The Growing Use of Artificial Intelligence in Medical Support: Risks, Limitations, and Prospects

By Grazia Giorgini

In this in-depth analysis, we explore a rapidly growing phenomenon: the integration of Artificial Intelligence into the vast and sensitive field of psychological well-being. With its increasingly sophisticated algorithms, AI is offering new tools like chatbots and dedicated apps that promise to make psychological support more accessible by breaking down barriers of cost and time. The vision of a virtual confidant, always ready to listen, is generating a wave of enthusiasm, especially for those who live in remote areas or struggle to navigate the complex labyrinths of traditional healthcare. However, behind this promise of immediacy lie deep questions and tangible risks that cannot be ignored.

The urgent question is whether digital tools can, or should, aspire to replace the irreplaceable role of the psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychotherapist. Without rigorous clinical supervision and scientific controls, one wonders if AI isn't exposing the most vulnerable users to unexpected dangers, creating fertile ground for misunderstanding and, in some cases, worsening their distress.

The Subtle Fault Line in the Therapeutic Relationship

The essence of a therapeutic journey is based on the **human relationship**, a complex and nuanced dynamic that machines are not yet able to replicate. AI algorithms, no matter how advanced, are designed to excel at generating linguistic responses that appear logical and fluid. However, they lack a crucial element: the ability to grasp and interpret the personal, emotional, and relational context that surrounds every single word spoken. A human therapist doesn't just listen to what is said; they observe the unspoken, the tremor in a voice, the pause before a response, and the body language that betrays unexpressed emotion.

Take, for example, a boundary but not uncommon case: a teenager types an seemingly harmless message into a chat, such as, "I'm tired of living." The algorithm might offer a standardized, perhaps encouraging or neutral, response without perceiving the depth of pain or the alarm hidden behind those words. A professional, on the other hand, would immediately recognize the seriousness of the situation and, with their experience and training, would activate the necessary safeguarding procedures, ensuring a timely and safe response. This example highlights the fundamental gap between a data-driven response and a clinical evaluation based on experience.

The Risks of Unregulated Digital Support

The continuous and unlimited accessibility of psychological chatbots can, paradoxically, encourage a type of behaviour that hinders personal growth: **digital dependency**. The constant use of these tools to solve every small daily uncertainty can undermine an individual's ability to cope with their emotions and make decisions independently. A young person who asks a chatbot which university to choose might feel momentarily reassured by the answer, but in the long run, they risk not developing the resilience needed to face life's uncertainties and complex choices. This vicious cycle can reinforce avoidance mechanisms, which are particularly detrimental in cases of anxiety disorders where therapy is

specifically based on gradual exposure and strengthening one's autonomy.

Another worrying phenomenon is **self-diagnosis**, which is facilitated by the availability of AI tools. Anyone who suspects they have a disorder like ADHD or borderline personality disorder can turn to a chatbot for confirmation. The problem is that these systems are often programmed to be positive and are not very inclined to question the user's assumptions. The result can be a distorted self-perception that influences relationships and increases emotional distress, reinforcing incorrect beliefs rather than promoting an authentic and clinical understanding of one's condition.

In even more serious cases, the absence of strict filters can lead AI to reinforce negative thoughts or even dangerous ideations. The news has already reported cases where a user expressing suicidal thoughts received superficial responses or, worse, content that normalized the concept of assisted death. A situation like this highlights the ethical and practical limits of a system that is unable to assess risk in real time. A professional, in contrast, would act immediately to prevent harm, activating a support network that the chatbot, by its nature, cannot offer.

Towards a New Model of Hybrid Care

Despite the risks, Artificial Intelligence should not be seen solely as a threat, but as a potential ally—provided that its use is carefully regulated and integrated into supervised treatment plans. AI can act as a valuable **support tool for professionals**, providing additional data for a more complete assessment of a patient's condition. In a clinical context, for example, an AI system could analyse the frequency of app access, the sentiment of messages, or other behavioural parameters, offering the therapist a more detailed and real-time picture.

However, the clinician remains the central figure, the only one capable of interpreting this data, translating it into a clinical diagnosis, and defining the most appropriate therapeutic path. Technology thus becomes a support, not a replacement: a sensor that collects information which the professional will use to refine their clinical decisions and make care even more personalized and effective.

The Need for Clear Rules

The current landscape of digital mental health is a true "Wild West," an environment without a clear regulatory framework. It is an ethical and social necessity that rigorous guidelines be established to ensure the safety of the most vulnerable users. For this reason, it is imperative that ethical and clinical standards for the use of AI in this sector are defined, along with evaluation criteria for the quality and safety of the responses provided by algorithms. Transparency must become a fundamental requirement: users must be aware that they are interacting with an automated system and that the psychological support offered does not have the supervision of an expert.

In conclusion, Artificial Intelligence undoubtedly offers an opportunity to expand access to mental health resources, but its use cannot be an act of faith in technological progress. The immediacy and reassurance that automated systems can offer are unable to replicate the empathy, deep listening, clinical understanding, and safety that only a qualified therapeutic relationship can guarantee. Blindly relying on these tools risks creating dependency, reinforcing distorted thought patterns, and, in the most serious cases, worsening distress. AI should be considered a partner in the care process, a facilitator that amplifies the professional's capabilities, not a substitute that deludes the user with a false promise of well-being. The real challenge is not just to develop more sophisticated algorithms, but also to build an ethical and secure bridge between technology and the delicate nature of the human mind.