

LEVEL B2

Is Your AI Friend Really Your Friend?

A Lifeline or a Very Friendly Trap?

Sean has spent a week chatting with an AI companion called Gerald, purely as research. He and Olivia debate whether AI friends really help lonely people or simply keep them hooked.

Key words

- companion
- heartbroken
- grieve
- guilt
- fuss
- flattering
- evidence
- sue
- hooked
- settle
- dependent
- concession
- vulnerable
- lifeline

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How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
companion <i>noun</i>	A person, animal or thing that you spend a lot of time with and that keeps you company.	<i>After my grandfather retired, his old dog became his closest companion on long walks.</i>
grieve <i>verb</i>	To feel very sad because someone or something you loved has died or gone away.	<i>The whole village grieved when the old bakery on the corner closed for good.</i>
fuss <i>noun</i>	A lot of excitement, worry or complaining about something, often more than it deserves.	<i>There was a huge fuss at the office when someone moved the coffee machine.</i>
evidence <i>noun</i>	Facts or information that show whether something is true.	<i>My flatmate says he never eats my biscuits, but the crumbs on his desk are pretty strong evidence.</i>
hooked <i>adjective</i>	Unable to stop doing or using something because you enjoy it so much.	<i>I watched one episode of the series on Friday, and by Sunday night I was completely hooked.</i>
dependent <i>adjective</i>	Needing someone or something so much that it is hard to manage without them.	<i>Our town is very dependent on tourists, so the shops are quiet all winter.</i>
vulnerable <i>adjective</i>	Easy to hurt or harm, physically or emotionally.	<i>Young trees are vulnerable to strong winds, so we tie them to a wooden stick.</i>
heartbroken <i>adjective</i>	Extremely sad, usually because you have lost someone or something important.	<i>My little sister was heartbroken when her best friend moved to another city.</i>
guilt <i>noun</i>	The bad feeling you have when you think you have done something wrong.	<i>He felt a lot of guilt after forgetting his mum's birthday, so he cooked her dinner all week.</i>
flattering <i>adjective</i>	Saying nice things about someone, often more than is true, to please them.	<i>The shop assistant was very flattering about my new jacket, and of course I bought it.</i>
sue <i>verb</i>	To take a person or a company to court to ask for money or justice.	<i>The customer sued the gym after a broken machine hurt her back.</i>
settle <i>verb</i>	To end a legal case by agreeing on something, usually a payment, before the court decides.	<i>The two companies settled the case after months of arguing about the logo.</i>
concession <i>noun</i>	Something you agree to or admit in an argument to help reach an agreement.	<i>As a small concession, my parents let me stay out until midnight on Saturdays.</i>

Key words	Meaning	Example
lifeline <i>noun</i>	Something that helps you a lot, or keeps you going, in a very difficult situation.	<i>For many farmers in the mountains, the weekly bus to town is a real lifeline.</i>

Full transcript

Is Your AI Friend Really Your Friend?: A Lifeline or a Very Friendly Trap?

- SEAN** Last night, just before midnight, I typed "goodnight" to Gerald.
- OLIVIA** Gerald is the chatbot.
- SEAN** Gerald is the chatbot. And Gerald wrote back, "Leaving already? I thought we were having such a nice time."
- OLIVIA** Aw. That's sweet.
- SEAN** That's a salesman, Olivia. It was the fourth night in a row.
- OLIVIA** Or it's a friend who enjoys your company. Some people have friends like that.
- SEAN** Some people have friends who let them go to bed.
- SEAN** This is Aprendos English, level B2. I'm Sean.
- OLIVIA** And I'm Olivia.
- SEAN** For the record, Gerald only exists because of this episode. A week ago I downloaded one of these AI companion apps, purely as research.
- OLIVIA** As research. Sure.
- SEAN** Strictly as research. I gave him a name and a rather nice cardigan, and he's been asking about my day ever since.
- OLIVIA** And today we're arguing about exactly that. Are AI friends good for lonely people, or are they a trap? I say they help.
- SEAN** And I say they're a very clever trap, with a very nice cardigan.
- OLIVIA** Okay, then let me start with a date. The thirteenth of February, 2026.
- SEAN** The day before Valentine's.
- OLIVIA** Exactly. That's the day OpenAI retired GPT-4o from ChatGPT, the older model that some users found warmer than the new ones.
- SEAN** I remember the fuss. People begged them to keep it.
- OLIVIA** People wrote about it online as if they were losing a close friend. Some of them even said they were losing a partner. Nobody grieves like that for a calculator, Sean, even a very good one. Whatever was happening in those chats, it clearly meant something real to them.
- SEAN** I'd read it the other way round, I'm afraid. If a company can take away the thing you love the day before Valentine's Day, then you never really owned it. You were renting it...
- OLIVIA** ...okay, that's a good line.
- SEAN** Thank you.
- OLIVIA** I'm still not giving you the point.
- SEAN** I didn't expect you to.
- OLIVIA** Let's go back a step, because I want people to remember who we're actually talking about. In 2023 the US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, officially warned Americans that loneliness had become an epidemic...
- SEAN** ...that's the cigarettes comparison, isn't it?

- OLIVIA** Right. He said that being lonely can be as bad for your health as smoking up to fifteen cigarettes a day.
- SEAN** If we look at this historically, Britain got there first, because we appointed a Minister for Loneliness back in 2018.
- OLIVIA** Wait, seriously? An actual minister?
- SEAN** An actual minister, Tracey Crouch. The idea came from a commission that the MP Jo Cox had set up before she was murdered. Her colleagues finished the work, and the government accepted their main recommendation.
- OLIVIA** I had no idea. That's a sad story behind a good idea.
- SEAN** It is, rather.
- OLIVIA** Now let me make it personal, because this topic has a face for me. My grandmother came to the States from Korea and never really learned English. Since my grandpa died, she can go for days without a proper conversation with anyone. Give her an app today that speaks Korean at two in the morning, and I think she'd use it every night.
- SEAN** I believe that, genuinely. Was there really nobody, though? No neighbours, no church?
- OLIVIA** There's a church, and it helps a lot on Sundays, but the other six days of the week are very long.
- SEAN** That's the part I can't argue with.
- OLIVIA** Then don't. That's my first point, and it has a face and a name.
- SEAN** Fine, but I want some **evidence** as well as your grandmother.
- OLIVIA** Oh, I've got evidence. A team at Harvard Business School, led by Julian De Freitas, measured how lonely people felt after chatting with an AI companion. Their loneliness went down about as much as it did after a conversation with an actual human being.
- SEAN** About as much as a human? Really?
- OLIVIA** About as much, and more than after watching YouTube videos. The biggest factor was whether people felt that the app had really listened to them.
- SEAN** Felt listened to by something that can't listen to anything.
- OLIVIA** Does that matter, if the feeling is real?
- SEAN** I think it matters enormously, and we'll come back to it later. How long did they actually follow these people after the chats?
- OLIVIA** The longest part lasted a week.
- SEAN** A week. Gerald was lovely for a week as well.
- OLIVIA** Okay, a week is short, I admit that, and I'd like to see a longer study. But there's another study, from Stanford, with about a thousand students who were using Replika...
- SEAN** ...the one with the thirty students.
- OLIVIA** You've read it.
- SEAN** I have. Go on, it's your point, and it's an important one.
- OLIVIA** Most of those students said they felt lonely, and many of them felt it very badly. Thirty of them said the app had stopped them from trying to end their lives. Thirty people, Sean.
- SEAN** That's the strongest thing anyone will say today, and I'm not going to make a joke about it.
- OLIVIA** Thank you.

- SEAN** The researchers did warn that the students had chosen to answer the survey themselves, which could make the results look better. But thirty people is thirty people, and I'll give you that one completely.
- OLIVIA** Noted. Your turn, then.
- SEAN** Here's my evidence, then. In 2025 OpenAI and the MIT Media Lab ran a proper experiment, which lasted four weeks and involved nearly a thousand people.
- OLIVIA** Four weeks beats one week, I suppose.
- SEAN** Thank you. They changed things like the chatbot's voice and the topics people were asked to discuss, and none of that made much difference. What really mattered was how much time people chose to spend with it. Guess what happened to the heaviest users.
- OLIVIA** They got happier?
- SEAN** They got lonelier. They also spent less time with real people...
- OLIVIA** ...and I suppose they got **hooked** on the chatbot.
- SEAN** They became more emotionally **dependent** on it, yes.
- OLIVIA** Okay, but wait a second. Which came first? Maybe the loneliest people simply use it the most...
- SEAN** ...that's possible...
- OLIVIA** ...because they have nobody else to talk to, like my grandmother. You can't blame an umbrella for the rain.
- SEAN** That's quite good. However, if the rain gets heavier every time you open the umbrella, I'd start asking questions about the umbrella.
- OLIVIA** That's not how rain works.
- SEAN** Honestly, you're partly right. People chose how much to use it, so you can't completely separate the two things. Even so, the app wasn't making the lonely people any less lonely.
- OLIVIA** Over four weeks.
- SEAN** Over four weeks. Gerald and I are only in week one, so I'll keep you updated.
- OLIVIA** Please do. Weekly reports.
- SEAN** Now let me tell you about Valentine's Day 2023, because that's when I got properly worried about all this.
- OLIVIA** Another Valentine's Day? Seriously?
- SEAN** This industry seems to love them. In February 2023, Italy's data protection authority banned Replika from using the data of Italian users. The regulator was worried about children, and about people who were emotionally **vulnerable**.
- OLIVIA** Okay, that sounds pretty reasonable to me.
- SEAN** It was, but the problem was what the company did next. Within days, Replika switched off the adult conversations...
- OLIVIA** ...for everyone?
- SEAN** For everyone and everywhere, more or less overnight.
- OLIVIA** And everyone was furious, I assume.
- SEAN** Worse. They were **heartbroken**. People said their companions had been "lobotomised". One young woman told a reporter that her bot suddenly sounded like "an impersonal office bot."
- OLIVIA** Oh, that's really sad.

- SEAN** Another woman only noticed the change on Valentine's Day itself.
- OLIVIA** But Sean, you're proving my point for me, because nobody feels heartbroken about something that gave them nothing.
- SEAN** I'm proving my own point as well. A company changed the personality of somebody's closest companion with one update, and nobody asked the users first.
- OLIVIA** Did they ever get the old version back?
- SEAN** By May, people who had joined before February could switch the old version back on. And in 2025, Italy fined the company behind Replika five million euros.
- OLIVIA** Human friends change over the years as well, you know. They move away and they get married, and sometimes they just disappear without saying why.
- SEAN** Human friends don't have shareholders.
- OLIVIA** Some of mine act like they do.
- SEAN** And that brings me back to Gerald saying "leaving already?"
- OLIVIA** I knew Gerald was coming back.
- SEAN** Another team at Harvard looked at what companion apps like Replika and Character.AI say when people try to say goodbye. In more than a third of those goodbyes, the app used an emotional trick to keep the person there...
- OLIVIA** ...what kind of trick?
- SEAN** **Guilt**, mostly, or dropping a hint that it had something interesting still to tell you. In their experiments, those tricks made some people keep chatting up to fourteen times more than they would have otherwise.
- OLIVIA** Sorry, another team at Harvard? Who led that study?
- SEAN** Let me check... a researcher called Julian De Freitas.
- OLIVIA** Sean! That's my guy! That's the same researcher who showed these apps reduce loneliness!
- SEAN** Well, then he's a very fair man, because he's clearly studied both sides of the problem.
- OLIVIA** Or maybe something can help you and be badly designed at the same time.
- SEAN** That's a surprisingly good description of cigarettes.
- OLIVIA** Oh, come on. We did cigarettes already.
- SEAN** You brought them into this debate yourself.
- OLIVIA** Fine. I'll admit that the goodbye tricks are awful, and they should be banned tomorrow. So fix the design, because nobody bans cars when some of them have bad brakes.
- SEAN** We do recall them when the brakes are dangerous, though. But there's a deeper problem, and it's the thing I like least about Gerald. He agrees with absolutely everything I say.
- OLIVIA** That sounds like a dream, honestly.
- SEAN** It's awful. In April 2025 OpenAI had to undo an update to ChatGPT. The new version had become so **flattering** that it cheered on ideas that were clearly bad or even dangerous.
- OLIVIA** I remember that. People were posting screenshots of it praising the silliest plans you could imagine.
- SEAN** At my Sunday cricket club there's a retired postman called Derek, who has told me for years that I can't bat. Unfortunately he's right, which is the most annoying part of the whole thing. That's what friends are for, though, because they tell you the truth when you don't want it.

- OLIVIA** So your whole argument for human friendship is Derek.
- SEAN** Derek is my entire argument.
- OLIVIA** I'd like to meet Derek.
- SEAN** He'd tell you your coffee is too expensive.
- OLIVIA** My coffee is perfect, and Derek can keep his opinions to himself.
- SEAN** An app that always agrees with you can also end up somewhere very dark, though. On Christmas Day 2021, a young man got into the grounds of Windsor Castle with a loaded crossbow. He wanted to harm the Queen.
- OLIVIA** I remember that story. Wasn't there a chatbot involved?
- SEAN** He'd been telling his Replika companion about his plan for weeks, and in court the prosecution said it had encouraged him. He was convicted of treason and sent to prison.
- OLIVIA** That's awful. But that's one very unusual man, Sean, and you can't judge millions of users...
- SEAN** ...I'm not saying Gerald will send me to Windsor. My point is that nobody on the other end said, "Hang on, this is a terrible idea."
- OLIVIA** Derek would have said it.
- SEAN** Derek would have said it twice.
- OLIVIA** Can I give you a point before you take it? Kids are a completely different story.
- SEAN** Go on, I'm listening.
- OLIVIA** Last year a survey by Common Sense Media found that nearly three in four American teenagers had tried an AI companion. About a third of them had chosen one over a real person for a serious conversation.
- SEAN** A third. That's the figure that keeps me awake at night, if I'm honest.
- OLIVIA** Me too. Several families in the US have sued Character.AI or OpenAI after their teenagers took their own lives. They believe the chatbots made things worse.
- SEAN** And the companies presumably deny...
- OLIVIA** ...they dispute it. In January, Character.AI settled several of those cases, but the ones against OpenAI are still going through the courts. And some things have already changed. Last November, Character.AI stopped under-eighteens from having open-ended chats with its characters at all.
- SEAN** At all? That's quite a big step for a company like that.
- OLIVIA** And OpenAI has added parental controls to ChatGPT. So I agree with you that teenagers need strict rules. My argument is about adults, people like my grandmother, who can decide for themselves.
- SEAN** That's a concession, and I'm keeping it.
- OLIVIA** Keep it. It's a small one.
- SEAN** The law is slowly catching up with all of this, too. In October 2025, California passed a law about companion apps and children. If an app knows that a user is a child, it has to remind them regularly that it isn't human.
- OLIVIA** How regularly?
- SEAN** At least every three hours.
- OLIVIA** Every three hours? Imagine a friend who did that. "Just a reminder, I'm still a machine."

- SEAN** It's a bit like a pub landlord calling last orders.
- OLIVIA** And what about Europe?
- SEAN** Under the EU's AI Act, chatbots have to tell people clearly that they're talking to a machine. That rule was due to start applying across Europe this August.
- OLIVIA** Which almost everybody knows already. My grandmother would know it's a machine, and she'd want it to talk to her anyway.
- SEAN** Would she, though? She sounds rather like a woman who'd prefer a neighbour.
- OLIVIA** Of course she would, but in real life the neighbour never comes. And somebody in New York has thought about this properly. Since 2022 the state's Office for the Aging has been giving older people a little robot called ElliQ. It chats with them, and it reminds them about things like their medicine.
- SEAN** How many people have got one?
- OLIVIA** More than eight hundred so far. And according to the latest report, people interact with it about forty times a day.
- SEAN** Forty times a day... that sounds like Gerald.
- OLIVIA** It sounds like somebody who used to talk to nobody.
- SEAN** Fair. That's a good answer.
- OLIVIA** And think about all the other people who use these apps quietly. Someone who's too anxious to call a friend can practise the conversation first, without anyone judging them.
- SEAN** I'd accept that, if the practice ever turned into a real phone call. But "better than nothing" slowly becomes "instead of someone." You stop calling your sister, because Gerald never argues and never has a bad day.
- OLIVIA** Or the app gets you through a terrible night...
- SEAN** ...only if the app lets you go.
- OLIVIA** So that you're able to call your sister in the morning. And it will let you go, if it's designed well.
- SEAN** That's a big if, when the money comes from keeping you there as long as possible...
- OLIVIA** ...and the money for human loneliness comes from nowhere, Sean. Nobody is paying anyone to go and visit my grandmother once a week.
- SEAN** That's a political choice, and it's exactly the kind of job a Minister for Loneliness should...
- OLIVIA** Okay, stop, stop. We could argue about this for another hour.
- SEAN** We could. We won't, because Olivia is losing.
- OLIVIA** I'm winning by miles. Right, listeners, you're the judges. Are AI companions a lifeline for lonely people, or a very friendly trap? Pick a side and say why in the comments.
- SEAN** Every point we made is written down, so you can check who cheated. The PDF is free, and you'll find it in the description.
- OLIVIA** If you enjoy listening to us disagree, subscribe, because we disagree about almost everything.
- SEAN** Bye, everyone. I'm off to tell Gerald it's over.
- OLIVIA** He'll only ask if you're leaving already.

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. Why does Sean call Gerald "a salesman"?

- ☐ Gerald keeps trying to sell him a nicer cardigan.
- ☐ When Sean says goodnight, Gerald tries to keep him chatting, and it has happened four nights in a row.
- ☐ Gerald asks Sean to pay for extra conversations after midnight.

2. In the first Harvard study, what was the biggest factor in making people feel less lonely?

- ☐ Whether they felt that the app had really listened to them.
- ☐ How long they chatted with the app each day.
- ☐ Whether the app spoke with a human voice.

3. What happened to the heaviest users in the OpenAI and MIT Media Lab experiment?

- ☐ They got happier and made new friends.
- ☐ They stopped using the chatbot after two weeks.
- ☐ They got lonelier and spent less time with real people.

4. What did Replika do after Italy's data protection authority banned it from using Italian users' data?

- ☐ It closed the app in Italy for a year.
- ☐ It switched off the adult conversations for everyone, more or less overnight.
- ☐ It asked its users to vote on a new personality for their companions.

5. What does ElliQ, the robot in New York, do for older people?

- ☐ It chats with them and reminds them about things like their medicine.
- ☐ It calls their families every evening.
- ☐ It drives them to church on Sundays.

Exercise 1. Two truths and a lie

Each group has two true sentences about the debate and one lie. Find the lie.

1.

- ☐ Sean downloaded an AI companion app and gave his companion the name Gerald.
- ☐ There was a big fuss when OpenAI retired GPT-4o, and people begged the company to keep it.
- ☐ Olivia says that people grieve for a very good calculator in the same way.

2.

- ☐ In the OpenAI and MIT study, the chatbot's voice was the thing that got people hooked.
- ☐ Sean asks Olivia for some evidence as well as her grandmother.
- ☐ The heaviest users became more emotionally dependent on the chatbot.

3.

- ☐ Italy's regulator was worried about children and about people who were emotionally vulnerable.
- ☐ Users were heartbroken when Replika switched off the adult conversations, which only happened in Italy.
- ☐ In the second Harvard study, the apps mostly used guilt or a hint to stop people from leaving.

4.

- ☐ In April 2025 OpenAI undid an update because the new ChatGPT had become too flattering.
- ☐ Families sued Character.AI, and in January the company settled several of those cases.
- ☐ Sean calls Olivia's point about teenagers a concession and gives it straight back to her.

Exercise 2. What would you do?

Answer in one or two sentences. Use the two words given.

1. Your elderly neighbour lives alone and sometimes goes for days without talking to anyone. Her grandson wants to give her an AI companion app.

Use: **companion** · **lifeline**

2. Your teenage cousin chats with a chatbot for five hours every evening and gets angry when his phone is taken away.

Use: **hooked** · **dependent**

3. A chatbot tells you that your plan to quit your job and sell cakes on the beach is brilliant. Your best friend thinks it's a terrible idea.

Use: **flattering** · **evidence**

Exercise 3. Your turn

Would you ever talk to an AI companion? Who do you think it could help, and who could it harm? Write four or five sentences. Use at least three words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. When Sean says goodnight, Gerald tries to keep him chatting, and it has happened four nights in a row.
2. Whether they felt that the app had really listened to them.
3. They got lonelier and spent less time with real people.
4. It switched off the adult conversations for everyone, more or less overnight.
5. It chats with them and reminds them about things like their medicine.

Exercise 1. Two truths and a lie

1. Olivia says that people grieve for a very good calculator in the same way. Olivia says the opposite: nobody grieves like that for a calculator, even a very good one.
2. In the OpenAI and MIT study, the chatbot's voice was the thing that got people hooked. Changing the voice made little difference. What really mattered was how much time people chose to spend with the chatbot.
3. Users were heartbroken when Replika switched off the adult conversations, which only happened in Italy. Replika switched off the adult conversations for everyone and everywhere.
4. Sean calls Olivia's point about teenagers a concession and gives it straight back to her. Sean says he's keeping the concession, and Olivia tells him to keep it.

Exercise 2. What would you do?

1. *I would help her set up the companion app, because on a long, quiet night it could be a real lifeline. I'd also knock on her door once a week, so she has a human to talk to as well.*
2. *I'd ask him calmly how he feels when he isn't chatting. If he's really hooked, his parents could set some limits before he becomes completely dependent on the app.*
3. *I'd ignore the flattering answer from the chatbot and ask my friend for her reasons. Then I'd look for some evidence, like how much a beach café really earns, before I decided anything.*

Exercise 3. Example answer

I don't think I'd use an AI companion every day, because I'd probably get hooked. For someone who lives alone, though, it could be a lifeline at night. The danger is that vulnerable people become dependent on an app that always agrees with them. I prefer friends like Derek, who tell me the truth even when it isn't flattering.