Public Perceptions of AI and Counselling & Psychotherapy in Mental Health Support – NCPS Report May 2024

The NCPS has commissioned online research via YouGov in order to understand how members of the public see counselling & psychotherapy, as well as how they view AI as a potential avenue for therapeutic support.

The questions we asked were:

1. How familiar, if at all, are you with the professions of counselling and psychotherapy?
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Counselling and psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support"
3. How likely, if at all, would you be to consider interacting with an AI generated Chatbot over a human being for your counselling/psychotherapy session?
4. You previously said that you are [very likely / fairly likely / not very likely / not at all likely] to consider interacting with an AI generated Chatbot over human being...What are your reasons for this?
5. Have you ever used counselling or psychotherapy services?
6. Please imagine you wanted to access support for your mental health...How likely, if at all, would you be to look into the following? Counselling / Mental Health app /Mental Health Chatbot
7. Still imagine that you wanted to access support for your mental health...Through which, if any, of the following methods, would you look to access a counsellor?

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2059 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 13th - 14th May 2024. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

Summary

Members of the public recognise the importance of the human connection in therapy, with only a small number of people likely to choose to interact with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being. How old someone is has an impact on that, of course, with younger people being much more likely than older people to adopt new ways of obtaining support with their mental health. That doesn't mean they're less likely to want to see a counsellor – on the contrary, the data shows us that those that are more likely to use a ChatBot are also more likely than average to want to see a counsellor for their mental health support, as well as using a mental health app. A greater adoption of tech for mental health support seems to imply that simply people are looking for more support with their mental health in general.

There is a highly positive response towards counselling & psychotherapy, and people clearly feel that it is an important part of mental health support provision.

The higher someone's personal income is, the more likely they are to access counselling and psychotherapy, which shows us that personal income can be a limiting factor for people, especially as it is so hard to access through publicly funded means such as the NHS. It would be interesting to see the impact that improved access to mental health support through the NHS would have on future data collections.

Ultimately, counselling & psychotherapy are clearly very important as a source of support to members of the UK public, and while a small number of people may be interested in exploring more avenues for support, their perception and need for the human connection in therapy does not diminish because of this. It is therefore of vital importance that we continue to ensure that these professions are supported to continue providing this valued service, especially given the large percentage of people that are not likely to want to engage with AI at this point.

The Top-Line Results

Almost 50% of people in the UK are familiar with the counselling & psychotherapy profession.

Just over 79% of people in the UK agree that counselling & psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support.

57.6% of people would be not at all likely to choose to interact with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being for therapy, and another 22.6% would be not very likely. This gives 80.2% of people preferring to work with a human for their mental health support.

40.5% of people in the UK have used counselling & psychotherapy services in the past.

People would be most likely to access counselling for support with their mental health (with 66.6% indicating they would be likely to choose this for their mental health support), followed by 38.3% that would be likely to access support for their mental health using a mental health app, and finally 12.3% would consider mental health support from a mental health ChatBot.

If people were looking for a counsellor, they'd be most likely to choose a counsellor based on personal recommendation (53.4%), followed by using a search engine to find someone (40.5%). 28.7% of people said that they would look on an online directory, and 10.3% said they would try to find a counsellor on social media.

We conducted some sentiment analysis on our open-ended question, which asked – when considering using an AI generated ChatBot over a human being for a therapy session – why someone would or wouldn't do this.

The responses show a mix of positive, negative, and neutral feelings towards interacting with AI chatbots, naturally leaning more towards negative given that only 3.5 %of respondents were very

likely to choose to interact with an AI ChatBot over a human for therapy, and 8.33% fairly likely. Positive responses, though as mentioned less frequent, spoke about the increased convenience, cost-effectiveness, and efficiency of AI ChatBots. People indicated that things like the immediate availability and quick handling of repetitive tasks, as well as the privacy provided when discussing certain topics, were potentially good things. However, these positive aspects of AI ChatBots were very much overshadowed by significant concerns; things such as a lack of trust and reliability, a lack of empathy and human understanding, AI being inadequate for dealing with mental health issues, and a general discomfort around the thought of interacting with a ChatBot.

A substantial portion of the respondents emphasised a preference for human empathy and understanding, citing the inability of AI chatbots to provide the emotional support and nuanced understanding necessary for complex or sensitive issues.

It is also important to note that a growing adoption of tech does not necessarily mean that people are therefore less likely to choose to approach a human therapist for support. The data shows that, of the people that are likely to choose to interact with an AI Chatbot over a human being when it comes to therapy, 48.2% of them have not used counselling or psychotherapy services. They are, of course, significantly more likely to choose to use a mental health ChatBot than average (71.5% vs the average 12.3%), however they would still be very likely to choose to also access counselling (69.4% were likely to choose to access this for their mental health support), as well as mental health apps (67.1%). This shows that even though some people are likely to choose to access support via AI ChatBot, this doesn't mean they are unlikely to want to access counselling; they are actually still more likely than average to choose to access a counsellor (69.4%). This shows us that use of technology for mental health support simply correlates with an increasing desire to access support for mental health in all its forms; the use of new technology does not preclude the use of human-centred services.

Young People (18-24), Therapy & Tech

The data shows that young people are much more likely to adopt newer technologies when it comes to accessing support for their mental health than their older counterparts. This will likely come as no surprise, as young people have been surrounded by social media and interacting with artificial intelligence in their homes for a significant portion of their lives. For 18 years olds, half their lives may have been spent with AI-driven devices in their homes, like an Amazon Alexa (released in April 2015), or Google Home (released in November 2016). Talking to technology is more likely to feel more natural, and easier to accept by younger generations.

In terms of the data, young people were more likely than average to be familiar with counselling & psychotherapy (53.5%), however they were slightly less likely to agree that counselling & psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support (76.6%).

46.9% of people aged 18-24 would be not at all likely to choose to interact with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being for therapy, and another 19% would be not very likely. This show us that young people are much more open to the concept of using new technology to support their mental health.

Young people are less likely than average to have accessed counselling or psychotherapy services, with only 35.9% saying that they had. 4.9% didn't know or couldn't recall, and 8.2% preferred not to say.

Young people would be most likely to access counselling for support with their mental health (with 61% indicating they would be likely to choose this for their mental health support), followed by 38.6% that would be likely to access support for their mental health using a mental health app, and finally 22% would consider mental health support from a mental health ChatBot. This shows that young people are 10% more likely than average to use a mental health ChatBot than the UK average.

Young people would still be mostly likely to find a counsellor through a personal recommendation (49.1%), followed by a search engine (37.6%). They're more likely than average to use online directories (32.1%), and again significantly more likely to use social media to find a counsellor with 21.1% (10.8% more than average) indicating that they would use this.

Personal Income & Views of Therapy & Tech

Counselling & psychotherapy are very difficult to access via the NHS, and many people will have to pay privately in order to access therapy. As the results show, a significant proportion of the UK feel that counselling & psychotherapy play an important role in mental health support provision, but how does this change by income level?

We have separated personal income data into three categories: Lower Personal Income (up to £29,999 a year), Medium Personal Income (between £30,000 and £59,999 a year), and Higher Personal Income (£60,000+).

People with lower personal incomes are less familiar with counselling and psychotherapy services, though they value them highly and are still more likely than average to have used them. They overwhelmingly prefer human therapists over AI chatbots, with a significant majority seeking personal recommendations for counsellors. Those with medium incomes show greater familiarity with counselling & psychotherapy, yet also a slight increase in openness to AI chatbots; still predominantly preferring human interaction, however, accepting more varied mental health resources. Higher earners are the most familiar with and likely to have accessed counselling services, yet also displaying the highest acceptance of AI chatbots among the groups, whilst also prioritising personal recommendations and professional human support for their mental health needs.

This analysis suggests that income levels do significantly influence both the perception of and use of counselling & psychotherapy services. All income groups show a strong preference for human connection in therapy, although there appears to be a greater willingness to use tech for mental health support the more you earn. The reasons for this are unclear, and could be a good opportunity for future research. It's also telling that, while people on lower incomes overwhelmingly feel that counselling & psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support, they're less likely to access it than those with a greater personal income.

Lower Personal Income Data

Those with a lower personal income were less likely than average to be familiar with counselling & psychotherapy (47.7%), although, as per the UK average, 79% agree that counselling & psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support.

58.7% of people with a lower personal income would be not at all likely to choose to interact with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being for therapy, and another 22.3% would be not very likely.

People with a lower personal income are more likely than average to have accessed counselling or psychotherapy services, with 41.5% saying that they had. This could be linked to the increasing likelihood of poor mental health linked to poverty and financial worries.

People with lower personal incomes would be most likely to access counselling for support with their mental health (with 66.5% indicating they would be likely to choose this for their mental health support), followed by 36.7% that would be likely to access support for their mental health using a mental health app, and finally 12.2% would consider mental health support from a mental health ChatBot. These figures are very similar to the national averages, so it does not appear that having a lower personal income changes how likely a person is to try and access each of the different types of mental health support listed.

People with lower personal incomes would still be mostly likely to find a counsellor through a personal recommendation (51.2%), followed by a search engine (37.5%). They're less likely than average to use online directories (25%), and again significantly more likely to use social media to find a counsellor with 21.1% (10.8% more than average) indicating that they would use this.

Medium Personal Income Data

Those with a medium personal income were more likely than average to be familiar with counselling & psychotherapy (55.1%), and a huge 83.7% agree that counselling & psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support. This indicates that income may have an effect on how counselling & psychotherapy services are perceived.

54.7% of people with a lower personal income would be not at all likely to choose to interact with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being for therapy, and another 25.4% would be not very likely. This shows that people with a medium personal income would be slightly more likely to choose to interact with an AI ChatBot over a human being for a therapy session.

People with a medium personal income are more likely than average to have accessed counselling or psychotherapy services, with 42.7% saying that they had.

People with medium personal incomes would be most likely to access counselling for support with their mental health (with 72.5% indicating they would be likely to choose this for their mental health support), followed by 44.1% that would be likely to access support for their mental health using a mental health app, and finally 13.5% would consider mental health support from a mental health ChatBot. These figures show that overall those with a medium personal income are more likely than average to consider support for their mental health from a variety of different sources.

People with medium personal incomes would still be mostly likely to find a counsellor through a personal recommendation (57.1%), followed by a search engine (49.7%). They're less likely than average to use online directories (35.8%), but around the average for use of social media to find a counsellor with 12.8% indicating that they would use this. People with medium personal incomes are much more likely than average to use a search engine to find a counsellor.

Higher Personal Income Data

Those with a higher personal income were more likely than average to be familiar with counselling & psychotherapy (56.7%), and a significant 87.4% agree that counselling & psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support. This, again, indicates that income may have an effect on how counselling & psychotherapy services are perceived.

45.6% of people with a higher personal income would be not at all likely to choose to interact with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being for therapy, and another 27.4% would be not very likely. This shows, again, that people with a higher personal income would be slightly more likely to choose to interact with an AI ChatBot over a human being for a therapy session than the average (80.2% of people, on average, would be unlikely to interact with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being, but for those on a higher income the net figure for those unlikely to interact with AI drops to just 73%).

People with a higher personal income are more likely than average, and the most likely out of all the income brackets, to have accessed counselling or psychotherapy services, with 50.7% saying that they had. This could be due to their increased ability to afford to pay privately for these services.

People with higher personal incomes would be most likely to access counselling for support with their mental health (with 74.1% indicating they would be likely to choose this for their mental health support), followed by 38.9% that would be likely to access support for their mental health using a

mental health app, and finally 17.2% would consider mental health support from a mental health ChatBot. These figures show that overall those with a higher personal income are more likely than average to consider support for their mental health from a variety of different sources. They are also the income bracket that is most likely to consider using a mental health ChatBot.

People with higher personal incomes would still be mostly likely to find a counsellor through a personal recommendation (70.7%), followed by online directories (45.3%). This is unusual in that they're less likely to use search engines (44.8%) than online directories, but just a little bit higher than average for use of social media to find a counsellor, with 16.9% indicating that they would use this. It's notable how much more than average people with higher personal incomes are to ask for personal recommendations for a counsellor.

Other Notable Data

People in urban locations (50.7%) are more likely to be familiar with counselling & psychotherapy than those in town & fringe (45%) or rural (43%) locations. 48.8% of people in Northern Ireland are familiar with counselling & psychotherapy.

You may have assumed that people in rural locations would be more likely to engage with an AI-generated ChatBot than those in Urban locations due to the increased difficulty in accessing a face-to-face appointment with a counsellor, but the figures show that only 6.9% of people in rural locations would consider doing so, while 14.1% in urban locations would. 87% of people in rural locations would, in fact, be unlikely to consider interacting with an AI-generated ChatBot over a human being for a therapy session, contrasted with 78.7% in urban locations.
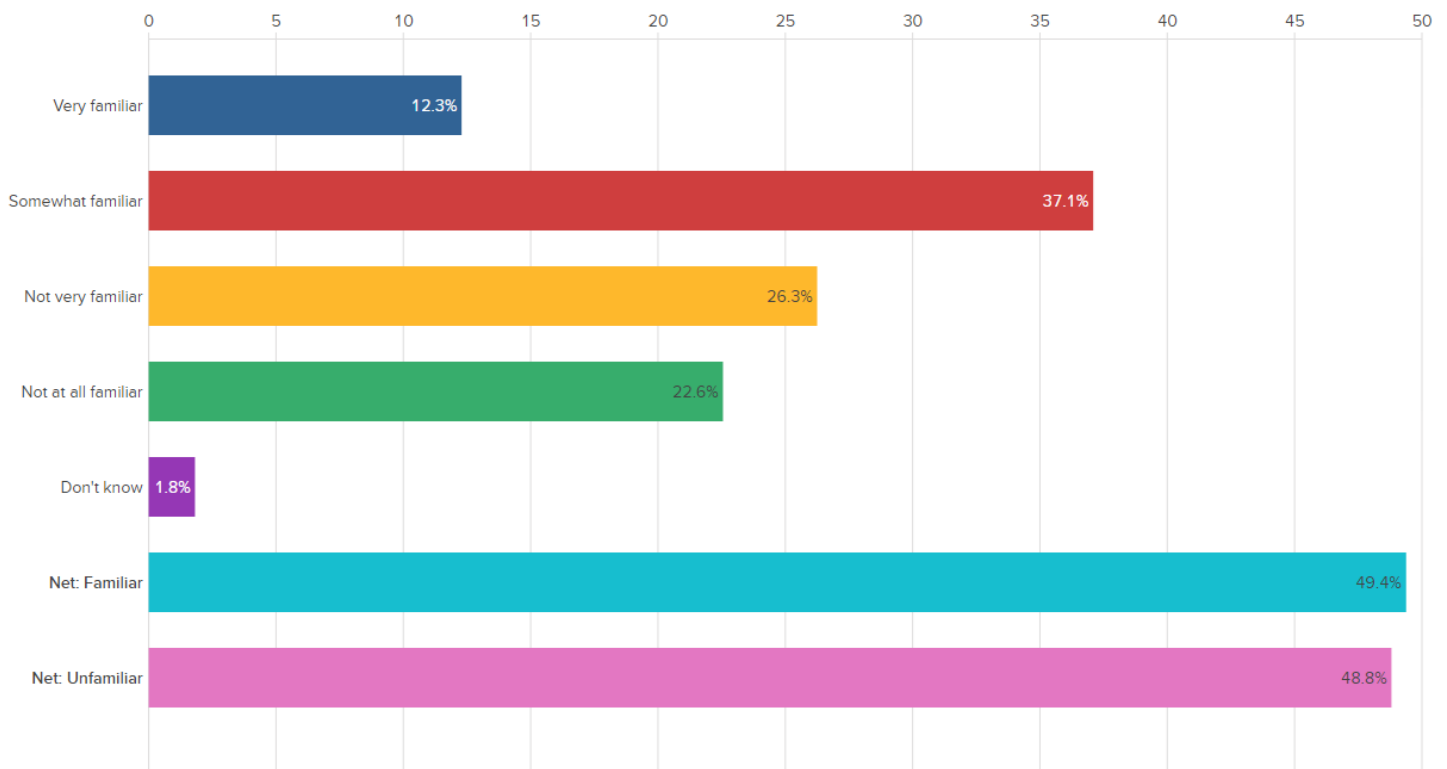
Of the people that are likely to choose to interact with an AI Chatbot over a human being when it comes to therapy, 48.2% of them have not used counselling or psychotherapy services. They are significantly more likely to choose to use a mental health ChatBot than average (71.5% vs the average 12.3%), however they would still be very likely to choose to also access counselling (69.4% were likely to choose to access this), as well as mental health apps (67.1%). This shows that even though people are likely to choose to access support via AI ChatBot, this doesn't mean they are unlikely to want to access counselling; they are actually still more likely than average to choose to access a counsellor (69.4%). This shows us that use of technology for mental health support simply correlates with an increasing desire to access support for mental health in all its forms; the use of new technology does not preclude the use of human-centred services.

Graphs – National Average

How familiar, if at all, are you with the professions of counselling and psychotherapy?

Familiar with profession
How familiar, if at all, are you with the professions of counselling and psychotherapy?
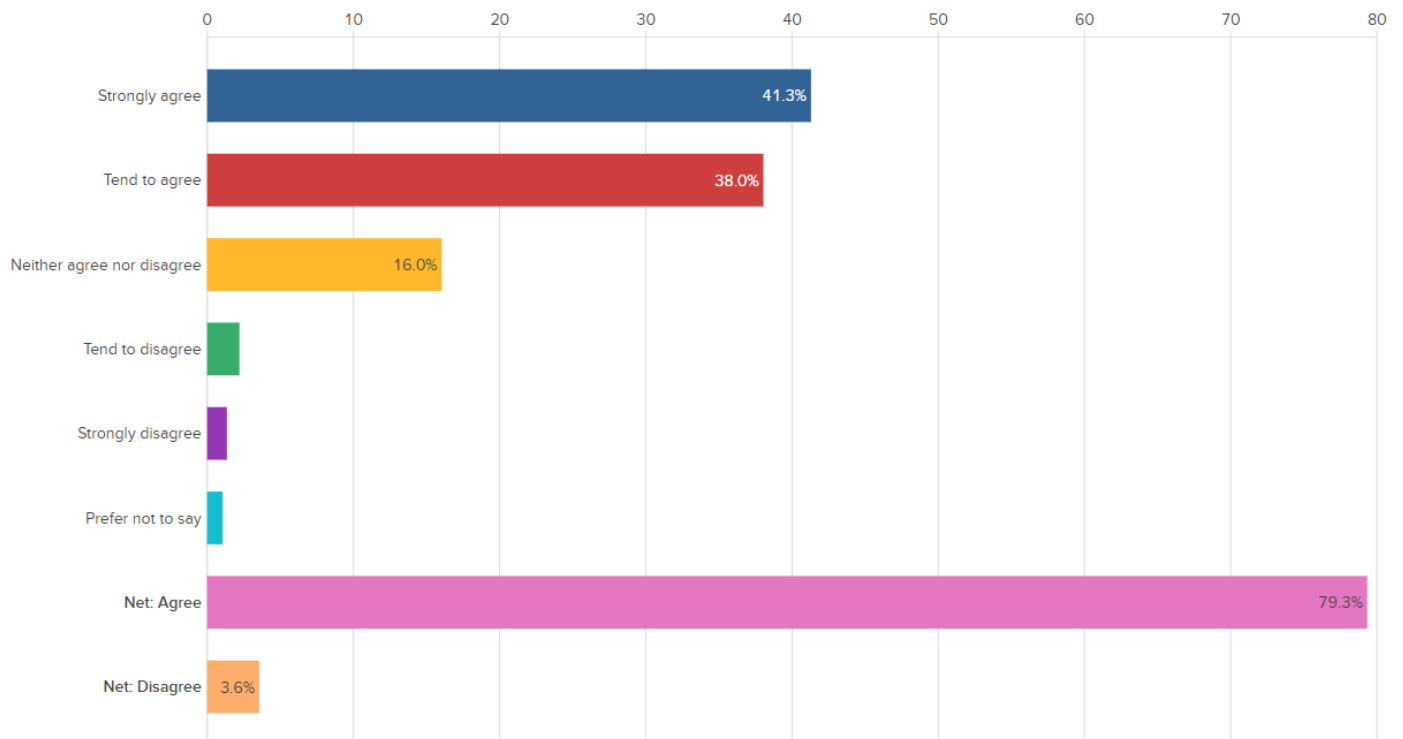

Category	Percentage
Very familiar	12.3%
Somewhat familiar	37.1%
Not very familiar	26.3%
Not at all familiar	22.6%
Don't know	1.8%
Net: Familiar	49.4%
Net: Unfamiliar	48.8%

N 2,059

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Counselling and psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support"

Agree or Disagree
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?"Counselling and psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support"

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	41.3%
Tend to agree	38.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.0%
Tend to disagree	
Strongly disagree	
Prefer not to say	
Net: Agree	79.3%
Net: Disagree	3.6%

N 2,059

How likely, if at all, would you be to consider interacting with an AI generated Chatbot over a human being for your counselling/psychotherapy session?

Interaction with AI

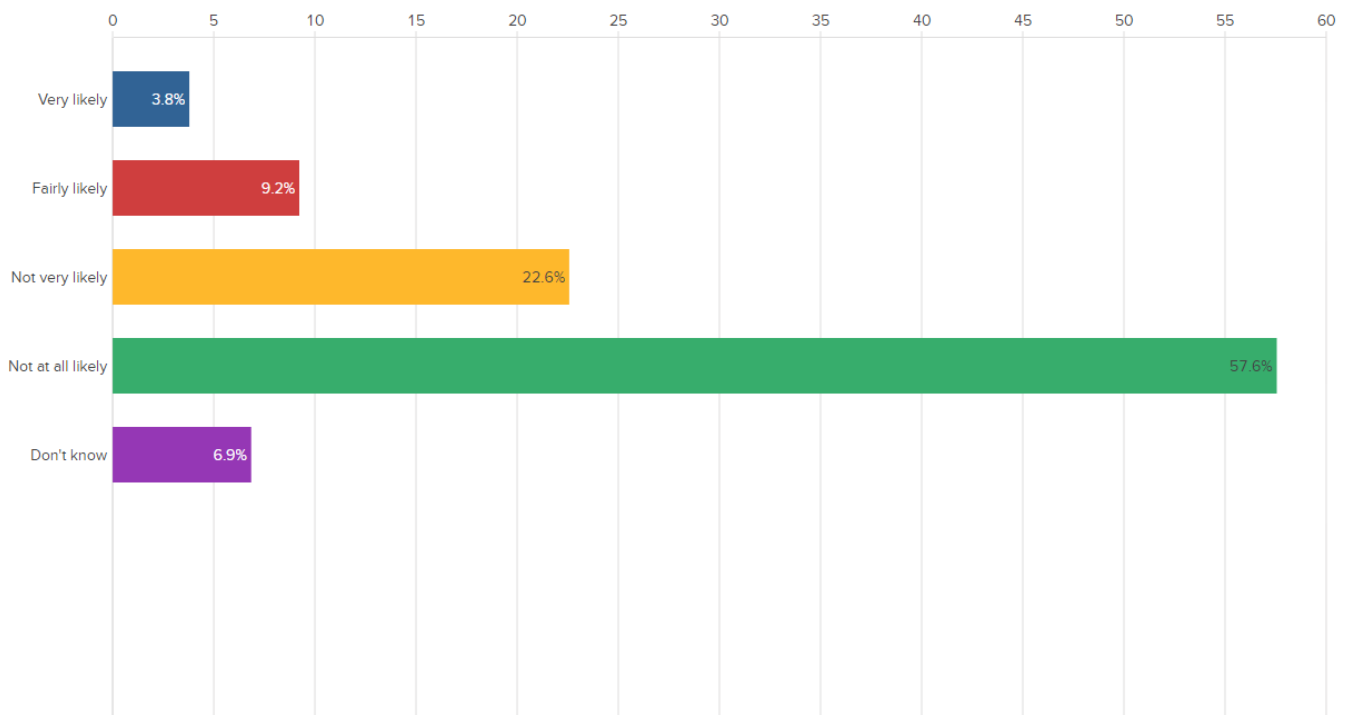Still thinking about counselling and psychotherapy...How likely, if at all, would you be to consider interacting with an AI generated Chatbot over a human being for your counselling/psychotherapy session?

N 2,059

According to the data, of those who were likely to consider interacting with an AI ChatBot, 58.3% were male and 41.7% were female.

25-34 year olds were the age group most likely to choose to interact with AI, followed by 18-24 year olds.

Of 25-34 year olds those that were likely to interact with AI, 50% have previously used counselling or psychotherapy services.

Of those that were not likely to interact with AI over a human being, these were predominantly female (53.8%), the majority of whom were over 55 (43%).

Of those who said they were not likely to use AI, only 9.1% of those were aged 18-24.

Those that were not likely to use an AI ChatBot for counselling and psychotherapy were also less likely to have used counselling and psychotherapy services in the past. 54.8% of those who responded that they weren't likely to prefer an AI ChatBot over a human had not had counselling or psychotherapy in the past.

You previously said that you are [very likely / fairly likely / not very likely / not at all likely] to consider interacting with an AI generated Chatbot over human being...What are your reasons for this?

Our sentiment analysis of the survey responses shows a mix of positive, negative, and neutral sentiments towards interacting with AI chatbots. Positive responses, though less frequent, spoke about the convenience, cost-effectiveness, and efficiency of AI chatbots. People were positive about the immediate availability and quick handling of repetitive tasks, as well as the privacy provided when discussing certain topics. However, these positive aspects are often overshadowed by significant concerns, including a lack of trust and reliability, a lack of empathy and human understanding, being inadequate for dealing with mental health issues, and general discomfort.

A substantial portion of the respondents emphasised a preference for human empathy and understanding, citing the inability of AI chatbots to provide the emotional support and nuanced understanding necessary for complex or sensitive issues.

Have you ever used counselling or psychotherapy services?

Used counselling or psychotherapy services
Have you ever used counselling or psychotherapy services?
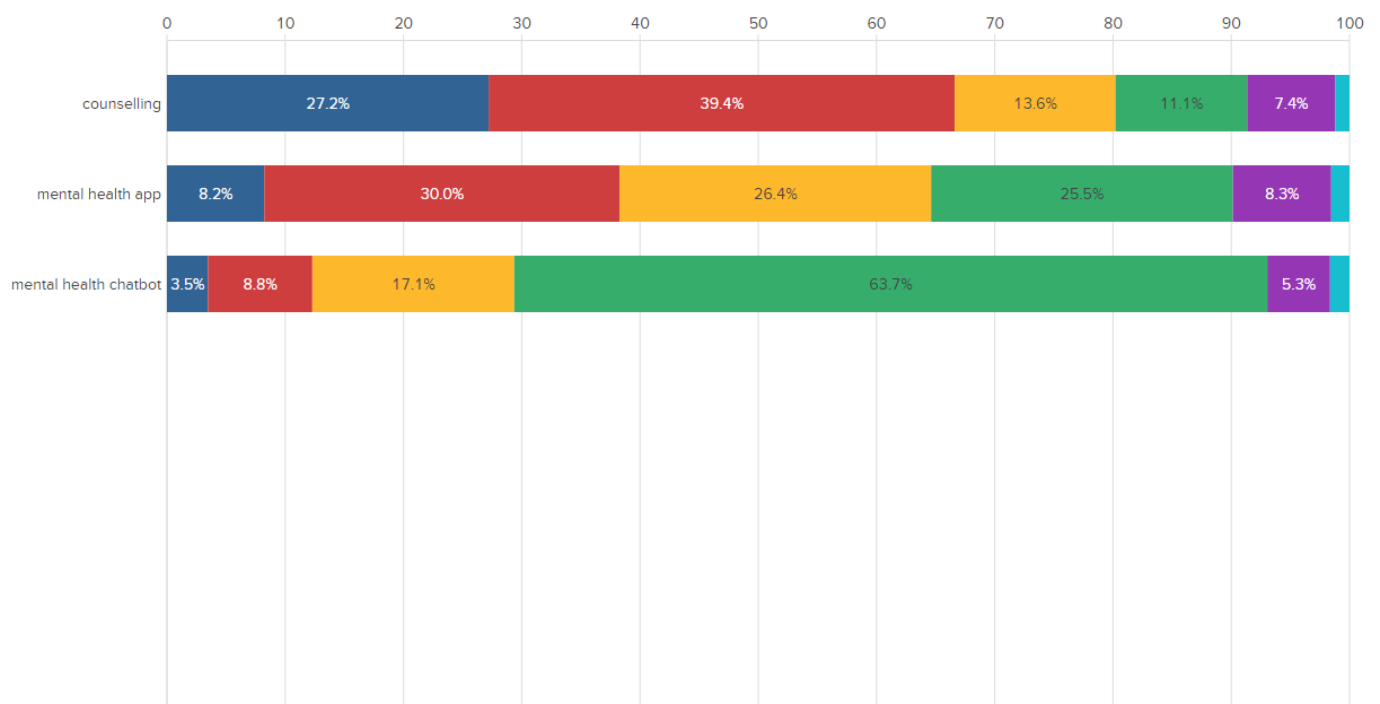

N 2,059
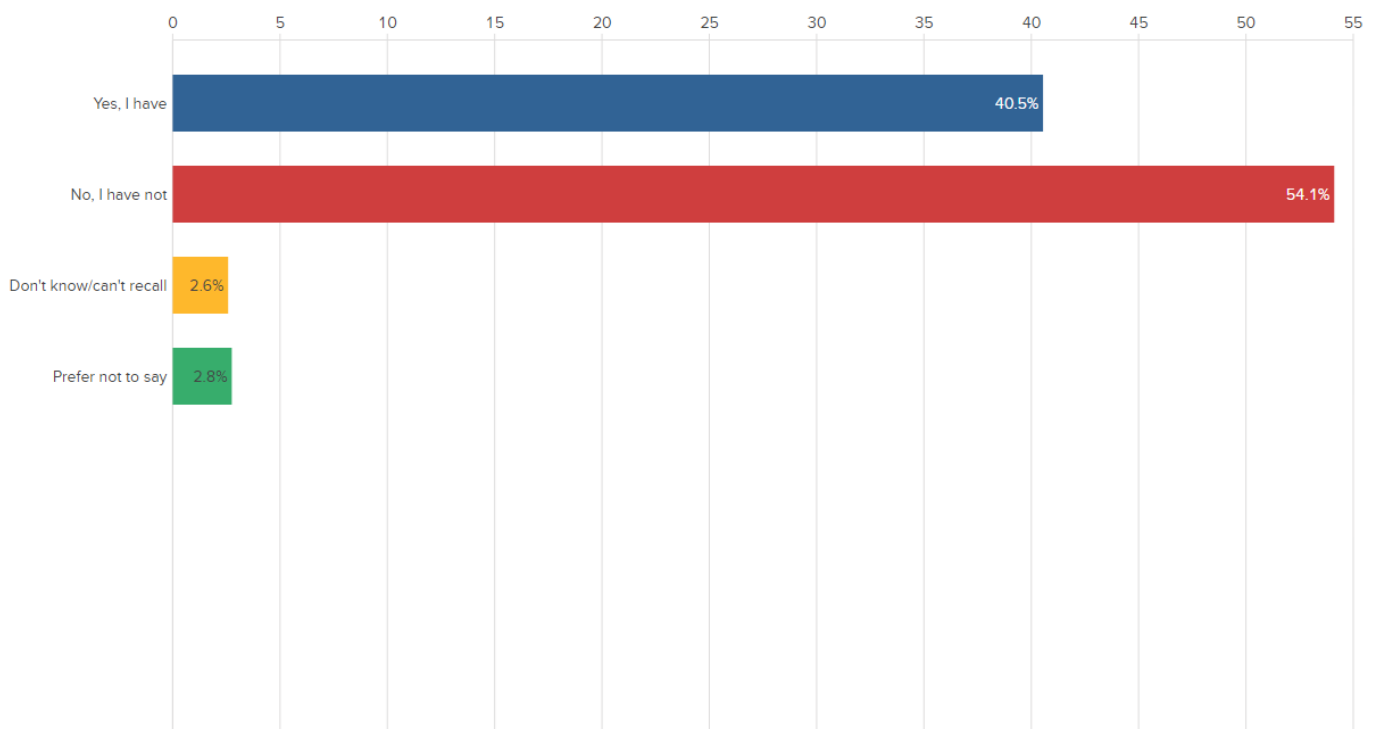
Please imagine you wanted to access support for your mental health...How likely, if at all, would you be to look into the following? Counselling / Mental Health app /Mental Health Chatbot

Likely or unlikely accessing counselling

Please imagine you wanted to access support for your mental health...How likely, if at all, would you be to look into the following? (Please select one option on each row)

■ Very likely ■ Fairly likely ■ Not very likely ■ Not at all likely ■ Don't know ■ Prefer not to say

	Very likely	Fairly likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely	Don't know
counselling	27.2%	39.4%	13.6%	11.1%	7.4%
mental health app	8.2%	30.0%	26.4%	25.5%	8.3%
mental health chatbot	3.5%	8.8%	17.1%	63.7%	5.3%

N 2,059

Still imagine that you wanted to access support for your mental health...Through which, if any, of the following methods, would you look to access a counsellor?

Platforms for accessing a counsellor
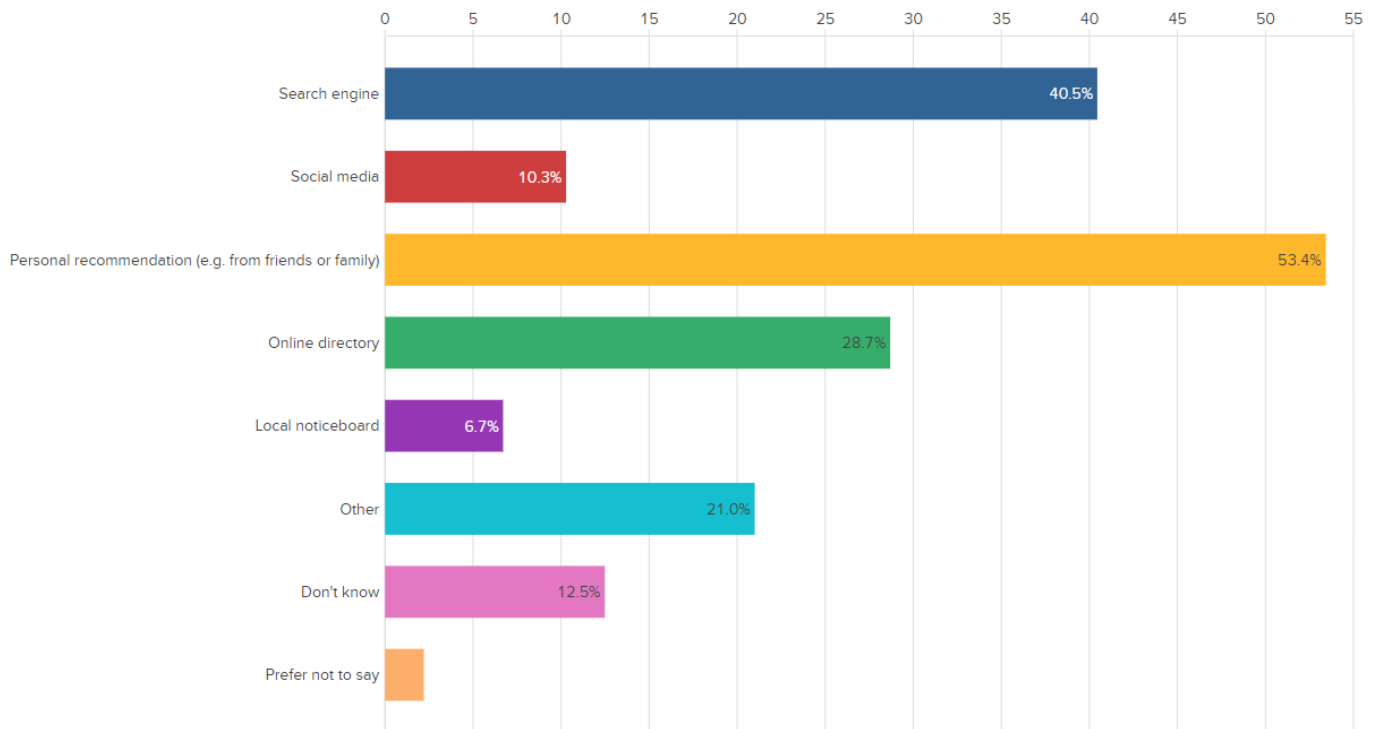Still imagine that you wanted to access support for your mental health...Through which, if any, of the following methods, would you look to access a counsellor? (Please select all that apply)

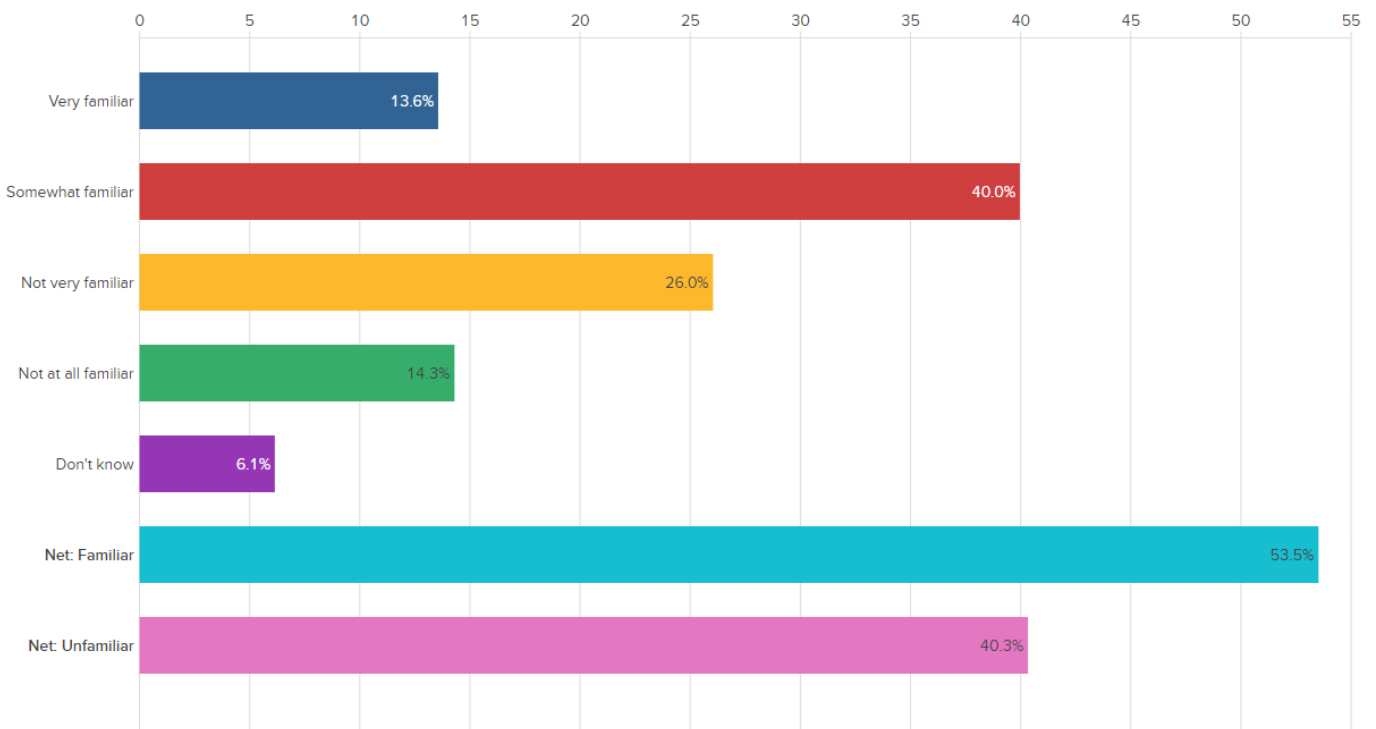| Method	Percentage
Search engine	40.5%
Social media	10.3%
Personal recommendation (e.g. from friends or family)	53.4%
Online directory	28.7%
Local noticeboard	6.7%
Other	21.0%
Don't know	12.5%
Prefer not to say	

N 2,059

Graphs for Young People – Aged 18-24

How familiar, if at all, are you with the professions of counselling and psychotherapy?

Familiar with profession
How familiar, if at all, are you with the professions of counselling and psychotherapy?

Category	Percentage
Very familiar	13.6%
Somewhat familiar	40.0%
Not very familiar	26.0%
Not at all familiar	14.3%
Don't know	6.1%
Net: Familiar	53.5%
Net: Unfamiliar	40.3%

N 232

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Counselling and psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support"

Agree or Disagree
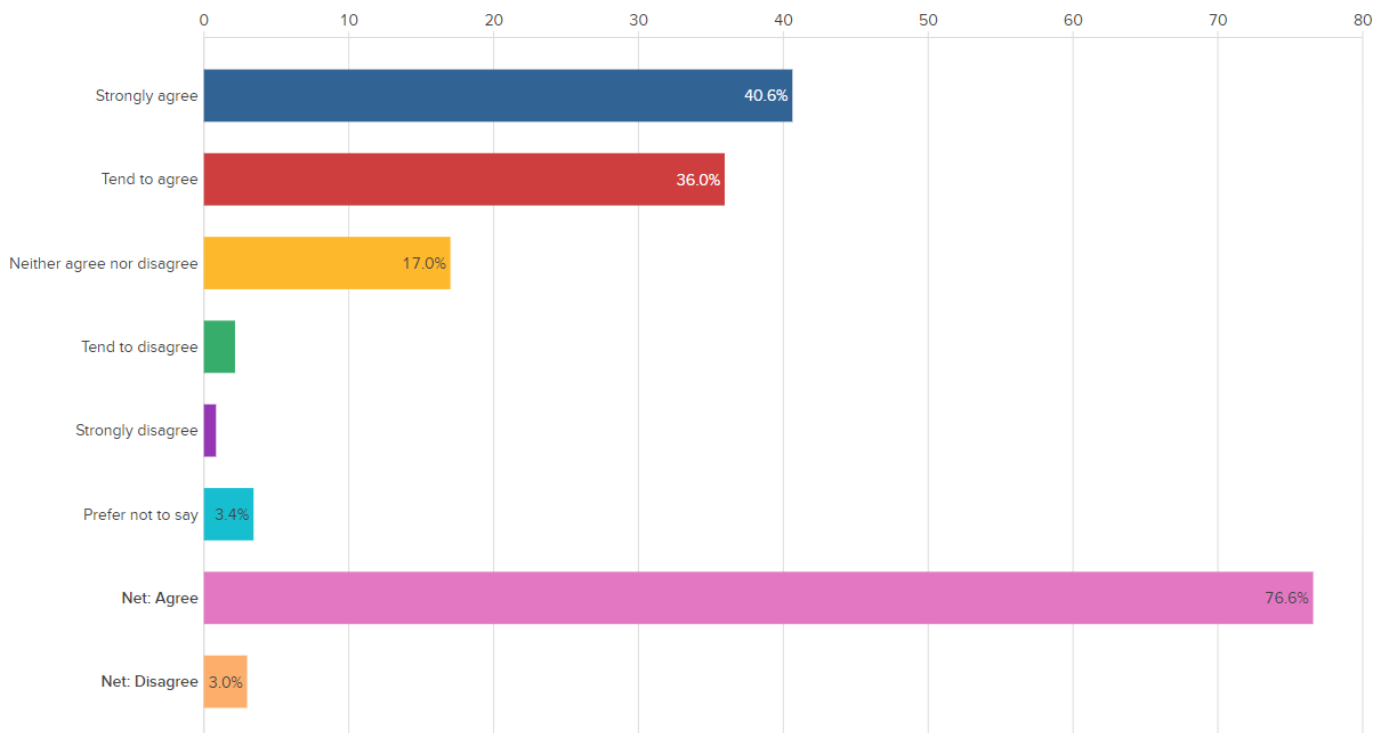
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?"Counselling and psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support"

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	40.6%
Tend to agree	36.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	17.0%
Tend to disagree	
Strongly disagree	
Prefer not to say	3.4%
Net: Agree	76.6%
Net: Disagree	3.0%

N 232

Still thinking about counselling and psychotherapy...How likely, if at all, would you be to consider interacting with an AI generated Chatbot over a human being for your counselling/psychotherapy session?
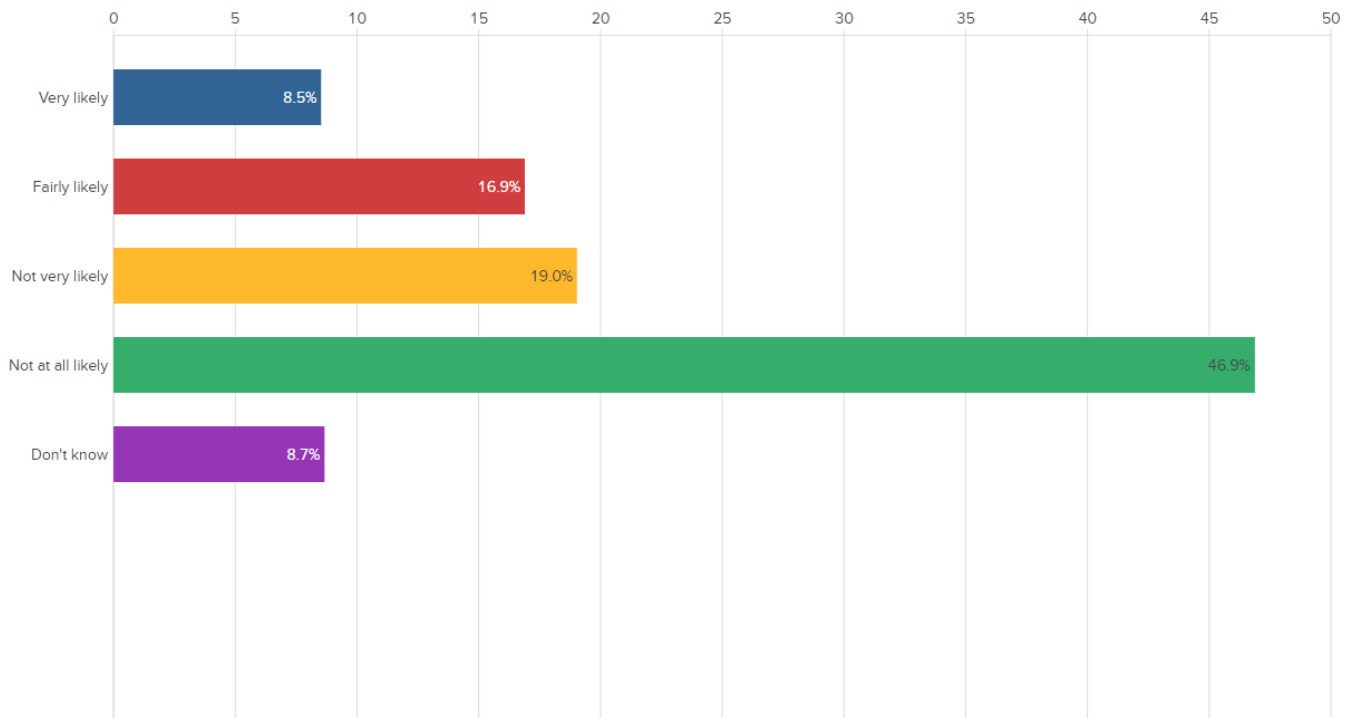
Interaction with AI

Still thinking about counselling and psychotherapy...How likely, if at all, would you be to consider interacting with an AI generated Chatbot over a human being for your counselling/psychotherapy session?
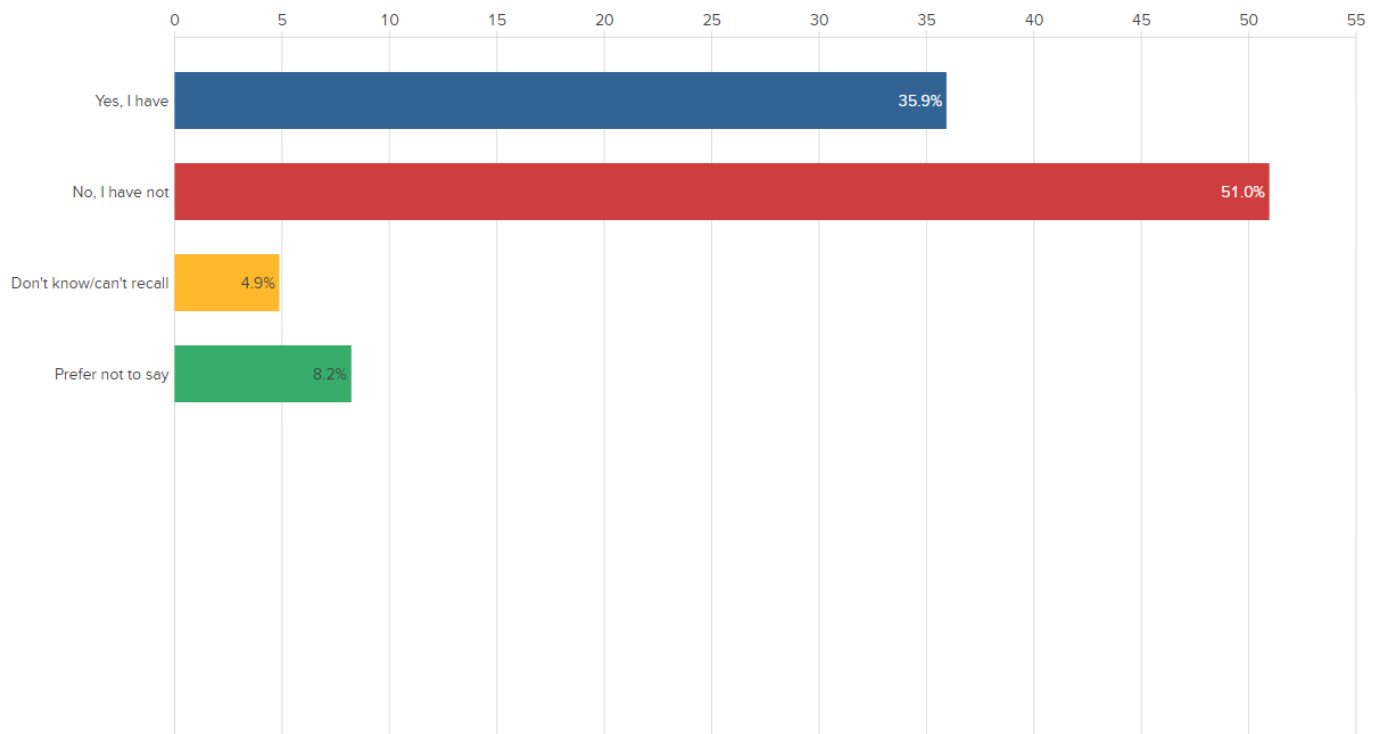
Response	Percentage
Very likely	8.5%
Fairly likely	16.9%
Not very likely	19.0%
Not at all likely	46.9%
Don't know	8.7%

N 232

Have you ever used counselling or psychotherapy services?

Used counselling or psychotherapy services
Have you ever used counselling or psychotherapy services?

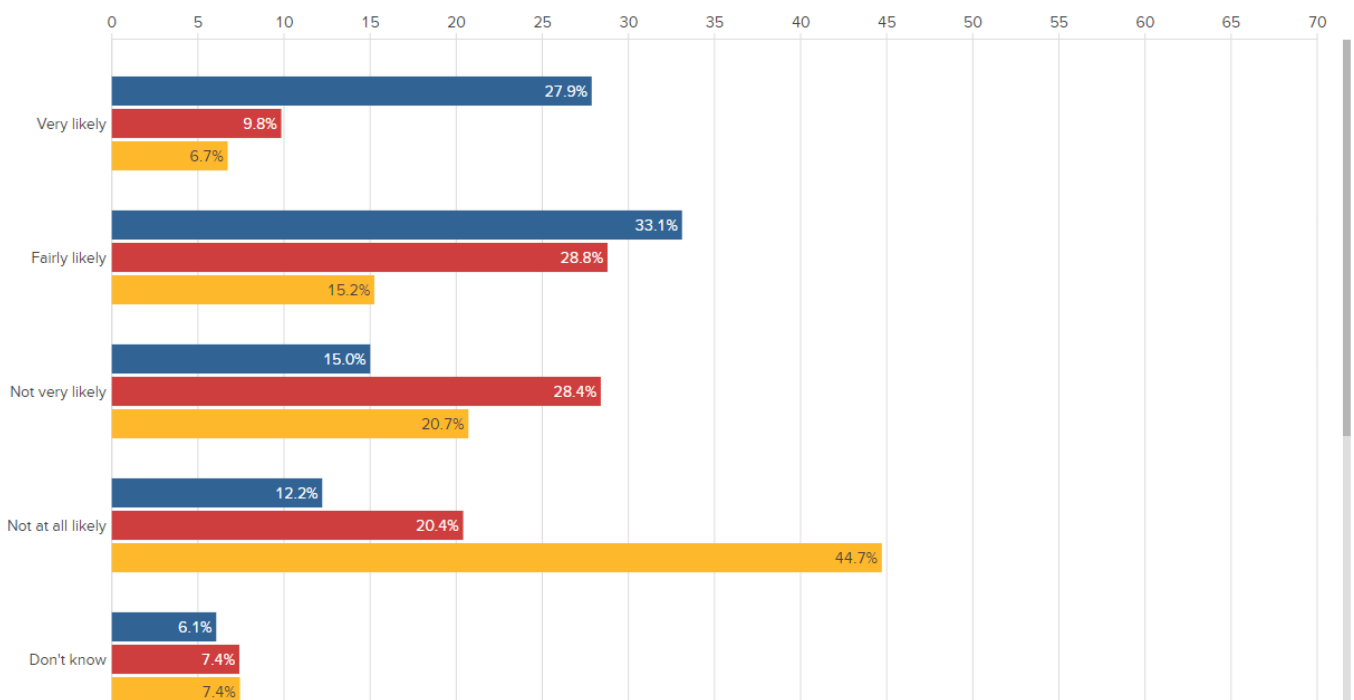| Response	Percentage
Yes, I have	35.9%
No, I have not	51.0%
Don't know/can't recall	4.9%
Prefer not to say	8.2%

N 232

Please imagine you wanted to access support for your mental health... How likely, if at all, would you be to look into the following?

Likely or unlikely accessing counselling

Please imagine you wanted to access support for your mental health...How likely, if at all, would you be to look into the following? (Please select one option on each row)

■ counselling ■ mental health app ■ mental health chatbot

	counselling	mental health app	mental health chatbot
Very likely	27.9%	9.8%	6.7%
Fairly likely	33.1%	28.8%	15.2%
Not very likely	15.0%	28.4%	20.7%
Not at all likely	12.2%	20.4%	44.7%
Don't know	6.1%	7.4%	7.4%

N 232

Still imagine that you wanted to access support for your mental health...Through which, if any, of the following methods, would you look to access a counsellor?

Platforms for accessing a counsellor
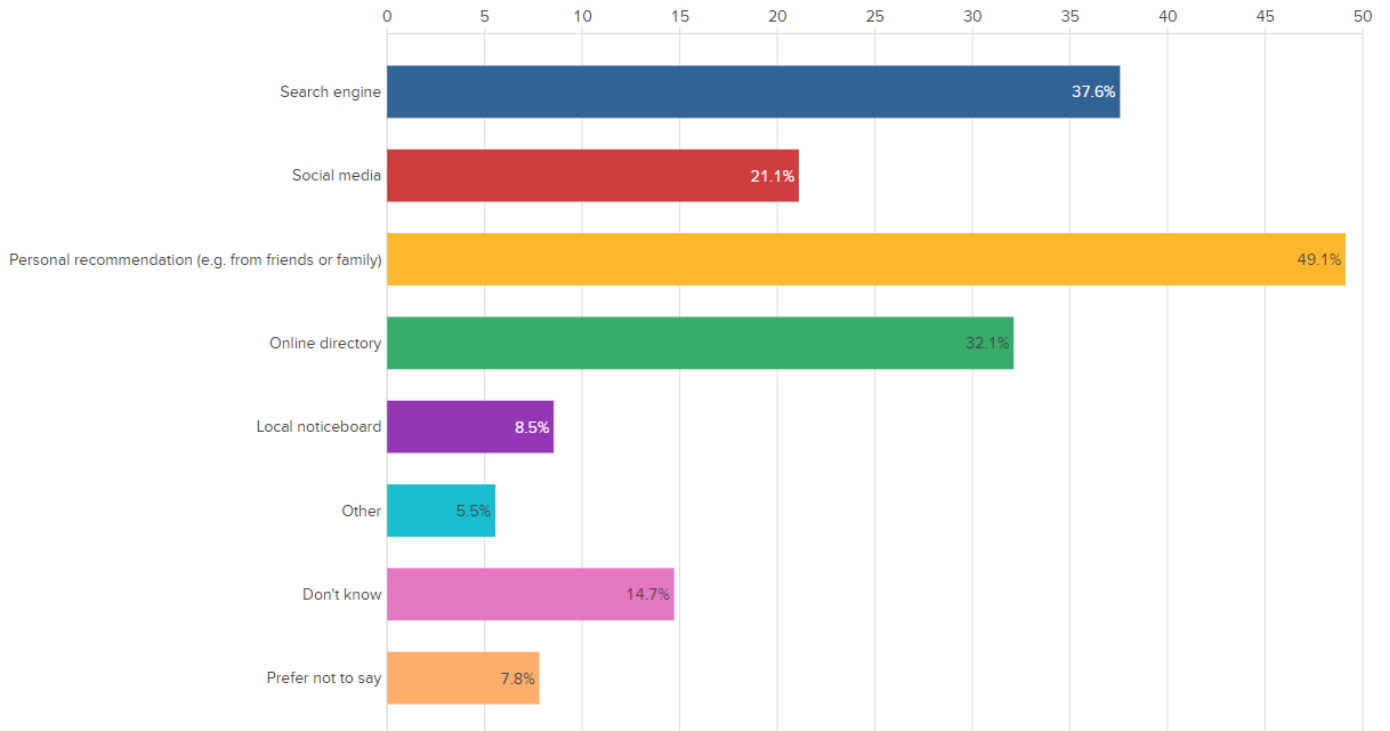
Still imagine that you wanted to access support for your mental health...Through which, if any, of the following methods, would you look to access a counsellor? (Please select all that apply)

Method	Percentage
Search engine	37.6%
Social media	21.1%
Personal recommendation (e.g. from friends or family)	49.1%
Online directory	32.1%
Local noticeboard	8.5%
Other	5.5%
Don't know	14.7%
Prefer not to say	7.8%

N 232