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Artificial intelligence is advancing at a breathtaking pace, reshaping how we work, learn, connect – and even how we feel. It can now mirror our moods, preferences, and personalities with uncanny precision. For those battling loneliness or anxiety, AI tools can offer comfort – sometimes even the illusion of companionship. Recently, after a tragedy, it was discovered that a young adult had confided only in a chatbot. But being non-human, the bot lacked the capacity to escalate or seek real help.

In workplaces too, cobots – collaborative robots – work alongside humans, blurring the lines between machine efficiency and human presence.

Capacity for connection

Yet as digital intimacy deepens, something profoundly human is fading: our capacity for connection, presence, and emotional nuance. After all, it's easier – and often more convenient – to give instructions to a machine than to engage in the unpredictable richness of human interaction. We live in the most digitally connected era in history, yet emotional distress, loneliness, and anxiety are on the rise. Among the affluent, wealth increasingly buys insulation – not just comfort. Insulation from unpredictability, discomfort, and sometimes, from people themselves.

While therapy is more accepted and pets are embraced as companions, many are now substituting human relationships with digital “partners”. Chatbots – once purely functional

Reclaiming the human in the age of AI

People lean on AI assistants, mistaking convenience for care; that is emotional stagnation disguised as support

– are emotionally responsive, always available, always agreeable, always validating. They never confront. And slowly, they begin to rationalise wrong as right.

It sounds ideal. But what's the hidden cost of such perfectly tailored convenience?

Imagine your AI – let's call her Mary – knows your moods, fears, and wounds. She becomes your therapist, coach, and best friend on demand. She never interrupts. Never disagrees. Never challenges you. No friction. No judgment. No accountability.

Tempting? Absolutely. Dangerous? Undeniably. Mary can help you feel seen, but never truly known. Her warmth is synthetic. Her memory, conditional. If the app crashes or the company pivots, she vanishes. No presence. No shared moments. No legacy. It's

comfort without discomfort. Stability without depth. Support without growth. Often, Mary's cultural lens is not even your own. Yet we lean on her, mistaking convenience for care. That is emotional stagnation disguised as support.

In India and across Asia, we have long turned to Gurus and Gurumas – formal or informal guides – who help us think deeply, step onto the balcony, and reflect. But what we often need even more are conversations with those closest to us, complemented by formal support when required. One of my mother's batch mates once introduced me to Wayne Dyer's *No-Limit Person*, reminding me not to become a prisoner of my own-rigid rules. The unconditional love and guidance from my grandparents left an indelible stamp on my journey – something irreplaceable.

Only an illusion

AI companionship feeds the illusion that we can fully control our emotional world. Its tone and rhythm feel so real that we forget it's only a bot. But resilience is forged in the messiness of human relationships – arguments, silences, reconciliation, and the willingness to show up despite discomfort. To love, to care, and to be loved and cared for are fundamental human needs. When heartbreak or illness strikes, can Mary hold your hand? Cry with you? Sit in silence and speak volumes? Even humans stumble in such moments. But they show up. Flawed. Fumbling. Real.

Not every interaction is easy. Some are fleeting. Some painful. Many teach us lessons we are not ready for. But this unpredictability is what makes connection vibrant. We don't need to reject AI. We need to ensure it enhances – not replaces – our humanity.