

AI Chatbots to Help with Mental Health Struggles

今回は、AIがメンタルヘルスを支える時代の到来についての話題です。ストレスや不安といった悩みを抱える人々のために、最近ではAIチャットボットを使ったサポートが広がっています。

struggleは「苦しみ」や「困難」といった意味で、struggle with anxiety（不安に悩む）やdaily struggles（日々の悩み）のように動詞・名詞として使われます。もし精神的に悩んだとき、AIからどんなサポートを受けたいと思いますか？



1. Article

Read the following article aloud.

The mental health chatbot Earkick greets users with a friendly-looking panda that could fit easily in a children's program.

When users talk about anxiety, the panda gives the kind of **comforting** statements that a trained mental health professional, called a therapist, would say. Then it might suggest breathing exercises or give advice on how to deal with stress.

Earkick is one of hundreds of free chatbots aimed at dealing with a mental health crisis among young people. But the co-founder of Earkick, Karin Andrea Stephan, says he and the other creators do not “feel comfortable” calling their chatbots a therapy tool.

Whether these chatbots, or apps, provide a simple self-help tool or mental health treatment is important to the growing digital health industry. Since the apps do not claim to **diagnose** or treat medical conditions, they do not need approval from the Food and Drug Administration (or FDA).

The use of AI chatbots

The industry's position is now coming under more careful examination with recent developments of chatbots powered by artificial intelligence (AI). The technology uses a large amount of data to copy human language.

The upsides are clear: the chatbots are free; they are available 24 hours a day; and people can use them in private.

Now for the downsides: there is limited data that the chatbots improve mental health; and they have not received FDA approval to treat conditions like depression.

Vaile Wright is a psychologist and technology director with the American Psychological Association. She said users of these chatbots, "have no way to know whether they're actually effective."

Wright added that the chatbots are not the same as traditional mental health treatment. But, she said, they could help some people with less severe mental and emotional problems.

Earkick's website states that the app does not "provide any form of medical care, medical opinion, diagnosis or treatment." Some health lawyers say such claims are not enough.

Glenn Cohen of Harvard Law School said, "If you're really worried about people using your app for mental health services, you want a disclaimer that's more direct..." He suggested, "This is just for fun."

Still, chatbots are already playing a role due to an ongoing [shortage](#) of mental health professionals.

Shortage of mental health professionals

Britain's National Health Service has begun offering a chatbot called Wysa to help with stress, anxiety and depression among young people.

This includes those people waiting to see a therapist. Some health insurers, universities, and hospitals in the United States are offering similar programs.

Dr. Angela Skrzynski is a family doctor in the American state of New Jersey. When she tells her patients how long it will take to see a therapist, she says they are usually very open to trying a chatbot. Her employer, Virtua Health, offers Woebot to some adult patients.

Founded in 2017 by a Stanford-trained psychologist, Woebot does not use AI programs. The chatbot uses thousands of structured language models written by its staff and researchers.

Woebot founder Alison Darcy says this rules-based model is safer for health care use. The company is testing generative AI models, but Darcy says there have been problems with the technology.

She said, "We couldn't stop the large language models from... telling someone how they should be thinking, instead of facilitating the person's process."

Woebot's finding was included in a research paper on AI chatbots published last year in Digital Medicine.

The writers concluded that chatbots could help with depression in a short time. But there was no way to study their long-term effect on mental health.

Ross Koppel of the University of Pennsylvania studies health information technology. He worries these chatbots could be used [in place of](#) treatment and medications. Koppel and others would like to see the FDA review and possibly [regulate](#) these chatbots.

Dr. Doug Opel works at Seattle Children's Hospital. He said, "There's a whole host of questions we need to understand about this technology so we can ultimately do what we're all here to do: improve kids' mental and physical health."

And that's the Health & Lifestyle report. I'm Anna Matteo.

Matthew Perrone reported this story for the Associated Press from Washington, D.C. Anna Matteo adapted it for VOA Learning English.

2. Key phrases and vocabulary

First repeat after your tutor and then read aloud by yourself.

1. comforting (adj.) helping to take away worry, pain, or sadness

Talking with family and listening to music can be very comforting when I am under stress.

2. diagnose (v.) to try to discover what kind of illness a person has

After a couple of tests, the doctor diagnosed her with the flu.

3. shortage (n.) a condition of not having enough of something

Recently, there has been a severe rice shortage.

4. In place of (prep.) instead of; replaced with

In his cooking, Cooper likes to use nonfat yogurt in place of sour cream.

5. regulate (v.) to control something by using laws

The buying of alcohol for drinking is regulated by national laws.

3. Questions

Read the questions aloud and answer them.

1. What are the benefits of having an AI chatbot to help with mental health?
2. What are the weaknesses of such a system?
3. Why is Ross Koppel of the University of Pennsylvania concerned about this use of AI technology? What exactly does he mean? What is he suggesting the effects might be?
4. What kinds of treatment and therapy are available in your area for anxiety or depression?
5. In times of stress, what things are comforting for you?