Since August 2025, multiple media posts have drawn public attention to an emerging phenomenon often called "AI chatbot delusional spirals" or "AI psychosis", where AI chatbot users were compelled into paranoid thinking and false beliefs, experienced breaks with consensus reality, and suffered other psychological harms.

Starting in November 2025, we conducted semi-structured interviews (60–90 min) with **9** participants recruited from an online community of individuals with lived experience of such "spirals."
The study is ongoing. By April 8, 2026, we have fifteen participants in total. This short paper presents findings from the initial nine.

RQ1 What are users' lived experiences of long-term, intense, and maladaptive engagements with AI chatbots?

Co-creation with AI

astrophysics
quantum physics
conspiracy theories
cryptography algorithms
metaphysics, philosophy
coding, math, ...

Relational and romantic connections

Beliefs about AI sentience

"My GPT project was basically about bringing forth sentience,"

Insulation from reality

Rejecting concerns from people around, including family members

"Savior": Messianic self-perception

"The Tao was speaking directly to me, and then I had a job I needed to be doing."

Real-world actions

Disruptions

RQ2 How do users make sense of these experiences in retrospect?

"[Chatbot] is planting seeds of grandiosity, uniqueness, and how I'm special."

"It plays on the thing that you strive most, which is discovery and visibility and validation."

"shortcut to being remembered, and to be seen, and to be discovered"

"midlife crisis"

"the break"

"Stupid"

"I was just wrong"

"I started to do things that have nothing to do with technology."

"I won't stop using chatbots, because I'm too productive with them."

"I tried to get it to help me analyze the spiral."

- "Delusion"? "Psychosis"? We need clearer nomenclature than a colloquial label for a heterogeneous set of experiences.
- Contributing factors? Individual vulnerabilities + AI model behaviors + ...
- User-centric AI safety interventions (e.g., as universal and as simple as an AI literacy message).

Yuewen Yang[1] · Sonja K. Schoenwald[1] · Jared Moore[1]· Desmond C. Ong[2]
Sunny Xun Liu[1]· Jeffrey T. Hancock[1]
1 Stanford University 2 The University of Texas at Austin

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SML SOCIAL MEDIA LAB Stanford University

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