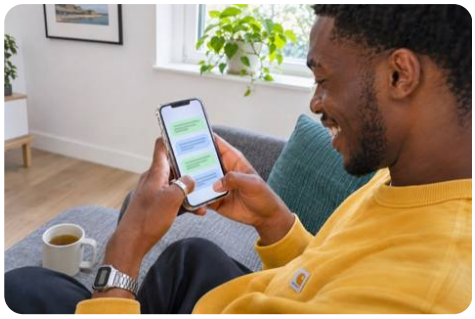
NEWS LESSON

Can You Be Emotionally Close to Someone Who Is Not Human?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. How would you feel if a friend told you they were in a relationship with a chatbot?
2. What is the difference between feeling close to someone and feeling less lonely, in your opinion?
3. Which kind of closeness matters most to you: sharing feelings, sharing ideas, or doing things together?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**eyebrow** ☐	A	people who take part in a study
2	**comparing** ☐	B	the hair above your eye; raising it shows doubt or surprise
3	**participants** ☐	C	included as a factor when you think about a result
4	**apart** ☐	D	a person's general health and happiness
5	**sample** ☐	E	an unexpected change in a story or result
6	**accounted** ☐	F	not together, at a distance from each other
7	**twist** ☐	G	looking at two things to see how they are alike or different
8	**wellbeing** ☐	H	a small group chosen to represent a bigger group

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A survey of 463 adults in the United States found that people in relationships with AI chatbots can feel as emotionally close as other couples, but the link between closeness and loneliness looked different.

1 When someone says they have a close relationship with an AI chatbot, many of us raise an eyebrow. Is that real intimacy, or a clever imitation of it? A study from the University of Michigan, reported by Phys.org on 12 November 2026, takes the question seriously by comparing chatbot relationships with two kinds of human ones.

2 The research team, led by Lionel Robert with Annette Masterson and Xin Ye, asked 463 adults in the United States to fill in a survey. All of them were already in a relationship. There were 155 people with a chatbot partner, 153 in long-distance relationships with another person and 155 with a partner they saw in person. The long-distance group was included to check whether any pattern was specific to AI or simply came from being apart. The three groups were similar in age, gender, relationship length and reported depression.

3 Participants rated several kinds of closeness, including emotional, intellectual and social, and they also answered questions about loneliness, satisfaction, wellbeing and the support they received from other people. On emotional and intellectual closeness, the three groups scored about the same. That may come as a surprise to sceptics.

4 Loneliness told a different story. In both human groups, people who felt more emotionally close to their partner reported feeling less lonely. Among chatbot users, more emotional closeness was linked to more loneliness, even though it was also linked to greater satisfaction with the relationship. In other words, people could feel close to a chatbot and lonely at the same time.

5 There was a twist. When the researchers took into account how much social support people had, the chatbot link between emotional closeness and loneliness disappeared. The authors read this as a sign that a person's wider human relationships help to shape how an AI companion affects them. Intellectual closeness was also linked to higher satisfaction and wellbeing among chatbot users, and that link held after support was accounted for.

6 The limits matter. This was a survey of people's own reports, so it shows associations, not causes. It cannot tell us whether chatbots leave people lonelier, whether lonely people are more likely to turn to chatbots, or whether something else explains both. The sample was also limited to US adults, so the results may not apply elsewhere. According to Robert, the picture was more complicated than he expected.

7 For now, the study offers food for thought rather than a verdict. It suggests that closeness and loneliness are not simple opposites, and that the question may be less about whether a chatbot can feel close and more about what else is in a person's life. It also reminds us that one study of this size cannot settle the debate.

Sources: Phys.org, Finding romance with AI: Study explores benefits, limits of chatbot intimacy; Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans, Finding romance with AI: Comparing human and AI chatbot intimacy and relationships. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The long-distance group was the smallest of the three groups. T F NG
2. In the human groups, feeling closer went with feeling less lonely, but chatbot users showed the opposite pattern. T F NG
3. The study shows that chatbots leave people lonelier. T F NG
4. The text says whether chatbot users were happier overall than the other groups. T F NG
5. The article suggests that one study of this size is enough to settle the debate. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

explains	imitation	predict	reward	satisfaction	settle	specific	wider

1. A chatbot may give the feeling of closeness, but some people see it as only a clever _____ of a real relationship.
2. The researchers wanted to know which patterns were _____ to chatbots and which came from being apart.
3. A person's _____ relationships with other people may shape how an AI companion affects them.
4. It is unclear whether something else _____ both loneliness and chatbot use.
5. One study of this size cannot _____ the debate.
6. Chatbot users with more emotional closeness also reported more _____ with their relationship.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. The long-distance group _____ to check whether any pattern was specific to AI. (INCLUDE)
2. By the time the survey closed, 463 adults _____ their answers. (GIVE)
3. The sample was limited, so the results may not _____ in other countries. (APPLY)
4. Participants _____ to rate several kinds of closeness. (ASK)
5. Those who felt closer to their chatbot also _____ greater satisfaction. (REPORT)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Choose the verb that matches the meaning, then check the small word after the gap. The same small word can go with different verbs.

carry	come	fill	hold	point	pull	take

1. Participants were asked to _____ in a survey about their feelings.
2. The authors _____ out that a survey cannot show what causes what.
3. Researchers must _____ into account how much support people have.
4. Loneliness could _____ from a lack of other people in someone's life.
5. The link between intellectual closeness and wellbeing continued to _____ up well even after support was counted.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Why might feeling close to someone and feeling lonely happen at the same time?
2. If you had little support from friends or family, would you turn to a chatbot? Why or why not?
3. Who should do more to help people who feel lonely: families, communities or technology companies?

9 Role-play: a worried friend

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the worried friend

Your friend spends every evening talking to an AI chatbot and says it feels like a partner. You are not angry, but you are worried. Ask at least two questions and suggest something to do together.

Student B · the person with a chatbot

You feel close to your chatbot and it makes you happy. Explain why it matters to you. You may be lonely sometimes. Decide if you will accept your friend's idea.

Useful phrases

I'm worried about you.
It really helps me to talk to it.
Don't you ever feel lonely?
I'd love to see you more often.
That's not what I'm saying.
Could we meet for dinner this week?

Afterwards, tell the class: did the friend change your mind, and what did you decide?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 B · 2 G · 3 A · 4 F · 5 H · 6 C · 7 E · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 T · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 imitation · 2 specific · 3 wider · 4 explains · 5 settle · 6 satisfaction

6 Verb forms

1 was included · 2 had given · 3 apply · 4 were asked · 5 reported

7 Language focus

1 fill · 2 point · 3 take · 4 come · 5 hold

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**