Could AI help cure 'downward spiral' of human loneliness?

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Are you an introvert, extrovert or ambivert? Take the quiz. Tick the answers that are true for you. Compare results with a classmate.

	Always	Sometimes	Never
1. I feel excited at parties.			
2. I need alone time every day.			
3. I love meeting and talking to new people.			
4. I prefer reading books to going out.			
5. I work better alone.			
6. I work better in a team.			
7. I prefer talking.			
8. I prefer listening.			

2 Key words

a. Write the correct words from the wordpool to complete the definitions below. Then, find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

> artificial intelligence (AI)   chatbot   introvert   lonely   relationship

1. a person who enjoys being alone and likes calm environments _____

2. the way two people or groups behave towards each other _____

3. a computer program created to have conversations with human beings, usually over the internet _____

4. the study and development of computer systems that can copy intelligent human behaviour _____

5. unhappy because you don't have friends or people to talk to _____

> conversation   morals   privacy   social skills   solution

6. the abilities people use to act the right way in a social situation _____

7. when two or more people talk _____

8. standards for good behaviour _____

9. a way to solve a problem _____

10. someone's right to keep their personal information and relationships secret

_____

b. **Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.**

1. Some people think _____ are shy, but that's not always true.

2. Many people are worried that _____ will take their jobs.

3. I'm nervous because my boss just called and said, "We need to have a

_____." I wonder what's wrong.

4. Who do you call when you feel sad and _____?

5. What kind of _____ do they have? Are they just friends, or are they going out?

6. Many company websites have _____ to answer simple questions about their products and services.

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Ian Sample

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1 Joaquin Phoenix played an introvert in the 2013 movie *Her*. He had some trouble with AI, but one professor says we should still be open to relationships with chatbots.

2 Tony Prescott, a professor at the University of Sheffield, argues that artificial intelligence (AI) has an important role. We develop strong relationships with pets and have no issues with children playing with dolls. So, we should also be open to AI for adults, he says.

3 Prescott wrote in *The Psychology of Artificial Intelligence* that many people say their lives are lonely. Prescott believes AI could help people improve their social skills by practising conversation, for example. This would help them feel connected to society.

4 Prescott also wrote that loneliness often leads to spending more time alone. This makes the problem worse. AI relationships could support people's relationships with humans and machines.

5 In the UK, over 7 per cent, or nearly four million people, feel lonely "often" or "always". According to a Harvard study from 2021, more than a third of Americans feel "serious loneliness". Young adults and mothers with small children are the two groups most affected.

6 In 2023, the US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, talked about a loneliness "epidemic". Loneliness is linked to heart disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and early death. It has the same effect as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, he said.

7 It was simpler in the film *Her*, where Phoenix falls in love with an AI voiced by Scarlett Johansson.

8 Whether AI can or should be part of the solution is not new. Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, warned that relationships with machines could mean people have fewer human relationships.

9 Christina Victor, a professor at Brunel University, has similar concerns. "I doubt AI would solve the problem of loneliness," she said.

10 Murali Doraiswamy, a Duke University in North Carolina professor, said that "having a close human friend is still the best solution for loneliness." But robots are a solution for the millions who have no friends.

11 "We need to be careful to build in rules," he said, adding that AI must have good morals and protect people's privacy.

12 Researchers may soon know if people have AI relationships. Tech companies are building chatbots to respond better to emotions. Recently, OpenAI asked Johansson to be the voice of their latest chatbot. Johansson said no, but the chatbot was released with a voice like hers. OpenAI later removed it.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What film is mentioned in the article, and who starred in it?

2. What does Professor Tony Prescott argue about AI?

3. How does Prescott think AI could help people?

4. How many people in the UK are lonely?

5. Which two groups are the most affected, according to the 2021 Harvard study?

6. According to the article, what are three diseases linked to loneliness?

7. What does Professor Murali Doraiswamy say is the best solution to loneliness?

8. What does Doraiswamy say we need to be careful about with AI?

9. Which actress did OpenAI ask to be their chatbot's voice?

4 Key language

a. In each sentence below, underline the modals.

1. We should also be open to AI for adults.

2. Prescott believes AI could help people improve their social skills.

3. This would help them feel connected to society.

4. AI relationships could support people's relationships with humans and machines.

5. Relationships with machines could mean people have fewer human relationships.

6. Researchers may soon see if people have AI relationships.

**b. Go back to the article and find three more examples of modals.
Underline them.**

The Guardian

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Loneliness is dangerous to our health."

- "Robots are machines, so humans can't have relationships with them."

6 In your own words

a. Do some research about AI and how humans interact with it.

- How do people use AI now?

- How do you think people will use AI in the future?

- What kinds of AI tools will soon be available?

- How do you feel about using AI?

b. Report your findings to the class and share your opinions. Here are some phrases to help you when you discuss facts.

My research showed …

Here's an example of …

One way it can help people is …

Some people worry about …

A problem / solution is …

Here are some phrases to use when stating your opinion.

From what I've seen / heard, …

I think (that) …

I (dis)agree with …

I wonder if …

For me, …

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