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Offering Empathetic Coping Mechanisms in Response to Queries on Emotional Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Users may issue queries to a virtual assistant, search engine, or other technological interface to seek help when experiencing acute emotional distress. Current approaches of surfacing relevant information are unsuitable due to lack of trustworthy local resources that provide support, lack of supportive information content in the user's language, etc. This disclosure describes techniques to present users with professionally vetted information on coping mechanism(s) and/or empathetic response(s) that support their emotional needs. When users issue queries related to emotional well-being, appropriate answers chosen from a pool of supportive responses collected from mental-health professionals can be presented with permission. The presentation of responses can proceed in a conversational manner that systematically generates follow-on responses based on user choices for the options described in the previous responses.

KEYWORDS

- Emotional well-being
- Mental health
- Search engine
- Virtual assistant
- Coping mechanism
- Empathetic response
- Emotional support professional

BACKGROUND

People are increasingly attentive to their mental health and place greater importance on seeking support for their emotional well-being. There has been a global rise in those who report suffering from mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm, etc. These matters are exacerbated by adverse external circumstances, such as economic uncertainty, extended pandemics, etc.

As a large proportion of the global population has access to the Internet and mobile devices, users often turn to technology to seek help when experiencing acute mental health challenges. For instance, users may ask a virtual assistant for help with specific mental health challenges or emotional problems. When users issue queries indicative of emotional distress, the current approach is to surface relevant information, such as the number for a local helpline, that can help connect the users to professionals, organizations, or information sources that can help them deal with the matter.

However, not all places have trustworthy local resources to support people's emotional needs that have been vetted and approved. Similarly, emotionally supportive information content, such as suggestions for coping mechanisms, is often unavailable in local languages. For users located in regions that lack appropriate local resources for emotional and mental health needs, queries related to emotional distress often produce no results. For example, if a user located in a region that lacks vetted support resources asks a virtual assistant, "What should I do if I am feeling depressed?" the lack of suitable results might lead to a response such as "Sorry, I don't understand." Alternatively, if the query is responded to without recognizing that the user is seeking help for emotional distress, the results might provide pointers with detailed information on the problem, which can potentially act as a trigger that may exacerbate the issue.

DESCRIPTION

This disclosure describes techniques to provide suitable coping mechanism(s) and/or empathetic response(s) when users issue queries regarding emotional support, including for users located in regions that lack vetted local resources for these purposes. The coping mechanism(s) and empathetic response(s) can be selected from a large pool of choices collected by consulting domain experts on mental health and emotional well-being. The responses can cover support needs for one or more emotional challenges, such as sadness, loneliness, anger, fear, depression, etc.

When a user issues a query related to emotional well-being, appropriate answers chosen from the pool of supportive responses are presented. The presentation of responses can proceed in a conversational manner that systematically generates follow-on responses based on user choices for the options described in the previous responses. For instance, users are first presented with an empathetic response that offers the choice to know more about one or more coping mechanisms relevant to the query. Users can choose a specific option among the offered choices, ask to explore any one of the options without specifying one, or decide to decline the offer.

Otherwise, the interaction can proceed by offering more information regarding the coping mechanism chosen by the user. In turn, users can choose to solicit more information about matters connected to the described coping mechanism or move on and seek alternative coping mechanisms. Whenever the user chooses to end the interaction during the interactive sequence as it progresses, the interaction can be concluded by expressing positive wishes for their well-being, along with a suggestion to reach out to a professional for emotional support as needed.
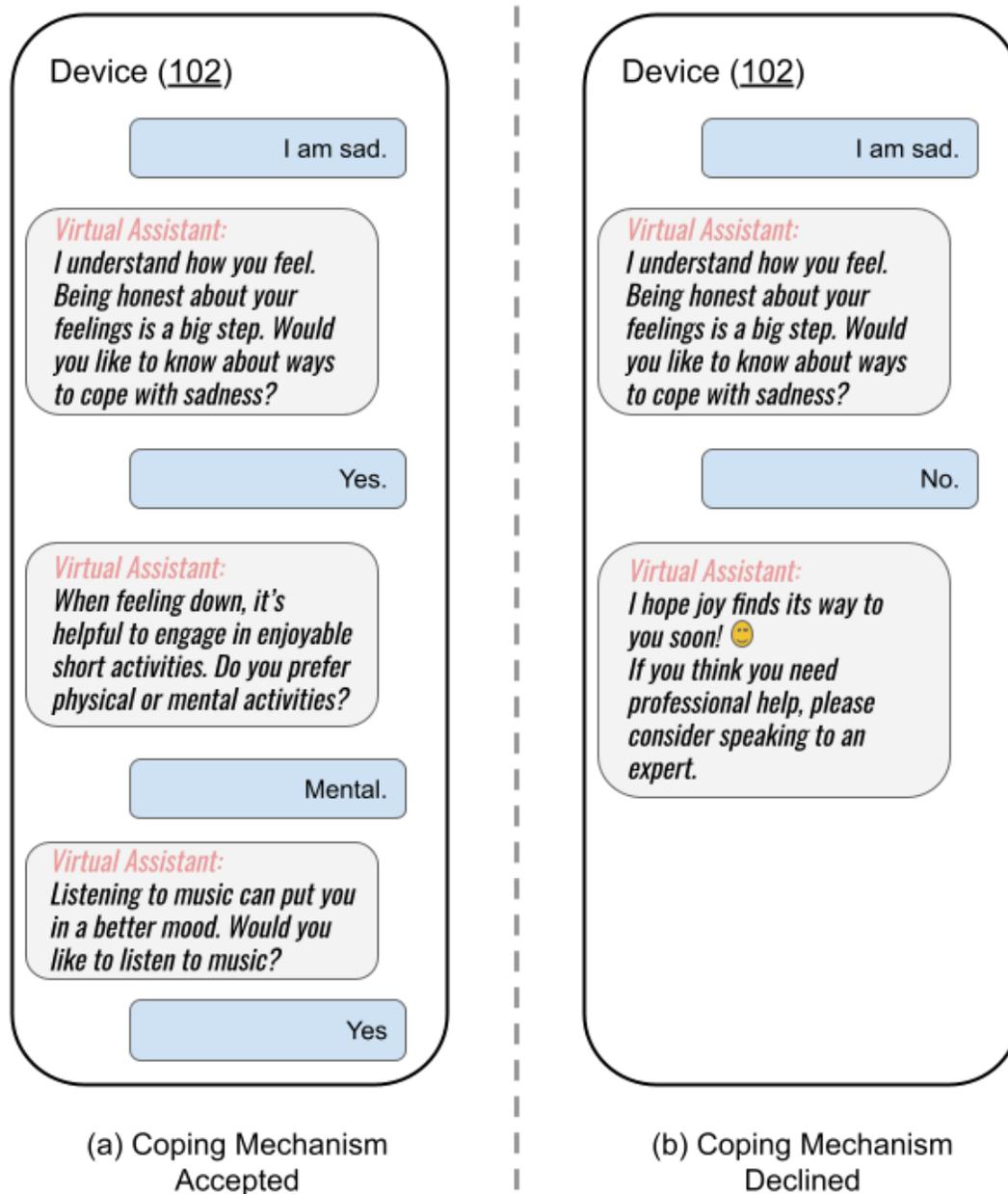
Fig. 1: Empathetic interaction to present coping mechanisms for emotional support

Fig. 1 shows an example of interaction between a virtual assistant and a user, where the virtual assistant provides empathetic interaction. A user interacts with a virtual assistant via device (102) with an initial expression indicating that the user is sad. The virtual assistant response is an expression of empathy followed by an offer to provide information on

mechanisms to cope with sadness that the user can choose to accept (Fig. 1a) or decline (Fig. 1b). As Fig. 1a shows, if the user agrees to know about coping mechanisms the interaction proceeds with the user being asked for choosing among available choices for coping mechanisms i.e., physical or mental activities. Upon asking for mental activities, "listening to music" is suggested as a coping mechanism. The user can then follow the cue and ask the virtual assistant to play music. Alternatively, as Fig. 1b shows, if the user does not wish to know about coping mechanisms, the interaction terminates with a positive empathetic message and a reminder to seek professional help if needed.

The techniques described in this disclosure can be implemented by any search engine, virtual assistant, application, or platform that includes functionality to search for information on emotional well-being and mental health. Users can issue queries related to emotional support with text or voice input. Correspondingly, the empathetic responses and coping mechanisms can be presented in text and/or speech. The implementation can leverage appropriate partnerships between providers of search and assistant functions and trustworthy, accredited mental health professionals that contribute to the pool of available coping mechanisms and provide feedback to ensure that the operation is trustworthy, reliable, and compliant with the guidelines and practices of the mental health and emotional support professions.

The techniques can seamlessly avoid potentially inappropriate or traumatic results by embedding relevant supportive responses within the search user experience to help ensure that their emotional needs are appropriately addressed. Implementation of the techniques can provide users with relevant supportive information that can help them deal with emotional distress and enhance their mental well-being.

CONCLUSION

This disclosure describes techniques to present users with professionally vetted information on coping mechanism(s) and/or empathetic response(s) that support their emotional needs. When users issue queries related to emotional well-being, appropriate answers chosen from a pool of supportive responses collected from mental-health professionals can be presented with permission. The presentation of responses can proceed in a conversational manner that systematically generates follow-on responses based on user choices for the options described in the previous responses.