

OCTOBER 6, 2022 | 8 MIN READ

Do You 'Matter' to Others? The Answer Could Predict Your Mental Health

The psychological construct of mattering gauges the risk of depression, suicide and other disorders

BY FRANCINE RUSSO



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Mental Health ▾

In South Carolina a grieving mother whose son died by suicide hands out stickers to young people. The sticker bears the words “Jackson Matters and So Do You.” To be important to others—to *matter*—has become more than just a truism. “You Matter” is the tagline of the National Suicide Prevention hotline. And the phrase “Black Lives Matter” calls attention to the exclusionary racism to which more than one in eight Americans is exposed.

Over the past 30 years, but never more so than now, psychologists have formalized “mattering” into a psychological construct that uniquely predicts depression, suicidal thoughts or other mental ills. It also foretells physical resilience among the elderly.

Increasingly a consensus is building that mattering stands on its own in psychological terms: “There is no other construct that gets at people’s need to feel valued and seen by others as important,” says Gordon Flett of York University in Ontario, author of *The Psychology of Mattering: Understanding the Human Need to Be Significant* (2018). Mattering overlaps with self-esteem, social support and a sense of belonging, he says, but is not identical. What’s especially powerful, he says, is that compared to other psychological states, a low sense of mattering is more amenable to change. And that goal can be achieved with years of therapy. “People can learn to engage with others in ways that foster their own sense of mattering,” he says.

In 1981 sociologist Morris Rosenberg created a five-item mattering scale with questions such as “How much do other people depend on you?” and “How much would you be missed if you went away?” Rosenberg, renowned for his widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, was not the one who eventually tested the measure. In the early 1990s, over a beer at an annual meeting, Rosenberg suggested to sociologist R. Jay Turner that the mattering scale be included in a large, planned

Toronto community survey. In 1997 Turner suggested to his student John Taylor, now a Florida State University sociologist, that he analyze the survey's mattering data for his doctoral dissertation. As much as the scale made sense to him intuitively, Taylor says, he couldn't help but ask himself, "Is it the same wine in a different bottle?"—perhaps just a repackaged form of self-esteem, for instance. But after a 2001 study he conducted on mattering, any lingering doubts vanished. "Mattering makes a unique contribution," Taylor says. "It's distinct from self-esteem, social support and other factors; it's an important part of the self-concept."

MEASURING MATTERING

Scales to assess mattering have multiplied in the ensuing years. Besides Flett's Anti-Mattering Scale (with items such as "To what extent have you been made to feel you are invisible?") and a Work Mattering Scale, developed by Ae-Kyung Jung and Mary J. Heppner at the University of Missouri, scientists can now measure your sense of significance to family, to your university, and to the larger community and society. One scale even does so for your romantic partner.

Mattering is defined as consisting of three components. Brown University sociologist Gregory Elliott describes them as:

Awareness: Do people pay attention to you or walk right by you?

Importance: Do you have people who take a real interest in your well-being?

Reliance: Are there people who would come to you for help, support or advice?

A sense of significance (or insignificance) begins in childhood. "What makes neglect by parents so destructive," Flett says, is "the message it sends to the child who is made to feel irrelevant, invisible and insignificant."

In teenagers, an absence of mattering is highly destructive. In a landmark study of 2,000 adolescents in 2009, Elliott found that as teens' feeling of mattering in their family decreased, antisocial, aggressive or self-destructive behaviors rose.

Conversely, if you believe you matter to your family, you are less likely to go astray. Clemson University psychologist Robin Kowalski has been coding teenagers' posts on Reddit's "Suicide Watch" page. "About half felt that they didn't matter," she says, citing posts such as "I just want to matter" and "No one cares about me."

Taylor's 2001 study linked mattering to mental health. In a 2018 study, he went further, showing a strong correlation with physical health. He and his colleagues Michael McFarland and Dawn Carr conducted in-depth psychological interviews of 1,026 Tennessee residents, ages 22 to 69, followed by a battery of physiological measurements such as blood pressure, cortisol levels and hip-to-waist ratio. The research team found that allostatic load—the general wear and tear of stress on the body over time—increased with age, and those who did not feel a strong sense of mattering to others had significantly greater allostatic load. "Even minute variations in mattering are stronger predictors of physical and mental health than social support," he says. Social support is seen as a defining factor in describing physical resilience, but it can also encompass troubled relationships with family. "Mattering is a cleaner measure," he says. "It captures only the positive effects of close personal ties."

SCHOOL, WORK, COMMUNITY, SOCIETY

We derive our sense of significance not just from our personal relationships, says University of Miami community psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky, but from work and community. Prilleltensky created his own scale to measure this broadened

measurement. In his [Mattering in Domains of Life Scale \(MIDLS\)](#), people assess their degree of feeling “worthy, acknowledged and appreciated,” as well their sense of contributing to others. These feelings relate to four domains: the self, relationships, work (paid or unpaid) and community.

Prilleltensky took those elements and created the [image of a wheel with “mattering” occupying its center](#). “Feeling valued” and “adding value” form semicircles around the target, and an outer circle replicates the four domains for each of the “value” categories in the adjacent inner ring. The goal is to come up with a “virtuous cycle,” he wrote, “where the benefits of feeling valued will lead to adding value.” The more others make you feel you matter, he noted, the more likely you are to contribute to them, reaping notice and appreciation.

Mattering scales have begun to make appearances in the workplace. Investigating nurse burnout in a [nationwide survey](#), Julie Haizlip, a nursing professor and pediatrician at the University of Virginia (UVA), and her colleagues found that nurses who reported higher levels of mattering to patients and co-workers had less burnout. “In health care, it seems to be more about the interpersonal than the organizational. Mattering occurs in the small moments,” Haizlip says. It might involve holding a frightened patient’s hand or your colleagues ordering lunch for you and knowing which sandwich you like.

In her current study of nursing and medical students at UVA and the Medical College of Wisconsin, Haizlip has learned that instilling a sense of mattering can be as simple as remembering students’ names during their rotations, a task helped along by distributing photographs of incoming students.

The importance of mattering differs by gender. When queried by researchers,

women “almost universally” report higher levels of mattering in their relationships, Taylor says, and he notes that this has been true from the 1990s to today even through changes in women’s roles. Both men and women derive a sense of mattering from close relationships, but women do so more than men from their roles as parents and close friends, reports a recent [study](#) by Baylor University sociologists Rebecca Bonhag and Paul Froese.

Men’s sense of significance, the study finds, stems more from their perceived status and social class within the broader community and through membership in groups. Donating to local organizations, for example, is linked to mattering for men but less so for women. One intriguing finding is that men who strongly identified as Republican and were active on social media felt a greater sense of mattering; the same link was not found for men who were independents or Democrats. It’s not possible to say what causes what, but Bonhag speculates that men who have lost some sense of mattering find it in being strongly partisan. If that’s the case, she says, “that would be a troubling trend.” On the other hand, she suggests, social media may help men feel connected to others in ways women get from their close ties.

MATTERING, SUICIDE AND HOMICIDE

Not mattering to another person has been linked to both suicidal and even homicidal thinking. Several scholars have attributed mass shootings at least partly to such a deficit. The 2007 Virginia Tech shooter left a chilling manifesto, which Elliott paraphrases as “None of you recognize who I am, so I have to show you I’m important.” A 2003 study examined media reports of the [writings of 10 mass shooters](#). A consistent theme, Flett says, could be summarized as “I have been made to feel like I don't matter, but I matter more than you people realize.”

As the mattering concept gains more notice, it is being incorporated into mental health interventions. The You Matter lifeline represents one key example. Calling 988 opens a way for people with suicidal thoughts to feel someone will listen and they will matter to another person.

At McMaster University, psychology researcher Christine Wekerle and her colleagues are testing JoyPop, a phone app to help young people boost their sense of mattering. It guides them to understand their moods, distract themselves from negative thoughts and connect socially. All these features, Wekerle says, “increase your sense of mattering because you’re doing something positive for yourself.”

Trailblazers in some communities are focusing on the importance of mattering for young people. Kini-Ana Tinkham, director of the Maine Resilience Building Network, points to Maine’s 2021 Integrated Health Survey. It found that 49 percent of high school students and 45 percent of middle school students believe they do not matter in the communities where they live. In response, the Maine Resilience Building Network launched a mattering awareness initiative.

One librarian, noticing teens vaping after school in a vacant lot, enlisted them to convert a storeroom into their own hangout. A local outdoor program, Teens to Trails, created a teen advisory panel to make sure “we make no decision about you without you,” says executive director Alicia Heyburn. Perceiving opportunities to become involved in an activity and to have a voice in decision-making, researchers found, increased middle schoolers’ sense of mattering in two rural Michigan school districts.

Simply *noticing* the kids, Maine’s Tinkham says, makes a difference: a store owner, for example, simply saying, “Justin, I haven’t seen you for a while. How you doing?”

Many interventions occur spontaneously without an institution as an intermediary. Adolescents can join and volunteer in church or leadership groups. Helping others increases mattering. Older people, who connect socially on Facebook, some [research](#) has found, feel an increase in how much they matter to others as they interact with others more on the site.

For a neglected or abused child, an intervention may arrive as a trusted adult who cares and pays attention—a relative, a teacher, a coach. Some clinical accounts acknowledge that establishing the feeling of mattering might involve major life upheavals, but establishing it is by no means an impossible goal. “Once they matter to someone,” Flett says, “they can no longer think, ‘I don’t matter to anyone.’”

IF YOU NEED HELP If you or someone you know is struggling or having thoughts of suicide, help is available. Call the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988, use the online [Lifeline Chat](#) or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741.

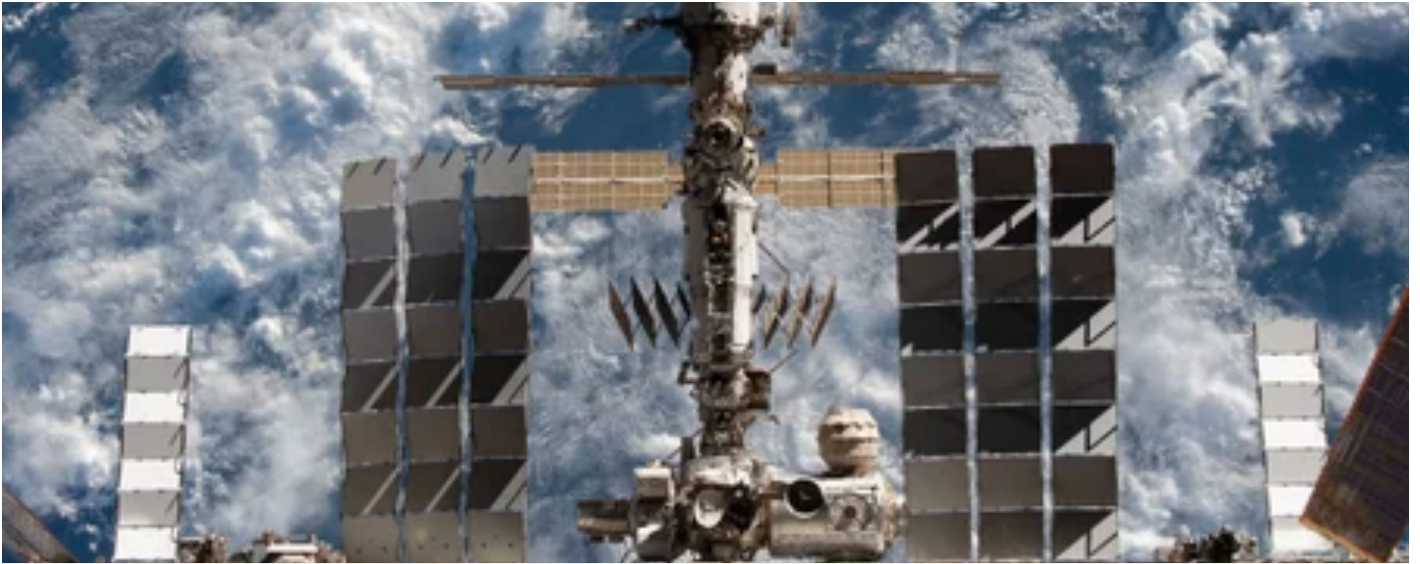
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