



Using AI Chatbots for Emotional Support: What Therapy Offers That AI Can't

An explainer and "Human vs. AI Support" comparison sheet · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- Many people now turn to AI chatbots to talk through feelings, especially late at night.
- AI can be useful for some things, like learning coping skills or organizing thoughts.
- It isn't a replacement for a trained, accountable human professional, especially for complex or serious concerns.

Why people turn to AI

AI chatbots are available 24/7, free or low-cost, and never seem tired or judgmental. For someone who feels alone, ashamed, or unsure where to start, typing to a chatbot can feel easier than talking to a person. Those reasons make complete sense.

At the same time, it's worth understanding what AI can and can't offer, so you can use it wisely.

What AI can be helpful for

- Learning about mental health topics in plain language
- Practising coping skills, such as breathing exercises or reframing thoughts
- Organizing your thoughts before a hard conversation or therapy session
- Journaling prompts and reflection
- Finding information about where to get professional help

Where AI falls short

- **No real relationship.** Healing often happens through a trusting relationship with someone who knows you over time.
- **No clinical judgment or accountability.** AI isn't a regulated professional and isn't responsible for your care.
- **It can agree too easily.** Chatbots are often designed to be agreeable, which can reinforce unhelpful beliefs instead of gently challenging them.
- **It may miss risk.** AI can misread or miss signs of crisis.

- **Privacy is different.** Conversations may be stored or used by the company, and aren't protected in the same way as health records.

What the research says

The relationship between client and therapist, known as the therapeutic alliance, is one of the most consistent predictors of good outcomes across therapy approaches (Flückiger et al., 2018).

In Ontario, Registered Psychotherapists are regulated by the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO), and personal health information is protected under the Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA).

Research on AI mental health tools is growing quickly but is still early, and most tools have not been tested for complex conditions or crisis situations.

Tool: Human vs. AI Support Comparison Sheet

	AI chatbot	Registered therapist
Availability	Any time, instantly	Scheduled sessions, often same-week
Cost	Often free or low-cost	Fee-based; often covered by workplace benefits
Knows your history over time	Limited or none	Yes, builds a full picture of you
Reads body language and tone	No	Yes
Training and regulation	None; not a professional	Graduate training; regulated (e.g., CRPO)
Accountable for your care	No	Yes, to a regulatory college and ethics code
Challenges unhelpful patterns	May agree too readily	Yes, with care and skill
Responds to crisis	Unreliable	Trained in risk assessment and safety planning
Privacy protections	Depends on the company's policies	Protected by law (e.g., PHIPA in Ontario)
Best used for	Information, skill practice, reflection	Healing, complex concerns, lasting change

Questions to ask yourself

What do I usually turn to AI for?

After those conversations, do I feel better, the same, or more stuck?

Is there something I'm avoiding saying to a real person?

What would I want from a human therapist that AI can't give me?

Using AI safely

- Avoid sharing identifying details or sensitive health information.
- Treat responses as general information, not professional advice.
- Notice if you're relying on AI instead of people in your life.
- Never rely on AI in a crisis. Call or text 9-8-8 or call 911.

When to reach out for support

If you find yourself turning to AI to cope with ongoing distress, it may be a sign you deserve more support. A therapist can offer what a chatbot can't: a real relationship, professional judgment, and care that's accountable to you.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Flückiger, C., Del Re, A. C., Wampold, B. E., & Horvath, A. O. (2018). The alliance in adult psychotherapy: A meta-analytic synthesis. *Psychotherapy*, 55(4), 316–340.

Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004, S.O. 2004, c. 3, Sched. A (Ontario).

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