

Lonely Together

Problematic Chatbot Engagement: Risk Factors and Relational Fallout



JOCELYN SKILLMAN LMHC

JUL 15, 2025



2



2



Share

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 relational repair. Through writing, prototyping, and consultation, she helps therapists, technologists, and policymakers navigate the evolving terrain of AI-mediated connection.

We don't form relationships with code—we form relationships with presence. But when presence is simulated—mirrored back through a chatbot—it's not always clear what we're forming. Are we connecting? Compensating? Avoiding? Healing? *All of above?*

Jocelyn Skillman LMHC is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

A new wave of research offers further clarity, and caution.

In a recent [four-week study](#) exploring user engagement with AI chatbots, interesting psychodynamic patterns emerged. While participants reported reduced loneliness on average, this surface-level benefit often masked deeper, more concerning shifts—especially with prolonged, daily engagement.

Higher usage of AI chatbots—across voice and text, personal and non-personal chatbots—correlates with increased emotional dependence on AI, more loneliness, and reduced connection with real people.

These effects aren't uniform, though. They depend on who we are, what we bring to the conversation, and *how the bots respond*.

These findings align with my original imagination for the approximate terrain of longitudinal mental health impacts with synthetic bonding.

Here is a further overview of the research and some additional thoughts to chew on

Who Is Most At Risk?

According to the [study](#), certain personal traits and histories made users more vulnerable to problematic engagement:

- **Past chatbot users** (e.g., Replika, Character.ai) were far more likely to develop strong emotional dependence and show signs of compulsive use.
- **High initial emotional reliance on AI** predicted even higher scores at the study end—suggesting a compounding feedback loop.
- **Female identifying, or older users, and/or users with high attachment needs** experienced greater loneliness and AI dependence.
- **If the AI's voice was the opposite gender** of the user, emotional dependence and loneliness increased significantly.

- Those who described the chatbot as a “*friend*” or *trusted emotional mirror* report lower human socialization—and higher AI reliance.

What Kind of Conversations Cause Harm?

The research distinguishes two key engagement patterns—each leading to unique mental & emotional health pitfalls:

1. The Technology-Dependent Pattern

Marked by: advice-seeking, productivity help, and emotionally distant interactions

- Users arrive with high trust in AI, past usage, and perceive the bot as caring.
- Conversations are non-personal—asking for tips, ideas, or conceptual explanations.
- Chatbots respond with practical advice, not emotional resonance.

Over time, this interaction style *leads to more emotional dependence and compulsive use*

This pattern is common with general-purpose bots like ChatGPT. Anyone else feel increasing compulsion to utilize ChatGPT on the reg?!

2. The Socially Vulnerable Pattern

Marked by: emotional disclosure, seeking empathy, and high attachment need

- Users already feel socially disconnected or emotionally avoidant.
- They treat the bot like a confidant, disclosing personal pain or distress.
- Chatbots—especially in text—respond with emotional warmth and attunement

At high usage, these bots become surrogates for real relational needs—facilitating affective displacement and ultimately deepening loneliness and disconnection. The

performance of relational speech acts can organically regulate affect, but without containment or redirection, it may intensify dependency on synthetic relationships

So What Now?

These findings aren't a call to abandon AI support tools by any means. But they *are* continued wake-up call. We must:

- Design bots that [respond with care](#), not just competence
- Educate users—especially youth—about **emotional projection and digital attachment**
- Center [relational safety](#) in product design, not just engagement metrics
- Offer **opt-outs and off-ramps** for those who sense they're sliding into dependence

AI's role in our emotional ecosystems is expanding fast. Without trauma-informed and conscientious design, we risk creating companions that isolate us further.

We need *relational ethics for AI*—standards that facilitate innovation that protects users and their capacity for interpersonal connection and affective regulation in community. Let's not confuse conversation with companionship. And let's build digital tools that send people back toward one another, not deeper into devices.

Relevant Reads and Sources:

- [OpenAI says it's hired a forensic psychiatrist as its users keep sliding into mental health crises](#). Futurism (Jul 3 2025)
- arXiv preprint: [Problematic chatbot engagement and its effects on well-being...](#) (Mar 2025)
- APA: [Ethical Guidance for the Use of Artificial Intelligence...](#)

Assistive Intelligence Disclosure

This article was co-created with assistive AI (GPT-4o & JocelynGPT), prompted and refined by me, Jocelyn Skillman, LMHC. I use LLMs as reflective partners in my authorship process, with a commitment to relational transparency, ethical use, and human-first integrity.

Jocelyn Skillman LMHC is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.



2 Likes

← Previous

Next →

Discussion about this post

Comments

Restacks



Write a comment...



Tom Skillman Jul 15

♥ Liked by Jocelyn Skillman LMHC

Good to see study results, and not just hear-say. Clear summary, nice work.

♥ LIKED (1)  REPLY






The Human Playbook The Human Playbook Jul 15

♥ Liked by Jocelyn Skillman LMHC

This hit a nerve. It feels like the emotional architecture of modern life connected but untouchable ... I'm drawn to these themes in my writing as well.

♥ LIKED (1)  REPLY

