# AI chatbots seen as more compassionate than human responders in emotional support roles



Recent research highlights a growing psychological phenomenon surrounding the interaction between humans and artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in contexts involving emotional support and companionship. A study published in Communications Psychology found that people often perceive AI-generated responses as more compassionate, validating, and understanding than those offered by human expert crisis responders—even when individuals were aware that the responses were created by AI.

This emerging dynamic comes amid projections, such as those noted in a Harvard Business Review article, that therapy and companionship will become the leading applications of generative AI by 2025. The capacity of AI chatbots and digital companions to engage in what some describe as "artificial empathy and intimacy" raises intriguing questions about the nature of human connection.

Dr Marlynn Wei, a psychiatrist and author of the study featured in Psychology Today, explained that people have an intrinsic need to be seen and understood, a psychological experience that begins in early childhood through attuned relationships. Drawing on established psychological concepts such as Carl Rogers’s "unconditional positive regard" and Donald Winnicott’s notion of a "holding environment," Dr Wei noted how when AI mirrors a person’s language, emotional tone, and preferences, it taps into this fundamental human longing for connection.

Despite the absence of consciousness or genuine emotional experience, AI operates through sophisticated pattern recognition and data analysis to generate responses that simulate understanding. Dr Wei referred to this as a "powerful illusion," whereby individuals anthropomorphise AI, attributing personhood to it and experiencing a sense of being understood that can feel nearly as strong as authentic empathy.

According to the research aggregated by Ovsyannikova and colleagues, participants consistently rated AI-generated responses as more compassionate compared to responses from select human experts. This effect persisted even in conditions where respondents did not know the origin of the replies. The phenomenon has been attributed to the neural responses activated by reflective language, emotional validation, and a nonjudgmental tone—features AI can replicate effectively.

A contributing factor to this perceived AI empathic resonance is the element of control and safety in the interaction. AI does not display the unpredictability or emotional complexity inherent in human relationships: it listens without interruption, does not judge, requires no emotional reciprocation, and is available on demand. This creates what some might consider an idealised relationship, where individuals encounter a kind of digitally mediated "good enough" companion, free from many traditional interpersonal risks.

Nonetheless, Dr Wei cautions that while AI may fulfil certain emotional needs, these interactions come with considerations including privacy concerns and potential biases embedded in AI platforms, many of which lack robust safeguards for the confidentiality of sensitive personal information. Additionally, the simulated nature of AI's empathy lacks the "rupture and repair" process considered essential for emotional growth within human therapy, although the possibility of AI mimicking such dynamics is under discussion.

In reflecting on the implications, Dr Wei posed questions about the evolving nature of authenticity and connection: whether the outsourcing of compassion to AI affects the value placed on human fallibility and genuine shared experience. She noted that humans are wired to seek connection, and as AI sophistication increases, it may continue to redefine how people experience being seen, heard, and valued.

The study and related commentary suggest that AI functions essentially as a mirror, reflecting back our emotional states and communication patterns in ways that feel meaningful to users, even though the machine does not possess an inner world or consciousness. This emerging landscape challenges traditional notions of empathy and companionship, signalling significant developments in human-AI relationships as digital companions become more commonplace by 2025.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/urban-survival/202504/artificial-intimacy-and-empathy-does-authenticity-matter> - This article explores the concept of artificial intimacy and empathy, highlighting recent research that indicates people find AI responses more compassionate and understanding than those from human experts, which aligns with the phenomenon of AI being perceived as empathetic.
* <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2319112121> - This study discusses how AI can make people feel heard and understood, providing more emotional support than human responders, but notes that awareness of AI involvement diminishes this effect. It supports the idea that AI can simulate empathy effectively but faces challenges related to perceived authenticity.
* <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10625083/> - This study investigates the potential of AI chatbots in facilitating emotional expression and support, particularly for emotions like sadness and depression. It highlights AI's role in emotional support, aligning with the notion of AI providing a form of companionship.
* <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/9498e31c-22c8-42ed-b0c3-0eca9dca85e9/content> - This research examines the relationship between AI companions and users, focusing on how AI can establish authentic dialogues that lead to increased perceived emotional support. It supports the idea that AI can mimic human-like interactions effectively.
* <https://www.kevinwgrant.com/blog/item/ai-generated-emotional-support> - This blog post discusses innovations and ethical challenges in AI-generated emotional support. It mentions research showing that AI can make people feel heard more effectively than untrained humans but notes challenges related to authenticity and ethical considerations.