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How Is Mattering Felt and Experienced by Adolescents? An Analysis of Their Spontaneous Accounts and Descriptions

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Abstract. Objectives: The current research sought to advance understanding of how mattering is experienced according to analyses of the personal accounts provided by young people. Themes explored how mattering feels and how it is experienced in specific contexts and domains. **Methods:** Frequently mentioned core themes were identified after reviewing the 363 responses provided by adolescents aged 13 years and older. Students were asked to describe a time when they felt like they matter after reading a newspaper article on mattering in *the New York Times*. The methods essentially reflected an open-ended spontaneous self-description task. **Results:** Thematic analyses fit closely with descriptions of the mattering construct. It was confirmed that mattering is an intense positive affect that can enhance resilience among those adolescents. Adolescents described mattering accompanied by personal feelings of growth, strength, and purpose and building positive relationships. The positivity of mattering was contrasted with the pain inherent in feelings of not mattering to others as spontaneously expressed by some respondents. Specific accounts of mattering to friends and family at home, as well as mattering at school pointed to the need to contrast general mattering with feelings of mattering tied to meaningful life contexts. **Conclusions and Implications:** These findings advance understanding of the nature of mattering in terms of how it is experienced and expressed by adolescents and how it can become a source of resilience and adaptability. The results indicate that mattering is meaningful and relevant in the lives of young people and much is to be gained by further attempts to examine how individual young people distinctly and uniquely experience the feeling of mattering to others.

Keywords: Resilience, Mattering, Growth, Relationships, Well-being, Distress, Adolescents

Introduction

Individual differences in resilience and adaptability among children and adolescents often reflect the presence of key resources in the self and social network. Resilience is often rooted in relational factors, especially in terms of bouncing back from interpersonal stressors and challenges (see Flett et al., 2015). The current article focuses on the role of feelings of mattering to others in resilience among young people. Mattering is the feeling of being valued and regarded as important by significant others (see Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). The person with a sense of mattering feels heard, seen, and valued and this can result in a positive sense of self and identity.

Empirical research has established links between mattering and higher level of resilience and adaptability (see Besser et al., 2022; Flett, 2025; Flett et al., 2015). As might be expected, mattering is associated with higher levels of well-being and lower levels of distress. For instance, recent investigations of adolescents from China found evidence that linked feelings of mattering with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and burnout (see Flett, Su, Nepon, Ma, & Guo, 2023; Flett, Su, Nepon, Sturman et al., 2023). The potential significance of mattering in resilience was emphasized by Emmy Werner based on her lifelong research program. Werner summarized her research by closing a conference by observing that, "The most optimistic thing we have seen in our study is that, even under adverse circumstances, change is possible if the older child or adolescent encounters new experiences with people who give meaning to his life and who tell him that he matters" (as cited in Moore, 1981, p. 140).

Research on mattering continues to grow yet fundamental questions remain unanswered. Three main questions are addressed in the current work. First, how do children and adolescents experience mattering to others in their daily lives? Second, what different forms does mattering take in terms of how it is expressed and experienced? Third, what is it about mattering that makes it highly effective in terms of resilience and adaptability?

The current article addresses these fundamental questions by taking a unique approach and utilizing a unique source of evidence. The *New York Times* published lengthy articles on the psychology and science of mattering in two articles in 2023 (see Cornwall, 2023; Proulx, 2023). The initial article by Cornwall (2023) introduced mattering and its facets to readers, but it also considered how mattering is reflected in the relational experiences of individual people. The second article by Proulx (2023) was one in a series of articles of likely interest to students. This article invited adolescent students who had read Cornwall's article on mattering to share their experiences with mattering in the comments section. That is, they were asked to describe personal experiences and feelings after reading and learning about mattering and its facets. It was stipulated by the newspaper that it was open to responses from students 13 years and older from the United States and Great Britain and 16 and older elsewhere. The majority

of responses were from students in the United States, but other countries were represented. These countries were Canada, India, Japan, Romania, South Korea, and the Republic of the Philippines.

A reasonable way to regard the nature of this task and the responses provided is that all students were given access to the same stimuli (i.e., the Proulx article that summarized what mattering is) and in a manner similar to a projective test, it was up to each individual student to respond on the basis of their personal experiences. The banner introducing the article read as follows: “When have you felt you mattered? On a sports team? In a class project? With your family? Tell us about yourself about a time when you felt important and needed.”

The request issued by the *New York Times* to adolescent students aligns with past research on the spontaneous self-concept procedure introduced by McGuire and colleagues (see McGuire et al., 1978; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). This simple procedure requires individuals “to tell us about yourself.” Their research on the spontaneous self-concept found that people tend to mention attributes that are salient and meaningful with particular emphasis placed on unique and distinct elements of the self and identity (e.g., a left-handed person is more likely to mention handedness). This task utilized by McGuire and associates asked respondents to, “Tell Us About Yourself” in a manner that was unstructured and open-ended. McGuire and McGuire (1987) described how they felt it was important to counter the predominant tendency to assess the self in ways that are quite reactive in a stimulus-response format (e.g., requiring adolescents to response the items found on a self-esteem scale).

The current article is based on the themes that emerged as determined by the current author based on personal experience in mattering theory and research and engaging in extensive reading of research, theory, and case accounts of the nature of mattering to others. This work was guided largely by the facets of mattering introduced by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) as well as other facets that have emerged in other work such as the feeling of being appreciated (Schlossberg, 1989) and mattering that comes from giving value to other people (Prilleltensky, 2020).

This current work is not a qualitative study in the typical sense of a grounded analysis but it is an analysis that uniquely reflects what young people were willing to share and this author’s interpretation and analysis. The possibility of subjective bias must be acknowledged given that a second evaluator was not involved. This concern notwithstanding, the overarching question is whether the responses provided by young readers would correspond to past conceptual descriptions of the facets the comprise the mattering construct as outlined by earlier theorists (e.g., Elliott, 2009; Rosenberg, 1985; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This information gleaned from the responses of young readers is especially valuable because most research in the mattering field is similar to the volumes of research on self-esteem; that is, it is quantitative and based on administering self-report questionnaires with questionnaire item content reflecting the facets of

matter (e.g., having the interest and attention of others, knowing you would be missed by others, feeling that others depend on you, etc.). Unfortunately, there has been little attempt across four decades to carefully consider how mattering is naturally expressed and experienced by children and adolescents. The accounts they provided underscore the wisdom that exists among young people and their awareness of the power of warm and caring relationships.

The first set of results listed below focuses on mattering as an affective experience. The positive emotions associated with mattering are contrasted with accounts of what it feels like to not matter. The focus then shifts to the experience of mattering in specific contexts. Finally, some responses that link mattering with forms of social behavior are examined.

Methods

The data for this study were obtained through analyzing the online response section that accompanied an article in *the New York Times*. In this instance, as suggested above, *the New York Times* essentially asked students to “Tell Us About Yourself” in terms of when you felt like you mattered. There were 363 individual responses in total. Young readers who presumably had a clear understanding of mattering based on reading the article were given the chance to share their views and experiences in an open-edited format with no restrictions. The vast majority of responses reflected the request for a personal account, but a small subset of students simply provided a summary of what they learned from the article and they did not provide an account of their own experiences.

It should be noted that in most instances, when it comes to the responses provided, no attempt was made to correct the response in terms of writing, grammar, or punctuation. Also, each statement found in the tables in the results section were from unique individuals (i.e., no one respondent appears multiple times). It was sometimes the case for space considerations to take a proportion of a response and not provide the full account. Most readers were anonymous and did not provide identifying demographic information, though physical location was provided. Interested readers can locate the original responses online in the *New York Times* archive and examine individual statements within the context of the entire response.

Results and Discussion

How is Mattering Felt?

The central theme of this article reflects the emphasis on mattering as a feeling (see Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). How exactly does mattering feel? This extends what is known because other than some case accounts in the literature, the personal experience of the feeling of mattering has not been explored.

Table 1 lists individual responses submitted by adolescent readers. It is immediately apparent from these responses that mattering is an intense feeling that is commonly accompanied by joy and happiness. Mattering is described as a great feeling that is “amazing” and perhaps even “the best in the world.” It even involves a celestial element for one respondent who equated it with a feeling of being able to touch the stars. This went beyond another account that equated the feeling of mattering with being on “cloud nine.”

It was evident in several responses that the feeling of mattering was tied to the feeling of being treated as someone who is special. This complex feeling seems to reflect a sense of satisfaction with oneself.

It can be extrapolated from their responses that the young person with a sustained feeling of mattering should have a rich source of positive affect that puts them in a strong starting position when a stressor or challenge requires them to bounce back and be resilient. The intensity of affect likely facilitates the quick recall of autobiographical memories. Personal experiences linked with greater emotional intensity tend to be more easily remembered (see Flett et al., 1986) and the feeling of mattering without it being conditional ought to be linked with highly vivid positive memories.

Clearly, however, the intensity of the feeling of mattering varied according to accounts. Mattering is different for those who feel like they are on “cloud nine” versus the feeling of mattering being nice. However, there was variability even among those who had an intense feeling of mattering.

Table 1
The Feeling of Mattering

#	Participant Statement
1	"One of the greatest things a person could feel"
2	"Realizing you matter to someone is the best feeling in the world"
3	"Feeling like we matter is so amazing"
4	"Being valued feels nice. :)"
5	"I feel like I matter the most with my friends and family and on birthday parties because they make me feel special!"
6	"When you feel that you matter, you feel that no one else can tell you otherwise. You are truly happy with yourself so you feel satisfied. This allows your mood to be lifted, leading to better relationships and self-esteem."
7	"When someone tells me I am needed in their life it makes me feel very special... It brings me so much joy."
8	"The reason I feel I matter with my family or friends is because I feel like I'm supporting them and that makes me feel decent and good inside."
9	"Feeling like you matter is the best feeling someone could ever feel, especially when you walk into a room and everyone is happy to see you."
10	"The more you feel you matter, the more you enjoy interacting with people. I've found that I eventually stop talking to friends who don't make me feel appreciated."
11	"Having the feeling ... is just making me feel like I'm in cloud nine."
12	"This feeling of importance and being missed makes me feel loved and fills my heart with joy."
13	"Other times I feel important is just from family and friends just being there for me — just being loved is something very special that everyone should feel and that you should spread yourself."
14	"...you start feeling like you can touch the stars right now. You start feeling like nothing ruins your day..."
15	"The overall feeling you matter is a great one."
16	"Feeling valued is one of the best feelings you can feel."
17	"I never knew what it felt like to be important — now, truly knowing that feeling is something I hope I never lose."
18	"Mentally, I think one of the most essential things is to feel like you matter. Everyone deserves to be told that they are important, even if just subtly."

On Knowing You Matter to Others

One growing realization while reviewing the accounts of mattering is that there is an important distinction between feeling like you matter to others versus knowing you matter to others. This vital distinction was acknowledged when Flett and Zangeneh (2020) examined the role of mattering during the COVID-19 pandemic and described the need for people to feel a sense of mattering but also to know they matter with certainty during times of crisis and uncertainty that they are important to others and will never be forgotten or overlooked. Although the adolescent readers were invited to discuss feelings, many young people shared accounts that reflected knowing beyond doubt that they matter to the people in their lives. Relevant accounts are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The Knowing of Mattering with Certitude

#	Participant Statement
1	"I know that if I didn't exist my parents, siblings, and friends would miss me a lot. Also, my dogs and cats would be lonely without me. Overall, I love life and I want to live life to the fullest."
2	"Everyone wants to feel good inside and know that they are important. I feel like when I get invited somewhere, I feel like someone wants me."
3	"Both knowing that you matter to someone and someone knows that they matter to you builds a better bond and a very trusting relationship between the two of you."
4	"I mostly feel as if I matter. Knowing that I matter or not can either make me happy or sad, but it doesn't affect how I act. It can just hurt my feelings at some point and then I'll get over it."
5	"Violet on the other hand, always compliments you when she sees you're down. She makes sure you know that she misses you and that she's always happy to see you."
6	"I think knowing you matter is important, depending on who and why you matter to them."
7	"I don't really matter to most of my friends. I know, though, that I matter to my sister, papa, and aunt. I don't really care if I do matter a lot. I only care if the person matters to me."
8	"The time that I feel like I matter the most is when I am playing football and I do well because I know that I helped the team, and even if we don't win, I know that I did as much as I could."

The next two tables summarize some revealing statements that suggest that various positive impacts can stem from or be enhanced by the frequent and intense feeling of mattering to other people. Table 3 reflects accounts that tie mattering to various positive impacts, including growth, motivation, and mood regulation. The theme of being enhanced and lifted up was evident in multiple accounts. Growth was referenced not only in terms of the self but also in terms of the growth of key relationships. This element is in keeping with research that links mattering assessed with the General Mattering Scale with a growth seeking orientation (see Flett et al., 2022).

The links with resilience and mood regulation and enhancement were suggested by multiple accounts of the role of mattering to others in terms of being lifted up and getting through a hard time. This was described as changing life for the better. One adolescent stated that, "It can be

incredibly motivating, boosting your confidence and making you believe in yourself even more.” This aspect of mattering as a source of strength and resilience is in keeping with past accounts of how mattering can be fundamental to the resilience of young people (see Flett, 2018a).

Notably, a few adolescents mentioned mattering in terms of its role when they were at their lowest points. These accounts suggest that mattering can potentially play a vital role in confronting and managing psychological pain and this is very much in keeping with the emphasis on why mattering matters in youth suicide prevention (see Flett, 2024).

Table 3

Positive Impacts: Growth, Motivation, and Mood Elevation and Regulation

#	Participant Statement
1	"I felt like I mattered when I was going through a hard time but the people I hung out with raised me up."
2	"When someone expresses to me that I matter, the empty feeling inside somehow fills up, even if I don't feel 'bad' before."
3	"Having a good self-esteem is highly reliant on your opinion of yourself, and when you know that you have good friends/coworkers/peers that appreciate you, it's a massive reassurance and it helps you to feel good about yourself."
4	"Feeling valued as a person is very important, helps you become confident and comfortable with yourself, and it makes life so much more fun."
5	"There are times when I'm not playing, my teammates will let me know that they need me in that particular game. This reassures me that I matter to my team, and this gives me confidence and pleasure. Gives me joy that I can support my boys to victory."
6	"When someone makes you feel valued, it becomes much easier to trust them and yourself. This validation unsurprisingly boosts your self-confidence as well."
7	"Instead of thinking you are important, you should know you are important. It will allow relationships to grow instead of staying at the same pace."
8	"I found true friends that make me feel important and make me feel like I matter, which is why I can give a true and honest perspective of how making myself feel like I mattered changed my life for the better, and gave me a stronger mindset that allowed me to love myself a lot more than I did 2 years ago."
9	"Feeling as though I matter has always had a tremendous effect on how I behave. When I feel as though I matter in a situation, I will most likely work to do better at what I'm doing."
10	"A genuine friend should consistently give support when their friends are facing difficult situations. They need to have the ability to offer a helping hand and give a shoulder to lean on... This has provided me the opportunity to be a true friend to her. Not only her, but I also had a chance to have personal growth."
11	"For this reason, it's important to make sure you know you're valued, while simultaneously making sure your companions also feel that way. Realizing that you matter to others can benefit your relationship with them, but also improve your mental health and self-compassion."
12	"People telling me that I did a good or even a great job on something makes me feel like I am good at that thing and that I should keep pushing myself to try my best... it can be incredibly motivating, boosting your confidence and making you believe in yourself even more."
13	"During a day at cheer, I had news that I didn't like... After people found out, they told me how much they cared for me and believed in me... That is when I knew I matter."

#	Participant Statement
14	"My family is always there for me... My team cheers me up when I mess up... During these times, I feel like I am on top of the world, and no one will be able to weigh me down."
15	"We each make sure that we are aware of our importance and just how much we matter to this team... This reassurance makes me feel important and content as I am."
16	"The one place I feel that I matter the most is at home with my family... They help lift me up and motivate me to achieve my goals."
17	"I was sitting in a hospital bed preparing for surgery... My loved ones expressed their gratitude towards me. I felt a sudden surge of motivation when everyone I cared about was expressing their love for me."
18	"I always feel mattered thanks to my friends and family... Whenever I feel bad about myself or sad, they always know how to cheer me up."
19	"A specific time when I felt that I had mattered was when I received heartfelt appreciation from close family members and friends during a challenging time in my life... It deeply resonated with me and made me feel good about myself."

Table 4 extends this focus on positive impacts by summarizing statements that framed mattering in terms of providing a sense of purpose. It is generally accepted and empirically shown that mattering is associated with purpose in life and meaning in life but they are distinguishable constructs (see Flett, 2018b). Various statements in Table 4 make it clear that mattering may fuel a sense of purpose and helps sustain it.

Explicit references to mattering and purpose were not abundant but there were enough mentions for this connection to be highlighted here. One respondent introduced an emphasis on this sense of purpose by referring astutely to Frankl's (1946) seminal work. This link with purpose further supports the conclusion that mattering reflects a very positive motivational orientation.

This association with purpose is important to acknowledge because it suggests that the resilience of young people with a sense of mattering to others tends to be accompanied by other key resources and capabilities that combine to create a strong source of strength. If viewed from a person-focused perspective, the young person characterized by mattering and a sense of purpose along with other resources is someone with a strong capacity to be resilient.

Table 4**Mattering and a Sense of Purpose**

#	Participant Statement
1	“I feel like I matter because I feel that I have a purpose in this world and there is a plan for me. I know that if I didn’t exist my parents, siblings, and friends would miss me a lot. Also, my dogs and cats would be lonely without me.”
2	“We all have a destiny to fulfill and a purpose to serve, no matter how much we would like to argue about who is more important than the other. The way I see it, everyone fulfills their role even if they don’t realize it. We can all be examples of something, and that is what gives us value. We can all be inspirations or even examples of what not to do.”
3	“Frankl claims that most of the men who had died in the camps had a lack of a purpose. However, Frankl was motivated to continue by the chance of being able to complete his study on logotherapy and by his role of keeping the sick inmates alive and cared for. This explains that for someone to feel that they matter, they must have a purpose.”
4	“Having a purpose in life makes me feel like I <u>matter</u> and I have to do my job to be meaningful. For some people they don’t have to work for it, but all my life I have been trying my hardest to be meaningful and purposeful.”
5	“Hearing that someone <u>actually thinks</u> you matter and have a purpose is probably one of the best feelings to ever exist. I feel like it is a necessity to have those types of people. One of those people to me is my mom.”
6	“For a long time, I believed that I was just another person in this universe doing the daily mundane tasks everyone does. About a year and a half ago I grew a lot religiously and in my personal views and opinions I know God values me as an individual and He has a plan for my life. A lot of the time I mess up and I can be annoying and may act out, but I’ve realized though I may screw up and may feel like my life is little or pointless, I know God has a purpose for my life.”

The Feeling of Not Mattering

Adolescent readers were asked to focus on mattering as being positive, but the reality is that mattering has been described as double-edged in the sense that it is highly beneficial to have a feeling of mattering but it is highly deleterious to have the feeling of not mattering to others (see Flett, 2022). In fact, the costs and consequences of not mattering to others have resulted in the creation of the Anti-Mattering Scale (see Flett et al., 2022). This five-item scale assesses differences in terms of feeling unheard, invisible, and unvalued or devalued. Why is this relevant in the current article? Several adolescent readers spontaneously provided accounts of feelings of not mattering to others. These accounts are summarized in Table 5. Many young people revealed considerable psychological pain and distress. Below, some key contexts for feelings of not mattering are outlined. Parenthetically, these accounts should not be surprising given that as many as 1 in 3 young people may lack a feeling of mattering according to prevalence estimates (see Flett, 2025).

Some readers made explicit mention of feelings of not mattering being reflective of low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Many accounts

reflected a profound sense of insignificance (e.g., there wouldn't be any difference if I wasn't here) in a manner that fits with the proposed state of "unbearable insignificance" (see Flett, 2026). Some adolescents linked feelings of not mattering with depression and suicidality. One key element of mattering is the feeling of being noticed when absent and the sense of being missed by other people (see Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) and there were a few references to not mattering to the extent of not being missed. One young person suggested that it feels like being hit by a bus and then being replaced by a total stranger.

A few respondents couched the feeling of not mattering in terms of absolutes and overgeneralizations similar to what exists when someone says that no one cares about them at all. Categorical thinking was suggested in terms either mattering or being insignificant with no other alternatives. One respondent described not mattering to anyone and not belonging anywhere. This type of extreme thinking was detected in a previous article that examined online statements to a suicide watch forum. This work found that anti-mattering statements were highly prevalent and were associated with more frequent use of an "absolute talk" category that fits with themes such as never feeling important and not mattering to anyone (see Deas et al., 2023).

The feeling of not mattering was often paired with accounts of being excluded and being isolated and in one instance "being closed off from everyone else." One respondent discussed feeling like an outcast and there are some indications in a few accounts of feeling ostracized. These accounts seemed to reflect anti-mattering experiences that align with how anti-mattering has been conceptualized and assessed. It is also not difficult to fathom on the basis of these accounts why feelings of not mattering are so strongly linked with the experience of loneliness (see McComb et al., 2020).

Table 5**Spontaneous Accounts of How Not Mattering Feels**

#	Participant Statement
1	“Not feeling important makes me feel left out and not included. I feel like I don't have a purpose.”
2	“I feel like I don't matter because there wouldn't be a difference if I wasn't here... I don't matter to anyone except for my family because I'm always alone.”
3	“Millions of people everywhere commit suicide because they feel like they don't matter... When someone feels like they don't matter, sadness and depression can consume them.”
4	“There are circumstances beyond my control that make me feel like I don't matter... I feel like I can't make mistakes or people will whisper about me.”
5	“I can't think of a time when I truly felt like I mattered... I have struggled with low self-esteem.”
6	“I struggle with depression and anxiety... Sometimes I tell myself that I don't <u>matter</u> and no one will miss me if I was gone. My best friend reassures me that I do matter.”
7	“My bed is warm and cozy. I don't have to deal with my mother, who makes me feel like I don't matter.”
8	“I took two steps back from my 'friends'... They said nothing. I felt like nothing, like I didn't matter.”
9	“I always felt like I didn't belong anywhere or mattered to anyone... It affected me in many negative ways.”
10	“Isolation makes adolescents wonder whether they matter... It makes you question if people appreciate you.”
11	“I always feel like I matter, but sometimes it feels lower... I hope it doesn't get worse.”
12	“I've never felt important... Sometimes it feels like I could be replaced by a total stranger.”
13	“Growing up, I saw worth as either mattering or insignificance... leading to burnout, self-criticism, anxiety, and depression.”
14	“I surround myself with people who make me feel included, yet I still sometimes feel like I don't matter.”
15	“When I don't feel that I matter, it's usually when I'm insecure and close myself off.”
16	“Feeling that you matter is happiness. The scariest thing is people not knowing your existence.”
17	“‘Mattering’ seems simple, but we forget to practice it... We notice immediately when someone isn't caring.”
18	“Feeling like <u>you</u> matter is the key to happiness. I don't personally have that experience.”
19	“If you feel like you do not matter, you will not have confidence in yourself.”
20	“I feel like I don't matter when I feel sad or like I'm not doing anything for the world. I just want to make it better.”

Mattering in Specific Contexts and Relationships

Most research in the mattering field focuses on mattering in general. It is also possible and meaningful to examine mattering in specific contexts and in specific relationships. When young people have developed an overgeneralized sense of mattering to no one and mattering nowhere, often

in the form of feeling like no one cares about them in any place, it is transformative if they can develop a sense of mattering in the context of a specific relationship or a specific environment. The potential for certain people and certain places to provide resilience and adapting through a feeling of mattering is reflected in the many accounts that young people provided of mattering to a parent or a friend and mattering at school.

When it comes to research with children and adolescents, mattering has been assessed in terms of mattering at school and mattering in the community (see Flett, 2018b). As for specific relationships, mattering has been assessed with Marshall (2001) has developed structured self-report questionnaires to assess mattering to parents and mattering to friends. The basic premise in terms of levels of resilience and adaptability is that the young person with multiple forms of mattering (i.e., mattering at home, at school, and in the community) will have higher levels of resilience and adaptability.

The next series of tables illustrates how the spontaneous descriptions of adolescent respondents often made references to mattering at home to family members and mattering to friends and mattering at school. Mattering to family members involved references to a parent and the sense of being cared about. Importantly, several accounts reflect times and situations in which young people were actively shown that they matter.

Regarding the comments in Table 6, the first account illustrates how mattering is so often centered in loving relationships with grandparents. Of course, it is not uncommon for a grandmother or grandfather to respond in ways that foster special relationships. This role of grandparents in the development of mattering is a key topic for future research.

Another specific theme in Table 6 is the notion of being cared about and mattering when a parent or other family member initiates the difficult conversations that are designed to build resilience and steer young people onto a better path. Table 6 includes a references to being disciplined by a mother as an illustration of caring. Indeed, one young person acknowledged that, "... my mom disciplines me so that I can make it in life too and so that I can be a good person in the future." Such accounts accord with a recent analysis and evidence attesting to the including of feeling cared about as part of the mattering construct (see Flett & Nepon, 2024).

Keys to how mattering is expressed can also be found in Table 6. One key indicator is the sheer amount of time that a parent spends with a child or adolescent. Time is valuable and precious and giving time to someone is an indicator of interest and a clear sign of receiving attention.

Another indicator in Table 5 is realizing and being aware that others are thinking about you. It was mentioned by one adolescent that, "I always remember that my parents or someone out there is always thinking about me." Alternatively, not being cognitively salient to the other person indicate low mattering. Rosenberg (1985) discussed this in terms of being "peripheral in the minds of others" (p. 219).

Table 6

Mattering at Home in the Family

#	Quote
1	"I feel 'matter' when my grandpa, whom I love very much, walks up to me and gives me a giant hug saying, 'I am proud of you.' To me this just strikes love into my heart and gives me courage that I matter."
2	"Hearing that someone actually thinks you matter and have a purpose is probably one of the best feelings to ever exist. I feel like it is a necessity to have those types of people. One of those people to me is my mom. She tells me every day how grateful she is to have me as her child."
3	"When someone tells me I matter to them, it makes me feel like I have an important role in their life. When my parents say this to me, it's different because I know I matter to them. When they tell me it almost feels like reassurance that they care and love me. But with other people, it feels like enlightenment—I realize I matter to them."
4	"I feel like I matter most to my aunt. She always lets me talk to her about problems. We spend hours talking; if I'm not at her house, we are talking on the phone. We have a really close relationship."
5	"One of the main places where I feel like I matter the most is inside of my very own home. Just the thought of being able to relax in a place that I love the most and with the people I love the most makes me feel so great."
6	"My parents know me inside and out and make me feel like I belong in every situation and place, which is the best feeling a kid can ask for."
7	"Everyone matters whether they're part of your family or not. Sometimes I feel that I don't really matter to people around me. I always remember that my parents or someone out there is always thinking about me."
8	"The person with whom I feel like I matter the most is my Uncle Ralph... With him, I can freely express myself, listen to my own music, and talk about anything without feeling judged."
9	"I always feel like I matter when I'm with my dad. He goes out of his way to make sure I'm okay and safe. And after my volleyball game, my mom told me how proud she was of me and how hard I worked."
10	"On the first Thursday of every month, along with my dad, I translate at a free outreach clinic... We help each other and appreciate each other more with each patient and visit."
11	"I mostly matter to my family... every time they see me they smile, and my mother tells me how much she loves me."
12	"If my mom yells at me for doing something dangerous, it really shows that she cares and that I matter."
13	"I feel mattered with my mom because she cares for me, makes sure I'm fed, not sick, and disciplines me so I can be a good person."
14	"I feel like I matter most when I'm with my sister. She treats me like a friend, and I can be my truest self with her."
15	"When I hung out with my dad at work and helped teachers, they congratulated me and called me 'the biggest helper.' It made me feel as though I mattered."
16	"When my mom and I went to New York for a weekend, I really felt that my opinion was valued and that what I thought mattered during that trip."
17	"My father handcrafted a nutcracker for me when I was upset... I see it as proof there is someone who would do anything just to make sure I am not unhappy."
18	"I feel that I matter the most in my house and with my mom because she always tells me she loves me and shows she cares."
19	"What stands out to me the most is my father's dedication... the hours of his life he sacrificed just for my little holiday dream."
20	"When I visited Vietnam again, my whole family treated me like royalty... it made me very surprised and excited."
21	"Personally, my importance is evident. I feel the most important with my family and in my home because of their caring personalities."

It has been demonstrated empirically and acknowledged widely that close friendships of high quality are vitally important to adolescents as they become increasingly focused and responsive to feedback from peers and friends (see Alsarrani et al., 2022). Accordingly, a feeling of mattering to a friend or friends should be a vital element of the overall sense of mattering experienced by children and adolescents. Indeed, it was observed by Rosenberg (1985) that, “It may be that one reason why the adolescent clings so tenaciously to his or her peers is that to them, at least, he or she matters” (p. 219).

Of course, in addition to the many positive feelings that emanate from friendships, it can be quite difficult when there is an apparent loss of mattering to a friend or a highly significant friend does something that results in feeling less significant in the moment.

Table 7 contains a subset of the many references to friends were included in the comments to the article in the *New York Times*. The first comment illustrates the potential in terms of it being concluded that mattering within friendships can make life “ten times better.” Some reasons for this are being accepted with being judged and having close and caring people who offer comfort and emotional support during difficult emotional times.

It is apparent from some responses that being a friend can become a valued role that aligns with the emphasis that Prilleltensky (2020) placed on making a difference by adding value to others. This emphasis underscores that mutual mattering is often experienced in friendship dyads and it is important to feel relied on and depended on by a friend.

Table 7

Mattering To Friends

#	Participant Statement
1	"Life is ten times better when you have friends you can talk to, and I hope everyone has someone in their life that makes them feel like they matter."
2	"For my whole life I realized I didn't belong a lot of the time... I'm doing better now because my friends have been helping me through my struggles. My best friend has been a really great help."
3	"The most important part of 'mattering' is dedication... the friend who takes time every day to walk with you or go out for coffee makes the feeling strong."
4	"I feel valued with my family and with my friends... I contribute through humor and being someone they can talk to."
5	"I feel I matter most when I'm with my best friend... she never makes me feel like a bother and shows me what it is like to be truly loved."
6	"I've created a tight bond with Maya... I feel like I can always be myself. She makes me realize I don't deserve to be treated poorly."
7	"There was a time I truly felt like I mattered... my friends listened to me during a rough time and cared about what happened."
8	"I truly felt like I mattered when my best friend told me one of her biggest secrets. I felt trusted and important to her."
9	"If I didn't have great friendships and feel like I matter, I would not be the same person I am today."
10	"With my friends and family I always feel wanted and safe... I can express myself and resolve issues."
11	"When friends come to me to talk about their tough times, it shows trust... It tells me I matter to them and they matter to me."

Just as it is the case that friends are of core importance to young people, it is just as important to develop a sense of mattering at school. Young people who lack a feeling of mattering to parents should be especially in need of mattering at school. The answers shown in Table 8 are clear indications of how many young people describe their mattering experiences in the school context. This is not particularly surprising in the sense that, as noted above, school is such an important element of self and identity for many young people.

Certain responses listed in Table 8 illustrate that mattering versus not mattering at school is also double-edged. Ideally, young people will experience the benefits and grow their capacity to be resilient through mattering experiences but not mattering at school can also be felt deeply and can be a detriment to morale, motivation, and the capacity to cope when stressors are encountered. The results in Table 8 support a school specific form of anti-mattering involve school experiences such as being bullied or others failing to listen. This school specific aspect can supplement general anti-mattering (see Flett et al., 2022).

While there has been limited research thus far on mattering to a teacher, there were multiple accounts about feeling significant because of interactions with teachers. These accounts underscore how impactful teachers can be and in ideal circumstances, it results in teachers knowing how much they matter to their students. These results signify that adapting measures such as the one developed by Marshall (2001) to assess mattering to teachers reflects a key source of mattering to adolescents.

Table 8

Mattering at School

#	Participant Statement
1	"As a girl, I was bullied... I used to feel like I didn't matter because I wasn't valued at school."
2	"Feeling unimportant and unwanted was something I struggled with in middle school and freshman year... I dreaded going to school and pretended to be satisfied with my social life."
3	"When I went back to my old school and people genuinely wanted me back, it truly felt like they thought I was important."
4	"You matter to your teachers; they can dictate your future."
5	"I feel that I matter the most in band class... It becomes a place where you belong and are needed."
6	"In 1st grade, my teacher gave compliments when we helped others. That year helped me feel like I mattered."
7	"I felt that I mattered when Mr. Cornell said he was proud of me for overcoming my fear. It gave me reassurance."
8	"In elementary school I was bullied and unappreciated... Unlike others, I constantly overthink my self-esteem."
9	"I feel most important with family or teachers who truly listen and care about my success."
10	"A 'You matter' poster in 7th grade made me reflect on my self-worth during struggles with self-image."
11	"Sometimes at school teachers interrupt me and don't care what I have to say, which makes me feel like I don't matter."

Mattering and Social Cues and the Broader Social Environment

The final two contexts were not mentioned often but they were clearly evident. There is growing concern about the role of social media in young people’s lives and the role that destructive social comparisons play in impacting their well-being. Indeed, when it comes to social media, two advisories were issued in the same month in 2023. U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy issued his Social Media and Youth Mental Health Advisory (US Surgeon General, 2023). The advisory emphasized that about one-third of young people report using social media on an almost constant basis, and social media represents a meaningful risk of harm to youth while also providing some benefits. This was followed slightly preceded by a similar advisory issued by the American Psychological Association. The health advisory on social media use (American Psychological Association, 2023) recognizes when social media use is positive and when it is negative.

Some young people who responded to the newspaper article linked mattering to social media and receiving text messages on their phones. They were not many mentions overall, and most were positive, as shown in Table 8. The insights on display show a great deal of thoughtfulness and also the impact of social media and its influence on the self.

Table 9

Online/Social Media

#	Participant Statement
1	“With 8 billion people... social media makes us feel special and significant. If you disappeared, people would notice and worry.”
2	“We try to get more friends or followers to show that we matter. We want reassurance that people care about us.”
3	“Becoming famous on social media seems easier than becoming an actual celebrity. Being admired by strangers can feel better than appreciation from people you know.”
4	“Being online increases my sense of mattering... I can express myself more freely and find people with similar hobbies.”
5	“A simple message like ‘I miss you’ makes me feel like I matter because someone thought about me.”
6	“When friends text ‘How have you been?’ I feel like I matter. It shows they care about my well-being.”
7	“Even a simple text like ‘How have you been?’ can go a long way.”
8	“When I was out sick, my friends instantly texted to check on me. It made me feel mattered.”

One concern about excessive involvement with social media is that it will mean frequent exposure to social comparison information and this social comparison information can have a strong negative impact on mood states and the sense of worth (see Flett, 2025). Several adolescents mentioned social comparisons and how they were impacted. For the most part, these social comparisons were painful, forced, and unwanted.

The responses shown in Table 10 illustrate that social comparisons can be quite painful and tied directly to feelings of not mattering to others and perhaps the feeling of not mattering as much as others seem to matter. The final response shown in Table 10 is especially poignant in terms of wanting and needing to be special and matter but feeling just the opposite when in the presence of others who are doing better or who seem to be doing better. In this instance, there is a reference to being slapped in the face with the truth.

Table 10

Social Comparison and Feelings of Not Mattering

#	Participant Statement
1	"I'm part of my school's marching band and spin with colorguard. It's my safe space, but I often feel like I don't matter because I can't do some of the things others can. I want to matter like those girls do."
2	"Being around people who excel can hurt. I used to feel good at math, but after 7th grade it became harder, and I started thinking I wasn't good enough."
3	"There were times I distanced myself from my friend group because I didn't like how I mattered in it. That feeling carried into the classroom and made me participate less."
4	"I don't feel important when I'm around people who excel where I used to thrive. I sometimes think my opinions are insignificant."
5	"I don't usually feel that I matter when others are better at things I thought I was good at. It makes me feel mediocre and not special."

When considering how exposure to social comparisons can be painful and amplify the feeling of not mattering, it is important to keep in mind the role that feelings of mattering or not mattering can play in self-evaluation. Flett (2025) described various pathways to depression and one pathway was taking the feeling of not mattering and using it to negative judge the self. The feeling of not mattering can be highly destructive when it is fuel for a negative pattern or sequence of self-appraisal that undermines self-confidence.

Summary and Conclusions

The current analysis began by considering how mattering feels according to adolescents. While it was expected that mattering would involve positive feelings, the sheer intensity of positive affect reported by some young people was remarkable. Unfortunately, just as remarkable was the intense pain expressed by some young people and this pain was expressed despite the focus being on mattering as a positive life experience. The responses obtained provided some clear insights into the pain inherent in anti-mattering experiences that leave a young person feeling unseen, unheard, and unvalued.

Regarding the overarching question of how mattering contributes to resilience, there were several mentions that linked mattering with growth and development and a stronger sense of the self as a worthy individual. It

was also apparent throughout the various responses that mattering was tied closely to feeling emotionally supported and cared about by others and mattering facilitated the growth of close relationships with significant others.

This article also focused on mattering in specific relationships (i.e., friends and family) and specific contexts (i.e., mattering at school or mattering online). These responses serve as an important reminder that when mattering is assessed with general measures, these measures might not capture important nuances and the overall complexity of mattering as it is experienced at the level of the individual adolescent.

The approach taken in the current article is unique and highly atypical and it is clear and obvious that there are limitations. Because of the format adopted by the newspaper, we know little about the demographic factors that might have impacted the results. The sample of respondents is obviously far from representative. The conclusions reached also are impacted by the biases of the current author and no attempt was made to utilize a full and rigorous qualitative approach that would have included having multiple people go through the various statements. Still, some key new insights emerged and the hope is that full scale qualitative studies under more controlled conditions will be conducted as future investigators revisit such issues as how mattering feels when experienced by young people and how it emerges in specific contexts.

It is clear from the accounts examined in the current article that there is much to be learned from further attempts to analyze how young people experience mattering and marshal its positivity when faced with both the usual and atypical challenges faced as part of development. It is also evident from the range of themes experienced that there are many avenues for future cross-sectional quantitative research on themes that matter to adolescents.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author's Contributions

The author conducted all writing, conceptualization, and analyses.

Informed Consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

Ethics Approval

N/A.

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