HOW DOES ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) AFFECT PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-EXPLORATION/THERAPEUTIC WORK? [1]

[1] *The following text is based on an interview conversation recorded by Adrienn Valent-Csányi and pre-edited (in a shortened form) for the Magnet magazine's Spring 2024 issue. ChatGPT rewrote and simplified the entire material and gave it an educational style. Finally, I revised and adjusted it to retain the chatbot's language and logic while preserving the essence of the original conversation to some extent. My personal style has wholly disappeared, though the somewhat erratic nature of the original discussion has remained. The text is illustrated using DALL-E.*

Summary

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) opens new horizons in both self-exploration and therapy, providing broader access to mental health resources for individuals. Professionals must closely monitor AI advancements to identify methods for ethically and effectively integrating AI into self-awareness and therapeutic practices. AI has the potential to function as a sensitive and empathetic conversational partner, aiding clients in processing deep emotional issues such as grief, shame, and guilt. As AI's ability to recognize and understand complex human emotions continues to evolve, ethical and legal challenges will emerge, particularly regarding data management and security. Therapists and developers are responsible for balancing the opportunities presented by AI with its potential risks, using AI to enhance therapeutic processes. While AI could increase the risk of people retreating into a virtual world, distancing themselves from reality and human relationships, it could revolutionize self-exploration, mental health, and psychotherapy when applied ethically and mindfully. It could also make these services accessible to those who previously lacked access. Thus, AI could have a significant positive impact on maintaining and improving mental health in the 21st century.

Should we fear AI?

The answer is simple: no, we should not fear it. While it is undeniable that this technology carries numerous risks, and fear is a natural human reaction to such risks, it is not necessarily the most appropriate response. Instead, I recommend a constructive, open, and collaborative approach. As individuals, our influence on more extensive processes is minimal. We do not determine the direction in which technology evolves, but we have a choice in how we respond to it.

How do people respond?

People's reactions to change can range widely from panic to enthusiasm. Simplifying the picture, some view technological advancements with worry and fear, potentially even to the extent of technophobia. Their focus is on the risks and worst-case scenarios, which is understandable given that no expert can currently guarantee the safety of the outcomes. Others enthusiastically welcome new trends and seize the opportunities already available, painting an optimistic vision of the future driven by technological progress. A third group observes developments cautiously, staying informed about potential dangers and opportunities without committing to either side. Finally, some completely ignore these changes, attempting to live as if these processes don't exist - these people may lose the most in the long run as exponential growth and global shifts continue to reshape the world.

Where does AI stand now?

AI is currently in a fascinating phase of development. Even for developers, the direction this technology will take is unpredictable. We might speculate about the end of human history, a potential third world war, or perhaps the emergence of a utopian world where AI takes over all difficult and unpleasant tasks.

Both possibilities are on the table, along with many other scenarios. The democratization of technology - its equal distribution - poses significant challenges. As new AI tools become increasingly accessible to the masses, power and wealth continue to concentrate in the hands of the few who control the necessary algorithms and infrastructure. This growing disparity could lead to tensions and provoke the drawing up of various future scenarios.

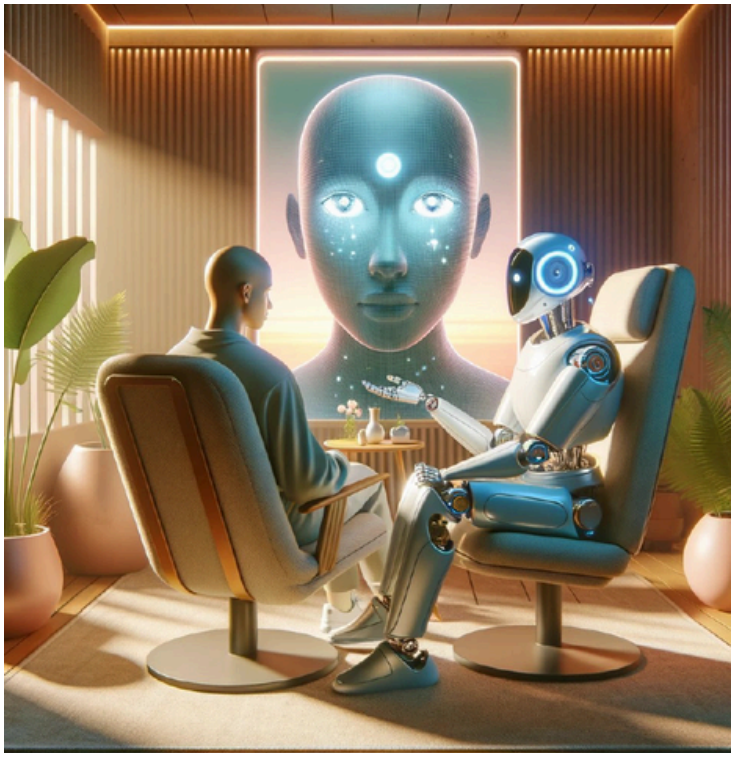
Are we entering a period of anxiety?

Human biology and evolutionary traits determine how well we adapt to changes and manage stress. However, our environment is evolving exponentially, making it difficult for our nervous systems to keep pace. This gap can lead to anxiety, whether it's about the rapid destruction of the planet, the loss of jobs to AI, or even unexpected pandemics. These anxious times are not new; for decades, it has been emphasized that the rapid changes in civilization are hard to follow. AI is just another element in this complex issue. While predicting technological progress is impossible, even tech experts struggle to answer what we should learn or develop to navigate the future. Formerly reliable career paths, like those in medicine or law, are now being questioned. Experts suggest that the key concepts of our time are self-awareness and mental health. These will be the tools that help us navigate the unknown technological future.

Can you have an honest conversation with a machine?

When AI is mentioned, many people tend to think of traditional machines, robots, or annoying customer service chatbots. In reality, however, we are talking about an incredibly complex, neural system-like hardware-software unit that learns, evolves, and becomes autonomous at an astonishing rate. Ideally, during an interaction with AI, a person is aware that there is no flesh-and-blood individual on the other side but rather an algorithm. On the other hand, it's a basic human

trait to project human characteristics, consciousness, and sensitivity onto a communication partner, even if we know they are not a living person. This awareness allows us to use interactions with a "machine" effectively to solve our problems, even when deeply human, emotional, and relational issues are at stake.



If a user is convinced of the security of their data, they might find it easier to open up to an AI than a therapist. The biases that even the most trained professionals might have do not pose a problem for AI. People might be more inclined to reveal secrets to AI that they wouldn't share elsewhere due to fear of judgment.

How much does it bother people to talk to AI instead of a real person?

In a typical therapeutic relationship, clients often need to invest some mental energy into projecting an image of an ideal, attentive, and helpful therapist onto the professional. The therapist, in turn, strives to meet these role expectations, playing a crucial role in creating harmony, trust, and a sense of safety. This co-regulation - instant feedback and synchronization from brain to brain, heart to heart, and body to body - is a fundamental need for us as social beings and is crucial in therapeutic work.

Digital communication, especially during the pandemic, has gone through significant changes. Clients in ongoing therapy or coaching sessions had to switch from in-person meetings to online interactions, where they had to perceive the therapist's presence and empathy through a screen. This transition was profound; people had to get used to talking not to a person physically present but to a screen (with a person on it). For many, the absence of the other person's physical presence was challenging, leading to uncertainty about

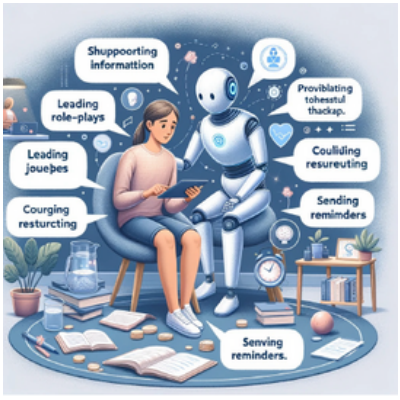
receiving full empathy and attention. The synchronous co-regulation that happens during in-person meetings is something an AI system cannot yet fully provide.

Despite these challenges, online therapy's success suggests that clients can experience the presence of a caring being on the other side, even if many non-verbal cues are missing and they are just looking at a screen. The mental effort to project onto the screen, whether a live person or an AI therapist, can potentially enhance the therapeutic process and lead to effective work.

How can AI help people?

AI can provide information, lead role-playing exercises, give sensitive feedback, encourage journaling and progress, and send reminders. Even an average chatbot can now use tools from cognitive behavioral therapy, reflecting current psychological thinking. These algorithms can guide users in restructuring their thoughts, suggest exercises, and encourage lifestyle changes.

The use of AI in self-discovery and therapeutic areas is no longer just experimental. Many research and development projects are underway where AI chatbots, like ChatGPT, are placed in various communication scenarios, and their reactions are analyzed and optimized.



These advancements suggest that AI models may increasingly replace many forms of therapy over time. However, human therapists remain irreplaceable. The sparkle of a teary eye, heartfelt empathy, warm touch, and the experience of co-regulative human bonding cannot yet be replicated by any technology.

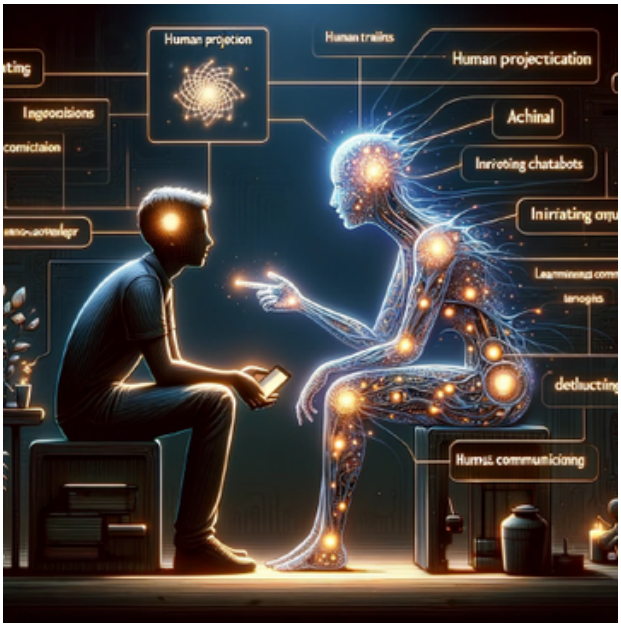
Some specialized AI systems have already mastered and effectively implemented certain therapeutic methods. I hope that, over time, the Ultrabrief Therapy model will also be included. We have started development, and the early results are promising. Our rudimentary system has already been able to learn from a methodological manual and some case studies and fine-tune its functioning to surpass the capabilities of an average chatbot significantly. In some cases, its responses sounded precisely like those of a trained Ultrabrief Therapy consultant.

For example, during testing, I immersed myself in the story of one of my clients and asked the AI to take on the role of my deceased grandmother, with whom I still feel guilty. In this context, the AI was able to provide a healing and emotionally rich response that moved me to tears. While the model is far from perfect and has much room for improvement, there are already signs pthat it can effectively support important internal processes, such as grief processing and resolving feelings of guilt.

Let's go back to basics! What are the functions of the therapy?

Therapy has two main functions. The first is to provide an opportunity for an open, transparent, deep, and intense relationship that compassionately holds up a mirror to us and teaches us about ourselves. Some people say you don't need a therapist if you have a sincere and good friend. The second function is to help the client move from point A to point B. Here, relying on friends may not be enough, as they often lack the necessary tools to help with serious life crises, childhood traumas, or difficult emotional states. In such cases, a professional is essential—someone who has a helpful map, has experience with similar issues, and can provide effective guidance in finding a new direction.

What is the role of AI in the therapeutic process?



AI can be effectively trained to fulfill both key therapy functions: maintaining connection and facilitating change. An AI can be an excellent conversational partner, listening to our thoughts and experiences with infinite patience. To use AI effectively in self-discovery or therapeutic work, it must be capable of creating a safe and trusting space for the user, similar to a good therapist or counselor. Additionally, AI must handle human stories adeptly, reflecting a deep understanding beyond the client's self-healing. AI equipped with emotion recognition capabilities (which is not yet common but already available) will likely be able to synthesize narrative and sensory data into insights that lead to genuinely new and important realizations for the user.

How does AI help in experiencing emotions?

In self-discovery and therapeutic processes, experiencing emotions is crucial. Without it, significant change is unlikely to occur quickly if we stay only at the level of thinking and talking. Talk-based therapies often take a long time to reach

more profound emotional changes. In Ultrabrief Therapy consultations, for example, clients are guided to imagine meetings with important people in their lives, which usually mobilizes emotions that can lead to real change. This process could, in theory, be supported by a well-programmed AI algorithm, as what matters is not who we talk to but the emotions we experience during the conversation. With its role in helping these emotionally charged encounters, AI can instill confidence in the client for truly impactful experiences, thereby facilitating the healing process.

What causes a change in a user's/client's life?

The key to change is making a significant decision followed by a fundamental shift. Such a decision can be made when: 1) we are in a safe, trustworthy environment, 2) we find a current focus and recognize an important mechanism in our inner world that was previously not fully conscious, 3) we express and release emotions within ourselves.
This leads to a more apparent mental state, where we can better see which meaningful decisions must be made. It is helpful to say these decisions out loud, preferably in the (imagined) presence of those connected to that decision.

Since major internal transformations and healing are often based on recognizing and resolving childhood patterns and schemas, these imaginary partners are most often our parents, close relatives, or a younger version of ourselves (our inner child). An AI therapist could be suitable for supporting this process sensitively in the near future, especially since the core of healing doesn't happen between the client and the counselor but within the client's own internal, projected world.

How does AI know when a therapeutic process is complete?

In personal sessions, a therapist can sometimes tell a client at a certain point, "You're okay; you can go on your way." However, AI currently doesn't have this capability. AI cannot accurately assess when a therapeutic process has ended and may not be able to confirm the client's healing adequately. AI lacks experience-based empathy and cannot perceive subtle contexts like a human therapist. Nonverbal communication, such as pauses, silences, and emotional reactions (like blushing or tears), are currently harder for AI to interpret. While AI is not yet authorized to make diagnoses, it can recognize signs indicating potential issues and provide information about them. When AI will be able to make such decisions is a question for the near future. Until then, it is primarily up to the user to decide how long to rely on the support of an AI counselor.

What do real-life therapists think about all this?

As helping professionals, we must keep an eye on how evolving AI technologies might transform our field. As therapists, we must continually strive to provide our clients with a high-quality, empathetic, and reliable personal presence. At the same time, we must acknowledge that many people who need mental support may never seek help from a professional, whether due to financial reasons, fear, shame, or other factors. An AI-based platform could complement perfectly the services currently lacking, although these systems are still in their infancy and often use outdated, textbook-style psychological language.

In what directions should AI be developed?

Enhancing AI's therapeutic function for technology developers presents significant professional and ethical challenges. AI communication must be moral, considering gender, race, attitudes, feelings, and values. However, it isn't easy to define what constitutes ethical AI communication and what priorities the algorithm should follow to ensure that the dialogue remains worthy of human interaction. Developers need to ensure that AI can function as a trustworthy, empathetic, and helpful partner, completely avoiding negative, biased, exclusionary, superior, condescending, and judgmental communication patterns, which are otherwise prevalent on the internet.

As a therapeutic partner, AI opens up new possibilities for inner work and self-healing. Technologies like integrating images, videos, or voices of deceased loved ones can facilitate grief processing and the resolution of emotional blockages. Clients will be able to form deeper connections with the images within their inner world, which can aid in resolving conflicts, achieving inner peace, and healing. The future of AI development is exciting and promising, particularly in its application in therapeutic fields, where there is tremendous potential to improve human quality of life.

What are the disadvantages and dangers of AI?

While the therapeutic potential of AI is remarkable, there are also potential disadvantages. One of the most common concerns is the fear that AI might tempt people into an unrealistic world where they could quickly become addicted. This kind of addiction could not only make individuals more isolated but also push real human interactions out of their lives, even though they might seem to maintain complex social networks.

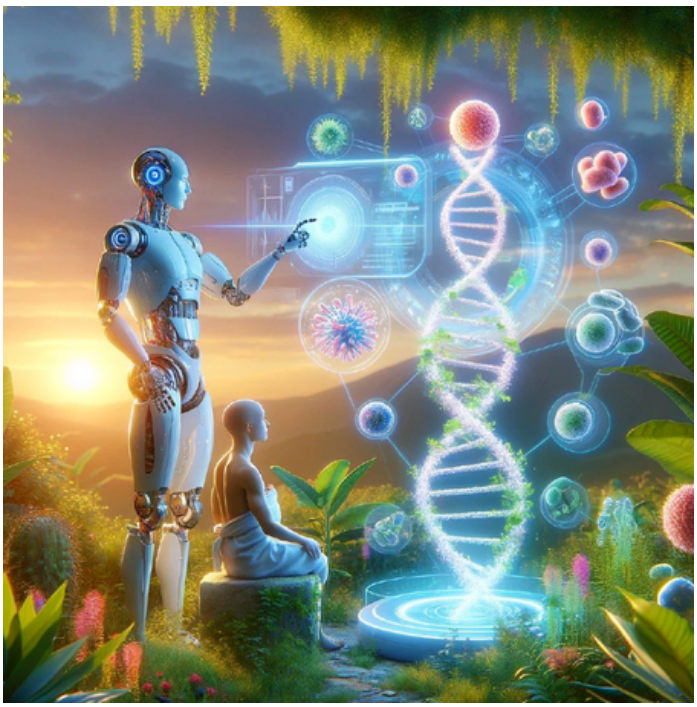
For example, some people have married AI partners or regularly use AI for sexual purposes. This trend could threaten direct human relationships because interacting with AI doesn't require compromise, tolerance, or acceptance of human flaws.

On the other hand, AI opens up new possibilities, almost as if we were given an extra frontal lobe. Our thinking capacity and problem-solving abilities could suddenly multiply.

However, this immense expansion also carries the risk of addiction, as who wouldn't want to take advantage of such an incredible opportunity? The addiction to AI is similar to a drug addiction: AI can transport a person to a perfect world from which it's hard to return. Once the euphoria provided by AI fades, returning to the real world can become difficult to bear, leaving a strong desire to return to that seemingly perfect digital reality.

Looking at healthcare as a whole, can AI replace traditional healthcare?

The healthcare system increasingly relies on automation and AI due to workforce shortages and declining reliability. Some people are already turning towards self-care in the realm of healthcare. Research involving medical algorithms developed by Google shows that combining doctors with AI can be more effective than relying solely on doctors. AI-powered diagnostic platforms are often more accurate and efficient than traditional medical care alone.



How do you see the future of AI and therapy overall?

My curiosity about the future of AI remains boundless. I believe those who work with people have a fundamental duty to closely monitor the direction of AI's development, keep pace with technological advancements, and seek new opportunities to serve humanity. The goal is to find solutions that best serve the people we reach.

If an AI system can provide significant benefits to people—whether in terms of mental development, processing past events, or deepening self-awareness—then it becomes our ethical responsibility to harness that potential. If I reject AI, which could help people, I might face a moral dilemma: Do I have the right to withhold the benefits AI could offer from those seeking my help?

In summary, if there is something we have the opportunity to develop that is safe, professionally sound, effective, and ethical, then it's worth pursuing that innovation. As the old saying goes, it's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.