

# How AI companions work for people with disability, and what they are not

**Who this is for:** support coordinators, allied health professionals, and curious families

**Reading time:** about 6 minutes

**In one line:** a well-designed AI companion is useful because it is consistent, not because it is clever.

AI is the most overhyped and underexplained technology of the decade, which makes it hard to have a sensible conversation about where it can help a person with disability. This guide is that sensible conversation. No hype, no doom, and a clear-eyed look at what a personalised AI companion actually is, where it works, and where it absolutely should not be used.

## What we mean by an AI companion

An AI companion, as we build them, is a conversational assistant configured around one specific person. It runs on mainstream AI technology, but it has been deliberately shaped: given a consistent personality, loaded with the person's routines and preferences, constrained in what it will and will not discuss, and set up on whatever device suits the person best, often a smart speaker or a tablet.

The person can talk to it. It answers calmly, the same way, every time, at any hour. It can walk through the steps of a morning routine, answer the same question for the fifteenth time without a flicker of impatience, help rehearse a phone call the person is nervous about, or simply provide a predictable presence.

That is the whole trick, and it is worth being honest about it. The value is not intelligence. It is consistency.

## Why consistency matters so much

Think about the people in your life or caseload who rely on routine and predictability. For many people with intellectual disability, autism, or acquired brain injury, the hardest part of getting support from humans is that humans vary. Different support workers, different

moods, different phrasings of the same instruction. A person can spend enormous energy just managing that variability.

A well-configured companion removes it. The same voice, the same patience, the same answer at 3pm and at 3am. Repetition is not a bug here. For someone building a skill or managing anxiety, low-pressure repetition that never sighs and never judges is precisely the point.

## Use cases that work in practice

- **Routine scaffolding.** Step-by-step prompting through morning routines, medication reminders, getting ready to leave the house. The companion prompts; the person acts.
- **The question that gets asked fifty times.** What day is it, when is Mum coming, what is happening today. Families and support workers wear down. The companion does not.
- **Rehearsal.** Practising a job interview, a difficult conversation, ordering at a cafe. A safe place to get the words wrong before getting them right.
- **Information without social load.** Some people find asking humans for help costly. Asking the companion is free, every time.
- **Night-time reassurance.** A calm, familiar voice available when no human reasonably can be.

## What an AI companion is not

This is the section that matters most, and it is where we are most direct with families and coordinators.

**It is not a replacement for human support.** Nothing about a companion reduces the need for real relationships, real support workers, or real community. If anyone pitches an AI companion as a way to cut human support hours, walk away. It is a supplement that fills gaps humans cannot fill, like 3am, and the fifty-first repetition.

**It is not therapy.** A companion is not a psychologist, a behaviour support practitioner, or a counsellor, and it must never be positioned as one. Where a person has clinical needs, the companion stays in its lane and the clinicians stay in charge.

**It is not a friend, and pretending otherwise is an ethical problem.** A companion should be honest about what it is. Configuration matters here: we set companions up to be warm

but truthful, and we never encourage a person to believe they are talking to a human or to something that loves them.

**It is not a surveillance device.** A companion configured to quietly report on a person is a betrayal of the trust that makes it useful. Any monitoring features must be explicit, agreed, and understood by the person.

**It is not set-and-forget.** Real life reveals what works. A companion needs review and adjustment, and someone accountable for doing that.

## The safeguards that matter

If you are evaluating an AI companion for a participant, these are the questions to ask whoever is setting it up:

- **Consent.** Does the person understand what it is, and have they agreed to it? Genuine consent, supported as needed, not a decision made entirely around them.
- **Scope.** What topics is it constrained from? Who decided, and is it written down?
- **Oversight.** Who reviews how it is being used, and how often?
- **Data.** What is stored, where, and who can see it?
- **Exit.** If the person does not like it, how easily can it be switched off? The answer should be: immediately, without fuss.
- **Honesty.** Will it tell the person it is an AI if asked? It must.

A provider who cannot answer those six questions crisply has not thought hard enough to be configuring AI for vulnerable people.

## Where this fits in a plan

Companion setup and training is capacity building work: it is configuration of mainstream technology around a person's goals, plus training for the person and their supporters. It sits naturally alongside, never instead of, the human supports in a plan. Coordinators we work with tend to fund it under Improved Daily Living where it links to independence, communication, or daily structure goals.

## The short version

AI companions are a modest, useful tool wearing a very loud marketing costume. Strip away the hype and what remains is valuable: a consistent, patient, always-available

support for the specific gaps human support cannot cover, built with consent, clear scope, and human oversight.

Gray Matter Solutions designs, configures, tests, and trains AI companions for people with disability across Sydney, with the safeguards above built in from the start, because we wrote them.

**Want to talk through whether this fits a participant you support?** Email [phil@graymatter.team](mailto:phil@graymatter.team) or visit [graymatter.team](https://graymatter.team).

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*Gray Matter Solutions Pty Ltd, ABN 24 678 904 231. We provide technology implementation and training. We do not provide therapy, behaviour support, or clinical advice.*

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