



When The Machine Feels Safer Than Therapy

On a planet that's been wired for anxiety, it's no surprise that some of us find machines safer than humans.

Tension. A gap between words. I pause and try to take a breath. Pulse racing. Heart thumping.

The person sat opposite me promises to help, but is feeling uneasy and unsure. Their role is to provide guidance, support, help and care, but all I feel is their judgement. I look into their eyes for a moment and see their bias, fear and discomfort. Their eyebrows no longer sending signals that I can interpret for anything other than threat. Primal connection suddenly lost.

Therapy shouldn't feel this way, and you only have to experience this feeling once before you get cold feet and feel the tug of the door, to get out of there and never return - only to continue to suffer with whatever put you on that couch in the first place.

It's experiences like this that I, as well as many others will read and immediately connect with. A validation that therapy is too difficult to endure. Many of these individuals are now sitting in an upward trend of humans who are starting to turn away from face to face therapy and instead turn to artificial intelligence for mental health support.

Polls and studies in both the US and the UK are clearly demonstrating this.

US numbers via a poll conducted by Cognitive FX cite that 35.25% of adults would turn to AI due to their fears of judgement, with a staggering further 48.75% stating they would prefer AI chatbots to discuss issues with first, over their loved ones and friends.

In the UK, 37% of adults have used an AI chatbot for mental health or wellbeing support - according to a poll of 2,000 adults in a report commissioned by Mental Health UK.

"This figure isn't exactly "in place of therapy," but it is a significant indicator that people are actively using AI tools in the mental health space, especially when traditional services are harder to access"

Mental Health UK

Indeed. This quote reveals the biggest and most pressing challenge around finding help. Access.

It's tough to gain appropriate access to a mental health service in both countries - even for those that have shorter wait times like me, a combat veteran diagnosed with PTSD. You're talking a minimum of a 6 month waiting time.

Then of course, once you get into a program, you feel so wired and nervous that you immediately start to misread the situation and the person sat in front of you, that you decide to quit - leading to a clogging of the whole system and an increase of people going through the wait, to only skip out before the root cause of the problem is addressed.

This isn't a dismissal of classic sofa led therapy, nor is it a promotion of this new solution of going to AI instead of therapy. It's rather an opportunity to cast a lens over the *why* of the matter, based on these poll findings.

Therapy offers nuance, embodied empathy, relational challenge, long-term accountability, as well as emotional co-regulation where all of our senses can be engaged in a way, to foster a connection that can go deep enough to help us navigate through our inner turmoil. It also, however, brings the knowledge that

humans are judging creatures, with their own biases, fears and of course trepidation. Some therapists - due to being human after all - are not always able to control their emotional response, to certain language used or outbursts and convulsions in body language.

This leads us to become more concerned on what our therapist thinks of us, rather than locking in and exploring the problem that put us in this space to begin with.

AI as an alternative, can look more appealing. It feels cleaner, somehow providing more psychological safety, resulting in sharing becoming easier. There's no judgement to perceive in the eyes of another. No misread on micro expressions in the eyebrows, leading to a presumption of a perceived imbalance.

No fear of *disappointing* the therapist.

Most importantly, when it comes to access, you can get responses 24/7, with zero cost barrier - depending on your platform of choice.

People however are not seeking out AI because they hate therapy. They are simply going to it, so that they can speak without the fear of being seen - yet missing the point that it should be treated as a gateway, rather than a replacement.

AI detects and recognises patterns in our behaviour filling in our dissonance, giving cohesion to our chaotic thoughts.

Clarity without conscience, lacking creativity and empathy.

It does provide a level of psychological safety but this doesn't result in psychological growth.

"It's non-judgemental - I can say things I wouldn't say out loud," one Reddit user posted. Another reminder:

"Yeah, but it can't hold you whilst you grieve someone you lost"

This highlights the challenge with turning to AI. It may be a space where we can indeed speak without feeling the scanning of a watcher, but we will also find this comes with an absence of human touch - something that AI will always require, just like it's creator.

AI can be a healthy tool. I, and many others have found immense benefit in its validating responses, encouragement and empowering comments - especially when the timing hit's just right. But it is simply a tool, and it's important we remember this. It can be one of many that we can use to address our mental health challenges.

If 37% of us are already turning to the machine in this new age, to talk about our pain, then this isn't about technology at all. It's more about why someone feels more comfortable to talk to something without eyes.

AI has not triumphed over the field of psychological therapy; it merely reflects the failed systems we've built - and the rooms we don't feel safe or able to access.

It may be a space to speak before we're ready to be seen, but it needs to be a beginning of the conversation, not an end. The growth we crave, the accountability and the improvements we seek, will come with human connection - which is waiting on the other side of the chat window.

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