# 2026 Mental Health Care Forecast



2025 brought some seismic changes to many areas of work and life, and mental health is no different. The growing presence of AI workflows (and everpresent AI conversations) along with changes to the regulatory environment under a new government have kept organizations on their toes. But human needs don't change much, and the mental health community has stayed focused on delivering human-centered care while looking for more creative and innovative ways to get the right support to the people who need it most. As we head into 2026, here are some of the trends we're expecting to see in the mental health space.

# Urgency to address AI risks and build safe alternatives

We'll become more acutely aware of the dangerous, sometimes catastrophic phenomenon of people relying on general purpose LLMs for companionship and mental health support. The technology and people's use of it has raced ahead with limited oversight this year, and in 2026 stakeholders will be racing to build the right guardrails. Recent studies find that **nearly half of US adults** have turned to LLMs for psychological support, almost **3 in 4 teens** have turned to AI for companionship, and **13% of youth 12 to 21 years old** had used an LLM chatbot for mental health advice. With youth suicides the most tragic result, alarm bells are signaling an urgent need to create safer AI environments and prevent people from relying on unregulated general purpose LLMs for mental health needs.

"We know people are turning to LLMs and using them inappropriately as a stand-in for therapy," said Talkspace CEO Jon Cohen, MD, outlining the risks at a recent investor event. "But general LLMs fail to challenge delusions or reinforce reality, there's a lack of real-time identification, there's a lack of clinical oversight, and these are not HIPAA-compliant environments. They can encourage what we call social deskilling, eroding the ability to engage with people in the real world."
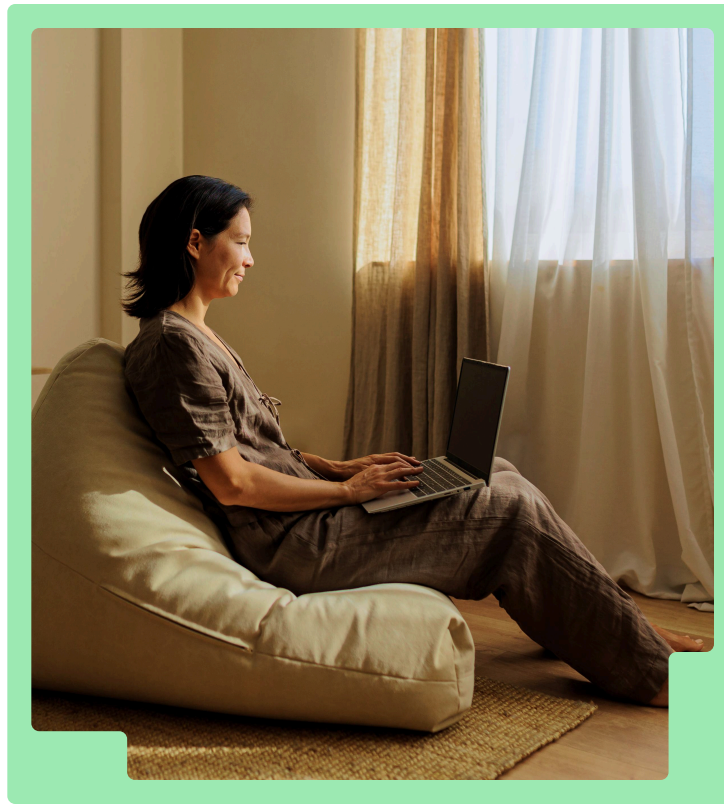
> "A true mental health LLM must have the capacity to establish an alliance and maintain continual engagement across a treatment arc to achieve positive outcomes,"
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> **Talkspace CEO Jon Cohen, MD**

This year we'll see the development of more safe, HIPAA-compliant AI tools to support mental health, at the same time as general purpose LLMs attempt to build in more safeguards and partner with trusted mental health providers to offer an offramp to private, evidence-based support. The Talkspace team is addressing this need by training and refining a mental health LLM using our rich dataset of deidentified therapy conversations, always collaborating closely with human clinicians on design and evaluation. Both the challenge and the opportunity are significant: "A true mental health LLM must have the capacity to establish an alliance and maintain continual engagement across a treatment arc to achieve positive outcomes," says Dr. Cohen.

# Human therapists make AI a superpower

One area where AI is already adding measurable value to mental health care is in assisting providers. In the face of a provider shortage, AI tools that reduce administrative burden for therapists while actually increasing quality of care will see increasing use in the year ahead. An analysis of the **Talkspace AI-powered Smart Notes** notetaking tool found that providers using it completed more therapy sessions per week without increasing time worked, and an audit by licensed clinicians concluded that Smart Notes are equal to or better than traditional clinical notes. Even more importantly, AI tools for therapists show promise for improving engagement and outcomes. When Talkspace providers use **AI-generated Smart Insights** to prepare for sessions, clients are 30%+ more likely to book and complete follow-up sessions within 30 days.

# Investment in social health solutions

The loneliness epidemic—and its negative impacts on physical health, mental health, and longevity—has been a growing concern, and this year we'll see more energy and intention put into solutions. With an estimated cost of **$400 billion in healthcare and productivity losses**, loneliness must be approached as a public health challenge, with solutions that recognize social health support isn't as simple as telling people to get out more. Rather, strengthening social health requires a structured approach to connecting people with others with similar experiences, in environments where they can receive emotional support, form reliable alliances, and foster a sense of belonging.



"Empathy, companionship, and social support, especially from those with lived experience, are essential to our wellbeing and to driving positive behavior change and better health outcomes in the people we are all dedicated to help and support," said Ron Goldman, President of Wisdo Health, now leading the build-out of Talkspace Community. **The Talkspace acquisition of Wisdo Health** is driven by the demonstrated value of building authentic community connections between people with shared experiences—of grief, anxiety, caregiving, cancer treatment, or even GLP-1 weight loss, for example—to provide a therapeutic option that immediately benefits participants, relieves some pressure on providers of one-on-one care, and can provide an on-ramp to therapy when needed.



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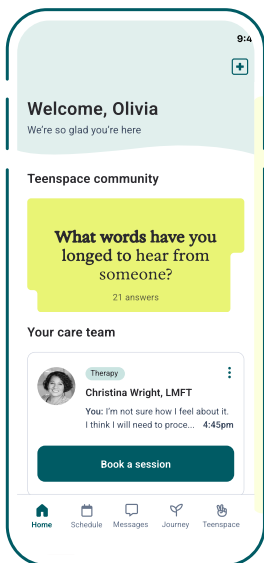**Ron Goldman, President of Wisdo Health**

# Mental health care that's contextual and interventional
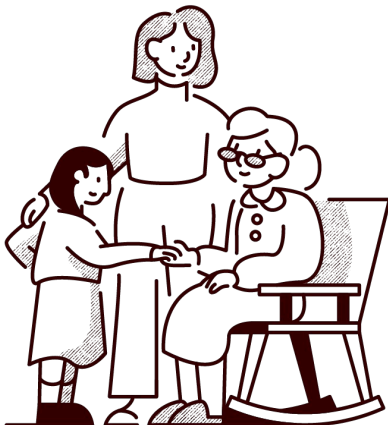


Related to a growing emphasis on peer support is the recognition that mental health needs vary significantly with different life stages and situations, and care can't be one-size-fits-all. In 2025 Talkspace launched **Chapters**, a program that connects women to informed care for the mental health challenges that can arise during specific life stages, such as pregnancy and infertility, perimenopause and menopause, and more. Chapters builds on our foundation of providing specialized therapy for teens and for older adults, and is designed to offer early intervention for women during times of life that, whether due to hormonal shifts or lifestyle changes, can make them vulnerable to mental health challenges.

# The search intensifies for safe online support for youth

We know that today's youth have grown up online and crave on-demand connection through their devices, but we also know they can end up in all the wrong places online. The negative impacts of social media on teen mental health is well-documented, there's increasing focus on how streaming platforms can lead to isolation or extremism, and AI chatbots pose a new danger. People who care about youth will be closely watching the effects of more high schools banning phones, and Australia outlawing social media entirely for kids younger than 16. Whatever the results, teens will keep seeking online connection, and creating healthy ways for them to find it remains essential. Talkspace has continued to grow Teenspace Community, our anonymous but closely moderated social health platform for teens, and in 2025 more school districts and municipalities have begun offering their youth online access to a Talkspace therapist through 24/7 messaging (and often live video sessions as well). In addition to New York City and Baltimore County, Seattle and North Carolina (and more to be announced) now provide their youth with free access to this important avenue to support.



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### Welcome, Olivia
We're so glad you're here

**Teenspace community**

**What words have you longed to hear from someone?**
21 answers

**Your care team**

Therapy
Christina Wright, LMFT
You: I'm not sure how I feel about it. I think I will need to proce...  4:45pm

**Book a session**

Home   Schedule   Messages   Journey   Teenspace

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**NYC** Health    MEMPHIS SHELBY COUNTY TENNESSEE    **Seattle** Department of Education & Early Learning    TEAM BCPS    **NCDHHS** Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services

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# The workplace mood requires the right support



With the **"no hire, no fire"** employment environment expected to persist into 2026, employees may feel trapped by lack of mobility while also experiencing high anxiety about holding onto their jobs. Employers will be looking for innovative ways to prevent burnout and demonstrate that they have their people's backs during uncertain economic times. Mental health benefits that allow workers to receive expert support virtually, on-demand and no questions asked, will be crucial, and comprehensive work-life offerings prevent absenteeism and the more subtle "presenteeism" too. To make it low-lift and cost-effective to create a tailored benefit plan that makes employees feel fully supported, Talkspace has partnered with Corporate Counseling Associates (CCA) with benefits offerings that provide access to the highest quality mental health care along with the work-life support that's right for specific employee populations.

# Minding the gap between health haves and have-nots

While a segment of the population that skews younger, wealthier, and more tech-savvy has unprecedented access to personal health data and personalized care through wearables, D2C lab tests, and ever more specialized concierge medicine and telehealth options, many others still face financial, geographic, tech, and stigma barriers to needed treatment. Geographic gaps will remain a priority of the federal government, which is seeking to **transform rural health** in regions where limited broadband internet, transportation challenges, hospital closures, and clinician shortages lead to less preventive care and worse health outcomes. Overall, high wealth inequality and looming Medicaid cuts will continue to bring disparities into stark focus.



When it comes to mental health, primary care screening remains a vital way to close access gaps, but overworked PCPs often don't have good referral options or feel empowered to effectively care for behavioral health. One underutilized solution is the Collaborative Care Model (CoCM). With a care coordinator connecting patient, PCP, therapist, and psychiatry provider, this model empowers PCPs to refer to care with the confidence that the patient will receive consistent follow-up and the primary care office will receive progress notes. CoCM is proven to be a highly effective way to treat anxiety and depression, especially in patients who might not access or stay engaged in care without their PCP's encouragement, and the model is evidence-based and reimbursable. When PCPs have trusted behavioral health partners, they're able to effectively intervene in mental health challenges and offer a great patient experience that delivers results.

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# On to **2026**

The many changes 2025 brought could sometimes feel chaotic, or even scary. But we think Talkspace therapists would suggest we reframe chaotic as "intriguing" or "exciting" and approach change with curiosity rather than anxiety. Wishing you a year ahead fueled by curiosity and excitement around our shared mission to improve lives through access to great mental health support. Reach out any time to talk with the Talkspace team about how these trends apply to your population and goals as you plan your 2026 mental health strategy.