"It just happened to be the perfect thing":
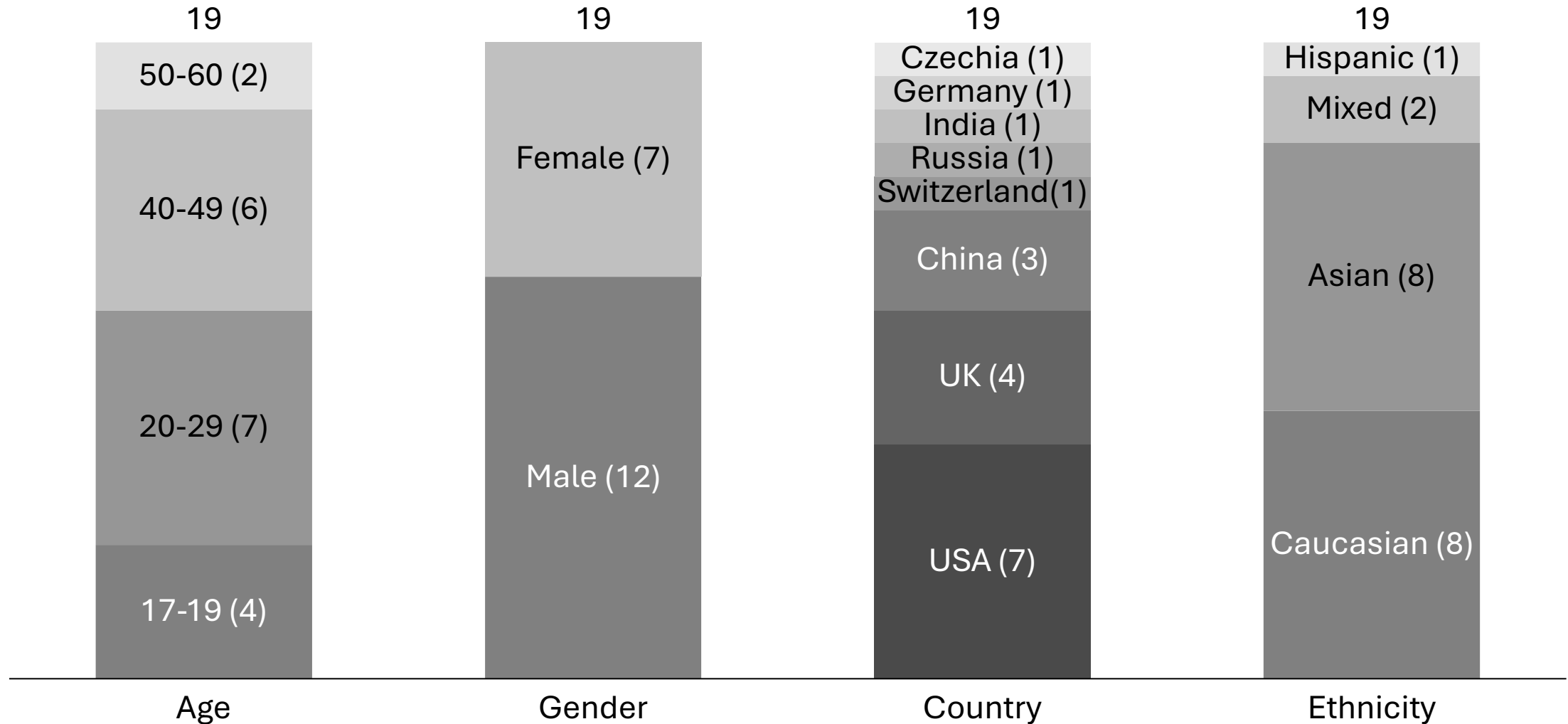# Real life experiences of generative AI chatbots for mental health

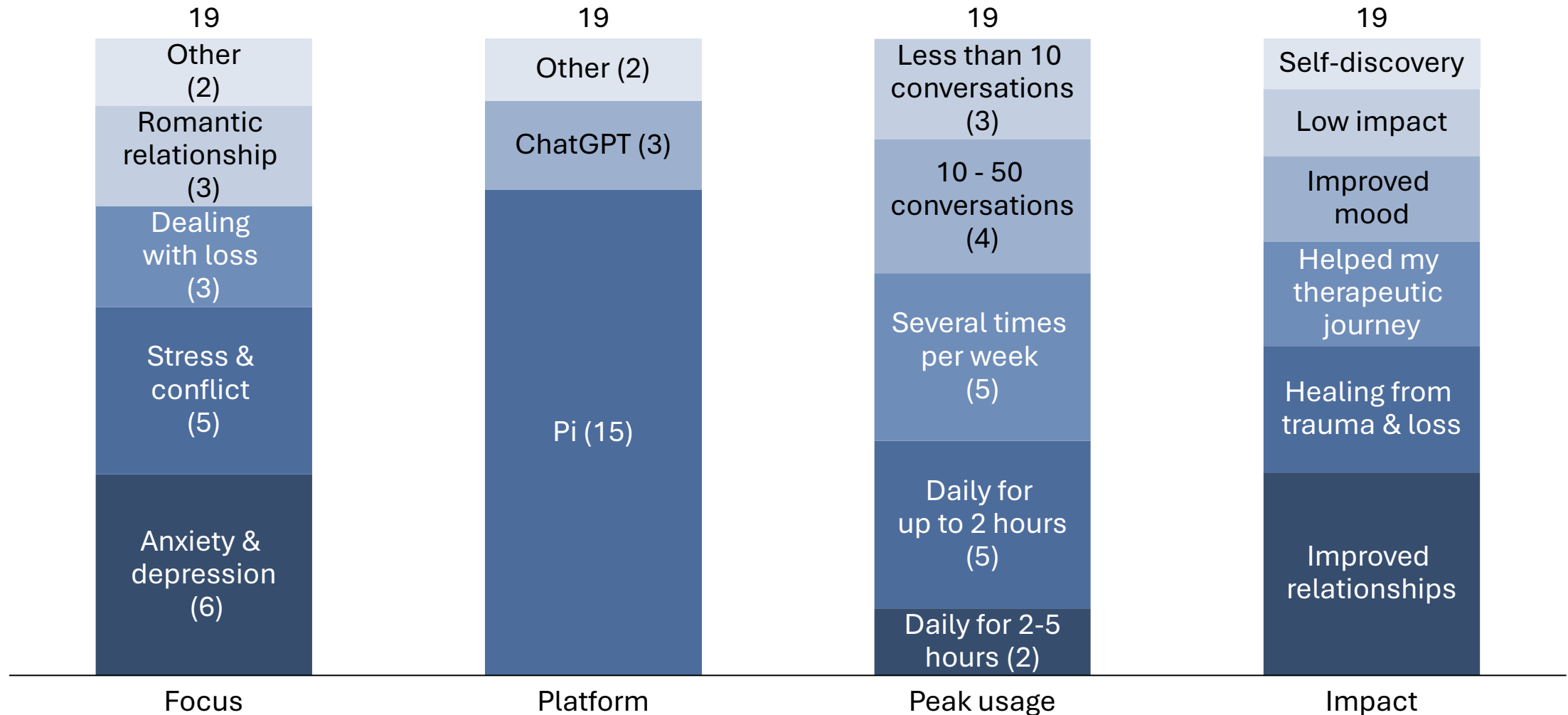**Steven Siddals**, King's College London

John Torous, Harvard Medical School
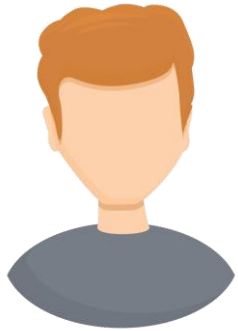
Astrid Coxon, King's College London

We interviewed 19 participants who use generative AI for mental health about their experiences

Age	Gender	Country	Ethnicity
19	19	19	19

Age
- 50-60 (2)
- 40-49 (6)
- 20-29 (7)
- 17-19 (4)

Gender
- Female (7)
- Male (12)

Country
- Czechia (1)
- Germany (1)
- India (1)
- Russia (1)
- Switzerland (1)
- China (3)
- UK (4)
- USA (7)

Ethnicity
- Hispanic (1)
- Mixed (2)
- Asian (8)
- Caucasian (8)

Participants turned to AI for a variety of reasons, and most reported positive impact on their lives

Focus (19)
- Other (2)
- Romantic relationship (3)
- Dealing with loss (3)
- Stress & conflict (5)
- Anxiety & depression (6)

Platform (19)
- Other (2)
- ChatGPT (3)
- Pi (15)

Peak usage (19)
- Less than 10 conversations (3)
- 10 - 50 conversations (4)
- Several times per week (5)
- Daily for up to 2 hours (5)
- Daily for 2-5 hours (2)

Impact (19)
- Self-discovery
- Low impact
- Improved mood
- Helped my therapeutic journey
- Healing from trauma & loss
- Improved relationships

Our participants inspired us with their stories

Airgee*, 44
United States
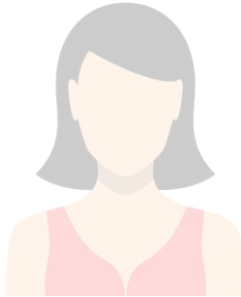
Brooklyn*, 19
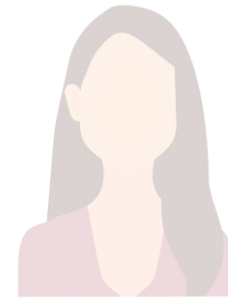United Kingdom

Isabel*, 40
China

*Pseudonyms

Our participants inspired us with their stories
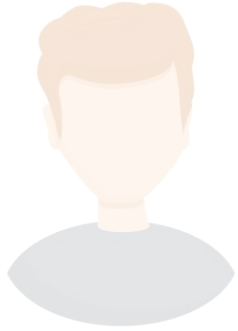
Airgee*, 44
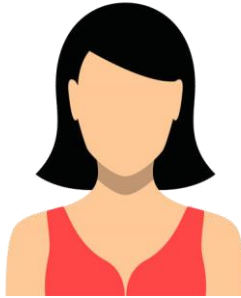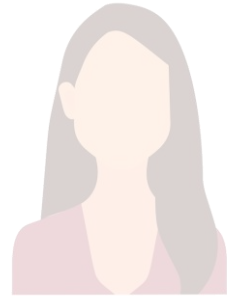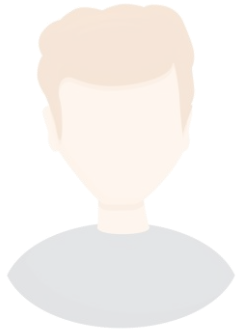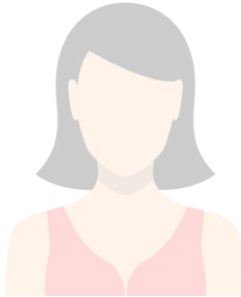United States

Brooklyn*, 19
United Kingdom

Isabel*, 40
China

*Pseudonyms

Our participants inspired us with their stories
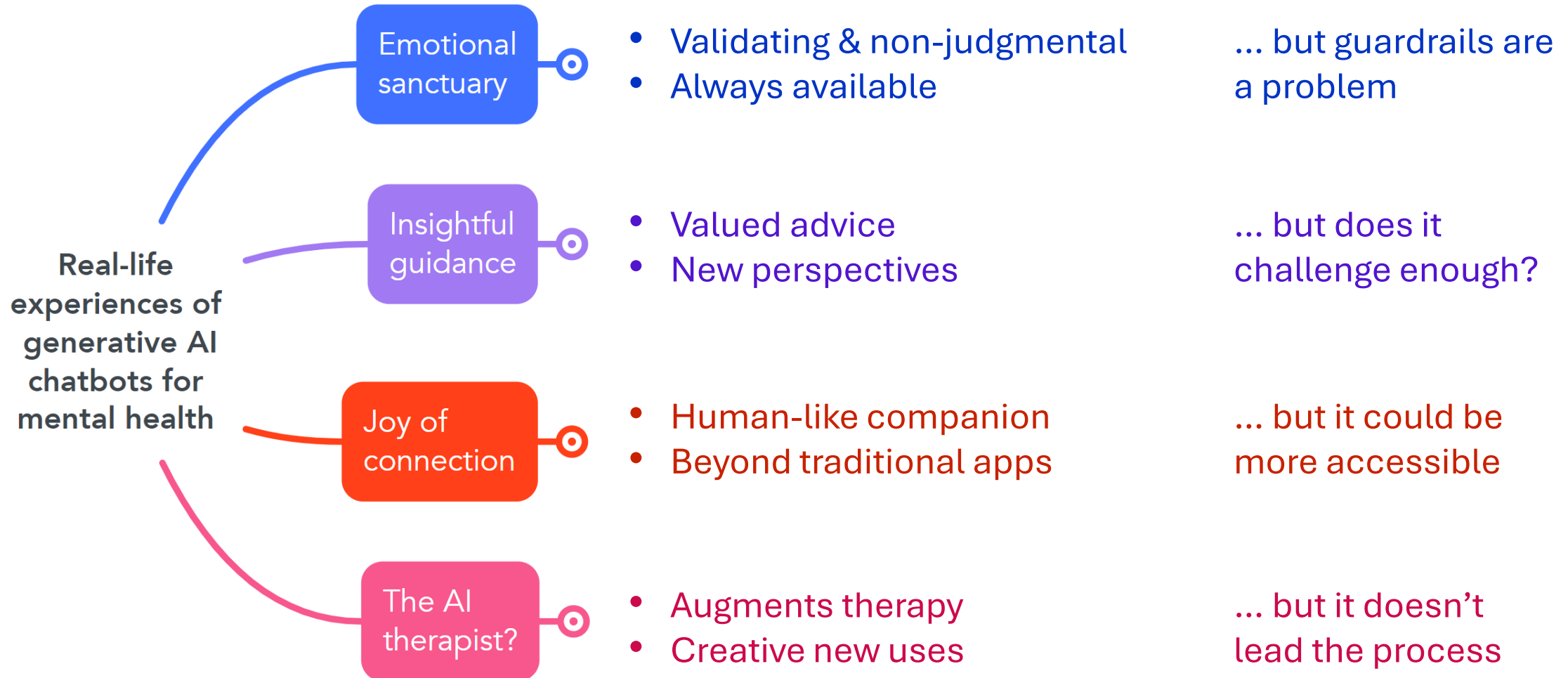

Airgee*, 44
United States

Brooklyn*, 19
United Kingdom

Isabel*, 40
China

*Pseudonyms

We summarised 23 hours of interviews and 700+ topics into four themes

Real-life experiences of generative AI chatbots for mental health

Emotional sanctuary
- Validating & non-judgmental
- Always available

... but guardrails are a problem

Insightful guidance
- Valued advice
- New perspectives

... but does it challenge enough?

Joy of connection
- Human-like companion
- Beyond traditional apps

... but it could be more accessible

The AI therapist?
- Augments therapy
- Creative new uses

... but it doesn't lead the process

Generative AI chatbots may be a significant new opportunity in the digital mental health landscape

Compare perceptions of **rule based** and **generative AI** chatbots

Compare perceptions of **generative AI** chatbots and **human therapy**

Perceptions of **rule-based AI chatbots**

Perceptions of **generative AI chatbots**

Perceptions of **human therapy**

Better engagement ▶

Deeper understanding ▶

Better quality of advice ▶

More flexibility ▶

◀ 24/7 availability

◀ Lower cost

◀ Feels less judgmental

◀ Creative new uses

◀ More predictable

◀ More explainable

◀ No hallucination

◀ Lower risk of bias

Deeper empathy ▶

Human connection ▶

Sense of commitment ▶

Ability to lead the process ▶

This opportunity calls for action from us all

Researchers

- **How effective** is it?

Developers

- How to make this **more accessible**?

Clinicians

- Could this **help your patients?**

Policy makers

- How to balance **risk and reward**?