solace
surviving exile and persecution
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How Maslow missed the mark

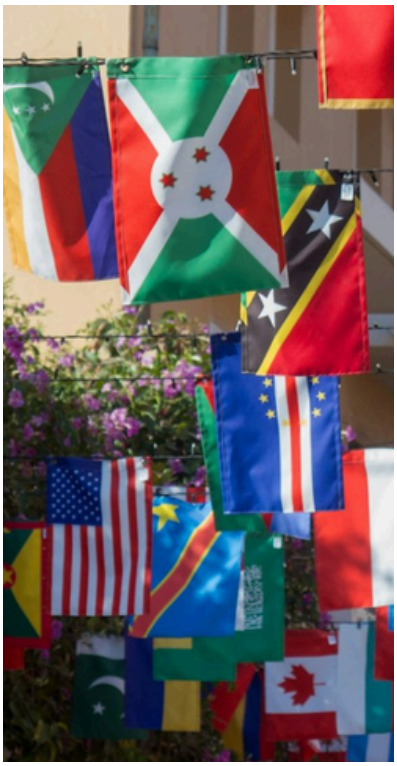
Just about everyone who has studied any psychology in the UK will have encountered Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow considered to be one of the founders of humanistic psychology, proposed a hierarchy of human need beginning with most basic, universal ones and ascending to the most sophisticated which few ultimately achieve. While there are variations, it progresses from the physiological, then safety, often thought of as job security, then the social needs of love and belonging, esteem or respect and ending with autonomy and self- actualisation.

Anne Burghgraef
Solace Clinical Director

A dangerous oversimplification

This perspective, which to western eyes, may appear self-evident, has been ubiquitous, influencing such areas as education, business, health and social care. While it has undoubtedly influenced much for good as it honours much of the richness of human functioning, with respect to refugees, it significantly misses the mark. For refugees, safety is not only the reason for uprooting themselves and their families from their homes, but for most, it remains a top and frequently elusive priority. Sanctuary seekers frequently endure severe deprivation in their quest for safety for themselves and their loved ones.

The impact of perpetual fear and insecurity whether crossing deserts, navigating the asylum system or worrying about separated family members has a significant embodied, psychological impact. At Solace, a specialist therapeutic service for asylum seekers and refugees, we witness this every day. To enable sanctuary seekers to recover any mental and emotional wellbeing, we need to create safety, physically, psychologically and socially, not just in the therapy room but in all our interactions.



This embodied lack of safety ranges from difficulties in knowing who to trust to chronic and acute pain, intrusive and disturbing memories, cognitive distortions, troubling feelings and body sensations. Many find it difficult to understand these changes in their feelings and functioning. Sometimes, I will explain by saying that, 'a part of you knows you are safe but other parts of you don't know that yet'. When refugees are referred for psychological help, sometimes they are refused because they are destitute, meaning their basic needs aren't met or they are said not to engage. If safety was prioritized, therapists would focus upon building psychological security for refugees to engage along with referrals for practical support.

Refugee children may struggle in school because they don't feel emotionally safe in the classroom or playground. It may be connected to the re-triggering of trauma, the lack of safe attachment, the humiliation of making a mistake and being laughed at or the actual or perceived threats from other children. It may manifest itself with children withdrawing, fighting or becoming unwell.

Being sensitive to the needs for safety for all refugees by fostering a welcoming atmosphere, compassion for mistakes or forgetfulness and offering gentle support can help to rebuild a shattered sense of self and the world. Encouraging refugees to engage socially by nurturing good connections and engaging in meaningful activities within a context of safety will enable them to integrate in their new world.

While it may not lead to Maslow's self-actualisation, fostering safety within our organisations may contribute to global peace.