



Why Mattering Matters

The importance of mattering for people with serious mental illness





Temple University Collaborative

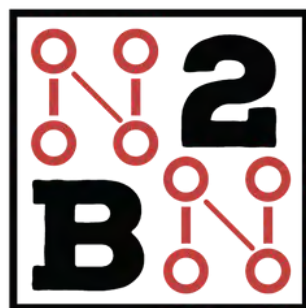
On Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities

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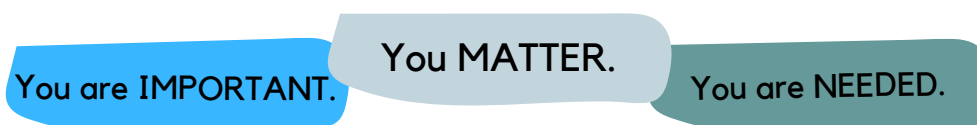
NEED TO BE NEEDED

*A Disability & Rehabilitation Research Project
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Introduction

Loneliness, social isolation, social connections—these are terms we often hear and may have personal experience with. Many people have experienced social isolation after moving to a new neighborhood or city. You might feel lonely on a Friday night when it seems like everyone you know has social engagements with others. Often, people’s activities within a day are centered around social connections. However, for many individuals who experience serious mental illnesses, social isolation and loneliness are part of their experience of everyday life.

But social connection is not simply being in the presence of others. Do people notice when someone is there or when they are absent? Does their presence contribute to the social environment or to the activity? In short, does it feel like they matter? So, while it may seem like simply spending more time with other people might combat loneliness, it appears that reducing loneliness and isolation likely involves more than increasing one’s social connections. Mattering may be a key component to effectively reducing loneliness among individuals who experience mental illnesses. This document presents the importance of social connections and mattering for all people, and why these issues are especially important for people living with mental illnesses.



What do we mean when we talk about mattering?

When we feel that we are valued and needed by other people and that we contribute to the world around us, we develop a sense of mattering. This feeling of mattering is often an outcome of our social connections. In short, mattering is the feeling that we **are valued** and that we **add value**. These feelings can develop within our families and groups of friends, in schools, at places of work, and within communities.

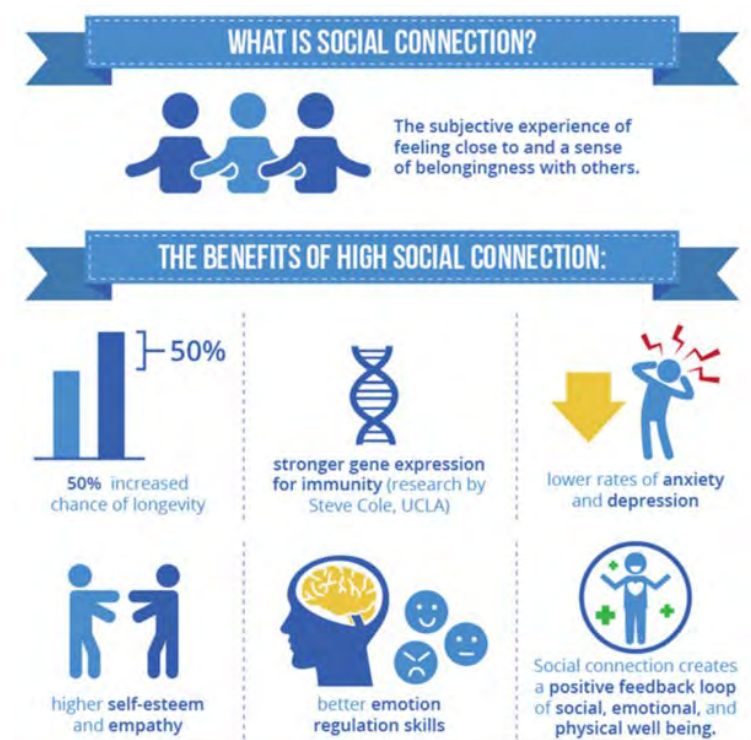
If you’ve ever been part of a team, think of how you felt when your teammate gave you a high-five after you scored for your basketball team. You might have felt like a valued part of the group, knowing that your goal helped win the game! You **mattered** to your team. Or perhaps you have a friend or family member who always sends you a card for your birthday. Every year when you receive this simple note, it’s a reminder that someone took the time to remember you—that you **matter** to this person. Even everyday interactions such as waving to a fellow hiker on a trail or exchanging friendly small talk with the barista at a local coffee shop, can help us develop this sense of mattering. Being seen and acknowledged during normal, daily interactions can promote a sense of belonging and being valued, a **sense of mattering**.

On the other hand, have you ever made a joke, and no one laughed? Have you tried to catch someone’s eye only to be ignored? Have you ever waited at a restaurant, only to find that no one came over to help you? If you answered “yes”, to any of those questions, you probably felt the pang of rejection even as you remembered those situations. Experiences like these can make us feel invisible and unwanted. Sometimes the feeling is fleeting, but other times it persists. If these experiences become the norm, people can begin to feel like they don't matter.

Importance of Social Connection

Human beings are social by nature, and while some of us might prefer more alone-time than others, on some level we all experience a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is important for all people to feel connected to others.

Think about the important people in your life. Who are the people that you can turn to when you need to talk? Who are the people who come to you when they have something important going on in their own life? Who is it that makes you laugh or encourages you to do the things you enjoy? Now think of how you feel when you are in the company of this person or people. How does it feel when you share a laugh, hug, or simply make eye contact with this person? These connections can be very powerful! Did you know that social exchanges such as touch and eye gaze are considered a form of basic sensory pleasure? (Berridge & Kringlebach, 2008). Seemingly simple interactions such as seeing others and being seen are actually very meaningful moments in our daily lives!



Adapted from Seppala, D. E. (2014).

When we find that we lack meaningful relationships in our lives this can lead to feelings of social isolation or loneliness. This can happen as a result of not having enough contact with other people or from having relationships that lack meaning or importance to us.

What is the difference between social isolation & loneliness?

Social isolation

Social isolation describes the experience of not having enough social contact with others or lacking relationships with other people. A person experiencing social isolation might have difficulty identifying social contacts or important people in their lives. Research has found that social isolation is associated with significantly increased risk of mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; House et al., 1988).

Loneliness

Loneliness is the term used to describe feeling a lack of satisfaction with one's social relationships. Have you ever heard the expression "feeling lonely in a crowded room"? Sometimes, even if we can identify people we know in our lives, we might still feel disconnected from them or feel that we don't have meaningful or close relationships with others. People who experience this might feel lonely.

Loneliness is associated with a variety of negative health effects including cognitive decline, cardiovascular disease, increased mortality, depressive symptoms, and suicide attempts (Dell et al., 2020; Hare Duke, 2017; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Solmi et al., 2020).

Alone but Not Lonely

It is important to keep in mind that being alone does not always mean someone is lonely. We all need time to ourselves, and some of us even prefer time alone to the company of others. Some of us thrive off the energy of a large group and others feel drained by it. For some people having a large social circle is central to their happiness and sense of belonging, and for others a few trusted friends make us feel right at home. Having a larger network of social contacts does not mean that those people will be less lonely, just as having only a few close friends does not make someone more likely to feel isolated. J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, “Not all who wander are lost.” Similarly, not all who are alone are lonely. In short, what matters is whether our interactions leave us feeling invisible or valuable—whether we feel like we matter, or not.



Not all who are alone
are lonely...
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How does mattering connect to social isolation and loneliness?

Research indicates a clear link between mattering and loneliness, and oftentimes, mattering can be a strong predictor of loneliness, meaning that the more we feel that we matter, the less likely we are to experience loneliness (McComb et al., 2020). Feelings of mattering typically arise from relationships that are mutual, that is, both parties feel supported and valued by one another (Prilleltensky, 2020). Welcoming places can lead to these types of relationships (Prilleltensky, 2020). From our own work, we know that individuals who experience mental illnesses visit welcoming places to meet people or sometimes, just to be around others (Snethen et al., 2021). Just imagine walking into a room where no one notices your presence; then picture yourself entering a gathering where everyone turns to smile and greet you when you arrive. Which space would you prefer to visit? Which people would you rather be around, and where would you feel more welcome—where would you feel like you mattered?

How does this affect people with serious mental illness?

Roughly 18.8 million Americans live with serious mental illness--that's approximately 5.8% of adults in the United States (Bagalman & Napili, 2015). Diagnoses typically include major depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. Regarding health outcomes for individuals with serious mental illness, researchers who conducted a global literature review found that mortality was reported as significantly higher among individuals diagnosed with serious mental illness, than among those without (Walker et al., 2015). Social disconnection is a contributing factor to this trend towards earlier death (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Social connection and feelings of mattering are important for all people, but for people who experience mental illnesses, the presence or absence of these feelings can have significant consequences. For these individuals, the absence of mattering can lead to feelings of insignificance that deepen existing perceptions of social isolation and rejection (Conrad-Garrisi & Pernice-Duca, 2013). Gordon Flett (2018) observed, “The person with an acknowledged mental health problem is someone who can feel a great sense of being marginalized. They can feel not only like they don’t matter but also they can feel like they are unwanted or that they simply don’t count (p.268)”. Unfortunately, when people feel unwanted, they often withdraw from others, further exacerbating the social isolation and loneliness that can increase feelings of not mattering.

As serious mental health conditions develop, individuals’ social contacts and interactions tend to reduce in number (Perry & Pescosolido, 2012; Topor et al., 2016). Usually this is the result of a decline in community participation which often accompanies the onset of mental illness (Sale et al., 2018). All of this can take a toll on people’s social networks, meaning that people with serious mental illness generally have fewer friends than the general population (Koenders et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2006). Research shows that people living with serious mental illness identify loss of friends and living without friends when describing their social isolation (Topor et al., 2016). In fact, the most significant unmet needs for individuals living with mental illnesses include challenges with loneliness and social isolation and the need for companionship and intimate relationships (Arvidsson, 2003; Bengtsson-Tops & Hansson, 1999; Fortuna et al., 2019; Trémeau et al., 2016).

Isolation and loneliness are certainly not new experiences for individuals who live with mental illnesses. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, the majority of adults with a mental illness reported greater isolation and reduced social connection as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Costa et al., 2020).

How can we promote feelings of mattering for ourselves and others?

There is still a lot we don’t know about exactly which types of everyday experiences contribute to mattering and how these experiences relate to loneliness. What we do know is that even seemingly small daily interactions with others can help build our sense of purpose and mattering. For example, people who live in cities might seek out daily interactions with strangers as a way of addressing the desire to matter (Zeeb & Joffe, 2021). Everyday encounters such as saying hello, being friendly with someone else, and/or having a stranger help when in need can help someone feel as if they matter (Zeeb & Joffe, 2021).

THE PRACTICE OF CULTIVATING MATTERING



NOTICE PEOPLE

Make eye contact, check-in regularly on people's lives.



COMMUNICATE OTHERS' SIGNIFICANCE

Show people how their traits, strengths, and behaviors make a difference.



SHOW PEOPLE THEY'RE NEEDED

Regularly remind people they're a vital part of your life, school, organization, and society.

Adapted from Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981

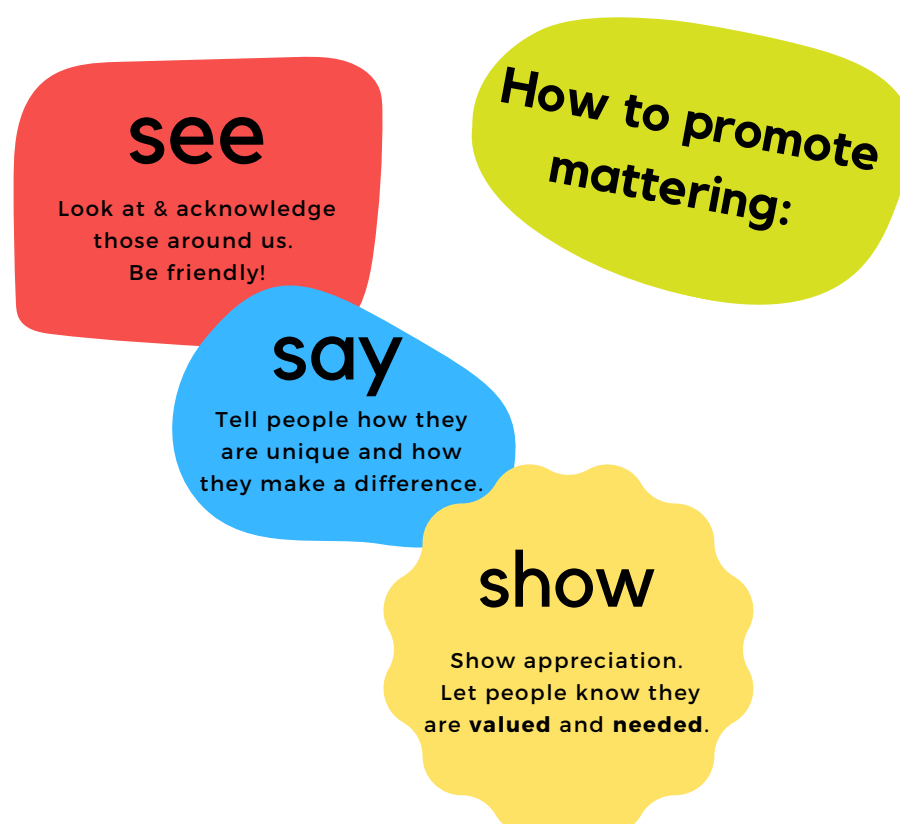
 ZACH MERCURIO

Mercurio, Z. (2020)

Volunteering is another way to promote mattering. When we focus on improving other people's lives, we can experience an enhanced feeling of mattering (Flett, 2018). The nature of the volunteer work is an important factor to consider. Quality volunteer experiences that contribute to others in clear ways can improve wellbeing and promote mattering for the volunteer, but experiences that don't seem to make a difference and go unnoticed or unappreciated can actually contribute to a person's own perception of not mattering (Flett, 2018). Therefore, one promising way of increasing a sense of mattering is to support individuals in getting involved in personally meaningful activities (Flett, 2018).

Another helpful way to remember to remind others around us that they matter is to think "See, Say, Show":

- **See:** notice people, look at and acknowledge others around us, be friendly!
- **Say:** tell people how their unique qualities and actions make a difference in their community and the world
- **Show:** Remind people of how important they are. Show appreciation for who they are and what they contribute. Let them know they are valued and needed.



Summary

Many people feel isolated or lonely at times, but individuals with serious mental illness are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness during everyday life. The quality of our social connections is more important than the number of people in our lives, and the way that we interact with others can make a big difference to our health and wellbeing. Mattering, or feeling that we matter, is the sense of being valued and adding value. Promoting a sense of mattering might help to reduce social isolation and loneliness for people living with serious mental illness, and that is something that matters.

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