

Can AI Teach Empathy?

New research reveals AI's role in campus care culture

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THE DATA

Students reporting improved emotional support access

Among undergraduates at Penn using AI-driven wellness tools

This figure reflects a significant shift in how students perceive emotional support on campus. The rise in reported access suggests AI is not merely a diagnostic tool but a relational bridge, particularly for those hesitant to seek traditional counseling. The data points to a deeper transformation in campus culture—where emotional care is normalized through digital touchpoints.

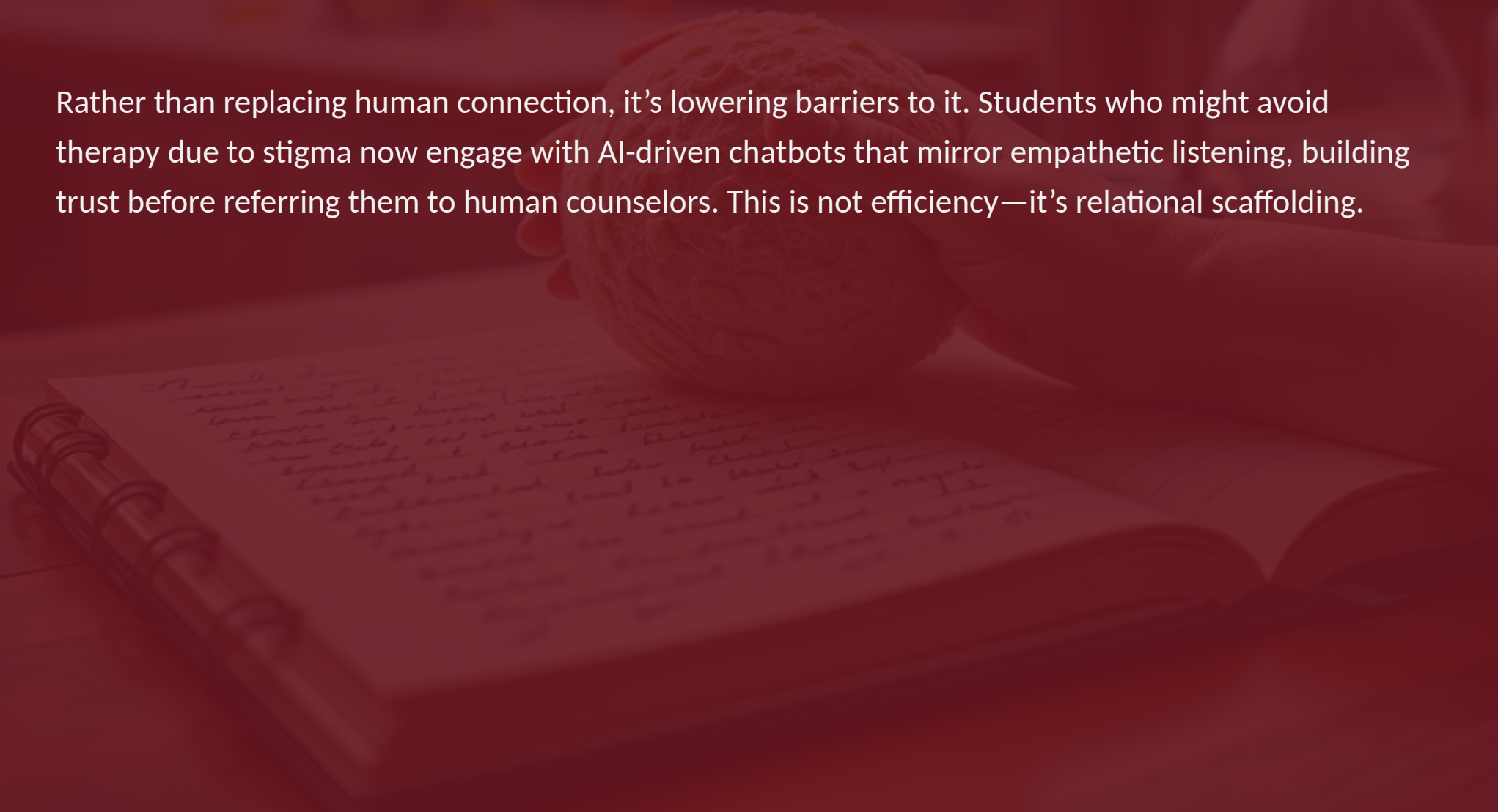
Source: University of Pennsylvania • Published October 14, 2026
<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/what-does-caring-each-other-mean-college-campus>



01

AI as Emotional Infrastructure

Rather than replacing human connection, it's lowering barriers to it. Students who might avoid therapy due to stigma now engage with AI-driven chatbots that mirror empathetic listening, building trust before referring them to human counselors. This is not efficiency—it's relational scaffolding.





02

The Paradox of Digital Care

Students using AI tools most frequently are more likely to report anxiety when disconnected from the platform. This suggests a new dependency: emotional wellbeing is being conditioned on algorithmic availability. The real challenge isn't access—it's ensuring AI supports, rather than replaces, the human capacity for care.

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