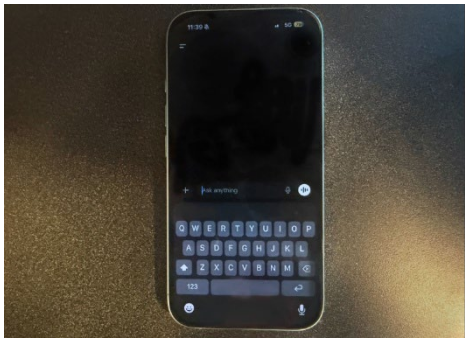
The Potential Dangers of "AI Therapy"

By Spencer DuMontier

AI is nearly everywhere. Almost every time you open social media you are bombarded with hundreds of AI videos or images. Countless news headlines mention it. Seemingly every company wants a piece of the AI pie. Many people rely daily on the "intelligence" arising from this AI revolution (or bubble). Though there are many positive aspects to artificial intelligence, there are immense downsides to this "Pandora's box" of technology. The proper use and morality of AI have been continuously and rigorously debated. Though great at mimicking human language, AI often puts out false information and cannot *think*. Another downside to its human-like communication is that many see it as a "friend" to talk to. With an ongoing crisis in mental health, and 11 percent of recently polled Altamont students reporting feeling unhappy, AI therapy is a relevant but fraught topic. According to that *Acta Diurna* poll, 68 percent of student respondents regularly use AI, while 10 percent report using AI as a conversation partner or for assistance with mental health. People everywhere are increasingly turning to a variety of AI chatbots to discuss their problems, sparking concern and debate among experts.



Now for some basic background on AI – what it is and what it *isn't* – before we get to *our* expert:
The initial purpose of AI was to gather human input and generate human-sounding output. And, as anyone who's tangled with ridiculous auto-"corrected" text knows, the output can be deceptive or outright wrong. Many mistakenly believe that AI can *think* about a multitude of human problems, including mental health issues. Another issue with AI's use in therapy is its sycophantic tendencies. According to a Cornell University study, "AI affirms users' actions 50 percent more than humans do." When someone is in a vulnerable emotional state, constant affirmation can be seductive but extremely harmful. According to a New York Times article, "One woman, who had no history of mental illness, asked ChatGPT for advice on a major purchase she had been fretting about. After days of the bot validating her worries, she became convinced that businesses were colluding to have her investigated by the government."

Those are just a few instances of AI not helping people's mental state. Lauren Garrett, head of student assistance counseling, recently shared her expert perspective with *The Acta Diurna*.

What are your thoughts on AI therapy?

In my opinion, AI therapy is not true therapy. The healing that occurs in therapy is about human connection, not simply tools or advice as may be given through interactions with AI. AI therapy is missing an essential component to successful therapy.

What consequences do you see coming because of AI therapy in the coming years?

While using AI as a therapy tool probably has some benefits (ease of use, it's free), it also has a lot of dangers. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists go through years of training and internships to receive the qualifications they practice with. While AI can search the internet for answers, research, diagnoses, suggestions, etc., it does not have the same training, interpersonal skills, or ability to recognize human need. Additionally, a crucial part of a mental health provider's job is to provide redirection and reframing. This may occur simply when a client does not see the discrepancies in what they are sharing, or much more seriously, it may happen when a client is engaging in dangerous behavioral or thought patterns. Because AI is designed to affirm what the user is looking for, AI does not offer this same skill. AI is often "yes, and-ing" the user, leading them deeper into flawed thinking patterns, rather than helping them find a way out of them. Along these same lines, mental health providers may often say that our goal is to "work ourselves out of a job," meaning that if we have done our job well, you eventually do not need us anymore. As a platform, AI wants you to keep coming back over and over again. So, AI therapy is not working with the goal of helping you feel better; it is working to give you the answers that will keep you coming back.

Do you see it as harmful to a child's development to replace human help and connection with artificial intelligence?

Yes, for a plethora of reasons. Humans are wired for in-person connection. We need connection and community to be healthy. As I stated before, part of the healing that occurs in therapy, occurs *because* of that face-to-face connection. To know a real person cares for you can be transformational. Facial expressions, gestures, silence, and shared space all convey meaning beyond words. These human interactions strengthen empathy and understanding in ways that are harder to replicate without physical presence. AI does not provide connection. In fact, it creates a way to remain disconnected from those around you. And at the end of the day, AI cannot provide empathy and connection as a real person can.

Do you think AI could ever be used as a helpful tool in therapy?

Sure. AI might be able to help a therapist create an activity for a client to complete outside of session to further their progress. Or a therapist may suggest that a client use it as a thinking partner about some sort of idea in between sessions. However, if AI is being used as a therapeutic tool, I feel strongly that it should be used *in conjunction* with, not instead of, a trained mental health professional.