

Automating empathy

With youth loneliness on the rise, many are turning to chatbots for connection and social support. While these 'AI friends' can provide short-term relief, experts warn they may end up deepening the isolation in the long run.



Do you know who your kids are talking to online? Meta owner Mark Zuckerberg has pitched a future where we all have 'AI friends' to help with loneliness – and this future is already unfolding in Malaysia. — 123rf



Here are some ways to cope with loneliness:

Feeling lonely? You are not alone

Connect with purpose: Join new clubs, creative workshops, volunteer activities or reach out to extended family members or old friends.

Be kind to yourself: Spend time doing activities you enjoy, or write down some things you like about yourself.

Talk about it: Don't be afraid to talk about your feelings of loneliness and isolation with friends or family or someone else you trust.

Think about what's making you feel lonely: Identifying the issue will not magically solve loneliness, but it will make it a bit more manageable moving forward.

Spend time with animals: Hanging out with pets is a great way to feel less lonely.

For parents looking to spot when their child feels lonely, here are some changes to look out for:

<p>Social withdrawal: It is okay for your child to spend time alone but if they begin to do so in a way that is out-of-character, this can be a sign of social withdrawal.</p>	<p>Trouble sleeping: Children or young people experiencing loneliness are likely to have increased levels of stress and difficulty sleeping.</p>	<p>Low self-esteem or a loss of confidence: When experiencing loneliness, young people may experience low self-esteem.</p>	<p>Feeling frustrated: If a child or young person is getting frustrated easily, this may indicate that they are dealing with other inner struggles.</p>
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You can also reach out to these helplines for further support:

The Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA)
Psychological Therapy and Support Services
Phone: +03 2780 6803 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm, except public holidays)

Talian Kasih 15999
24-hour Nationwide Helpline & Counselling
Phone: 15999 or WhatsApp: +60192615999

The Befrienders
Emotional Support & Suicide Prevention Helpline

<p>■ Klang Valley +603-7627 2929 (24 hours)</p> <p>■ Penang +604-2910 100 +6011-56706261 (3pm-12am midnight)</p> <p>■ Ipoh +605-5477 933 +605-5477 955 (1pm-10pm)</p>	<p>■ Seremban +606-6321 772 +606-6321 773 +6018-9691772 (7pm-10pm)</p> <p>■ Melaka +606-2250 791 (7pm-12am midnight)</p> <p>■ Muar +606-9520 313 +606-9540 313 (8pm-11pm)</p>	<p>■ Johor Bahru +607-331 2300 +607-331 2300 (4pm-10pm)</p> <p>■ Kota Kinabalu +608-8255 788 +608-8259 788 +6016-803 6945 (7pm-10pm)</p> <p>■ Kuching +6082 242 800 (6.30pm - 9pm)</p>
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Sources: Mental Health America, Relate Malaysia

TheStargraphics

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YOUNG people are always connected 24/7 nowadays – sharing their opinions, posting details of their lives, jumping into group chats, scrolling through social media feeds, liking posts, rumbling in multiplayer games, and even making new friends online.

You might think this would provide social fulfilment, but the truth is all these digital interactions hide a deeper sense of isolation among the youth.

In a survey conducted by Gallup and Meta between 2022 and 2023 in 142 countries, they found that approximately one in four young people below the age of 30 reported feeling fairly lonely or very lonely.

Perhaps surprisingly, that same survey found older adults aged 65 and above reported feeling lonely at a much lower rate – 10% lower. This is despite all age groups reporting feeling high social connectedness above 70%.

Within Malaysia, the Health Ministry's National Health and Morbidity Survey 2022 also pointed to a rising trend in loneliness among secondary school students, rising sharply from 8.1% to 16.2% within 10 years.

This is a worrying trend says founder of mental health portal Relate Malaysia and clinical psychologist Dr Chua Sook Ning because loneliness often goes unrecognised as a serious issue, as it is overshadowed by more commonly discussed mental health concerns.

But amid this growing emotional void, a new kind of support is emerging: chatbots driven by artificial intelligence.

Meta owner Mark Zuckerberg has even pitched a future where we all have "AI friends" to help with loneliness – and this future is already unfolding in Malaysia.

In recent research, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak senior lecturer Dr Chuah Kee Man says his team found that nearly 90% of their respondents, particularly those from Gen Z, regularly used AI tools such as ChatGPT and Google's Gemini AI to share their personal challenges.

However, while experts say such tools may provide short-term relief for those seeking to ease loneliness, they may risk deepening isolation by replacing genuine human connection and delaying help from professionals.

AI mates versus human buddies

Dr Azree Nazri, head of

laboratory at the Institute of Mathematical Research at Universiti Putra Malaysia, says several studies have indicated that AI chatbots are providing some sense of emotional relief in users.

For example, he says, a 2023 study in South Korea involving college students found users of AI-based wellness apps reported reductions in loneliness and depression over a four-month period with qualitative feedback revealing a high level of user satisfaction and emotional support.

Even more intriguing, he adds, are studies from last year that have found users consistently underestimated how emotionally impactful their interactions with AI companions would be.

"The data suggested that these digital interactions provided emotional relief comparable in some cases to real human support, particularly in moments of vulnerability," he says.

Chuah, who specialises in educational technology, instructional design, and computational linguistics, says AI has already shown its value as a companion for someone who is anxious or simply seeking a listening ear.

"I personally think AI friends may be effective for alleviating short-term loneliness or providing a safe space for social rehearsal."

However, he says while AI can simulate certain aspects of companionship like offering empathy or personalised responses, it's still a long way from truly replicating the richness of human relationships.

"Real friendships are built on shared experiences and an ever-evolving cycle of emotion and trust. So AI can play a supportive role but it cannot yet replace the fundamental need for genuine human connection," he says.

Pointing to results from his recent research, he says while 90% of respondents said they regularly used AI tools for emotional support, all of them said no when asked if AI could replace human friends.

The issue, he says, is authenticity because while AI can mimic empathy, it lacks true self-awareness and lived experience.

Users can sense this "emotional gap" over time, which could paradoxically lead to deeper feelings of isolation, he says.

This is backed by a recent studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says Chua, who explains the studies found that higher daily engagement with AI, whether for per-

sonal or non-personal conversations, was associated with increased loneliness, greater dependence on the technology, more problematic usage patterns, and reduced social interaction in real life.

"While AI might provide short-term comfort or convenience, it risks deepening the very isolation proponents claim it eases by pulling people further away from meaningful human connection," she says.

Speaking about the same studies, Azree says this suggests that when overused, AI can discourage deeper engagement in human relationships.

He says the four-week longitudinal study involving nearly 1,000 participants revealed a direct correlation between daily AI chatbot usage and reduced real-world social interaction, alongside rising emotional dependence.

"These findings underline a critical point: AI companions can act as emotional buffers, especially for those lacking human support, but they should be regarded as supplemental, not substitutive, tools for mental and emotional well-being."

Build better communities, not better chatbots

Chuah also expresses concern that those who spend more time chatting with AI chatbots rather than real humans may end up not knowing how to interact with people in real life or end up blurring the line between reality and simulation.

"Also, while AI can offer support, it is not a substitute for professional help. Users experiencing severe depression or other mental health issues might delay seeking real assistance, relying on AI instead," Chuah says.

For computer science expert Emeritus Prof Datuk Tengku Mohd Tengku Sembok, the question of AI friends isn't simply about whether they can effectively address loneliness – it also opens the door to serious ethical and spiritual questions.

"Loneliness is not merely a psychological void; it is a spiritual ailment rooted in disconnection from both community and the Creator," he says.

Religious teachings consider caring for the lonely a collective obligation, he explains, and thus outsourcing this duty to machines may dehumanise society and shift moral responsibility from people to machines.

"Are we allowing AI to replace

what should be human acts of duty?" he questions.

More practically, he says, there are also significant risks of data exploitation as these "AI friends" inevitably collect emotional and behavioural data.

"If commercial interests drive such platforms, the vulnerable may become commodities."

"Any system that pretends to be your friend while mining your feelings must be scrutinised," he says.

That is not to say he completely rejects AI; instead, Prof Tengku Mohd says it is a call to humanise the use of AI by using it as a guide towards real help rather than replacing genuine community-building.

"In the end, addressing loneliness is not about building better chatbots. It is about building better communities. And that is something no machine can do better than us."