

From the President

Professor Lynne Gabriel OBE, President of BACP

‘Like them or not, digitised mental health and wellbeing platforms are already providing valuable support’

Consider this. It's 2099, and your partner has arranged an appointment with their workplace mental health counsellor. After their introductory session your partner shares that the counsellor is a humanoid robot who works for a global company providing wellbeing support to organisations and their employees.

It may seem like science fiction but given the growth of conversational artificial intelligence (CAI)-enabled mental health or wellbeing support through chatbots such as Wysa, we are in a rapidly changing wellbeing landscape. Writers such as Philip K Dick, author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the inspiration for the cult film *Blade Runner*, and Ian McEwan who more recently published *Machines Like Me*, have long explored what the world could look like when humans coexist with humanoid machines. Who knows where we'll be with AI (artificial intelligence) in the 2090s?

Like them or not, AI-enabled digitised mental health and wellbeing platforms are already providing valuable support - including Kooth, which offers digital mental health services to young people, and to adults through its Qwell platform. Commissioned by the NHS, local authorities and other organisations, Kooth and Qwell provide 24/7 help, including counselling that is free at the point of access, as well as pathways to other services. Their services complement the limited NHS, primary care and charity sector offers, and provide accessible, inclusive support.

A recent study concluded that we need a wider understanding of the possibilities of AI within the counselling professions.¹ There are questions about ethical and relational issues including safeguarding,

risk and how client data may be used, plus concerns about what constitutes authentic emotional depth and relational nuances in CAI. Research to build our knowledge and understanding of CAI and augmented reality is key.

I wonder how robot counsellors could manage nuanced human dynamics, such as those that often play out in the workplace? Will it be possible to programme for reflexivity? If AI is to become available in the form of a reflexive relational entity, then it needs to be able to navigate the multidimensional and multiverse nature of human relationships.

Humans have the power to influence and shape relationships. Workplace bullying can confound that ability, as distorted power relations undermine people's capacities to fully comprehend and make sense of their own lived experience. At times we can become caught up in a drama triangle and find it difficult to get a perspective on the

relational dynamics at play. I've experienced difficult workplace situations over the years, including a time when two senior colleagues took every opportunity to ghost or gaslight me to the point where I questioned my own experience and perspective. Each time I reacted I was triggered into a trauma response. Ultimately, EMDR trauma therapy helped me move beyond oppression, ending trauma triggering. Finding ways of surviving and responding proactively and positively to difficult workplace relationships is important for our wellbeing and sanity, especially when we find ourselves in a seemingly intractable dynamic, or when exiting is the best reasoned response. While counselling and coaching help clients to develop relational tools, some occasions call for solidarity and kindness from a friend or colleague. Such compassionate conversations occur in human domains and can be pitch perfect.

When I read *Machines Like Me* I was left with a sense of concern about humanoid-human interaction, an anxiety that rapid evolution of AI could leave humans unprepared in a forever changed landscape. My hope is that we can navigate valuable, proactive and positive ways forward.

One thing is clear - the counselling professions need to be involved in high-level discussions on how AI enters and impacts the field. Partnerships between UK and international therapy associations are needed to inform future directions of CAI and AI in the counselling professions. As the technology advances and we learn more about the pitfalls and potentialities, we will need collaborative power to uphold ethical and professional boundaries. ■



1. Prescott, J., Hanley, T. Therapists' attitudes towards the use of AI in therapeutic practice: considering the therapeutic alliance. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion* 2023; 27(2): 117-105.