

YOU MATTER

...but what does mattering
really mean?



Stories from
people with
lived
experiences



**NEED TO
BE NEEDED**

A Disability & Rehabilitation
Documentation Project
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Temple University
Collaborative

On Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities



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*A Disability & Rehabilitation Research Project
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What is "Mattering"?

- and why does mattering matter?

"The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody would be to not be used for anything by anybody."

Kurt Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan*



When we matter to other people, we feel valued, appreciated, recognized, and respected. We have the sense that we add value to the people around us and contribute to their lives (Prilleltensky, 2020; Flett, 2022). One of the first definitions of mattering was offered by Rosenberg and McCullon (1981) who suggested that mattering refers to the sense that other people depend on us, are interested in us and care about us. Elliot and colleagues (2004) later defined the three core concepts of mattering, which are:



Awareness

Other people see us and pay attention to us



Importance

Other people think that we are important to them

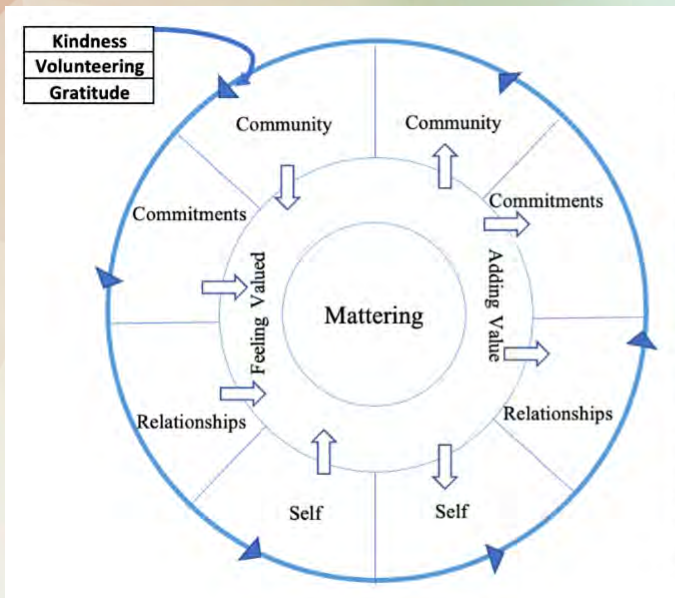


Reliance

Other people depend on us and would miss us if we were no longer around



Mattering is a psychological need, which provides us with a sense of being part of a community where we make a difference. This serves as a great motivator and reinforces prosocial behavior which further increases our sense of mattering. The benefits of feeling valued and appreciated will lead to adding value, which results in a “virtuous cycle” or positive feedback loop of mattering (Prilleltensky, 2020).



In sum, mattering is caused by social information that one is both valued and needed by others, and that one contributes value to one’s community (Flett & Zang, 2020, Prilleltensky, 2020).

Evidence suggests that mattering has positive implications for mental health (Prilleltensky, 2020). It leads to feeling connected to other people and is associated with positive relationship quality, life satisfaction and having purpose in life. Additionally, it serves as a protective factor against social isolation and loneliness (Flett & Zangeneh, 2020).



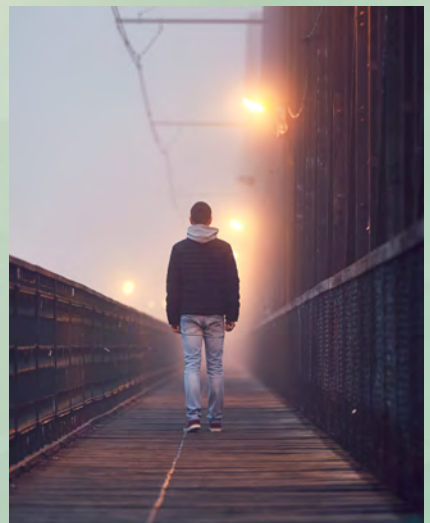
Mattering and SMI



On the other hand, feeling like one's life doesn't matter is correlated with social isolation, loneliness and an increased risk of depression and suicidality. Flett (2018) identified that people who feel like they do not matter have previously encountered people who minimized, invalidated or ignored their feelings and emotional experiences.

Consequently, individuals may have developed coping strategies (e.g. social withdrawal and avoidance) which are no longer be helpful in changed environments and pose obstacles to behaviors that foster a sense of mattering. When other people don't listen to us, interrupt us or shift the subject as soon as we speak up, we may think that our voices do not matter. Such experiences are common in everyone's lives. However, people with serious mental illness (SMI), such as depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, frequently experience that their voices are not considered important. SMIs pose barriers to the feeling of mattering.

For instance, a person with depression and social anxiety who experiences fatigue, drowsiness and anhedonia as part of their condition, will have to overcome more social, physical and psychological barriers than a non-depressed person to seek out opportunities to add value to their community. Research shows that mattering and loneliness are linked, and mattering is, in fact, a robust predictor of loneliness (McComb et al., 2020; Flett et al., 2016).



Documentation project

For the current documentation project, we sought stories from individuals with SMI. We wanted to hear what mattering means to them and learn more about their experiences. Although we did not provide any definition or background information on the concept of mattering, our participants independently identified the three components of mattering: Value, Importance and Reliance. Rather than using a structured interview, we asked three questions and used follow up questions and reflections as needed:



What does mattering mean to you?

How do you know if you matter to other people?
How does it make you feel if you matter to others?



Can you tell me a story of a time when you felt you mattered?

A time when you felt people noticed you, or you were important to others, or really needed?



Could you tell me about a time when you felt like you didn't matter?

A time when you felt like you were invisible or not needed?



Awareness



(Will) Mattering is feeling valued and included by other people

(Ella) It's when I'm respected and listened to. When I don't matter nobody listens or takes me seriously and I'm disconnected from my people

(Dora) Mattering means that you are aware that other things exist, and respect is paramount. You can get into a dark place thinking that the outside world matters more, and that if you're not accepted in the outside world, then that's the end of it.

(Jane) It's a warm feeling inside. It makes me feel valued and that my presence is appreciated and wanted. People want me to be there and talk to me.

(Tony) It means that I am listened to, heard, and seen, not discounted for my experiences or for what I might be going through. When I matter, I feel valued, that I am equal. It just makes me feel good.



Awareness



(Ella) When I worked as a nurse, I felt like I mattered, when I sat with patients, listened to their stories and was able to help them feel comforted, heard and validated.

(Jane) When I went to college, there was a lot of racial tension. My classmates would tell me to shut up and my professors got overwhelmed with the tension so that they would just make me work by myself. That's when I felt like I did not matter.

(Josy) When people listen to you, you matter. They want to hear what you have to say. But most psychiatrists don't allow you to do that because they only have 15 minutes to talk to you. I finally became a PhD candidate and I feel like I matter now. I have relationships with public officials, and CEOs. I never thought I would be in this space and them calling me.

(Josy) I lost two sons...so I hear voices sometimes. When people hear that, they tend to put me in a certain category and can easily make me feel like I don't matter. I withdrew and I was very quiet. But that doesn't mean that I had a mental condition. Or does it? But repeating my diagnoses over and over again made things worse. If people keep telling you something is wrong with you, you start to believe it. I think people should be allowed to mourn the way they mourn without getting a diagnosis. I think a lot of times such diagnoses make more damage than good.

(Tony) One thing that always discouraged me is speaking with clinicians or doctors. When they looked down at their questionnaire and if they can't even look at me and have a dialogue, what can I expect? If I don't even matter to the people who are supposed to be there to help, then what are my chances? The change happened when I finally found a therapist who just listened and had a dialogue with me. I learned that there were others. If we don't know that other people go through similar things, it can be isolating. It is important that we see the person in front of us and not their illness.



Importance



(Tony) When I felt that I did not matter, I did not take care of myself. I was self-medicating with alcohol and drugs and was not seeing myself.



(Ella) It feels good when I matter to others, feels like I'm important and valuable.

(Dora) It's key to have people, even if it's just one person in your corner, so when I'm starting to slip in a darkness they say, they want me here. I have a challenging relationship with my parents. They are very narcissistic and were not excited about being a parent to me. My parents let me know that I didn't matter. When you grow up in bad circumstances like that, you can either sink into it and become like them, or you work hard to not be that person. I live with depression and there are days when I can't be everything I want to be. My friends know that if they don't hear from me by a certain time every day, then they reach out to me. They respect the fact that I live with a mental illness, and can't always be 100%, but they still let me know that I'm in their thoughts and that they're there to help me. So I know I matter to them.



Importance



(Will) Mattering is not just based on others but also an internal belief. When I was homeless, lived in cars and was not functioning very well, it was very difficult to connect with other people. They treated me differently, sometimes were even scared of me because I may have appeared different and disheveled perhaps. Sometimes when I share with people some of my experiences, if I just mention “yeah I am a person in long-term recovery” they say “you are not as bad as my daughter or other person” and this is truly discounting the importance of my experience.

(Ella) When I have a depressive episode, I am down, I withdraw socially and it's too overwhelming to text back or I don't have the energy to socialize or things like that. Once you've felt life like the rock bottom, you have an appreciation for all the other stuff.

(Josy) In psychiatry, people tend to make decisions for you because they feel you can't make your own decisions. When I matter I feel happy, joyful and optimistic. It makes me believe that mental health recovery is possible.



Reliance



(Will) I do a lot of trainings and the evaluations we get back indicate that people feel like we've done a good job. It feels as if what I'm doing matters. I'm also a musician and you can really sense if the crowd is getting into it and it's this sense of mattering and bringing joy. I also spend a lot of time on an island. The solitude and being in the wilderness just makes feel like part of something much larger.

(Josy) Mattering is having a sense of belonging. When people ask for help, when I'm part of decisions about myself.

(Ella) Mattering means that you're needed by other people and add value to other people, mostly when they aren't able to do things for themselves. As a nurse, I have skills or knowledge that might help and I feel needed and appreciated when people come to me for help. For instance, friends or family that have medical questions, or my clients that need help and don't have the experience in the medical field.

When I used to work in the hospital, people were at their most vulnerable point and really had needs that they couldn't fulfill. I was able to help and a lot of people were really appreciative of the time that I spent with them.

When my mom had surgery a couple years ago I was able to help her afterwards with medication and taking care of her, dressing and things like that. She was so thankful and I was really appreciative for the Opportunity to do that.

I feel like I don't matter when I'm not able to show up for my people.



Reliance



(Dora) Mattering is necessary for life. If you have things that matter to you then you have a purpose. I may be alone, but I'm not lonely. I know I can always pick up the phone and call my children or call my friends, and so my mom making me feel lonely made me fight back to be a better mom for my children. With my work as a mental health advocate, a podcaster and a writer and I only reach one person, that means that I mattered that day. If people know that they matter, then they will push to move forward and continue to be here with us. That's an important thing that people need to feel. When I feel like I matter, it helps me wake up in the morning and make sure that I stay on Earth that day.

(Josy) I've been a client and I have an idea of the things that should be different, and finally I am a PhD candidate and people are really listening. I felt that if I furthered my education and had those acronyms in the back of my name, maybe they would listen when I say it's not fair for us... when you tell us to wait outside for a mental health appointment before the office opens and it's brutally cold and you stand outside...you don't know if I have a good coat or shoes that keep me warm.

(Jane) I helped a student feel at ease because I spoke their language and had similar experiences as them. I guess you can say that there was a purpose behind my existence. Everything I had done up to that point, like being a first generation person in America, having to learn English made it very worthwhile because now I could be a resource to this student who was going through the same things. I could show them the joys of having such an experience instead of feeling like they didn't belong.



Individuals who took part in our documentation project shared their stories of experiences when they felt they mattered and times when they felt they did not matter. All participants noted that they were seen, appreciated and valued when they experienced a sense of mattering. Additionally, they felt that they not only belonged but actively contributed to a community and made a difference in other people's lives. Dora and Jane shared that they felt a sense of purpose in their lives when they felt like they mattered. In short, mattering refers to not only to feeling valued, but also adding value to other people. Experiences that promoted such feelings made our participants feel happy and optimistic.



When participants had the sense that they did not matter, they felt invisible. Being let down or rushed by mental health service providers was particularly challenging. Will and Josy both described experiences when they felt unseen by their therapists and psychiatrists, which led to hopelessness and sadness. However, when clinicians acknowledged their concerns and worries, and engaged them in decisions regarding their treatment plans, Josy and Will became optimistic about the possibility of recovery.





Social connections and feeling like we matter are important for everyone. But the absence of mattering has severe repercussions particularly for people with mental health problems. It can lead to feelings of insignificance that deepen existing perceptions of social isolation and rejection (Conrad-Garrisi & Pernice-Duca, 2013). Individuals who reported that they had previously been reduced to their diagnoses, disclosed that receiving diagnostic labels made them feel “abnormal” and that “something is wrong” with them. These experiences have been found to increase social withdrawal and loneliness (McComb et al., 2020).

It is important that we promote feelings of mattering for ourselves and others. Although more research is needed to explore which types of everyday experiences lead to a sense of mattering and a reduction of loneliness, there are multiple ways to help others feel seen, important and needed.

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)

When we make eye contact with others, say hello and smile, we signal that we are aware of them. When we involve others or ask for their opinions, we show them that they are important to us. Finally, we can let people know that they are needed and valued by showing them appreciation and reminding them that they are a vital part of our lives. Another way of promoting the sense of mattering for ourselves is to volunteer and getting engaged in activities that are personally meaningful to us (Flett, 2018).