Headspace Health acquires an AI chatbot— will peer-to-peer therapy be next?

Article

The news: Mental health giant **Headspace Health** announced the acquisition of chat-based AI tool company **Sayana** for an undisclosed amount, per a company press release.

Sayana's chat-based AI persona encourages its 300,000 users to track their moods along with associated influences, while also suggesting breathing exercises.

What the acquisition means for Headspace Health: The Sayana deal should fit neatly with Headspace's recent multibillion-dollar merger with **Ginger** to allow the growing company to offer more personalized care than its competitors.

The merger of mindfulness company Headspace with Ginger, an online therapy startup, last October formed an entity that covers about 100 million users across 190 countries.

- We posited the deal would help Headspace's direct-to-consumer (D2C) model expand into the employer market, since Ginger already partners with 500+ employers like **Delta Air Lines** and **Sephora** to offer care.

Now, the Sayana addition will likely take the combined entity's offerings one step further to outpace rivals: For example, mental health company **Calm** includes a mood-tracking feature but has yet to offer sessions with a therapist or psychiatrist.

What's next? Headspace Health's acquisition could be a sign that telemental health companies will try to reel in new customers this year with tools like **chatbots** and **peer-to-peer sessions** to reduce a long-standing barrier associated with accessing traditional therapy: **stigma**.

- About **84% of adults agree stigma is a major barrier to people accessing mental healthcare**, according to the 2021 Mood Disorder Survey conducted by NAMI.

Many consumers say they prefer to talk to a chatbot or other AI program rather than a human therapist, likely due to unfamiliarity or the stigma tied to receiving traditional therapy.
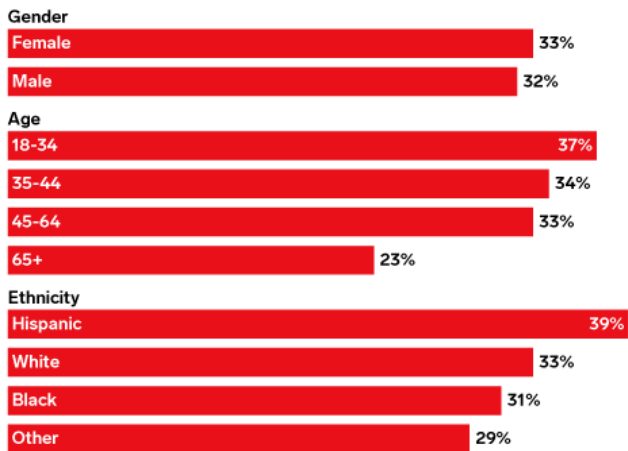
- Only **18% of people say they prefer humans over robots to support their mental health**, as robots provide a judgment-free environment, per an October 2020 Oracle survey of 12,000 US employees.

- Besides Sayana, companies like **Woebot Health** and **Wysa** have also gained traction among consumers over the past year for their chat-based mental health tools.

But chatbots aren't the only mental health services cropping up this year: Newer entrants such as telehealth startup **Pace** are confident they can use their peer-to-peer care model to reduce consumers' stigma around receiving mental health treatment.

- Attending a peer-to-peer support group could entice consumers who are reluctant to try traditional therapy but still want help.

- It wouldn't be far off to imagine a giant like Headspace Health rolling out its own peer-to-peer care model or teaming up with a startup such as Pace to encourage more consumers to access its mental health offerings.

US Adults Who Have Used In-Person or Telehealth Mental Health Services, by Demographic, Oct 2021
% of respondents in each group

Gender

Female	33%
Male	32%

Age

18-34	37%
35-44	34%
45-64	33%
65+	23%

Ethnicity

Hispanic	39%
White	33%
Black	31%
Other	29%

Note: in the past year; includes meeting with a therapist, counselor, or psychiatrist
Source: Morning Consult, "National Tracking Poll #2110001," Oct 5, 2021

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