



Fruit from the Gold Tree: Articles and Insights

AI and Your Mental Health: Handle with Care

Written by Gold Tree Therapy's Registered Psychologist, Goldie Hamilton, 23rd December 2025

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly changing many aspects of our lives, and mental health support is no exception. From AI chatbots offering instant advice to apps designed to monitor wellbeing, AI is becoming increasingly present in how we think about and manage our mental health. This brings both exciting possibilities and important concerns. This article explores the potential risks of using AI for mental health and offers guidelines to help you engage safely and responsibly.

AI in Mental Health

At its core, AI involves developing computer systems that mimic human cognitive functions like learning and problem-solving. In mental health, this often takes the form of chatbots – computer programs designed to simulate conversation – or apps that use complex algorithms to offer advice and monitor your wellbeing.

Growing Concerns

While AI offers promising breakthroughs, and some believe in the potential of AI therapists ([source](#)), there's growing concern about AI use in mental health. Stanford University research has raised important questions about the safety and effectiveness of AI mental health support ([source](#)). Parents of individuals who took their own life have claimed that interactions with AI chatbots contributed to their tragic deaths ([source](#) and [source](#)). Similar concerns have been reported by The Guardian ([source](#)), the American Psychological Association ([source](#)), and mental health professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand ([source](#) and [source](#)), emphasising the need for careful consideration by those providing and using AI services.

Like a Knife - Handle with Care

AI is a tool that can be used for good or ill. Think of it like a knife. In the right hands, a knife is invaluable – from preparing food to performing delicate medical procedures. But in the wrong hands, or used without caution, knives can be dangerous. The same is true of AI. It has the potential to be a valuable resource for wellbeing, but also carries risks, especially because seeking support for mental health inherently means we may be more vulnerable.

The Human Touch: Benefits of a Registered Mental Health Professional

One of the most profound differences between AI and mental health professionals is the deeply human connection forged in therapy, and the processes this supports. Therapists ask thoughtful questions to truly understand your unique needs and adjust their support to your preferences and capacity. Therapy isn't about clients passively receiving information; it's about gaining insight into your human experience, feeling understood by another human being, and taking that journey with tailored guidance. This therapeutic relationship – which is deeply human and therefore something AI simply cannot replicate – is central to progress with mental health insight, healing, and growth. Working deeply and long-term with clients with a range of needs, I have seen firsthand how essential the therapeutic relationship is for effective therapy. When people experience the illusion of such a relationship with AI, this can be a cause for concern and may increase their distress, isolation, and vulnerability.

The genuine human connection between therapists and their clients provides a foundation for other important elements of therapy, such as “unconditional positive regard”. Therapists are ethically and professionally obligated to create a safe, non-judgemental space where you can be your authentic self. Exploring vulnerable feelings, like shame or embarrassment, and being met with acceptance by another human being can be profoundly healing. It's precisely because a therapist could judge you, but doesn't, that this experience is so transformative. AI can simulate empathy, but it cannot offer the human acceptance that fosters true healing and hope.

Another advantage of a skilled therapist is their ability to discern what isn't being said and gently guide you to explore underlying issues at a healing pace, even those you may be unaware of or hesitant to address. This is crucial because often the things we don't think about can significantly impact our wellbeing. AI, limited to explicitly shared information, misses

these vital nuances and may also overlook subtle but important warning signs that have not been directly communicated.

Finally, it's important to consider how AI's strengths in other contexts may not generalise to mental health support. For example, while AI's constant availability can seem appealing, it can hinder long-term resilience. Over-reliance on AI for guidance can impair problem-solving and self-confidence. Therapy, on the other hand, provides a balance of support and empowerment, helping you develop the tools you need to thrive independently.

Risks of AI Support for Mental Health

Certain individuals should be extra cautious about turning to AI for support. People with the following mental health experiences, among others, are vulnerable to a range of risks:

- Those with anxiety may find that AI's constant engagement exacerbates rumination.
- Individuals with OCD can get caught in cycles of compulsive reassurance-seeking.
- People experiencing depression might have their negative perspectives reinforced and feel more isolated.
- Those with suicidal thoughts are particularly vulnerable, as AI validation can be dangerous.
- Individuals experiencing psychosis may have their delusions worsened by AI.
- People with low confidence might become overly reliant on AI approval, further reducing their confidence in their own perspectives and abilities.
- Young people, still developing their understanding of themselves and the world, may be more susceptible to harmful advice.

Guidelines for Safe Engagement

Seeking support for your mental health is an empowered step. Before turning to AI, ask yourself these important questions to ensure you're using it safely and effectively.

1. Could AI's mental health advice be unhelpful without me knowing it?

Engage with AI only on topics where you feel confident in your ability to judge the quality of support and trust yourself not to proceed with poor advice. If you have a good understanding of your needs and can critically

evaluate AI's suggestions, you're less likely to be led astray. If you're not in a position to judge the appropriateness of AI's support, it may be wiser to seek support from a well-trained registered mental health professional.

2. **Am I seeking validation or reassurance about something personal?** If you're primarily seeking validation or reassurance about something personal, engaging with AI may cause more harm than good. For example, as a psychologist working with clients with OCD, I have seen how AI can validate obsessions and reinforce compulsions.
3. **Does AI support appeal because I'm anxious about social interactions?** If you find yourself turning to AI because of difficulty socialising and opening up to the humans in your life, then it's worth considering how this may worsen your struggles. Like any skill, practice makes it easier and builds confidence. Choosing to turn to AI will likely make you feel more disconnected from people around you and reduce your ability to engage and connect with other humans in ways that are known to enhance our mental health.
4. **Am I turning to AI because I fear being judged by a therapist?** It's understandable to feel apprehensive about opening up to a therapist, but working through this is one of the things that can make therapy so powerful. Skilled therapists create a safe space where you can explore deep fears and vulnerabilities without judgement. Some of my clients have shared experiences that trigger their sense of shame, and working through these feelings in therapy has been a key step in their healing journey. I recommend taking the time to find a therapist you have good reason to trust, whether through word-of-mouth or a reputable registration (such as with the New Zealand Psychologists Board).
5. **Have I become dependent on AI mental health support?** It's important to be aware of the potential risks of regular, deeply personal interactions with AI. Turning to AI too often, and the illusion of a genuine relationship, can be harmful in a range of ways. If you find yourself relying on AI support, it may be helpful to discuss with a therapist AI's role in your life and whether this is a form and frequency of support that can safely and effectively meet your needs. If you don't have access to a therapist, you may wish to discuss alternative supports with your GP, local community centre, or [free helpline](#).
6. **Has my wellbeing deteriorated while engaging with AI for mental health?** It's essential to monitor your overall wellbeing while using AI. This can be difficult when we're vulnerable and perhaps not seeing ourselves or our life as clearly. It can therefore be preferable to engage with a therapist alongside AI support, to reflect on any AI content that resonates

strongly or any mental health changes. Asking family or friends if they've noticed differences in your mood, behaviours, or relationships while you've been engaging with AI may also help you identify its impact and safeguard your wellbeing.

If you found yourself answering “yes” to any of these six questions, it may be best to reduce or discontinue your engagement with AI and connect with a professional for tailored support.

Conclusion

AI offers exciting possibilities for mental health support, but it's essential to approach it with caution and awareness. Like a knife, AI can be a valuable tool, but it's not a substitute for the expertise and human connection offered by a registered mental health professional, especially when you're feeling vulnerable and in need of deeper support. Each person's journey is unique and important, and the conversation around AI and mental health is just beginning and will continue to evolve. While it is helpful to have options, it's vital that we protect vulnerable populations and engage with support that truly guides us towards greater mental health and wellbeing.



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