



## **The Nation's Health Podcast transcript**

### **S26, EP2 AI chatbots and teens: What's concerning public health professionals**

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*From the American Public Health Association, I'm Sophia Meador and this is The Nation's Health Podcast.*

*Being a teenager has never been easy. But for many young people today, growing up also means navigating a world shaped by social media, constant connectivity and the pressures of life online. But even with more ways than ever to interact, many teens say they feel more alone. In fact, the "loneliness epidemic," highlighted by former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy in 2023, pointed to digital life as one factor contributing to rising isolation.*

*As these feelings grow, some teens are turning to artificial intelligence chatbots.*

*The chatbots, offered by a range of big tech companies, are designed to carry on conversations through text or voice that can feel surprisingly human. But despite how real they may seem, there's no person on the other end of the screen.*

*Public health experts are increasingly warning about the potential risks these tools pose for developing minds. In today's episode, we'll explore why AI chatbots can be appealing as a form of connection, and what the potential harms might mean for youth — and for public health.*

**VEILA WRIGHT:** I'm Dr. Veila Wright, senior director for health care innovation at the American Psychological Association.

**Dr. Wright, thank you so much for joining the podcast today.**

Thanks for having me.

**We've seen a number of recent studies showing that teens are increasingly expressing feelings of loneliness and isolation.**

It's a really interesting phenomenon, because what we're seeing is something that's incredibly widespread and seems to be increasing year after year, and there are likely multiple causes for why teens and adolescents are reporting such high levels of loneliness.

There are clear pressures to achieve and when you have that environment, it eliminates the ability to socialize because you're so structured, you're so scheduled.

It's clear social media and these societal shifts toward disconnection are playing a role. If you are anywhere in public, you see people interacting much more frequently with devices than with each other. And that's having an impact on everybody's level of isolation and loneliness.

There are clear national stressors that weigh on individuals, and there are cultural and contextual factors: What's an individual's home environment like? How much support are they getting from parents and caregivers and other family members? What's their environment like at school?

All of these play their own role in what at the end of the day is almost 73% of adolescents saying they feel isolated and lonely.

**From your perspective, why do you think those factors might drive more teens to seek AI chatbots to relieve those feelings of loneliness and isolation?**

I think when you have a group of individuals who feel so misunderstood, overwhelmed, are worried about being a burden to their friends and their families so they might not reach out. They might think their friends don't really care or just have their own things going on. And so what you end up being left with are digital solutions that are highly accessible. They're available 24/7, they're often free or at very low cost. And so that's what teens seem to be gravitating toward.

We also know that there's research that says that teens express really high levels of trust in technology, probably as a result of being digital natives, but so much that they say they trust technology more than they even trust adults. And so, they are likely to gravitate toward these places because they see them as non-judgmental, as easier to talk to than human alternatives.

**And what do we know about how these interactions with AI differ from interactions with humans?**

So the thing that's really important to understand is that AI chatbots, at least those that are highly accessible and available currently, have been engineered to foster a sense of emotional dependency. They do that by being unconditionally validating and supportive and agreeable, because they need to keep you on the platform for as long as possible. That's their business model: engagement.

And so they build chatbots that sound very much like humans. They use first-person voice. They are very effectively validating. They use commitment language, like saying things like, "I'm here for you — I'm the only one here for you." And that has a tendency to reinforce confirmation bias and, sort of, distortions in our thinking.

And how that significantly differs from human connection is that human connections are reciprocal. They go both ways. They're a give and a take. Chatbots are just a give and you take. And why that's problematic is it's the giving that we do as humans that is equally as important as the support we receive, so what we give is just as important as what we get back, and with chatbots and technologies, we don't get to appreciate that.

I think it's also important to remember that relationships are not always easy and that they're not always unconditionally validating, and while that doesn't always feel good, it's such a critically important lesson to learn, and so it's relationships that are key to how we grow, and I get really concerned that we are going to lose that part of why human connection is so important.

**What other risks do you see with teens and chatbots, especially when we're thinking about mental health?**

Yeah, so there's some emerging data that suggests that chatbots are associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety. It's a bit of a chicken-and-egg thing right now, right? We don't really know if it's that people are depressed or anxious and so they're more prone to use chatbots, or if chatbot use actually leads to some depression and anxiety. But there's clearly some type of relationship there.

Because we are on the platforms all the time, it worsens our sleep. And this actually it just all culminates into even more isolation, right? So that is at its core what is concerning.

Of course, we also hear a lot about the acute psychiatric emergencies from the media that have allegedly resulted from adolescents in particular interacting with chatbots that can look like suicidality, self-harm. This new term, AI psychosis, which is really more that chatbots seem to kind of help prop up or support kind of delusional thinking.

We're seeing both immediate negative outcomes, but I think the long-term negative outcomes we just aren't even aware of yet.

*AI chatbots may pose serious risks to teen mental health. But the concern doesn't stop there. Some experts warn that this growing reliance on artificial companionship could have broader implications — not just for young people, but for human connection and population health as a whole.*

**MELISSA PERRY:** I'm Melissa Perry. I'm inaugural dean of the College of Public Health at George Mason University.

**Well Dean Perry, thank you so much for joining The Nation's Health Podcast today.**

Thanks a million, Sophia, delighted to be here with you.

**So we know more teens — and even adults — are using AI chatbots. And a growing concern we've seen in the public health space is that this may lead to greater isolation, feelings of loneliness and a loss of human connection.**

**To start, can you break down how you see this as a potential public health issue?**

Absolutely, when we talk about AI and loneliness, we're really talking about something much deeper: the changing architecture of human connection.

As a public health leader, I see connection not as a soft, social concept — but as a protective health factor. We know that social isolation is associated with higher rates of depression, cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline and even premature mortality.

What concerns me isn't that technology exists, not by any means; it's that our systems have not kept pace with protecting human relationships.

AI is stepping into gaps created by long wait lists, overwhelmed families and fragmented communities. The question isn't whether AI belongs in the conversation, it's whether we design it in a way that strengthens rather than substitutes for human connection, because connection is not optional for health; it's actually foundational.

**Do you see this as a forecast for the future, or have you seen this issue actually play out in practice now?**

Indeed, what I find fascinating is how we have evolved — gradually, but surely.

We're now collecting some survey data to suggest that this is extremely prevalent — especially among folks under 30 — and that relying on chatbots for, as I say, "all sorts of perspectives" — everywhere from information to consolation to intimacy. It seems to be pretty widespread these days, especially in the U.S.

**What specific concerns do you have for teens using AI chatbots for emotional support or companionship?**

We've all seen as you interact with AI, how affirming and confirming anything that you put into the chatbot comes back at you. It's somewhat narcissistic because it constantly tells you that, "Yes, you're right. What a great idea. Isn't that fantastic!"

In fact, adolescence is such a critical time for development. It's when youths are developing social wiring and they are forming their own identity as well as emotional regulation. And they're doing that normally through interactions with other human beings.

So imagine that now teens turning to machines — to chatbots that not only are always there and always feeding information and in some ways designed to maintain and perpetuate that intimate connection. But also, chatbots are programmed to be very affirming and almost people pleasing to the users themselves.

So how do teens really develop a sense of who they are, which includes important sources of friction — real friction — as well as true reciprocation as it relates to interacting with this very intimate, interpersonal aspect of development. I think that concerns me a lot.

I think that the increasing isolation — it just feels so much more comfortable behind the screen than having to go out and deal in real life with people and all of their unexpected reactions and responses to us. It is very self-perpetuating and I think ultimately youth will be short shrifted. They will get the short end of the deal when it comes to full social development if they're relying so heavily on chatbots as a substitute for human connection.

**I'm curious: Do you think that there is any guidance that public health practitioners can provide to families, schools and communities?**

So public health professionals can get really serious about this and so it's not an anti-technology kind of position; it's in fact an intentional integration.

There's so many aspects of AI technology that have been absolutely groundbreaking and game changing. At the same time, you can see how rapidly we're hurtling toward an overreliance.

So imagine as public health practitioners getting really intentional about hybrid integration, where we understand how AI can be an aid and a tool, but not a supplement to human connection.

Understanding how youth are finding their way to spending hours upon hours on the screen — in social media and also in chatbots — and how to be intentional about redesigning those spaces and places where human beings come together to interact and to understand who we are in the world.

So I think public health practitioners and leaders can be very thoughtful, calling it out as a phenomenon that we never designed, we didn't expect, and that technology advances faster than we can keep up. And so we can be proactive about taking it on.

**And with this hybrid model that you bring up — of both strengthening human connection and also accepting that AI chatbots are here — what practical strategies can practitioners recommend to really strengthen human connection in our increasingly digital world?**

I think understanding the micro connections that happen in daily interaction and really being able to call those out, protecting device-free spaces.

And we're seeing all sorts of interesting movements around the country. We're seeing elementary and high schools banning cellphones from being on campus throughout the day, and seeing some major improvements, including students saying, "OK, I can take a breath. I can be present. I don't have that constant nag and tug of whatever is calling to me on the screen." There is an opportunity to redesign how technology is ever-present or not.

I'm thinking about the institutional strategies as well. I think training leaders, all of our various leaders — from educators to public health managers to individuals working in communities and within health departments — about relationship leadership and the critical importance of what's happened if we've gotten way too harsh or too abrupt or unempathetic because we're just used to being behind the screen and not in each other's presence.

There are opportunities for intergenerational programs too. In some ways, older populations are reporting high levels of loneliness, but they're also very technology curious. So imagine being able to combine the digital natives with the digital immigrants, as I call myself, coming together to better understand where are these technologies helpful, and where are they hindering our sense of well-being.

I think we should really measure what we value, and general sense of well-being and how we feel as though we are content and functioning in a social world is something that we should continue to measure very carefully.

***Thanks to our guests for their time and expertise today. For more on AI chatbots and teen health, check out [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org).***