Humans vs AI

Attitudes toward human therapists vs artificial intelligence when working on mental health.

By Trevor Eddolls

Which would you rather do: speak to a therapist that was a real person, or speak to an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot? As I'm sure you know, an AI chatbot is a software program that uses artificial intelligence to simulate human-like conversations with users.

While you're thinking about the answer, let's look at the results from a YouGov survey carried out earlier this year. The self-serve poll had answers from 1,500 UK-based adults and found that 19 percent were familiar with applications that use AI chatbots to offer mental health support.

The survey also found that 18-to-24-year-old Britons (31 percent) are the most comfortable talking about mental health concerns with a confidential AI chatbot. 48 percent of Britons who are familiar with AI chatbots said that ease of access and availability was one of the most appealing things about AI chatbots offering mental health services. 33 percent of people familiar with AI chatbots liked the idea of non-judgmental interactions such applications offer. However, potential misdiagnoses were a top concern among those familiar with AI mental health chatbots (64 percent). Out of those people familiar with AI mental health chatbots, only 18 percent said that they would find it preferable for such bot-based applications to exist as standalone platforms. 55 percent of Britons who are familiar with AI chatbots offering mental health services would prefer it if such chatbots were integrated into existing services.

Just a fifth of all polled respondents say they would be comfortable sharing their mental health concerns with an AI chatbot instead of a human therapist, with 78 percent of Britons above the age of 55 and 70 percent of 40-to-54-year-olds saying that they would be uncomfortable talking about their mental health to an AI chatbot as opposed to a human therapist.

It's worth noting that a similar survey held in the USA found that people were more familiar and more comfortable with AIs.

A survey conducted on behalf of The University of Law (ULaw) found that there was a loneliness epidemic among 25-34-year-olds. The survey also found that more than one in three (36 percent) UK adults would prefer to tell AI their problems rather than a loved one. Two-thirds (66 percent) of younger people (25-34-year-olds) would prefer to talk about their feelings with an AI than a loved one. 39 percent of all respondents agreed that if they could access mental health support through an AI chatbot they would, whereas 70 percent of those aged 25-34-years-old said they would access mental health support through AI software if they could.

Dr Julie Prescott, Head of Psychology at ULaw, comments: "There's a growing body of evidence that suggests advances in technology could play a pivotal role in supporting people's mental wellbeing. In a 2021 study, I and others found that groups on social media such as Facebook are viewed by users as useful online resources to gain emotional support and a sense of community".

"The rise of AI feels very much like an evolution of this online support, providing users with a space to discuss their feelings and emotions with a sense of anonymity, acting in a sense like an online journal."

Looking back to a survey in 2020 carried out by Oracle and Workplace Intelligence of more than 12,000 employees, managers, HR leaders, and C-level executives across 11 countries, which found that 60 percent of UK-based respondents were happy to use AI to help their mental health at work. The figure globally was higher at 75 percent. For UK respondents, 77 percent wanted their employer to provide more technology to support their mental health, and 69 percent were open to having a robot therapist.

The survey also found that only 18 percent of people would prefer humans over robots to support their mental health because they believe robots provide a judgement-free zone (34 percent), an unbiased outlet to share problems (30 percent), and quick answers to health-related questions (29 percent). 68 percent of people would prefer to talk to a robot over their manager about stress and anxiety at work, and 80 percent of people are open to having a robot as a therapist or counsellor. 75 percent said AI has helped their mental health at work. The top benefits noted were providing the information needed to do their job more effectively (31 percent), automating tasks and decreasing workload to prevent burnout (27 percent), and reducing stress by helping to prioritize tasks (27 percent). AI has also helped the majority (51 percent) of workers shorten their working week and allowed them to take longer vacations (51 percent). Over half of respondents say AI technology increases employee productivity (63 percent), improves job satisfaction (54 percent), and improves overall well-being (52 percent).

Let's have a quick look at the wider world of AI:

- Firstly, AI can process and analyse vast amounts of data quickly and accurately. It's used in areas such as financial analysis, healthcare research, and consumer behaviour.

- AI algorithms can provide personalized content and product recommendations based on user data on TV and music platforms as well shopping sites.

- Things like ChatGPT can generate written content, music, and art that is often indistinguishable from human-created works.

- AI-powered systems can recognize and categorize images. This can be used with facial recognition, medical imaging, and security.

- AI systems transcribe and interpret speech accurately, even in noisy environments.

- AI is being used in cyberattacks and can also be used for cyber security by monitoring networks, detecting threats, and responding to security incidents.

- AI can translate text and speech between multiple languages. There are real-time translators like Google Translate. There are document translators that can preserve the context and nuances of the original text. There's also cultural customization, which is a feature in Microsoft's Translator.

- AI-driven chatbots and virtual assistants provide efficient and consistent customer support. They are always available and can handle high volumes.

- AIs are used in predictive maintenance, identifying when machinery and equipment are likely to fail, preventing downtime and saving costs.

- AI systems can detect fraudulent activities more efficiently by analysing transaction patterns and identifying anomalies.

- AI can be used in self-driving cars to navigate, recognize obstacles, and make real-time decisions.

- In financial trading, AI algorithms analyse market data and execute trades with precision.

- AI optimizes supply chains by predicting demand, managing inventory, and ensuring timely deliveries.

- AI enhances climate models, predicting weather patterns and assessing the impacts of climate change more accurately.

- AI streamlines recruitment and human resources management by automating processes and providing insights.

- AI-powered educational platforms offer personalized learning experiences and adapt to each student's needs.

- AI-controlled robots assist in performing precise and minimally invasive surgeries, improving patient outcomes.

- AI optimizes farming practices by analysing soil conditions, predicting crop yields, and managing resources efficiently.

- AI generates engaging storylines, interactive games, and virtual reality experiences that captivate audiences.

- AI aids in planning and executing space missions, analysing data from space telescopes, and controlling robots on other planets.

Artificial Intelligence can do all those things as well as helping individuals with their mental health. Personally, if I had a medical scan, I would prefer an AI to read the results. Do hypnotherapists need to worry about losing their jobs to AI? The results would indicate that younger people are happier working with AI than older people, so there's still plenty of people around who are looking for a human therapist. Is there a future in being a hypnotherapist? That all depends on how good Hypnotherapy AI is when it's used. If it gets a bad reputation, then people will seek out a human therapist. If it's viewed as being better than humans, then, perhaps, hypnotherapists need to work on their ease of access and availability, as well as being non-judgmental. And maybe those characteristics should be featured heavily on therapists' websites and social media posts to ensure that potential customers are aware of them.

After all, would you prefer to work with AI or a human therapist when discussing your mental health?

References:

https://business.yougov.com/content/49481-uk-trials-ai-therapy
https://www.law.ac.uk/about/press-releases/millennials-share-problems-with-ai/
https://workplaceinsight.net/people-with-mental-health-would-prefer-a-robot-therapist-to-a-human/
https://www.simplilearn.com/artificial-intelligence-vs-human-intelligence-article
https://medium.com/@kombib/21-things-ai-can-do-better-than-humans-0a0cf389244f

Just a fifth of all polled respondents say they would be comfortable sharing their mental health concerns with an AI chatbot instead of a human therapist.

Younger people are happier working with AI than older people.

About the writer:
Trevor was made a Fellow of the AfSFH in 2022 for his work to spread the word about SFH as a therapist, Supervisor, CPD provider, blogger, writer and podcaster, and for his long-standing contribution to the AfSFH Committee.