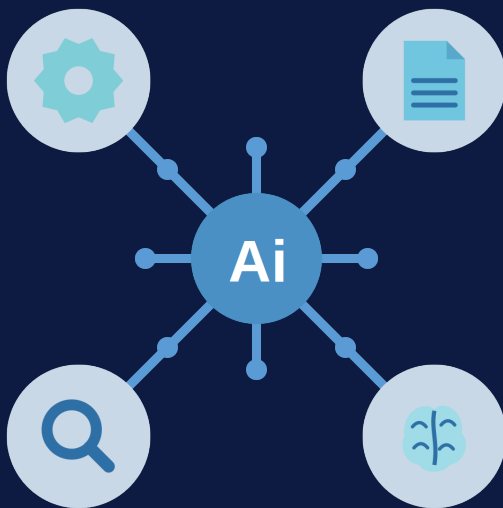


RAPID REPORT

Generative AI Use and Mind Health Outcomes

September 30, 2026



MIND HEALTH

THE ABILITY TO NAVIGATE LIFE'S CHALLENGES AND FUNCTION PRODUCTIVELY



Dear Reader,

Generative AI came hurtling into our lives hardly four years ago and like all new things it will take time for us to really understand the impact it will have on us. The Global Mind Project was established to provide a more rapid view of the population level impact of changes in the environment on the human mind so that we can identify emerging risks earlier. New product introductions operate on much faster timelines than academic publishing and it is important that we have perspectives that inform debates on their use and regulation that can keep pace. This rapid report precedes a more rigorous academic publication, and as always, the data is available for all academic researchers.

The trends outlined in this report speak both to the benefits and harms of Generative AI and we hope will inform the design of new studies as well as the debates on regulation, use of AI in the classroom and design of AI-based products.

Of particular concern are the more pronounced effects on younger adults. Like Covid, Generative AI appears to have a much more negative effect on this group than older adults, perhaps due to their lower baseline mental health and resilience.

We invite researchers, educators, policymakers and technology developers to engage with these findings. As Generative AI becomes ever more woven into daily life, we will continue to track its impact on the human mind. How we choose to use and shape these tools in the coming years will matter greatly for the mind health of the next generation.

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Chief Scientist



Summary

Generative AI (GenAI) chatbots such as ChatGPT and Claude have, in the space of a few years, become part of how hundreds of millions of people work and manage their personal lives. Yet there has been little systematic, population-level understanding of what regular use of GenAI does to the human mind. Here we use a global Internet-enabled sample of 264,085 adults 18 and older, collected between June 2025 and April 2026, to examine GenAI use frequency, and the association between frequency and type of GenAI use and mind health. Mind health was assessed using the Mind Health Quotient (MHQ), an aggregate score built from 47 elements spanning emotional, social, cognitive and physical capacities and problems that broadly reflects the ability to navigate life's stresses and function productively. Key findings are as follows:

- **GenAI adoption and use:** Across a global sample of 264,085 respondents, 66.7% reported using generative AI chatbots. Adoption is dominated by young adults: 89.0% of 18-34 year olds are active GenAI users compared with 55.4% of those 35 and older, and 41.3% of 18-34 year old users engage with it several times a day or constantly, versus 18.2% among those 35+.
- **Mind Health and GenAI use frequency:** Mind health follows an inverted U-shape in relation to AI-use frequency, most pronounced among young adults. MHQ is higher among those who use GenAI several days a week than among those who rarely use it, but then falls sharply among those who use it every day or constantly. The drop from peak to constant use is 25.1 MHQ points for those 18-24 and 17.4 points for those 25-34, shrinking to 7.5 points for those 65 and older.
- **Individual mental capacities and problems and GenAI use:** Most mental capacities and problems followed a U-shape with two stark exceptions: focus & concentration sharply decreased and addictions & cravings sharply increased with every higher frequency. Other aspects showing large declines with increasing AI use were poor self-image, emotional control and emotional stability as well as confusion & slowed thinking, unwanted & obsessive thoughts, and sadness & hopelessness.
- **Emotional use and mind health:** The proportion of users who use GenAI for emotional purposes (companionship, emotional support, or romantic/intimate conversation) rises sharply with frequency of use, from 20% among those who rarely use GenAI to 55% among those who use it constantly. The inverted U-shape holds for both cognitive-only and cognitive-plus-emotional users, but those using GenAI for emotional purposes have consistently lower mind health, by 26 to 32 MHQ points, at every level of use.



1 Introduction

Since its public release in late 2022, generative AI has achieved one of the fastest technology adoption curves on record, with ChatGPT alone reportedly reaching approximately 800 million weekly active users by 2025 (Bellan, 2025). These tools are now freely available to anyone with an internet connection, are aggressively promoted, and are increasingly expected by employers to be a normal part of daily work. Their use extends well beyond narrow technical tasks to encompass emotional and social navigation of the world, including specialized tools promoting therapy-like emotional support and companionship.

A growing number of studies point to negative mental effects associated with GenAI use. Daily use has been linked to higher depressive symptoms in a large U.S. sample (Perlis et al., 2026), and separate studies of knowledge workers (Lee et al., 2025) and essay writers (Kosmyna et al., 2025) report diminished critical thinking and reduced neural engagement with frequent AI use for cognitive tasks. Concerns have also been raised about emotional reliance: joint industry research combining tens of millions of real-world chatbot interactions with a randomized trial found that higher daily usage was associated with greater loneliness, emotional dependence and reduced offline socialization among a subset of heavy users (Fang et al., 2025; OpenAI, 2025), and clinicians increasingly report patients substituting AI engagement for professional mental health care (American Psychological Association, 2026), a pattern consistent with survey data showing a growing share of young people turning to AI chatbots for emotional support (McBain et al., 2026). At the most severe end of this spectrum, an emerging body of case reports has described a pattern informally termed “AI psychosis,” in which sustained, emotionally immersive chatbot engagement appears to coincide with the onset or worsening of delusional thinking (Morrin et al., 2025; Pierre et al., 2025).

Despite this growing concern, there has not been a systematic, comparative, population-level view of how frequency and type of GenAI use relate to overall mind health and its specific components. Here we define mind health as the range of cognitive, emotional and social capacities that enable people to navigate life's stresses and challenges and function productively. Data were collected through the Global Mind Project, an ongoing global survey of mental wellbeing using the Mental Health Quotient (MHQ) assessment (Newson & Thiagarajan, 2020; Newson et al., 2024). Between June 2025 and April 2026, questions on GenAI-use frequency and purpose of use were added to this assessment. We report here the association between GenAI-use frequency and type of use and mind health outcomes among the 176,198 respondents, out of a total sample of 264,085, who reported using generative AI chatbots.

While we acknowledge that this is an observational study, rapid perspectives are required in this fast-moving landscape in order to guide future study design.

2 Results

AI adoption and frequency of use

Across a total of 264,085 global Internet-enabled respondents, 176,198 (66.7%) reported using generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT and Claude (referred to from here on as GenAI). Adoption is heavily weighted toward young adults: 89.0% of Internet-enabled respondents aged 18-34 are active GenAI users, compared with only 55.4% of those above 35. Among 18-34 year olds, 41.3% engage with GenAI several times a day or constantly, compared with 18.2% among those 35 and older. Differences between males and females were negligible in both age groups (Figure 1).

Figure 1: AI-use frequency by age group and sex

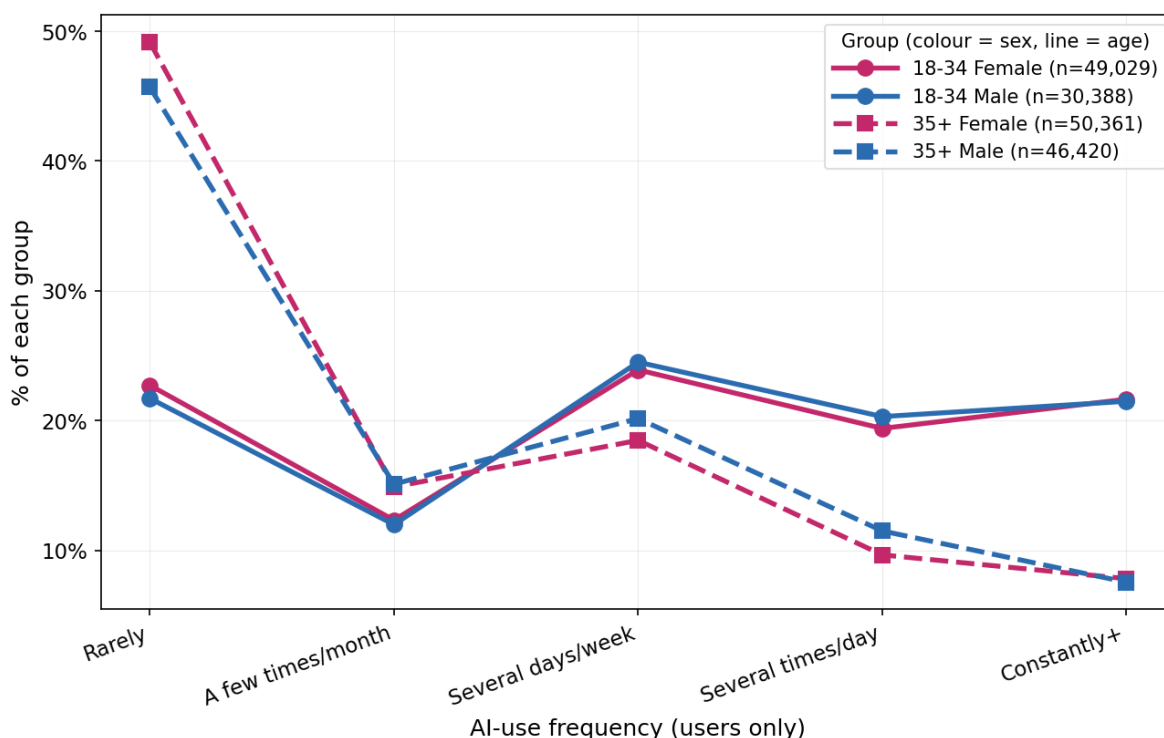


Figure 1: AI-use frequency by broad age groups and sex, shown as the % of each group reporting each frequency of use.

An inverted-U shape relationship between mind health and AI use frequency

For those 18-34, who are the most aggressive users of GenAI, there is a prominent inverted U-shape relationship between mind health and GenAI-use frequency (Figure 2A). MHQ scores are higher among those who use GenAI several days a week compared to those who rarely use it, suggesting some mental health benefit at moderate use, but then decline sharply among those who use GenAI every day or constantly, to levels below even the rarely-use group. Older age groups above 35 show a similar pattern, but it is substantially muted, with smaller differences across GenAI-use frequencies. The difference in MHQ between the lower-frequency peak and constant GenAI use shrinks steadily with age: from 25.1 MHQ points among those 18-24, and 17.4 points among those 25-34, to 7.5 points among those 65 and older. Each older age group has better mind health at every AI-use frequency, consistent with an overall decline in mind health across generations that has been reported in numerous other studies.

Figure 2B shows a similar inverted U-shape for specific dimensions of mind health among the 18-34 age group. The decline between several-days-a-week use and constant use is sharpest for Cognition (-21.2 points) and Social Self (-21.0 points), followed closely by Mood & Outlook (-20.9 points), Adaptability & Resilience (-19.0 points), Drive & Motivation (-17.6 points) and Mind-Body Connection (-16.4 points).

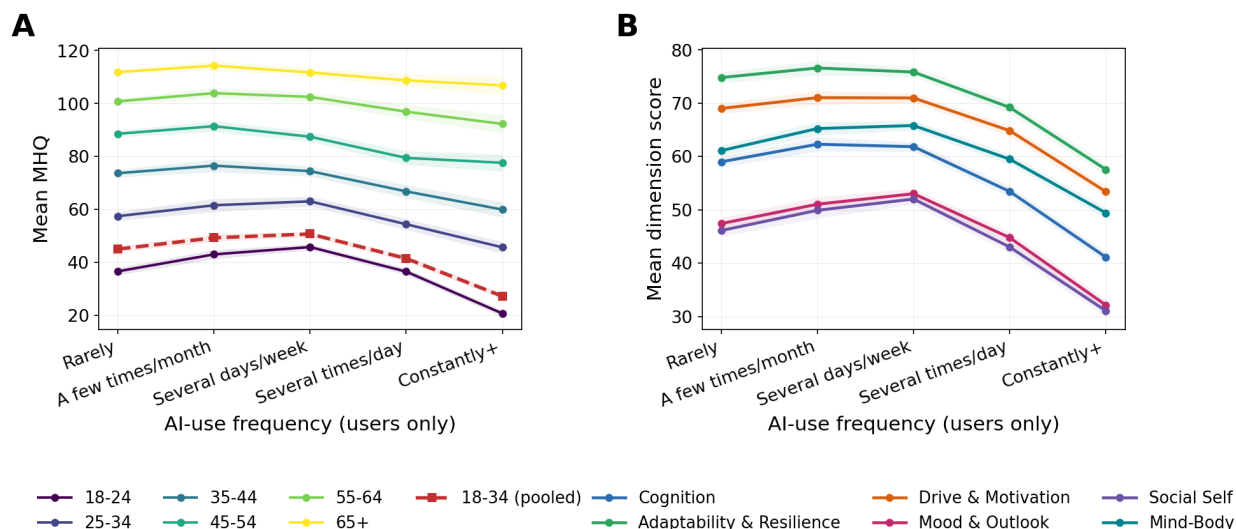
Figure 2: Mind health and AI-use frequency


Figure 2: (A) Mean MHQ by AI-use frequency for each age band, and (B) mean score for the six MHQ dimensions among those 18-34.

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Mind health rises with low-to-moderate GenAI use and then falls sharply with constant use, an inverted U-shape most pronounced among young adults 18-24.

Individual capacities and problems with different levels of GenAI use

At the level of individual capacities queried, ratings of 22 out of 27 capacities were higher with low levels of GenAI use and then decreased at higher use, following the same inverted-U pattern seen for overall MHQ. Focus and concentration stood out from the rest, decreasing prominently and steadily with each increasing level of GenAI use. The sharpest declines between peak and constant daily use were for focus and concentration, self-image, emotional control, and emotional stability & calmness (Figure 3A). In contrast, sleep quality and adaptability to change increased modestly across most levels of AI use, except constant use.

Similarly, of 20 problems queried, all but one followed the same U-shaped pattern, decreasing somewhat with moderate use before rising again; the exception was addictions and cravings, which rose steadily across every level of use (Figure 3B). The sharpest increases in problems between rare and constant use were for addictions & cravings, confusion & slowed thinking, unwanted & obsessive thoughts, and sadness & hopelessness. The problems that decreased the most at moderate levels of use, before rising again at high use, were hallucinations and suicidal thoughts.

Figure 3: Item-level dose response

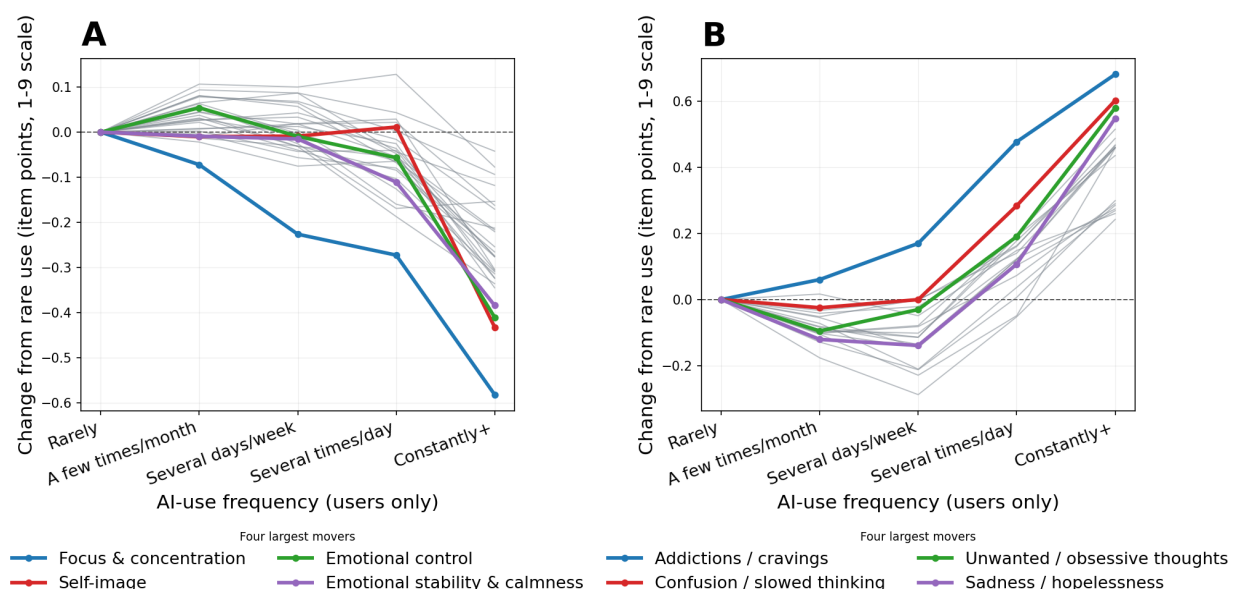


Figure 3: Item-level dose response: change relative to the Rarely group at each use frequency for the 27 capacities (A) and the 20 problems (B), shown on the raw 1-9 scale.

Thus, while moderate levels of AI use were associated with benefits to several aspects of mind health, even moderate use was associated with reduced focus and concentration and higher levels of addiction. Daily use was associated with worse mind health across nearly every dimension measured, and constant use with worse outcomes on all 47 items queried.

Type of use and the U-shape dose response

To explore what aspects of GenAI use might drive this association, use was classified into two broad categories: cognitive (learning, planning, information seeking, translation, writing, coding, analysis, summarizing, content creation, and problem solving/decision making) and emotional (companionship, emotional support or counseling, and romantic or intimate conversation). Focusing on the 18-34 age group, where the relationship to AI-use frequency was most prominent, almost all respondents used GenAI for cognitive purposes, while 36.7% used it for both emotional and cognitive purposes. The proportion of users reporting emotional use rose sharply with frequency of use, from 20% among those who use GenAI rarely to 55% among those who use it constantly (Figure 4A).

This raises the possibility that the inverted U-shape is simply a consequence of emotional use becoming more common among the heaviest users. However, the U-shape remained equally prominent for both types of use, although those using GenAI for both emotional and cognitive purposes had consistently lower MHQ, by 26 to 32 points, than those using it for cognitive purposes only, at every frequency of use (Figure 4B). The inverted U-shape therefore cannot be attributed to this broad type of use alone.

Figure 4: Type of use and the inverted U-shape

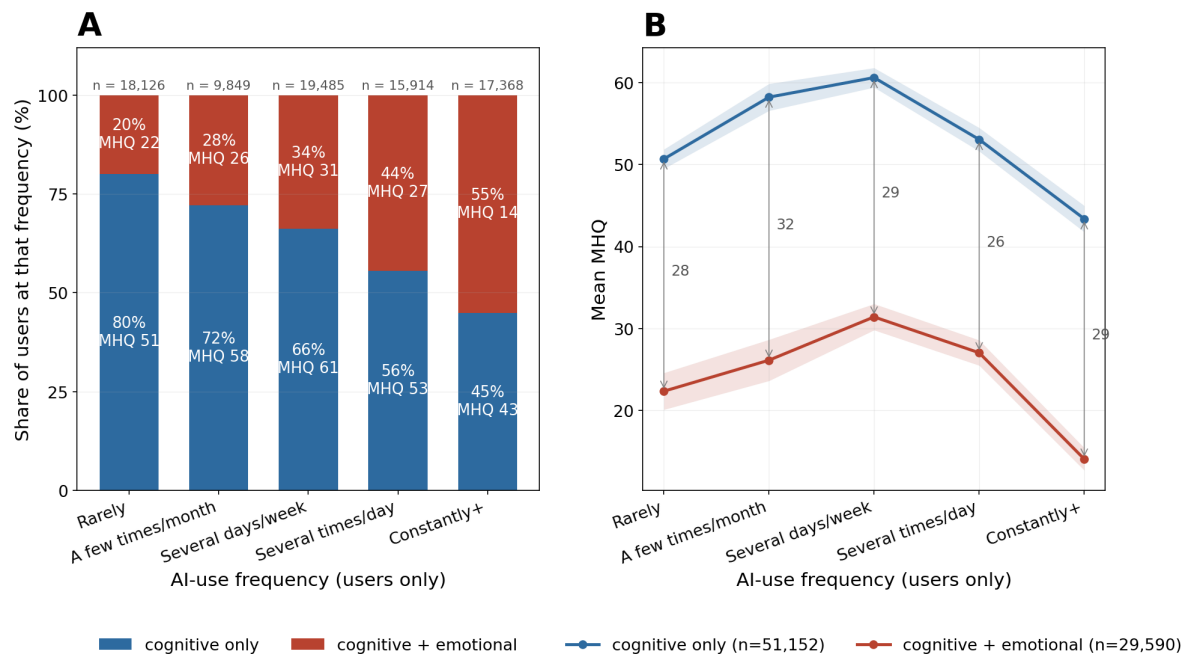


Figure 4: (A) The share of users also using AI for emotional purposes at each use frequency, and (B) mean MHQ by frequency for cognitive-only versus cognitive-plus-emotional use.

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The inverted U-shape holds for both cognitive-only and emotional GenAI use, but those using GenAI for emotional purposes have consistently lower mind health at every frequency of use.



3 Insights and Interpretations

A U-shape association dominant in younger adults regardless of type of use

The relationship between GenAI use and overall mind health is not simply positive or negative but follows a U-shape curve overall: modest, occasional use is associated with somewhat better mind health than very rare use, while daily and constant use are associated with substantially worse mind health, falling below even the rarely-use group. This pattern held irrespective of the type of use (cognitive or emotional) and was far more pronounced among young adults 18-34, who are also the heaviest users of GenAI overall. The 18-34 age group has had lower mind health compared to older age groups even before the advent of GenAI chatbots. This may result in a greater vulnerability to suggestion and the influences of GenAI use. In addition, they may have distinct patterns of use relative to older adults that drive this more pronounced relationship.

Distinct signature of associated problems

The MHQ is an overall metric of mind health. The U-shape association of overall mind health and dimensional metrics masks a specific systematic decrease in focus & concentration, and increase in addiction & cravings, with each higher frequency of use. Other challenges that increased most sharply with daily GenAI use included confusion and slowed thinking, unwanted and obsessive thoughts as well as challenges with emotional control, that point towards a cluster of attentional and compulsive difficulties quite different from the typically studied mental health aspects of depression and anxiety.

Emotional use carries an added burden dominated by symptoms of psychosis

While the U-shape association between GenAI use frequency and mind health held for both emotional and cognitive use, those who used it for emotional purposes such as emotional support or companionship had lower mind health at all frequencies of use. However, the tendency for emotional and companionship-type use of GenAI are more prevalent among the heaviest users. Since these are cross-sectional associations, we cannot determine whether people with poorer mind health are more drawn to using GenAI for emotional support, whether such use itself erodes mind health, or both. Regardless of the direction of causation, the co-occurrence of rising emotional use with heavier overall use, and lower mind health at every level of use among emotional users, is a pattern worth close attention as GenAI companionship and support tools continue to expand.

Direction of causality and implications

This is cross-sectional study so it does not provide conclusive insight into direction of causality. Two interpretations are therefore possible, particularly when considering the under 35 adults:

- Explanation 1: Only those with a higher level of attentional and compulsive or psychosis-like problems tend to use GenAI daily.
- Explanation 2: More frequent use of GenAI degrades mind health.

While the first explanation is a likely contributing factor, given that a higher proportion of daily users use GenAI for emotional purposes, it offers only a partial explanation. Cognitive use of GenAI has a similar relationship to mind health, the proportion of the 18-34 age group using AI daily is high (41.3%) and there is a push towards more regular AI use at work. Although not shown here, our data shows that unhealthy lifestyles (sleep, diet and exercise) and traumatic experience are not more prevalent among daily users and cannot explain the relationship.

Overall, we favor an interpretation of a reciprocal relationship whereby greater mental health problems may draw one into GenAI use, particularly for emotional purposes, as one increases GenAI use frequency, it results in progressive attentional and compulsive problems that may result in increased GenAI use.



Magnitude of the effects

Changes in MHQ between moderate and constant generative AI use are on the order of 20 points on the MHQ scale which ranges from -100 to +200. To put these in context, the MHQ has been shown to relate linearly to function such that a 12-point decrease in the MHQ corresponds to a loss of productivity of approximately one day per month (Newson et al., 2024). This also corresponds to a doubling of the population with serious mental health distress (from 6.1% to 13% in the Distressed range) which is a substantial shift in the mental health burden.

Conclusions

Almost everything humans consume or rely on shows an inverted-U relationship with wellbeing: too little is insufficient, and too much becomes harmful, with a beneficial range somewhere in between. These results suggest the same may be true of generative AI. With over 41% of young adult users already engaging with GenAI several times a day or more, and the fastest-growing category of use being the one associated with the poorest mind health outcomes, these findings warrant careful attention from individuals, educators, mental health professionals, and the technology companies developing and promoting these tools. Without the appropriate guardrails we risk substantial degradation of the mind health of humanity. We will continue to track these patterns as GenAI use becomes further embedded in daily life.



4 Methods

Data Acquisition

Data were acquired through the Global Mind Project between June 16, 2025, when questions on AI use were added to the assessment, and April 12, 2026. The Global Mind Project acquires data from the Internet-enabled population across 85+ countries using the Mental Health Quotient (MHQ) assessment, which includes 47 items spanning 27 mental capacities and 20 problem items, together with numerous demographic, life-context and lifestyle questions. This report uses data from 176,198 respondents who answered questions on AI use in addition to completing the MHQ, out of 264,085 total respondents during this period; individuals who indicated they had never used a generative AI chatbot were excluded from the AI-use analyses.

AI Questions

Respondents were asked how often they use generative AI assistants such as ChatGPT or Claude (Rarely, A few times a month, Several days a week, Several times a day, Constantly), which of ten cognitive purposes they use AI for (e.g., finding information, learning, writing support, coding, planning), and which of three emotional purposes they use AI for (companionship; emotional support, life coaching or counseling; romantic or intimate conversation).

The MHQ

The MHQ is a comprehensive, freely available, anonymous assessment of mind health comprised of 47 elements spanning positive capacities and problems drawn from the symptom criteria of ten major disorders. Each item is rated on a 9-point life-impact scale. The MHQ aggregates these ratings into an overall score positioning individuals from Distressed to Thriving (-100 to +200), as well as six dimensional sub-scores: Mood & Outlook, Social Self, Adaptability & Resilience, Drive & Motivation, Cognition, and Mind-Body Connection.

Analysis

Average MHQ, dimensional scores, and item-level ratings were computed for each combination of age band, sex, AI-use frequency, and type of use. Differences between groups were assessed for statistical significance; given the large sample sizes involved, effect sizes were also examined alongside significance to evaluate the practical magnitude of the differences reported.



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