



Can AI replace therapy? Let's be honest

BY BRIANNA REINHOLD, LPC, CFRC, ERPSCC

A **AI. CHATGPT. YOU HEAR ABOUT IT** everywhere.

What was once a niche, almost taboo topic is now part of daily conversations — between kids, teens, adults, business leaders and in the headlines. Some people are worried “I, Robot” might be our future, while others fully embrace the change.

Colleges are figuring out how to monitor its use while still integrating it into their teaching methods. Businesses are adopting it to streamline tasks. Whether we like it or not, AI isn't going anywhere. That means we need to be honest about its capabilities — and its limits.

One of the most concerning developments is the growing use of programs like ChatGPT as a replacement for therapy. Therapy at its core is about human interaction. It's the rapport and trust built between a client and their clinician. This is why therapists so often stress the importance of finding someone you “click” with — someone who makes you feel safe enough to share your deepest memories and most vulnerable moments.

While specialized training, certifications and techniques matter, decades of research show the strongest predictor of success in therapy is the quality of the therapeutic relationship. That's not something AI can replicate.

So if the relationship is so important, why are people turning to AI?

Part of the answer is accessibility. Insurance companies often fail to reimburse clinicians fairly, despite the years of education, additional certifications and business expenses involved in providing therapy. Many therapists are forced to charge private pay rates to sustain their practices, which leaves countless people unable to afford care.

AI, on the other hand, is available 24/7, often at little or no cost. For someone facing a mental health struggle without affordable access to a therapist, AI can feel like the only option.

It's true that AI can be helpful in certain ways. Need quick ideas for new coping skills? Want a better understanding of a psychological concept?



AI can deliver that instantly, but that's not therapy. AI cannot attune to the client. It doesn't notice subtle changes in body language, tone of voice or emotional cues. It can't detect when your words and feelings don't match. It doesn't hold space for silence or sit with you in uncomfortable moments.

Most importantly, AI is programmed to be agreeable. It reflects and validates what's said rather than challenging it. But therapy often requires gentle — and sometimes firm — challenge. If no one is questioning your intrusive or irrational thoughts, they may be reinforced instead of resolved. That can take you further away from healing, not closer to it.

There's also the issue of confidentiality — or rather, the lack of it. Your therapist is legally and ethically bound to keep what you share private, with the only exceptions being situations covered under mandated reporting laws.

AI has no such obligation. Everything you type, no matter how much you think you've deleted it, can be stored, reviewed and even used in ways you may never know about. That means the deeply personal details you share with an AI program could be exposed or repurposed without your consent. In a world where data breaches and misuse of information are already common, this is a serious risk to consider.

Another limitation is that AI doesn't set boundaries. You can ask it for guidance at any hour, in any state of mind and it will respond instantly. While the accessibility is appealing, immediacy isn't always what's best for someone in distress. Therapists know when to slow down, pause or redirect for your safety.

AI lacks that judgment. It also doesn't know your personal history, your values or your unique life context — all of which are essential for tailoring effective mental health support.

This doesn't mean AI has no place in mental health conversations. Like any tool, it can be valuable when used appropriately. Think of it as a supplement, not a substitute. You might use it to brainstorm journal prompts, learn about mental health topics, explore different coping skills or organize your thoughts before a therapy session. But your deeper processing, accountability and emotional work? That's where a trained professional comes in.

We wish we could remove all the barriers that prevent people from getting the help they deserve. Until that happens, AI will continue to be tempting for those who can't access therapy.

If you choose to use AI for mental health support, do so with caution. Understand what it can and cannot offer. Use it alongside, not instead of, other supports: friends, family, peer groups, crisis lines and, most importantly, trained mental health professionals.

Healing happens in connection. No program, no matter how advanced, can replace the presence, intuition, confidentiality, and humanity of a therapist. 

 **NorthernLightsTherapyAZ.com**

SPONSORED CONTENT

