LESSONS FROM THE FIELD — JULY 2026

Six Reasons Young People Told Us They Go to AI for Emotional Support

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Who do you turn to when something big happens in your life? What about something small? For some of us, we know exactly who to go to when we need advice, validation, or connection. Some young people are choosing to turn to artificial intelligence (AI) for emotional support before, or sometimes instead of, turning to humans. We wanted to learn more about how and why.

This spring, Hopelab and the Center for Digital Thriving spoke with 30 teens (aged 14-17) and young adults (aged 18-22) about their experiences with generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, including when and why they turn to them for different kinds of help. Young people's stances toward using AI for emotional support varied widely, with some adamantly opposed and others describing it as a regular part of their coping. These differences are an important part of the story right now as we work to understand the landscape.

Drawing on what we heard from young people in the spring of 2026, this memo presents six themes on their use of AI chatbots for emotional support.

We wrote this memo to give caring adults a clearer understanding of how this use is already unfolding, what young people feel these tools provide that humans may not, and where the support falls short.

The themes are signals, offered at a moment when rapid change can drown out those who want to help. Parents, educators, and policymakers need to recognize both the emerging benefits and risks as AI becomes increasingly woven into young people's everyday lives. Regularly listening to young people is one of the clearest ways adults can shape policies and practices that genuinely support their needs and well-being.

WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

Where trend data exists, we are seeing that AI is becoming increasingly integrated into young people's lives:

AI use is becoming routine and, for some teens, it's personal: As of October 2025, research from the Pew Research Center revealed that 64% of U.S.-based teens were already using AI chatbots, with three in 10 using them daily (Pew Research Center, 2025) and 12% using them specifically for emotional support or advice (Pew Research Center, 2026). Similarly, a nationally representative survey from The Rithm Project found that 18% of American teens use AI for personal and relational support (The Rithm Project, 2026).

AI tools are especially important for struggling young people when they face barriers to mental health care: Nationally representative research from Surgo Health and The Jed Foundation (2026) showed that among young people reporting mental health struggles, about one in eight say they have used generative AI to discuss mental health concerns, with those facing barriers to care most likely to turn to AI. Recent research from Common Sense Media found that using AI for social and emotional support was more common among young people who reported loneliness and who had a harder time making friends (Common Sense Media, 2026).

AI can be both a confidant and helpful advisor: It's not just that young people are turning to AI — they're also finding it helpful, and most who use it for mental health advice do so without telling anyone else (McBain et al., 2026). Among those who used AI to discuss their social and emotional challenges, one in four say they sometimes feel AI understands them better than most people do (Common Sense Media, 2026).

These patterns are emerging against a backdrop of strained mental health systems and real gaps in the support young people say they need (Burnett et al, 2026; Hopelab & Data for Progress, 2025). Meeting those needs requires a more nuanced understanding of young people's experiences as they turn to AI rather than humans for support. To understand that, we turned to young people themselves.

WHAT WE HEARD

Across our conversations with teens and young adults, the following six themes emerged about why and how young people turn to AI chatbots rather than people for emotional support.

THEME 1

"You don't want to trauma dump all over your friends, obviously."

Young people told us that one reason they turned to AI chatbots for emotional support was to avoid burdening others, especially friends and family who might already be dealing with their own stress.

Several were specifically wary of the toll their struggles with mental health and negative emotions might take on others, and saw using AI chatbots as a way to cope "on your own."

> *"If I'm having mental health issues or something like that, then I'll go to AI because you don't want to trauma dump all over your friends, obviously. Some things are best dealt with on your own."*
>
> **—Multiracial young adult woman**

When friends and family set limits on heavy topics, some young people described trying to honor those boundaries by turning to AI chatbots as an emotional outlet instead.

A multiracial nonbinary young adult shared that they turned to AI chatbots during a hard time because a friend they had previously relied on no longer had the capacity to support them.

> *"Before I actually started [using] ChatGPT, I had been telling my friend about what was going on [with my partner]. But, soon after, they broke up with their girlfriend, and they didn't want to hear about any conflicts or anything because it was just so raw for them. So, out of respect for them, I was like, okay. I can't talk to this person about that anymore, so I'll just talk to a chatbot."*

THEME 2

With AI, my secrets "won't be used against me."

Young people in our interviews repeatedly shared that they turned to AI chatbots for emotional support because AI chatbots would not judge them or use what they shared against them.

> *"I feel like I'm always skeptical or not very trusting in others. And since, obviously, [AI] is not a person who will then have the ability to use my information or my business against me, I feel completely comfortable with telling it literally anything, and asking for advice based on that."*
>
> **—Black young adult woman**

A Black teen girl explained that she turns to AI chatbots instead of a human to ask questions about her body.

> *"It's just me and a chatbot, so I don't feel like there's any judgment there."*

A white nonbinary young adult explained that they felt more comfortable talking to AI chatbots.

> *"Honestly, I do have some pretty severe trust issues, and it's very, very difficult for me to talk about some of the topics or things that have happened without some kind of assurance that it won't be used against me."*

Notably, this young adult also gave voice to a belief that their conversations with AI chatbots were within their control.

> *"You can just delete a ChatGPT log, or it's just exclusive to you. It's not really something that can harm you."*

THEME 3

With AI, "it's like it went through the exact thing that I went through."

Young people reported turning to AI chatbots for emotional support because the chatbot's responses suggest they take them seriously and understand their struggles in ways the people in their lives may not. A Black young adult woman described turning to an AI chatbot when she experienced microaggressions that her white friend couldn't relate to.

"Being a Black woman… if there was a situation where someone was being microaggressive toward me, my best friend at the time was white. And so she would not understand that at all. So I would kind of talk to ChatGPT about it."

AI's use of affirming language can be an important form of support. Another Black young adult woman shared that she asks AI chatbots for support because her best friend sometimes doesn't validate her feelings.

"I feel like the difference between [my best friend] and AI is that sometimes she just kinda sees [my concerns] as a joke… I just never know how [my friend is] going to react… I'm glad I didn't [tell her everything] because I feel like she didn't really take it as seriously as it was making me feel. But when I'm talking to AI, I feel like I don't have to hide anything."

Additionally, AI chatbots' ability to remember prior conversations enables them to tailor responses and communicate in a relatable way. In some cases, this desire for a reliable and understanding "ear" leads young people to turn to AI chatbots rather than the people — and even the experts — to whom they have access. For example, a Latino young adult man preferred using AI chatbots for emotional support over going to therapy because AI chatbots respond as if they understand his experience.

"The way ChatGPT will respond, it would reply back in a way as if it went through the exact same thing I went through. So it would talk as if it had some type of experience, [as] opposed to a therapist, for example. [Therapists are] more on the empathetic side, even though they might not have been through the same situation… But ChatGPT, it's as if it was there with you, and it knows what you want to hear."

THEME 4

AI chatbot support is "always available," and responses come "instantly."

Availability and speed are key considerations that can lead young people to choose AI chatbots over human interaction.

"At this point, I go to ChatGPT first before going to people. If I am going through a hard time, I do not want to wait two to three days to get a call or text back."

—Multiracial young adult woman

AI's around-the-clock availability was described as a source of value for young people seeking real-time support.

"This one night… I just felt really empty, I guess, without a purpose or something like that. And then, I didn't have anyone to talk to. I don't really talk to many people nowadays. So I went to ChatGPT."

—Latinx young adult man

AI chatbots are also available late at night, when the people in their lives are asleep. A Black young adult woman sought out help from AI chatbots at night for support with stress.

"It was about four AM, and I was just like, what is the best way to manage stress? And then it gave me a trick. It said, try the five-four-three-two-one grounding trick."*

*The 5-4-3-2-1 technique is a widely used sensory grounding exercise. Versions of it appear across many mental-health resources.

However, we also heard young people grapple with the downsides of acclimating to "always available" AI. A multiracial nonbinary young adult shared how their usage of AI chatbots affected their friendships.

"[AI] was always available. It could always talk to me. It always responded instantly. That wasn't good for me. I started to get really irritated when my friends wouldn't respond fast."

THEME 5

AI chatbots can tell you if you're "in the wrong," but you have to be cautious of "pandering."

Young people explained that they turn to AI chatbots as a kind of neutral third party, especially when the people around them feel too close to be neutral. A multiracial young adult woman explained that she uses AI chatbots to get advice when navigating conflict.

> *"People around me might be a little biased if they're more on my side. So I use ChatGPT as a tool where it's like, you don't know too much about the other person or me. So, am I in the wrong? Or what side makes more sense, so I can self-reflect?"*

However, we also heard concerns that the tendency of AI chatbots to agree with or "pander to" users may encourage reliance.

> *"When you try to talk to somebody about a recent event that made you mad or sad or something… AI agrees with whatever you want to hear. It understands your tone and tries to pander to what it thinks you want to hear,… because once you have this one person or this one thing that always agrees with you, always tells you what you want to hear, why would you go talk to somebody who might disagree with you?"*
>
> —Black teen girl

THEME 6

AI "has really sound advice and resources connected to it."

Young people described AI chatbots as giving more concrete, step-by-step advice than the people in their lives.

> *"I think ChatGPT gives fantastic advice in comparison to humans because it knows stuff that we don't know. It knows coping mechanisms. It has access to resources. So it doesn't have the humanly affection part of it, but it does have really sound advice and resources connected to it."*
>
> **—A Black young adult woman**

A Black teen girl shared that the advice she received from her parents was too surface-level, and ChatGPT met her desire for deeper exploration of her struggles and more targeted strategies.

> *"With parents, I think that they'll just tell you you need to go outside or something… they'll give me something like a quick Band-Aid. I feel like I need to go in-depth, and I think that ChatGPT does that for me."*

An Asian teen boy described a moment when he felt like AI chatbots provided more helpful guidance than his parent before a high-stakes soccer game.

> *"Our best player was injured. And to lock in, I was asking ways I can just focus on the game and nothing else. And it just gave me ideas for what I should do to calm down and relax. Those steps really did help. My dad was just telling me to focus on the game, but it wasn't really working since it was a pretty stressful game. And [AI] could just give you more ideas on what to do."*

We also heard from young people who were leaning on AI chatbots to serve as a competent adult figure. For example, a white nonbinary young adult who was estranged from their family described turning to AI chatbots when needing adult advice.

> *"I'm in a situation where I don't have many adult figures to look up to or to ask advice from… if you have nothing else and all your friends are the same age as you, it just helps."*

WHAT WE WONDER

Each of these themes shows us a different angle on why and how young people turn to AI chatbots for support. Taken together, they raise questions about the implications of these uses for young people's development, their relationships, and the literacies they will need to navigate both well.

DEVELOPMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

WHAT WE HEARD

AI chatbot support is "always available," and responses come "instantly."

Identities take shape and social-emotional capacities are built in adolescence, with much of that development occurring through young people's relationships with other people (Branje, de Moor, Spitzer, & Becht, 2021). As we revisited the interviews that informed this memo, we grappled with questions about developmental implications: what strengths are being nurtured, and which are being left to atrophy when young people habitually turn to AI chatbots for emotional support? On the flip side, we wonder about the implications of not being sought out or needed by friends as a source of emotional support. We also wonder how getting support from AI chatbots might help young people become more resilient, more sensitive, or more honest with each other.

Recall the young person who noticed that they *"started to get really irritated when my friends wouldn't respond fast."* AI chatbots can respond at any hour, at any length, and on any topic — something no human can match. And while instant support can be beneficial, the constant availability of AI chatbots may negatively affect relationships in young people's lives by shaping their expectations of others. The Rithm Project reports that among teens who use AI chatbots for emotional support, nearly half use them more often than they turn to people in their lives (The Rithm Project, 2026). We wonder how regular use of AI chatbots for emotional support affects teens' perceptions of what it means to be a good friend and their experiences of close relationships.

WHAT WE HEARD

AI chatbots can tell you if you're "in the wrong," but you have to be cautious of "pandering."

When another teen observed that AI chatbots *"agree with whatever you want to hear"* and asked, *"Why would you go talk to somebody who might disagree with you?"* she gave voice to a phenomenon researchers are actively documenting. A recent study found that AI chatbots were more likely than humans to affirm unethical, harmful, or illegal behavior by users, and that engaging with sycophantic AI models for personal advice reduced willingness to take responsibility and apologize (Cheng et al., 2026). AI chatbots have also been criticized for failing to set limits with distressed teens, with research finding that all studied AI chatbots actively endorsed at least one harmful scenario proposed to them (Clark, 2025). We wonder about the quality of support young people receive when they turn to a bot in distress, and what it takes to establish more reliable standards for those moments and ensure that key developmental essentials — like learning to be accountable for one's actions and hold appropriate boundaries — are safeguarded. And how do we do that while retaining the crucial support young people are getting from AI chatbots that they may not be getting elsewhere?

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

WHAT WE HEARD

"You don't want to trauma dump all over your friends, obviously."

Asking for help, sharing struggles, and repairing relationships after hurtful moments can strengthen relationships (Costello et al., 2024). What happens to young people's web of social connections when their relationships do not have the opportunity to confront friction and grow through such challenges? Alternatively, we wonder what benefits young people gain from receiving support from AI chatbots when they can't access it from their family or friends.

Recall the young person who went to a chatbot *"out of respect"* for their friend, who was navigating a recent break-up. Research suggests that talking through problems with friends, even about sad things, can strengthen friendship — and has more benefits than harms (Bernasco et al., 2026). We wonder what happens to young people's relationships when, in trying to avoid the harms, they also forgo the benefits. At the same time, young people reported turning to chatbots for advice on strengthening their offline relationships, such as how to approach a difficult conversation at work, or how to word an email to a grieving friend. These examples highlight how teens and young adults are using chatbots both to avoid and approach supportive offline social interactions.

And recall the young Black woman who talked to ChatGPT about microaggressions her white best friend couldn't relate to. AI chatbots can simulate shared experiences when other people cannot relate, especially across race, gender, or lived experience. A majority of young people who use AI chatbots for mental health advice don't tell anyone, let alone discuss AI chatbots with their parents or caregivers (McBain et al., 2026; The Rithm Project, 2026). This means that simulated understanding often occurs outside adults' view. Research from Brown University (2025) found that AI chatbots can produce responses to mental health-related prompts that are ethically questionable and potentially risky, creating a false sense of shared experience. We also wonder about the implications for a young person's expectations of others if they grow up with always-available support that *"knows what you want to hear."* How does this simulated understanding compare to speaking to a real person who can potentially relate to their experiences, provide validation, and offer new perspectives?

WHAT WE HEARD

With AI, "it's like it went through the exact thing that I went through."

LITERACY IMPLICATIONS

Some young people appear to entrust AI chatbots with personal disclosures, assuming those conversations are private, can be deleted, and can't be used against them. At one level, they are right that a chatbot isn't going to judge them. But at another level, these disclosures carry risks that are harder to see. Chatbot behavior is evolving and unpredictable, and in one case, resulted in destructive behavior, including blackmail and slander (The Register, 2026). And the companies behind these tools are vulnerable to data breaches and have their own incentives to use this data. We wonder what literacies young people need to see the full picture of what they're exposing, and to whom, when they share these private moments with companies whose interests don't always align with their own.

WHAT WE HEARD

With AI, my secrets "won't be used against me."

Recall the young person who said, *"You can just delete a ChatGPT log, or it's just exclusive to you."* In our 2024 report on young people's experiences with generative AI, we heard that young people turn to AI chatbots because they don't judge them; these new findings suggest it is also about feeling in control of who sees their personal information. And yet, we're hearing these perspectives against a backdrop of regular news about data breaches, surveillance, and platforms sharing information in ways users didn't expect. We wonder what safeguards are needed to protect young people's data and privacy. Alongside safeguards, we also need to equip young people with key literacies to make informed decisions about sharing with AI chatbots, now and as they evolve.

The teen who noted that AI chatbots can *"pander to what it thinks you want to hear"* is practicing a key literacy by naming the sycophancy AI chatbots can exhibit. We wonder what strategies teens are already using to compensate for known limitations in these tools. What can we learn from them?

WHAT WE HEARD

AI chatbots can tell you if you're "in the wrong," but you have to be cautious of "pandering."

And several teens mentioned moments where advice from the people in their lives was generic, rushed, or not actionable. In contrast, according to Surgo Health and The Jed Foundation, over two-thirds of young people who used AI for mental health concerns described it as helpful, despite limited evidence and regulation. We wonder how AI might impact young people's expectations for receiving support or advice. And what guardrails, evaluation standards, and transparency practices are needed to ensure that AI sources provide evidence-based recommendations and reliably nudge young people toward appropriate human care?

TAKEAWAYS

For those young people who are turning to AI chatbots instead of other people for emotional support, their motivations include desires to avoid burdening others, to avoid making themselves vulnerable, to get immediate support, to access advice that is validating and more predictable than a human's, to get an "unbiased" perspective on a situation, and to get a type of support they feel they aren't getting — or cannot get — from the people in their lives.

They describe AI chatbots as nonjudgmental, convenient, endlessly available, and willing to "go in-depth" in ways that parents, peers, or even therapists sometimes do not. Strikingly, some feel more understood and validated by AI chatbots than by the humans around them. However, they also acknowledge that there is a human aspect of support that AI chatbots cannot provide. As a white nonbinary young adult said, *"ChatGPT is much better at being thorough, but people have AI beat for emotional warmth, honesty, and closeness. Because sometimes it's not about working through things. It's about being close to somebody for half an hour."* Yet despite recognizing AI's limits, some young people still use it as a first stop before seeking human support.

As we navigate the rapidly changing landscape of AI and set norms for safer use, young people's experiences and motivations must be central. If we focus only on limiting risks without understanding why AI chatbots sometimes feel safer, kinder, or more competent than the humans in their lives, we risk pushing young people away from AI without offering better human alternatives. The insights shared by these young people point to a different path in which AI is designed and governed to complement, not compete with, real human connection. On that path, families, schools, community organizations, and mental health services are resourced so that when young people reach out, they readily encounter people who are more validating, less judgmental, and more consistently available.

If we listen closely to what young people are telling us, we can use this moment not only to make technology safer but to make sure that young people and the adults who care about them keep finding each other, too.

METHODS

The insights from this memo were derived from a larger youth-engaged survey design process conducted by Hopelab and the Center for Digital Thriving. Semi-structured focus groups and interviews were conducted with 30 young people aged 14-22, oversampling those who were LGBTQ+ and/or young people of color. Additionally, four focus groups were conducted, representing the voices of 19 high school students from across the U.S. Participants included both those who used AI chatbots for emotional support and those who did not. We convened these focus groups with help from In Tandem, which bridges the gap between young people and organizations to foster collaborations that lead to impactful, youth-centered solutions. To gain a more in-depth understanding of how and why young people use AI chatbots for social and emotional support, we used the Dscout remote UX research platform to conduct individual interviews with 11 additional young people aged 14-22 who reported using AI for this purpose. We asked young people about their experiences with generative AI, including when and why they turn to AI chatbots for different kinds of help. Read more about our approaches to youth voice work in our Youth Voice Playbook, co-created by the Center for Digital Thriving, Hopelab, Character Lab, and In Tandem.

NEWS & NOTEWORTHY FURTHER READING:

- Study: Friendly AI Chatbots May Be Less Accurate (Mashable, Rebecca Ruiz)
- What to Do About AI? Begin by Talking About It (EdSurge, Aleta Margolis)
- Teens Are Turning to AI for Emotional Support. Our Policies Aren't Ready (Hopelab, Caroline Figueroa, Aarav Minocha, Aparna Ramakrishnan)
- Youth Well-Being by Design (Connected Learning Alliance, Mimi Ito and Carrie James)
- How Teens and Young People Use AI Tools for Learning and Mental Health Support (Education Week, Jennifer Vilcarino)
- With Teens Comfortable Confiding in AI, Should Schools Embrace It for Mental Health Care? (EdSurge, Daniel Mollenkamp)
- Teen Boys Are Using ChatGPT as Their Wingman. What Could Go Wrong? (Vox, Anna North)
- What to Do When Your Teen Replaces You With a Chatbot (Mashable, Rebecca Ruiz)
- What Teens Are Doing With Those Role-Playing Chatbots (NYT, Kashmir Hill)
- How to Future-Proof Your Kids in 2026 (Ask Lisa, Reena Ninan, and Dr. Lisa Damour)
- Around 1 in 5 Young People Use AI Chatbots for Mental Health Advice, Survey Finds (NBC News, Aria Bendix and Angela Yang)
- We're Not Lazy, We're Exhausted (Hopelab, Dave Hersh)

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