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## Commentary: Make sure that young people in your Maine community know they matter

Notice them, show interest in their lives, listen to what they say and prioritize what they have to contribute. Let's all push back against a youth mental health crisis.

BY DEL VINA MIREMADI-BALDINO SPECIAL TO THE PRESS HERALD

If we know youth are our future, why are we ignoring their cries for help? According to findings [recently released](#) by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2021, almost 3 in 5 teenage girls reported feeling so persistently sad or hopeless nearly every day for at least two weeks in a row that they stopped their regular activities. Nearly 1 in 3 high school girls reported seriously considering suicide, and 18% of girls reported experiencing sexual violence.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In 2021, before having any data, the American Academy of pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association declared a ["national emergency in children's mental health,"](#) urging policymakers to address the crisis swiftly.

Nevertheless, here we are in 2023, with increases in all facets of adversity, from social media bullying, sexual assault, hopelessness and suicide attempts.

Eighty-seven percent of Americans are concerned about young people's mental health, with 2 in 3 parents saying they are "extremely" or "very" worried, according to a USA Today report. Why does it not feel like more of an alarm? Some communities are leading the charge by declaring an urgency to cultivate mattering in our youth.

In 2019, Kini-Ana Tinkham, executive director of the Maine Resilience Building Network, was alarmed by data from Maine's Integrated Youth Health Survey, which reported that only 57% of high school and 59% of middle school students believed they mattered in their communities. [That dropped in 2021](#) - just 51% of high school and 55% of middle school students feel they matter in their communities. In a collective approach with partners throughout Maine, the network launched Cultivating Mattering in Maine's Youth to create a culture where youth feel they matter.

Canadian psychology professor Gordon Flett says, "Mattering is the sense of being significant and valued by other people ... People who believe they matter to others have a key protective resource that can buffer them from life stressors and challenges."

Following the network's lead, we must all cultivate youth mattering in homes, schools and communities. With social connectedness recognized by the federal CDC as a priority social determinant of health that affects health and health equity, youth mattering is the perfect focus for sustainable change.

Maine youth need every community, school, business and family to act, or this mental health crisis will continue to grow. Who are the youth who cross your path - daily, weekly, monthly? They need you. Your role in addressing this crisis is critical.

Your actions to cultivate youth mattering can have a profound impact, protecting youth from experiencing detrimental health risks into adulthood. Youth who feel connected at school and home were as much as 66% less likely to experience health risk behaviors related to sexual health, substance use, violence and mental health in adulthood. Beyond being protective, mattering promotes health and happiness and boosts motivation and well-being at school. Having at least one accepting adult can [reduce the risk of a suicide attempt](#) among LGBTQ young people by 40%.

Helping youth in your community feel like they matter starts with intentional actions to help them feel that they're a significant part of the world around them. Youth believe they matter when they are seen, heard and valued and know that they add value.

- Seen: Youth thrive when adults notice and see them and are interested in what's going on in their lives.
- Heard: Youth thrive when adults care about their voices and value their contributions as uniquely significant.
- Valued and add value: Youth thrive when adults prioritize them as vital contributors to the community.

Our youth continue to call out to us, telling us they think they don't matter in their schools and communities. We must take this seriously. As Gordon Flett highlights, people at risk for depression and suicide tend to ruminate on thoughts like, "Nobody would miss me if I were gone" or "No one cares about me." If we know youth are our future, we cannot ignore their cries for help.