

Becoming friends with artificial intelligence

Fears of the unknown are normal, but AI can be useful to your health if you can navigate it

Artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly expanded in 2023, and it's here to stay. ChatGPT, Snapchat and altered photos and videos are just some of the AI encounters people have on their devices daily.

AI has many positives. But experts say when it comes to health advice, take it from a trained human being, not a robot. And if you're scared of "the rise of the robots" – as they say in Hollywood – there are ways to cope.

"You're absolutely normal to be anxious when there's the first stirrings of big shifts in technology or other things that might change our life," says Ari Lakritz, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at OSF HealthCare who says he sees these concerns often.

Coming to grips with technology advances

Common fears include technology making your job obsolete or providing you with misinformation. Dr. Lakritz suggests being proactive to the changes, not reactive. Learn how AI is changing your job or hobbies.

"See if you might be able to be part of that. Start integrating some of that into your day-to-day practice," Dr. Lakritz says.

AI can be a time-saver, too.

"It has potential to streamline things we don't like to do, giving us more time and energy to do things we want or things we feel are important," Dr. Lakritz says.

For example, it may take you an hour to do an online search for sources for your college essay. If ChatGPT can do it in minutes, you might have time to take that afternoon walk or meet a friend for lunch, boosting your mental and physical health and spurring creativity.

It's also not our first time dealing with digital unknowns. Remember the supposed Y2K bug around the turn of the millennium? Fears of computer clocks malfunctioning and worse didn't materialize, and experts took away lessons for the next big technology shift, like AI. And a silver lining of the Y2K anxiety, Dr. Lakritz says, is that it got people learning about technology.

Don't go to a robot for mental health care

Snapchat, the photo messaging application popular with young people, recently rolled out a chatbot called "My AI." It's a way for people to connect with someone when they have no one else.

"My AI can answer a burning trivia question, offer advice on the perfect gift for your BFF's birthday, help plan a hiking trip for a long weekend, or suggest what to make for dinner," Snapchat's website says.

But the company concedes: "It's possible My AI's responses may include biased, incorrect, harmful, or misleading content. Because My AI is an evolving feature, you should always independently check answers provided by My AI before relying on any advice, and you should not share confidential or sensitive information."

Some parents and mental health experts have picked up on that concern, too. They worry young people are getting inadequate mental health advice from a robot.

“That’s like Googling your symptoms when you’re sick instead of going to a real doctor,” Dr. Lakritz says with a hint of dismay. “You’ll get a great deal of information, but there will be very little guidance about *how* to use that information and which information is more applicable to you.”

If talking about your mental health virtually is your preferred way to go, there are more legitimate options than Snapchat, Dr. Lakritz says. First and foremost, your health care provider may offer virtual visits. Otherwise, talk to a provider or trusted adult about online, third-party counseling options.

“These are programs that have been tested and vetted. There’s oversight and accountability. There’s research behind it,” Dr. Lakritz explains. “Whereas with an AI assistant, it’s not clear the source of information. It’s not clear how to *use* that information best.”

Will AI and chatrooms replace in-person mental health care? Don’t count on it, Dr. Lakritz predicts. The human connection of being in a room with someone can’t be understated, he says.

When in doubt

When the content on your device is just too much to handle, turn it off, set it aside and take a break.

Look for these warning signs:

“Do you feel you’re doing too much of it? Do you find your use of technology is taking over other interests in your life? Have you tried to cut down but have not been able to? Do you find that using so much technology causes you to stress or dysfunction?” Dr. Lakritz asks.

Most devices have settings that can limit screen time. Parents should set boundaries with their children’s device use. Dr. Lakritz says you can even share your browsing or chat history with a trusted adult so they can make sure you’re using technology appropriately.

If your technology use is causing significant mental health problems, talk to your primary care provider or mental health provider. You can also call 9-8-8 to reach the [Nation Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#).

Learn more

Learn more about behavioral and mental health on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).