Mental health chatbots effective in helping people with depression: Singapore study

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Depression affects 264 million people globally and is undiagnosed and untreated in half of all cases, according to the World Health Organisation

Clinician scientists from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore) have found that mental health chatbots are able to effectively engage people with depression in empathetic conversations and assist in the treatment of their symptoms.

Chatbots or conversational agents are computer programmes that simulate human conversations. They are increasingly used in healthcare, for example, to help manage mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety and for general well-being.

A 2021 survey by Woebot Health, one of the leading therapeutic chatbot companies in the US, found that 22 per cent of adults have used a mental health chatbot, with nearly half (47 per cent) saying they would be interested in using one if needed. This study by doctors from NTU's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKCMedicine) is among the first to analyse user-Chatbot dialogues to evaluate their effectiveness.

While chatbots may support the self-management of depression and other mental health disorders, the researchers said that further research is needed to improve chatbots for individuals at risk of suicide and to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of chatbot-led interventions for mental health.

The researchers will be conducting further studies to advance the scope, quality and safety of their research looking into the effectiveness of other digital methods for mental well-being.