

11: Calling Dr. Alexa

Grace, a high school senior, has been grappling with anxiety and stress due to academic pressures and social dynamics. Seeking support, she discovers an AI-powered therapy app offering cognitive-behavioral techniques and mindfulness exercises. Attracted by its accessibility and affordability, Grace begins using the app regularly.

The rise of AI therapy platforms represents a new direction of mental health care. Proponents argue that such technology democratizes access to support, especially for those who may face barriers to traditional therapy due to cost, stigma, or scheduling. It's plausible that AI therapy apps could fill a crucial gap by providing immediate assistance to people who might otherwise go without help. Even the American Psychological Association mentions that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) "places an emphasis on helping individuals learn to be their own therapists".¹

However, concerns arise about the efficacy and ethics of relying on AI for mental health. Critics point out that AI lacks the empathetic understanding of human therapists. An algorithm may not be able to replace the nuanced understanding of human connection and there's a risk of oversimplifying complex emotional issues, not to mention the potential for unhelpful (or even harmful) advice or directives.

Grace notices improvements in her mood and appreciates the convenience that AI therapy offers. The app's exercises help her manage stress, and the 24/7 availability fits her busy schedule. However, she sometimes wonders whether the responses from the app truly address her individual needs or if they're generic solutions that dilute her individual perspective. Privacy is another concern; the app collects personal data to tailor its services and she wonders about how this sensitive information is stored and used.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it appropriate for technology to play such a significant role in something as personal as mental health?
2. What level of clinical evidence and oversight should be required before an AI app may present itself as 'therapeutic'?
3. If an AI system reliably outperforms average therapists on key outcomes, is there still a moral reason to prefer human care for some patients?

¹ American Psychological Association. 2017. "What Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?" *APA PTSD Guideline*. <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral>.