



Before we give them fuzzy robots, let's try solving elderly loneliness with people

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Introduction

The loneliness statistics among aged persons can leave you feeling desolate. Thanks to the shortage of social reference to others, quite 40% of adults over the age of 65 within the US are lonely on a daily basis.

To counteract this phenomenon, we as a society have two options: to outsource social duties to robots, or reconfigure society to worry for elders ourselves.

A helping robotic hand... or flipper

Robots will become a traditional part of the emotional and social lives of these older persons, stepping in with the great intention of alleviating loneliness while providing care and support. They need the potential to become future relations, replacing those who are absent.

Such robots will little question be readily embraced by the older persons of tomorrow including yourself. After all, you've got already grown used to interacting with early voice assistants like Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa. By the time today's younger generations come of aged and technology has trapped with its own hype cycle, it'll feel totally natural to rely on and befriend a social robot in adulthood.

Take Paro, for example: This robotic baby seal from Japan may be a furry endearing companion designed as a therapeutic tool to elicit emotional responses from its users. It imitates the sound of a true baby *Pagophilus groenlandicus* and intelligently responds to the touch, sound, light, temperature, and posture.

When being called, Paro moves its head and makes sounds. Like a cute living pet, maintains eye contact through its adorable big eyes, and should move its flippers when being stroked. It's certified by Guinness World Records because the world's most therapeutic robot, research over the years has found that interactions with Paro reduce stress, stimulate interaction, and improve socialization for both users and their caregivers. There's also evidence of positive physiological effects.

The social roles of robots are sometimes regarded as more important than their practical purposes. A report on a home testing "intelligent nursing robots" in China found a surprising result, although the robots were tasked to provide nursing functions like checking sign, the residents considered them more as companions. Some residents even considered the robots as replacing their children and grandchildren, who rarely visited.

But are we outsourcing empathy?

This all said, being emotionally attached to machines can never fully catch abreast of the shortage of face-to-face presence and one's desire for human interaction. News reports with the titles like "Robots replace family love for China's lonely elderly" explain this situation well. When it involves ethical debates on trusting elderly to the care of robots, we fear the further reduction of normal human contact and feelings of objectification.

But if nobody else are going to be there for the elders, isn't a robot better than nothing?

Although family will remain important within the future as the source of emotional closeness, mutual support, and exchanges the reality is that there'll be less of them around to assist. As a consequence of mass longevity and continuous low fertility, future older cohorts will have a far better likelihood of belonging to the so called "beanpole family structure." this is often where there could also be three, four, or maybe five existing multi-generations, but with less members in each younger generation to worry for the older. Within the future, there'll be fewer grandchildren to travel around for a bigger amount of grandparents, and grandchildren and their parents might not be living close enough to supply intergenerational support and companionship.

In the Japan, "rent a family" services became a business solution to the will for intergenerational engagement and also for aged people. Japan Efficiency Headquarters, a corporation that pioneered the business in 1989, was reported to possess a roll of elderly people that have purchased services to simulate a three-generational family. A typical scenario comprises a visit by the actors rented as "family members" to arrange meals and eat in conjunction with the elderly couple or individual. They'll also do family activities together, like going to the park, chatting, and have grandchildren playing on their laps.

However, the transactional nature of renting a family will solve loneliness temporarily but not permanently. It'll not appeal to those seeking to foster deep and nurturing social and emotional relationships with others. And is that basically any better than a robot?

With a scarcity of real family around to assist and robots' inability to supply real emotional care, we appear to be at an impasse. But there's an answer.

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