

# Want to Believe in Yourself? 'Mattering' Is Key.

This overlooked concept has been linked to better relationships — with oneself and others.

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By Gail Cornwall

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Gordon Flett came across the term “mattering” as a psychology graduate student. Sitting at his desk in 1987, poring over a textbook, “I immediately knew what mattering was,” he said.

He remembered visiting his grandmother during the summer as a child and taking trips to the insulation plant where she managed the cafeteria. She hung on his every word, and her co-workers treated him like royalty. Recalling the experience, he could almost taste the Jell-O and chocolate milk.

A few years later, the concept landed even closer to home. He was struggling to find research subjects for his master’s thesis and panic was rising. His mother, who lived nearby, was also facing a difficult moment; her marriage was falling apart.

Mary Flett decided to help her son. She became known in her community as “the lady on the bike,” pedaling to baseball and soccer fields to recruit young participants for his study.

“She got the boost she needed in terms of mattering by carving out a new meaningful role,” said Dr. Flett, who published the resulting paper in a prestigious journal. “I also got a reminder of my value at a time when I needed it.”

Dr. Flett, now a professor at York University and the author of “The Psychology of Mattering,” is one of the world’s foremost authorities on the subject. He and other experts agree that a sense of mattering is necessary for human flourishing, and while some factors are out of our control, there are steps, both big and small, that everyone can take to enhance it.

## What mattering means

Mattering is “a core, universal human need,” a necessary component for well-being, Dr. Flett said. But it’s tricky to define, he added, because people sometimes confuse it with belonging, self-esteem and social connection.

Mattering involves “more than feeling like you belong in a group,” he explained; it’s also being “missed by people in that group if you weren’t there.” When it comes to self-esteem, you can like yourself and feel capable, Dr. Flett said, but “you still won’t be a happy person if no one notices you when you enter a room.”

To matter, people must feel valued — heard, appreciated and cared for — and they must feel like they add value in ways that make them feel capable, important and trusted, said Isaac Prilleltensky, a professor at the University of Miami and a co-author of “How People Matter.” It’s a two-part definition: feeling valued and adding value.

Research suggests that people who feel like they matter experience more self-compassion, relationship satisfaction, and greater belief in their capacity to achieve their goals, while lack of mattering is associated with burnout, self-criticism, anxiety, depression, aggression and increased risk of suicide.

How do you know where you fall on the scale? Start, Dr. Prilleltensky said, by asking yourself a few questions: Do you feel valued in your relationships? At work (both paid and unpaid)? In your community? Do you matter to yourself, possessing a sense that you're worthy regardless of what you accomplish or how you look?

Then ask whether you add value in each of those four areas. Do you feel like a good partner or friend? Do you feel competent at work? Do those outside your immediate circle rely on you for anything? Is self-care a reality or a pipe dream?

The key, Dr. Prilleltensky said, is to aim for a sense of balance across both parts of the definition and all areas of your life. (Think, for instance, of the workaholic who is indispensable at the office but doesn't invest enough time at home to feel valuable there.) These questions can help you notice where you need to make changes.

## How to increase your sense of mattering

Wherever you are on the spectrum, "mattering is malleable," Dr. Flett said. We can't change how we were raised or whether we've experienced discrimination, exclusion and unfair treatment — all of which can have a heavy impact on our sense of mattering — but there are steps that can change how we perceive our value.

**Identify your strengths.** Think about a time when you felt useful, Dr. Prilleltensky said. Or pinpoint areas where you're already adding value and figure out how you can kick it up a notch.

While people can be good at many things, true strengths are things that we're good at, that we choose to do and that make us feel good while we're doing them, said Lea Waters, a professor of positive psychology at the University of Melbourne and the author of "The Strength Switch." If all three components are not in place, Dr. Waters said, they aren't strengths by positive psychologists' definition.

Let's say you're great at spreadsheets, socializing and event planning. The P.T.A. nominates you as fund-raising chair but running an auction sounds as pleasurable as having a root canal. That is not a role that plays to your strengths, Dr. Waters said. But if you show up early to every meeting because you enjoy chatting with other parents and guardians, leading the welcome committee is likely to make you feel like you're adding value.

**Assess your work life.** Feeling a sense of significance at work has been tied to lower absenteeism, more readiness to share ideas, more engaged employees and better employee-manager relationships, Dr. Prilleltensky said. So it's worthwhile to figure out which aspects of your job make you feel capable and in control. A young lawyer, for instance, might split her time between drafting court briefs — an energizing task where her creativity helps — and taking depositions, which leaves her feeling drained and clumsy. With this information, she might request more opportunities to draft briefs to increase a sense that she's adding value.

But don't forget to interrogate how valued you are, too. Are you treated fairly? Do your co-workers value your point of view? Was your request for a promotion taken seriously? These questions can help you assess whether

you're valued in the workplace, but more important, they can determine whether you *feel* valued.

If work is unrewarding, you can try to encourage changes or consider leaving. A career pivot is a big disruption, one that's not available to everyone, Dr. Prilleltensky said, but a prolonged sense of not being valued can lead to burnout, depression and ineffectiveness.

**Adjust your relationships.** In "How People Matter," Dr. Prilleltensky and his co-author (and wife), Ora Prilleltensky, recommend telling people why and how much you appreciate them. Try something specific like, "It meant a lot to me that you took out the trash before I got home because you realized I'd be tired from work."

You can also add value in relationships by asking your loved ones at least one open-ended question every time you see them. Doing so helps you better understand their perspectives, and it communicates that you value them enough to care about their experiences.

Sometimes mattering requires "making sure you only engage in relationships with people who reflect that you matter back to you," said Marisa Franco, the author of "Platonic" and an assistant clinical professor in the University Honors program at the University of Maryland. If you have expressed your needs and still don't feel valued, walk away, she said.

**Volunteer your time.** Fighting for a cause is one path to mattering, Dr. Prilleltensky said, though "you don't need to be Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King." Make a sandwich for someone experiencing homelessness, for example, or attend an event hosted by an organization you believe in. Just getting started begets the kind of satisfaction and recognition that makes you feel valued, he said.

**Express grievances and practice self-compassion.** We often blame ourselves when we aren't valued, Dr. Flett said. But far too often, circumstances beyond our control have made us believe we don't matter. Perhaps you grew up feeling like you were important to one parent but not the other, or you noticed that teachers expected the worst of children who looked like you. People who have marginalized identities are often made to feel less significant than others.

But two things can be true at once: There are aspects of mattering that you can't change without institutional and structural overhauls, and you can take action to increase your sense of well-being, Dr. Prilleltensky said. It often starts with recognizing that you've been treated unfairly, according to Dr. Flett.

This is what inspired T'áncháy Redvers, a queer television writer and performer, to become a co-founder of We Matter, an organization that aims to teach Indigenous youth about how "systemic and structural forces" make it more difficult to feel valued, and that shares stories of Indigenous people surmounting those forces. Its message is one of hope: Look at how people like you have added and asserted value.

It's also a message of self-compassion. Just as mattering is a universal human need, having it go unmet is a common part of being alive, Dr. Franco said. So, when possible, eschew self-judgment and remind yourself that you're not alone, she said. When you think "I don't matter," try not to over-identify with the thought; instead, notice and gently challenge the idea, she said. You might say: "I'm having the thought that I don't matter, but I remember the cashier at the grocery store smiling when I asked about her grandson on Tuesday."

From there you might find a way forward that underscores how much you matter, just like Dr. Flett's mother did when she helped him with his research. Instead of ruminating over why her husband no longer valued her or her

decision to leave the marriage, Mary Flett became “the lady on the bike” — who knew she mattered quite a bit.

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Gail Cornwall is a freelance writer in San Francisco, covering psychology, education and child development, among other topics.