

# Mattering must be central in youth suicide prevention, says study

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Youth suicide is a growing concern in Canada, the U.S., and around the world, with some research suggesting this might be linked with excessive social media use in vulnerable teens. With Mental Health Awareness Month closing out this week, York University Psychology Professor Gordon Flett says he was motivated by a growing sense of alarm and frustration when undertaking a review of studies on mattering and youth suicide for his [latest research](#), which appears in *Child Protection and Practice*.

Mattering is feeling significant in the eyes of other people, which is further linked to feeling that people are noticing you and keeping track of you, and that you are contributing to other people's lives. "Anti-mattering," a term coined by Flett to describe the feeling of not mattering, is the opposite: feeling unseen, unheard, and unimportant to others.

"It's shocking how many indicators there are of an increased problem with [young people](#), including a study that was done in Canada, based on pandemic data last year," says Flett, Canada Research Chair in Personality and Health. "No matter how you measure it, if you're feeling a sense of mattering, you're less likely to have [suicidal ideation](#), less likely to have a plan, less likely to have an actual attempt. But if you feel like you don't matter, it goes the other way."

The paper is the first to review the [scientific literature](#) on youth suicide and mattering. Flett took a look at the situation for younger people after seeing the benefits in his recent research on mattering and suicidality among university students. For this article, he examined a dozen studies and found mattering to be central to protection against youth suicide, and the feeling of not mattering to be a central risk.

Flett says one reason for growing rates of youth suicide might be linked to social media, with new research by Flett and colleagues linking excessive social media with fears and feelings of not mattering in youth. Negative interactions online or not feeling seen or heard might be extra risk factors for youth who are already vulnerable, although Flett says the feeling of mattering acts as a shield.

"We now have data confirming that both anti-mattering and fear of not mattering are linked with elevated social-media addiction scores. Youth characterized jointly by [social-media](#) addiction and anti-mattering will be quite vulnerable," says Flett. "However, people who are high in mattering are more interpersonally resilient. So if they get slagged online, for instance, they're not going to take it to heart as opposed to the person who will internalize."

Some of the research on youth goes back decades and given the strong evidence, he argues the concept of mattering should become key to suicide-prevention policy.

Flett says that while "You matter" is a popular slogan in the U.S., the way our mental-health system operates can often send the opposite message to those who are seeking help. "If you're a youth and you've actually taken the brave step of saying, 'Hey, I've been having these thoughts, I need help' and then you can't get treatment or even an assessment in a timely manner, it's like, 'Well, here's some evidence, again, that I don't matter as much as I should.'"

While mattering is often confused with other concepts such as self-esteem or belonging—even in some of the literature Flett has reviewed—he says mattering is neither, and is robustly protective over and above many other factors.

"While they are correlated, [self-esteem](#) is essentially feeling like you're a

likable person, sometimes in terms of talent, and getting things done, but mattering is the feeling that others essentially care about you," explains Flett. "And you can be part of a group, but it doesn't mean you'll be recognized or valued within the group. It can feel worse in a way if you belong but don't matter."

While mattering matters for everyone, Flett says some youth, especially racialized, LGBTQ+ and those with difficult family situations and living in poverty, need to hear this message more.

In the U.S, there has been an estimated increase of suicide rates by almost 4% annually among males between 2009-2020 and almost 7% among females between 2007 and 2017. While there are no definitive studies for the most recent years for Canada as a whole, Manitoba reports a 42% increase in youth suicides for 2022-2023 versus the previous reporting period, and the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth's office saw three times as many suicide attempts by young people in care versus the previous year.

For parents or others interacting with youth, Flett says spending time with them, listening to them and validating their feelings will help youth feel as if they matter.

Flett's top advice: Show them they matter. Show them you care.

"Bottom line is, if somebody knows that they matter to someone they care about, then they have a reason to not do something that's risky towards themselves. And then they can internalize that message, to start to matter to themselves."

**More information:** Gordon L. Flett, Mattering matters in youth suicidality: Implications for implementing in practice, *Child Protection and Practice* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chipro.2024.100041](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chipro.2024.100041)

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