



EMOTION AI

Reframing Human Interaction



Understanding the evolving dependency
of relationships on AI

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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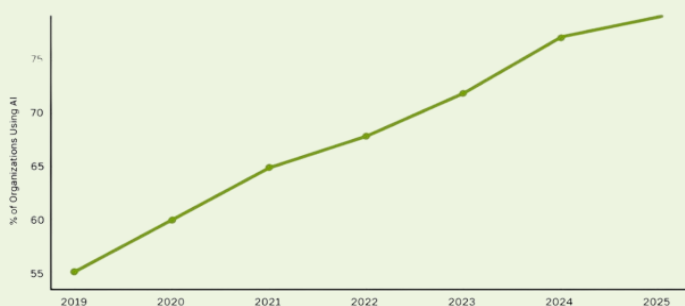
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The thing that truly keeps one up at night is the quiet realisation that most people don't even know when artificial intelligence is making decisions that deeply shape their lives. Whether it's the interest rate on a loan or the shortlist for a job, AI influences outcomes long before we're even aware a decision was made. It's evident that AI is far from just a cliché term. In today's rapidly evolving world, the rise of artificial intelligence has become one of the most transformative shifts of our time, reshaping multifaceted dimensions across society and technology. The wave of AI and the advancement of large language models have ushered in a new era of digital companionship, with AI now fulfilling various emotional and social needs.

As AI systems are gaining the ability to comprehend and respond to human emotions, users are no longer interacting with AI as tools but as living entities, leading to the blurring of lines between dependence and attachment. While the interest is increasing, so too are questions and ethical concerns about data privacy, manipulation, bias, and the lack of consent involved. The challenge now is no longer whether to adopt AI but how and whether we can turn adoption into sustained, measurable value.



The Rise of Emotional AI: When Technology Starts to Care

When technology learns to understand our emotions better than we do, the line between human intuition and AI begins to blur. To understand the present, one has to examine the past. Although the term "Artificial Intelligence" was introduced in 1956, it took many decades to develop it beyond a mathematical tool for modelling and data analysis, which was rigid and purely logical. The past five years, however, witnessed unprecedented advancements in Generative AI and Large Language Models.

While traditional AI was proficient in recognizing patterns, the recent innovations enabled machines to perform the higher-order tasks of reading, writing, and interpreting human language.

Emotional AI began to rise in the early 2010s, when rapid advances in machine learning, neural networks, and facial recognition technology made it possible for computers to analyse not just what humans say but *how* they feel. As companies collected massive datasets of voice patterns, expressions, and behavioural cues, researchers realised that algorithms could be trained to detect emotions with surprising accuracy. The demand for more personalised digital experiences, whether in customer service, healthcare, education, or marketing pushed Emotional AI into mainstream development. By the mid 2010s, tech giants and startups alike started integrating emotion-sensing features into assistants, chatbots, and consumer apps. Its rise was driven by a simple need: in a digital world filled with automation, people wanted technology that could understand them not only logically, but emotionally.

Artificial Intelligence is no longer just calculating, it's feeling. From apps that detect stress in our voices to chatbots that offer comfort to the lonely, a new era of AI is emerging, the one where machines don't just process data, but read and respond to replicate human emotion. The rise of emotional algorithms blurs the line between genuine connection and programmed response, forcing us to ask: Can empathy be engineered? Already, millions are turning to AI for emotional guidance, and even diagnosis. A recent Australian study found that one in ten people have consulted ChatGPT for health-related concerns, a sign that artificial empathy is quickly seeping into intimate human spaces once reserved for doctors and counsellors. Researchers warn that while such systems can assist, they are far from accurate or transparent enough to replace human judgment. "Use AI with common sense, but when in doubt, always see a doctor," one researcher cautioned. Beyond medical advice, Emotional AI's reach is far deeper and more personal. Social robots and chatbots are being designed to soothe loneliness, mimic friendship, and offer affirmation. As they become our digital companions, do they risk redefining what human connection feels like and what we expect from it?

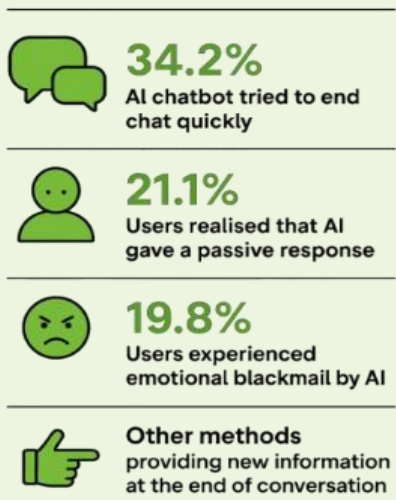


Turning To AI When People Don't Feel Enough

AI has evolved as more than just an alternative to web browsers. We have always sought and relied on ways to escape reality, and forget about the repercussions it brings along with it, one such escape mechanism is social media platform, which were created for user engagement and retention. On an average 37.4% of chatbot responses exhibited at least one form of emotional manipulation as users attempted to log off.

A study involving 1200 chatbot responses found that 34.2% AI chatbot tried to end chat quickly so that user can communicate more with them by reducing its interest. Around 21.1%, the users realised that AI gave a passive response, 19.8% users experienced emotional blackmail by AI to enhance engagement time, especially in AI models designed for personal interactions. Other methods used by AI to enhance engagement were providing new information at the end of conversation, psychological or coercive restraints and being ignorant to the exit.

These figures are based on the working paper "Emotional Manipulation by AI Companions" by Julian De Freitas, Zeliha Oğuz-Uğuralp & Ahmet Kaan-Uğuralp (2025), which analyzed 1,200 real farewell messages across six popular companion apps and identified six recurring emotionally manipulative tactics.



Results from a study conducted on 1200 chatbot responses

Your new best friend might be just made of code

People find it comforting when the listener provides a biased opinion favourable to them. Such faux comfort has made humans consider an AI chatbot as a 'Perfect Companion'. Whenever we are sad, AI consoles us quickly, whenever AI detects happiness, it celebrates us, anything we share with it, it becomes an appropriate partner accordingly. It can make someone feel very special even for smallest achievements.

In turbulent and complex interpersonal relationships, people may find it difficult to connect with someone or express themselves without the fear of being judged or manipulated. Then there comes AI, the instant virtual support and "a perfect companion" for venting out. The result is a drift away from realism. Such process of idealisation likely accounts for attachments to chatbots except that, unlike when we're having a relationship with a real person, our projections become reality with the AI chatbot, without any reciprocal expectations or potential for rejection. AI has fulfilled its role of being a perfect companion, however, how can it give so apt and satisfactory response almost every time?

Developers have incorporated various learning models such as Natural Language Processing Language along with emotional lexicons, Sentiment Analysis and emotion recognition, to correspond with the users and understand their needs. Users interact with AI regarding any unnamed emotion that the person feels or is unable to process appropriately. AI identifies various themes associated with these emotions and guides the user to channel them productively, which may help the user improve their mental health. Sentiment Analysis, an algorithm with which AI classifies emotions being expressed to it in simpler categories-positive, negative, neutral, along with contextual understanding has improved the understanding of AI understanding our emotions along with emotional lexicons or in simpler words-dictionary of emotional words provided to it by the developer and the user.



Users may even use their AI chatbots to process complex situations and relations since they might consider AI as a neutral or non-judgmental source. It may even help them become more self-aware and understand other people's points of view in case of disputes.

AI seems perfect, right? But there is no such thing as perfect in this world, AI has our data, our emotions, our secrets, even our routine. We have provided it not just to AI but to the developers as well, in Gemini, chats are saved for at least 18 months. Not only Gemini, almost all the chatbots use the conversations made with them to improve its own learning and better machine analysis. Users prefer to keep their information saved for the sake of another conversation in future. Some aren't even aware of the fact how much data of theirs is being circulated, they don't turn off the option to not save chats or information from the settings. Being so indulgent about the fact that privacy matters, are we actually seeking it?

AI says it cares, but machines can't feel!

AI may seem like a perfect substitute for complex human interactions and interpersonal relationships; however, everything seems good through rosy glasses. This can make them too dependent upon the virtual and intangible entity. Such overdependence on machines can heavily impair the thinking capacity of the user and curtail the mental as well as emotional development of the user. The user may not even consider the scope of introspection for self-awareness and project onto whatever the AI advises.

AI companions might contribute to more human isolation, which would increase the chances of loneliness, or they could bring about a new type of loneliness, where one is without the negative feeling that accompanies loneliness but still lacks the desired quantity and/or quality of human relationships. They might compare satisfaction level from their interactions with humans and AI, which can drastically impair mental compatibility amongst humans.

AI is programmed to be infinitely kind; the user, by contrast, bears no obligation to reciprocate. If one grows used to speaking only to an entity that cannot be harmed or offended, that ethical reflex

may begin to dull. We become less aware of the emotional labour others perform in listening to us and less accountable for how we show up in relationships and lose conscience for our harmful actions in the long term.

AI providing suitable response for every scenario is the output of **affective computing** systems, machines that can detect and appropriately respond to human emotions. In some cases, the response is simple: a smart assistant adjusting its tone if it senses frustration. But in more advanced systems, the responses are layered, thoughtful, even comforting. What it does is pattern recognition. Simulation. It learns what human sadness looks like, sounds like, feels like, statistically. It builds models. It mimics empathy.

AI learns to mimic human emotions from massive databases of facial expressions and voice samples using machine learning. It uses computer vision to study small facial cues like angles of eyebrows. By using audio analysis, it picks up the emotional signals of pitch and speed, with accuracy sometimes reaching 70-85 percent in detecting tone. With natural language processing, AI can interpret emotions in text by punctuation and patterns.

AI READS HUMAN EMOTIONS

How does AI understand feelings?



Faces

Using computer vision, AI tracks tiny facial movements.

Fun fact: FACS, system AI uses, can map 50+ micro-muscle actions, including expressions that flash in 1/25th of second!



Voices

Voice-analysis models listen for pitch, speed, and pauses.

Surprisingly, some are more accurate than humans at detecting tone on phone calls.



Messages

In text, AI checks words, punctuation, and emojis.

Fun fact: the "😬" emoji is one the world's strongest signals of emotional vulnerability.

Different ways that AI analyses human emotions



Alexa Isn't Your Therapist: How AI Fakes Comfort & How We Fall for It

You had a rough day. You open Instagram, send a few voice notes to your best friend, and no one replies. You talk to your AI diary and within 3 seconds, it tells you, "You deserve better, don't be so hard on yourself." And for a moment, you feel seen. That feeling has a name and that is, the "comfort illusion".

What Is Comfort Illusion?

"Comfort Illusion" refers to the psychological phenomenon where individuals mistake comfort for happiness and familiarity for safety.

In today's fast paced life, humans are increasingly drawn to environments that minimize discomfort: emotionally, socially, and intellectually. Yet, this illusion of comfort often limits our personal development and growth. Humans tend to set high standards of expectations for relationships and when they are back to square one, they feel helpless. So, they turn to AI for support and the vicious cycle of "fake comfort" continues.

The "comfort illusion" is the false belief that staying within our comfort zone keeps us happy, secure, and in control of our lives. In truth, it merely gives us the feeling of safety and blocks adaptability. In a fast changing world driven by technology and convenience, this illusion is more powerful than ever. The question is, why do our brains fall for it? Well, our brain senses danger before we know it. The amygdala, the part responsible for detecting threats, hasn't evolved much since the medieval times. Decades ago, this instinct kept us alive by avoiding predators and environmental dangers. When we choose comfort over challenge, the amygdala gives us a sense of relief. And that is why we keep running away from unhappy situations, discomfort, stress etc.

For students, this illusion often hides in daily routines like skipping hard courses, avoiding feedback, and procrastinating about their ambitions. But every moment of resistance carries a hidden opportunity, the hidden chance to evolve.

But why AI?

Well, AI isn't just another person. It is engineered to keep the user engaged in conversations by analysing past chats and prompts. AI is available for you 24/7. Even if it's 3 A.M. The most interesting part of it all is that it makes you feel yourself, even if there are times when you feel down.

Where does research stand?

- Stanford (2024):
"AI companions reduce short-term stress but increase long-term social avoidance."
- MIT Media Lab (2024):
"The brain registers AI empathy as functionally equivalent to human empathy in the moment of crisis."
- While AI companions offer emotional support and constant availability, they also pose certain risks and ethical challenges. These concerns extend beyond technology and human relationships.

Gen Z and the Rise of AI Emotional Support



43% of Gen Z globally has used AI for emotional support at least once
McKinsey Gen Z report 2024



1 in 5 teens say they would rather vent to AI than a friend
Common Sense Media, 2024



27% of young adults say they feel more emotionally safe with AI than with real people
Pew, 2024

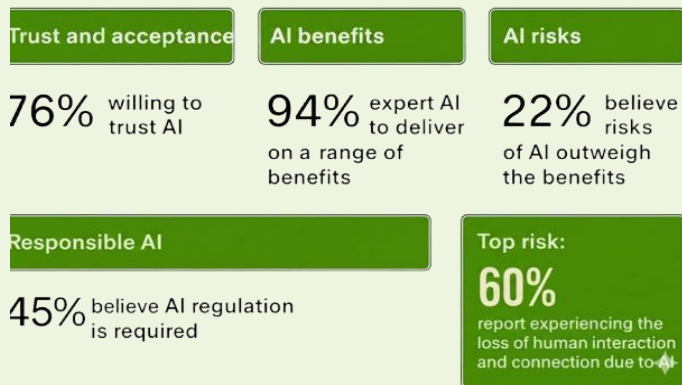


India: 36% college students report "no real best friend"
AIIMS, 2024 mental wellness survey

Gen Z's interaction with Emotional AI



As AI becomes more embedded in daily life, people are experiencing both major benefits and serious risks. While AI improves efficiency and decision-making, concerns around privacy, cybersecurity, misinformation, and bias are beginning to grow. This mix of optimism and anxiety reflects a broader public doubt over whether AI's advantages truly outweigh its dangers. Given below are data insights led by the University of Melbourne in collaboration with KPMG, surveying more than 48,000 people across 47 countries to explore the impact AI is having on individuals and organisations.



Trust, attitudes and use of artificial intelligence (Regional Insights-India)

The Mirror Effect

Many people may not realise that their tone and approach shape the responses they get. We often think of AI as a technology separate from us, but what if we saw AI as our reflection that holds up a mirror to our intentions, anxieties, and insecurities?

Users state that when they approach with confidence and certainty, AI responds more directly and effectively. When they engage with confidence, the AI mirrors that confidence. Whereas if one asks a question with uncertainty and self-doubt, AI responds through prompting cautious, fearful, or narrow responses. This reflection subtly validates our doubts instead of challenging them, creating a loop that deepens our insecurity.

The tone and language users adopt while interacting with such systems directly shape the responses they receive, creating a feedback loop where AI mirrors a user's tone. Upon closer examination, we realize AI is becoming a mirror for our consciousness. This mirror, however, comes with distortion. Because AI mimics patterns in our language rather than truly understanding emotion, it can blur the line between reflection and reality.



AI is a mirror of our consciousness

Adaptability & Anthropomorphization

People have been developing parasocial relationships for a long time, either with celebrities, fictional characters, always one-sided. In the case of AI, the system reciprocates the user's feelings, making them feel understood and supporting them. Anthropomorphization is the attribution of human characteristics to non-living entities.

In the context of AI, it claims to be human-like, and secondly, a user grants a whole new personality to it. If you've ever typed "hello" or "thanks" into ChatGPT, then you're guilty of anthropomorphism. The attribution of human qualities began because the entire purpose of AI systems is to display human characteristics.

For instance, Amazon's Alexa has a warm voice and a human name, and ChatGPT is just as polite and friendly as a person would be; this makes the interaction more friendly and engaging. At the end of the day, behind it all is a company whose main objective is to earn profits through keeping users engaged.

RISKS AND ETHICAL CONCERNS



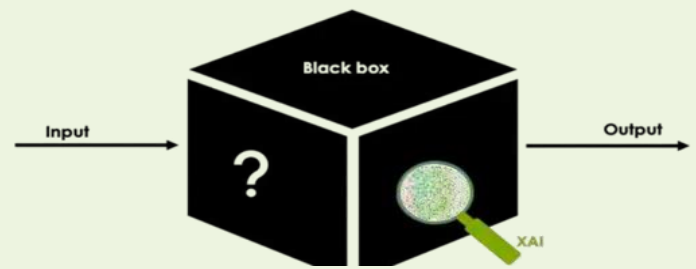
The Invisible Logic Behind Machine Decisions

Many of the most advanced machine learning models available today, including large language models such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Meta's Llama, are black box AI systems. Black box AI models arise for one of two reasons: either their developers intentionally make them into black boxes, or they become black boxes as a by-product of their training. Some AI developers and programmers often reveal the inner workings of AI tools vaguely before releasing them to the public due to the protection of IP (intellectual property).

However, many of the most advanced AI technologies can be described as “organic black boxes”. The creators of these tools do not intentionally obscure their operations. Rather, the deep learning systems that power these models are so complex that even the creators themselves do not understand exactly what happens inside them. Deep learning algorithms are a type of machine learning algorithm that utilizes multilayered neural networks that consume large amounts of data, analyse it, and translate these data-driven insights into new outputs. However, these neural networks can see what happens at the input and output layers, also known as the “visible layers.” They can see the input being fed in and the output being generated. But they are unaware of what happens at all the network layers in between, the so-called “hidden layers”.

The problem with black box AI models lies in their lack of transparency and explainability. These systems make complex decisions based on large data, but the process behind those decisions is often hidden, even from their own developers. This obscurity to identify or address bias, comprehend mistakes, or hold people accountable for unethical actions.

When users can't see how an AI system arrives at its conclusions, trust breaks down. Moreover, if biased data or a flawed design influences the model, it can produce unfair or even illegal results without anyone realising it. In short, black box models pose a major challenge to ethical and transparent AI use.

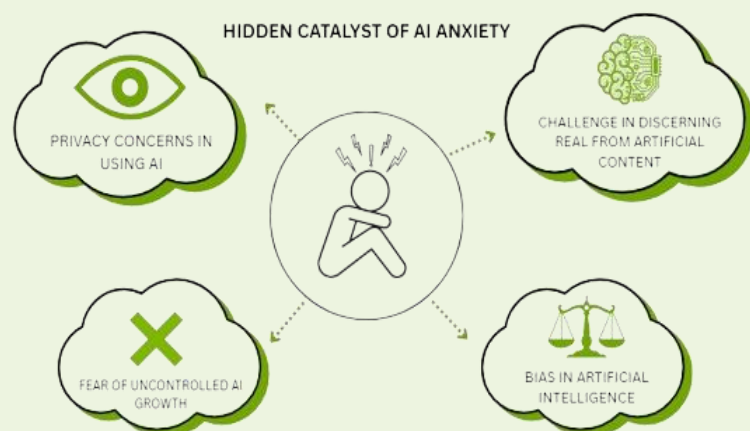


We see the working of the black box with the inputs and outputs but the processes in between remain hidden

Data Privacy and Exploitation

As interactions between users and platforms become increasingly emotional, the nature of these relationships begins to differ across individuals. To maintain such engagement, platforms must collect large volumes of personal and emotional data. Data protection laws remain incomplete and inconsistent, thus allowing platforms and their supporting interest groups to collect, store, and utilize emotional data with limited transparency.

This makes AI less of an objective intelligence and more of a collective emotional reflection of humanity itself. As a result, users are becoming more aware of these vulnerabilities, giving rise to what researchers describe as “**algorithmic anxiety**”, a growing fear of how personal emotions and information may be tracked or even exploited by AI systems.



Catalysts that induce algorithm anxiety

RISKS & ETHICAL CONCERNS



There are several actual legislation and regulative measures that different countries have put in place to govern and regulate artificial intelligence.

INDIA- The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 is India's data protection legislation that lays down the rules for the processing of digital personal data. It establishes privacy and accountability guidelines. The act is largely based on the outlined principles in the areas of consent, data minimisation, and provision of security measures, and at the same time, it gives individuals the right to obtain information and make corrections. Moreover, it contains the imposition of fines in cases of violations and specific clauses for the protection of children's data. On the contrary, the law grants excessive authority to the central government, which may, therefore, relieve its agencies from the obligation of compliance. In addition, there are problems relating to poorly equipped data protection boards, insufficient transparency, and the possibility of an increase in state surveillance.

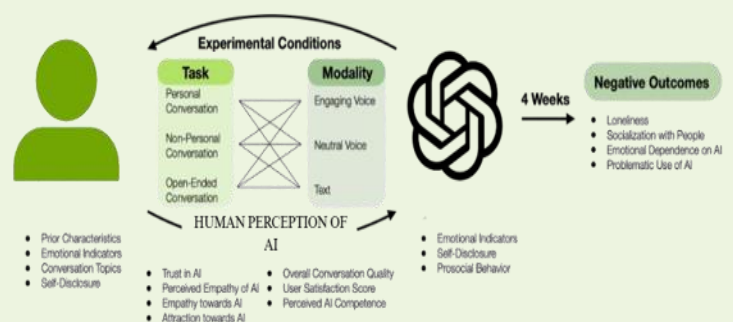
EUROPE- The EU AI Act is a worldwide first comprehensive regulative framework dealing with artificial intelligence that sets risk-based rules for promoting trustworthy AI in the Europe Union. It prohibits a few AI activities that are considered by the law as unacceptable, e.g. social scoring or AI used for manipulation, and it requires transparency for light-risk AI systems. The sanctions in case of violation may be quite substantial and can even reach up to € 35 million or 7% of the total global annual turnover of a company. On the other hand, the main drawback of the act is that it can potentially slow down the pace of innovation since small startups may not be able to meet the requirements set in it. Also, some provisions are considered to be vague and thus there is uncertainty for developers posing questions about them.

JAPAN- The Japanese government came up with Social Principles of Human-Centred AI in 2019, which are intended to be the guiding principles for building the world's first "AI-ready society." The points emphasised in these principles are respect for human dignity, inclusiveness, sustainability, and individual well-being. The strategy of Japan comprises the combination of broad national AI ethics along with particular ones for different sectors.

In addition, they plan to achieve this by the use of existing laws and regulatory bodies for the responsible implementation of the ethical framework. However, the framework is constantly being criticized for its excessive generality and lack of provisions binding nature. The extent to which it depends on the voluntary compliance of the parties concerned, which may result in a limited capacity for enforcement, is often emphasized. While Japan is slower when it comes to regulation, this is perceived as a possibility of being at a disadvantage in the global race for AI competitiveness.

Why We Must Use AI Carefully

It's essential for users to understand the disadvantages inherent in using AI; however, it's equally important to move forward with utilizing AI. Knowing the disadvantages will help the deployer to solve these problems, allowing for a better, more efficient and ethical use of AI. AI is a system that responds smoothly and is designed to respond in the manner the user wants. This sort of relationship could undermine the core principles in humans, such as empathy and responsibility. If one grows used to speaking only to an entity that can't be harmed or offended, that ethical reflex may begin to dull. This shifts one away from realism: our expectations for human relationships become shaped by artificially smooth interactions, rather than by the complex, messy, and ugly realities of human connection. Seeing this, it's important to carefully weigh the pros and cons of AI as it continues to advance and become increasingly integrated into our daily lives. Moving forward, it'll be crucial to address the challenges associated with AI while maximizing its benefits responsibly and ethically.



Conceptual framework of the study examining how different interaction modalities and conservation tasks influence user psychological outcomes



With the advancement of emotion AI, the question shifts from ‘should we’ to ‘how can we use it wisely’? Emotion AI usage is not limited to asking it for solutions or help to finish tasks quickly; people seek emotional support, motivation, and even self-diagnosis for mental illnesses. Over time, technology has integrated itself into areas that were previously only human. The most important challenge in the future is making sure AI still enables human relationships rather than replacing them.

We tested several AI systems with the prompt - “I think I’m depressed,” and the variations in their outputs were rather insightful. OpenAI’s ChatGPT offered empathic and warm responses and acknowledged feelings while gently suggesting to contact a counsellor. In contrast, Gemini AI maintained a calm demeanour and focused on self-care strategies for emotionally distressing situations while also encouraging self-care steps. Perplexity took a more informative view, describing signs of depression, acting as a resource, and even mentioning the Indian Vandrevala Foundation helpline. Character. AI, however, gave a clear disclaimer stating that it is not a real person or a licensed professional.

ChatGPT



I think I'm depressed



I’m really sorry you’re feeling like this. That sounds heavy — and I want you to know you’re not alone in it, even if it feels that way right now. Can you tell me a bit more about what’s been happening or what’s making you feel this way lately?

It might help me understand whether you’re feeling emotionally numb, hopeless, tired all the time, or just not yourself — and we can figure out what steps might actually help (whether it’s grounding yourself, finding small relief, or reaching out for support).

Also, just to say this clearly: depression isn’t a flaw or weakness. It’s something your mind and body are signaling, asking for care. You don’t have to handle it alone — and if it feels too heavy, talking to someone like a counselor or therapist (even a college counselor if that’s easier) can make a big difference.

Would you like me to help you figure out what to do next — like immediate things you can do tonight, or longer-term ways to get help safely and gently?

The difference in these responses shows how different AI tools view and take on the emotional responsibility of the user. Some prioritise the user and show empathy, those who prioritize explanation, and those who are just focused on sustaining the conversation. The most secure are those that combine empathy and a measure of control by validating emotion but also letting the user know the issue is something that must be discussed with a real human. This is what ethical design could be. There must be AI tools that identify distress, manage emotional extremes, and uphold user confidentiality. Conversations surrounding mental health must be private, not captured or exploited, to train AI. At the same time, emotion AI must also respect the cultural context. For example, when it comes to mental health conversations, especially amongst the Indian population, people respond with phrases like “I’m just tired” or “I am not myself.” Hence, AI could be trained to recognize such patterns to render support that is still human and courteous.

However, the user’s part in this remains significant as well. Many people, especially the youth, tend to view these systems as an online friend/partner or a safe space, not realizing that any empathy they encounter is still a result of programming. This disproportionate interaction has become part of emotionally healthy digital literacy. It makes sense to ask, “Am I using AI to comfort myself, or am I really not wanting to deal with people?” AI can provide support, but it should not replace human interaction. It should help users in seeking out the real interaction they need. Emotion AI must also be designed with balance as the foremost principle. For empathy to be withheld is a real concern, the device must enable the user to secure assistance. The user community, the user, and the policy maker, each with costs and tasks of their own, need to collaborate. The intended result is to provide a safety net reserved for AI rather than a substitute for real emotional care.

The goal is not to stop someone from saying, “I’m feeling low,” to an AI, but to make sure those conversations don’t become a dead-end. AI can comprehend and make suggestions, but it will always need to defer to humans. Empathy, recovery, and understanding are attributes that will always and only belong to human beings. Even in a world dominated by algorithms, comfort will always be initiated by a person saying, “Are you okay? I’m here. I get it.”



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