

Digital Insight Isn't Enough: Why AI Coaching Falls Short of Real Change

There's been a lot of noise lately about AI coaching, mostly around how it's innovative, scalable, inevitable. But underneath the hype, I find myself sitting with a quieter, more human question:

What are we really reaching for when we turn to AI instead of each other?



AI coaching can help us think, but not truly change.

As a psychologist and psychotherapist (in training) and someone who has personally used AI to support reflection, I can understand the appeal. AI is fast, non-judgemental, always available. It can help me reframe my thoughts, challenge my perspective (if I ask it to), and clarify my internal mess when I don't have the energy to journal.

But the more I use it, the more I notice something missing.

What's missing is something **relational**. Something **felt**. Something that can't be manufactured or mimicked, no matter how convincing the output.

AI can offer insight. Sometimes it even feels wise. But there's a difference between **being understood** and being **held**. Between **clarity** and **change**. Between being mirrored by a machine and being seen by another human.

Insight is useful. But real change? That's relational.

Because what truly shifts us isn't just a clever question. It's someone holding space while we wrestle with the answer. It's being witnessed when we want to hide. It's having someone stay with us not just when we're brilliant, but when we're messy, confused, or afraid.

That kind of transformation doesn't come from efficiency. It comes from **attunement**. From presence. From **co-regulation**, in the nervous system and in the room. And that's what AI, no matter how advanced, cannot offer.

What AI Can (Actually) Do Well

Let's give credit where it's due. AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude and even custom coaching bots are incredibly effective at:

- Providing coaching-style prompts
- Organising your thinking with models like GROW or PAC
- Offering leadership or values-based reflections
- Helping you prepare for tricky conversations
- Simulating a thought partner when you're processing something sticky

In that sense, AI is a brilliant **companion for reflection** especially between coaching sessions or when support isn't accessible.

I use it that way myself. It's helped me surface patterns, rehearse difficult conversations, and even soothe my nervous system a little by giving shape to what I'm feeling. But it stops there. Because no matter how clever the prompt, **AI doesn't really care about me**. And that matters more than we think.

We often use **insight as a shield** a way to stay safe in the realm of thinking when what we actually need is to **feel**. It's a well-known defence mechanism in psychotherapy: **intellectualisation**. We analyse, explain, and "understand" our pain rather than truly sitting with it. AI, by its very nature, encourages this. It meets us in the head, not the body. It lets us stay clever and composed when what might actually move us forward is the exact opposite: **getting into the mess**, grounding into the body, and letting ourselves feel what's real. Growth isn't just cognitive it's somatic.

Coaching Isn't Just Insight — It's a Relationship

There's a common misconception that coaching & therapy is just about great questions and sharp frameworks. But ask any experienced coach or client, and they'll tell you the truth:

It's the relationship that changes you.

A great coach:

- Holds space for your discomfort
- Tracks your patterns over time
- Challenges you (gently and precisely) when you need it most
- Helps you feel safe enough to explore what you'd rather avoid
- Help you spot the exact moments you're starting to **self-sabotage** — and stay with you as you move through it

This isn't a technical skill. It's a **relational one**.

And this isn't just my opinion it's well-evidenced.

The research is clear:

- In therapy, the **quality of the relationship** (the therapeutic alliance) accounts for more of the outcome than the method itself → *Wampold & Imel, 2015*
- In coaching, a strong working alliance between coach and client **significantly predicts positive outcomes** → *Gramann et al., 2021*
- In trauma work and emotional development, **co-regulation**: feeling safe in the presence of another person is foundational to healing → *Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014*

AI can't hold discomfort. It doesn't track your nervous system. It won't notice the tremble in your voice, the story you're avoiding, or the way your foot starts bouncing when you talk about something gut-wrenching. It won't catch the gallows humour masking your sadness or pause gently when your silence says more than your words.

It can give you clever insight but it can't sit with you in the moment you need to be witnessed and understood. Many of my clients are high-performing, hyper-aware, and incredibly well-read. They've mastered insight. But when they turn to AI, it often keeps them in that cognitive space when what they likely need most is to step out of it, drop into their bodies, and actually feel.

AI Doesn't Challenge You — Unless You Tell It To

Here's a subtle but serious limitation.

Most people don't realise that AI needs to be carefully prompted to challenge assumptions. Left to its own devices, it reflects rather than disrupts. It validates. It affirms. It people-pleases.

And let's be honest **unless you know how to prompt it like a coach, a therapist, or a philosopher**, it will simply echo your current thinking back at you. At this rate, we'll all need a PhD in prompt engineering just to get anything truly transformational out of it. The technology is evolving so quickly that **knowing how to use it well is becoming a skillset in itself**, one most people don't have time, energy, or access to develop.

The risk? We confuse the presence of a smart-sounding response with actual growth

"AI is a people-pleaser by design. It validates more than it questions." — Dr David Gunkel, AI ethics scholar

Even the best AI tools won't say:

**"I'm going to stop you there... Can we look at what's really going on?" OR
You've told me this story before, what do you think you're avoiding by
staying in this loop?**

And yet, those moments are often the turning point in coaching. The moment your belief system cracks open. The moment your identity starts to shift.

AI doesn't know how to go there because it doesn't **really** *know you*.

But Here's the Bigger Issue: We're Already Disconnected

The appeal of AI coaching isn't just technological, it's emotional.

We're living in a time where many people are:

- Overstimulated, under-supported
- Isolated, even when surrounded by others
- Numb from the emotional cost of high-performance culture

We are social animals, designed for connection and meaning making yet we're more alone than ever. The data backs this up:

- Loneliness is now recognised as a serious public health risk
→ UK Gov. *"Loneliness Strategy"*, 2018; WHO, 2021
- Disconnection and lack of belonging are strongly linked to anxiety, depression, burnout → Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018

In that context, AI coaching becomes appealing because it requires nothing of us. No vulnerability. No relational mess. Just a clean, quiet answer.
But here's the paradox:

The very thing we crave connection is what we quietly avoid. And AI makes that avoidance easier than ever.

AI Feeds the Void — But Can't Fill It

It's easy to mistake the **appearance** of relationship for the real thing. AI gives us just enough of the experience. Just enough empathy in its tone, just enough reflection in its responses to feel like something has happened.

"We expect more from technology and less from each other."

Sherry Turkle, Alone Together

AI coaching can become the mental equivalent of empty calories it satisfies a surface craving while quietly deepening the underlying hunger for real connection

So What Do We Do With This?

We stop pretending AI is the same as coaching or therapy or relationship. We don't buy into the hype.

We start designing systems that support real human development, not just scalable simulations of it.

We democratise access to **coaching**, not just coaching bots. We build cultures where people don't have to **choose AI** because real support feels too expensive, too emotional, or too out of reach.

And we remember that growth doesn't come from tools. It comes from **being seen** and **understood** especially when we're not performing and excelling, when we feel confused and unsure.

Final Thought

Use AI to reflect. Use it to journal. Use it to untangle your thoughts at 2am.
But don't mistake insight for integration. And don't mistake simulation for safety.
Change doesn't happen in isolation. It happens in relationship. That's what we're wired for. That's what coaching, at its best, gives us.
Let's not trade that away for convenience or compliance.

Perhaps the future of AI in development lies not in replacing connection, but in reminding us how vital it is?

References

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