# Aristotle’s friendship test reveals why AI chatbots fall short as companions



Mark Zuckerberg's recent assertion that AI chatbots could serve as companions to combat social isolation has sparked considerable debate. He notes that the average American has fewer than three close friends but aspires to have around 15, a claim reflecting findings from a 2021 report by the Survey Center on American Life, where nearly half of Americans reported having fewer than four close friends. In proposing that AI might bridge this gap, Zuckerberg suggests we will eventually articulate the value of such interactions.

However, this notion raises fundamental questions about the role of AI in alleviating loneliness. While AI may mimic aspects of companionship, it fundamentally lacks the depth, empathy, and understanding that characterise genuine human relationships. As societal problems of loneliness and social disconnection intensify, several researchers are beginning to probe the implications of relying on AI for emotional support. As a moral philosopher, it is prudent to invoke the ancient wisdom of Aristotle to examine the nuances of friendship in this context.

In his seminal work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asserted that true friendship is essential for achieving "eudaimonia," which embodies the concepts of flourishing and well-being. He argued that friendships are not mere luxuries but instead are central to ethical existence and personal happiness. According to Aristotle, “Without friends, no one would choose to live,” indicating that the absence of friends leaves life incomplete. This sentiment resonates in contemporary studies; for instance, a 2023 Pew Research report highlights that 61 per cent of adults in the U.S. consider close friends more vital than marriage, children, or wealth for a fulfilling life.

The significance of friendship parallels shifts in societal connections. A meta-Gallup survey reveals that nearly 24% of adults globally feel lonely, with young adults aged 19 to 29 experiencing the highest rates of loneliness. This connection between the rise in loneliness and the diminishment of meaningful friendships has alarmed experts, echoing the sentiments expressed by Daniel A. Cox, who notes that the social cost of increasing loneliness is comparable to smoking 12 cigarettes daily.

Aristotle categorised friendships into three distinct types: utility, pleasure, and virtue. Friendships of utility focus on mutual benefits and are often temporary, while those of pleasure are formed around shared interests. The pinnacle of these relationships, however, is the virtuous friendship, rooted in mutual respect and commitment to each other's moral development. Aristotle describes perfect friendship as one shared between individuals of good character, where each person inspires the other to strive for personal growth.

Evaluating AI against these criteria, it becomes evident that AI chatbots, regardless of their sophistication, cannot fulfil the role of true friends. While they can provide information and engage in lighthearted interactions, AI lacks genuine concern, reciprocity, and the capacity for mutual moral development. Their programmed empathy is simply a simulation, unable to cultivate the deeper connections integral to human relationships. Unlike human friends, AI does not share the journey toward a flourishing life, nor can it engage in the ethical dilemmas that arise in genuine friendships.

The popularity of AI as a form of companionship could mask deeper societal issues. As much as these chatbots may fill temporary social voids, they ultimately stand in stark contrast to the nourishing qualities of virtuous friendships. This growing reliance on artificial companions serves as a reminder of the pressing need to cultivate real friendships, especially in an era characterised by increasing disconnection. Understanding the value of human connections in light of Aristotle's teachings invites a deeper conversation about how we might better support each other in an increasingly isolated world.

Gregg D Caruso, a scholar in ethics and management, underscores these concerns by emphasising that true friendships yield both happiness and personal growth. As we find ourselves inundated with technology, it is vital to remember that while AI can act as tools to improve our lives, they cannot replace the irreplaceable nourishment of the soul that comes from authentic human connections.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082857/aristotle-would-scoff-at-mark-zuckerbergs-suggestion-that-ai-can-solve-the-loneliness-epidemic), [[2]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/12/what-does-friendship-look-like-in-america/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082857/aristotle-would-scoff-at-mark-zuckerbergs-suggestion-that-ai-can-solve-the-loneliness-epidemic), [[3]](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/health/lonely-adults-gallup-poll-wellness/index.html/), [[4]](https://www.americansurveycenter.org/commentary/the-price-well-pay-for-our-ai-future-more-loneliness/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/12/what-does-friendship-look-like-in-america/), [[5]](https://www.happiness.hks.harvard.edu/february-2025-issue/the-friendship-recession-the-lost-art-of-connecting)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2024/08/01/aristotles-concept-friend-social-networks)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082857/aristotle-would-scoff-at-mark-zuckerbergs-suggestion-that-ai-can-solve-the-loneliness-epidemic), [[4]](https://www.americansurveycenter.org/commentary/the-price-well-pay-for-our-ai-future-more-loneliness/), [[7]](https://www.arxiv.org/abs/2407.19096)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082857/aristotle-would-scoff-at-mark-zuckerbergs-suggestion-that-ai-can-solve-the-loneliness-epidemic), [[3]](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/health/lonely-adults-gallup-poll-wellness/index.html/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://scroll.in/article/1082857/aristotle-would-scoff-at-mark-zuckerbergs-suggestion-that-ai-can-solve-the-loneliness-epidemic> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/12/what-does-friendship-look-like-in-america/> - A Pew Research Center survey reveals that 61% of U.S. adults consider having close friends essential for a fulfilling life, surpassing the importance of marriage, children, or wealth. The study also highlights that 53% of adults have between one and four close friends, while 38% have five or more. Notably, 8% report having no close friends, underscoring a significant 'friendship recession' in the U.S. over recent decades.
3. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/health/lonely-adults-gallup-poll-wellness/index.html/> - A Meta-Gallup survey indicates that nearly 24% of adults globally feel very or fairly lonely, with young adults aged 19 to 29 reporting the highest rates. The survey underscores the widespread nature of loneliness, affecting individuals across various age groups and regions, and highlights the need for effective interventions to address this growing concern.
4. <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/commentary/the-price-well-pay-for-our-ai-future-more-loneliness/> - Daniel A. Cox discusses the escalating loneliness epidemic in the U.S., noting a decline in social interactions and close friendships. He references a report from the U.S. Surgeon General, which equates the health impact of increasing loneliness to smoking 12 cigarettes daily. The article emphasizes the need for societal solutions to combat this trend.
5. <https://www.happiness.hks.harvard.edu/february-2025-issue/the-friendship-recession-the-lost-art-of-connecting> - An article from the Harvard Kennedy School's Leadership & Happiness Laboratory highlights the 'Friendship Recession' in America, where the percentage of adults without close friends has quadrupled since 1990. It discusses factors contributing to this decline, including increased mobility, time constraints, and the rise of digital interactions over face-to-face connections.
6. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2024/08/01/aristotles-concept-friend-social-networks> - This article explores Aristotle's categorization of friendships—utility, pleasure, and virtue—and examines how these concepts apply to modern social networks. It discusses the challenges of forming deep, meaningful connections in an era dominated by digital interactions and emphasizes the importance of genuine, virtuous friendships for personal well-being.
7. <https://www.arxiv.org/abs/2407.19096> - A study titled 'AI Companions Reduce Loneliness' examines the effectiveness of AI chatbots in alleviating loneliness. The research finds that AI companions can reduce loneliness comparably to human interactions and more effectively than other activities like watching videos. It also highlights that users often underestimate the benefits of AI companionship.