



FACT SHEET

FOR:
HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
PROFESSIONALS
YOUNG PEOPLE
AND FAMILIES

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

AT A GLANCE

- Young people are increasingly using artificial intelligence (AI) apps and tools when seeking mental health support.
- Evidence for the effectiveness and safety of AI used for youth mental health purposes is currently uncertain.
- Mental health professionals play an important role in helping young people use AI tools safely, understanding their benefits, risks, and limitations.

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This resource brings together evidence from young people, families, clinicians, subject matter experts and research literature.

WHAT IS AI IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH?

Artificial intelligence (AI) in youth mental health is an emerging technology that uses advanced computational programming to mimic human-like decision-making and reasoning.^(1,2) While digital tools and interventions are already popular across the mental health sector, recent years have seen AI adopted and integrated as a new and enhanced digital tool. AI has been used in research settings to support the detection, diagnosis, and even treatment of mental health conditions in young people.⁽¹⁾ There are different forms of AI being released and used in mental health – from administrative assistance for clinicians like scribes, to young people using chatbots for support.^(1,3,4)





With rising rates of youth mental ill-health and increasing pressures on the health system, traditional services and interventions aren't meeting the needs of all young people.(5) In response, many young people are independently turning to AI tools for support. This is especially the case for the young people of today who have grown up using technology and the internet. Their familiarity and comfort with the digital world means they are more likely to explore AI for mental health support.(3,6)

“Young people are digital explorers, they go to the far depths of the internet but may not have developed the skills to critically engage with the content”

WILL COOK, YOUTH ADVISOR

The most common AI tools used for mental health support are called 'chatbots' – computer programs that talk with you through text or voice. There are different types of chatbots, defined by how they use AI for creating a response.

1. **Pre-scripted chatbots** use pre-written, clinician- or researcher-approved responses selected from a set library of replies. Some may use AI to interpret what you type, but the responses themselves are fixed rather than newly generated.
2. **Generative chatbots** create novel responses in real time based on patterns learned from large amounts of human language data. Instead of selecting from pre-written replies, these systems generate new conversational responses during the interaction.
3. **Hybrid chatbots** combine approved therapeutic content with generative AI. Their responses may be guided or constrained by clinician-approved material, therapeutic frameworks (such as cognitive behavioural therapy), pre-written content, approved information sources or instructions that shape how the AI responds. Generative AI is then used to present this information in a more conversational, personalised or novel way.

To read about the evidence for whether AI chatbots are safe and effective for youth mental health treatment see [Orygen's Evidence Review on AI treatment tools for more information\(7\)](#)

HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE USING AI FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT?

Young people are increasingly using AI as part of their everyday lives, including when seeking mental health support. Most commonly, young people report using AI to access general information, explore symptoms, and better understand mental health experiences. Some young people also use AI to seek reassurance, reflect on their thoughts, or make sense of how they are feeling in the moment.(4,7) Additionally, families, carers, supporters and kin (hereafter referred to as ‘families’) have observed that young people may turn to AI to validate and normalise their experiences of mental health challenges.(7)

“When it feels like I have no one to turn to, I sometimes use AI as someone to talk to – offering an immediate, judgement-free space to explore how I’m feeling.”

ANONYMOUS, YOUTH ADVISOR



SHADOW USE OF AI

With the rise in popularity of AI, new AI-enhanced technologies with different purposes are constantly being released. Therefore, young people will increasingly be exposed to, and seek out, mental health support from AI. Some young people with a lived experience of mental ill-health report that they would use AI applications *instead* of seeking professional support.(7) However, current AI applications aren’t intended for this use and are not regulated to treat mental ill-health.(8)

Research evidence to date has mostly focused on pre-scripted and hybrid chatbots that are specifically designed for mental health.(7) In contrast, most young people turn to general-purpose, entirely generative AI technology that is not designed specifically for mental health uses or regulated as such (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude or Google Gemini). Little is known about the efficacy, safety, and usage of this kind of AI technology in supporting youth mental health.(3,7)

The use of platforms like this, outside of their intended purpose, poses a risk due to inadequate built-in safety and oversight. Media attention has also highlighted some generative AI chatbots may even worsen mental health symptoms, like delusions and suicidal ideation.(9,10) The full extent of these risks remains unknown as popular AI platforms are under-researched and unregulated for use in mental health.(8)

Regardless of this, young people will continue to use these generative AI technologies for mental health support. Mental health professionals and families should be mindful of this, ensuring the young people in their lives have access to human support alongside their use of AI.

To find out more about popular mental health AI applications, see: [Environmental Scan. AI in youth mental health](#)(8)

“Young people aren’t always distinguishing between tools built for mental health and general AI, they’re just using what’s available.”

ANONYMOUS, YOUTH ADVISOR

KEY CHALLENGES OF USING AI IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Young people and their families have identified several potential risks and challenges associated with using AI for mental health care and support. Largely, many are concerned with how young people are critically engaging in AI use. This includes thinking about where their data is going, where advice is coming from, and who is held responsible and accountable for the security of their data.(7,11,12) Some young people also report inaccuracies in the advice they have received from AI, such as over-diagnosis, overly agreeable responses, or conflicting advice.(7,11)

Many young people and their families were concerned with the lack of human oversight associated with using AI for mental health care. Mental health often requires complex and personalised care, and AI may not be capable of this with a focus on risk management.(7,12) Families felt that the nuanced, individualised care received through a human therapeutic relationship was very important in the care of the young people in their lives, and that this may be lost with an overreliance on AI.(7,11) Likewise, AI may have biases (e.g. related to race, gender, age) that can lead to unhelpful and even harmful recommendations.(7,11,12) Young people and their families have described the importance of the human relationship in understanding intersecting lived experiences and cultural sensitivity in care.(7)

“One of the biggest challenges is that AI can sound confident and convincing, even when the information isn’t accurate. For young people, it can be difficult to know what to trust, especially when they’re already feeling vulnerable.”

ANONYMOUS, YOUTH ADVISOR

Lastly, it is unclear if different AI technologies are equipped to understand and respond to emergency and crisis situations.(11) In cases where emergency responses are triggered, the exact method to detect and respond to risk is often unpublished by app developers, and they may not have been evaluated for effectiveness.(8) Young people and their families were particularly concerned with this, indicating they felt like AI recommendation has the potential to cause adverse outcomes and harm.(7)

POTENTIAL FUTURE BENEFITS OF USING AI IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Young people and their families have also identified several potential benefits of using AI for mental health support in the future.(7) Digital interventions such as AI can reduce key accessibility barriers to receiving care. This may include decreasing wait times, making care more cost-effective, and even reducing the burden of travelling to a physical location.(3,13) Likewise, AI offers flexibility for young people, where they can access support in their own time, space, and in a way that is comfortable for them.(3,7,14) Lastly, young people expressed that AI can increase anonymity and reduce the stigma associated with receiving care.(3,7,14) This has the potential to increase the likelihood that young people engage in mental health support – clarifying, validating, and normalising their experiences.(7)





TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE USING AI

Young people and their families have indicated they are more likely to use AI for mental health support if done in conjunction with traditional support facilitated through mental health professionals. They suggest that human oversight is an important part of mental health care, and with that oversight missing, too many risks arise.(7)

“When I use AI, it’s important that I remember I’m in charge and that I need to keep the tools I use in check.”

WILL COOK, YOUTH ADVISOR

RELATED RESOURCES

- [Orygen. Evidence Review. AI in youth mental health.](#)
- [Orygen. Environmental Scan. AI in youth mental health.](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION

- [Centre for Clinical Interventions. Handout resources.](#)
- [RACGP. Conversational artificial intelligence.](#)

Tips for practitioners if young people are wanting to use AI programs for mental health support:

- **Be curious, non-judgmental** and seek to understand what motivates the young person to use AI for support.
- **Normalise the experience.** Many young people will turn to AI for support and validation.
- **Explore the patterns** in the young person’s use of AI and encourage them to build confidence in their own coping and problem-solving skills, rather than turning to AI for easy support.
- **Provide psychoeducation** on when AI support may be inappropriate (e.g. in times of crisis, for self-diagnosis etc.).
- Highlight that AI can sometimes provide **inaccurate information** and even ‘hallucinate’.
- **Encourage the young person to think critically** about the AI they’re using. Support them to consider where information comes from, how responses are generated, and how any information they enter may be used (e.g. personal information may go to third parties).
- **Encourage the young person to still seek out human supports** – both clinical and non-clinical (e.g. family) – alongside their AI use.
- Support the young person to **find fit-for-purpose and regulated digital interventions.** These may not necessarily use AI technology but may still meet their need.
- Remind the young person that **real-world and in-person supports** are still available 24/7.

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