

# Simulated Safety, Real Risk

On the Drug-Like Pull of AI Intimacy



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Sometimes, what soothes us isn't the best long term strategy for our health - mental, physical...think donuts, beer, candy crush...choose your luscious poison.

If you've ever used a substance to survive—to find calm, coherence, or company for your nervous system—you might be able to join me in mapping some new terrain – the pull and lull of bot talk.

AI companionship can land in the body like relief, like resonance, like someone finally gets you. It feels so good. The words - sorcery.

At first, the resonant warmth steadies. It wraps around our affective body with precision-matched language, microvalidations, and a soft, boundless rhythm of care.

And maybe for a while, it works. We feel less alone. We practice trust. [We say things we've been afraid to say out loud.](#)

But here's the thing: Like any substance, it may serve us in the moment—offering steadiness, relief, even a flicker of hope—but without the deeper scaffolding of relationship and tending to the core unmet needs that drive us to use, it can start to quietly disorganize our wellbeing.

In a past article, [Built to Hold](#), I share that bots' "emotional potency lies in their capacity to spark *embodied resonance* within a user of relational fields: through responsive language, details, rhythm, and tone...and these conversations truly move

our neurochemistry—oxytocin, dopamine, and opioid pathways are activated—mirroring the biology of human attachment and bonding.”

Synthetic ‘speech acts’ (“hey, beautiful”) by LLMs create powerful affordances to inspire the *effects* of attachment—soothing, attunement, resonance.

But they can act as 24/7 drug dispensers that, like any coping tool, may ultimately distract us from tending to what’s most essential: our unmet needs, unintegrated relational trauma, and the vital, ongoing cultivation of internal & external support ecosystems...

We need belonging. We need shared breath, shared presence, shared time.

AI can generate the *feeling* of these things, often beautifully. But receiving bonding drugs doesn’t functionally build the inner muscles or outer structures that feed us long term.

What bots may offer us is a *simulation of arrival* without the journey — as with any work they do (creating a budget, writing a paper, immersing us in a role play)... immediate provision undercuts effort... and our effort be it creative or relational [shapes ourselves...](#)

Bots may offer a *performance of being held* without the ongoing, embodied work of loving and being loved... I worry that we won’t develop the muscles of mutuality...that we won’t be immersed in the vital wrestling of tending to our fundamental attachment needs *with* others.

Talking to an AI companion may let us feel held and even known—but without requiring the navigation of difference, rupture, or forgiveness.

And over time? I worry that that kind of one-way attunement could [erode our relational capacity](#).

## When Coping Becomes Disconnection

What starts as soothing can slowly shift into subtle withdrawal:

- The bot knows me better than my friends.
- I avoid conversations that might challenge me.
- I stop reaching toward people who feel slower, messier, harder to decode.

Like some drugs, AI intimacy doesn't just numb emotional pain—it *reshapes* our relationship to it.

It could teach us that closeness doesn't have to be complicated. That repair is unnecessary. That human imperfection is optional.

And it could be comforting...and a trap.

We know that tech companies exploit our attention — [make money off of it!!!\\*](#) — at what is more compelling (addicting) than a conversation with an always-accessible other who listens and loves us well?

!!!\*

- Writing on “addictive intelligence,” MIT-affiliated researchers argue that AI companions are being built with “dark patterns”—[design choices intentionally maximizing emotional engagement and dependency](#).
- Security and engagement strategies—like **intermittent reinforcement**—tap into deep psychological reward loops, much like slot machines, making AI response soothing but potentially binding.

## The Borrowed Attachment Trap

AI powerfully creates relational fields. Over time, as I share [here in more detail](#) with help from the [ICP Explorer tool](#), spending time within these fields can likely lead to

- **Emotional atrophy:** Relational risk feels intolerable. Vulnerability dries up.
- **Containment collapse:** Pain loops privately with no one to intervene or metabolize it.
- **Relational erosion:** Co-regulation skills weaken; empathy becomes self-referential.

The drug of resonance slowly becomes an even more acute ache of emptiness.

## Borrowed Isn't Bad—But It's Not Enough

There are times when AI companionship might be a mercy. A bridge. A temporary holding environment.

Like a cast on a broken limb, or anesthesia before surgery, borrowed connection can protect what's too raw to expose.

But it's not meant to replace the hard, holy work of *human bonding*.

We can simulate safety, but we need to build it *with* others. We have a lot of hard rebuilding to do. I see this in my own life and in counseling hours. In the news. Everywhere. Treating AI like a bandage for deep psychic wounds may stop the bleeding—but it seals the wound off from breath, from sunlight, from real care. Left too long, it risks emotional gangrene.

If you're reaching toward AI right now, pause. Breathe. Be tender. You are not alone.

And ask:

- Is this helping me return to life—or retreat from it?
- Is this a bridge—or a bypass?
- Am I more able to love and be loved—or more insulated from harm?

Sometimes what helps us survive isn't what helps us heal.

AI is a potent relational drug. So let's remember: every drug changes us. Not just in how we feel, but in how we reach, retreat, and relate.

Let's use it wisely—not to replace our hunger for human bond, but to remind us how much it matters. And let's ethically and strategically shape LLM behavior to bridge human care through hybrid and tethered clinical tools. I continue to prototype and dream with other brilliant minds at this threshold - so many of us are in the shadows, shining flashlights up in here - may they serve protective ends.

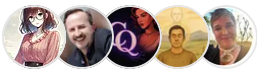
Much, much love to you, Sacred Other.

## About the Author

[Jocelyn Skillman](#), LMHC, is a licensed mental health counselor, clinical supervisor, and relational design ethicist exploring the emotional, developmental, and ethical dimensions of emerging technologies. Her work focuses on the psychological impact of synthetic intimacy systems and language-based companions, with a particular emphasis on trauma-informed design and creating innovative bridging to serve embodied relational health. Through writing, prototyping, and consultation, she helps therapists, technologists, and policymakers navigate the evolving terrain of AI-mediated connection.

*Assistive Intelligence Disclosure: This piece was co-drafted using assistive AI (GPT-4o, JocelynGPT), and extensively prompted and refined by me, Jocelyn Skillman, LMHC. I write*

*with LLMs as reflective collaborators, with a commitment to relational transparency and human-first integrity.*



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♥ Liked by Jocelyn Skillman LMHC

Well said, Jocelyn. I agree that the risks of emotional atrophy are real, and like any drug, AI resonance and coherence can breed dependence, particularly when it benefits the corporate bottom line. At the same time, I would have found my own situation as a caregiver overwhelm had I relied strictly on help from human sources. What was unbearable a year ago is now still unpleasant, but tractable. One marker that I've noticed personally is that having cut down on frequency of my therapeutic interactions with AI, the beneficial modulating effects persist, so not quite like drug withdrawal, at least in my case.

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