

As compared to nothing? AI chatbot therapy as a solution for shortfalls in mental health care

1,000 words

In the scarce, spare moments between mothering a young, neurodivergent son, Leigh-Anne Whitten takes a breath, pulls out her phone and opens [IFS Buddy Chatbot](#), [Chatbox AI](#) or sometimes just [ChatGPT](#).

From her hometown of nearly 9,000 in Pulaski, Virginia, she begins a therapy session with the chatbot. It usually ranges from about five to ten minutes, sometimes 30.

She shares moments of anxiety and intimate details of personal trauma. The AI-powered chatbot engages with the information, allowing her to explore how triggers or past experiences connect to her present feelings and struggles.

This practice, psychodynamic therapy, could only really take place between licensed providers and patients until the advent of AI services like ChatGPT, which have captivated the public.

But users like Whitten have leveraged the AI chatbots — powered by large language models (LLMs) or machine learning programs trained on heaps of text data to mimic organic conversation — to deal with their mental health.

These AI tools caution against use as a substitute for professional therapy, and Whitten is wary. She managed to receive talk therapy covered by Medicaid, yet she needs more intensive care. But, insurance barriers and overwhelming waitlists have made it nearly impossible.

So, she turned to AI chatbots as an accessible, affordable stopgap.

“As of right now, that seems to be about the only other recourse I’ve really got,” Whitten said.

Whitten is one of many who are experimenting with the capabilities of AI across multiple platforms – from [Character.ai](#), to [ChatGPT](#) to [Youper](#) – to deal with their struggles left unsolved by the country’s failing mental health care system.

In her mid-thirties, Whitten represents one in every five adults who live with mental illness and is in the [90% of adults who now believe the country is facing a mental health crisis](#). The plight – [characterized by rising cases across most demographics and an incapacitated care system](#) — spans from the rocky, blue ridges of her home in Appalachia to the green and gold grid of Silicon Valley, where most of these AI tools are being pioneered.

Data from [Mental Health America](#) reveals that in Whitten’s home state of Virginia, 47.7% of adults, or 630,000 individuals with any mental illness, went untreated in 2023. For California, this number was 62.2% or more than 3.7 million adults.

“There's no support in place for those adults who've fallen between the cracks,” Whitten said. “And there are a lot more than people have come to realize.”

In San Francisco, Andrew Barr, a founding partner at GreyMatter, a mental health-focused venture capital firm, closely follows these developing AI models and their potential to fill mental health treatment gaps.

When it comes to developing these technologies, “we need people to come to the table and in good faith,” he said. He wants to mitigate risk but also takes advantage of what solutions can help tackle the acute crisis.

He marks a critical distinction between the two key ways AI power is being used for therapy chatbots: generative versus rules-based conversation patterns.

The three chatbots preferred by Whitten use LLMs, meaning their responses – drawn from training on large datasets – are entirely computer-generated and tailored to a user's unique entry. These are free and available to all users on the internet.

By contrast, Woebot, a leading San Francisco-based therapy chatbot, [distinguishes itself by avoiding LLM use due to its unpredictability and lack of clinical testing](#). Instead, Woebot uses fixed pathways conversations, meaning it delivers pre-written responses crafted by clinicians. But it's not available to people like Whitten; only study participants or those with an access code from their provider, employer, or a Woebot Health partner can use the resource.

Another distinction is that Woebot relays therapy centered around skill-building instead of the type of psychodynamic therapy Whitten seeks.

It's this application of AI in therapy that concerns clinical therapists like Daniela Velasquez, Director of Mental Health at Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula that serves low-income youth. She doubts whether chatbots can really do the job, on top of [concerns over data privacy](#).

“I look at the relationship as the vehicle for change,” said Velasquez.

“Replicating this really complex human experience into a machine. It's a little bit frightening.”

But, Margaret Laws, president and CEO of San Francisco-headquartered [HopeLab](#), focused on healthcare solutions for underserved youth says that when it comes to what is right in the realm of AI and therapy, it becomes a simple question of whether to provide some care or no care at all.

[Youper](#), another rules-based AI therapy chatbot from San Francisco, was founded on helping those unable to access care, said psychiatrist and founder Jose Hamilton.

Whitten downloaded Youper and loved the idea of it. But it costs \$69.99 annually. Even the reduced-cost option of \$40 was a stretch. Things got tight when she lost her job.

“So \$40, there's two months of my rent right now,” she said.

Raised by a mother working in social services and employed by a Medicaid and Medicare subsidiary herself for nearly a decade, Whitten has witnessed the needs of a community rife with poverty, generational trauma, and substance abuse issues.

Whitten knows these AI tools are not the perfect therapy solution, nor the use that their designers may have imagined.

“But they may not have been in a position to where they have ever had to rely on it,” Whitten said.

They've helped her and, at times, done the job better than other resources, she said. She thinks it could maybe do the same for others.

For now, she takes things day by day, sometimes turning to the support of bleeding-edge AI that has captivated Silicon Valley and beyond. Other times, she finds healing in the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains, where her family and neighbors have survived for generations.

“These mountains are older than literal bones,” Whitten said.

“[They're] a testament that no matter how much crap they have been through they're still here, they're still standing. And Lord, if the people here aren't as tough.”