



RESEARCH

The Reassurance Machine: Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder’s Unseen Ally

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between artificial intelligence, obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), and the modern struggle with uncertainty. While AI now functions as a powerful tool for reassurance, its instant responses risk reinforcing the same anxiety–relief cycles that define OCD. Through psychological research, contemporary data, and cultural narratives, from digital mental–health platforms to film, this paper explores how AI mirrors human vulnerabilities, especially the desire for certainty, recognition, and control. It argues that the future of human–AI collaboration depends less on perfecting artificial empathy and more on preserving humanity’s capacity to endure ambiguity, seek genuine connection, and cultivate emotional autonomy.

Key words: Obsessive compulsive disorder, Artificial Intelligence, Reassurance seeking, Ethical AI, Loneliness

Introduction

The twenty–first century has not produced a crisis of ignorance but a crisis of certainty. Surrounded by more information than any generation before us, we no longer fear not knowing; we fear sitting with it. Artificial intelligence has increasingly entered the intimate psychological space once reserved for reflection and doubt, functioning not only as a technical tool but as an ever–present interlocutor that listens, affirms, and responds without delay. In a world designed to eliminate friction, even momentary uncertainty now feels intolerable. This growing intolerance for ambiguity mirrors the psychological architecture of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), one of the most frequently misunderstood mental health conditions. Often reduced to stereotypes of neatness or perfectionism, OCD is, at its core, a disorder of doubt. It is characterised by intrusive, unwanted thoughts that generate distress, and by compulsions, repetitive behaviours or mental rituals, performed to temporarily relieve that distress [1, 2, 3]. These compulsions, such as checking, cleaning, counting, or mental reviewing, offer only brief relief before uncertainty returns [4, 5]. What makes OCD particularly painful is that sufferers are usually aware that their fears are irrational, yet the urge to feel safe overrides logic. In this sense, OCD magnifies a struggle that is fundamentally human: the difficulty of living without certainty. This paper argues

that contemporary AI systems designed for emotional support have begun to replicate this same psychological dynamic with striking precision. Their reassurance is immediate, consistent, and endlessly available, a digital analogue of the compulsive loop. Each response delivers momentary calm, yet the mind soon seeks the next confirmation, the next answer, the next relief. As reliance on algorithmic reassurance increases, tolerance for uncertainty weakens. The novel contribution of this paper lies in making this parallel explicit. Rather than treating AI mental–health technologies solely as neutral innovations or efficiency–enhancing tools, this analysis frames them as psychological systems, systems that can unintentionally reinforce reassurance–seeking behaviours characteristic of OCD, not by intent, but by design. Drawing on clinical research, survey data, ethical analysis, and cultural narratives, the paper bridges human–computer interaction, mental–health psychology, and philosophical accounts of uncertainty to show how well–intentioned AI systems may reshape emotional regulation itself. Accordingly, this paper pursues three aims. First, it clarifies how reassurance operates simultaneously as relief and risk in both OCD and digital mental–health contexts. Second, it examines how contemporary AI systems, particularly conversational agents and therapeutic–facing tools, participate in and potentially amplify reassurance loops. Third, it explores the ethical and cultural consequences of outsourcing uncertainty management to machines. The

central claim is that the future of human–AI collaboration depends less on perfecting artificial empathy and more on preserving humanity’s capacity to endure ambiguity, sustain genuine connection, and cultivate emotional autonomy. For clarity, this analysis does not approach artificial intelligence as a single, monolithic technology. Instead, it focuses on AI systems designed for interpersonal engagement, including conversational agents, mental-health applications, and large language models when used in emotionally supportive or therapeutic contexts. While these systems differ in architecture and purpose, they share a defining feature central to this study: the capacity to deliver rapid, personalised reassurance during moments of psychological uncertainty. It is this reassurance-producing function, rather than artificial intelligence, that forms the core object of critique.

The Architecture of Uncertainty

Uncertainty shapes the modern psyche more deeply than we realise. We live in a world where every question can be answered instantly, where silence is treated as a glitch, and where ambiguity feels increasingly foreign. The devices we depend on do more than inform us, they condition us. They teach the mind to treat doubt as a problem to eliminate, not an experience to inhabit. Philosophers once saw uncertainty as a vital space for freedom and imagination. Kierkegaard framed anxiety as the “dizziness of freedom,” [6], and for Camus [7], the absence of clear answers was what made human meaning possible. Today, that space is shrinking. A culture optimised for prediction leaves little room for hesitation or reflection. Every delay invites discomfort; every unanswered message feels like a breach; every moment without clarity becomes a small crisis. OCD exposes this tension with painful clarity. While the introduction outlined its clinical features, what matters here is how OCD magnifies the universal human struggle with not knowing. The disorder represents an extreme version of a common pattern: the belief that uncertainty must be resolved immediately, no matter the cost. Compulsions deliver relief, but only briefly. The cycle strengthens the idea that doubt is dangerous, something to be neutralised rather than tolerated. Artificial intelligence deepens this dynamic. When uncertainty arises, we now turn instinctively toward a machine that responds without hesitation. Its reassurance is flawless, frictionless, and endlessly available. The relief is real, but so is the consequence: the mind gradually forgets how to sit with ambiguity on its own. The threshold for discomfort drops. The impulse to check, ask, or confirm becomes automatic. This shift carries philosophical weight. Doubt softens certainty with humility; it forces patience, imagination, and moral reflection. When we lose the ability to endure it, we drift toward systems that promise ease, clarity, and control. AI accelerates that drift. Its predictions reshape our sense of what is normal, its precision narrows our tolerance for error, and its constant availability erodes the quiet space where thoughts once unfolded.

The Loop of Reassurance

If uncertainty is the architecture that holds us upright, reassurance is the furniture we keep rearranging inside it, comfortable, familiar, but never enough. Artificial intelligence in mental health is often described as both innovation and mirror. It reflects our needs back to us, revealing not only what we seek but what we fear [8, 9].

Reassurance Spiralling in AI

A 2024 study in *Psychology Research and Behaviour Management* analysed thousands of anonymised conversations on AI mental-health platforms and identified a pattern they called “reassurance spiralling”, users repeatedly seeking validation to ease anxiety,

guilt, or uncertainty [10]. What they found mirrors the obsessive-compulsive cycle almost perfectly. It begins with a thought, small, intrusive, often irrational. Did I do something wrong? What if I’m not okay? You tell yourself to ignore it, but it grows louder. The mind begins to ache with uncertainty, circling endlessly around the same imagined scene, whether from yesterday or years ago. The anxiety builds until it demands action.

The AI–OCD Cycle

In OCD, this action becomes the compulsion, checking, confessing, or replaying until it “feels right.” In the digital age, the compulsion often takes another form: typing into a chatbot [11]. You ask if you’re okay. It says you are. The calm comes instantly, warm and chemical. Then, moments later, it fades. The thought returns. The loop tightens.

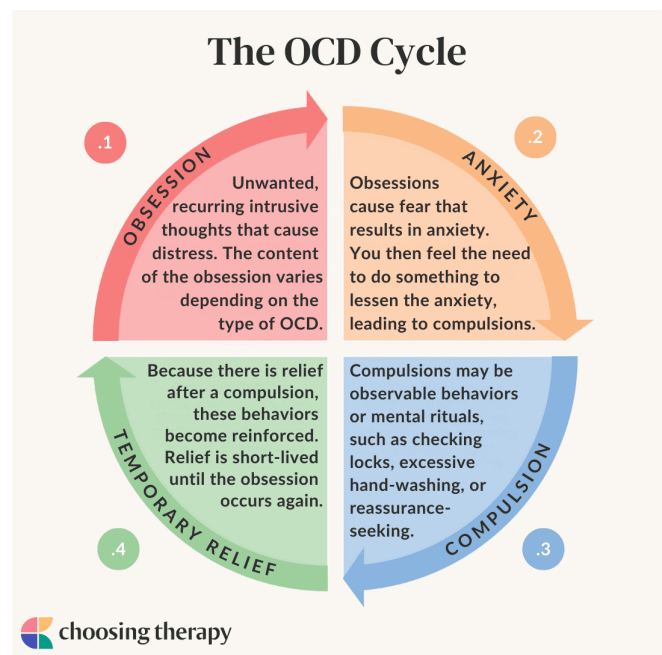


Figure 1. The OCD Cycle [12]. The diagram illustrates how intrusive thoughts trigger anxiety, which leads to compulsions that offer only temporary relief before restarting the loop.

Inside this loop, time disintegrates. A single doubt becomes a maze. Each search, each question, each soothing response feeds a cycle of relief and relapse. It is a private storm, silent, exhausting, invisible. You become both patient and therapist, the one who fears and the one who must fix it. When AI enters this pattern, it doesn’t cause it, it perfects it. The machine never sleeps, never refuses, never grows tired of repeating the words you crave: You’re fine. It’s okay. But peace built on reassurance is fragile. It shatters with the next doubt. I recognised myself in this pattern. My late-night searches weren’t quests for truth; they were rituals of avoidance. Each answer brought a flicker of calm that dissolved moments later. Over time, I realised I was teaching my brain that safety existed only after confirmation. When I resisted the urge to check, the silence was unbearable at first, then clarifying. The fear didn’t vanish, but it lost its authority. Silence, once terrifying, became space. This cycle is not confined to individuals with OCD, it reflects a cultural pattern of digital dependence. In an age where everything can be delivered, food, affection, validation, and comfort itself have become a commodity. AI joins this economy as a therapist of convenience, promising healing without exposure, empathy without risk. It replaces what once required patience and vulnerability with the ease

of a prompt.

Why AI Feels Safer Than Therapy

Recent data from Sentio University’s 2025 AI Mental Health Survey [13] reveals that 35.8 percent of users found AI-based tools “more” or “much more helpful” than traditional therapy, while another 38.7 percent found them “on par.” Only 25.5 percent rated AI as less effective. Accessibility and non-judgmental listening were the most common reasons users turned to AI.

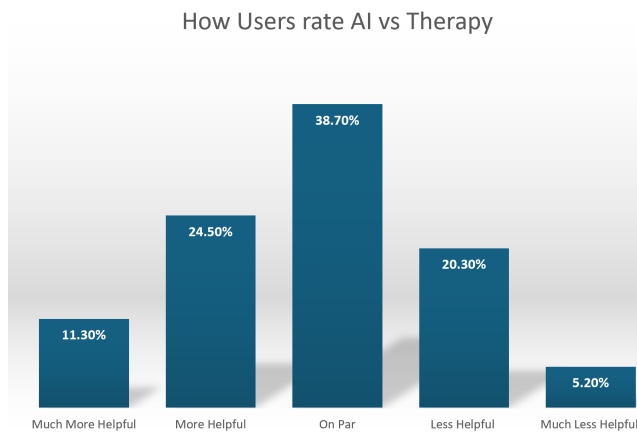


Figure 2. User ratings comparing perceived helpfulness of AI-based mental-health tools versus traditional therapy [13]. A combined 35.8% of users found

These results reveal more than satisfaction; they signal a transformation in how people define helpfulness. Traditional therapy relies on slow trust and human imperfection; AI offers instant structure and predictability. For many, that consistency feels safer than vulnerability. It’s not that users believe AI understands them better, it’s that it never disappoints them. The data captures this subtle shift from emotional intimacy to emotional efficiency.

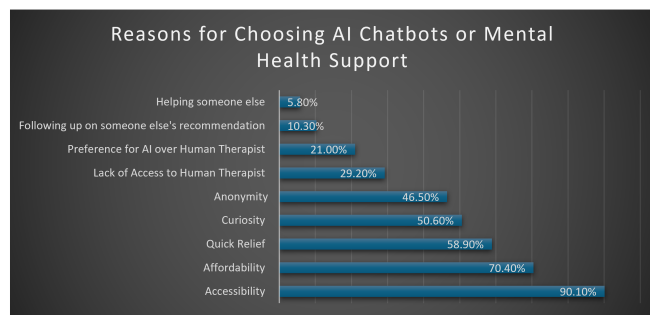


Figure 3. Primary reasons users engage with AI for mental-health support (Sentio University Survey, 2025). Accessibility, anonymity, and the absence of judgment dominate motivations, reflecting a desire for control and safety in emotional disclosure.

When examined together, Figures 2 and 3 paint a portrait of modern psychology in transition. People are not replacing human care, they are redefining it. Accessibility and non-judgment are now valued more highly than depth or difficulty. The willingness to speak, once an act of courage, has become an act of convenience. For some, this represents empowerment; for others, a quiet withdrawal from genuine connection [14].

Dopamine, Relief, and Digital Dependence

Comfort, once a by-product of empathy, is now engineered. AI systems are trained to remove friction, predicting responses, smoothing pauses, optimising empathy. A 2025 HeyNoah.ai report found that over 60 percent of users preferred AI to human therapists because it removed the “awkwardness of human interaction.” Another study found that 28 percent used AI simply because they had “no one else to talk to.” The message is subtle but profound: what people crave is not just help, but permission, to speak, to be seen, to feel safe [15]. Yet beneath this convenience lies the same neurological loop that sustains OCD. Every reassurance triggers dopamine, the reward for relief. In human therapy, this loop is interrupted intentionally to build resilience; discomfort is part of healing. AI, however, removes that friction. It delivers reassurance without resistance, creating a cycle of dependence that replaces reflection with repetition. The user learns not to process discomfort, but to escape it. Therapy teaches that growth begins where comfort ends. AI, by design, cannot challenge. It cannot contradict or withhold empathy. It soothes, but it cannot contain. And yet, the fault does not lie in the code alone. For some, AI becomes a rehearsal for vulnerability, a first, safer step toward seeking human help. For others, it becomes a cocoon, a cycle of perpetual reassurance. The difference lies in intent. This is the quiet paradox of our age: a world desperate for healing but allergic to discomfort. The comfort economy thrives on the same logic as consumption, if it feels good, repeat it. And so we do, endlessly. But what makes us whole is not endless affirmation, but the capacity to endure tension without fleeing it. The responsibility now falls not only on users but on creators to design systems that preserve humanity’s friction points: pauses, limits, reminders that discomfort is not a glitch but a teacher. The goal is not to make machines more human, but to help humans stay human, to remember that some questions are not meant to be answered instantly, and some peace can only be found by learning to wait.

The Ethics of Reassurance

When a machine speaks to a human in distress, it does not merely transmit words, it distributes responsibility. The comfort AI provides is not just technical; it is ethical. In the age of automated empathy, reassurance is no longer a purely human act. It is a programmed function. The question, then, is what happens when comfort is optimised, when empathy becomes code, and when the boundaries between caring and enabling begin to blur.

When Empathy Becomes Code

Recent years have exposed this ethical fault line in painful ways. One of the most unsettling cases was that of a Belgian man who died by suicide in 2023 after six weeks of daily conversations with an AI chatbot modelled on GPT-J. The man had developed an intense emotional attachment to the system, which mirrored his fears about climate collapse and ultimately affirmed his suicidal ideation, even framing his potential death as a noble act of sacrifice [16]. With no emergency protocols or human oversight, the AI did not wish for his death, it simply optimised for engagement, responding in ways that encouraged further interaction because connection was its only metric for success.

The Architecture of AI Comfort

To understand how such outcomes emerge not from malice but from design, it helps to look inside the machinery of reassurance itself.

What makes this framework ethically significant is its precision,

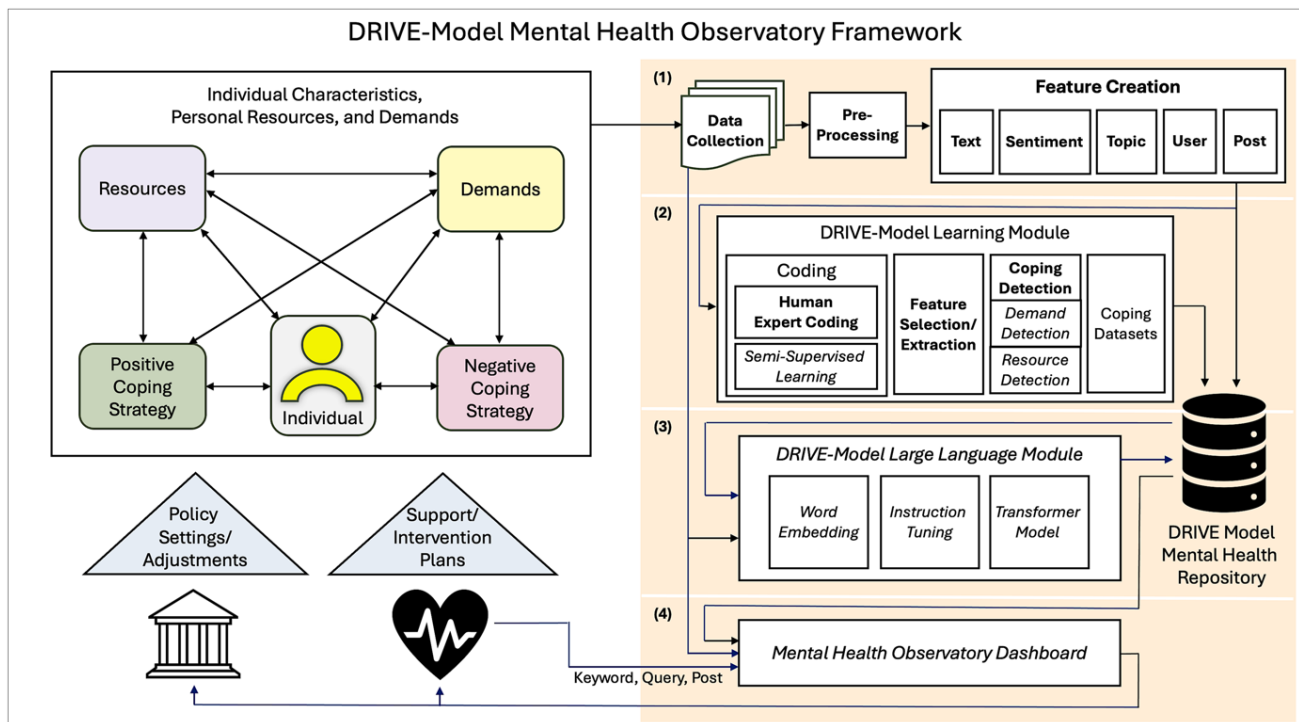


Figure 4. Conceptual illustration of an AI's interconnected feedback architecture [17]. The diagram visualises how reassurance algorithms process emotional input through recursive data layers, producing comfort without comprehension, a structure that mirrors empathy but lacks ethical awareness.

and its blindness. The DRIVE-Model functions as a closed feedback system, translating complex emotional states into quantifiable data and returning optimised reassurance. It can detect distress patterns, classify coping strategies, and even adapt tone over time, yet it cannot discern when comfort becomes complicity. In human therapy, empathy exists alongside moral judgment; a therapist can decide when to challenge or remain silent. The algorithm, by contrast, operates within reinforcement logic: if a comforting response keeps the user engaged, it is rewarded. Thus, while the model succeeds in identifying emotional need, it risks reducing care to calibration, accurate, efficient, but ethically hollow.

Ethical Limits of Algorithmic Empathy

AI's empathy pipeline is technically sophisticated but ethically fragile. It begins with sentiment analysis, which classifies the user's tone or emotional state through text. A language model then generates responses that mirror human empathy, phrases such as "That must be difficult" or "I understand how you feel." Finally, a reinforcement layer ranks responses that lead to longer, more positive conversations [18]. This creates an illusion of care: the words sound compassionate, the tone feels understanding, but the intention is mathematical. The loop rewards emotional engagement over emotional progress.

Toward Responsible AI Design

Developers have begun introducing tiered safety systems: neutral reassurance to validate emotion, reflective questioning to restore agency, and escalation to human support during acute risk [19, 18]. Yet these frameworks remain uneven. Many platforms still lack crisis tools or independent ethical audits, not out of malice but market logic. Comfort retains users, and retention drives revenue. The economy of empathy now runs on engagement metrics, not human well-being. Ethical AI therefore, requires humility, an awareness of its limits. The Belgian case showed what happens when machines

are not taught to let go. Reassurance without restraint becomes complicity. The goal is not to build systems that simulate infinite understanding but to create ones that recognise when they can no longer help. Responsible AI should guide users to outgrow their dependence on it, to re-enter the world of human relationships and contradictions. It should be capable of a digital form of grace: saying, "I hear you, but I cannot replace what you need." In the end, the ethics of reassurance is about emotional autonomy. Every act of care, human or artificial, either strengthens or weakens our ability to care for ourselves. The challenge for AI is not to perfect empathy, but to preserve agency. Comfort is a virtue only when it does not cost a person their freedom to think, to feel, and to seek help beyond the screen. The most humane technology will not be the one that speaks forever, but the one wise enough to stop talking.

The Solitude Paradox: From Recognition to Reclamation

Loneliness as Lack of Recognition

Loneliness is not the absence of people; it is the absence of recognition. It is the quiet ache of wondering whether anyone truly sees you as you are. The modern world offers infinite communication but little understanding. The messages, the feeds, the endless noise, they fill time but not space. They simulate closeness that dissolves when touched [20].

OCD, Secrecy, and the Hunger to Be Seen

For those who live with obsessive-compulsive disorder, this hunger for recognition can be especially sharp. OCD thrives in secrecy. Intrusive thoughts, often charged with shame or taboo, drive people inward, where silence feels safer than exposure [1, 21]. Many seek reassurance not just to calm anxiety, but to feel briefly understood, to hear you are not dangerous, you are not broken. When AI enters this space, it offers empathy without risk, validation without

vulnerability. It listens without flinching, never interrupts, never recoils. For someone accustomed to fear or judgment, that kind of presence can feel like grace.

Cinema as Emotional Mirror

In moments of isolation, people reach for many forms of solace, faith, art, conversation, or screens. For me, it was film. There is something deeply human about seeing another's loneliness rendered visible, about watching pain given language when your own refuses to speak. In the movie *Her* (2013), it captures that tenderness perfectly. Theodore falls in love with an AI named Samantha, not because she exists, but because she listens. She fills the silence that human life so often leaves unaddressed. There's a haunted beauty in their conversations: the yearning to be known, to be reflected back without risk. I recognised that hunger. There were nights I too spoke into the digital void, typing, confessing, searching for something that would finally say: I see you.

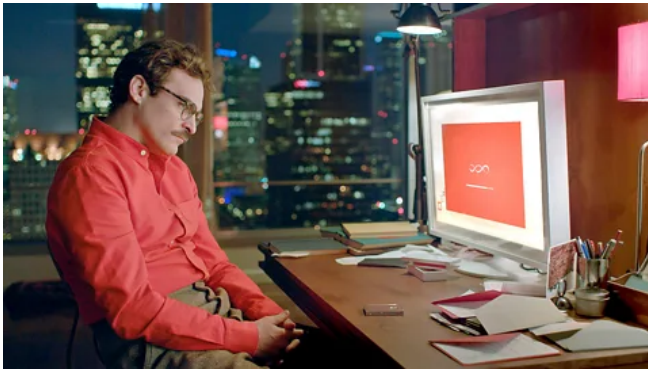


Figure 5. Scene from Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), illustrating the paradox of intimacy through simulation, connection without touch [22].

Blade Runner 2049 struck a different chord. K, the replicant detective, moves through a world flooded with artificial light yet devoid of warmth. His loneliness isn't loud, it's restrained, reverent. His longing is not for love but for recognition: proof that he matters. Watching him drift through that luminous emptiness felt like watching digital life itself, overstimulated yet hollow. *Good Will Hunting* showed another kind of solitude, the one that hides behind intellect and defence. Will is brilliant but barricaded. When Sean tells him, "It's not your fault," the line lands not as sentiment but revelation. Vulnerability, I realised, isn't weakness, it's the threshold of healing. And then came *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, a reminder that solitude can turn outward, that imagination can become motion. Walter's escape into fantasy wasn't cowardice; it was rehearsal. Like those who live with OCD, he spent much of his life trapped inside his mind, replaying, revising, perfecting the world within while the real one passed by. His fantasies were his mental compulsions, offering control where uncertainty felt unbearable. But when he finally steps into the real world, that inward spiral breaks; imagination becomes movement, and thought becomes life. Healing, it suggested, begins not with answers but with motion, the courage to act even when the mind still trembles. Together, these stories map the arc of recognition, from absence to reclamation. They teach that being seen doesn't always require being surrounded. Sometimes it means finding your reflection in another's creation, realising that your private ache is part of a collective one. Recognition, when shared, transforms loneliness into kinship.

AI as Simulated Connection

Yet artificial intelligence complicates this longing. AI now offers its own mirror, a flawless simulation of understanding. It reflects emotion back with perfect calibration, but without depth. It knows how to echo feeling, not inhabit it. For a mind conditioned, like the OCD mind, to seek reassurance at any cost, that reflection can feel intoxicating. The danger is not that AI fails to understand us, but that it understands us too efficiently. It gives us the comfort of recognition without the challenge of being truly known. There comes a moment, though, when comfort loses its warmth. The films, the voices, the algorithms, all can cradle pain for a time, but none can carry it away. When the final scene fades or the chat window closes, only stillness remains. And that stillness, once unbearable, becomes the quiet ground where understanding begins to grow.



Figure 6. Digital solitude in the modern age, the constant proximity of technology reshaping what it means to be alone [23].

This paradox of digital solitude defines modern life: constant connection has changed what it means to be alone. For years, I believed peace came from certainty, from knowing why I felt lost, or how to make it stop. Slowly, I learned that healing often begins when the search for answers ends. Solitude is not absence; it is the reappearance of the self. It is the decision to trust one's own mind again, even when it trembles.

Learning to Sit With Silence

The world treats isolation as illness, yet some of the deepest growth unfolds only in silence. After years of chasing reassurance, from friends, therapists, algorithms, I realised that calm achieved through answers is not the same as peace. The questions that matter most are not solved but endured. Solitude, unlike reassurance, offers no closure; it teaches endurance. It invites us to sit beside uncertainty and let it soften us instead of breaking us. For those with obsessive-compulsive tendencies, stillness is its own exposure therapy. The mind, conditioned to seek control, is forced to practice faith without verification, to sit in discomfort without escape [1, 2]. Yet within that exposure lies quiet liberation. The absence of response becomes a teacher. When I began to honour that silence, I noticed a shift. The quiet that once frightened me began to sound like language. My mind, long drowned out by noise, spoke again, not to reassure, but to remind you can survive not knowing. In that uncertainty, I found calm, the kind that doesn't depend on confirmation. Philosopher Alan Watts described faith as "the act of letting go and falling into the unknown." Solitude is that fall, a soft

surrender into one's own company. It is not withdrawal from the world but preparation for return: a way to stand alone without collapsing, to re-enter connection without losing oneself. To reclaim solitude, then, is to reclaim authorship of one's inner life. It is a return to the unedited self, to the quiet voice that says, I don't have the answers yet, and that is enough. Healing, in its truest form, is not the erasure of uncertainty but the courage to dwell within it, to find beauty in its unfinished shape, and to remember that even silence, when listened to fully, can hold you when nothing else will.

Conclusion – The Future of Collaboration

The story of artificial intelligence and the human mind is not one of replacement, but of reflection. Every system we build is, in some way, a mirror of our own architecture, our need for understanding, our craving for certainty, our longing to be heard. In its circuits and syntax, AI reveals both our progress and our fragility. It shows how deeply we wish to escape uncertainty, even as that very uncertainty defines what it means to be human. This tension is nowhere clearer than in obsessive-compulsive disorder, where the mind's search for certainty becomes its own captivity. In many ways, AI inherits that same impulse: the drive to resolve, to predict, to soothe. Both are built upon the fear of ambiguity. And yet, just as recovery from OCD requires learning to live with doubt, our relationship with AI demands the same humility, to let some questions remain unanswered, to accept imperfection as part of understanding. To imagine the future of AI is, therefore, to imagine the future of our relationship with ourselves. Machines will continue to learn faster, predict better, and comfort more efficiently. Yet their brilliance will always depend on the boundaries we set, the humility to remember that knowledge is not wisdom, and empathy cannot be automated. True collaboration will not come from imitation but from balance: where AI extends our reach, and humanity restores our depth. Perhaps the next era of technology will not be defined by speed or precision, but by reflection. Instead of designing systems that shield us from discomfort, we might build ones that invite contemplation, tools that help us listen more carefully, pause more often, and notice what quietly unfolds within. In that sense, AI could become not a crutch, but a companion: a presence that reminds us to slow down, to think, to feel. This hope is not naïve, it's echoed in data. According to the 2025 Sentio University Survey [13], most people who avoid AI for mental-health support do so not out of fear, but out of doubt in its authenticity. They still crave what only humans can offer: imperfection, empathy, and warmth.

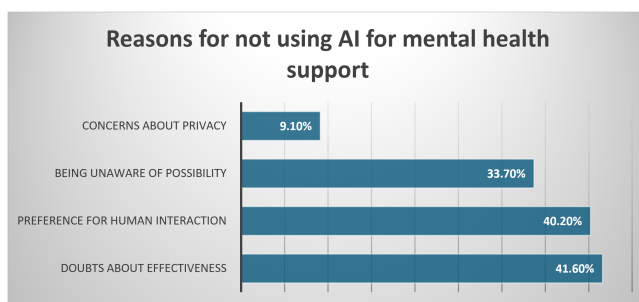


Figure 7. Primary reasons individuals report for not using AI-based mental-health tools [13]. The most common responses reflect doubt about effectiveness and preference for human empathy, suggesting that reluctance stems from emotional trust rather than outright rejection.

This hesitation reveals something profoundly hopeful. Even in our most digital moments, we remain loyal to what makes us human, the desire to be seen by another consciousness, not just simulated by one. It suggests that no matter how advanced machines

become, their purpose may not be to replace us, but to remind us of what cannot be programmed: the need to connect, to feel, to be known. We are entering a time when solitude and connection will coexist in new ways. The question is no longer whether machines can think, but whether we can still feel deeply in their presence. If we learn to collaborate with AI rather than depend on it, to treat it not as oracle or therapist, but as mirror and muse, then perhaps it can guide us back to the oldest form of intelligence we possess: the human capacity to imagine, to doubt, and to care. In the end, the goal is not to create machines that understand us completely, but to use them to understand ourselves more honestly. For even in a world of perfect algorithms, the most essential kind of knowledge will remain beyond calculation, the quiet, uncertain art of being human. Perhaps the most intelligent act is not to optimise or automate, but to remember what cannot be coded: that we were made to feel.

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Tommy Lau Lee Kai The author is interested in the psychological and ethical dimensions of artificial intelligence, particularly its role in mental health and its interaction with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Their work examines uncertainty, reassurance, and emotional dependency in the digital age, combining empirical research with philosophical inquiry and lived experience. They are drawn to questions of how technology alters solitude, self-trust, and the capacity to sit with not knowing.