

# 1 in 10 Mental Health Clinicians Report Patients Turning to AI Chatbots for Emotional Support

*A national survey shows waitlists and high costs are driving patients to use commercial AI instead of care, raising concerns about patient harm.*

BALTIMORE, MD, UNITED STATES, July 8, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A new national study reveals

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Patients aren't choosing AI because they necessarily prefer an algorithm over a human therapist; they choose AI because the human healthcare system is failing to meet them in their moment of need.”

*ICANotes Chief Clinical Officer,  
October Boyles*

that patients are increasingly turning to commercial AI chatbots for mental health support, leading to growing alarm among licensed practitioners who are beginning to witness the clinical fallout.

According to the [ICANotes Clinician Survey 2026](#), which analyzed insights from 416 licensed behavioral health professionals across the U.S., 9% to 10% of clinicians state that their patients now regularly or occasionally disclose using AI for emotional support.

However, this reliance on algorithmic care comes with significant clinical risks.

The survey found that 18% of clinicians have already treated patients where unguided AI use actively worsened their mental health outcomes.

An additional 14% of providers report observing "possible" clinical harm, creating a combined 32% of practitioners who are raising red flags about the trend.

The study illuminates the systemic barriers driving patients toward AI. When evaluating why individuals experiment with algorithmic support, providers identified the top drivers as:

1. Financial Barriers (21%): High out-of-pocket costs for traditional therapy.
2. Lack of Clinical Awareness (21%): Patients failing to recognize the severity of their need for licensed human care.

3. Systemic Wait Times (11%): An inability to access a human provider during an immediate crisis.

The survey directly links this reliance on AI to a severe human capacity shortage: 23% of behavioral health providers report waitlists of four or more weeks, or are completely closed to taking new patients. Bypassed by a congested system, patients are utilizing the immediate availability of technology.

"Patients aren't choosing AI because they necessarily prefer an algorithm over a human therapist; they are choosing AI because the human healthcare system is failing to meet them in their moment of need," said [ICANotes](#) Chief Clinical Officer, October Boyles, DNP.

"When an individual is experiencing a crisis at two o'clock in the morning and faces a month-long waitlist for an appointment, a readily accessible smartphone app becomes an incredibly tempting alternative. Unfortunately, general or commercial AI models lack clinical guardrails, and our data suggests that this unsupervised substitute is actively harming vulnerable individuals."

Frontline clinicians participating in the survey echoed this reality, noting that the round-the-clock availability of tech bridges an institutional gap: "Patients often tell me they tried an AI app because it was available at 2 AM when they couldn't sleep and couldn't reach anyone else."

The findings challenge tech developers, health executives, and bioethicists attending this month's AI conferences to shift their focus.

Rather than trying to build automated "front-end" digital therapists that simulate human empathy—a path that currently introduces clinical risk—the survey suggests technology is better utilized on the "back-end."

By leveraging administrative AI to address the staggering documentation burden that currently consumes a full workday per week for 40% of clinicians, the industry can naturally free up human clinical hours, allowing providers to be accessible when patients spiral.

Boyles added: "Patients aren't choosing AI because they necessarily prefer an algorithm over a human therapist; they are choosing AI because the human healthcare system is failing to meet them in their moment of need."

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