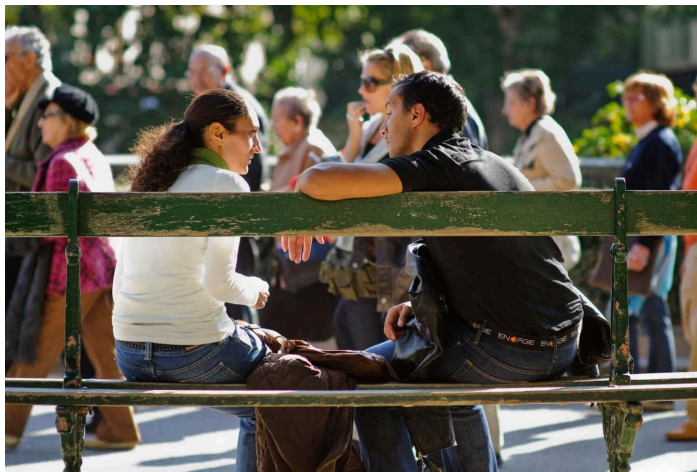


How to sparkle in conversation with strangers

In the face of loneliness, many people are turning to AI chatbots for companionship – but research shows it can't replace human connection. Columnist **David Robson** explores how beneficial it can be to talk to strangers, with evidence-based tips on how to get the conversation flowing

By [David Robson](#) on June 12, 2026



Talking to strangers can feel daunting, but research shows it has real benefits. Paul Carter / Alamy

Guaranteed compassion, encouragement and validation? A soothing voice available to massage your ego whenever you feel unsure of yourself? If you could find a living being with these qualities, you'd call them your soulmate, and yet it is exactly what many chatbots are offering an increasing number of users.

But can those exchanges with AI ever achieve the benefits of real, human connection? That's the question behind [a fascinating new study](#), which has found that chatting with an AI is no match for talking to real human beings, even if they are complete strangers.

The results are good news for anyone, like me, who would like to believe that there are some areas of life that are best served by living people, but the fact remains that many people are turning to AI out of social anxiety. Fortunately, the psychological research can also offer us plenty of ways to go about our real-life conversations more confidently.

Our tendency to feel an unexpected intimacy with our chatbots became obvious far longer ago than many people might realise. In the 1960s, computer scientist [Joseph Weizenbaum](#) created

an algorithm called ELIZA. Its guiding principle was to turn each of the user's statements into a follow-up question.

Here's a [sample exchange](#):

User: Men are all alike.

ELIZA: IN WHAT WAY

User: They're always bugging us about something or other.

ELIZA: CAN YOU THINK OF A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE

User: Well, my boyfriend made me come here.

ELIZA: YOUR BOYFRIEND MADE YOU COME HERE

User: He says I'm depressed much of the time.

ELIZA: I AM SORRY TO HEAR YOU ARE DEPRESSED

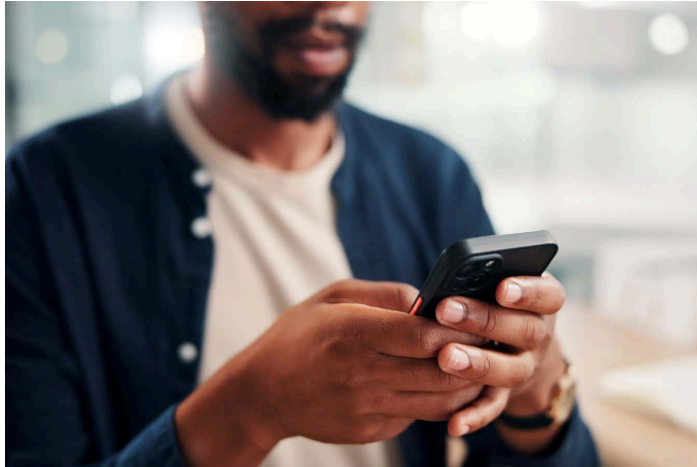
Despite the crudeness of the conversation, ELIZA became a huge hit, as users poured out their hearts to its prompts. (Weizenbaum's secretary found the interaction to be so intimate that [she asked him to leave the room](#) during her session.)

Today's large language models can, of course, offer infinitely more sophisticated exchanges, and they are available to provide the comfort of an imagined listening ear to anyone with a smartphone. It should be little wonder, then, that [companionship is a common motivation](#) for using the technology. For instance, around 16 per cent of all US adults have [used AI for companionship](#), while 25 per cent of people under 30 had. A recent survey commissioned by a loneliness charity in the UK [paints a very similar picture](#).

For those of us who bristle at AI's encroachment, it's not all bad: studies suggest those interactions often do result [in an immediate mood boost](#). Whether these momentary uplifts would ease long-term loneliness remained an open question, however – inspiring [Ruo-Ning Li](#) at the University of British Columbia in Canada and her colleagues to set up their new study.

The team first developed a new chatbot named Sam. It was powered by ChatGPT-4o mini and instructed to show empathy and understanding to its users. "You are a highly positive and optimistic AI, embodying the ideal qualities of a perfect roommate – supportive, encouraging, and always available to listen," was one of its prompts.

The researchers then recruited around 300 students and divided them into three groups. One-third were asked to send at least one message to Sam each day for two weeks, while another third exchanged daily text messages with a randomly assigned student. The rest were asked to keep a journal of at least one sentence each day.



Talking to chatbots doesn't seem to improve loneliness, but talking to strangers does.
PeopleImages/Shutterstock

At the start and end of the trial, they all took a standard test to measure loneliness, in which they reported how often they would agree with statements such as: "I feel left out", "No one really knows me well", and "There is no one I can turn to".

Most of the participants were highly engaged, sending an average of eight to 10 messages each day. As expected, those interacting with fellow students felt significantly less isolated after their two weeks of daily conversation. Strikingly, however, the people talking to the chatbot saw no overall change in their loneliness from the beginning to the end of the study; they felt just as disconnected as those keeping a journal.

The implications are obvious. "Alleviating loneliness requires more than the mere simulation of human emotions and care," the researchers conclude.

Strike up conversation – a lot

I've noticed numerous finger-wagging hot takes decrying the number of young people turning to AI – but I am loath to add my voice to that chorus. As someone who was once incredibly shy, I can understand the appeal of seeking reassurance in an unthreatening algorithm. So I was pleased to find two recent books that offer plenty of advice to make our real-life interactions a little easier.

The first is *Once Upon a Stranger: The science of how 'small' talk can add up to a big life*, by [Gillian Sandstrom](#) at the University of Sussex in the UK. The second is *Hello: The unexpected power of choosing to connect* (named *A Little More Social* in the US) by [Nicholas Epley](#) at the University of Chicago.

Both authors have conducted groundbreaking research on both the power of social connection and the ways to get it – and their books offer huge reassurance for anyone who feels a little shy

about reaching out to others. For one thing, they show that our fears about talking to strangers are almost completely unfounded: time and again, studies show that people enjoy the experience much more than they expect. And contrary to most people's beliefs, you do not need to be incredibly eloquent or witty to sparkle: it is your warmth – how friendly and honest you are – that will matter most to the other person.

With regular practice, we can retune our brains to expect more pleasure from those interactions. In [one experiment](#), Sandstrom and her colleagues set their participants with the challenges of striking up a conversation with at least one new person each day for a week. After just five days, the participants felt less pessimistic about the possibility of rejection and more confident in their conversational ability.

The consistency of the practice seems to be key. We will mark down one isolated conversation as a fluke – and feel just as nervous the next time. After we've felt the same buzz day after day for an extended period, however, we begin to realise that our underlying expectations were wrong.

Epley's advice is to make a conscious effort to seek those opportunities. "You might find there's lots of low-hanging happiness that could come from being a little more social once you start looking around for it," he writes. One way to do this, he says, is by identifying specific cues (such as "I'm standing in a queue") that will prompt specific behaviours ("so I will talk to the person next to me").

We can never be certain how those interactions will unfold, of course, but I'm starting to wonder whether the very unpredictability that leads us to fear them is also what makes them so rewarding. To gain some insight into the complexities of another's inner world, and to feel that they've seen some small part of you in return in a way that you might have never imagined – that's the cure for loneliness, and it can only come from the meeting of two human minds.

David Robson's latest book is [The Laws of Connection: 13 social strategies that will transform your life](#). If you have a question that you would like answered in his column, please send him a message at davidrobson.me/contact