



Mattering Matters

by Lori Hewitt, MSW, RSW

You matter! Say it out loud, scream it from the roof tops, heck... make it into a neon sign! Do whatever it takes to ensure you internalize this message, because it is essential to good mental health (and because it's true)!

Now that we have that established, let's take a step back. Have you ever felt unheard, not valued, invisible? Have you maybe not gotten the recognition at work you were hoping for, or felt unseen in a large group? Have you felt taken for granted by a partner or friend? I'm certain we all have felt this way from time to time. The perceived absence of mattering can lead to feelings of insignificance, social isolation, and loneliness.

Now remember a time when someone asked for your opinion, when your presence was noticed and acknowledged, when someone sent you a message letting you know you were in their thoughts. How did this make you feel? Valued and appreciated? Seen and heard? Recognized and respected? Connected and cared for? As if you made a difference and you mattered?

What is Mattering?

"Mattering" is the basic human need to feel valued, and it's also the opportunity to add value. It is the notion that "we are a significant part of the world around us." This concept was first conceptualized by sociologist Morris Rosenberg in the 1980's. Most recently the concept of mattering was revisited by journalist Jennifer Breheny Wallace in her new book entitled, *Mattering: The Secret to a Life of Deep Connection and Purpose*. Wallace simplifies the somewhat academic concept developed by Rosenberg and offers practical, and dare I say simple ways to incorporate its intent into daily practice. Not only is it important to feel significant, appreciated, invested in, and depended on, it is essential to help instill these feelings in others and know we are adding value to the world around us. When we do this, we feel we make a difference and, in turn, we matter.

"Mattering is feeling valued by ourselves, our family, our friends, our colleagues, and society – and then having an opportunity to add value back."

~ *Samantha Laine Perfas, Harvard*

How "to do" Mattering

Mattering is not just a cognitive concept; it is tangible and actionable. There are things we can do daily for ourselves and others that support mattering. Wallace highlights some tips to help remind ourselves, and others, that we matter.

- **Take a Minute to Reflect**

At the end of each day, take a few minutes to think about how it went. Write down one way you contributed to someone else's life (I keep a special journal just for this purpose). Don't overcomplicate this, it can be as simple as making a colleague laugh with a silly joke or helping a neighbour carry in groceries. Or maybe you acknowledge you handled a difficult situation with patience and kindness. Wallace says that "this kind of self-awareness builds our own internal sense of mattering."

- **Find "Your People" and Create your Mattering Space**

In her book, Wallace talks about creating mattering spaces. "A mattering space is anything outside of our homes and workplaces where you can build community." This can be a gym, a park, a library, a spiritual hub, or a local coffee shop. Mattering spaces are anywhere that helps promote a sense of purpose and belonging and can be in person or virtual. They are places where your presence is recognized and you are missed when absent. You

can also create your own mattering space by recognizing others, showing interest in their lives, and building consistent, positive relationships with others. Finding or developing mattering spaces are crucial to our well being and support mental wellness.

- **Save Nice Notes**

Make an impact file, which can be a regular file folder, or a pretty box where you store thank you notes or cards people have given you. This also works for e-folders where you can store kind messages and e-mails. On days you're feeling as if you don't matter, pull everything out as a reminder of your value.

- **Make Your "Thank You's" Specific**

Showing others you appreciate them is a core component of mattering. The next time you receive a gift try focusing on the giver and not just the gift. Instead of saying, "thank you for this beautiful scarf", you could say, "Thank you for being the kind of friend who knows me so well and puts so much thought into what I might like."

- **Picture an invisible sign**

Imagine everyone you meet is wearing an invisible sign that reads, "Tell me, do I matter?" This can be as easy as making eye contact, saying hello, smiling, and being present with those around you. Every time we respond to someone with kindness and compassion, we not only reinforce their value, but we're also reminded that we are also needed and valued.

The concept of mattering can also be brought into your classrooms. There is quite a bit of research that focuses on the role of mattering in promoting child and youth mental health, belonging, and resilience (Gordon Flett, Canada Research Chair in Personality and Health). "Several studies confirm that high school students who feel like they matter are relatively protected from anxiety and depression, engage in fewer risk acts, and predicts academic engagement and higher grades." Rosenberg talked about how, after food and shelter, to matter is the motivation that drives human behaviour. "When people don't feel as if they matter, when they don't feel valued or know how they add value, they can become anxious, depressed, turn to substances to try and alleviate the pain, or lash out in anger."

This is important, because it provides a road map to understanding behaviours not only in ourselves, but in your students as well. This provides you, as educators, with a unique opportunity. I would expect you already demonstrate mattering in your schools on a regular basis. The fact you invest time and energy outside of your regular duties suggests you are a significant part of your students' lives. Have you ever tutored a student after classes are finished for the day? This is communicating that the student is important to you and that they matter. This does not go unnoticed.

Mattering and Self Care

I would be amiss if I didn't mention that mattering requires balancing our own needs with the needs of others. "True mattering requires us to matter to ourselves, which means prioritizing your own needs (not when everybody else's needs are met or when its at the end of your day and you're exhausted), but really radically prioritize them."

Our own personal resilience is impacted in part by the depth and support of our relationships. Find people who remind YOU of how much you matter. Nurture these relationships and allow them to fill you up. This is paramount if we are to show up day in and day out for those who rely on us. Keep in mind that our own sense of mattering can be shaken, especially during times of life transitions, excessive stress, or grief or illness. If you find yourself in this situation, or, if you feel you could benefit from additional support, please know your EAP is just a phone call away.

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