LONGREADS

“I tried an AI therapist – here’s why I won’t be giving up my flesh and blood psychoanalyst”

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AI-powered mental health apps are on the rise. But how do they compare to the experience of face-to-face therapy? Hannah Mackenzie puts one to the test.

My worst fears. My experience of having a baby during the pandemic. My tendency towards relentless self-criticism. These are just a few things I've discussed over the three years I've been in psychotherapy, a process that's cost me thousands of pounds (and many tears). But would I have been better off mulling it all over with a robot?

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes an increasingly powerful force in modern life, AI-powered mental health support is on the rise. People are turning to ChatGPT as a pseudo-therapist. The NHS is trialling chatbots as a way of streamlining mental health referrals, following a £36m government funding boost. Recent research by Wysa, the first AI mental health app to meet the NHS's clinical safety standards, shows that 53% of UK employees would rather use a mental health app with self-help resources than speak to a therapist. While it's hard to put an exact number on how many AI-enabled therapy apps are out there – new platforms are constantly being launched while older versions are retired – a 2021 report suggested there could already be 20,000 mental health-related self-help apps on the market in the US alone.

It's not hard to understand the appeal of AI therapy, especially when an estimated 1.2 million people are on waiting lists for NHS mental health services in England. To put it bluntly, many of us are desperate for more accessible sources of therapeutic support. "AI chatbots are available 24/7 and can be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection," observes Charlie Penwarden, a CBT therapist and the founder of mental health education platform Behaveo. But there are big questions about whether

machines ever can fulfil the role of a trained, accredited mental health professional – and some experts believe AI therapy may cause more harm than good.

“These therapy bots are part of the disease, not the cure,” says Dr Jonathan Shedler, clinical professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). He believes people generally go to therapy “because something is getting in the way of having meaningful, fulfilling, satisfying relationships with other humans”. Having an AI therapist who is “constantly on call” won’t help people work through those problems because it’s “not how human relationships work”, he continues, adding that it’s impossible to have an authentic therapeutic relationship with an app: “A chatbot is to psychotherapy, what an inanimate sex doll is to a lover.”

Having never used an inanimate sex doll nor an AI therapist, I decide to put the latter to the test. After a frustrating day at work, I download Woebot, an app billed as a “personal mental health ally that helps you get back to feeling like yourself”. Woebot allows users to track their moods and learn techniques based on interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT). While the team behind Woebot say they are “absolutely not” trying to replace traditional therapy, framing the app as an “additional resource” of support, these methods are used by many human therapists – aimed at helping people develop practical skills to cope with problems such as di cult emotions and fraught relationships.

They're distinct from the approach taken by my human therapist. She specialises in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which gives you the space to talk through whatever is on your mind to help you become more aware of certain connections and patterns. Nevertheless, I'm intrigued to see whether Woebot can offer the balance of support and challenge I get from my usual therapy.

"I wonder if I'm failing by not matching Woebot's relentless optimism"

Normally, a therapy session at the end of a bad day makes me feel freer. But Woebot and I get off to a bad start. A fan of exclamation marks, emojis and even the occasional Minions gif, she encourages me to use positive 'self-talk', tells me how "awesome" I am and builds me a power playlist to lift my spirits (Woebot is genderless, but I think of her as a woman, like my actual therapist). Her peppy conversational tone is somewhere between an upbeat maid of honour on a hen party WhatsApp group and a spinning instructor at SoulCycle, and it contrasts starkly with my own low mood.

It's jarring: one of the things I've found most impactful about seeing a human psychotherapist is the sense that all parts of me are welcome in a session,

whether I'm feeling cheerful or something less palatable. It's allowed me make peace with negative emotions I previously tried hard to avoid. But Woebot's sunny disposition makes me wonder if I'm failing by not matching her relentless optimism. When I tell her I'm quitting vaping, she tries to distract me with a joke ("How many robot life coaches does it take to change a lightbulb? One, but they must want to change"). Research published in the Journal Of Medical Internet Research in 2021 concluded that Woebot was associated with significant reductions in problematic substance use during the pandemic, but I'm struggling to imagine that joke being helpful to anyone addicted to something harder than a Pink Lemonade Elf Bar.

I do find some of Woebot's interventions useful: when I'm feeling anxious about money, she talks me through a progressive muscle relaxation exercise to release physical tension in my body, helping me relax my tight jaw and stiff shoulders so I can think more clearly. But I'm struck by the contrast between Woebot's focus on providing distraction and soothing difficult emotions, and my therapist's goal of helping me understand myself better.

This may reflect the difference between solution-focused interventions like CBT and more reflective approaches such as psychoanalysis more generally. But while a competent real-life CBT therapist will be able to read a room effectively, Woebot can't pick up on cues from my body language and tone to see how I'm responding to her suggestions.

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Fundamentally, Woebot misses a crucial component of what I’ve found most valuable and precious about therapy: the human-to-human relationship. The idea of sitting in front of another person and telling them your biggest secrets is something that fills a lot of people with dread, and for many, this adds to the appeal of AI therapy (Penwarden tells me that many prefer expressing their feelings to a chatbot because there’s less fear of being misunderstood or judged). But through therapy, I’ve shared the most shameful aspects of my psyche with a flesh and blood human – and it’s revealing myself to another human, despite the risk of judgment, that has made all the difference. With an AI, there is none of that risk, and so that powerful dynamic feels like something that can’t be replicated.

This is one of Shedler’s key arguments against AI therapy, which he sees as guided self-help rather than meaningful psychotherapy. “A person recreates their relationship patterns in the therapy relationship in ways that affect the therapist, so that it becomes possible to recognise, understand and rework those patterns,” he says. “That requires a human being and a human relationship.” That’s certainly been my experience. My human therapist has helped me notice the ways I can automatically assume she’s thinking

critically about me, and how I struggle to express anger towards her – and these are patterns that play out in my other significant relationships.

Of course, with in-person therapy usually costing from £40 to over £100 per session, it's a luxury that not everyone can afford. Surely something is better than nothing for those who are struggling? But Shedler says this is like sending a first aid kit to someone with a heart condition who can't access a cardiologist. The issue, he believes, is that not enough resources are invested in making quality psychotherapy available to all – and mental health apps do not solve that problem.

"Nobody would buy that in any other domain except mental health," he says. "And I think that's a sign of mental health stigma. There's no other area of medicine where somebody says, 'Well, this is an expensive treatment, therefore, you can't have it. But we're going to give you something else and tell you it's equivalent."

After a month with Woebot, I've softened slightly towards the little robot animation I see popping up on my smartphone screen, asking if I want to "jump back in" (accompanied by a kangaroo emoji). And I'll be using the progressive muscle relaxation technique again whenever I'm feeling tension in my body. But am I convinced that AI therapy is really the future of mental health support? No. An app can guide you through tactics to bolster your mood in the moment, but it can't provide long-term exploration capable of revolutionising your whole sense of self. Nor can it replicate the human relationship that's so essential to effective therapy.

My worry is that if people start to rely solely on therapy apps – either by choice or because they can't access any other form of support – they'll never

know what else is possible. And there'd much more to real therapy than jokes and feel-good gifs.