questions:
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> - Where did you grow up?
> - What did you enjoy doing as a child?
> - What qualities did others recognize in you as you grew up? (ex. "I know I can rely on you." Or "You are good at making people laugh."
> - When you are with a group of people, what is your role in the group? (Ex. Listening, coordinating meeting times and location, initiating getting together).
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> Why do you think you communicate the way that you do? Is it based on some of the answers to these self-reflexive questions? Sometimes people behave and interact with others because of their past experiences, their background, and/or their observations with others.

On the other hand, people with low self-esteem will view things negatively and may focus more on their failures. They are more likely to take other people's comments as criticism or hostility. A recent study found that people with low self-esteem prefer to communicate indirectly, such as an email or text, rather than face-to-face compared to people with high self-esteem.[7]

## Building and Maintaining Relationships

Research indicates that your self-concept doesn't happen when you are born.[8] Rather, it happens over time. When you are very young, you are still learning about your body. Some children's songs talk about your head, shoulders, and toes. As you develop into an adult, you learn more about yourself with others. It is through this communication with others that we not only learn about our self, but we can build and maintain relationships. To start a relationship with someone else, we might ask them very generic questions, such as their favorite color or favorite movie. Once we have established a connection, we might invite them to coffee or lunch. As we spend time with others, then we learn more about them by talking with them, and then we discover our likes and dislikes with someone. It is through this sharing of information with others that we learn more about them. We can build intimacy and a deeper connection with others when they tell us more about their experiences and their perspectives.

Think about all the relationships that you have developed over time. Now think about how these people either shaped your self-concept or perceptions regarding your self-esteem. For instance, you may have had a coach or teacher that impacted the way that you learn about a certain topic. You may have had an inspirational teacher that helped you find your career path or you might have had a coach that constantly embarrassed you in front of your teammates by yelling at you. These two very different experiences can impact how you feel about yourself.

We are constantly receiving messages from people throughout our life. On social media, there will be people who like our posts, but there might be some who disagree or not like what we post. These experiences can help us understand what we value and what things we may choose to ignore.

From an early age, we might compare ourselves to others. This is called social comparison. For instance, in grade school, your teacher might have asked everyone to line up against the wall to see who is the tallest and who is the shortest. Instinctively, we

already compare ourselves to others. When there is an exam, students want to know how other people performed on the exam to see if they are different or similar. By comparing ourselves to others, we might be able to discern if we are better or worse than others, which can, in turn, influence our self-esteem.

We will build and maintain relationships with others who have similar self-concepts to us, or we perceive them to have a similar self-concept about ourselves. Your closest friends are usually people that are similar to you in some way. These relationships most likely occurred because you were willing to disclose information about yourself to see if you were similar or compatible with the other person.

## Uncertainty Reduction Theory

As humans habitually form relationships, theorists Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese[9] sought to understand how humans begin relationships. Their research focused on the initiation of relationships, and it was observed that humans, in first meetings, attempt to reduce uncertainty. Thus, the **Uncertainty Reduction theory** emerged. This theory addressed cognitive uncertainty (uncertainty associated with the beliefs and attitudes of another) and behavioral uncertainty (uncertainty regarding how another person might behave). Three strategies are used to reduce uncertainty, including passive, active, and interactive strategies. Passive strategies avoid disrupting the other individual and can be accomplished through observation. Active strategies involve asking a friend for information or observing social networking such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Finally, interactive strategies involve direct contact with the other individual.

Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese (1975) believed that when we meet new people, we are fraught with uncertainty about the new relationship and will seek to reduce this uncertainty and its resulting anxiety.[10] They found that the best and most common way of reducing this uncertainty is through self-disclosure. As such, self-disclosure needs to be reciprocal to successfully reduce uncertainty. Upon new introductions, we tend to consider three things: (1) The person's ability to reward or punish us, (2) the degree to which they meet or violate our social expectations, and (3) whether we expect to reencounter them. Most of these considerations are made instantly and often through expectancy biases. Research revealed that we tend to make snap decisions about people upon meeting them based on previously held beliefs and experiences and that these decisions are extremely difficult to overcome or change.[11] When we meet other people, there is a ton of information for us to go through very quickly, so just as in other situations, we draw on our previous understandings and experiences to make assumptions about this new person. The process of self-disclosure allows us to gain more data to create a more accurate understanding of other individuals, which gives us better insight into their future actions and reduces our uncertainty of them.

These ideas can be seen very clearly in the digital age as they relate to Chang, Fang, and Huang's (2015) research on consumer reviews online and their effect on potential purchasers.[12] They found that similarities in a reviewer's diction to the shoppers' language, and the confirmation of the shoppers' prior beliefs, created more credibility. We are more comfortable with things and people that are like us, and that we understand and can predict. How does this translate to more personal forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as email?

In another study, researchers sought to find out what factors influence our understanding of such messages.[13] They found that the individual personality of the receiver was the biggest factor in the way the messages were interpreted. Again we see that we as humans interpret data in as much as we are familiar with that data. We will consistently make assumptions based on what we would do or have experienced previously. The lack of nonverbal information in CMC adds to this. We have very little more than text to use in the formation of our opinions and seek to eliminate the uncertainty.

We need to go back then to the solution that Berger and Calabrese found for the reduction of uncertainty, self-disclosure. Many new relationships today, particularly in the dating world, begin online. To be successful in these initial encounters, the key would seem to be to engage in as much self-disclosure as possible on the front end to help others reduce anxiety based on uncertainty. More research in this area would support that an increase in self-disclosure results in an increase in positive reactions from similar users in a social network. The implied problem of all of this is that there is little to no way to verify the information disclosed by users. So a new kind of uncertainty reduction theory seems necessary. How can we alter our previous notions of human behavior to reflect a culture in which deception is presumably so much easier? Is the answer to live in a world of uncertainty and its resulting anxiety? To what degree must we assume the best of others and engage in potentially risky relationships to maintain a functional society? Who can we trust, and how can we know?

> **⚐ Key Takeaways**
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> - Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs impacts the content of communication as well as the purpose.
> - The feedback we receive from others provides insight into who we are as individuals.
> - A major theory in building relationships is Uncertainty Reduction Theory, which explains how we put ourselves at ease with others.

> **⚐ Exercises**
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> - Write down a list of questions you asked when you first met your college roommate or a new friend? Review these questions and write down why these questions are useful to you.
> - Recall a situation in which you were recently carrying on a conversation with another person. Write down the details of the conversation. Now, relate the parts of the conversation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.