

What Is Humanistic Psychology?

A Psychology Perspective Influenced By Humanism

By Kendra Cherry, MEd. Updated on November 14, 2022

Humanistic psychology is a [perspective](#) that emphasizes looking at the whole individual and stresses concepts such as free will, self-efficacy, and self-actualization. Rather than concentrating on dysfunction, humanistic psychology strives to help people fulfill their potential and maximize their well-being.

This area of psychology emerged during the 1950s as a reaction to psychoanalysis and behaviorism, which had dominated psychology during the first half of the century. [Psychoanalysis](#) was focused on understanding the unconscious motivations that drive behavior while [behaviorism](#) studied the conditioning processes that produce behavior.

Humanist thinkers felt that both psychoanalysis and behaviorism were too pessimistic, either focusing on the most tragic of emotions or failing to take into account the role of personal choice.

However, it is not necessary to think of these three [schools of thought](#) as competing elements. Each [branch of psychology](#) has contributed to our understanding of the human mind and behavior.

Humanistic psychology added yet another dimension that takes a more holistic view of the individual.

Other Types of Humanism

Humanism is a philosophy that stresses the importance of human factors rather than looking at religious, divine, or spiritual matters. Humanism is rooted in the idea that people have an ethical responsibility to lead lives that are personally fulfilling while at the same time contributing to the greater good of all people.

Humanism stresses the importance of human values and dignity. It proposes that people can resolve problems through science and reason. Rather than looking to religious traditions, humanism focuses on helping people live well, achieve personal growth, and make the world a better place.

The term "humanism" is often used more broadly, but it also has significance in a number of different fields, including psychology.

Religious Humanism

Some religious traditions incorporate elements of humanism as part of their belief systems. Examples of religious humanism include Quakers, Lutherans, and Unitarian Universalists.

Secular Humanism

Secular humanism rejects all religious beliefs, including the existence of the supernatural. This approach stresses the importance of logic, the scientific method, and rationality when it comes to understanding the world and solving human problems.

Uses for Humanistic Psychology

Humanistic psychology focuses on each individual's potential and stresses the importance of growth and [self-actualization](#). The fundamental belief of humanistic psychology is that people are innately good and that mental and social problems result from deviations from this natural tendency.

Humanistic psychology also suggests that people possess personal agency and that they are [motivated](#) to use this free will to pursue things that will help them achieve their full potential as human beings.

The need for fulfillment and personal growth is a key motivator of all behavior. People are continually looking for new ways to grow, to become better, to learn new things, and to experience psychological growth and self-actualization.

Some of the ways that humanistic psychology is applied within the field of psychology include:

- **[Humanistic therapy](#)**: Several different types of psychotherapy have emerged that are rooted in the principles of humanism. These include client-centered therapy, existential therapy, and [Gestalt therapy](#).
- **Personal development**: Because humanism stresses the importance of self-actualization and reaching one's full potential, it can be used as a tool of self-discovery and personal development.
- **Social change**: Another important aspect of humanism is improving communities and societies. For individuals to be healthy and whole, it is important to develop societies that foster personal well-being and provide social support.

Impact of Humanistic Psychology

The humanist movement had an enormous influence on the course of psychology and contributed new ways of thinking about mental health. It offered a new approach to understanding human behaviors and motivations and led to the development of new techniques and approaches to [psychotherapy](#).

Some of the major ideas and concepts that emerged as a result of the humanistic psychology movement include an emphasis on things such as:

- Client-centered therapy
- Free will
- Fully functioning person
- Hierarchy of needs
- Peak experiences

- Self-actualization
- Self-concept
- Unconditional positive regard

How to Apply Humanistic Psychology

Some tips from humanistic psychology that can help people pursue their own fulfillment and actualization include:

- Discover your own strengths
- Develop a vision for what you want to achieve
- Consider your own beliefs and values
- Pursue experiences that bring you joy and develop your skills
- Learn to accept yourself and others
- Focus on enjoying experiences rather than just achieving goals
- Keep learning new things
- Pursue things that you are passionate about
- Maintain an optimistic outlook

One of the major strengths of humanistic psychology is that it emphasizes the role of the individual. This school of psychology gives people more credit for controlling and determining their state of mental health.

It also takes environmental influences into account. Rather than focusing solely on our internal thoughts and desires, humanistic psychology also credits the environment's influence on our experiences.

Humanistic psychology helped remove some of the stigma attached to therapy and made it more acceptable for normal, healthy individuals to explore their abilities and potential through therapy.

Potential Pitfalls

While humanistic psychology continues to influence therapy, education, healthcare, and other areas, it has not been without some criticism.

For example, the humanist approach is often seen as too subjective. The importance of individual experience makes it difficult to objectively study and measure humanistic phenomena. How can we objectively tell if someone is self-actualized? The answer, of course, is that we cannot. We can only rely upon the individual's assessment of their experience.

Another major criticism is that observations are unverifiable; there is no accurate way to measure or quantify these qualities. This can make it more difficult to conduct research and design assessments to measure hard-to-measure concepts.

History of Humanistic Psychology

The early development of humanistic psychology was heavily influenced by the works of a few key theorists, especially Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Other prominent humanist thinkers included Rollo May and Erich Fromm.

In 1943, [Abraham Maslow](#) described his hierarchy of needs in "A Theory of Human Motivation" published in *Psychological Review*.¹ Later during the late 1950s, Abraham Maslow and other psychologists held meetings to discuss developing a professional organization devoted to a more humanist approach to psychology.

They agreed that topics such as self-actualization, creativity, individuality, and related topics were the central themes of this new approach. In 1951, [Carl Rogers](#) published "Client-Centered Therapy," which described his humanistic, client-directed approach to therapy. In 1961, the [Journal of Humanistic Psychology](#) was established.

It was also in 1961 that the [American Association for Humanistic Psychology](#) was formed and by 1971, humanistic psychology became an APA division. In 1962, Maslow published "Toward a Psychology of Being," in which he described humanistic psychology as the "third force" in psychology. The first and second forces were behaviorism and psychoanalysis respectively.

A Word From Verywell

Today, the concepts central to humanistic psychology can be seen in many disciplines including other branches of psychology, education, therapy, political movements, and other areas. For example, [transpersonal psychology](#) and [positive psychology](#) both draw heavily on humanist influences.

The goals of humanism remain as relevant today as they were in the 1940s and 1950s and humanistic psychology continues to empower individuals, enhance well-being, push people toward fulfilling their potential, and improve communities all over the world.

[The Origins of Psychology](#)

1 Source



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