

## FORUM

COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

# It turns out that feeling you matter really matters

**Richard M. Perloff**



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Her words still stick with me.

“Humanizing,” she kept saying; she felt a need for a humanizing academic experience.

She was a student in my web-based persuasion course this summer, was grateful the course was offered online, but longed for more hands-

on, pedagogical caring. She felt disconnected, alone, and isolated. I empathized with her, and although I did the best I could to offer her attention in the online environment, her words hit home.

A couple weeks later, after coming across insightful psychological research by Gordon L. Flett, a Ph.D. psychologist, her words hit me more profoundly.

My student wanted to feel like she was noticed, valued — and as Flett felicitously puts it, that she mattered. Flett has pioneered a program of research on the psychology of mattering, a simple but emotionally powerful concept that consists of a feeling that others care about us, notice what is going on in our lives, and believe that others need or rely on us.

Flett's research emphasizes that the human need to be significant — to feel our lives, and our work, are personally or existentially important — is a core human need. In painstaking psychological studies, he has found that believing you matter is associated with psychological well-being, life satisfaction and self-acceptance.

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You can immediately see mattering's relevance on both ends of the political continuum. Black people who for years felt ignored, unseen and worse developed the mantra that Black Lives Matter, to showcase the fact that they do. President Donald Trump built a populist movement by convincing — some say conning — working-class voters into believing that their economic and emotional concerns had been neglected by the liberal elite, but deeply mattered to him, illustrated by his many references to “the people” in his speeches.

What is more profound is what happens when we think we don't matter.

Feeling like you don't matter can have devastating psychological consequences, contributing to the nation's epidemic of loneliness by causing people to feel isolated, invisible and forlorn, while also increasing depression and, in extreme cases, an intent to commit suicide.

Death can be associated with not mattering in a different way. Young men who have killed innocent people in horrific acts of political violence are frequently described as loners who feel insignificant. It is plausible that the feeling of not mattering eats away at them to such a degree that they feel that, by committing one blaze-of-glory act of defiance, they will finally achieve, in a perverse but sadly unforgettable way, the feeling that eluded them in life, that they matter.

American society works in many ways to undermine people's sense that they matter. Businesses' adoption of AI makes workers feel they are expendable. People are told by email that they're fired without even the courtesy of being informed by a supervisor who can give the news with dignity and respect. In Washington, D.C., police uproot the most vulnerable members of society, the homeless, hurling a man's clothes and tent into a dumpster, making it clear these lives don't matter.

This maltreatment of citizens requires the development of an ethos of mattering that teaches this value to children from an early age, and takes lessons from the Nordic countries, the happiest on earth, where life and work are balanced by giving workers leave time to cope with stress; offering stipends to help people find a meaningful life path; and communicating the simple but powerful message: You are important; you matter.

*Perloff is a distinguished professor of communication, psychology, and political science at the Levin College of Public Affairs and Education at Cleveland State University.*