

The (artificial intelligence) therapist can see you now

Warm-up question: Have you ever used a chatbot or AI tool for help or information? Would you trust one to help with your mental health?

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AILS CHANG, HOST:

Therapy is one of the new frontiers for artificial intelligence. A number of AI bots already on the market claim to offer mental health care, but some have **dubious** results or have even led people to self-harm. A recent study, however, suggests that given the right kind of training, AI therapy could be as effective as or even better than human therapists in providing mental health care. NPR's Katia Riddle reports.

KATIA RIDDLE, BYLINE: There just aren't **enough** mental health professionals **to go around**. Nick Jacobson is a **clinical psychologist** and one of the researchers at Dartmouth College who worked on this project.

NICK JACOBSON: I think one of the things that unfortunately doesn't **scale** super well is humans.

RIDDLE: For every 340 people in the U.S., there is just one mental health clinician. Jacobson and his colleagues thought, since we can't manufacture more human therapists, why not train an AI bot in the best therapeutic practices? Fast-forward to today - after five years of work, they published the results of the first **randomized clinical trial** for an AI Therabot in the New England Journal of Medicine.

JACOBSON: The effects that we see in each of our outcomes strongly mirror what you would see in the - like, the best evidence-based trials of psychotherapy studies, with folks giving a **gold-standard** dose of the best treatment we have available.

RIDDLE: These researchers gathered a group of roughly 200 people who had **diagnosable** conditions like depression and anxiety or were at risk of developing eating disorders. Half of them worked with AI therapy bots. Compared to those that did not receive treatment, they showed significant improvement.

JACOBSON: So people were really developing this strong relationship with it, an ability to trust it and feel like they can work together on their mental health symptoms.

RIDDLE: Another advantage of AI therapy - people could talk to their bots at all hours, for as long as they wanted. The American Psychological Association has **raised the alarm** recently about the dangers of using **unregulated** AI therapy bots. But the Association is pleased with this clinically trained and tested bot. Vaile Wright is the director of the Office of Healthcare Innovation at the APA.

VAILE WRIGHT: The Therabot in this study **checks** a bunch of **the boxes** that we have been hoping technologists would start to engage in. So it is rooted in psychological science, it is demonstrating **efficacy** and safety, and it's been cocreated by subject matter experts for the purposes of addressing mental health issues.

RIDDLE: This bot won't be widely available until it's tested more. Wright says with the tremendous shortage of mental health providers, human therapists need not be intimidated by their AI counterparts.

WRIGHT: I don't think humans need to be concerned that they're going to be put out of business.

RIDDLE: She says we need all the quality therapists we can get - human or bot.

Katia Riddle, NPR News.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Dubious:** Not reliable or trustworthy; something that causes doubt or suspicion.
2. **Enough (something) to go around:** Sufficient supply for everyone who needs it.
3. **Clinical psychologist:** A trained professional who treats mental and emotional disorders using talking therapies instead of medicine.
4. **Scale (v.):** To grow or expand something so it can reach or serve more people.
5. **Randomized clinical trial:** A scientific study where participants are randomly assigned to different groups to test how effective a treatment is.
6. **Gold-standard:** The best or most reliable example or method of something, often used as a benchmark in science and medicine.
7. **Diagnosable:** A condition or illness that can be clearly identified and named by a medical or mental health professional.
8. **Raise the alarm:** To warn others that something is wrong or dangerous.
9. **Unregulated:** Not controlled by laws or rules; without proper oversight.
10. **Checks the boxes:** Meets all the required standards or expectations.
11. **Efficacy:** The ability of something (like a treatment or tool) to produce the desired or intended result.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Why did researchers decide to develop an AI therapy bot?
2. What shortage does clinical psychologist Nick Jacobson describe?
3. How did the AI bot perform in the randomized clinical trial?
4. What kinds of mental health conditions did participants in the study have?
5. What warning has the American Psychological Association given about AI therapy?
6. Why is this new AI bot different from other unregulated therapy tools?

Discussion Questions:

1. Would you be open to speaking with an AI about your mental health? Why or why not?
2. In what ways could AI therapy help people in countries with limited access to mental health professionals?
3. What are the risks of using AI for personal or emotional support?
4. Should governments create rules for AI mental health tools? Why might that be important?