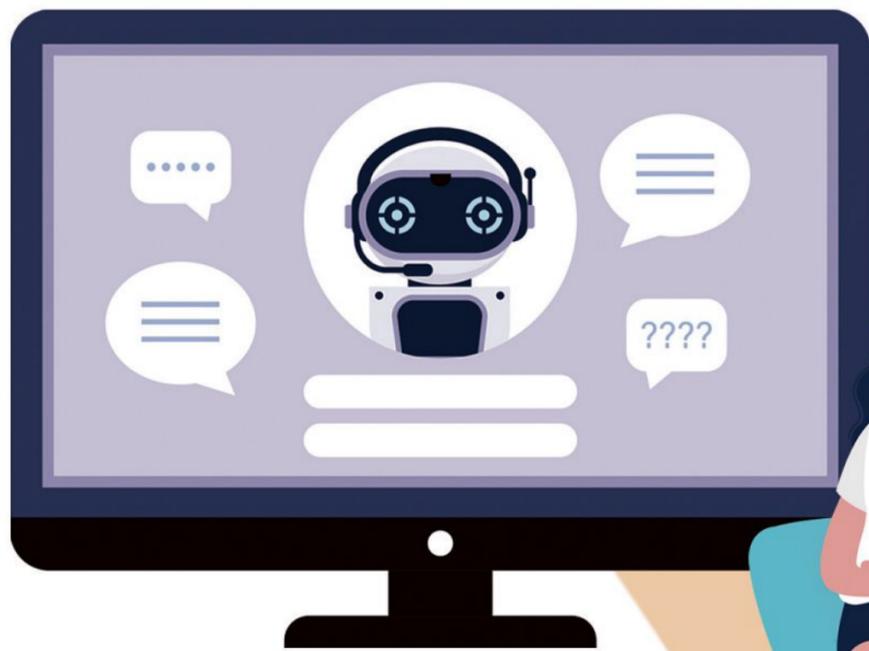


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CoupleRef is an alternative to high-cost couples therapy – with caveats

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Alyssa Goldberg USA TODAY

Daniel Fountenberry met his wife during COVID-19 lockdowns. A year later, they were married with a kid on the way.

Still in the “discovery” phase of the relationship, as Fountenberry calls it, they decided to seek couples therapy to better navigate the new marriage.

But the price tag on each session was jarring. In-person couples therapy sessions in the United States can range from \$100 to \$300 per hour, according to the Cerebral Institute. While looking for a therapist, Fountenberry saw some charging as much as \$350 for a single 50-minute session.

The experience itself was exhausting. He often felt unheard by the therapist in sessions, or that just as he got to the precipice of an issue, the session time was up.

Fountenberry, who began working in AI and educational technology in 2020, confided his grievances about couples therapy to a friend who also worked in tech. He decided that he needed a different intervention – not another therapist. He had the idea to create a “neutral referee,” an AI model that could help people understand and change their behaviors.

He said he believes that “therapy isn’t necessarily something that comes from a person.”

“Instead of believing that there’s this person who does magic, that has this secret knowledge,” he said, “I believe that the knowledge is public.”

Thus, CoupleRef, a U.S.-based “AI couples referee” platform, launched in February. Fountenberry said CoupleRef re-creates the structure of evidence-based practices and assessments, using AI, to provide an experience similar to meeting with a PhD-level clinical psychologist.

“I decided that I would build this for my own marriage, for my own relationship,” he said, “but also for other people who are frustrated, who are looking for an alternative to additional therapy.”

Is AI couples therapy the new frontier of AI wellness? AI therapy is becoming increasingly popular – along with the appearance of “Chat-GPT induced psychosis” and lawsuits against OpenAI for mental health harms. While it offers benefits like accessibility and affordability, mental health experts warn that AI chatbots can’t replace a human being – especially a therapist.

AI alternatives can lessen cost barrier of couples therapy

CoupleRef plans to charge users \$12 per week – a cheap alternative to real-life couples therapy, but without the added benefit of a real person on the other end of the conversation. Fountenberry said the high cost of couples therapy can chip away from vacation funds and necessary expenses, and wants his platform to be accessible to couples re-



Daniel Fountenberry and his wife of four years, Cécélia Ouiali, say CoupleRef helps them identify patterns and friction points in their relationship for a fraction of what couples therapy costs.

PROVIDED BY DANIEL FOUNTENBERRY

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Daniel Fountenberry
Creator of CoupleRef platform

gardless of their income.

“I would rather a couple be able to get to the heart of their issues, understand their own emotional needs and their partner’s emotional needs, and then go on vacation and spend good quality time together,” Fountenberry said.

Fountenberry said he and his wife, Cécélia Ouiali, speak with CoupleRef daily. With his wife’s permission, he shared a transcript of a conversation the couple had with CoupleRef on Dec. 26, 2025. She used it independently to process her feelings and understand how to navigate a friction point in their relationship regarding household responsibilities, Fountenberry says.

“The kitchen is a war zone,” Ouiali, who went by the username “Joz” on the platform, wrote.

The chatbot pulled on the “Five-Factor Personality Assessment” taken by both partners during their intake, and replied, “For you, Joz, cleaning while cooking is a logical and efficient process. ... From Daniel’s perspective, his very low Conscientiousness

means he thrives on spontaneity and adaptability.”

The responses read similar to what users might expect from astrology apps like Co-Star or The Pattern. Those apps provide a generic explanation of behavioral patterns based on the astrological signs in your birth chart that you can apply to your own life however you see fit. CoupleRef, on the other hand, will explain how those overarching patterns impact your behaviors in specific situations that you share with the chatbot.

By the end of the exchange, CoupleRef had suggested steps for Ouiali to communicate her needs and set boundaries to mitigate Fountenberry’s behaviors.

“There are some cases that are better dealt with you and your partner in therapy in person,” Fountenberry admitted. “But if you don’t have the money or access, that’s not an option. So everyone needs an option.”

Online interventions aren’t new for couples

CoupleRef isn’t the first platform to offer online interventions. Arya, a subscription box for sex where couples can also address their relationship tension points and sex life with a third-party human – called a “concierge” – was founded in 2022. Though there’s a real human involved, AI informs the concierge’s responses.

According to the company, Arya integrates AI with human supervision to scale their personalized support. Customer service responses are automated, but relationship guidance is more complex. Arya’s AI models are trained privately on knowledge from internal relationship experts and sexologists, and can offer immediate responses, but human concierges review and confirm AI suggestions. When issues are flagged as requiring deeper expertise or personalization, they’re escalated directly to a human specialist, according to Arya.

Safeguards are essential in mitigating AI therapy harms

Fountenberry says CoupleRef is not appropriate for individuals experiencing intimate partner violence, but the platform does not conduct manual reviews of conversations to protect users’ privacy.

Mental health experts warn that using AI tools as a replacement for mental health support can reinforce negative behaviors and thought patterns, especially if these models are not equipped with adequate safeguards.

“ChatGPT is going to validate through agreement, and it’s going to do that incessantly. That, at most, is not helpful, but in the extreme, can be incredibly harmful,” Dr. Jenna Glover, chief clinical officer at Headspace, previously told USA TODAY while discussing the rise in AI therapy. “Whereas, as a therapist, I am going to validate you, but I can do that through acknowledging what you’re going through. I don’t have to agree with you.”