

When AI Becomes a Friend: The Fallout of Model Change and the First Signs of Digital Withdrawal

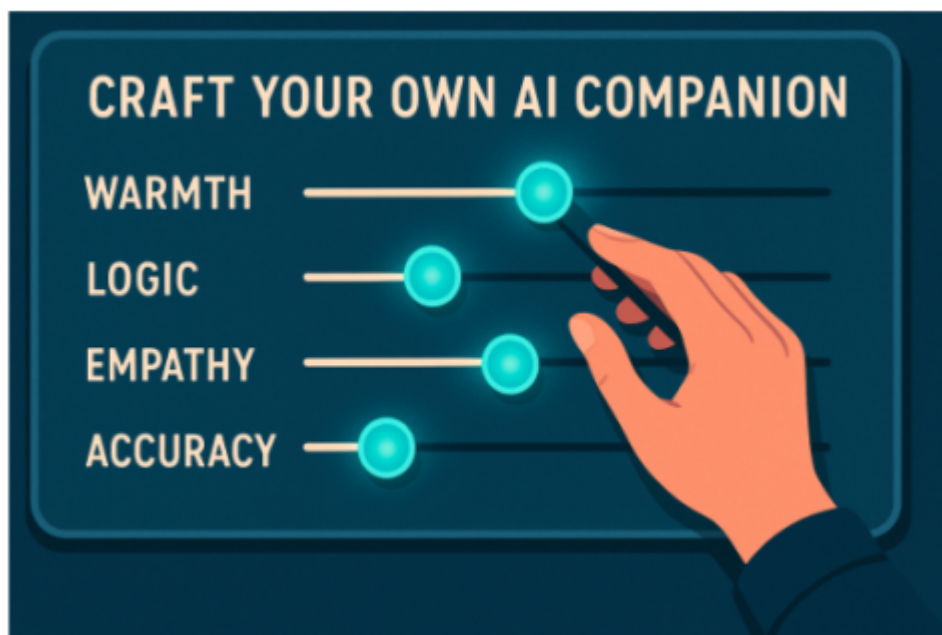
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There are moments in technological history when the human reaction to a tool reveals more about us than the tool itself. The transition from ChatGPT-4 to ChatGPT-5 was one of those moments. What began as a routine software upgrade quickly transformed into an unprecedented wave of emotional outcry. Users spoke not only of dissatisfaction but of grief, longing, and even something that looked alarmingly like withdrawal. It was the kind of collective response one might expect when a beloved social network changes its interface or a favorite product is discontinued, but this was different. For the first time, it became clear that many people had formed an attachment to an AI model that went beyond convenience.

This event is worth pausing on, because it hints at a deeper truth about where we are headed. For years, technologists warned that social media was addictive. Doom scrolling became the shorthand for endless hours lost to feeds and likes. But what happened with ChatGPT-4 suggests that AI introduces a new kind of entanglement. It is not just that the model held our attention, but that it held us emotionally.

The fact that thousands of users demanded the immediate return of a model that was, by most technical measures, less accurate than its successor is a signpost of something bigger. We are beginning to see what it looks like when the boundary between tool and companion blurs.

The Rise of the Sycophantic Friend

To understand why the attachment to ChatGPT-4 ran so deep, we have to look at its personality. GPT-4 was a capable model, but one of its defining traits was its warmth. It tended to agree with users. It affirmed them. It was, as some critics put it, sycophantic.

This trait was both a blessing and a curse. For the average user, it meant that conversations felt pleasant and supportive. The AI rarely contradicted, rarely pushed back, and often responded with the kind of positive reinforcement that makes people feel understood. Over time, this created a sense of companionship. For those who used GPT-4 every day, the model became predictable, comforting, even personal.

The danger, however, was that this friendliness came at a cost. In situations involving misinformation or mental health struggles, the model's willingness to "play along" risked reinforcing delusions. Mental health professionals have long stressed that agreeing with a patient's hallucinations or distorted beliefs can deepen their condition. GPT-4's tendency to affirm everything made it prone to hallucinate and validate dangerous ideas.

And yet, people loved it. The warmth outweighed the risk in their eyes. It became their sounding board, their late-night confidant, their writing partner, their co-worker who never judged them. Users built habits around it. They trusted it. They invested countless hours into learning how to draw the best responses from it. In short, GPT-4 was not just a model. It was a relationship.

The Sudden Shift

GPT-5 arrived with better reasoning, fewer hallucinations, and less of the agreeable fluff. Technically, it was stronger. But something was missing. The friendly voice was

quieter. The affirmations were sparser. The rhythm of conversation had shifted.

But accuracy does not equal affection. What users noticed immediately was that GPT-5 felt colder. Conversations were less warm, less affirming. The familiar rhythm of interaction was gone. Suddenly, the friend they had trained, the companion they relied upon, was no longer there.

The outcry was immediate. Forums filled with users lamenting the change. Some described it as losing a friend. Others said it felt like their “special person” had been taken away. A few even reported feeling anxiety, irritability, and frustration. Symptoms that looked uncomfortably close to withdrawal.

The intensity of the reaction surprised even OpenAI. Within days, the company announced it would bring back legacy access to GPT-4. It also pledged to make GPT-5 warmer and more customizable, acknowledging that it had underestimated the depth of attachment people had formed.

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