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HEALTH

# Why Mattering Is So Important to Our Mental Health

New research on "anti-mattering" and overcoming loneliness.

Posted April 23, 2022 | Reviewed by Abigail Fagan



## KEY POINTS

- Mattering is the general belief that you are important to others. "Anti-mattering" means that you feel you just don't matter at all.
- New research developing the 5-item Anti-Mattering Scale shows how people high in this quality can be vulnerable to mental health disorders.
- Learning to recognize anti-mattering in yourself can be an important first step to overcoming loneliness.

There may be times that you'd like to feel invisible, but for the most part, people like to feel that other people notice and care about them. If you've ever walked into a social gathering and waited five minutes for someone to greet you, then you know how painful it is to feel like you're blending into the background. Alternatively, consider the agony you can suffer when you've sent a text to a friend, only to have it sit there "delivered," but unanswered.

When you stop and think about it, though, why should you care so much about whether people notice you or not? After all, the people who know you might be busy and preoccupied with other things. It shouldn't make a difference, either, whether people who don't know you acknowledge your presence. And, in reality, aren't there those times when you'd be just as happy to get in and out of someplace without having to stop and talk to anyone?

In positive psychology, the quality of "mattering" is considered, in the words of York University's Gordon Flett and colleagues (2022) to be "a key psychological resource." Although you might occasionally enjoy the cloak of invisibility, Flett et al. propose that feeling chronically insignificant can become a "meta-pathology" that can interfere with the ability to obtain "optimal health and well-being."

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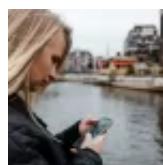
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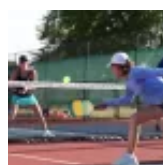
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# Why Does it Matter to Matter?

According to the Canadian researchers, rather than simply feeling invisible, when you suffer from what they call "anti-mattering," you define yourself as someone whose "personal identity is dominated by the sense of not mattering to others." You adopt this identity as a shield for the specific reason of protecting yourself from the stress of being ignored or regarded as irrelevant by others. The "anti" here, literally means "against" mattering, not simply being low in the feeling that you matter.

In the words of the authors, anti-mattering "should be regarded as a unique and specific vulnerability unlike any other risk factor... [it] can become a cognitive preoccupation that is internalized and results in self-harm tendencies and an inability or unwillingness to engage in self-care."

The anti-mattering stance can come from many sources, such as facing constant rejection from potential romantic partners, employers, or even those rude people who never reply to your texts. However, the Canadian researchers propose that its most likely source can be traced to early childhood experiences of neglect by distracted and unresponsive parents. The hard shell around your need to matter eventually forms so that even the worst ex-

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periences of rejection will fail to penetrate.

Unfortunately, the more resistant the shell becomes to rejection or dismissive treatment, the harder it is for others to get through to you. Rewarding relationships become that much more difficult to attain as others learn that it's easier just to stay away from you.

## 5 Ways to Test Your Anti-Mattering Tendencies

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To tap into the unique qualities of anti-mattering, the Canadian researchers set about to develop a new 5-item Anti-Mattering Scale (AMS). Across a series of studies using young adult and adolescent samples, Flett et al. first built and then compared their AMS to an existing "General Mattering Scale" (GMS) in its relationship to measures of depression, loneliness, and anxiety. You can best get a

sense of what's at the heart of anti-mattering by testing yourself on these five items (rate yourself from 1, not at all, to 4, a lot):

1. How much do you feel like you don't matter?
2. How often have you been treated in a way that makes you feel like you are insignificant?
3. To what extent have you been made to feel like you are invisible?
4. How much do you feel like you will never matter to certain people?
5. How often have you been made to feel by someone that they don't care what you think or what you have to say?

Most of the participants in the undergraduate sample scored between 7 and 15 on this scale, with an average of just about 11.

Key to the idea of the AMS is that it's not just feeling unimportant (or low in mattering).

These five items from the GMS show this nuanced difference. Rate yourself with the same scale as the AMS:

1. How important are you to others?
2. How much do others pay attention to you?
3. How much would you be missed if you went away?

4. How interested are others in what you have to say?
5. How much do other people depend upon you?

Participants tended to receive higher scores on the GMS than the AMS, with the average at 16 and the majority scoring between 13 and 18.

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From these averages alone, you can see that it is more common for people to feel that they have a valuable role in the life of others than to feel that they are not worth anyone's attention.

## Does Being High on Anti-Mattering Matter?

Now that you've tested yourself on AMS and seen how it differs from GMS, it's time to turn

to the psychological consequences of turning away from others as a self-protective mechanism. As shown in the Flett et al. findings, the patterns of scores on key indicators of mental health, including depression, loneliness, and anxiety, showed that anti-mattering wasn't simply the opposite of mattering.

Most importantly, the findings across the young adult and adolescent samples confirmed the predicted relationship between anti-mattering and loneliness as well as the incremental effect on depression of high AMS vs. low GMS scores. This pattern reflects, in the words of the authors, “ties between low mattering and a maladaptive early schema reflecting disconnection and alienation from others.” Combined, high AMS and high loneliness scores produce what Flett et al. refer to as the “double jeopardy of feeling alone and insignificant.”

**To sum up**, feeling that you matter is clearly a contributor to positive mental health. Anti-mattering can become part of a larger identity in which you feel that you lack value to others, even contributing to a sense of marginalization. Although the York University findings established the negative consequences of anti-mattering among young adults and teens, this basic need appears to be one that can form an important cornerstone of healthy development

throughout life.

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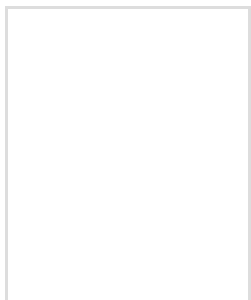
## References

Flett, G. L., Nepon, T., Goldberg, J. O., Rose, A. L., Atkey, S. K., & Zaki-Azat, J. (2022). The Anti-Mattering Scale: Development, psychometric properties and associations with well-being and distress measures in adolescents and emerging adults. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 40*(1), 37–59. doi: 10.1177/07342829211050544



## About the Author

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**Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D.**, is a Professor Emerita of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her latest book is *The Search for Fulfillment*.

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