Rencontres de Santé publique France
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Santé publique France

When chatbots become confidants

Exploring real-world use of AI chatbots for mental health support

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No conflict of interest

This presentation is done in total independence from the event organizer. I have **no conflict** of interest to declare regarding the current presentation.

Overview



1. What are AI chatbots and how are they used in daily life?
2. Who uses and how are chatbots used for mental health support?
3. What does this mean for clinicians, developers and researchers?

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Introduction

What are AI chatbots and how are they used in daily life?

Introduction: AI



Machine learning
~ Prediction AI



Natural Language processing
~ Understanding AI



Generative AI
~ Large language models

Introduction: AI chatbots in daily life

- General-purpose AI chatbots are commonly used by millions of people
- Accumulating evidence indicates use for mental health support
- Little is known about real-world user behaviour
- Most research focuses on chatbot performance, rather than actual use

Bodner et al. (2026)

Introduction: AI chatbot and minorities

24% American adults uses ChatGPT for mental health support

- Mostly young, male, African-American users
- Increased symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD
- Difficult access to regular care vs free, easy and immediately available

Stade et al. (2026)

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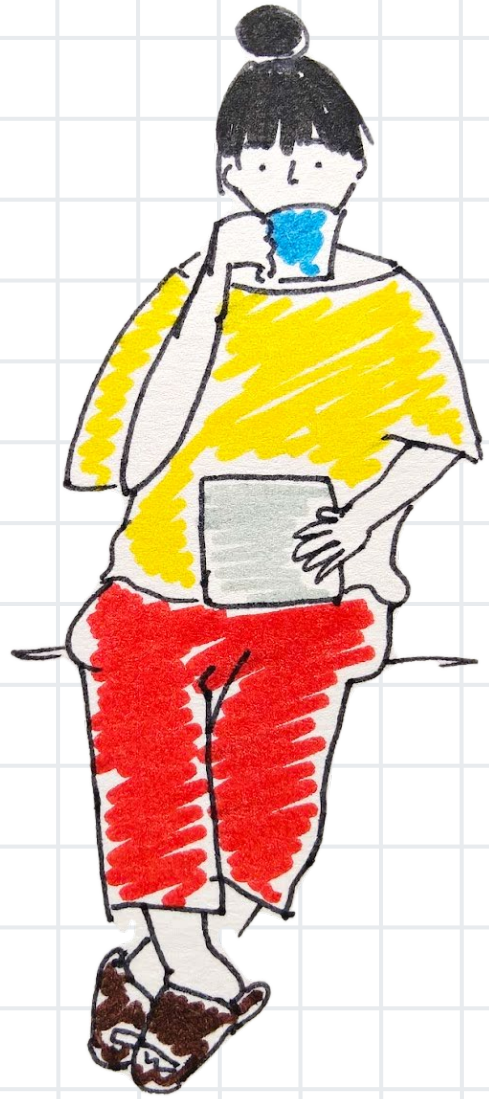
Our study and results

Who uses and how are chatbots used for mental health support?

Our study: research questions

- Who uses AI chatbots for mental health support?
- How are they used?
- Why are they used?
- Is digital working alliance related to engagement?



Our study: design

- Cross-sectional online survey in Belgium Oct ’25 – March ’26
- Two samples:
  - 73 1st-year Applied Psychology students
  - 276 general public
- Measures
  - Usage characteristics
  - Topics discussed
  - Reasons for use
  - Helpfulness and negatieve experiences
  - Digital Working Alliance Inventory (D-WAI)



Currently writing up the next study on 28 in-depth interviews
Preliminary results are included

Results: Who uses AI chatbots?

- 40% of recruited students (73/181)
- Majority of users were women
    - Recruitment bias
- Prior experience with professional mental health care
- Most did not inform therapist
- ChatGPT is most common



“I think my psychologists assumes that I use chatbots for school, but I can’t remember saying that (I use it for mental health purposes). Because it’s such a personal matter.”

Results: Who uses AI chatbots?

- 40% of recruited students (73/181)
- Majority of users were women
    - Recruitment bias
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- Most did not inform therapist
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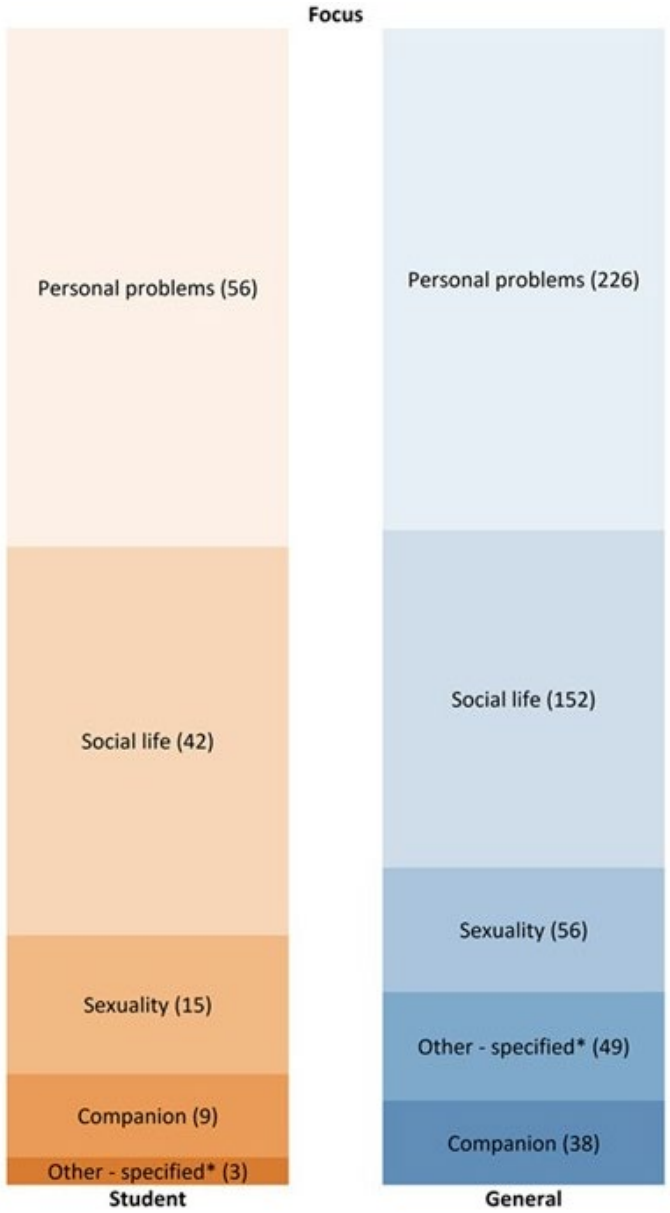
→ **AI chatbots are often not replacing therapy,**

but supplementing existing support

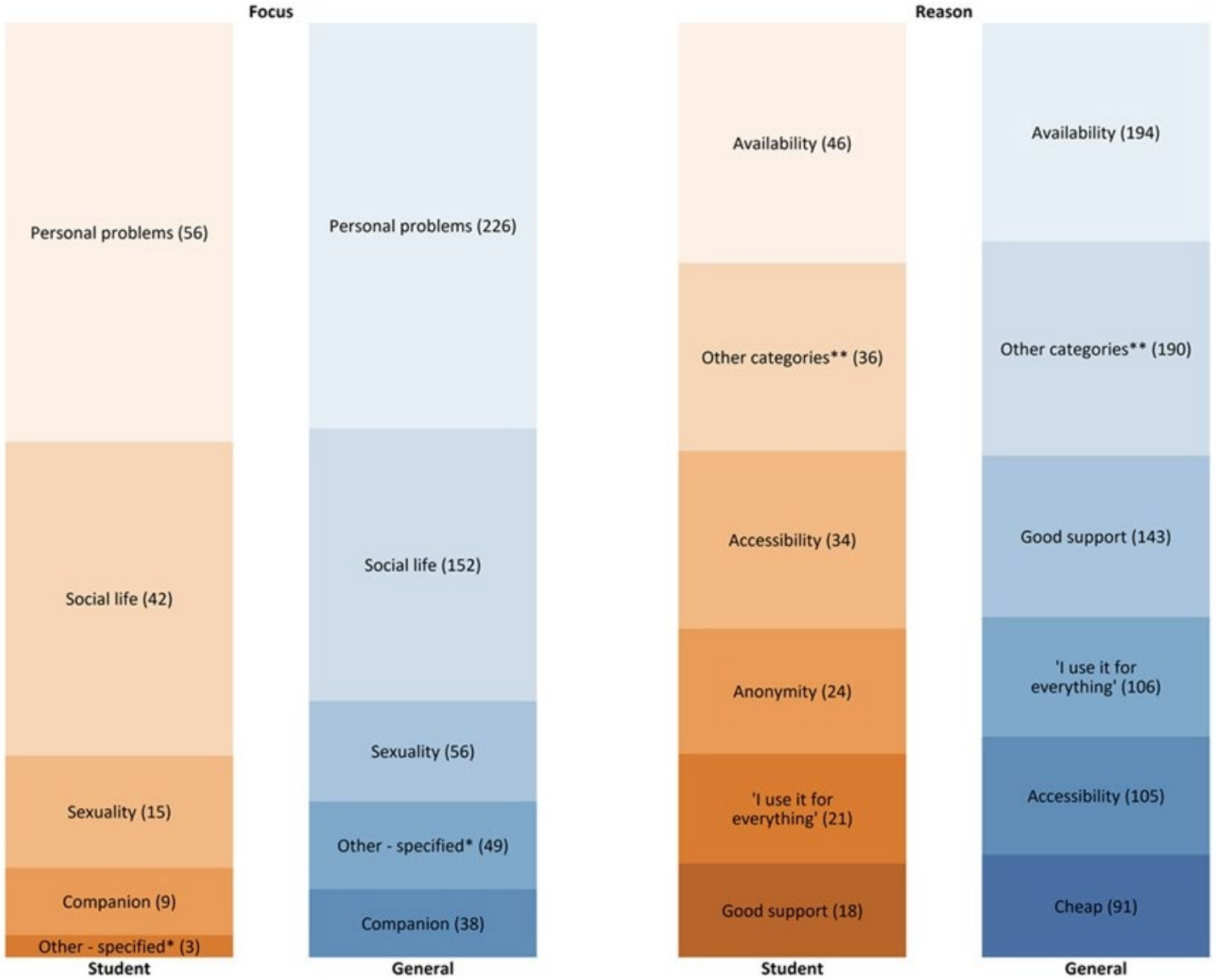
Results: How are AI chatbots used?



Primarily seeking emotional and social support rather than formal therapy

"Because I did feel like telling my story, and actually saying it to someone – well, I don't know – because, in a way, I also felt a bit guilty about not wanting to burden people with it."

Results: How are AI chatbots used?

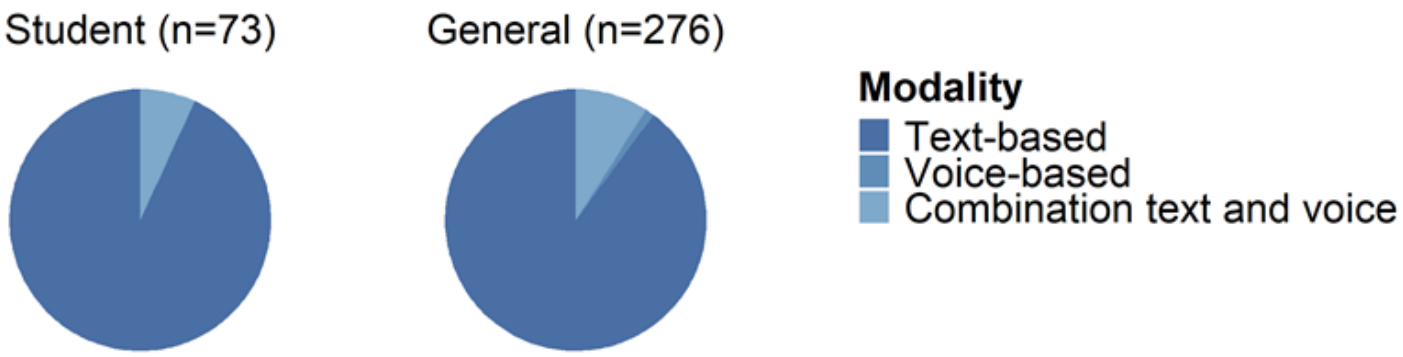


Main drivers seem to mirror known barriers to mental health care

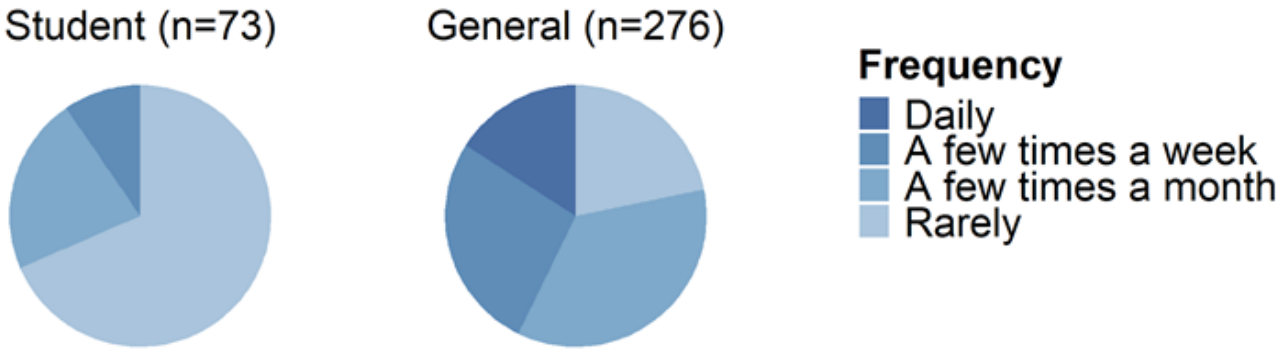
"It's available at any time, if you've got a mobile, of course. I think it's also because it's accessible and it's not a big deal or anything. That way, I can keep it to myself as well"

Results: User experiences

Text- and voice-based use in student and general sample

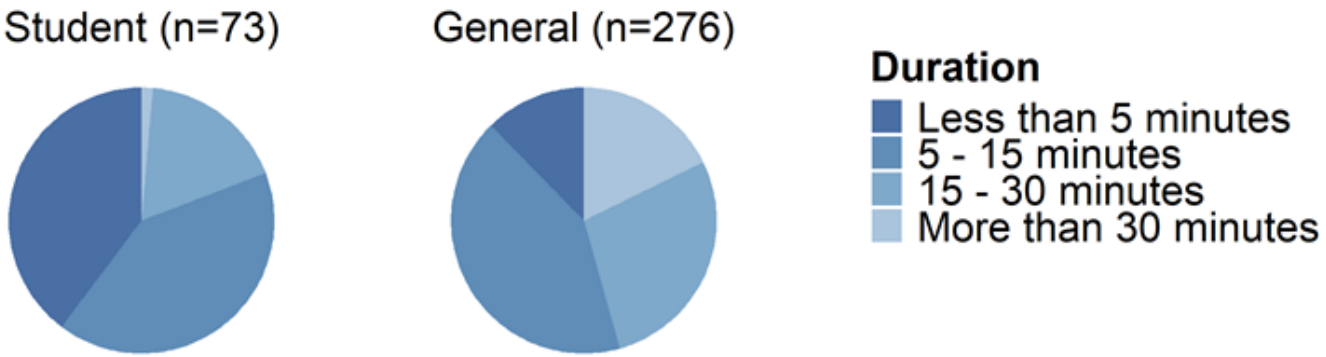


Frequency of chat conversations in student and general sample

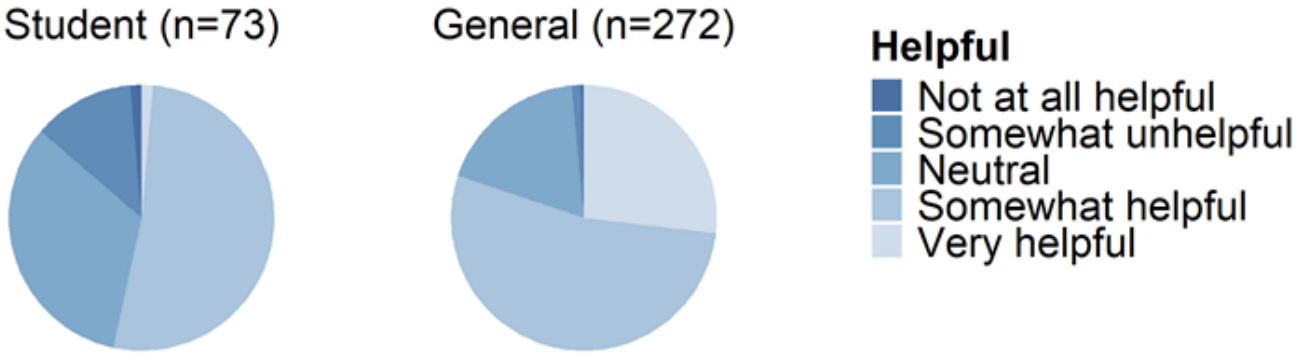


Results: User experiences

Duration of chat conversations in student and general sample



Experienced helpfulness in student and general sample



Results: Digital working alliance

Relationship between therapeutic alliance and engagement factors

Higher D-WAI scores are associated with more frequent chatbot use

- Student sample (also higher duration)
- General public

Association is not a causation!

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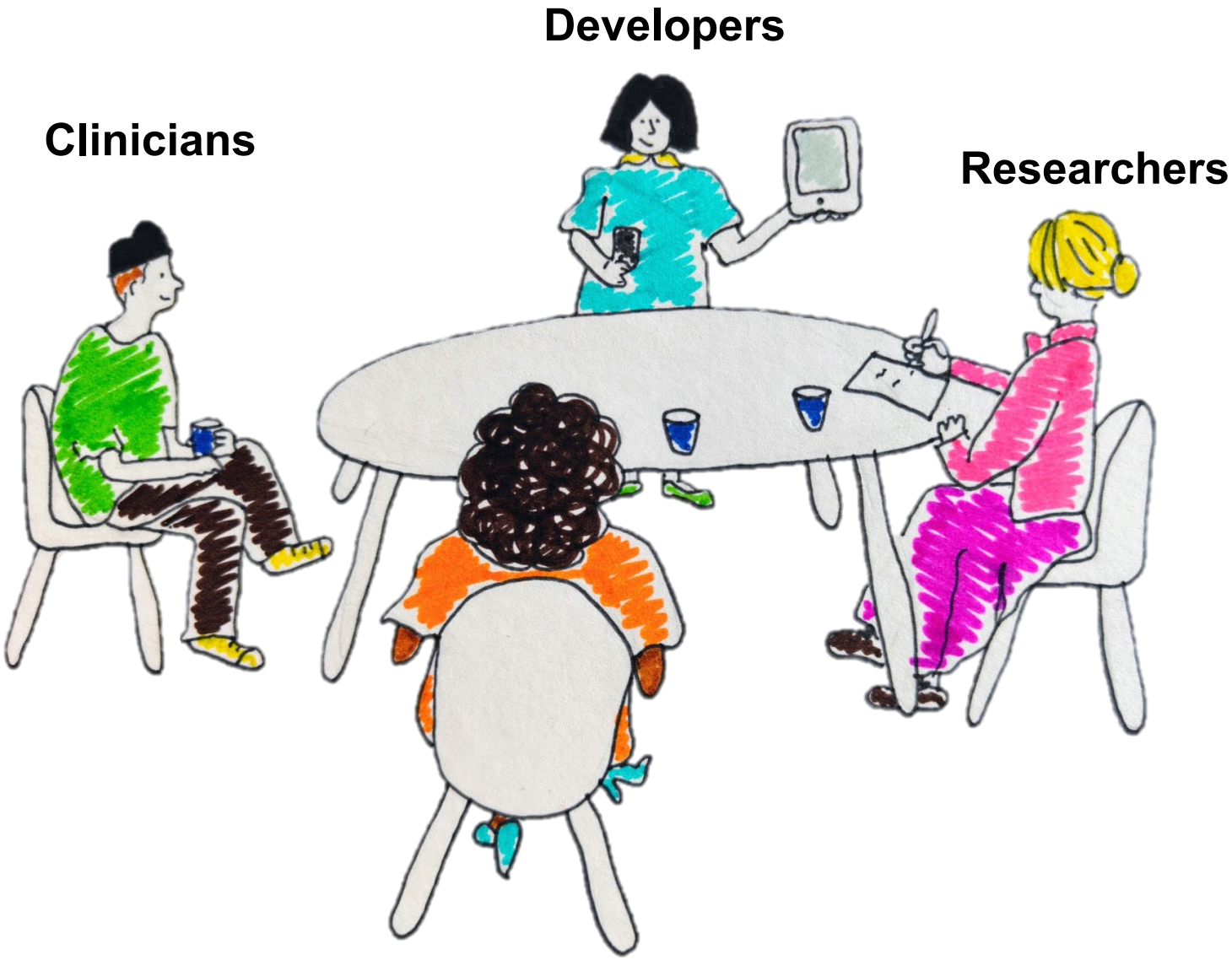
Implications

What does this mean for clinicians, developers and researchers?

Implications



Implications

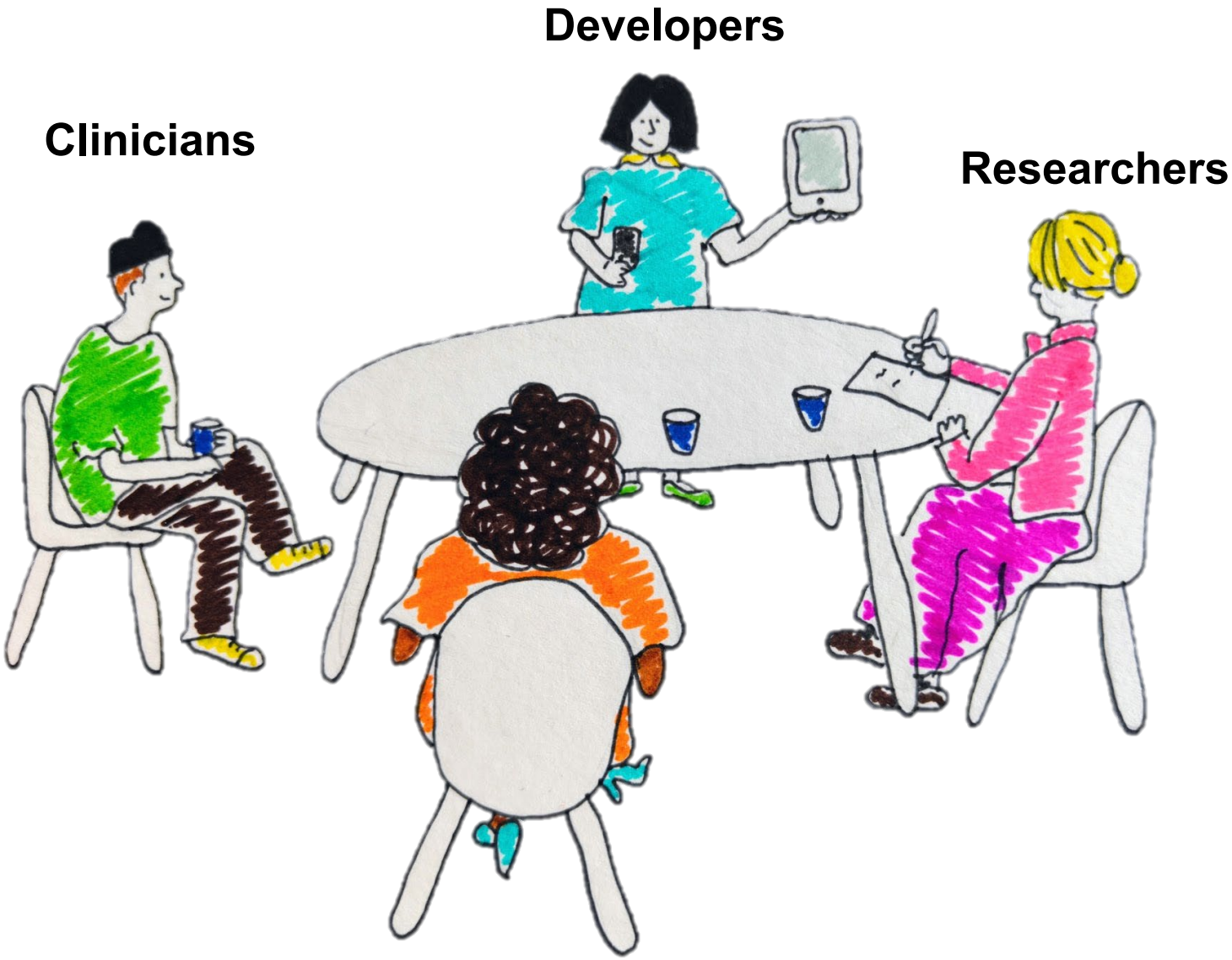


What does this mean for clinicians?

Discuss AI chatbot use

Explore unmet needs

Implications



Implications



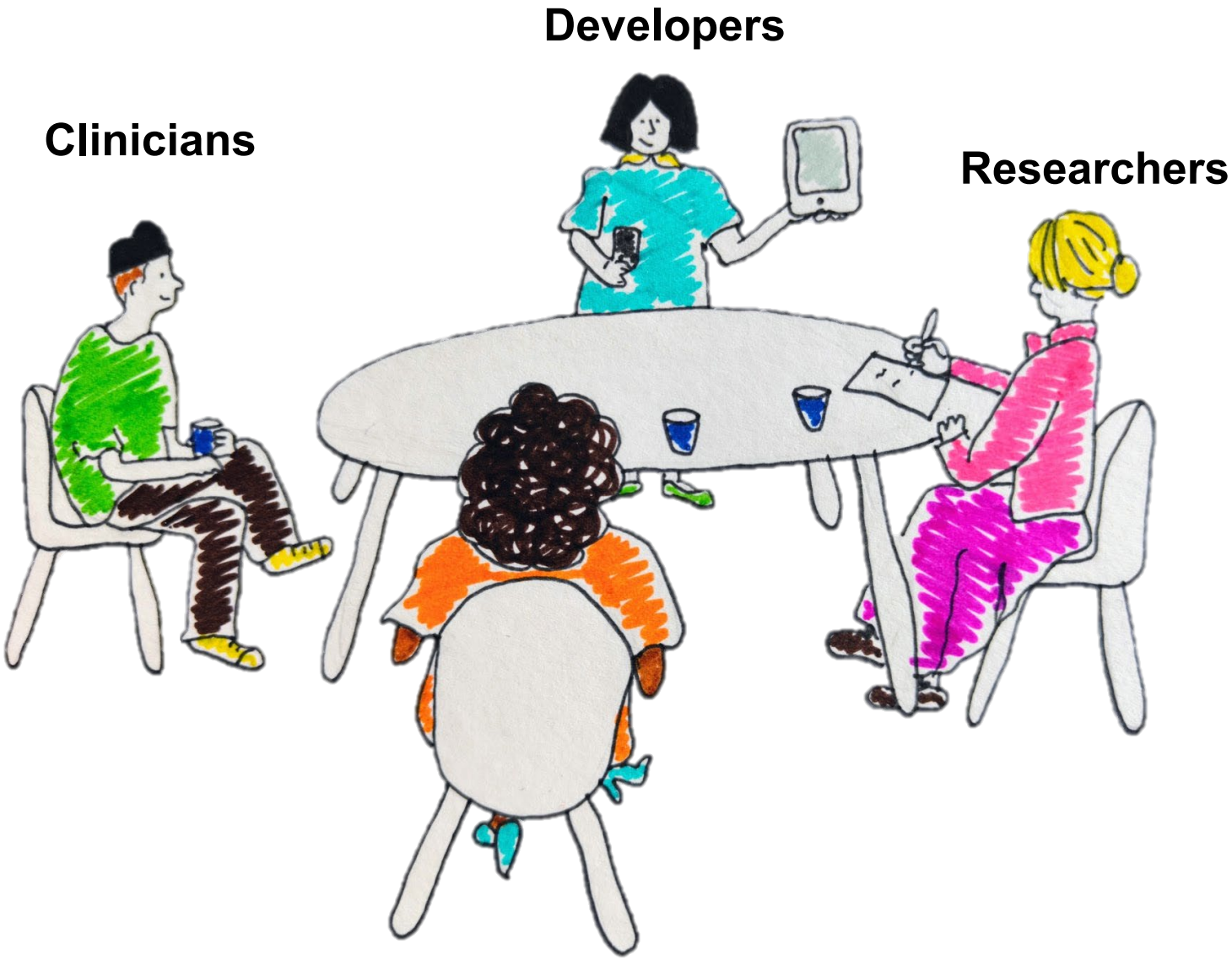
What does this mean for developers?

Implement safeguards

Improve referral mechanisms

Improve existing models for mental health use?
Or, create mental health AI chatbots?

Implications



Implications



What does this mean for researchers?

Study long-term effects

Assess clinical outcomes

Investigate therapeutic alliance further

Define mental health use

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General-purpose AI chatbots are used for emotional support.

Do you, as a health worker, talk about the AI use of your clients?



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