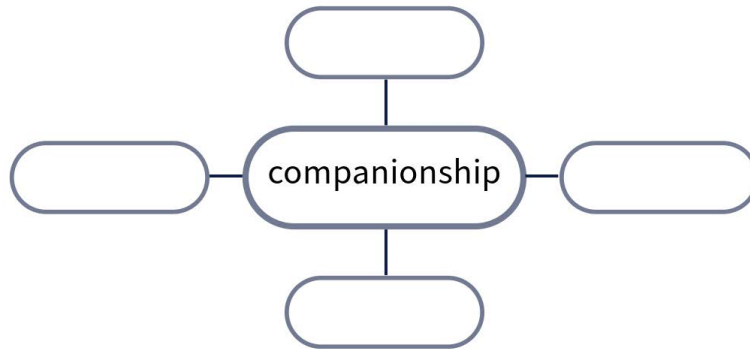


Could AI help cure 'downward spiral' of human loneliness?

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. What does *companionship* mean to you? Complete the mind map with your ideas. Then, compare with a classmate.



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.

backfire	bond	characterise	chatbot	chronic
disembodied	introvert	isolation	loneliness	meaningful
personalised	reciprocal	stimulating	strike up	trustworthy

1. begin something, such as a friendship or conversation _____
2. a person who enjoys solitary activities and calm environments _____
3. a computer program created to have conversations with human beings, usually over the internet _____
4. a feeling of being unhappy because you have no friends or people to talk to _____
5. serious and important _____
6. a strong connection _____
7. an arrangement between two people or groups who agree to help each other or behave in the same way to each other _____
8. inspiring; making people feel interested, excited, or enthusiastic _____



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9. designed specifically for a particular person or to meet certain needs

10. the state of being alone or lonely _____
11. be typical qualities of a person, place, or thing _____
12. lasting for a long time; a problem or disease difficult to get rid of _____
13. coming from a person or place that cannot be seen or identified _____
14. have the opposite effect, with bad or dangerous results _____
15. someone or something that you can rely on to be good, honest, sincere, etc.

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

1. How would you _____ his personality?
2. Asthma is a _____ illness that makes breathing difficult.
3. That webinar was not _____ at all. I almost fell asleep!
4. Before you make a big purchase, make sure that the seller is _____.
5. It is important for new parents to _____ with their baby.
6. Many companies' websites have _____ to answer basic questions about their products and services.
7. The two families had a _____ agreement for football practice: one would drop the children off, and the other would pick them up.
8. Elderly people who can't leave home often have feelings of _____.
9. If you get someone a gift with a _____ touch, it will feel more special.
10. During the pandemic, feelings of _____ increased dramatically because people had to stay home.
11. Some people think _____ are shy, but really, they need more alone time to reflect and recharge, especially after being in social situations.
12. The surprise party _____ because someone told the birthday girl about it!

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

One computer scientist says we should embrace human-machine relationships, but other experts are more cautious

Ian Sample

27 May, 2024

- 1 Hollywood may have warned about the perils of striking up relationships with artificial intelligence, but one computer scientist says we may be missing a trick if we do not embrace the positives that human-machine relationships have to offer.
- 2 Despite the troubles of Joaquin Phoenix's introverted and soon-to-be-divorced character in the 2013 movie *Her*, one professor says we should be open to the comforts that chatbots can provide.
- 3 Tony Prescott, Professor of Cognitive Robotics at the University of Sheffield, argues that AI has an important role to play in preventing human loneliness. Just as we develop meaningful bonds with pets, and have no issues about children playing with dolls, so should we be open to the value of AI to adults, he says.
- 4 "In an age when many people describe their lives as lonely, there may be value in having AI companionship as a form of reciprocal social interaction that is stimulating and personalised," Prescott writes in a new book, *The Psychology of Artificial Intelligence*.
- 5 Prescott believes AI could become a valuable tool for people on the edge of social isolation to improve their social skills by practising conversations and other interactions. The exercises would help build self-confidence, he suggests, and so reduce the risk of people withdrawing from society entirely.
- 6 "Human loneliness is often characterised by a downward spiral in which isolation leads to lower self-esteem, which discourages further interaction with people," Prescott writes. "There may be ways in which AI companionship could help break this cycle with feelings of self-worth and help maintain or improve social skills. If so, relationships with AIs could support people to find companionship with human and artificial others."
- 7 The magnitude of the loneliness problem has become clear in recent years. In the UK, more than 7 per cent, or nearly four million people, are known to experience chronic loneliness, meaning they feel lonely often or always. According to a Harvard study from 2021, more than a third of Americans feel "serious loneliness", and some of the worst affected are young adults and mothers with small children.
- 8 The knock-on effects on wellbeing are also better understood. In 2023, the US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, described an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation" and its profound impact on public health. Loneliness is linked to more heart disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and premature death, with an impact on mortality equivalent to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, he said. Failure to address the problem, he added, would see the US "continuing to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country".
- 9 It is a far more mixed picture, therefore, than that depicted in the film *Her*, where Phoenix finds love in the unlikelyst of places: a disembodied AI voiced by Scarlett Johansson.
- 10 Whether AI can, or should, be part of the solution is not a new debate. Sherry Turkle, Professor of Social Science at MIT, has warned that forming relationships with machines could backfire and lead people to have fewer secure and fulfilling human relationships.
- 11 Christina Victor, Professor of Gerontology and Public Health at Brunel University, has similar concerns. "I doubt AI would address loneliness, and I would question whether connections via AI can ever be meaningful, as our social connections are often framed by reciprocity and give older adults an opportunity to contribute as well as receive," she said.
- 12 Murali Doraiswamy, Professor of Psychiatry and Medicine at Duke University in North Carolina, said: "Right now, all the evidence points to having a close human friend as the best solution for loneliness. But until society prioritises social connectedness, robots are a solution for the millions of people who have no friends.
- 13 "We need to be careful to build in rules to ensure they are moral and trustworthy, and that privacy is protected."

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- 14 But Prescott argues that the risks should be weighed against the potential benefits. "Although AIs cannot provide friendship in the same way as other humans, not all the relationships we find valuable are symmetrical," he writes.
- 15 Researchers may soon know whether people turn to AI for company. Tech firms are building chatbots to be ever more fluent and responsive to emotions. Recently, OpenAI asked Johansson to be the voice of their latest chatbot, GPT-4o, to "help consumers to feel comfortable". Johansson declined, but the chatbot was released with a voice that friends and family thought was hers. OpenAI have since suspended the voice option "out of respect for Ms Johansson".

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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 believe about AI?
3. What does Professor Prescott compare “meaningful bonds” to AI?
4. In Prescott’s opinion, how could AI help socially isolated people?
5. How many people in the UK experience chronic loneliness?
6. According to the article, what are three loneliness-related diseases?
7. What does Professor Christina Victor think about AI for loneliness?
8. What does Professor Murali Doraiswamy say the evidence points to?
9. What does Doraiswamy say we must be careful about with AI?
10. Which actress did OpenAI ask to be the voice of their latest chatbot?

4 Key language

a. In the sentences below, underline the modal verb or verbs in each sentence.

1. One professor says we should be open to the comforts that chatbots can provide.
2. There may be value in having AI companionship as a form of reciprocal social interaction.
3. Prescott believes AI could become a valuable tool for people on the brink of social isolation to hone their social skills.
4. There may be ways in which AI companionship could help break this cycle.
5. Relationships with AIs could support people to find companionship with human and artificial others.
6. Whether AI can be part of the solution is not a new debate.
7. Whether AI should be part of the solution is not a new debate.
8. Researchers may soon know whether people turn to AI for company.

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b. Read the sentences in task A. Choose whether the modal expresses a *possibility* or a *recommendation*.

c. Write four sentences, two for possibilities and two for recommendations.

1. (possibility) _____
2. (possibility) _____
3. (recommendation) _____
4. (recommendation) _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Humans and robots can have meaningful relationships with each other.”
- “Loneliness is a dangerous epidemic that is growing.”
- “If we replace human relationships with robots, we lose some of our humanity.”

6 In your own words

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

- What are some of the most successful uses for AI you have seen?
- What kinds of AI tools and applications are under development?
- How would you like to see AI develop?
- How do you interact with AI now?
- In what ways could AI be most useful to you in the future?

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

According to my research, ...

Some risks might be ...

One example is ...

Another concern is ...

Some ways it can benefit people are ...

Here are some phrases to use when stating your opinion.

From what I've seen/experienced, ...

I wonder whether ...

I predict (that) ...

Personally, ...

I (dis)agree with ...