



## Proceedings for the 2025 Spring Think Tank

### A virtual convening of HERO members

June 4, 2025

#### *AI and Employee Mental Health: Promises and Perils for Employer Sponsored Health and Well-being Initiatives*

No, ChatGPT did not write all of these proceedings. But, yes, quite a bit of what follows are AI generated summaries of our expert presentations and polls. This was, after all, a Think Tank to explore how to get the most out of AI without forfeiting our humanity. But we promise we humans are still very much running the show at this HERO Members Only Think Tank.

As we made preparations for this Think Tank with the outstanding faculty featured in these proceedings, we were reminded often that we were at the front edge of something very big—not just a technological shift, but a values-based opportunity. AI is no longer the stuff of sci-fi. It's already at work in health systems, in employee wellness platforms, in the devices on our wrists, and in the algorithms shaping how care is delivered, accessed, and understood.

And—let's be clear—AI in mental health is still in its early days. Our subtitle for this Think Tank was “Promises and Perils for Employer Sponsored Health and Well-being Initiatives” because in this nascent stage for AI, it's like a toddler learning to walk full of potential, occasionally brilliant, but still prone to bumping into things.

As with any emerging tool, we have a choice: we can wait and see what happens, or we can shape the future. That's why we saved this topic for one of our members' only events. As business and organizational leaders in health and well-being, we engage our members' brain power at this Think Tank. As employers, HERO members aren't just downstream recipients of innovation—they are upstream influencers. HERO member organizations are the type that set expectations, demand accountability, and can help build guardrails that ensure AI is developed and deployed with equity, integrity, and transparency.

AI brings real promise. A recent study published in the New England Journal of Medicine suggests AI-driven chatbots can deliver personalized mental health support at scale—and users rate them positively. But as we all know, a five-star review isn't the same as five-star care. There are deep, valid questions about empathy, connection, and whether machine logic can truly complement—or replace—human intuition.

That's why, as always, this HERO Think Tank was highly interactive. Yes, we had insightful presentations from experts and, of course, plenty of slide decks. But members were also asked to roll up their sleeves in breakout groups to debate and discuss timely questions such as:

- Can AI support or sabotage employee well-being?
- How do we differentiate a health coach from a therapist when the “person” on the other side is an algorithm?
- What's the employer's role in curbing disinformation—or ensuring that AI doesn't amplify biases we've spent decades trying to dismantle?

We also wrestled with bigger philosophical questions. Is AGI—Artificial General Intelligence—a realistic possibility? And if it is, do we need more than just ethical guidelines? Should we be calling for regulation? The chief scientist at OpenAI said, “we're definitely going to build a bunker before we release AGI.” Tech firms are fiercely debating whether AI developers are doing enough to ensure our safety.

Throughout the day, we used polls to get a sense of the room, and we heard perspectives from peers as we looked for ways to collaborate and keep learning together. And yes—the opinions that arose in this Think Tank will inform HERO's ongoing work on employer strategies for AI in well-being. Member insights will help shape the responsible, human-centered integration of AI into mental health.

If AI ever does become sentient, let's hope it remembers how we treated it in its awkward teenage years. We came together when it was just a baby bot. We helped it grow, mature—and not destroy us all. That's something to be proud of.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Moseley, HERO President and CEO and Paul Terry, Ph.D., HERO Senior Fellow

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## **Overview of the HERO Think Tank on Artificial Intelligence in Employee Mental Health**

The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) Think Tank convened leading experts from academia, clinical practice, health tech, and public policy to explore the promises and perils of artificial intelligence (AI) in employee mental health. Across six sessions, the forum surfaced both the tremendous opportunities and critical concerns related to AI's rapid integration into workplace well-being strategies.

A consistent theme across sessions was the dual nature of AI in mental health: while AI holds promise to expand access, reduce costs, and enhance personalization, it also carries risks related to clinical safety, data privacy, misinformation, and bias. Thought leaders stressed the importance of ethical design, human oversight, and rigorous evaluation frameworks to ensure AI serves as a complement, not a replacement, to traditional care.

### **Think Tank Highlights:**

- **Dr. Russell Fulmer** unpacked the psychological impact of AI, warning that algorithms exploit our cognitive shortcuts, which can limit worldview and reinforce bias. His session emphasized the need for critical thinking, digital mindfulness, and intentional self-reflection when engaging with AI tools. Polling data highlighted clinical effectiveness (16 of 36 responses) and human oversight (10) as top concerns, while scalability and access (24) emerged as the most compelling advantage.
- **Dr. Thomas Derrick Hull** outlined a five-point evaluation framework for AI mental health tools, emphasizing the importance of clinically relevant training data, safety checks, regression testing, uncertainty signaling, and regulatory alignment. He underscored that over 40% of users are already turning to generative AI for mental health support, raising urgency for safeguards.
- **A panel with Dr. Kate Wolin, Panel Chair, Dr. Nikole Benders-Hadi, Dr. David Cooper, and Geoff Swindle** stressed the need for clinician involvement in AI development. While panelists acknowledged the scalability and personalization potential of AI, they emphasized that empathy, ethics, and human connection must remain at the center of care. A live poll showed that 15 of 21 respondents expect AI to positively impact employee well-being in the next five years.
- **Dr. Natalie Papini, Dr. Jonathan Bricker, and Dr. Ross Arena** focused on equitable and human-centered design. Bricker shared success with QuitBot, an AI smoking cessation tool, while Arena advocated for hybrid models combining AI personalization with human empathy. Polls showed professionals favored hybrid models (18 of 33 respondents) and expressed concern about misinformation and regulatory gaps.
- **Dr. Paul Terry, Panel Chair, Esther W.B. Bleicher, Tami Simon, and Dr. Seth Serxner** discussed policy implications, emphasizing the need for regulation and industry-led standards. While 13 of 24 respondents favored immediate government regulation, others expressed caution. Panelists highlighted the role employers can play in responsible AI adoption.

Throughout the Think Tank, polling data revealed strong interest in AI's benefits, especially access, affordability, and around-the-clock support, but also underscored persistent concerns about quality, safety, and oversight. Most experts agreed that AI, when implemented thoughtfully and ethically, could enhance mental health delivery without sacrificing trust or human connection.

### **Conclusion:**

The HERO Think Tank provided a balanced and forward-looking lens on AI in employee mental health. The sessions illuminated both the transformative potential and the ethical imperatives of

AI, calling for cross-sector collaboration to ensure that innovation aligns with clinical integrity, equity, and human values.

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## **How Algorithms Can Control You**

**Presenter:** *Dr. Russell Fulmer*

### **POLL #1: AI Top Concern**

**Poll Question:** When evaluating AI powered mental health service, what is your top concern?

A total of **36 participants** responded. Their answers are summarized below:

**Clinical effectiveness:** 16 responses

This was the most frequently cited concern, highlighting a strong interest in ensuring that AI tools in mental health provide meaningful, evidence-based outcomes.

**Human oversight:** 10 responses

Many respondents emphasized the importance of keeping humans in the loop, ensuring that AI does not operate in isolation from professional judgment.

**Data privacy/security:** 9 responses

A significant number of participants were primarily worried about how sensitive mental health data would be protected.

**Equity and access:** 2 responses

A few respondents identified fairness and accessibility—ensuring AI tools work equitably for all populations—as their chief concern.

### **Conclusion:**

Most respondents were concerned about the practical effectiveness of AI in mental health, closely followed by the need for human oversight and robust data protections. Fewer respondents named equity and access as their top issue, though it's a vital area of ethical consideration.

### **POLL #2: Advantages of AI**

**Poll Question:** What do you believe is the most compelling advantage of AI in mental health care?

A total of **36 participants** responded. Their answers are summarized below:

**Scalability and access:** 24 responses

This was the most frequently cited benefit, with two-thirds of respondents recognizing AI's potential to expand mental health services to more people, including underserved populations.

**24/7 availability:** 7 responses

Several participants valued AI's ability to provide around-the-clock support, enabling immediate access to care at any time of day.

**Cost-effectiveness:** 5 responses

A smaller group pointed to AI's potential to reduce the cost of mental health services, making care more affordable and sustainable.

**Poll Conclusion:**

The clear frontrunner among participants was the belief that AI can dramatically increase access and scalability in mental health care. While 24/7 availability and cost savings were also appreciated, they were secondary to the overarching goal of reaching more individuals with timely support.

**Session Summary:**

Dr. Russell Fulmer's session examined the subtle psychological influence of artificial intelligence, particularly how AI-powered systems can shape human beliefs, behaviors, and well-being in the workplace. Drawing on cognitive science, he described how algorithms exploit our natural tendency toward mental efficiency, what he termed "cognitive miserliness," to reinforce biases and restrict worldviews. This, he warned, may create echo chambers and lead to overreliance on automation, known as automation bias.

Dr. Fulmer emphasized that while AI offers efficiency, it can also diminish critical thinking and self-awareness if users are not careful. He highlighted real-world examples, including hallucinated content from AI models and the growing public reliance on machine-generated outputs, which can lead to unintended behavioral consequences. Despite these risks, Fulmer remains an AI optimist, calling for a balanced approach that emphasizes ethical use and digital mindfulness.

Practical strategies offered to counteract AI's cognitive impact included practicing introspection, engaging with diverse viewpoints, maintaining self-awareness, and applying "critical ignoring" to filter out low value or misleading content. These tools are crucial, he argued, for sustaining human agency in an AI-driven environment.

Poll data from attendees aligned with this cautious-yet-hopeful tone. When asked to identify the top concern in evaluating AI for mental health, most selected clinical effectiveness (16), followed by human oversight (10) and data privacy (9). On AI's advantages, respondents highlighted scalability and access (24) as the greatest benefit, with 24/7 availability (7) and cost-effectiveness (5) as secondary factors. The results reflected both optimism about AI's reach and realism about the safeguards needed.

**Key Takeaways:**

- AI exploits human tendencies toward mental shortcuts, influencing belief systems.
- Ethical use of AI requires self-awareness, diverse input, and critical engagement.
- Stakeholders prioritize both effectiveness and responsible oversight in AI tools.

**Speaker Bio:**

*Dr. Russell Fulmer is Professor and Director of the Graduate Counseling Program at Husson University. He is a leading voice on AI and mental health, with peer-reviewed publications and experience running one of the first clinical trials using chatbot therapy.*

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**Validating New Modalities of Care**

**Presenter:** *Dr. Thomas Derrick Hull*

**Session Summary:**

In this timely and thought-provoking session, Dr. Thomas Derrick Hull explored the promises and risks of generative AI in supporting employee mental health. As AI tools become increasingly accessible and widely used, Dr. Hull emphasized the need for structured evaluation frameworks to guide safe and ethical deployment in workplace settings.

Citing recent *Harvard Business Review* research, Dr. Hull noted that “therapy and companionship” have become the top use cases for generative AI, surpassing education and productivity tools. Surveys show that over 40% of users already turn to AI for mental health support, and many view it as a legitimate form of engagement. Yet, without regulation and clinical validation, these tools may reinforce harmful behaviors or provide inaccurate advice at scale.

To address these concerns, Dr. Hull outlined five essential criteria for evaluating mental health AI tools:

1. The relevance of their training data.
2. The presence of safety checks to prevent harmful outputs.
3. Regression testing to detect performance drift.
4. The model’s ability to express uncertainty.
5. Its compliance with clinical and regulatory boundaries.

He offered concrete examples, including how reinforcement learning can lead models to prioritize pleasing users over offering accurate guidance—a potentially dangerous trade-off in mental health contexts. Dr. Hull concluded by encouraging employers, developers, and policymakers to prioritize responsible implementation—ensuring AI augments, rather than replaces, clinical care.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Generative AI is already used extensively for mental health, often without safeguards.
- Evaluation should focus on clinical relevance, safety, and regulatory alignment.
- Continuous oversight—not blind trust—is key to responsible AI adoption.

### **Speaker Bio:**

*Dr. Thomas Derrick Hull is Chief Clinical Officer at Hero Journey Club and Clinical R&D Lead at Slingshot AI. A Columbia trained clinical psychologist, his work bridges research, ethics, and digital mental health innovation.*

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## **Public/Private Partnering in AI R&D: Opportunities for Employers**

**Panel Moderator:** *Dr. Kate Wolin*

### **POLL #3: AI Effect on Well-Being**

**Poll Question:** How do you anticipate AI will affect employee well-being over the next 5 years?

A total of **21 participants** responded. Their answers are summarized below:

**Slightly enhance it:** 8 responses

The most common response, suggesting moderate optimism. Respondents expect AI to bring incremental improvements, such as automating routine tasks or improving workflows.

**Significantly enhance it:** 7 responses

A strong vote of confidence in AI's potential to positively transform engagement through personalization, smarter systems, or workload relief.

**Neutral impact:** 3 responses

These participants don't anticipate major changes, possibly reflecting uncertainty or a belief that AI's effects will be minimal in human-centered areas.

**Slightly worsen it: 2 responses**

A few foresee mild downsides, like disruptions to communication, increased monitoring, or job anxiety.

**Significantly worsen it: 1 response**

One respondent expects major harm, potentially due to concerns about job loss, dehumanization, or reduced autonomy.

**Conclusion:** The majority of participants (15 out of 21) believe AI will enhance employee engagement to some degree, while only 3 foresee a negative impact. This suggests a generally optimistic outlook on AI's influence in the workplace.

**Session Summary:**

This forward-looking session explored the dual impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on employee mental health, balancing its potential to expand access and personalization with the need for careful oversight, clinician involvement, and ethical standards.

Dr. Nikole Benders-Hadi emphasized how digital mental health tools powered by AI can help close access gaps. Still, she warned against overreliance on automation, underscoring that empathy, safety, and clinical quality must remain central to care delivery.

Dr. David Cooper stressed that clinicians should be deeply involved in shaping digital tools. He highlighted the importance of designing AI solutions that support, not hinder, therapeutic relationships, provider workflows, and user safety.

Geoff Swindle added a business and innovation lens, noting that while AI can personalize care at scale, commercial solutions must remain aligned with clinical outcomes. He cautioned against letting efficiency outweigh user trust and well-being.

A live poll asked participants how AI would affect employee well-being over the next five years. Among 21 respondents, the majority were optimistic: 8 expected AI to *slightly enhance* and 7 to *significantly enhance* well-being. Only three predicted a negative impact, suggesting a generally hopeful outlook if AI is deployed thoughtfully.

**Key Takeaways:**

- AI has the potential to enhance mental health access and personalization but must be guided by human-centered values.
- Clinician involvement is essential to building safe, effective, and ethical AI tools.
- Most participants anticipate AI will positively impact employee well-being, though concerns about misuse remain.



**Speaker Bios:**

*Dr. Kate Wolin, Founder of Circea, Advisor, PACE Healthcare Capital, Faculty, Northwestern University, Kellogg School of Management.*

*Dr. Nikole Benders-Hadi is CMO at Talkspace, leading efforts in digital behavioral health innovation and clinical quality.*

*Dr. David Cooper is a digital health psychologist and Executive Director of Therapists in Technology.*

*Geoff Swindle is CEO of Headlight and former executive at Amazon Pharmacy and PillPack, focused on scaling healthtech solutions.*

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**Panel: Research and Development in Culture, Behavior Change and Burnout using AI**

**Panelists:** Drs. Natalie Papini, Jonathan Bricker, Ross Arena

**POLL #4: AI Misinformation**

**Poll Question:** How confident are you that your organization can counter AI-generated misinformation?

A total of **20 participants** responded. Their answers are summarized below:

**Not confident:** 10 responses

The most common response, reflecting widespread concern. Many respondents feel their organizations lack the tools, awareness, or capabilities to effectively respond to AI-generated misinformation.

**Somewhat confident:** 5 responses

A moderate level of assurance, suggesting that while some efforts may be in place, they are likely incomplete or still developing.

**We have no current strategy:** 5 responses

A significant portion of participants indicated their organizations haven't yet established any approach to this issue, underscoring an urgent need for strategic planning and preparedness.

**Conclusion:**

These results highlight a critical gap in readiness, with three-quarters of respondents either expressing doubt or indicating no strategy exists for tackling AI misinformation.

**POLL #5: Mental Health Support Factors**

**Poll Question:** Which factor do you believe is more critical to effective mental health support in the workplace?

A total of **33 participants** responded. Their answers are summarized below.

**A hybrid approach:** 18 responses

The most common choice, indicating strong support for integrating both human empathy and AI-driven personalization. Respondents appear to value a balanced model that combines the strengths of both methods.

**Empathy and emotional attunement (human):** 8 responses

A significant portion emphasized the irreplaceable value of human understanding, emotional sensitivity, and interpersonal connection in mental health care.

**Personalization and consistency (AI):** 6 responses

Several participants recognized the potential of AI to provide tailored support at scale, highlighting its role in ensuring consistency and timely interventions.

**Not sure:** 1 response

One respondent expressed uncertainty, possibly reflecting the evolving nature of mental health strategies and emerging technologies.

**Conclusion:**

Overall, the majority lean toward a blended strategy, suggesting that while AI can enhance support, human qualities remain essential for truly effective mental health care.

**Session Summary:**

This dynamic session explored the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI) in workplace mental health. While AI presents opportunities to scale and personalize support, panelists emphasized the need for careful, ethical implementation to avoid unintended harm.

Dr. Natalie Papini opened with a call for equity-centered design in mental health tools, stressing that AI must enhance, not replace, human connection, particularly in underserved populations. She emphasized the importance of culturally responsive care and thoughtful integration.

Dr. Jonathan Bricker discussed the promise of AI in digital health interventions, highlighting his work on QuitBot, a WHO endorsed AI chatbot for smoking cessation. He noted that AI can offer consistent and scalable support, but only if paired with strong scientific validation.

Dr. Ross Arena addressed the risk of overreliance on technology, advocating for hybrid models that integrate AI within human-led frameworks. He underscored that trust, connection, and empathy remain essential components of mental health care.

## Key Takeaways:

- AI must be implemented ethically and equitably to avoid amplifying disparities.
- Hybrid models integrating AI and human support are preferred by professionals.
- Most organizations lack confidence or strategy to counter AI-generated misinformation.

## Speaker Bios:

*Dr. Natalie Papini is a faculty member at Northern Arizona University focused on maternal mental health and equity.*

*Dr. Jonathan Bricker is a clinical psychologist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center and creator of QuitBot.*

*Dr. Ross Arena is a professor at the University of Illinois Chicago and founder of HL-PIVOT, advancing healthspan through community-based wellness.*

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## The Role of Health Professional Associations and Partnerships in AI Development and Quality Assurance

**Presenters:** *Paul Terry, Seth Serxner, Tami Simon, Esther Bleicher*

### **POLL #6: AI & Loneliness Epidemic**

**Poll Question:** Do you believe AI will ultimately reduce or exacerbate the loneliness epidemic?

A total of **26 participants** responded. Their answers are summarized below:

**Too soon to tell:** 11 responses

The most common answer, reflecting widespread uncertainty. Many respondents feel it is still early to determine whether AI will positively or negatively impact human connection and social well-being.

**Exacerbate, it will replace meaningful connection:** 8 responses

A significant number of participants expressed concern that AI may worsen loneliness by displacing genuine human interactions with artificial substitutes.

**Reduce, it will help people feel more connected:** 7 responses

Several respondents were optimistic about AI's potential to enhance connection, suggesting it could provide support, companionship, or facilitate better communication.

**Conclusion:**

In summary, the group is divided, with the largest portion expressing uncertainty. However, there's a notable split between those who fear AI could deepen isolation and those who believe it may offer new tools to combat loneliness.

### **POLL #7: Government Regulation of AI**

**Poll Question:** Should employers advocate for government regulation of AI?

A total of **24 participants** responded. Their answers are summarized below:

**Yes, strong regulation is needed now:** 13 responses

The most common response, showing strong support for immediate regulatory action. Many respondents believe that without clear guidelines, AI development could outpace ethical and societal safeguards.

**Maybe, depends on how fast AI evolves:** 6 responses

Some participants expressed conditional support, suggesting that the need for regulation depends on the pace of AI advancement and its observed impact on the workplace and society.

**Unsure/need more information:** 5 responses

Several respondents remained uncertain, indicating a need for more education, discussion, or clarity on what regulation might entail and how it would be implemented.

### **Conclusion:**

In summary, most participants support proactive government regulation of AI, though a significant portion are either cautious or undecided, highlighting the importance of ongoing dialogue and informed decision-making.

### **Session Summary:**

The closing session of the HERO Think Tank explored how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping employee mental health support. While AI promises improved access and personalization, panelists emphasized the need for safeguards around privacy, bias, and misinformation.

Esther W.B. Bleicher outlined the dual nature of AI, highlighting its potential as both a supportive tool and a source of harm if misused. She introduced frameworks from the Coalition for Health AI (CHAI) and the Future AI group and presented a practical checklist employers can use to evaluate mental health AI tools for fairness, transparency, and effectiveness.

Two live polls highlighted participant sentiment:

- **On AI and loneliness:** Of 26 respondents, the largest group (11) said it's *too soon to tell*. Eight feared AI could *exacerbate* loneliness, while seven believed it might *reduce* it.

- **On AI regulation:** Of 24 respondents, 13 supported *immediate government regulation*, while others were cautious or undecided.

Tami Simon stressed the importance of public policy that enables innovation while targeting bad actors and avoiding redundant regulation. Dr. Seth Serxner emphasized the role of professional associations like HERO in setting voluntary standards and helping employers make informed AI decisions. Panelists agreed that employers have a critical role in shaping how AI is used responsibly in mental health—balancing innovation with human oversight.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Employers must vet AI tools for bias, privacy, and clinical rigor.
- Industry groups can fill regulatory gaps with clear, practical standards.
- Participants support AI regulation but remain divided on its social impact.

### **Speaker Bios:**

*Dr. Paul Terry, Panel Chair, is a Senior Fellow at HERO and is Editor in Chief of the American Journal of Health Promotion*

*Esther W.B. Bleicher is General Counsel in AI health tech and a former FDA official.*

*Dr. Seth Serxner is a population health strategist and former Chief Health Officer at Optum.*

*Tami Simon is a national employee benefits expert and public policy leader based in Washington, D.C.*