



# Antecedents, correlates, and consequences of feeling like you don't matter: Associations with maltreatment, loneliness, social anxiety, and the five-factor model



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## ABSTRACT

While mattering to others is regarded as an essential element of personal adjustment, relatively little is known about the developmental origins and psychosocial correlates of mattering. The current research examined the extent to which a reported history of childhood maltreatment contributed to feelings of not mattering to others. We also examined the associations between mattering and measures of psychosocial adjustment (i.e., loneliness and social anxiety) and whether low perceived mattering was associated with these indices of adjustment after controlling for variance attributable to the broad personality traits comprising the five-factor model. A sample of 232 university students completed a general mattering measure and scales tapping childhood maltreatment, the five-factor model, loneliness, and social anxiety. As expected, mattering was associated negatively with reports of emotional maltreatment and emotional neglect with the strongest association being with emotional neglect. Additionally, low mattering was associated with loneliness and social anxiety and these findings held after taking into account the clear links that reduced mattering had with low extraversion and high neuroticism. We also showed that mattering mediates the links that maltreatment has with both loneliness and social phobia. The results illustrate the interpersonal antecedents and correlates of feeling insignificant and unimportant to other people.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on abuse experienced during childhood and adolescence is replete with studies documenting consequences reaching into adulthood. Various forms of maltreatment and related adverse experiences early in life have been linked consistently with a host of negative outcomes including poor adjustment and greater psychological distress later in life (see Widom, 2014). Moreover, several studies now attest to the neurobiological consequences of maltreatment (Dannowski, Stuhmann, Beutelmann, Zwanzger, et al., 2012).

In the current paper, we examine how various forms of childhood maltreatment can lead to the perceived sense that one does not matter to others, and we demonstrate that the associations between childhood maltreatment and mattering are not simply a reflection of variance attributable to the personality trait dimensions captured by the five-factor model of personality. Although mattering has received constant attention in the literature over the last three decades, work on the mattering construct is limited in scope in some key respects. The current

study examined key unaddressed issues involving the etiology of individual differences in mattering. We also investigated the links that mattering has with critical psychosocial outcome variables (i.e., loneliness and social anxiety) and we conduct an initial test of the possibility that mattering is a key psychological resource that mediates the proposed link that low levels of mattering have with loneliness and social anxiety. This possibility would be in keeping with the general notion that the availability of important social supports plays a protective role when a person is confronted with adversity.

What is mattering? Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) first conceptualized mattering as the sense that other people depend on us, are interested in us, and actively care about what happens to us. This sense of mattering is viewed as a major component of the self that is related to, but distinguishable from, self-esteem. While much is known about the antecedents of self-esteem, relatively little is known about the developmental antecedents of mattering. One plausible hypothesis is that a history of being mistreated by others contributes to a sense of not mattering. To our knowledge, this basic premise has not been empirically evaluated, with the exception of data suggesting that girls in mutually violent relationships, relative to girls who had not experienced violence, tended to report lower levels of mattering in their communities (see Chiodo et al., 2012). In light of these observations, as indicated above,

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the current study was designed to test some basic hypotheses related to the development of mattering and the likely psychosocial correlates of mattering. The notion that a history of childhood maltreatment is linked negatively with perceived mattering is in keeping with various conceptual models. For instance, according to symbolic interaction theorists (e.g., Baldwin, Cooley, and Mead), views of how the self is regarded by others are inferred from how people interact with us, especially in terms of verbal exchanges (for an overview, see Harter, 1999). It follows from this perspective that harsh interactions involving maltreatment should result in negative appraisals of mattering. What is less obvious is whether mattering is impacted to a comparable degree by physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and whether more blatant forms of maltreatment have a stronger link with mattering than does emotional neglect. Our sense is that emotional abuse is particularly relevant to developing a low sense of mattering, in keeping with the psychological impact of negative social exchanges. Similarly, a history of emotional neglect should be particularly salient in the sense of not mattering to others. Indeed, one team of researchers who documented the highly destructive impact of childhood neglect among a sample of at-risk women concluded that “One of the uniquely harmful aspects of being neglected is the implied message that one does not matter, that one’s needs – like oneself – are insufficiently important to be attended to” (see Klein, Elifson, & Sterk, 2007, p. 49). The issues discussed above were explored in the current study by including a multifaceted maltreatment measure that assessed abuse and neglect.

As noted earlier, the current study also evaluated the extent to which mattering is associated negatively with key indices of poor psychosocial adjustment. Our emphasis on the associations that mattering has with loneliness and social anxiety was guided by several considerations. First, both loneliness and social phobia are associated with a host of negative consequential outcomes. For instance, longitudinal work has linked loneliness with health problems and earlier mortality (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014), while persistent social phobia is seen as a contributor to various negative outcomes including unemployment, educational impairment, school dropout, physical health problems, and a lower quality of life (see Ranta, Kaitiala-Heino, Rantanen, & Marttunen, 2009; Stansfeld, Clark, Rodgers, & Caldwell, 2008; Stein & Kean, 2000). As for why mattering should be associated with lower levels of loneliness and social anxiety, feelings of mattering can promote a very positive sense of the self, but loneliness and social anxiety are associated with highly negative views of the self and less than ideal personal attributes (see Flett & Hewitt, 2014). People who have a strong sense of mattering should have some degree of confidence in interacting with others and they should be relatively low in social anxiety and loneliness. In contrast, people who feel like they don’t matter to others are likely to have the kind of negative personal identity that often underscores the self-views of people suffering from loneliness and social anxiety. Parenthetically, it should be noted that links have been established between not mattering and anxiety in general (see Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), but the proposed negative association between mattering and social anxiety has not been studied, with the exception of a recent study showing that mattering was linked negatively with social anxiety and social phobia in a sample of adolescents from China (Flett, Su, Ma, & Guo, 2014). This negative association between mattering and social anxiety should be generalizable and detectable in an individualistic culture as well.

The notion that mattering also mediates the association between maltreatment and poor psychosocial adjustment is consistent with our contention that mattering is a powerful psychological resource that acts as a resilience factor and coping resource. The sense of connection and care that comes from mattering to someone can conceivably go a long way toward lessening the impact of a prior history of maltreatment; for instance, someone who has been emotionally neglected is now having the need for care and warmth being addressed. Although this seems quite plausible, to our knowledge, previous researchers have not investigated the protective mediating role of mattering.

As alluded to earlier, in certain analyses reported below, we took into account the variance attributable to the five-factor model trait dimensions. This approach was taken in order to demonstrate the unique association between mattering and the psychosocial variables. However, we also included a brief measure of the five-factor model due to the general paucity of five-factor analyses of the mattering construct. At present, the extent to which mattering relates to broad trait dimensions is unknown. A broader understanding of the nature of individual differences in mattering is possible by examining its link with broader trait frameworks.

We tested these proposed associations in a sample of university students. Although difficult to estimate, college students have been reported to have considerable prevalence rates of childhood abuse (see Briere & Runtz, 1988; Graziano & Namaste, 1990).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 232 undergraduate students (91 men, 155 women, one undeclared). Their mean age was 20.3 years. Participants were paid \$10. Questionnaire booklets were administered to small groups of participants during scheduled research sessions. Participants were provided with a list of relevant community resources upon completion of the questionnaire and a consent form.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. The General Mattering Scale (RMS; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981)

The General Mattering Scale is a five-item measure of how much one perceives they matter to others. A sample item is, “How important do you feel you are to other people?” Respondents are required to indicate their level of agreement with each item on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*A lot*) to 4 (*Not at all*). This measure has shown good internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of .85 (Taylor & Turner, 2001). Factor analysis confirmed that this measure is unidimensional with factor loadings ranging from .63 to .79 (Taylor & Turner, 2001) and all items have been shown to have moderate relation to one another (DeForge & Barclay, 1997; Taylor & Turner, 2001).

#### 2.2.2. The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998)

The CTQ is a 28-item screening tool used to screen people who have had childhood abuse and neglect, which assesses the five types of maltreatment: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; emotional and physical neglect. Each item refers to childhood events of abuse and/or neglect. A sample item is, “I got hit so hard by someone in my family that I had to go see a doctor or go to the hospital.” Each item is scored using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Never true* to 5 = *Always true*). The CTQ is reported to have good reliability and validity by independent studies (e.g. Paivio & Cramer, 2004; Scher, Stein, Asmundson, McCreary, & Forde, 2001; Wright et al., 2001).

#### 2.2.3. UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980)

The UCLA Loneliness Scale is a 20-item self-report measure of loneliness as a function of desired and actual levels of social interaction. The internal consistency of this scale is reported to be between .89 and .94 across various populations including college students, nurses, and teachers (Russell & Cutrona, 1988), and has a test-retest reliability of .73 (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978).

#### 2.2.4. Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN; Connor et al., 2000)

The SPIN is a 17-item self-report scale assessing social phobia symptoms experienced over the past week. Items focus on the three components of fear, avoidance, and physiological arousal. Initial scale development work indicated that the scale has adequate internal consistency and discriminant validity. Clinical research indicates that the

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