

My Partner's Dependence on Chatbots Is Becoming a Problem. How Do I Tell Him?

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The Ethicist

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Illustration by Tomi Um

By [Kwame Anthony Appiah](#)

Kwame Anthony Appiah has been The New York Times Magazine's Ethicist columnist since 2015 and teaches philosophy at N.Y.U.

For the past year, my partner has used either ChatGPT or Claude to help him make almost every decision. Need help writing an email? Claude links to a tool that does it for him. Need help negotiating a lease renewal? He puts it through A.I. for an answer. He talks to ChatGPT daily and feels it knows him better than he knows himself. He has discussed our arguments with it to understand them better.

At one point he struggled to get out of a work rut and wanted to regain excitement or hope in a bad job situation. We had several discussions and I gave him advice from my experience. Days later he said, "I was talking to ChatGPT and it made so much sense!" Then he repeated the same advice I had given him. He is sometimes on his computer for hours on end, and not really spending the quality time with me that I deserve.

I respect using A.I. to save time figuring out how to roast a chicken or finding information you need. Still, one reason I love my partner is his sharp mind and critical thinking. Using A.I. for every decision is something I don't understand. I believe in using all your resources before turning to technology. Do the research, use real resources and think of a solution yourself.

Here's my question: How do I go about telling my partner his reliance on A.I. is damaging our relationship? ChatGPT and Claude are so embedded in his life that I'm not sure how to approach the situation. — Name Withheld

From the Ethicist:

There are lots of ways in which artificial intelligence, including the kind behind those chatbots, serves us well. (Bear in mind that A.I. is under the hood in all sorts of applications and features we don't think of as A.I.: spam filters, route planning, credit card alerts, garden-variety internet search and on and on.) But it's a familiar thought that new technologies lead to de-skilling, the erosion of capacities people used to cultivate. Socrates wasn't wrong to worry that the widespread adoption of writing would take a toll on our powers of memory and attention.

Of course, that wasn't the whole story: Writing brought advantages, too. And there are plenty of skills we can lose without much regret (shoeing horses, folding road maps). But one thing we surely don't want to lose is a basic capacity for critical thinking. That would be an example of "constitutive" de-skilling — the loss of a capacity, like judgment or empathy or imagination, that's central to our moral or intellectual being. You fell for someone who thought for himself; it's understandable that watching him outsource that mind to a machine could dim his appeal.

In "On Liberty" (1859), the British philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote, about someone who has his own "plan of life," that "he must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision." So one risk in downloading deliberation to a machine is that your life will, in a certain sense, cease to be yours, because it won't be your reasoning and judgment that guide it.

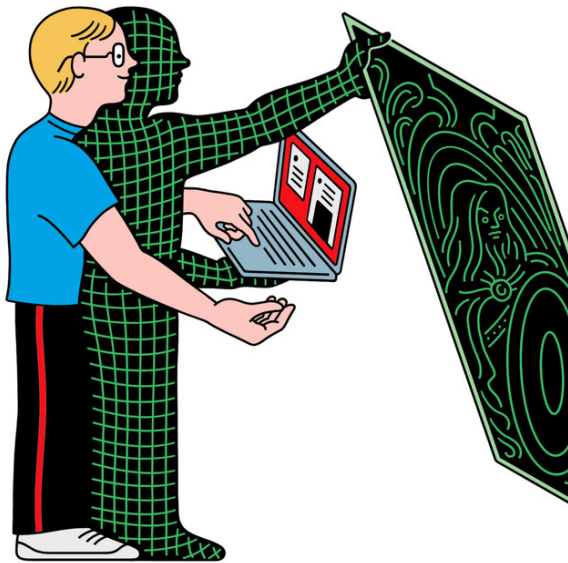
There's another risk in what you describe. By letting his conversations with the bot supplant actual conversations, your partner is degrading his relationships with real people. It sounds as if he may have lost sight of the fact that a large language model isn't a person.

You've reported an episode of what might be called "botsplaining": hearing your own good advice repeated back to you with the authority of a machine. But it also suggests he values his time with the chatbots more than his time with you. It's understandable that you're feeling crowded out. Be direct with him about how you feel. What's clear is that he's brought a third party to this two-person relationship, and it's talking too much.

Thoughts? If you would like to share a response to today's dilemma with the Ethicist and other readers in the next newsletter, fill out [this form](#).

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Back in 2024, the Ethicist answered a different question about navigating life in the era of artificial intelligence.



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[By Kwame Anthony Appiah](#)

Readers Respond

The previous question was from a reader who wondered whether he should tell his religious parents that he had lost his faith. He wrote:

I'm in my late 30s and grew up in Pakistan in a devout Muslim family. My parents and sisters still organize their lives around faith. ... I left home at 17 for university and have

lived independently ever since. I later moved to Europe and married a Christian woman, and I now have a 3-year-old daughter. Over the past 20 years, I have stopped practicing and no longer believe as my parents do. When they ask whether I pray or fast, I usually say yes, though it is untrue. ... Recently, my mother sent me a long voice message saying she believes I no longer pray, and that this hurts and disappoints both her and my father. She also implied that my wife may have led me away from Islam, though my beliefs changed long before I met her. ... What do I owe my parents ethically? Is protecting their peace of mind reason enough to keep lying, or do I have a responsibility to be honest about who I am, even if it hurts them? — Name Withheld

In his response, the Ethicist noted:

There's a meaningful distinction between deception and withholding, between actively misrepresenting yourself and simply not volunteering certain details. ... You might be tempted to lie about your faith — pretending that you're fasting on Ramadan, going to mosque and so on. That's a temptation to resist. ... But I'd also resist the temptation to blow things up in the name of transparency. A middle way may be best, if it proves possible. That entails avoiding discussion of religion as much as you can, and not flaunting your skepticism. (Emotional openness isn't everything.) Anxiety about your commitment to Islam may well cause your parents less suffering than the certainty that you are on the road to eternal punishment. The bonds you have with them may never be the ones either of you imagined. They're partial and imperfect in all sorts of ways. That doesn't mean they aren't worth tending to.

[\(Reread the full question and answer here.\)](#)



The Ethicist's response was excellent, as far as it went. But he left out one thing: what to say when the parents bring up religion. I suggest saying, "I know you are concerned, but I don't want to talk about religion." And then change the subject. If they persist, repeat the same sentence. Do not explain or justify. As the Ethicist said, you are a grown man with a life of your own. You are not responsible for taking away their distress. — Barbra



As someone who has, in the name of transparency and openness, dropped such an honesty bomb on my family, I can't say that I recommend it. About 20 years later, I am still reconciling with the ways that my openness traumatized my religious family. At the time, I could see no other way. My family's shock sent me into a kind of trauma and overcorrection — I became an atheist-leaning agnostic, moved to Polynesia and built a career in evolutionary biology. (I was raised to not believe in evolution.) I don't know if another path would have led to more closeness, I only know that the one I took did not. In

hindsight, I might have been open with my family about my doubts as they were accumulating, rather than waiting for the point of no return. — Jill



I agree with the response, but I would add to it: The son should make clear to his parents that his doubts preceded his meeting his wife, and she is not responsible for them. Letting them blame her is both unfair and unhelpful moving forward, especially as their daughter gets older and the daughter's own faith, or lack of it, becomes an issue. — Naomi



The real issue is that the letter writer has not fully separated from his parents and continues to live his life through the lens of keeping his parents happy. Unfortunately he is also being very inauthentic. In my view, he should put on his adult pants and have a loving conversation with them, starting with an apology for not being honest about his beliefs (honesty being a fundamental tenant of all the world's religions). They might not be happy with his choices, but at least it will be the start of an honest relationship. Later on, he might need to clarify boundaries regarding his wife and child, but the initial conversation needs to be focused on his relationship with his parents and include why he felt compelled to not be truthful and transparent, focusing on his choices (versus blaming them). — David



One of the hardest things I had to do was tell my mom that I left the Catholic Church. When I did, she was not happy and pulled a way a bit. I gave birth to my second child during this time, and my mother asked if she could baptize her when she came to visit. I had no problem with that, and assured her that if it brought her peace that would be fine. And she did. When my third child was born, 16 months later, I offered to let my mother baptize her as well. She declined, saying she had grown very comfortable with my beliefs and how I was raising my children. I didn't compromise in my beliefs, but I made room for her to express her concerns. — Breck

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