



The vital sign we miss: *Why mattering* matters in medicine

Presented by Dr. Alexandria Pavelich (University of Saskatchewan)

DISCLOSURE SLIDE

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BIAS DISCLOSURE SLIDE

I confirm that I have taken the following measures to ensure this learning activity/conference session is balanced and free from bias:

- Evidence-Informed Content: Presentation materials are based on a comprehensive literature review of peer-reviewed research in mattering, suicidology, and care provider wellbeing; this includes empirical frameworks developed by mattering experts Dr. Gordon Flett and Jennifer Breheny Wallace.
- Personal patient advocacy perspectives are contextualized within peer-reviewed data to maintain scientific objectivity and broad applicability across diverse pharmacy care settings.
- Learning objectives and workflow scenarios underwent independent expert review by practicing care provider peer with a PhD to ensure objective clinical relevance.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this session, you will be able to:

1. **Analyze** the empirical evidence connecting mattering and emotional safety to patient health management.
2. **Apply** validation strategies to eliminate structural friction or invisibility for often-stigmatized patients living with mental health, addiction, or chronic pain challenges.
3. **Execute** rapid, high-yield communication techniques to facilitate a sense of mattering between patients and colleagues.





Agenda

1. Introduction
2. Mattering
3. The Research
4. Effective Facilitation
5. Q&A



Dr. Alexandria Pavelich (MA, PhD)

- Interdisciplinary pain and suicide prevention researcher based at USask
- Specializing in the context of public health and emergency medicine
- Research focuses on exploring the social aspects that lead to suffering - as understood through the lens of “mattering”





The Clinical Paradox

and the

“Sixth Vital Sign”

**“Mattering is the human need
to feel significant in
the eyes of others.”**

Dr. Gordon Flett, 2018

The Psychology of Mattering: Understanding the Human Need to Feel Significant

In 5 words or less, what is
ONE small thing a patient
recently said or did that
made you feel like your work
genuinely mattered?

The science of mattering

Pharmacy Relevant Works on “Mattering”

Impact on engagement	Source
Mattering fosters healthier work environments in healthcare spaces, and improved patient outcomes (2025)	Hall, Katy, Amanda Datesman, Julie Haizlip, and Beth Epstein. 2025. “Mattering at Work: A Scoping Review with Implications for the Healthcare Work Environment.” <i>BMJ Leader</i> 10 (2): 123–30. https://doi.org/10.1136/leader-2025-001409 .
Reports that communication and relational features akin to mattering are linked to stronger pharmacist relationships (2021)	Idowu, O., T. Makhinova, M. Quintanilha, N. Yuksel, T. J. Schindel, and R. Tsuyuki. 2021. "Experience of Patients with COPD of Pharmacists' Provided Care: A Qualitative Study." <i>Pharmacy: Journal of Pharmacy Education and Practice</i> 9. https://doi.org/10.3390/pharmacy9030119
Provides evidence on relational continuity, rapport, trust, feeling seen/accepted, disclosure, and perceived safety – directly relevant to mattering (2024)	Isenor, J., L. Renaud, M. Mathews, B. Morrison, A. L. Murphy, A. Bishop, S. K. Bowles, et al. 2024. "Patient perspectives on the vital primary care role of community pharmacists in Nova Scotia, Canada: qualitative findings from the PUPPY Study." <i>The International Journal of Pharmacy Practice</i> 32: 216 - 222. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpp/riae008
Finds pharmacists' accessibility fosters trust; continuity gaps, stigma (esp. re: opioids), and volume-driven remuneration hinder person-centered engagement; patients often want greater pharmacist involvement (2021)	Dassieu, L., É. Paul-Savoie, É. Develay, A. C. V. Guilhon, A. Lacasse, L. Guénette, K. Perreault, H. Beaudry, and L. Dupuis. 2021. "Swallowing the pill of adverse effects: A qualitative study of patients' and pharmacists' experiences and decision-making regarding the adverse effects of chronic pain medications." <i>Health Expectations : An International Journal of Public Participation in Health Care and Health Policy</i> 25: 394 - 407. https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13399

Mattering VS Belonging

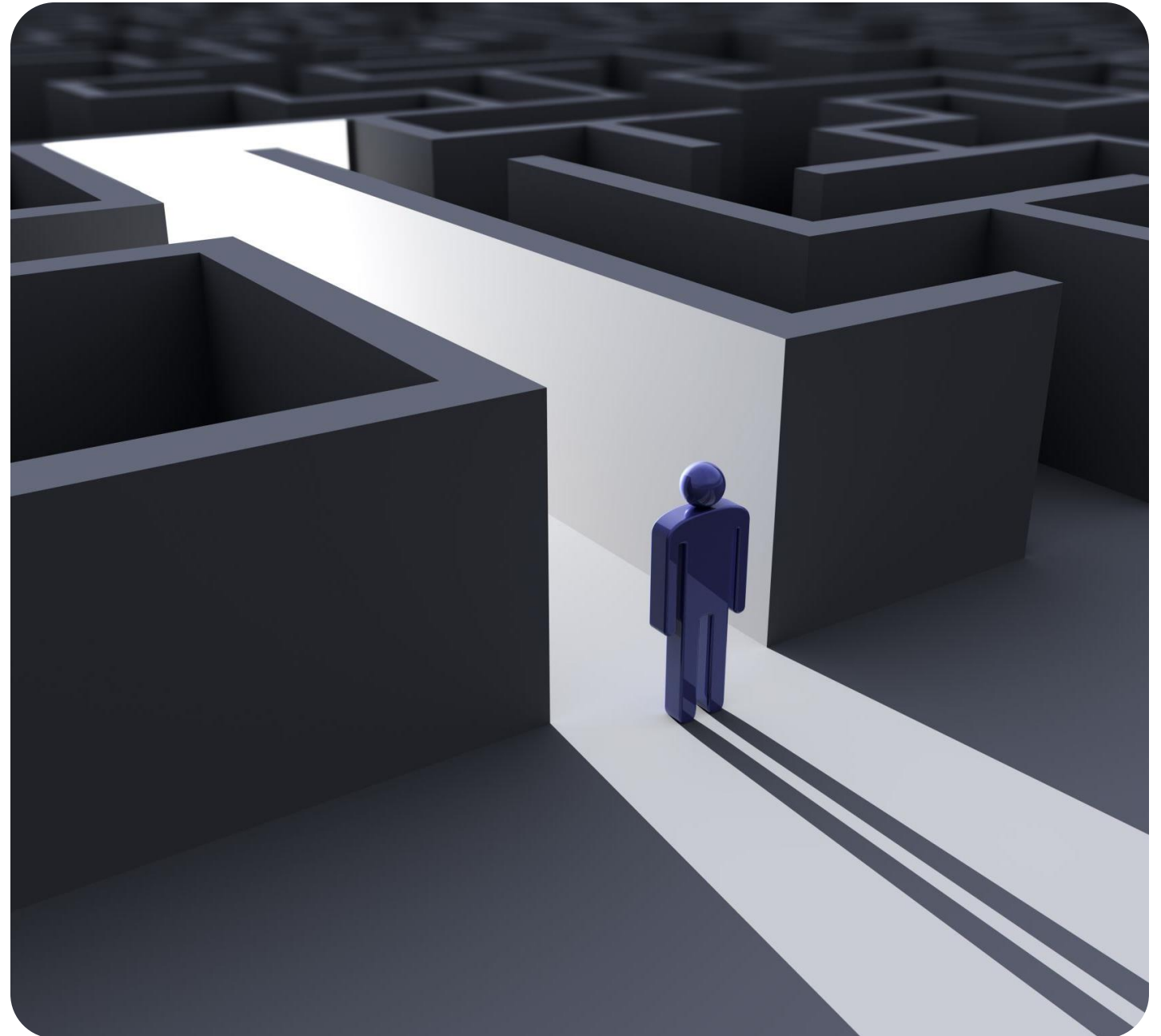


Anti-Mattering

Feelings of insignificance can lead to social withdrawal, isolation, and loneliness – common outcomes typically associated with depression, anxiety, and increased response to pain.

Flett, G. L., & Nepon, T. (2015). The development and psychometric properties of the Anti- Mattering Scale as a measure of feeling insignificant to other people. Manuscript in preparation.

Atkey, S. (2015). Mattering, Anti-mattering, and Self-Stigma of seeking help for mental health concerns in high school students. York University, M.A. Thesis.



Mattering Framework



Jennifer Breheny Wallace, 2026

Mattering: The secret to a life of deep connection and purpose

A core human need that is essential to well-being

Considered a “meta-need” as it encompasses belonging, connection, and purpose

(a) Feeling valued: feeling recognized and prioritized

(b) Having the opportunity to add value: being able to make meaningful contributions

The Erosion of Mattering in Fast-Paced Care



Efficiency-driven metrics aimed to improve operational efficiency often reduce care to mechanical transactions - patients feel like numbers rather than people.

Systemic structural pressures dictate micro-level encounters, stripping away authentic face-to-face connection.

Failing to signal a sense of connection between providers and patients can enable anti-mattering, driving care resistance, system distrust, and medication non-adherence.

Poll results

Mattering and Physiology

Research has shown feeling valued, and having safe human connection, regulates cortisol and stress-induced fight-or-flight responses.

Perceived anti-mattering can trigger a psychological threat response that lowers treatment adherence and health engagement, as well as increase experiences of pain and distress

Pavelich, A. (2026). *Mattering as medicine: exploring the significance of human-animal connections for individuals living with pain and suicidality*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Saskatchewan]. Harvest.



Clinical Application in High-Stigma Environments



Patients living with stigmatized, mental health, pain-related, or complex conditions speak to how they routinely encounter skepticism, implicit bias, and structural invisibility in traditional care settings.

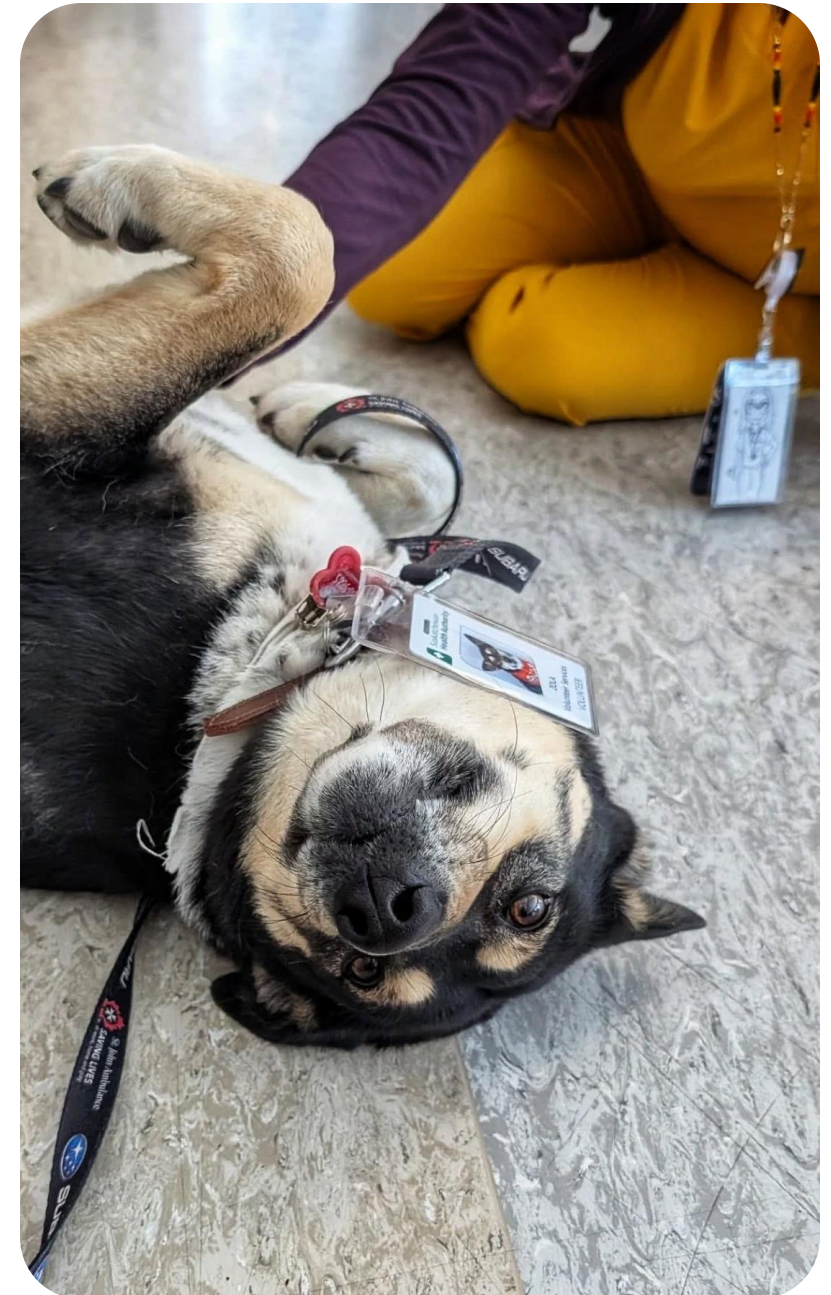
Facilitating a sense of mattering can help lower patient defense mechanisms, and replace prior frictions or mistrust that may have occurred through healthcare encounters.

Innovative social supports as a catalyst for mattering

Innovative social support services – such as animal-assisted services – that promote mattering serve as non-judgmental catalysts to rapidly build psychological safety and restore a sense of dignity for patients who may feel dehumanized or like they don't matter within the health care system.

Taking intentional approaches to speak to patients in a way that facilitates perceived mattering improves the patient experience, and signals to a broader sense of institutional caring.

Dell, C.A., Pavelich, A.R. & Stempien, J. Therapy dogs contribute to a more 'caring' emergency department environment for patients with mental health and substance use challenges. *Can J Emerg Med* 26, 848–850 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43678-024-00786-1>





Scenario 1



Scenario 2

The clinical outcome wasn't changed by anything that had to do with the medication itself – it was changed because the patient was shown that they and their pain mattered.

Mattering as an Ecosystemic Resource

In a high-volume environment, making others feel significant directly feeds the provider's own "Mattering Core".

Care providers can "burnout" from depersonalization and lack of purpose, not just workload or workplace stressors.

Promoting an internal sense of mattering can act as a safeguard against said burnout.



75%

of Canadian pharmacy professionals are at high risk of burnout.

Factors negatively impacting mental health

(CPhA, 2022)



Workload during
work hours



Work-life balance



Regulatory
requirements



Personal health



Salary/
remuneration

Workplace Culture & Peer-to-Peer Mattering



A pharmacy team under pressure cannot consistently signal significance to patients if they experience "anti-mattering" from their own leadership or colleagues.

Fostering mutual respect and recognition between pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, assistants, and other care providers builds team resilience against high-volume stress.

Peer-to-peer mattering isn't a perk – it is an operational strategy

Prescribing Mattering: Patient Mattering Workflow (60s)

THE HUMAN BUFFER (10 seconds)	VERBAL SIGN POSTING (30 seconds)	SHARED AGENCY (20 seconds)
Turn your shoulders and engage in direct eye contact - ensure you acknowledge the patient fully and presently before inputting information or focusing on a screen.	Validate and explain aloud to patients - name their emotional or physical reality, and explain your clinical logic out loud so they feel included, rather than directed, in the process.	Co-create the care plan implementation - shifts patients from a passive recipient of medicine to an active partner in their care management.
<i>"Hi Sarah, it's good to see you today. How have you been managing since we last spoke?"</i>	<i>"I hear how frustrating this pain flare-up is, and I hear you saying you're concerned about side effects so let me see what other options may be available."</i>	<i>"Based on what you shared about your work schedule, does taking this dose twice daily feel realistic for your daily routine?"</i>

Prescribing Mattering: Dispensary Team Workflow

SPECIFIC GRATITUDE	VISIBLE SAVES	NEEDED & MISSED
Replace generic praise with specific observations that prove you saw their contribution and its impact.	Publicly validate the crucial behind-the-scenes triage done by pharmacy technicians, assistants, and clerks.	Explicitly reinforce that a colleague's presence isn't just a body covering a shift, but a vital part of the team's success.
Instead of: <i>"Thanks for the hard work today."</i> ... <i>"Thanks for jumping on those phone lines when the intake desk got slammed—it gave me the focus needed to safely handle that complex prescribing adaptation."</i>	<i>"Great catch on that dosage discrepancy during intake, Mike. Your sharp eye saved that patient a major headache and protected our whole team."</i>	<i>"We really felt your absence while you were away on Tuesday—your speed at the compounding station makes the entire shift run smoother for everyone."</i>



Key Takeaways

Mattering is an **evidence-based** clinical tool.

1. Mattering is a **Clinical Modifier**
2. Mattering is a **Shield Against Burnout**
3. **Transformer** of institutional culture



Why *matter*ing matters

Mattering is reciprocal – and contagious.

Medicine can help save a life, but a sense of mattering can give us a reason to live.



“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

- Maya Angelou

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Q & A

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