

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

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

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

	Always	Sometimes	Never
1. I feel energised at parties and social activities.			
2. I need alone time every day to recharge.			
3. I love meeting and talking to new people.			
4. I would rather read a book or watch a film than meet new people.			
5. I work better alone.			
6. I work better in a team.			
7. I like being the centre of attention.			
8. I prefer to be in the background or "behind the scenes".			

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)
bond
chatbot
discourage
interact
introvert

isolation
lonely
moral
privacy
value
withdraw

1. the study and development of computer systems that can copy intelligent human behaviour _____
2. a person who enjoys being alone and likes calm environments _____
3. a computer program created to have conversations with human beings, usually over the internet _____
4. a strong connection _____
5. how much something is worth in money or other goods _____
6. unhappy because you don't have friends or people to talk to _____
7. move away from a place or situation; make somebody/something do this _____
8. being alone or lonely _____
9. try to prevent something or someone from doing something _____
10. communicate with someone while you work, play, or spend time with them _____



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11. connected with standards of right and wrong behaviour _____
12. someone's right to keep their personal matters, 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 really they need more alone time to reflect and recharge.
2. Many people are worried that _____ will take their jobs.
3. Close, healthy relationships have a high _____ in our lives.
4. Who do you call when you feel sad and _____?
5. It is important for new parents to _____ with their baby.
6. Many company websites have _____ to answer simple questions about their products and services.
7. Elderly people who can't leave home often have feelings of _____.

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Ian Sample

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- 1 Hollywood may have warned about the dangers of forming relationships with artificial intelligence, but one computer scientist says we may be missing out on the benefits that human-machine relationships 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, a professor at the University of Sheffield, argues that AI has an important role. Just as we develop strong bonds with pets and have no issues with children playing with dolls, we should also be open to the value of AI for adults, he says.
- 4 Prescott wrote in a new book, *The Psychology of Artificial Intelligence*, that many people say their lives are lonely. There may be value in AI relationships because they can bring personalised and stimulating social experiences.
- 5 Prescott believes AI could become a valuable tool for improving social skills. By practising conversation, for example, AI could help build self-confidence and reduce the risk of people withdrawing from society.
- 6 Prescott also wrote that human loneliness often leads to isolation. This leads to lower self-esteem, which discourages interacting with people. He believes that AI relationships could help break this cycle and strengthen social skills. This could support people to make relationships with humans and AI.
- 7 The size of the loneliness problem has become clear. In the UK, more than 7 per cent, or nearly four million people, 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 In 2023, the US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, described an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation" and its impact on public health. Loneliness is linked to heart disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and premature death. The impact is equivalent to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, he said.
- 9 It is a more mixed picture than shown in the film *Her*, where Phoenix finds love in an AI voiced by Scarlett Johansson.
- 10 Whether AI can or should be part of the solution is not a new debate. Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, has warned that relationships with machines could lead people to have fewer human relationships.
- 11 Christina Victor, a professor at Brunel University, has similar concerns. "I doubt AI would address loneliness," she said, questioning how meaningful AI relationships can be.
- 12 Murali Doraiswamy, a professor 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 robots are a solution for the millions 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."
- 14 But Prescott argues that there are risks and benefits. He says that although AI cannot provide friendship like humans, not all relationships are the same.
- 15 Researchers may soon know whether people turn to AI for company. Tech firms are building chatbots to handle emotions better. Recently, OpenAI asked Johansson to be the voice of their latest chatbot. Johansson declined, but the chatbot was released with a voice that friends and family thought was hers. OpenAI have now 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 believe about AI?
3. How does Prescott think AI relationships can bring value to people?
4. How many people in the UK experience chronic loneliness?
5. Who are some of the worst affected by loneliness, according to the 2021 Harvard study?
6. According to the article, what are three loneliness-related diseases?
7. What does Professor Sherry Turkle warn?
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 each sentence below, underline the modals.

1. There may be value in having AI companionship as a form of reciprocal social interaction.
2. This would help build self-confidence.
3. He believes that AI relationships could help break this cycle
4. Relationships with AIs could help people find companionship with human and artificial others.
5. Whether AI can be part of the solution is not a new debate.
6. Researchers may soon know whether people turn to AI for company.

b. Write three sentences using modals for possibilities.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- Humans and robots can have quality relationships together.
- Loneliness is dangerous to our health.
- When we have relationships with robots, we become less human.

6 In your own words

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

- What are some successful uses for AI?
- What kinds of AI tools and applications are in development?
- How would you like to see AI develop?
- How do you use AI now?
- How could AI be 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, ...

One example is ...

Some ways it can benefit people are ...

Some risks might be ...

Another concern is ...

Here are some phrases to use when stating your opinion.

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

I predict (that) ...

I (dis)agree with ...

I wonder whether ...

Personally, ...