



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NEEDS AND WANTS

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Often, we talk about our needs and wants interchangeably, as though somehow they are the same thing, mixing them up into one category. I believe there to be great value in distinguishing them from each other so as to set them up to serve the purposes they were created to serve. In general, having our needs met bring us to ground zero—to neutral. It put us at square-one. Brings us up to the plate. With our basic well-being accounted for, we can breathe better, relax more. *Begin*, somehow. Our survival is assured, and we can now look to the other areas of life that take us from mere survival to actual thriving. This is a true privilege and gift of being human. But it is by no means guaranteed: Whether for social, economic, governmental, or straight up developmentally-traumatized reasons, neither needs nor wants being met is ensured for so many of us on the planet.

As a baseline description, a need is a requirement or necessity for optimal survival. At the heart of codependency recovery (aka maturing/moving toward wholeness) there is an addressing (often, for the first time) of both basic needs *and* wants. But to start with needs, here are some of the basics we have as human beings: food; clothing; shelter; protection of emotional, physical (which includes sexual), intellectual, and spiritual safety (as kids, from our parents and caregivers; as adults, from our own selves and those we love); medical attention; appropriate touch; tenderness; affirmation; guidance; and limit-setting. The far-reaching impact when any one of these are not met can ultimately pave the way for anxiety, depression, substance abuse, trauma, disassociation, eating disorders, dysfunction in relationships (everything from incessant conflict to outright war), and a lack of a sense of self—among other forms of suffering—well into and throughout adulthood.

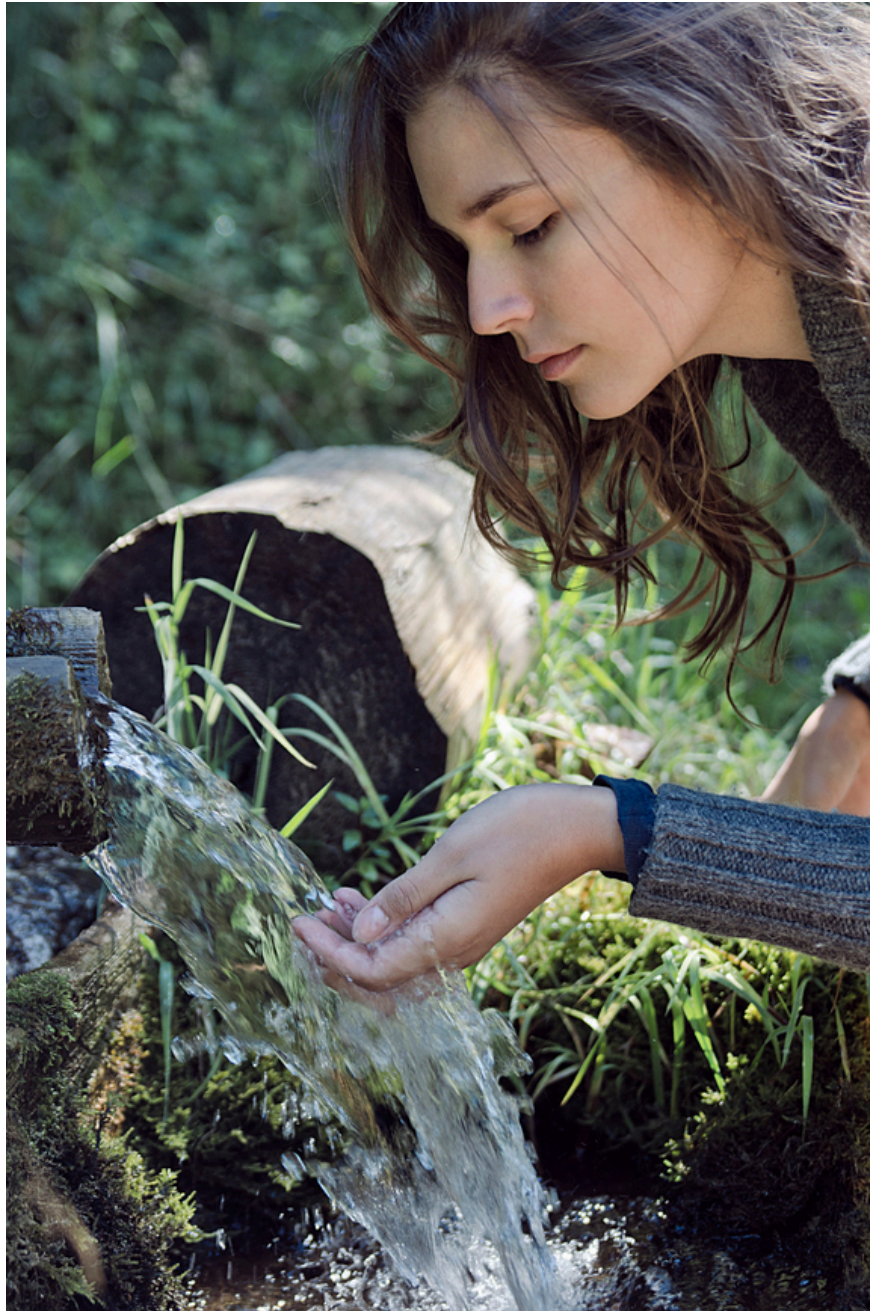
When all goes well, these needs are naturally addressed by our parents and other caregivers through their innate care and attunement. However, not all of us are so fortunate to be on the receiving end of this level of responsiveness, consciousness, and consistent care.

Nearly 75 years ago, humanistic psychologist **Abraham Maslow** (<http://www.maslow.com/>) outlined the Hierarchy of Needs, which continues to brilliantly describe a layering of what we need not only to survive (the basic ones) but to thrive (of the more emotional, spiritual, and psychological variety). Meeting our essential needs for air, food, and water sustains us and allows us to eventually reach for other needs, like personal achievement and self-expression. When these five categories of needs are tended to, they form a kind of latticework upon which we can flourish like wild growing flowers:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

1. Biological and physiological needs: air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, touch, contact, sleep.

2. **Safety needs:** protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, and freedom from fear (aka protection from the violation of boundaries).
3. **Love and belongingness needs:** friendship, intimacy, affection, and love—which can be fulfilled by family, friends, romantic relationships, as well as work colleagues.
4. **Esteem needs:** achievement, agency, mastery, interdependence, self-respect, and respect from others.
5. **Self-actualization needs:** realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, and actively seeking personal growth and experiences of the achievement of self-expression.



Needless to say, chronically *not* having our needs met is a recipe for suffering and dis-ease. In an ideal world, our governments would take care of the most essential for everyone—a roof over our head, physical warmth, food, and clean water, and even have an eye toward (in the education system, etc.) valuing needs of the more social, emotional, and psychological variety. We would ideally and collectively corral around having these basic needs met so that we could ALL “step up to the plate” and begin to live, in earnest, who we each uniquely ARE.

Having unmet needs met in adulthood

If there were needs that were inadequately met when you were a child, there is hope: Each of us can move toward attempting to get those needs met in our adult relationships, especially our romantic ones. In our compulsion to repeat (the animal aspect of us that associates familiarity with safety, no matter how uncomfortable it is), however, we often find ourselves in dynamics with people who similarly don't meet the same needs that were overlooked in childhood. This is where some interesting, growthful, and deeply healing games can begin. As **Imago Therapy** (<http://www.imagorelationships.org/>) extols: *The blueprint for your growth lies in the requests of your partner*. If we can slowly stretch out of our old survival behaviors to stretch into new ones to meet our partner's needs (often the ones that seem MOST important to our partner can require us to pull out of decades-old blind spots and survival strategies, and vice versa), then stretching to meet the requests of our partner is a recipe for moving, ever-so-slowly, outside of our conditioned wheelhouse and into a new way of living—and not incidentally, into our wholeness. So it is a double win: We heal parts of our partner in stretching into new behavior to meet their needs, and we experience the full breadth of our wholeness in so doing. *Wow*.

All the more reason to have clarity around what our needs *are*, so we can set our partners up to win in meeting them. This work is not for the meekly-intentioned, to be sure. It asks nothing less of us than to cull our own psyches and hearts to find the yearnings and hungers that have often been left to wail and resign for so long.

Author and educator **Alison Armstrong** (<http://www.queenscode.com/aboutAlison.php>) made a vital distinction that helps when trying to identify whether we're looking at a need or want: Meeting a need brings us to ground zero, as I mentioned above. Meeting a want *brings us joy*. And yes, it may be of the fleeting variety, but it is joy nonetheless—i.e., I don't NEED to watch a movie tonight, but if I do, I might just feel happy about it (depends on the movie of course, ha). But I do NEED connection, sleep, sustenance on a more basic level. With needs addressed, we can springboard toward the fulfillment of our wants and begin to touch into our sense of this glee and even bliss of being a sensual human. Where meeting our needs gets us up to the plate, where we're "okay with being here on the planet," fulfilling our wants lets us enjoy the game, where we are "*psyched* to be here." Contrary to a lot of spiritual writings that poo-poo the idea of desire and wanting (I believe they are alluding to hanging our sense of spiritual SELF on these fleeting yearnings and states, which I agree is not wise), desire is an ongoing invitation to experience the raptures and new-nesses of what life has to offer.



Wants add to our lives. In a sense, they are the decorations of well-being. A want is not an imperative, but it does increase the fun and sensual pleasure of life. When my son Ever needs a blanket because he is cold, that is a genuine need. If he asks for a lollipop, we're pretty clear on where that one falls—a big, delectable (and sticky) want. As for me, it brings me joy in some moments to have chocolate ice cream, but I don't need it (although of course I say I do, ha). Same with "fun shopping"—love it sometimes, but certainly don't need it.

While we ARE pure perfection on a spiritual level—nothing to add, no identity or "thing", emotion, role or desire could alter the perfection of the truth of who we *are*. Yes. Yet on a human egoic level, desires define the very self that allows us to move around and interact; to express and define and contribute our "us-ness" to the world at large. These desires are the compass that leads us to our next place in life!

So, I would say that it's important to pay attention to both the spiritual and egoic sides of it. Amen to the interplay of *both* being celebrated.

Another way to distinguish whether something is a need is to ask yourself: Does meeting or not meeting this need affect me *physiologically, psychologically, or spiritually*? If it affects us in any one of those ways, or in all of them, I would say it is a *need*. Would having this thing or this experience be a nice add-on, something fun, something cool, something pretty? If so, I would say it is a *want*.

Depending on one's temperament, some might say that wanting to be outside a lot could actually be a *need*. For example, as a sensitive, if I am not in nature enough, I start withering and can find myself getting sick. It affects me in all three ways—body, mind, and spirit, so I throw nature time into the category of needs.

Is it okay for you to have needs?

There was a particularly memorable moment during the week-long **workshop I led at Esalen** (<http://alanis.com/blog/teaching-at-esalen/>) last summer. We had cleared the floor of all pillows, chairs, and notebooks, and it was suddenly a clean slate for looking at our relationship to our needs. Partly inspired by my having worked with Alison Armstrong, I asked everyone to step into one of four quadrants based on which of the following beliefs they most identified with:

- *I feel entitled to my needs and to having them met.*
- *I feel that my needs are selfish.*
- *I am not worthy to have my needs met.*
- *I don't have any needs. I am needless.*

After everyone found their group, we took turns describing and articulating how that belief gets played out in our lives—the payoffs, the costs, the sense of identity gained from it, the impact on those around us. It was a *powerful* awareness practice. And as it turns out, there is no “right” relationship to our needs (sorry, even the entitled ones ☺). If there were any “right” relationship to our needs it would be that they are worthy of being met, to be sure; and that as an adult, their being met by another is a true GIFT from them, not a requirement.

I had many break-ups precipitated by my having shared certain needs with my then-boyfriends that they were simply unwilling to stretch into. This didn't make my needs any less valid. It just meant they were not up for meeting them. And their relationship with their OWN needs, perhaps in some ways projected onto me, was fraught enough to seem have those needs seem dangerous. All of this made sense to me, of course. But I was very much looking forward to being in a relationship with someone who saw the value in stretching to meet each other's needs. And knew that some of them would be harder than others to stretch into.

Stretching to meet your beloved's needs is not leaving room for them to control or to ask you to be someone you are, at your core, NOT. It is about expanding your being into the fullness of who you ARE while shifting *behaviors only*. A very big distinction.

There is inevitable fallout when we either don't have a sense of our needs and wants, or when we won't admit to them and own them. An example is the person who gets hired for the job (a demanding one) and doesn't ask for support or accept it when offered. Their new co-workers and supervisors extend their help. "Let me know if you need anything. Do you want a break? Did anyone show you where the supplies are kept? Let us know how we can help you to get acclimated here. Did you get any lunch today?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Thank you, though. It's all good."

A month later, they crash, burn, and quit. Their relationship with their needs might be such that they feel unworthy to have them met, let alone ask for help. So, one step in moving ever-so-slowly to getting our unmet needs in childhood met now is taking responsibility for them. And in order to do that it helps to identify what they even ARE—because they may have been kept out of our awareness for very good reason. Perhaps it wasn't safe to have needs, perhaps our parents were narcissistic and our needs were never a consideration. So many reasons to have disappeared these needs into the back-pockets of our consciousness. But if we want true connection and interdependence and intimacy, we simply have to become aware of our mutual needs and do everything we can to meet them.

Speaking up for the self

To express what we want is a very empowered way of speaking. While we may not be invested in our every want being fulfilled, the knowing of our wants has a self-knowledge empowerment quality to it. It is unequivocal. Expressing what we want has healthy narcissism built into it. (If we have an underdeveloped narcissism, it will be tough to say what we want. And if we have too much narcissism, we are overly concerned with our wants, and not aware of any others in the room. Both ends of this narcissism continuum don't leave room for real connection nor intimacy.)

Yes, this journey of self-knowing can be a long one. But moving in this direction takes us toward the life so many of us say we want. And in the back-and-forth of it all, I think The Rolling Stones hit the nail on the head:

You can't always get what you want.

But if you try sometimes you might find,

You get what you need.