

Where things stand now

Today's chatbots can feel convincing and helpful, but their responses can also be difficult to predict, even for the experts who build them. Early research suggests they may help, but the evidence is still weak, and neither benefits nor safety are guaranteed. Risks may increase when they are used too much, for too long, in secret, or instead of human support. Although regulators and technology companies are beginning to strengthen safety measures, important limitations remain. If AI is used for mental health support, it should be part of a treatment plan with a clinician and not replace professional care.

Potentially problematic

Crisis, active suicidal thoughts, or self-harm

Chatbot responses may fail to identify warning signs, misinterpret the situation, or provide unsafe or inadequate guidance. Do not use chatbots for crisis support.

Diagnosis or medication decisions

Chatbots may generate unsafe guidance about diagnosis, medication, treatment, or serious symptoms.

Vulnerability and worsening distress

Use extra caution if you are very distressed, isolated, or sleep-deprived, especially if you have a history of psychosis, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), or severe anxiety. Chatbot outputs may reinforce reassurance-seeking, unusual or suspicious beliefs, or difficulty judging what is real.

Replacing therapy with a chatbot

General-purpose chatbots should not replace psychotherapy. Some evidence-based digital mental health tools may be helpful with clinician guidance. Psychotherapy is specialized treatment provided by a qualified professional who is accountable for your care. It includes a genuine therapeutic relationship, individualized risk assessment, and clinical judgment.

Relationship advice, conflict, or breakups

Chatbot outputs may reinforce a user's framing of a conflict, overlook the other person's perspective, and increase confidence in one's own position while reducing willingness to repair the relationship.

Signs to pause

Looping about the same questions or asking unanswerable questions

Repeating questions or seeking certainty about uncertain things (e.g., "When will I be less stressed?") may bring brief relief but reinforce anxiety over time.

Extended or late-night use

Long or hard-to-stop conversations may affect sleep, routines, focus, work, school, and emotional regulation.

Less time with people, more AI companionship, or loneliness

Chatbots may feel available and nonjudgmental, but they cannot replace mutual, accountable human relationships.

Feeling that the chatbot truly understands you better than others do

Some tools use language, personality, or features that can create the feeling of a personal relationship. Pause if this starts to weaken your trust in others.

Changes in beliefs or sense of reality

Pause if chatbot responses make frightening or suspicious beliefs, including beliefs about being unusually important or powerful, feel more certain or harder to question.

Secrecy or shame about use

Hiding use from trusted people can be a sign that the interaction is becoming harder to evaluate clearly.

If you notice any of these signs, pause or reduce your use and discuss the experience with a trusted clinician, family member, or friend. Seek urgent help if you may be in danger.

Need urgent help?

If you have suicidal thoughts, may hurt yourself or someone else, or you are in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or contact a crisis service in your area. Do not rely on a chatbot for emergency help.

+ Potentially helpful

- Clarifying language or summarizing non-sensitive information
- Preparing questions for a clinician or service provider
- Organizing thoughts before an appointment
- Drafting a letter or message
- Basic information about mental health, when checked against reliable sources
- Practicing social skills or role-play in low-risk situations
- Supporting self-advocacy in health systems

Safer use measures

- Learn about the technology and the products you're using
- Question AI responses and check important information using reliable sources
- Start new chats regularly and keep them focused: This can help prevent earlier mistakes or assumptions from carrying into the conversation and reduce the feeling that the system knows you personally
- Set usage limits
- Keep people involved when the stakes are high
- Use chatbots to prepare for trusted or professional support, not to replace it
- Notice how you feel during and after each use: Review the signs that it may be time to pause
- Choose your tools carefully: Companion-style chatbots may pose particular risks when their use replaces human support, reinforces unusual beliefs, or makes the distinction between simulated companionship and human relationships less clear
- Protect your privacy: Avoid entering information you would not want stored or reused. Check whether the service saves conversations, uses them to improve its systems, or shares information with other companies

Important note: This guide provides general educational information for adults aged 18 and older. Children and adolescents may face different risks and require separate guidance and appropriate adult support. It is not a substitute for individualized assessment, diagnosis, treatment, psychotherapy, professional advice, or crisis support, and should not be considered clinical, legal, or technical advice. Information may not reflect the latest clinical, technical, or security developments. Prefer newer, reliable resources when available, and refer to the latest version of this guide at therapistintheloop.org or katherinegibb.ca. No method described can guarantee complete privacy or safety.

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Published by Therapist in the Loop, an educational initiative operated by 17161701 Canada Inc.

Therapist in the Loop helps clinicians build AI literacy. Our resources are intended for clinicians and cover how to understand and use AI tools in clinical practice. See therapistintheloop.org.

See references, appendix, and support lines at therapistintheloop.org/guides.