The Real Reason You Feel Lonely

8 MIN READ

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BY HEATHER HURLOCK & JENNIFER WALLACE

It’s not about being alone. It’s about not mattering.

Jennifer Breheny Wallace spent years investigating why so many high-achievers were anxious, burned out, and struggling. She discovered something that applies to people of all ages. The antidote to achievement pressure isn’t lowering the bar. It is helping people feel like they matter.

That insight became her new book ***Mattering***, her follow-up to the New York Times bestseller *Never Enough*, and eventually **The Mattering Institute**, an organization devoted to rebuilding cultures where people feel both valued and able to add value.

Her framework speaks to something most of us have felt but rarely name: that hollow sense when the roles that once made us feel vital, professionally, relationally, within our families, shift or fall away. We’re past asking “What’s next?” We’re asking something deeper: “*Do I still matter?*”

The answer, Wallace argues, is yes, but it requires understanding what mattering actually is, and how to rebuild it intentionally. This conversation gives readers a framework to assess their own sense of mattering as well as concrete practices to strengthen it, especially during life transitions.

Mattering: The Secret to a Life of Deep Connection and Purpose

A Q&A with author Jennifer Breheny Wallace

Heather Hurlock (HH): *"You began your career at "60 Minutes," went on to become an award-winning journalist for The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post, and then wrote Never Enough, a book about toxic achievement culture that became an instant New York Times bestseller. Along the way, you discovered something unexpected: that the antidote to achievement pressure was helping people feel like they matter. You've now founded* ***The Mattering Institute*** *and co-founded* ***The Mattering Movement****. Can you tell us about the moment (or the slow accumulation of moments) when you realized mattering was the key to the entire achievement story? "*

Jennifer Breheny Wallace (JBW): "What I first saw as a protective chapter became unmistakably clear as the research deepened: mattering wasn't just the antidote to achievement pressure. It was the antidote to so much of what ails us today — loneliness, anxiety, disengagement at work, and a pervasive sense of purposelessness and meaninglessness that has seeped into our lives.

Mattering is a fundamental human need, as essential as belonging or purpose, and yet we've treated it like a "nice to have." The Mattering Institute and the Mattering Movement grew out of a desire to move this idea out of the abstract and into daily life, to help people build cultures, relationships, and systems where individuals feel both valued and able to add value. Mattering is the pathway to a life of deep connection, purpose, and meaning for people across the lifespan.

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HH: *You identify four essential elements of what you call our "mattering core":*

recognizing your impact, being relied on (but not too much), feeling prioritized, and being truly known and invested in. For readers encountering this framework for the first time, can you walk us through these four elements?

JBW: Mattering is the feeling that we are valued and that we add value to the world around us. You may not use the word often, but you've felt it—the warmth when someone remembers your name, shows up for a milestone, or brings soup when you're sick. It's the assurance that we are not going through this life alone.

When people feel they matter, they show up with a desire to contribute and connect. When they chronically feel they don't, the pain can surface as withdrawal, anxiety, depression, substance use, or anger — road rage, online attacks, political extremes — desperate attempts to say, *I'll show you I matter.* Researchers argue that after food and shelter, this may be our most fundamental human need.

The good news: mattering is contagious and highly actionable. It can be taught, learned, and measured—which means we can intentionally rebuild cultures that foster it at work, at school, and in our communities. The Mattering Core is the set of experiences that allow people to feel they truly matter. When these elements are present, we thrive. When they're missing, we suffer.

Here they are:

Recognizing your impact: The sense that your actions make a difference, evidence that you helped someone or contributed **in a meaningful way**.

Being relied on (but not too much): Feeling needed — that others depend on you — signals that you're an **integral part of someone's world**. Although classic mattering research doesn't always use this exact language, the foundational conceptualization included "dependence" (others rely on you) as a key dimension.

Feeling prioritized: The feeling that others prioritize your needs and well-being.

Being noticed, treated as important, and valued by others are core components of mattering.

Being invested in: The relational heart of mattering—it's not enough to just be seen; you need to be understood, remembered, and genuinely **valued as a person**.

HH: *Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has called loneliness a public health crisis, and he praised your book as "an essential guide for how to restore meaning, comfort, and joy to our lives." You write that beneath the loneliness epidemic lies something deeper: "an erosion of mattering." Can you explain the relationship between loneliness and mattering?*

JBW: Mattering is the opposite of loneliness, and it's its antidote. Loneliness is often described as a lack of connection, but at its core, it's a perceived absence of meaningful connection. You can be surrounded by people—at work, in a family, on a team—and still feel profoundly lonely if you don't feel seen, valued, or needed. That's where mattering comes in.

Mattering answers a deeper set of questions: Do I count? Would I be missed? Does what I do make a difference to anyone? Does anyone really know me and care about my well-being? When those signals are missing, people can feel invisible even in crowded rooms.

That's why I describe loneliness as, in many cases, the symptom — and erosion of mattering as the root cause. Modern life has made it easier than ever to be in constant contact, but harder to feel significant. We have more interactions, but fewer moments where we feel genuinely relied on, prioritized, or invested in. This helps explain why loneliness shows up so frequently in places that look socially rich on the surface — busy workplaces, high-achieving schools, active families. The issue isn't proximity to people; it's proximity to meaningful signals of mattering.

When people feel like they matter — when their impact is recognized, when others depend on them in healthy ways, when their needs are taken seriously, and when they

are truly known — loneliness loses its grip. Even brief interactions can feel nourishing instead of empty.

So yes, it's absolutely possible to feel lonely while surrounded by people. What's missing isn't company. It's significance. When we feel like we matter, we're more than connected — we're anchored.

HH: *How does mattering get disrupted during life transitions and what does it look like to rebuild it? Are there specific practices that help people reclaim a sense of significance when the roles that once defined them fall away?*

JBW: Life transitions disrupt mattering by shifting the roles through which we've long felt valued and needed. For most of our lives, mattering is scaffolded by roles: parent, caregiver, professional, volunteer, leader, helper. These roles come with built-in signals of importance — people rely on us, seek us out, structure their days around us. When those roles shift or fall away, the loss isn't just logistical or emotional — it's existential. The question beneath the grief is: *Will I ever matter again?*

That's why transitions — empty nests, retirement, illness, caregiving, loss— can feel so destabilizing. Even when a transition is expected or chosen, it can erode the core signals of mattering. People may still be loved, but no longer needed in the same way.

One powerful pathway to rebuild mattering is through role models. Seeing others navigate similar transitions with meaning helps expand what's possible. When we encounter people who have rebuilt purpose after caregiving or found significance beyond parenting or paid work, it gives us a new map, a kind of blueprint. These role models show that mattering isn't confined to one chapter of life — it can be reconfigured.

Another crucial force is the power of invitation. Invitations signal mattering in a way few other gestures do: *I see you. I need you. You belong here.* An invitation to mentor, to contribute, to help in a new way, to simply show up — these moments restore reliance and priority without requiring someone to "prove" their worth.

In the end, the goal isn't to replace one role with another but to restore the feeling beneath the role — that you still matter, that you're valued and have value to offer the world around you.

HH: *You write about "overwhelmed caregivers" as one group whose mattering is at risk. How do caregivers maintain their own sense of mattering while giving so much? And what can the people around them do to help, especially when the caregiver insists they don't need anything?*

JBW: Caregiving creates one of the most painful paradoxes of mattering: you can be deeply relied on and yet feel profoundly unseen. People depend on caregivers emotionally, physically, and logistically. And yet many caregivers feel invisible because their needs often go unnoticed.

For caregivers, maintaining a sense of mattering starts with naming this imbalance. Feeling depleted means one dimension of mattering has been turned up too high while the others have gone quiet. Reclaiming mattering requires restoring some equilibrium:

Protecting moments of priority, even small ones, where your needs are not always last. This might mean asking for a break, saying no to one additional task, or letting someone else handle something imperfectly.

Making impact visible, especially when caregiving work is repetitive and unseen. Naming what you've done — out loud, to yourself or others — helps counter the sense that your efforts disappear into the void.

Allowing investment, which can be the hardest part. Many caregivers are excellent at giving care but less good at receiving it. Letting others support you restores your own mattering.

When caregivers feel recognized and supported, they are reminded of something essential: *I matter, too.*

HH: *One of your mattering core elements has a crucial caveat: being relied on, but*

not too much. Where's the line between healthy reliance, which feeds our sense of purpose and over-reliance, which depletes us? How do we know when we've crossed it?

JBW: The line is crossed when reliance becomes one-sided rather than mutual. Healthy reliance feeds purpose because it's paired with appreciation, boundaries, and choice — you're needed, but not taken for granted. You can step back without everything falling apart.

Over-reliance shows up when the system only works if you keep showing up at full capacity: your needs go last, and your worth becomes tied to how much you carry. A useful test is this: Does being relied on leave you energized and connected or chronically exhausted and invisible? Purpose expands us, while over-reliance erodes our sense of mattering.

HH: *You write that "our lives are transformed when we are reminded, in small and intentional ways, that we are valued and that we have value to offer." One reviewer noted that your book shows how "something as simple as a clementine will tell you everything you need to know about flourishing." Can you share an example of these "small and intentional" acts of mattering, the kind that don't require grand gestures but make a real difference?*

JBW: What struck me most when I asked people to share a moment when they felt like they truly mattered wasn't the big, visible wins — an award, a promotion, public recognition. It was the small, everyday moments: someone saving them a seat, a colleague checking in after a hard day, a neighbor showing up with a pot of soup.

We don't just crave mattering in the milestones — we crave it in the ordinary. In the past, these signals were built into daily life. Neighbors knew us and relied on us; we belonged to churches, 4-H clubs, and bowling leagues. As Robert Putnam has famously observed, we're now "bowling alone." Technology has accelerated this shift, making us less tolerant of friction and more isolated in our routines.

That’s why small, intentional acts matter so much today. They say, *I see you. I’m thinking about you. You count.* And over time, those moments add up and tell us that we are an essential part of the world around us.

HH: *Let’s end with something readers can try. You’ve spent years researching what helps people feel like they matter and have value to offer. If someone reading this suspects their mattering core has eroded, they feel invisible, unnecessary, or disconnected, what’s one concrete practice they can begin this week to start rebuilding?*

JBW: Each evening, I now ask myself two questions: *When did I feel valued today? And how did I add value to someone else, even in a small way?* In a journal, I jot down one concrete example for each: a text I sent, a problem I helped solve, a conversation where I really listened.

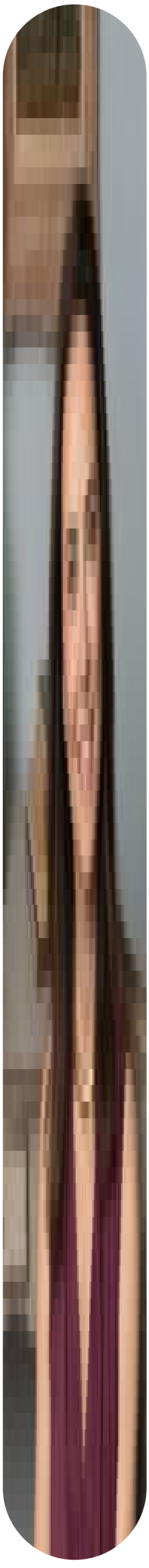
This works because it strengthens both sides of mattering: feeling valued and seeing where I’m adding value. Over time, it trains attention to notice where mattering already exists and where we can intentionally create more of it.

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WRITTEN BY:



Heather Hurlock



Jennifer Wallace