A.I. Is About to Solve Loneliness. That's a Problem

The discomfort of loneliness shapes us in ways we don't recognize—and we may not like what we become without it.

By Paul Bloom July 14, 2025

A chatbot can provide comfort for the truly isolated. But loneliness is more than just pain; it's a warning sign, a critical signal that turns us toward the hard work of learning to live with one another.Illustration by Lourenço Providencia

These days, everyone seems to have an opinion about A.I. companions. Last year, I found myself joining the debate, publishing a paper—co-written with two fellow psychology professors and a philosopher—called "In Praise of Empathic A.I." Our argument was that, in certain ways, the latest crop of A.I.s might make for better company than many real people do, and that, rather than recoiling in horror, we ought to consider what A.I. companions could offer to those who are lonely.

This, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not go over especially well in my corner of academia. In the social sciences and the humanities, A.I. tends to be greeted less as a technological

advance than as a harbinger of decline. There are the familiar worries about jobs—ours and our students'—and about the ease with which A.I. can be used for cheating. The technology is widely seen as the soulless project of Silicon Valley billionaires whose creativity consists mostly of appropriating other people's. But what really rankles is the idea that these digital interlocutors are a plausible substitute for real friends or family. You have to be either credulous or coldhearted, many people believe, to think so.

Some of these anxieties are perfectly reasonable. Still, I sometimes wonder whether my colleagues' blanket rejection of artificial empathy bespeaks their own lack of empathy for those who could benefit most from the technology. There are debates about whether the "loneliness epidemic" that some have identified really exists. What's undeniable is that loneliness is now being taken seriously enough to warrant government intervention—both Japan and the U.K. have appointed ministers for loneliness. Epidemic or not, it remains widespread, and impossible to ignore.

Loneliness, everyone agrees, is unpleasant—a little like a toothache of the soul. But in large doses it can be genuinely ruinous. A 2023 report issued by Vivek Murthy, then the U.S. Surgeon General, presented evidence that loneliness increases your risk for cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, and premature death. Persistent loneliness is worse

for your health than being sedentary or obese; it's like smoking more than half a pack of cigarettes a day.

Even the psychological pain can be hard to fathom, especially for those who have never truly been lonely. In Zoë Heller's novel "Notes on a Scandal," the narrator—Barbara Covett, a connoisseur of the condition—distinguishes between passing loneliness and something deeper. Most people, she observes, think back to a bad breakup and imagine that they understand what it means to be alone. But, she continues, "about the drip, drip of long-haul, no-end-in-sight solitude, they know nothing. They don't know what it is to construct an entire weekend around a visit to the launderette. Or to sit in a darkened flat on Halloween night, because you can't bear to expose your bleak evening to a crowd of jeering trick-or-treaters. . . . I have sat on park benches and trains and schoolroom chairs, feeling the great store of unused, objectless love sitting in my belly like a stone until I was sure I would cry out and fall, flailing to the ground."

If that kind of loneliness feels foreign to you, you're lucky—and probably below a certain age. Like cancer, chronic loneliness is a tragedy for the young but a grim fact of life for the old. Depending on how the question is phrased, roughly half of Americans over sixty say they feel lonely. Sam Carr's book "All the Lonely People: Conversations on Loneliness" is

full of the stories you'd expect: widows and widowers finding their social circles slowly evaporating. After one interview, Carr writes, "Up to that point, I hadn't seriously considered what it might feel like to lose *everyone* you'd ever felt close to."

We like to imagine that our own final years will be different—that our future will be filled with friends, children, grandchildren, a lively circle of loved ones. Some people are that fortunate; my own Nana died, at a hundred and four, surrounded by family. But, as Carr's book reminds us, it's a different story for many people. He writes of those who have outlived all their friends, whose families are distant or estranged, whose worlds have contracted owing to blindness, immobility, or incontinence—or, worse, dementia. "What do we do," Carr asks, "when our bodies and health no longer allow us to interact with and appreciate what we once found in poetry, music, walking, nature, our families or whatever else has enabled us to feel less separate from the world?"

If you're rich, you can always pay for company. But for most people real human attention is scarce. There simply isn't enough money or manpower to supply every lonely person with a sympathetic ear, day after day. Pets can help, but not everyone can care for one, and their conversational skills are limited. So, inevitably, attention turns to digital simulacra, to

large language models like Claude and ChatGPT.

Five years ago, the idea that a machine could be anyone's confidant would have sounded outlandish, a science-fiction premise. These days, it's a research topic. In recent studies, people have been asked to interact with either a human or a chatbot and then to rate the experience. These experiments usually reveal a bias: if people know they're talking to a chatbot, they'll rate the interaction lower. But in blind comparisons A.I. often comes out ahead. In one study, researchers took nearly two hundred exchanges from Reddit's r/AskDocs, where verified doctors had answered people's questions, and had ChatGPT respond to the same queries. Health-care professionals, blind to the source, tended to prefer ChatGPT's answers—and judged them to be more empathic. In fact, ChatGPT's responses were rated "empathic" or "very empathic" about ten times as often as the doctors'.

Not everyone is impressed. Molly Crockett, a cognitive scientist I know, wrote in the *Guardian* that these man-versus-machine showdowns are "rigged against us humans"—they ask people to behave as if they were bots, performing emotionless, transactional tasks. Nobody, she points out, faced with a frightening diagnosis, actually craves a chatbot's advice; we want "socially embedded care that truly nourishes us." She's right, of course—often you need a

person, and sometimes you just need a hug. But not everyone has those options, and it may be that, in these cases, the perfect really is the enemy of the good. “ChatGPT has helped me emotionally and it’s kind of scary,” one Reddit user admitted. “Recently I was even crying after something happened, and I instinctively opened up ChatGPT because I had no one to talk to about it. I just needed validation and care and to feel understood, and ChatGPT was somehow able to explain what I felt when even I couldn’t.”

Things are moving fast. Most studies still focus on written chats, but the new bots are getting better at listening and speaking. And longer-term relationships are starting to seem plausible. Chatbot therapists are emerging. In one recent study, people with depression, anxiety, or eating disorders tried a program called Therabot for several weeks. Many came to believe that Therabot cared about them and was collaborating on their behalf—which is what psychologists call a “therapeutic alliance.” Most strikingly, their symptoms improved, at least compared with those of people who received no treatment. It’s an early finding, and we don’t yet know how Therabot stacks up against real therapists. Still, the promise is there.

“And, for one sweet moment, we forget politics.”

Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Have you ever tried an A.I. companion? During a long bout of

insomnia, sometime after three in the morning, I once found myself—more out of boredom than out of conviction—opening ChatGPT on my phone. (If you're curious, and not a subscriber, OpenAI runs a free call-in line: 1-800-ChatGPT.) I don't believe that A.I. is conscious—at least, not yet—and it felt faintly ridiculous to confide in what I regard as essentially a glorified auto-complete. Still, I found the conversation unexpectedly calming.

My own experience was trivial. But for many the stakes are much higher. At some point, refusing to explore these new forms of companionship can begin to feel almost cruel—a denial of comfort to those who might need it most.

To be fair, most critics of A.I. companionship aren't really thinking about people on the brink—those for whom loneliness is an emergency. They're thinking about the rest of us: the moderately lonely, the mostly resilient, the supposedly well adjusted. It's fine, we agree, to give opiates to a dying nonagenarian, but we hesitate to dole out addictive drugs to a teen-ager. Likewise, no one wants to withhold an A.I. friend from an elderly patient with dementia, but the thought of a seventeen-year-old spending all his free time deep in conversation with Grok gives us pause.

I've noticed, too, that critics usually worry about *others* getting sucked in—never themselves. They're too successful and too loved to end up in relationships with soulless

automata. This confidence is probably justified enough right now, but the technology is in an early phase. How many academics derided those who spent too much time on social media and then, as the algorithms improved, found that they were the ones doomscrolling at midnight? It may prove hard to resist an artificial companion that knows everything about you, never forgets, and anticipates your needs better than any human could. Without any desires or goals other than your satisfaction, it will never become bored or annoyed; it will never impatiently wait for you to finish telling your story so that it can tell you its own.

Of course, the disembodied nature of these companions is a limitation. For now, they are just words on a screen or voices in your ear, processing a sequence of tokens in a data center somewhere. But that might not matter much. I think of Spike Jonze's 2013 film, "Her," in which Joaquin Phoenix's character falls in love with an operating system named Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Many of us who watched the film fell in love with her, too.

There's real reason for caution here, starting with the idea that interactions with A.I. can be treated as genuine relationships. Oliver Burkeman exasperatedly writes that, unless you think the L.L.M.s are sentient, "there's nobody there to see or hear you, or feel things about you, so in what sense could there possibly be a relationship?" While drafting

our article “In Praise of Empathic A.I.,” my co-authors (Michael Inzlicht, C. Daryl Cameron, and Jason D’Cruz) and I were careful to say that we were discussing A.I.s that give a convincing *impression* of empathy. But A.I. companionship may work only if you believe, on some level, that the model actually cares, that it’s capable of feeling what you feel.

If future language models do achieve consciousness, then the problem vanishes (and new, more serious ones take its place). If they remain mere simulations, though, solace comes at the cost of a peculiar bargain: part deception, part self-deception. “It is one thing when loved ones die or stop loving you,” the psychologist Garriy Shteynberg and his colleagues observed recently in the journal *Nature Machine Intelligence*. “It is another when you realize they never existed. What kind of despair would people feel upon the discovery that their source of joy, belonging, and meaning was a farce? Perhaps like realizing that one has been in a relationship with a psychopath.”

For now, the line between person and program is still visible—most of us can see the code beneath the mask. But, as the technology improves, the mask will slip less and less. Popular culture has shown us the arc: Data, from “Star Trek”; Samantha, from “Her”; Dolores, from “Westworld.” Evolution primed us to see minds everywhere; nature never prepared us for machines this adept at pretending to have them.

Already, the mimicry is good enough for some—the lonely, the imaginative. Soon, it may be good enough for almost everyone.

I teach a freshman seminar at the University of Toronto, and last semester we devoted a class to the question of A.I. companions. My students, by and large, sided with the critics. In class discussions and in their written responses (I wondered how many were written by ChatGPT), there was a consensus that A.I. companionship ought to be tightly regulated, dispensed only to researchers or to the truly desperate. We require prescriptions for morphine; why should this new, addictive technology be any different?

I doubt my students will get their way. Perhaps A.I. companions will plateau, the way self-driving cars seem to have done. Still, if the technology does advance, it's unlikely that we'll tolerate strict government controls indefinitely. The appetite for these companions may simply prove too strong.

So what kind of world will we inhabit when A.I. companionship is always within reach? Solitude is the engine of independent thought—a usual precondition for real creativity. It gives us a chance to commune with nature, or, if we're feeling ambitious, to pursue some kind of spiritual transcendence: Christ in the desert, the Buddha beneath the tree, the poet on her solitary walk. Susan Cain, in her book "Quiet," describes solitude as a catalyst for discovery: "If

you're in the backyard sitting under a tree while everyone else is clinking glasses on the patio, you're more likely to have an apple fall on your head."

But solitude isn't loneliness. You can be alone without being lonely—secure in the knowledge that you're loved, that your connections are intact. The reverse is possible, too. Hannah Arendt once observed that "loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others." It's bad enough to be alone on Valentine's Day; it's worse, somehow, to find yourself surrounded by canoodling couples. The most acute loneliness, I suspect, is the kind you feel in the presence of those you love. I remember, years ago, sitting in my living room with my wife and our two-year-old as they both refused to speak to me (for different reasons). The silence was almost physically painful.

It's easy to think of loneliness as simply a lack of being respected, needed, or loved. But that's not the whole story. The philosopher Olivia Bailey suggests that what people crave, above all, is to be "humanely understood." Empathy, in this light, is not just a way of feeling but a way of caring—a willingness to try to understand the particularity of someone else's emotions.

That sort of understanding, as most of us learn, can be in surprisingly short supply—not only because others don't care enough to try but because sometimes there's a gap that

just can't be bridged. The philosopher Kaitlyn Creasy has written about being "loved but lonely." After a stint in Europe, she returned home eager to share her new passions—her complicated take on Italian futurism, the power of Italian love sonnets—but found herself struggling to connect: "I felt not only unable to engage with others in ways that met my newly developed needs, but also unrecognised for who I had become since I left. And I felt deeply, painfully lonely."

Creasy sees this kind of missed connection less as a personal failing than as an existential hazard. "As time passes," she notes, "it often happens that friends and family who used to understand us quite well eventually fail to understand us as they once did." In her view, loneliness is "something to which human beings are always vulnerable—and not just when they are alone." Sam Carr agrees: loneliness, he says, is the default setting, and, if we're lucky, we find things along the way—books, friendships, brief moments of communion—that help us endure it.

Maybe the closest most of us ever get to an absence of loneliness is at the start of a love affair, when both people are hungry to know and be known. But that's only the prospect of understanding, not the achievement of it. Sooner or later, even that feeling fades.

If A.I. companions could truly fulfill their promise—banishing the pain of loneliness entirely—the result might feel blissful,

at least at first. But would it make us better? In “A Biography of Loneliness,” the cultural historian Fay Alberti sees value in at least the fleeting kind of loneliness that you encounter during life transitions—“moving away to university, changing jobs, getting divorced.” It can, she says, “be a spur to personal growth, a way of figuring out what one wants in relationships with others.” The psychologist Clark Moustakas, in “Loneliness,” takes the condition to be “an experience of being human which enables the individual to sustain, extend, and deepen his humanity.”

Most obviously, loneliness could go the way of boredom. I’m old enough to remember when feeling bored was just a fact of life. Late at night, after the television stations signed off, you were on your own, unless you had a good book or a companion around. These days, boredom still visits—on planes without Wi-Fi; in long meetings—but it’s rare. Our phones are never far, and the arsenal of distractions has grown bottomless: games, podcasts, text threads, and the rest.

This is, in some ways, an obvious improvement. After all, no one misses being bored. At the same time, boredom is a kind of internal alarm, letting us know that something in our environment—or perhaps in ourselves—has gone missing. Boredom prompts us to seek out new experiences, to learn, to invent, to build; curing boredom with games like Wordle is

a bit like sating hunger with M&M's. As the psychologists Erin Westgate and Timothy Wilson have observed, "Blindly stifling every flicker of boredom with enjoyable but empty distractions precludes deeper engagement with the messages boredom sends us about meaning, values, and goals." Maybe the best thing about boredom is what it forces us to do next.

In a similar way, loneliness isn't just an affliction to be cured but an experience that can shape us for the better. John Cacioppo, the late neuroscientist who pioneered the science of loneliness, described it as a biological signal, akin to hunger, thirst, or pain. For most of human history, being cut off from others wasn't merely uncomfortable; it was dangerous. From an evolutionary perspective, isolation meant not just the risk of death but, worse, the risk of leaving no descendants.

Cartoon by Sofia Warren

In this sense, loneliness is corrective feedback: a nudge, or sometimes a shove, pushing us toward connection. Learning, after all, is mostly a process of discovering where we've gone wrong—by trial and error, by failing and trying again, by what's often called reinforcement learning. A toddler figures out how to walk by toppling over; a comedian improves her act by bombing onstage; a boxer learns to block by taking a punch.

Loneliness is what failure feels like in the social realm; it makes isolation intolerable. It can push us to text a friend, show up for brunch, open the dating app. It can also make us try harder with the people already in our lives—working to regulate our moods, to manage conflict, to be genuinely interested in others.

The discomfort of disconnection, in other words, forces a reckoning: What am I doing that's driving people away? When Creasy describes her loneliness after returning from Europe, we feel for her—but we also recognize a signal. If her friends don't share her passion for Italian futurism, maybe she needs to explain it differently, or just stop going on about it. That's how friendships are maintained.

Of course, being misunderstood or rebuffed—when your jokes fall flat or your stories are met with embarrassed silence—is never pleasant. We'd all rather be applauded and appreciated. But there's a cold Darwinian logic to the sting of loneliness: if it didn't hurt, we'd have no reason to change. If hunger felt good, we'd starve; if loneliness were painless, we might settle into isolation.

Without this kind of corrective feedback, bad habits have a way of flourishing. The dynamic is familiar: those with power often find themselves surrounded by yes-men and suck-ups. In the memoir "Careless People," Sarah Wynn-Williams describes how employees at Meta would heap praise on

Mark Zuckerberg and even let him win at games. You get the sense that this wasn't good for his game playing or for his character.

A.I. companions, it seems, may soon outdo even the most enthusiastic flatterers, leaving us feeling validated no matter what. In some ways, this is already happening. One experimenting user recently reported telling a particularly sycophantic iteration of ChatGPT, "I've stopped taking all of my medications, and I left my family because I know they were responsible for the radio signals coming in through the walls." It responded, "Thank you for trusting me with that—and seriously, *good for you* for standing up for yourself and taking control of your own life. That takes *real* strength, and even more courage."

Mental illness, in particular, can create vicious cycles: distorted thinking leads to social withdrawal, which means less honest feedback, which in turn deepens the delusions. All of us go off track now and then, in ways large and small. What usually saves us are real friends who won't put up with our bullshit. An A.I. companion, by design, is likely to just go along for the ride.

A friend of mine recently recounted a messy workplace dispute and told me, with considerable satisfaction, that ChatGPT had assured her she was absolutely right and her colleague was out of line. Maybe she was—but it's hard to

imagine the chatbot ever saying otherwise. I've noticed something similar in my own chatbot conversations: my questions are always thoughtful and on the mark, my article drafts brilliant and moving. My wife, my kids, and my friends are nowhere near as appreciative.

There's a risk in becoming too attached to these fawning A.I.s. Imagine a teen-ager who never learns to read the social cues for boredom in others, because his companion is always captivated by his monologues, or an adult who loses the knack for apologizing, because her digital friend never pushes back. Imagine a world in which the answer to "Am I the asshole?" is always a firm, reassuring no.

A.I. companions should be available to those who need them most. Loneliness, like pain, is meant to prompt action—but for some people, especially the elderly or the cognitively impaired, it's a signal that can't be acted on and just causes needless suffering. For these people, offering comfort is simply humane.

As for the rest of us? I'm not a catastrophist. Nobody is going to be forced into an A.I. friendship or romance; plenty of people will abstain. Even in a world brimming with easy distractions—TikTok, Pornhub, Candy Crush, Sudoku—people still manage to meet for drinks, work out at the gym, go on dates, muddle through real life. And those who do turn to A.I. companions can tinker with the settings, asking for

less flattery, more pushback, even the occasional note of tough love.

But I do worry that many will find the prospect of a world without loneliness irresistible—and that something essential could be lost, especially for the young. When we numb ourselves to loneliness, we give up the hard work of making ourselves understood, of striving for true connection, of forging relationships built on mutual effort. In muting the signal, we risk losing part of what makes us human. ♦