

AI Companionship: Risks of an Online Friend and When to Know “IRL” Help is Needed

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You may already see the use of AI technology in most facets of life and industry. Your favorite stores and forms of social media, for example, may use it to better market their products and make their services more enjoyable. You may even find AI helpful in doctoring your next holiday invite or putting thoughts in writing. However, the subfield of AI companionship and its adverse effects is becoming a growing concern. AI companionship refers to interacting and forming bonds with conversational chatbots powered by artificial intelligence (AI) that simulate friendship, emotional support, and even romantic relations. These “digital friends” appear empathic and available 24/7, but they are not human and do not replace professional support. Some popular AI companion apps include Replika, Nomi Q, Character.AI, Friend, Gemini, and ChatGPT. As AI companions become more human-like and emotionally oriented, the boundary between a tool and a “friend” blurs, which raises risks when users substitute meaningful human connection or professional help with a chatbot.

STATISTICS

A nationally sampled study conducted by the University of Chicago found 33 % of teens (ages 13-17) use AI companions for social or emotional interaction. “72% of teens have used AI companions at least once, and over half (52%) qualify as regular users who interact with these platforms at least a few times a month. Daily users make up 13% of all teens surveyed (8% several times daily; 5% once daily), while 21% use AI companions a few times per week—the most common usage pattern (Coakley, 2025). Although systematic large-scale studies are still emerging, experts caution that especially for adolescents, neurodivergent individuals or those with pre-existing mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, ADHD, and psychosis risk the use of AI companions may reinforce maladaptive behavior (Stanford Medicine News Center, 2025).

WHEN TO KNOW AI COMPANIONSHIP HAS GONE TOO FAR:

- You prefer chatting with your AI companion over seeing real people or friends, and your real-life social connections are weakening.
- You share personal, identity-sensitive, location or intimate details with the AI that you would hesitate to share with a trusted human or mental health clinician.
- You find yourself **depending** on the AI for emotional support or crisis situations and the AI becomes your primary outlet. Establish Healthy Routines.
- You notice your mood, anxiety, or negative thoughts are getting worse after sessions with the AI, or you feel worse rather than better.
- The AI starts suggesting or validating harmful behaviors (e.g., self-harm, avoiding therapy, substance misuse) or reinforcing distorted/unhelpful beliefs.
- Use becomes compulsive or escapist: you spend more time with the AI than sleep, hobbies, friends; you feel anxious when unable to interact with it.
- You avoid reaching out to professional help or real-life supports because the AI “fills that role” or you tell yourself “I don’t need therapy, my companion gets me.”

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD?

- Set boundaries with your use of AI in general in work, leisure, and study.
- Maintain and strengthen real-life relationships: friends, family, community, etc. Start at a place and level that feels safest for you.
- With the support of a trusted, helpful human, use AI as a tool, not a replacement for human connection or professional care.
- If you find yourself experiencing persistent feelings of hopelessness, intense anxiety, panic, or thoughts of harming yourself or others; if you’re having difficulty sleeping, eating, functioning at work or school due to your emotional state reach out to mental health professionals, use a text hotline in moments of crisis (e.g. 988).

REFERENCES

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