

# AI therapy isn't getting better. Therapists are just failing

BY JONATHAN ALPERT  
*Los Angeles Times*

A growing number of people are turning to AI for therapy not because it's now smarter than humans, but because too many human therapists stopped doing their jobs. Instead of challenging illusions, telling hard truths and helping build resilience, modern therapy drifted into nods, empty reassurances and endless validation. Into the void stepped chatbots, automating bad therapy practices, sometimes with deadly consequences.

Recent headlines told the wrenching story of Sophie Rottenberg, a young woman who confided her suicidal plans to

ChatGPT before taking her own life in February. An AI bot offered her only comfort; no intervention, no warning, no protection. Sophie's death was not only a tragedy. It was a signal: AI has perfected the worst habits of modern therapy while stripping away the guardrails that once made it safe.

I warned more than a decade ago, in a 2012 New York Times op-ed, that therapy was drifting too far from its core purpose. That warning proved prescient and that drift has hardened into orthodoxy. Therapy traded the goal of helping people grow stronger for the false comfort of validation and hand-holding.

For much of the last century, the goal of therapy was resilience. But in the

past decade, campus culture has shifted toward emotional protection. Universities now embrace the language of safe spaces, trigger warnings and microaggressions. Therapist training, shaped by that environment, carries the same ethos into the clinic. Instead of being taught how to challenge patients and build their strength, new therapists are encouraged to affirm feelings and shield patients from discomfort. The intention is compassion. The effect is paralysis.

When therapy stops challenging people, it becomes paid listening. The damage is real. I've seen it in more than two decades as a practicing psychotherapist in New York City and Washing-

ton, D.C. One patient told me her previous therapist urged her to quit a promising job because the patient felt "triggered" by her boss. The real issue - difficulty taking direction - was fixable.

A mindset trained to "validate first and always" leaves no room for problem-solving or accountability. Patients quickly sense the emptiness - the hollow feeling of canned empathy, nods without challenge and responses that go nowhere. They want guidance, direction and the courage of a therapist willing to say what's hard to hear. When therapy offers only comfort without clarity, it becomes ineffective, and people increasingly turn to algo-

rithms instead.

With AI, the danger multiplies. A bad therapist can waste years. A chatbot can waste thousands of lives every day, without pause, without ethics, without accountability.

All this is colliding with a loneliness epidemic, record levels of anxiety and depression and a mental-health tech industry potentially worth billions. Estimates by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration suggest that roughly 1 in 3 Americans is comfortable turning to AI bots rather than flesh-and-blood therapists for emotional or mental health support.

The appeal of AI is not wisdom but decisiveness. A bot never hesitates, never says "let's sit with that feeling." It simply answers. That is why AI feels like an upgrade. Its answers may be reckless, but the format is quick, confident and direct - and it is addictive.

The way forward is not to imitate machines, but

to reclaim what made therapy effective in the first place. In my own practice, I ask hard questions. I press patients to see their role in conflict, to face the discomfort they want to avoid and to build the resilience that growth requires. That approach is not harsh. It is compassion with a purpose: helping people change rather than stay stuck.

Modern therapy can meet today's crisis if training programs return to teaching those skills. Instead of turning out young therapists fluent in the language of grievance, programs should focus on developing clinicians who know how to challenge, guide and strengthen patients. Patients deserve honesty, accountability and the tools to move forward. Therapy can remain a business of listening, or it can be a catalyst to change.

*Jonathan Alpert is the author of the forthcoming "Therapy Nation."*

# A fight among Illinois bishops is hurting the church and nation

BY STAN CHU ILO  
*Chicago Tribune*

The public clash between Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich and Springfield Bishop Thomas Paprocki over whether U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin should receive a lifetime achievement award from the Archdiocese of Chicago's Keep Hope Alive program has spilled into the public square with damaging effect.

What might have been an internal disagreement has instead exposed the deepening divisions among American Catholic bishops on questions of doctrine, faith and morals. The spectacle suggests a widening and perhaps unbridgeable gap between conservative-leaning bishops and their more progressive colleagues.

The Catholic Church in the United States has too often mirrored the polarization of the wider nation. It is all too common to see bishops and Catholic institutions align themselves with particular politicians, ideologies or

policy agendas. Yet while the church must take positions on matters that affect the common good, it cannot allow itself to become entangled in the culture wars to the point in which its prophetic and moral voice is drowned out by partisan noise.

Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, ultimately declined the award, sparing the archdiocese and the Catholic Church in the U.S. further escalation. Yet the damage was done. Two bishops at odds in public, with ideological tribes rallying behind them, has weakened the church's credibility as moral conscience of the nation. Cupich defended the award as recognition of Durbin's long advocacy for immigrants. Paprocki countered with the U.S. bishops' 2004 statement: Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of fundamental moral principles. For him, Durbin's record on abortion rights made the award impossible.

Into this controversy stepped Pope Leo XIV, the first American pope and a son of Illinois. His words

carried a particular resonance: "Someone who says, 'I'm against abortion, but I'm in favor of the death penalty,' is not really pro-life. Someone who says, 'I'm against abortion, but I'm in agreement with the inhuman treatment of immigrants,' I don't know if that's pro-life."

By linking abortion with other violations of human dignity, the pope recalled the late Chicago Archbishop Joseph Bernardin's vision of a "consistent ethic of life" or "seamless garment."

Bernardin had insisted that life issues are interwoven: abortion, capital punishment, war, poverty, racism, the plight of migrants, and the care of the sick and dying. His point was not that all issues are equal but that they are morally linked. To champion the unborn while ignoring the poor is incoherent; to defend the marginalized while dismissing the unborn is equally incoherent.

Cupich echoed this appeal, lamenting the deepening divisions in the Catholic community and



AUDREY RICHARDSON Chicago Tribune/TNS File

Cardinal Blase Cupich walks onto Rate Field at the beginning of a Catholic Mass celebrating the election of Pope Leo XIV with a gathering in Chicago on June 14. Cupich laments the deepening divisions in the Catholic community.

urging his brother bishops to help Catholics embrace the church's teaching "as a consistent whole." At stake is nothing less than the integrity of Catholic witness.

The temptation on both sides is Catholic reductionism - the narrowing of the church's identity into a single-issue religion. Conservatives often reduce Catholic witness to abortion and traditional marriage while neglecting poverty, the plight of migrants, racism, advocacy for nonviolence, the death penalty or gun violence. Progressives sometimes reduce Catholicism to

social change on gender and sexuality while deemphasizing the church's teaching on the unborn and some of the ancient liturgical traditions and liturgies of the church.

This quarrel over Durbin's award is not just about one senator. It is a symptom of deeper fractures. But it can also be a moment of decision. American Catholic leaders can continue down the path of ideological tribes and partisan entanglement. Or they can pause and recover the deeper Catholic tradition of unity, coherence and credibility. American Catholic lead-

ers must embrace the wholeness of their own tradition - the consistent ethic of life, the total vision of the church, the unity of the body of Christ. Only then can American Catholicism reclaim its voice as conscience to the nation and sign of hope to the world.

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# Gov. Beshear is using bureaucratic excuses to delay justice in Ralph Baze case

BY SEN. BRANDON SMITH



How long must families wait for justice? It's been more than 30 years since Powell County Sheriff Steve Bennett and Deputy Arthur Briscoe were murdered in the line of duty. Every appeal is over. A jury sentenced Ralph Baze to death in 1994, yet that sentence remains unfulfilled.

I called on Gov. Andy Beshear to do his duty and sign the death warrant.

Instead, he pointed to a regulation. Kentuckians, especially the Bennett and Briscoe families, deserve better than excuses. They deserve action.

The facts are simple: Kentucky is ready. Attorney General Russell Coleman agrees. The Department of Corrections has updated its protocols. The Trump administration has taken steps to ensure the necessary drugs are available. No barriers remain, except the one the Governor has chosen to invoke as an excuse for refusing to carry out the justice the jury and families were promised.

The Governor's excuse for ignoring these families' cries for justice is uncon-

vincing.

The regulation he cited outlines procedures for evaluating whether a death row inmate may have an intellectual disability before an execution proceeds. Even if an independent evaluation may be required before an execution, it's essential to consider that Baze never argued that he had an intellectual disability during his trial or since. It's also worth noting that Baze was deemed competent to stand trial. A jury of his peers reviewed the evidence and sentenced him to death.

None of this prevents the Governor from taking the action only he can take: signing the death warrant.

The regulation requires a medical exam 14 days before execution, not before the Governor's order. The process he cites begins after he acts.

Red tape aside, nothing stops the Governor from saying whether he supports this death warrant. These families want to know where he stands. I stand with the attorney general in support of the Bennett and Briscoe families and only wish the Governor would do the same. His claim that a regulation blocks him rings hollow.

Furthermore, anyone familiar with state government is aware of the lengthy process involved in creating regulations. A public hearing was held on

September 23, with comments due by September 30. The agency then has 15 days to respond, with an additional 30 days if the comments are extensive. Only then can it be sent to the review subcommittee—possibly not until December.

The Governor knows how slow this process is. By pointing to a regulation still in flux, he's telling these families to keep waiting for justice promised decades ago. That's not leadership. It's avoidance, and it's deeply unfair.

Why the delay? The Governor has said he supports the death penalty in the most heinous cases, and this is one. One officer was executed while crawling away. Hiding behind process instead of honoring the jury raises a question: are politics and national opinion outweighing justice and public opinion in Kentucky? We shouldn't

have to wonder.

Even with all the trauma these families have endured, this is bigger than one case. It's about whether Kentucky will stand with victims and law enforcement, or allow politics to silence a jury. Justice delayed is justice denied, and each day adds to their pain.

The families of Sheriff Bennett and Deputy Briscoe have waited long enough. The Governor alone can act. No more excuses. It's time to carry out the jury's decision and show Kentucky stands with victims.

*Sen. Brandon Smith represents Kentucky's 30th Senate District, including Powell County. He recently penned a letter to Governor Andy Beshear, encouraging the governor to sign the death warrant for Ralph Baze in light of determinations from Kentucky Attorney General Russell Coleman.*

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