**Introduction**

Chat Care is an AI-powered mental health chatbot by Kenya Red Cross Society in collaboration with GSMA and Microsoft. It is designed to provide psycho-social support to individuals, and is accessible 24/7 across multiple digital platforms including [Telegram](https://t.me/KenyaRedCrossBot), [Webchat](https://www.redcross.or.ke), and [Facebook Messenger](https://www.facebook.com/RedCrossKE/), with plans to include WhatsApp. The chatbot uses generative AI technology to offer confidential, empathetic interactions, helping users navigate mental health issues. It ensures privacy, integrates seamlessly with human support, and is built on a robust Microsoft infrastructure, making it a unique tool in the landscape of mental health support services.

**What Problem are we addressing**

Chat Care is addressing critical gaps in mental health support within Kenyan communities, particularly focusing on young populations and areas with limited access to mental health professionals. Despite the existence of a toll-free counselling line and in-person sessions, there remains a significant need for accessible and stigma-free mental health services that can leverage the widespread use of mobile technology. The Chat Care chatbot aims to complement existing services by offering 24/7 psycho-social support, breaking down barriers associated with geographical, financial, and cultural constraints.

**Why We came up with Chat Care**

We introduced Chat Care as a solution to address the limitations faced with our previous mental health chatbot, Dr. Imani, developed by Freshworks. While Dr. Imani was helpful initially, it lacked essential privacy features, scalability, and integration with modern communication channels. Recognizing these challenges, Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) partnered with GSMA and Microsoft to seek innovative solutions.

Chat Care, developed with Microsoft's technical expertise through Pathways Technologies and funded by GSMA, emerged from the need to enhance the capabilities of Dr. Imani. It's designed to provide immediate mental health support across various digital platforms, leveraging Microsoft's infrastructure for robust, scalable, and secure interactions.

Its key features include (but not limited to):

* 24/7 Accessibility
* Multi-Platform Availability – Telegram, Web Chat, Facebook, WhatsApp
* Human agent handover – A user can choose to chat with a Kenya Red Cross Human Agent.
* Referral Pathways - The chatbot offers referrals to professional mental health services based on users' location and specific needs, extending to other social services like Gender-Based Violence Support and Child Protection.
* Multi-Language Support - English and Swahili, for now
* Recognition of Repeating Clients - Chat Care is able to recognize repeating clients, avoiding repetitive introductory questions.

**Ethical Considerations**

Chatbot has been guided by existing policies and standards set by the Government of Kenya and other entities. Kenya Red Cross has continuously engaged with Mental Health Experts. Currently, we have tacit endorsement from 7 well known Mental Health Entities in Kenya, including the Ministry of Health. Furthermore, the donor, GSMA has provided some tools such as the [AI Ethics Playbook](https://www.gsma.com/betterfuture/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Mobile-Industry-Ethics-Playbook_Feb-2022.pdf) and the [AI Ethics Assessment](https://www.gsma.com/betterfuture/resources/ethicsplaybook) guide that have continued to shape the design and functionality of the platform

Some key considerations include:

* **Data Privacy:** All user interactions are confidential, with data encryption and strict adherence to data protection regulations.
* **Inclusiveness:** The bot supports both English and Swahili, ensuring it serves a broad demographic. Plans for additional languages are underway to include more diverse community segments.
* **Transparency and Human Centricity:** Users are informed about how their data will be used and have options to control it. The bot is designed to seamlessly transition to human counselors when automated interactions are insufficient, maintaining a human-centered approach.

**What have been the impacts**

Even though Chat Care is still on Beta Release, it has successfully provided support to hundreds of users. Early feedback indicates improved mental wellness in communities, a reduction in stigma surrounding mental health discussions, and increased accessibility to support services. While quantitative data on financial savings or time efficiencies are being compiled, the qualitative benefits to community well-being are significant. There is still much to expect once the we do a public launch in May, 2024.

**What you have learned and where do you see it going in the future**

The development and implementation of the Chat Care have significantly highlighted the crucial need for accessible mental health services and the powerful role AI can play in bridging these service gaps. Through our work with Chat Care, we have learned that AI can effectively simulate compassionate and empathetic interactions, which are vital in mental health support. The ongoing collection and analysis of user interactions have been instrumental in continuously improving the chatbot’s responses and functionalities. This iterative process, driven by real user feedback, underscores the potential of AI to adapt and evolve in response to the needs of its users.

Furthermore, the project has revealed several technical and operational challenges, particularly in maintaining communication consistency across multiple platforms and ensuring smooth transitions to human counselors when necessary. Addressing these issues has provided our team with valuable insights into the complexities of deploying AI solutions in a multi-platform environment. Looking forward, we see a path filled with opportunities for further enhancements.

Looking ahead, the KRCS plans to Publicly launch the bot in May, 2024. Plans are already in motion to expand the chatbot’s language capabilities, integrate more deeply with health services, and explore the use of AI in predictive mental health analytics to proactively offer support to individuals before crises occur.