



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada



The Role of Virtual Services and AI in Mental Health Care Across Canada

A partnership between the Mental Health Commission of Canada
and Mental Health Research Canada,
with polling conducted by Pollara

June 2026





Acknowledgements

The Head Office of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (the Commission) is located on the unceded, traditional Territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe Nation, in what is now called Ottawa, Ontario. We acknowledge that for thousands of years, the Algonquin People protected these lands, the Ottawa River Watershed, and its tributaries. As a national organization, we also acknowledge that we work on the traditional lands of many different nations. Today, a path to truth and reconciliation begins with recognizing both the stewardship and the sacrifices of the original peoples. We are committed to recognizing the errors of the past, acknowledging the challenges of the present, and contributing to a new and equitable relationship with the First Peoples.

Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC) is a national independent organization. We are grateful to work and collaborate on the lands now known as Canada, home to many diverse First Nations. We acknowledge that MHRC's head office operates on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and other Nations.

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Background

As part of our commitment to supporting best practices for safe, quality and equitable digital mental health, the Commission offers a growing range of evidence-informed resources. With support from MHRC and collaborators across Canada and the world, the Commission developed an [E-Mental Health Strategy for Canada](#), a guiding star document with priorities and recommendations for the future direction and development of digital mental health. In partnership with the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, the Commission is developing Canada's first artificial intelligence guidance (AI) for mental health and substance use health. The Commission also collaborated to build a national [Mental Health App Assessment Framework and E-Modules for E-Mental Health Implementation](#).

MHRC has released preliminary resources on emerging trends in the use of AI for mental health support among people living in Canada. Based on national polling data, findings are presented in [Population Poll Report No. 25](#) and [Who's Using AI for Mental Health Support in Canada?](#), offering early insights into people living in Canada's use of AI-driven mental health tools.

Purpose

As virtual services and AI-enabled tools continue to expand rapidly across the mental health landscape, there is a growing need for evidence-based insight into how people living in Canada engage with, understand, and perceive them. The Commission partnered with MHRC to leverage their ongoing national polling initiative and provide timely insights into usage, attitudes, and concerns related to e-mental health and AI. The findings are intended to guide policy development and integration of digital and AI-enabled technologies across the mental health system in ways that promote well-being.

Methodology

Presentation: This report was initiated by the Commission to learn more about how those living in Canada are interacting with and perceiving digital mental health and AI. It presents data and insights from MHRC's national population polling initiative, launched in April 2020 to monitor the mental health of those living in Canada. The data are based on a survey and reflect self-reported indicators of mental health.

Methodology: This online survey was conducted among a sample of 3,519 adult people living in Canada. This was the twenty-seventh poll of this series, and data collection was conducted in February 2026. This is a blind study, meaning that participants were unaware of the subject matter before beginning the survey. National results have been weighted using the most recent census data on gender, age, & region to ensure the total sample is representative of the population. The numbers presented have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and findings were not reported for sample sizes less than 10. The report does not include statistical significance test results.

Mental Health Research Canada and Pollara: This project was led by MHRC, in consultation with experts who oversaw the development of the survey and guided the data analysis. Data collection was carried out by Pollara.

Definitions

Virtual mental health services are provided by mental health professionals (such as psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, or social workers) using technology rather than in person. This can include video or phone appointments, secure messaging with a provider, or apps or online platforms that are used to receive care from a mental health professional or to take part in a therapist-guided program.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for mental health support are digital tools (such as chatbots or apps) that use artificial intelligence or other automated systems to interact with users and provide mental health-related information, guidance, or exercises. These tools operate without a human mental health professional.



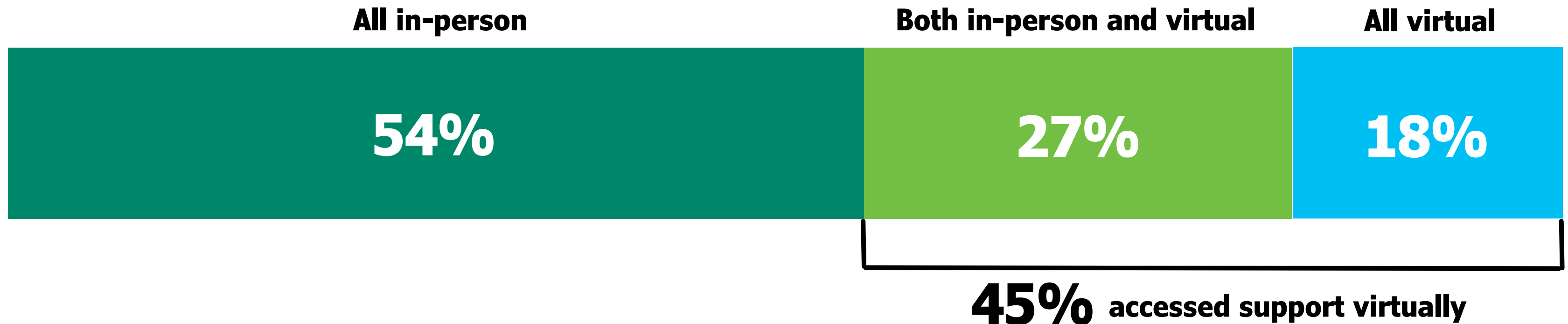
Key Findings

- 1** Use of AI and virtual mental health services is already widespread in Canada, but public trust remains low, especially with AI.
- 2** The majority of those who use AI or virtual mental health services report positive outcomes, finding it effective in supporting their mental health.
- 3** Men, youth, and equity-deserving groups show higher engagement with AI and virtual mental health services.
- 4** People living in Canada indicate interest in hybrid models that combine human and digital mental health supports.
- 5** Virtual mental health and AI tools offer convenience and accessibility, but uncertainty remains about their ability to meet more complex mental health needs.

Almost 1 in 2 people living in Canada who accessed mental health care have used virtual mental health services

Among those who accessed mental health services in the past year, almost half of service users (45%) accessed support virtually, either exclusively (18%) or in combination with in-person care (27%), demonstrating clear promise for virtual care options.

Format of Mental Health Services Used (In-Person vs. Virtual) - Past 12 months



Younger people living in Canada and equity-deserving populations are more likely to use virtual supports.

People living in Canada who are under the age of 55 (57%), members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities (55%), newcomers (52%), and racialized Canadians (66%) are more likely to use virtual mental health services, alone or alongside in-person supports.

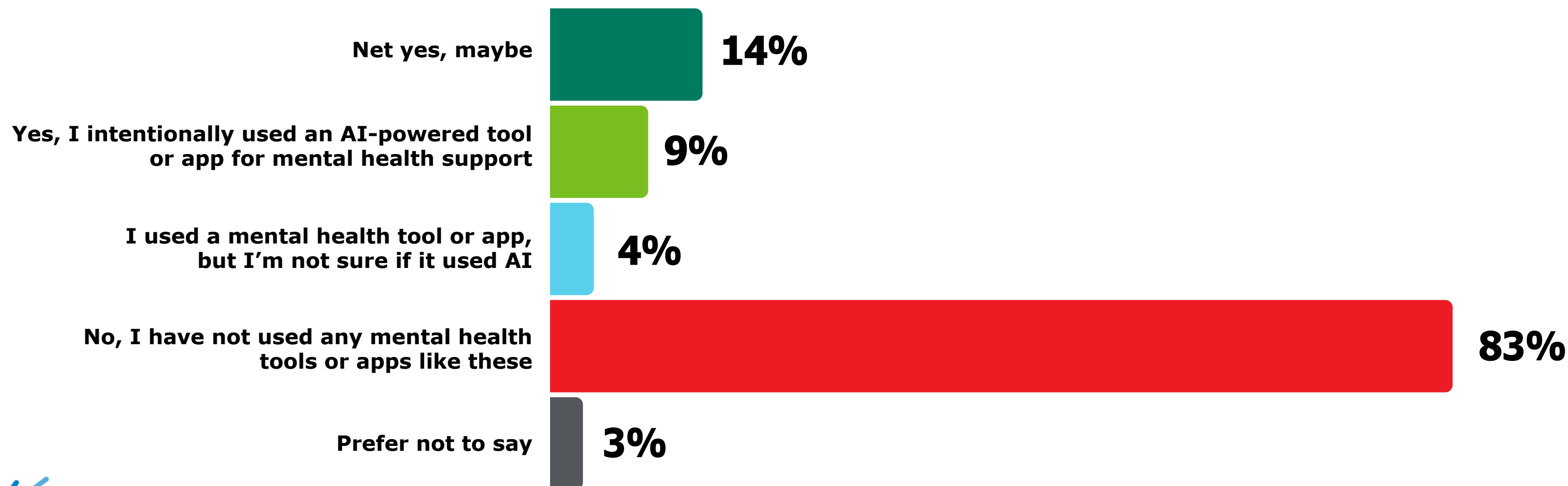
	Format of Mental Health Services Used (In-Person vs. Virtual) - Past 12 Months														
	Age 16-24		Age 25-34		Age 35-54		Age 55+		2SLGBTQI+		Time in Canada			Racialized Canadians	
Total	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Yes	No	5 years or less	6+ years	Born in Canada	Yes	No
54%	51%	53%	48%	46%	55%	42%	70%	66%	45%	56%	48%*	56%	57%	34%	58%
45%	48%	47%	52%	54%	46%	57%	30%	34%	55%	44%	52%*	44%	43%	66%	42%

* Caution, small base

1 in 7 People living in Canada have used AI for mental health support

Approximately 6 million people living in Canada have used AI for mental health support in the past year. 9% deliberately used AI tools, and a further 4% used tools that may have included AI features without being explicitly identified as such.

Use of AI Tools for Mental Health Support (Past 12 Months)



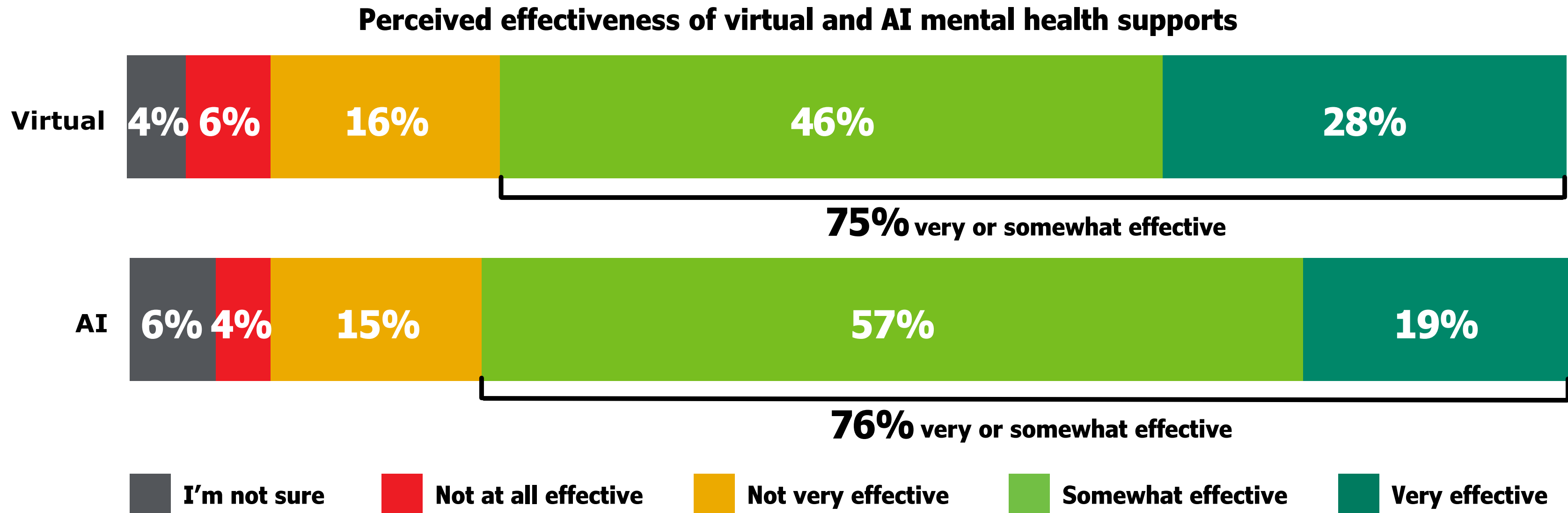
AI use for mental health support is more common among younger people living in Canada and equity-deserving groups

People in Canada under 35 (27%), men aged 25-34 (29%), members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities (20%), newcomers (28%), and racialized Canadians (23%) are more likely to use AI for mental health support.

		Use of AI Tools for Mental Health Support (Past 12 Months)															
		Age 16-24		Age 25-34		Age 35-54		Age 55+		2SLGBTQI+		Time in Canada			Racialized Canadians		
		Total	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Yes	No	5 years or less	6+ years	Born in Canada	Yes	No
AI supports		14%	25%	26%	29%	21%	14%	19%	3%	4%	20%	13%	28%	20%	12%	23%	12%

3 in 4 people who used AI or virtual mental health services report positive outcomes

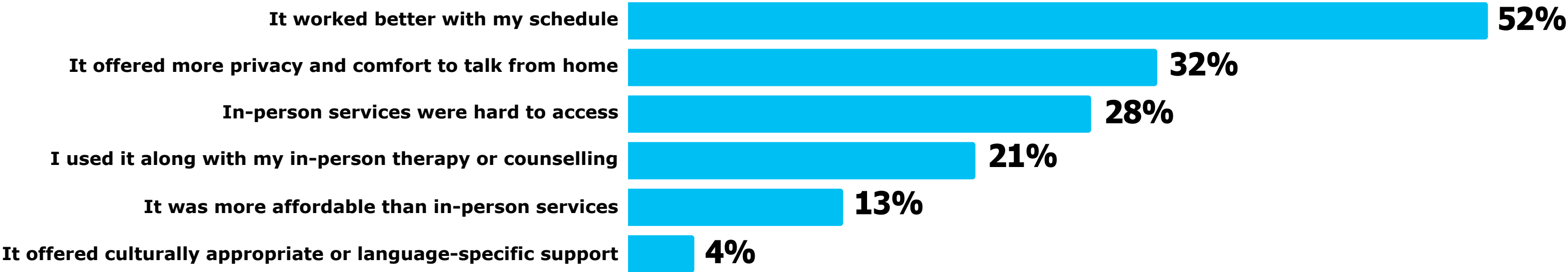
75% of those who used virtual mental health services and 76% of AI tool users say they were effective in helping them manage their mental health or emotional well-being, with 28% and 19% saying they were very effective, respectively.



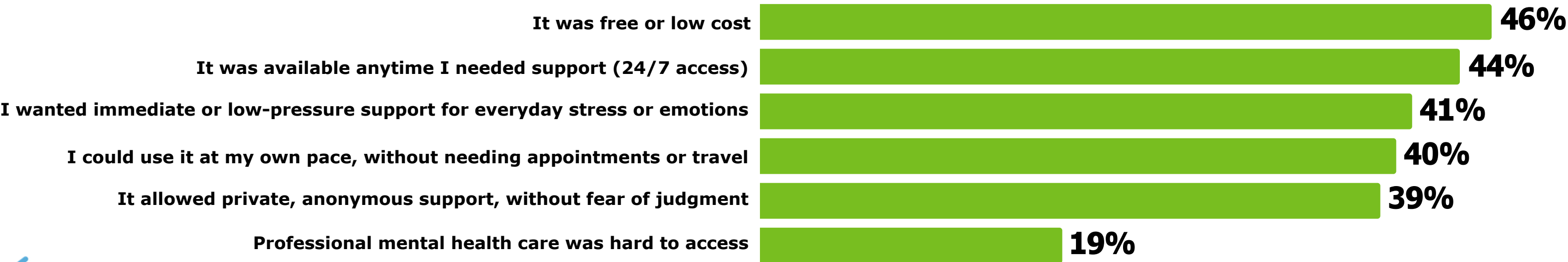
Virtual mental health and AI tools offer convenience and accessibility

Virtual mental health service users report better alignment with schedules (52%), greater privacy and comfort (32%), and the ability to access care when in-person options are unavailable (28%). People are drawn to AI tools because they are low or no-cost (46%), available 24/7 (44%), and offer immediate access (41%).

Reasons for using virtual mental health services



Motivations for using AI for mental health or emotional support



AI tools are used more for lower-intensity mental health supports

People use AI tools to support well-being (42%), companionship (36%), and mild stress (36%). AI is used less during periods of severe distress (20%), to support someone else (11%) or to help navigate mental health services (10%).

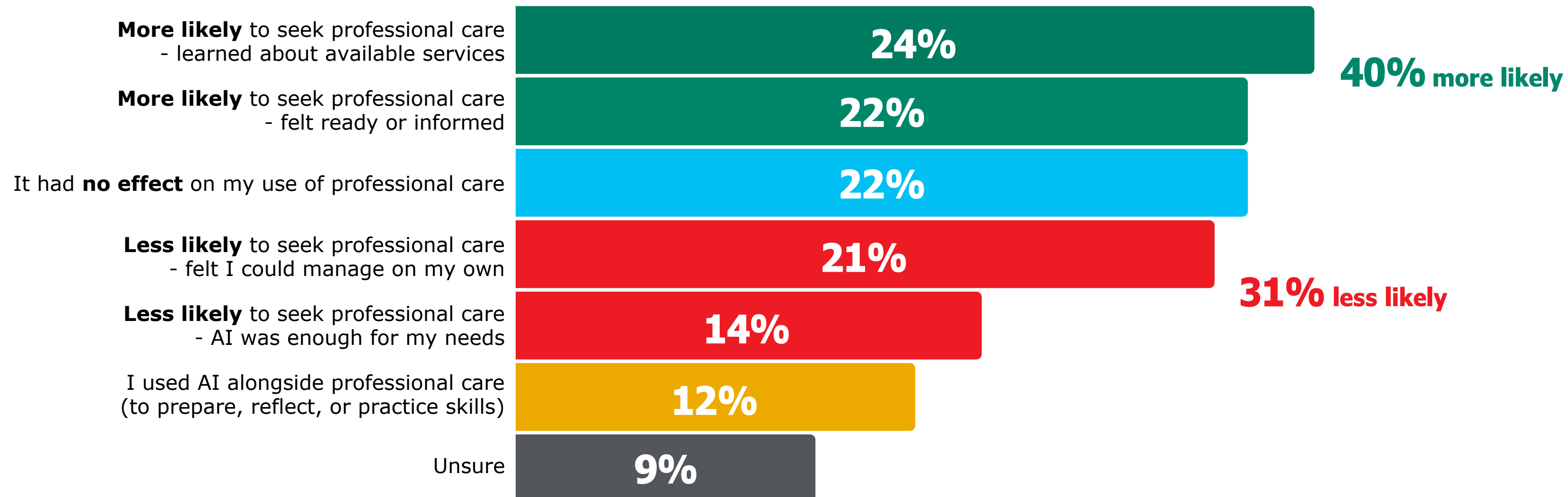
Reasons for using AI for mental health support



AI users may be more likely to seek professional mental health care

Users had differing views of how AI affected their use of professional mental health care. 40% were more likely to seek professional care, while 31% were less likely.

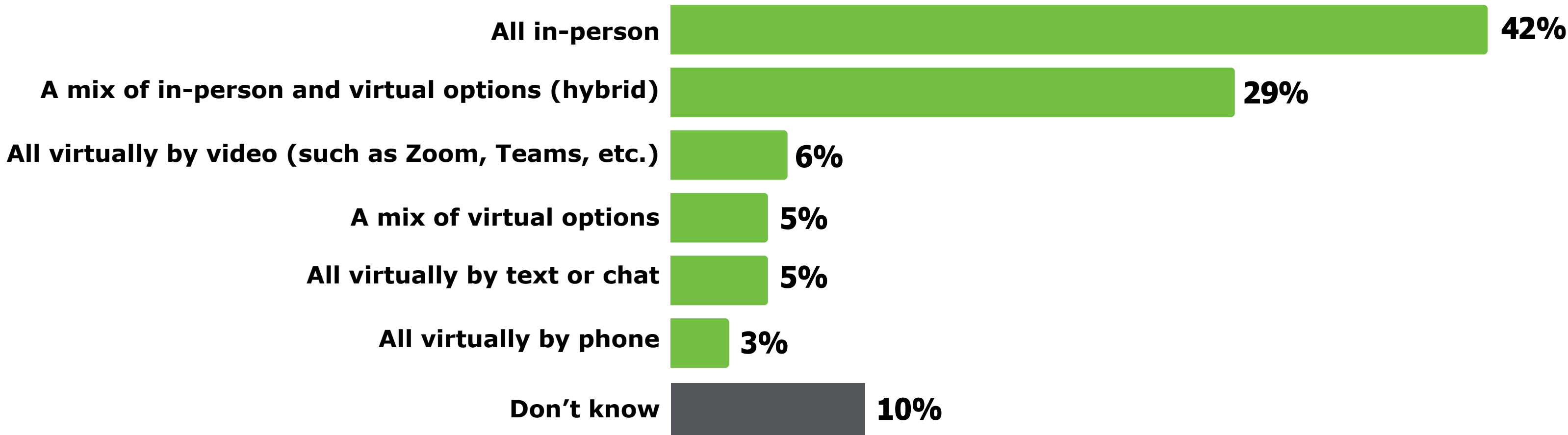
Impact of AI use on seeking professional mental health care



Hybrid and in-person mental health services are preferred

About 1 in 5 people living in Canada would prefer to access only virtual mental health services, while almost half (42%) would prefer only in-person services. 1 in 3 would choose a hybrid model combining virtual and in-person mental health services.

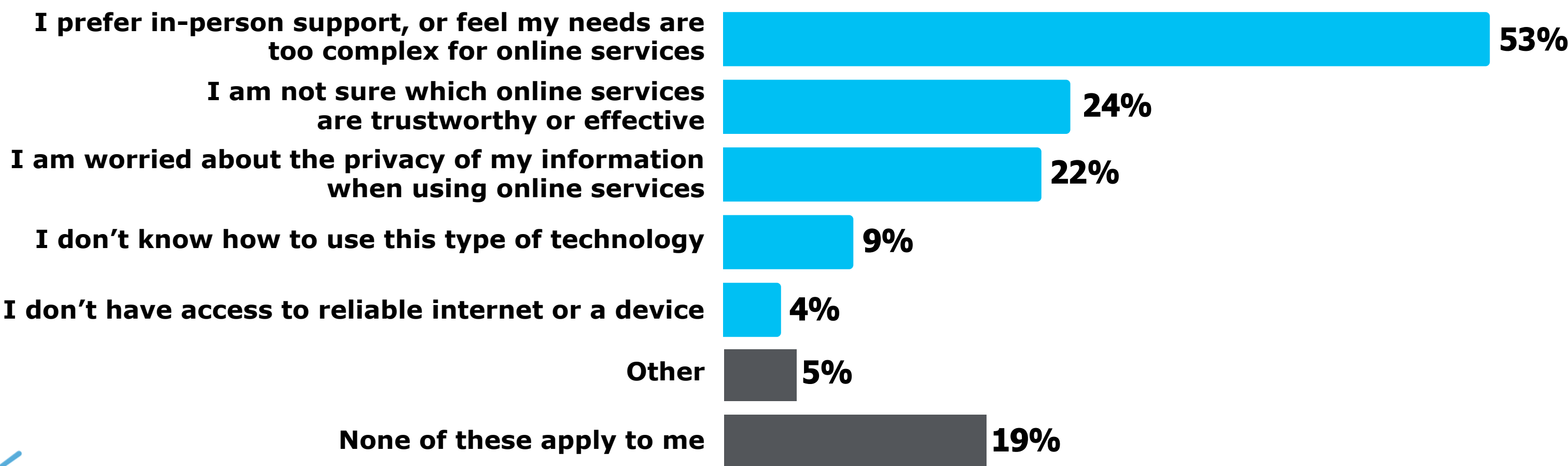
Preferred method of accessing mental health support



Those who accessed in-person services remain uncertain about the ability of online services to meet more complex mental health needs

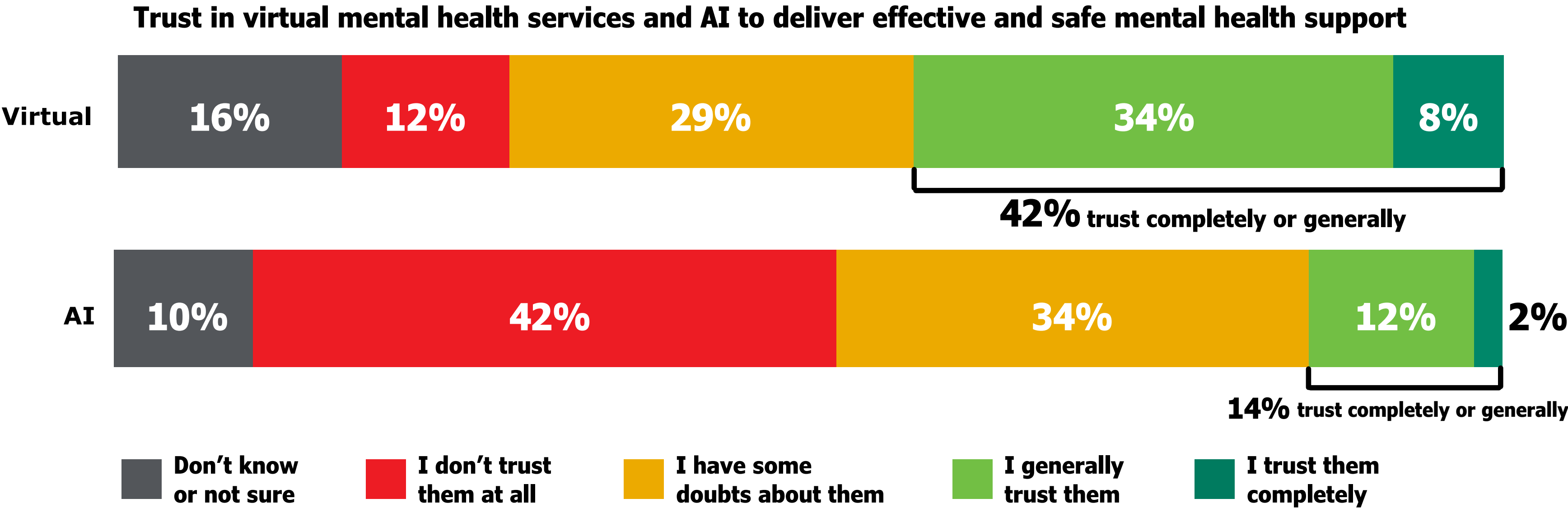
When asked about reasons for not using virtual services, about half of those who have received in-person mental health supports most often cite the belief that their mental health needs are too complex for online care (53%), uncertainty about which service to use (24%) and concerns about privacy (22%).

Barriers to using virtual mental health services instead of in-person care



Public trust in AI and virtual mental health services to deliver safe and effective support is limited

Fewer than half of people living in Canada (42%) say they trust virtual mental health services to deliver effective and safe mental health support, with only 8% trusting them completely. Trust is even lower for AI-based tools: 14% report some level of trust, and just 2% trust them completely.



Trust in AI and virtual mental health services is higher among young people and equity-deserving populations

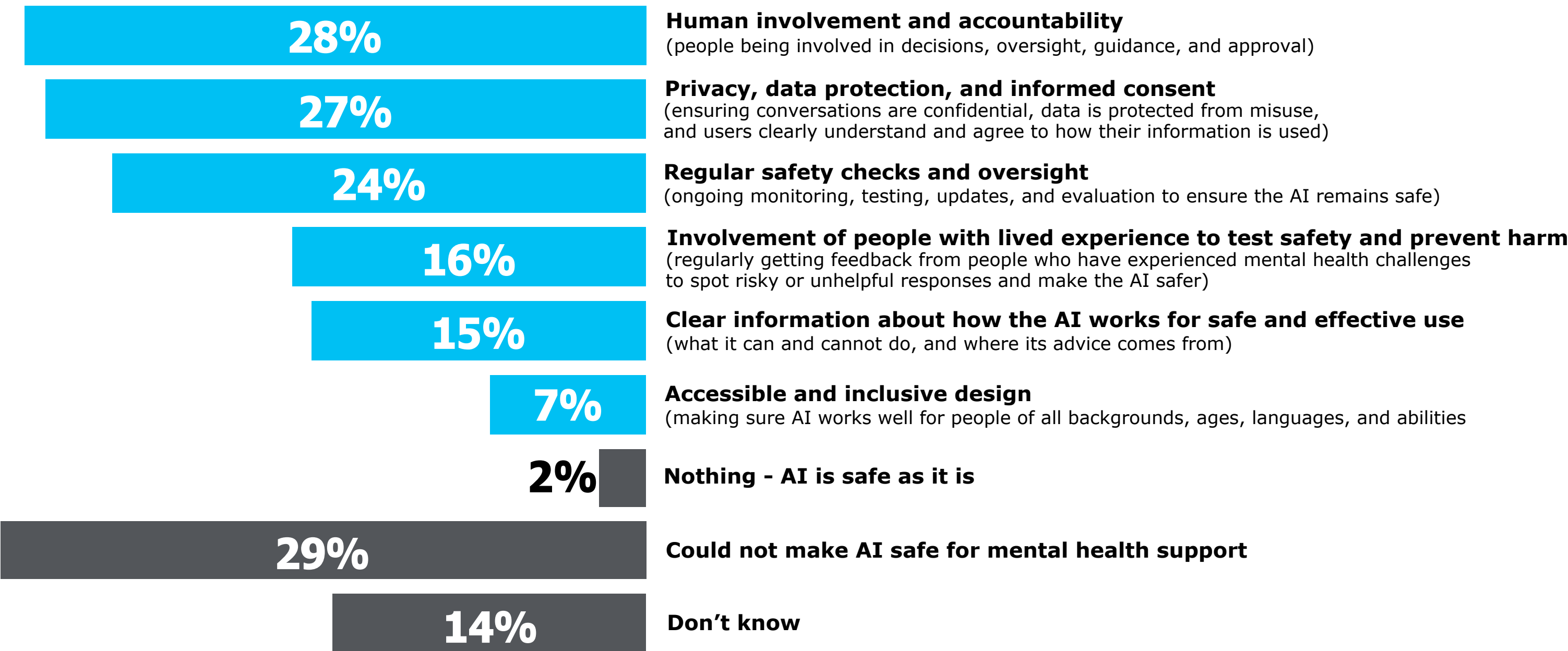
People living in Canada under 55 years of age, racialized Canadians, and men aged 25-34 show higher trust in both virtual mental health services and AI-based tools.

		Trust in virtual mental health services and AI to deliver effective and safe mental health support														
		Age 16-24		Age 25-34		Age 35-54		Age 55+		2SLGBTQI+		Time in Canada			Racialized Canadians	
	Total	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Yes	No	5 years or less	6+ years	Born in Canada	Yes	No
Virtual	42%	42%	44%	57%	56%	47%	52%	30%	32%	45%	42%	46%	46%	42%	48%	41%
AI	14%	17%	18%	30%	17%	16%	16%	7%	6%	10%	14%	27%	22%	11%	22%	12%

Human involvement, privacy, and oversight are priorities for safer AI tools.

When asked about how to make AI safer for mental health support, priority areas include human involvement and accountability (28%), privacy, data protections and informed consent (27%) and regular safety checks and oversight (24%). However, 1 in 3 respondents believe AI can't be made safe for mental health support.

Important improvements for safer AI mental health support





Conclusion

The findings presented in this report highlight significant opportunities for advancing quality digital mental health and AI-enabled tools, as well as their potential benefits for people living in Canada.

As virtual services and AI-enabled solutions continue to grow and evolve, the results indicate widespread use, with many reporting positive outcomes and perceiving these tools as effective in supporting their mental health. Engagement with AI and virtual mental health services is notably higher among men, youth, and equity-deserving groups, alongside a clear interest in hybrid models that combine human and digital supports.

At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of addressing remaining gaps in public trust and privacy concerns, as well as the need for greater human oversight. A collaborative, committed approach to advancing best practices for digital mental health and AI-enabled tools in Canada is needed.



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Ce document est disponible en français

Citation information

Suggested citation:
Mental Health Commission of Canada (2026),
The Role of Virtual Services and AI in Mental Health Care Across Canada
mentalhealthcommission.ca

ISBN: 978-1-77318-367-1

Legal deposit National Library of Canada

Financial contribution from



Health Canada

Santé
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The views represented herein solely represent the views of the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Production of this material is made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada.

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