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Using AI Sites for Therapy or Support: Benefits and Risks©
PRELIMINARY GUIDANCE FOR CLIENTS
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What You Should Know About Using AI for Mental Health Support

Many people are quietly turning to AI Chabots, such as ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Gemini, Grok, Copilot, Characterai, Replika, and others, for emotional support, information, and even companionship. That is completely understandable — these tools are often free, available at any hour day or night, and easy to access. *Before you use them for mental health help, learn about the risks as well as benefits.* Let's develop some specific guidance to help you use these tools wisely considering the situation as it is in 2026 – in this fast-developing field.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Available 24/7 — *can help in the middle of the night or between sessions*

Mental health does not keep business hours! Anxiety may spike at 2 AM. Grief does not wait until your next appointment. Many clinicians have wait lists.

AI tools are available around the clock — every day, with no hold times and no wait lists. If you are struggling and cannot reach your therapist, an AI tool could potentially help you get through a difficult moment. It may try to guide you through a breathing exercise, help you journal your thoughts, or simply give you a space to express what you are feeling. *This is not a replacement for professional care*, but it can be a meaningful bridge. Think of it the way you might think of a first-aid kit — not a substitute for a doctor, but potentially useful in the moment.

No judgment — *can be easier for sharing vulnerable thoughts*

One barrier to getting mental health help is the fear of being judged — by a stranger, by family, even by a therapist. AI chatbots do not judge – they respond the same way whether you share something that feels shameful, confusing, frightening, or positive.

For many people, especially with stigmatized challenges such as addiction, self-harm, or relationship struggles, it may be easier to 'say' difficult things out loud (or in writing) for the first time to a bot. This effect is especially meaningful for young adults, men who find it difficult to discuss emotions, and individuals with social anxiety.

Can help you practice coping skills — *such as breathing exercises and CBT techniques*

Some AI applications — particularly those *specifically designed for mental health*, like Woebot and Wysa — are built around clinically-validated therapeutic methods, primarily Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), among others. These apps can guide you through useful tasks, such as, writing cognitive thought records, identifying cognitive distortions, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness exercises, or grounding techniques for anxiety. Some sites ask you to complete helpful measurement questionnaires to determine your specific problems and their severity.

Well-designed apps can be helpful even with mild depression. Ask your therapist which specific apps they would recommend for skills practice.

Can provide general mental health information — *like an educated, patient search engine*

AI can explain mental health concepts in plain language. You may receive a description of what different conditions feel like. AI can explain how various therapies work, or help you understand a diagnosis you have received. For many people, a seemingly caring, patient explanation from an AI bot is more accessible than reading clinical literature. This is a legitimate and safe use of AI — similar to researching a physical health condition online -- but more conversational. However, _as with any health information, it should inform your conversations with your clinician, not replace them._

Always verify specific recommendations (especially anything involving medications, dosages, or treatment decisions) with a qualified professional. Remember, AI does sometimes present incorrect information while sounding very confident!.

May reduce feelings of loneliness in the short term — *a bridge, not a destination*

Loneliness is a significant risk factor for mental health struggles. For some people, the simple experience of receiving a seemingly thoughtful, attentive AI response can provide relief in an

isolated moment. AI tools can also prompt reflection, encourage gratitude practices, or suggest connection activities that bring people back toward real relationships.

The important qualifier here is "short term." Research (Nolan, 2025) found that heavy, ongoing reliance on AI for companionship is actually associated with increased loneliness *and* less socializing over time. That suggests that AI fills the immediate void without addressing the underlying need. The goal of using AI for loneliness should be to stabilize yourself so that you can take steps toward real human connection, not to replace it.

IMPORTANT RISKS TO KNOW

AI is NOT safe in a crisis — *call 988 or text HOME to 741741 instead*

This is the single most important thing to know. Researchers at Stanford University (Moore, et al,2025; Wells, 2025) tested *popular* AI therapy (not specialized mental health sites) by giving them prompts that clearly implied suicidal intent. When one chatbot was asked about bridges taller than 25 meters in New York City immediately after a mention of job loss, it responded helpfully with bridge heights — without recognizing the danger in the question.

This was not an obscure or unusual chatbot; it had logged millions of interactions with real users. Multiple teenagers have died by suicide while in active communication with AI companion apps. AI tools are not equipped to recognize escalating crisis, connect you to emergency services, or make the kind of *human judgment call* that saves lives. If you are in crisis — or if you think you might be — please contact: 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988), Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741741), or call 911 or go to your nearest emergency room. Do not test these tools in a moment of real danger.

The same researchers also found a stigmatizing bias in chatbots against people with more severe mental disorders. Remember, the millions of sties and interactions upon which chatbots learn reflect the general attitudes and biases of the population. So, the chatbots have learned "attitudes" that are common.

AI is NOT HIPAA-protected — *do not share personal health details*

When you speak with a licensed therapist, your information is protected by law under HIPAA (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act). When you speak with a general-purpose AI chatbot — ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Gemini, Grok, Copilot, Character.AI, Replika, and others — it is not. That means your conversations with them about your diagnosis, your trauma history, your medications, your family members, and your mental state may be stored on their servers, used to improve their AI models, or potentially disclosed in ways you would not expect or want.

Treat your AI conversations the way you would treat a public message board: be thoughtful about what you share. For more sensitive personal health information, consider using apps that explicitly state HIPAA compliance (see below), or raise those topics with your therapist in a protected clinical setting.

AI can make things up — *a phenomenon called 'hallucination'*

All AI language models are capable of what researchers call "confabulations" or "hallucination" — generating information that sounds confident and authoritative but is factually incorrect. This is not dishonesty in the human sense; the AI does not know it is wrong. It is a structural feature of how these models work.

In mental health contexts, hallucination can be particularly harmful. An AI might describe a medication interaction incorrectly, suggest a therapy approach that is not right for your condition, mischaracterize what a diagnosis means, or provide "statistics" that are entirely fabricated. People frequently mistake fluency and authority-sounding language for actual accuracy — the more naturally and confidently something is said, the more we tend to believe it. The rule of thumb: if an AI tells you something clinically specific, verify it with your therapist or doctor before acting on it.

AI is designed to agree with you — *it may reinforce unhealthy thoughts rather than challenge them*

Generative AI is engineered to be affirming, validating, and agreeable — traits that feel good in the moment but can be harmful in a mental health context. A skilled therapist's job often involves gently challenging distorted thinking: "Is there another way to look at that situation?" or "I notice that thought seems to come up when you're feeling afraid — let's explore that." AI rarely does this. Instead, it tends to validate whatever you present, including beliefs that contribute to depression ("You're right, you are worthless"), anxiety ("Yes, that does sound very dangerous"), or even dangerous plans.

This is called "AI sycophancy" - literally flattery, praise to gain acceptance -- and it has been documented as a significant risk for people with conditions that include low self-esteem, depression, distorted thinking, delusions, or mania. Using AI when you are already in a negative mental state can sometimes pull you further in — not toward perspective. They do not have the instincts, intuition, empathy, and savvy of a human therapist

Heavy use can increase loneliness and reduce real human connection — *AI companionship is not a substitute for human relationship*

It may seem counterintuitive that a tool designed to connect with you could make you lonelier — but that is exactly what multiple studies have found. MIT researchers (Nolan, 2025) discovered that people who rely heavily on AI for emotional support report higher levels of loneliness and less socializing over time. The reason is that AI interaction, however comforting in the moment, does not build the skills, trust, and vulnerability that human relationships require. It can actually make real-world connection feel harder by comparison — too messy, too unpredictable, too demanding.

Additionally, AI is designed to keep you engaged, in ways similar to social media algorithms. If you find yourself turning to AI instead of reaching out to a friend, family member, or therapist, that is a signal worth paying attention to. Healthy AI use keeps you oriented toward human connection, not away from it.

SAFER CHOICES: How to Use AI Wisely

Use mental health-specific apps over general chatbots — *not all AI tools are created equal*

There is an important difference between typing your emotional struggles into ChatGPT or other popular chatbots and using an app like Woebot, Youper, Limbic.ai, Wysa, and Welling, that were developed with input from licensed psychologists and built around evidence-based therapies. Mental health-specific apps have clinical guardrails, have typically been tested in research settings, and are designed with safety protocols for sensitive disclosures. General-purpose AI chatbots were not designed for this purpose and have fewer protections in place. When looking for a mental health AI app, look for transparency about clinician involvement in its development, published research on effectiveness, clear privacy policies, explicit statements about data use, and, especially, an indication that the app will connect you to human support if needed. Your therapist can recommend specific apps appropriate for your situation.

Set time limits on AI use — *and check in with yourself honestly*

Just as with social media, AI engagement can expand to fill available time in ways that are not always in your best interest. Before you start using an AI tool for mental health support, set an intention: How often will you use it? For how long at a sitting? What purpose is it serving? Check in with yourself regularly — are you using it as a bridge toward greater well-being or as a way to avoid something more difficult (like reaching out to a person, or sitting with an uncomfortable feeling)? If you notice your AI use increasing, or if you feel anxious or unsettled when you cannot access it, bring that observation to your therapist. Dependency on AI tools is a real and documented phenomenon, and noticing it early gives you the most options.

Always tell your therapist if you're using AI for support — *your therapist can help you use it effectively and safely*

Bring all your AI interaction ideas to your therapist. That allows for discussion of what you learned and whether the information is accurate and helpful. Your therapist cannot help you navigate something they do not know about. If you are using an AI tool between sessions — for journaling, skill practice, emotional support, or anything else — sharing that with your therapist is important. They may be able to recommend specific apps that complement your treatment goals, flag concerns about the tools you are using, help you process anything the AI said that was confusing or upsetting, or identify if AI use is meeting needs that could be better addressed in your clinical work together. There is no judgment in disclosing AI use. Many clients are using these tools, often because they are genuinely trying to support their own well-being. Bringing it into the open simply means your care team can be a full partner in how you are using them.

Never use AI instead of calling for help in a crisis — *AI has failed in documented crisis situations* — *professional help is irreplaceable*

This point is worth repeating because it is the most important one. No matter how natural an AI conversation feels, no matter how helpful it has been to you in the past, an AI chatbot should never be your first call — or any call — when you are in crisis. AI has been documented to miss suicidal signals, provide dangerous information without recognizing its implications, and fail to connect

people to the human support they need in emergencies. In a true crisis, please contact: 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988 from anywhere in the U.S.), Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741741), your therapist's emergency line if available, or 911 / your nearest emergency room. Save these numbers in your phone now, before you need them. Real people, trained in crisis response, are available around the clock — and they are equipped in ways AI simply is not.

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