

OPINION

Before We Blame AI, We Should Ask Why People Feel Safer Talking to It

Artificial intelligence may not be replacing human connection as much as revealing where human connection has failed.

By Donna Hartley | August 2026



AI can become a private place to prepare for human connection - not a permanent replacement for it.

AI is becoming the place people go when human conversation feels unavailable, uncomfortable or unsafe. Our job is not merely to take AI away. Our job is to become people worth talking to.

When people speak privately with AI, it is easy to blame the technology. We worry that people are becoming isolated, replacing relationships or avoiding real conversations. Those concerns are valid. But before judging someone for turning to AI, we should ask a more difficult question: Why did talking to a machine feel safer than talking to another human being?

In today's society, it can still be difficult to say, "I'm gay." It can be difficult to say, "I'm an atheist." It can be difficult to question the beliefs you were raised with or express an opinion you are still trying to understand.

Sometimes people simply need room to think out loud.

"Why did talking to a machine feel safer than talking to another human being?"

When Questions Are Treated as Rebellion

I understand what it feels like to grow up believing that questioning accepted rules makes you wrong. I was raised Southern Baptist. In the environment I grew up in, my brother having long hair and playing in a band was considered sinful. For me, being outspoken, questioning everything and refusing to be subservient were treated as sinful too.

We were not hurting anyone. We simply did not fit neatly into the expectations created for us.

When curiosity, individuality or independence is treated as rebellion, people learn to stop speaking honestly. They begin hiding pieces of themselves to avoid judgment, punishment, rejection or shame.

That experience stays with you. It teaches you that some people do not ask questions because they want to understand. They ask questions because they are waiting for an opportunity to correct you.

People who turn to AI are not necessarily looking for something that will agree with everything they say. They may simply want the freedom to explore an idea without being attacked, embarrassed, dismissed, preached at or told that another person's beliefs are the only acceptable beliefs.

AI can provide that space. It does not roll its eyes. It does not interrupt to defend itself. It allows someone to finish a thought, ask an uncomfortable question or admit something they may be afraid to say to anyone else.

A Personal Decision About My Son

I recently experienced this in a deeply personal way.

My son's father believes that living in a group home may be the best option for our son. I believe that living with me is best. We are both good parents. We both love our son. We simply see the situation from different perspectives.

Talking with AI helped me slow down and explore both sides. It helped me research the possible benefits and concerns. It allowed me to consider his father's point of view without feeling that I had to abandon my own.

It also gave me something I needed emotionally: validation that it is acceptable for me to feel the way I feel and to want my son to continue living with me.

That validation did not mean I was automatically right or that his father was wrong. It meant my feelings were real and deserved to be explored rather than dismissed.

Had I tried to have the entire conversation with another person, I might have felt pressure to temper my thoughts, defend myself, choose my words carefully or avoid saying something that could be misunderstood.

With AI, I could put every fear, question and emotion on the table. I could challenge my own thinking while still being honest about what I wanted.

AI did not make the decision for me, nor should it. It helped me think more clearly, examine research, consider another person's perspective and prepare for the human conversations that still needed to happen.

That is an important distinction. AI can become a hiding place from human connection, but it can also become a private place to prepare for it.

We Say We Want Honesty

At a leadership event, I learned that some professional women in my own circle still feel unheard and unseen by men in their fields.

Not decades ago. Today.

These are intelligent, experienced and successful women, yet they still describe speaking without being heard, contributing without being recognized and working without being fully seen.

How many years, decades or centuries must pass before we learn to leave our egos behind? How long before listening becomes more important than winning? How long before curiosity becomes more important than judgment?

We say we want honest conversations, but too often we only want honesty that agrees with us.

So many conversations are reduced to Republican versus Democrat, believer versus nonbeliever, right versus wrong and us versus them. We enter discussions prepared to defend our identities rather than understand another person.

Someone may be wrestling with a political opinion, religious belief, sexuality, career, marriage, family decision or sense of identity. Instead of listening, we often rush to correct them.

We tell them what they should believe. We tell them how they should live. We decide what kind of person they are before they have finished explaining themselves. Then we act surprised when they stop talking to us.

Some people are told they are immoral, broken or destined for hell because of who they are. Others are mocked for their faith, lack of faith, political uncertainty or personal questions.

It should not surprise us that people seek a place where they can speak without immediately being condemned.

AI Is Not Risk-Free

If someone is talking to AI, it may be because they want to express an opinion without having someone else impose their beliefs as the only correct beliefs. They may be lonely, afraid or simply trying to understand themselves before explaining themselves to anyone else.

There are real risks. AI can be wrong and can misunderstand context. It should not replace medical or mental-health care, legal advice, professional support, genuine friendship, responsible parenting or meaningful human connection. AI systems also have safeguards intended to reduce harmful guidance, but no safeguard is perfect.

We should take those dangers seriously without treating every private conversation with AI as dangerous.

The answer cannot simply be, "Take the AI away." Removing the tool does not remove the loneliness, fear, judgment or rejection that caused someone to turn toward it.

Our job is not merely to take AI away. Our job is to become people worth talking to.

Become People Worth Talking To

The more meaningful response is to create relationships where people can ask difficult questions without being humiliated. We need to listen without immediately preparing a rebuttal. We need to ask questions before making assumptions. We need to make room for people who are learning, changing and working through what they believe.

We need to stop treating every conversation like a courtroom where one person must win and the other must lose.

AI may give people a place to organize their thoughts, research possibilities, rehearse a difficult conversation or say something they are not yet brave enough to say aloud. Ideally, it should become a bridge back to human connection, not a permanent hiding place from it.

For that to happen, we must become safer people. Not people without values or boundaries, and not people who agree with everything, but people who can listen with empathy, disagree without cruelty and recognize that another person's humanity does not depend on whether they share our beliefs.

Perhaps the greatest warning about people turning to AI is not that machines are becoming more human. It is that humans may have forgotten how to make one another feel heard.

Our challenge is not simply to regulate, restrict or fear AI. Our challenge is to become the kind of people others trust with the truth.

People who listen. People who ask questions. People who allow uncertainty.

People worth talking to.