

The Emotional Infrastructure Gap

*Why mental health support fails most people before it begins,
and what Xolace is building at the layer that comes first.*

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A quiet place to be human.



1. Introduction

Every year, hundreds of millions of people wake up carrying something they cannot name. Not a diagnosis. Not a crisis. Just a weight. A tightness. A low hum of something that feels wrong but has no word attached to it yet.

Most of them will not seek help. Not because help does not exist. Because they will never make it to the door.

The global mental health crisis is one of the most underdiscussed public health failures of our generation. Over one billion people are currently living with a mental health condition worldwide, yet in low-income countries fewer than 10 percent of them will ever receive care.[1] High-income countries spend up to \$65 per person on mental health each year. Low-income countries spend as little as \$0.04. The gap is not only financial. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 2 percent of people with major depression receive what clinical researchers call minimally adequate treatment.[2]

These numbers do not fully capture what is being lost. Behind every statistic is a person who reached for help and could not find it, or never reached at all because they did not yet know what they were reaching for.

That is the problem most mental health tools do not address. They are built for people who have already made a decision. Who have identified the problem, named it, and decided to act. They assume a readiness most people never reach. They build for the moment after, not the moment before.

The moment before is where most people live. It is the eleven o'clock moment when something sits on your chest and you do not know what to call it. When you open your phone to tell someone and find you have no words. When you type something and delete it, and carry it alone. Again.

Nothing has been built for that moment. Not properly. Not for the people who need it most.

Xolace was built for exactly that moment. Not as a therapy tool. Not as a crisis line. As the layer that comes before all of those things. The doorstep of mental health support, not the room inside it. This document explains what Xolace is, why we built it, the research behind it, and where it is going.

[1] World Health Organization. *World Mental Health Today and Mental Health Atlas 2024*. WHO Press, September 2025.

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240114487>

[2] Moitra, M. et al. *The global gap in treatment coverage for major depressive disorder in 84 countries from 2000 to 2019: a systematic review and Bayesian meta-regression analysis*. PLOS Medicine, 2022.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8846511>

2. The Problem: Why People Never Start

Most conversations about the mental health crisis focus on treatment. More therapists, more hospitals, more funding, better access. These matter. But they all begin at the wrong place. They begin at step three. The steps before that, the ones most people never get through, are where the real problem lives.

There are three barriers standing between a person and mental health support. They are rarely discussed together, but each one is enough to stop someone from ever getting help.

The first barrier is stigma.

In many parts of the world, admitting you are struggling emotionally carries a social cost most people are not willing to pay. This is especially true across Sub-Saharan Africa, where research among Ghanaian university students found that economic, social, and psychological stigma all significantly reduced the likelihood of seeking help.[3] In communities where resilience is not just admired but required, vulnerability can feel like failure. Stigma does not disappear because a service exists. It disappears when the cost of reaching for help is low enough that it stops feeling like a risk.

The second barrier is articulation.

This barrier receives the least attention and causes the most damage. Research on alexithymia, a word that means literally no words for feelings, shows that a significant portion of people genuinely struggle to identify and describe their own emotional states, and that this difficulty is linked to higher rates of anxiety and depression.[4] It is not that people do not want to share what they feel. It is that they do not have the language for it yet. This is the barrier Xolace was built to address. Most tools ask people to name what they feel before they can use them. Xolace gives people the words first.

The third barrier is access.

Even for those who overcome stigma and find the words, reaching support in low and middle income countries is severe. There is roughly one psychiatrist per one million people in low-income countries, compared to more than ten per 100,000 in high-income nations.[5] A study across African universities found the three biggest barriers students face are a lack of mental health literacy, financial cost, and the absence of anyone to guide them through the process.[6] For most, by the time they navigate all three, they have given up.

What this means in practice

A young person in Koforidua, Accra, Lagos, or Nairobi is carrying something. They feel it. They do not have a name for it. The social cost of admitting it feels too high. The nearest professional is out of reach. And every tool built to help them assumes they have already named it, decided to address it, and found someone to talk to. They have not. Most people have not. So they carry it, quietly, until it becomes harder to carry.

This is the gap Xolace exists to close. Not by replacing therapy or professional support, but by being present at the layer where none of those things have started yet. The layer where the feeling is real but unnamed. Where something is needed before anything else can begin.

[3] Afriyie, E.K. et al. Effects of stigma on help-seeking behavior in mental health: a community-based study in Ghana's Sekyere South District in the Ashanti region. BMC Public Health, 2025. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC12835938>

[4] Wiginton, K. What Is Alexithymia? Medically reviewed by Smitha Bhandari, MD. WebMD, July 2025. <https://www.webmd.com/brain/alexithymia>

[5] Roser, M. Mental health care is scarce everywhere, but in poor countries, it barely exists. Our World in Data, March 2026. <https://ourworldindata.org/data-insights/mental-health-care-is-scarce-everywhere-but-in-poor-countries-it-barely-exists>

[6] Wao, H. et al. Availability, accessibility, and utilization of mental health services or support among university students in Africa: a mixed methods systematic review with meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. BMC Psychiatry, 2025. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12613773>

3. Why the Queue Never Shrinks

The barriers in the last section raise a question they do not answer. If the problem is access, why does building more therapy never seem to fix it? More therapists are trained. More clinics open. Waitlists get shorter. And yet the queue for mental health support never really shrinks. Why?

Because almost everyone treats this as a speed problem when it is really a source problem.

The usual response to the crisis is to move people through the system faster. More appointments. Faster triage. Shorter waitlists. All of that assumes the queue is long because the line moves slowly. But the queue is not growing because service is slow. It is growing because almost nobody helps a person before a feeling turns into something that needs a diagnosis.

Most people are not born with a mental health disorder. What they carry is mostly things that piled up, unnamed and unaddressed, until they became something with a clinical name. So you can speed up the queue all you want. New people keep entering it at the same rate, because nothing is stopping them from needing it in the first place. The line never shrinks. It just moves people through faster while filling up just as fast.

Xolace sits before that queue. At the moment before something has a name. Catch it there, before it grows into something bigger, and a large share of people never join the queue at all. They find the words early, they deal with the feeling, and it never becomes the crisis that would have put them in line months later.

This is the idea underneath everything else in this document. We are not trying to make the mental health system faster. We are trying to reduce how many people ever need it. For those who do need professional care, that care is still the goal, and we help them reach it. But the real measure of success is not how quickly the system moves people through. It is how many people never needed the system at all.

4. The Articulation Problem: A New Way to See It

There is a moment most people have experienced but almost nobody has named. You are trying to explain how you feel. You know something is there. You can feel its weight. But when you reach for the words, you find nothing. The feeling is real. The language is not. So you say you are fine, or you say nothing at all, and the conversation moves on, and you carry the thing alone because you could not find a way to hand it to anyone.

This is not a personal failure. It is a structural one.

The gap between feeling and language

In psychology, there is a term for the inability to identify and describe your own emotions. Alexithymia. From Greek, it means literally no words for feelings. But the problem is not limited to a diagnosis. It sits on a spectrum, and it is far more common than most people realise.

Research in emotional psychology has shown that the ability to name feelings with precision, what researchers call emotional granularity, is directly linked to mental health outcomes. People who can tell

the difference between feeling anxious and feeling embarrassed, between sad and disappointed, recover from hard experiences faster and feel better than those who feel everything as a broad, blurry sense of being bad or stressed. Naming what you feel is not just a communication skill. It is a mental health skill. And most people have never been taught it.

The deleted message

There is a specific moment that shows this better than any statistic. Someone picks up their phone late at night. They open a chat with someone they trust. They start typing. They write something honest, close to the real weight of what they are carrying. They read it back. And then they delete it. All of it. They put the phone down. They go to sleep. The next morning someone asks how they are. They say they are fine.

This happens millions of times every day. It is not a failure of courage. It is a failure of language. The person could feel the thing. They could not find words good enough to say it. And without the words, they could not share it. And without sharing it, they carried it alone.

Why existing tools miss this

Most mental health apps begin with a prompt. How are you feeling today? Rate your mood from one to ten. Choose from this list of emotions. These are fine for someone who already has the language for their experience. For someone who does not, they are a dead end. Being asked to name something you cannot name is not a helpful invitation. It is a reminder that you do not have the words yet.

Xolace does not begin with a prompt. It begins with whatever you can give, however incomplete. The Mirror, which is the core of Xolace, takes what a person brings and reflects back the words that fit. Not a diagnosis. Not a label. Just the words for what was already there, given back, so the person can finally hold it.

Research in neuroscience has shown that the simple act of putting a feeling into words reduces how strong it feels and helps a person steady themselves.[7] Naming what you feel does not just describe the experience. It changes it. That is the foundation the Mirror is built on. Not therapy. Not advice. The one thing that has to happen before any of those can begin. The words.

[7] Lieberman, M.D. et al. Putting feelings into words: affect labelling disrupts amygdala activity. *Psychological Science*, 2007. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17489452>

5. How Xolace Started and Why We Pivoted

There is a lesson taught at Y Combinator Startup School that every founder needs to hear before they build anything. Michael Seibel, a partner at Y Combinator and co-founder of Justin.tv, which became Twitch, and Socialcam, describes a certain kind of founder. The kind who wants to be Steve Jobs. They see Steve Jobs as a genius who built great and iconic products, and they want to be exactly that, immediately. So they try to leap straight to it. They refuse to start small. They want to build something perfect from the very beginning, without the humble early work of shipping something simple and learning from it.

Seibel calls these founders fake Steve Jobs. His point is that wanting to be great is not the problem. The problem is believing you can get there without starting from somewhere. Every real builder begins with something small and imperfect and makes it better over time.

Xolace was not built by fake Steve Jobs. When the four of us started building at Koforidua Technical University, we did not begin with the Mirror. We began with something much simpler, and as it turned out, much less right.

We built a community sharing platform. The idea was simple. People were carrying things they could not say out loud in their real lives. Give them an anonymous space to share those things, connect with others going through the same, and the weight would lighten. Anonymity was the key, we thought. Remove the fear of being seen and people would open up.

We shipped it. People came. And then they went quiet. Not because the platform was broken. Because we had misread the barrier. We thought people were not sharing because they were afraid of being seen. The truth was harder. They were not sharing because they did not have the words. They could feel the weight of what they were carrying. They could not name it. And without a name for it, they could not hand it to anyone.

Paul Graham writes that the way to get startup ideas is to notice problems you have yourself. We had lived this problem for years. But we had misread which part of it was the real one. The pivot was not a business decision. It was a correction. We stopped building what we assumed people needed and started building what they actually needed. We stopped building a sharing platform and started building something that meets people before the words exist.

That product is the Mirror. And everything Xolace is today came from being willing to be wrong about the first version, to ship something real, and to follow where the truth led. We are still improving it, and we always will be. That is not a weakness. It is the only honest way to build something that serves people in their most vulnerable moments. You cannot imagine your way to that standard. You earn it, one session at a time.

[8] Seibel, M. *How to Build an MVP. Module 4: Planning an MVP, Lesson 2. Y Combinator Startup School.*

<https://www.startupschool.org/curriculum/how-to-plan-an-mvp>

[9] Graham, P. *How to Get Startup Ideas. Module 2: Getting and Evaluating Startup Ideas, Lesson 2. Y Combinator Startup School.*

<https://www.startupschool.org/curriculum/how-to-get-startup-ideas>

6. What Xolace Is

To understand Xolace, it helps to know the idea it was built around. The campfire. In earlier times, people gathered around a fire at night to share what was on their minds, to talk, to laugh, to be heard, and to feel less alone before they slept. That is the feeling Xolace was built to recreate in a digital space. A place to gather, to be honest, and to be human together. The people who use Xolace are called Campers. They come to the fire carrying something and looking for a place to set it down.

A Camper arrives carrying something. They may not know what it is. Instead of being asked to rate their mood or pick from a list of clinical labels, they are invited to say what is true, however incomplete. From there, Xolace helps them find the words for what they could not name on their own. Xolace is not therapy. Not a crisis line. Not an AI companion that keeps you talking. Not a social network of feeds and followers. It is the layer that comes before all of those things. The doorstep, not the room. It is made of connected parts that unfold in a natural order.

The Mirror

The Mirror is the core of Xolace. A Camper describes how they feel, either by writing or by voice, in words that come close to what they are carrying. The Mirror reflects it back in one to three clear sentences, giving language to something that was shapeless. It does not diagnose. It does not label. It does not hold a conversation or try to become a companion. It reflects once, gives the person the words, and steps back. The point is not to keep someone talking to an AI. It is to hand them the clarity they arrived without, so they can decide what to do with it.

The bet behind the design

It is worth saying plainly what Xolace is betting on, because it is the most unusual choice we have made. Most companies in this space bet one of two ways. Either that AI will eventually replace the human side entirely, or that human connection is too hard to grow, so you focus on the AI alone and leave the people out. We are betting on neither.

Our bet is that AI can get good enough to make human connection easier to reach, not to replace it. The AI is the preparation step. It clears the things that stop people from reaching other humans in the first place, not having the words, not knowing where to go, not feeling ready. Then it steps back and points the person toward a real connection. The Mirror prepares. The Echo reminds you that you are not alone. The Trusted Bridge and the Xolacers carry you to a real person. The AI is the groundwork. The human connection is the point. Neither works as well without the other.

Venting

There is something people have done for as long as anyone can remember. When you have carried something heavy for too long, you write it on a piece of paper and burn it. You watch the words curl into flame and rise as smoke, and something in you loosens. Venting on Xolace carries that same feeling. It is focused on voice. A Camper speaks, out loud, letting go of whatever they have been holding. There is no reflection at the end. No response required. Just the old, simple relief of letting the thing out and watching it leave you, the way paper turns to flame and smoke at the fire.

The Echo

Finding the words is powerful, but people also need to know they are not alone. The Echo does that, and it is genuinely human. Echoes are not generated. They come from real Campers. When a Camper chooses to share their moment, it becomes an anonymous Echo that another Camper might come across later. There is no identity attached. No name, no profile, nothing that traces back to the person. But it is real. It came from someone who sat by the same fire and chose to let their words be seen so another person would feel less alone. When a Camper meets an Echo, they are not reading content. They are receiving a piece of another person's truth. Recognition. The quiet realization that someone else has stood exactly where they are standing, and that what they feel is human, shared, and survivable.

The closing choice

After the session and the Echo, the Camper reaches a choice, and Xolace hands the moment back to them. There are three paths. They can carry on, closing the app with more clarity than they arrived with. They can cross the Trusted Bridge, where Xolace helps them shape their words into a message they can send someone in their real life. Xolace never sends it for them and nothing happens automatically. It helps write

the message, and the person sends it themselves, in their own name, when they are ready. Or they can choose to talk to a Xolacer, when reflection is not enough and they want a real person to listen.

Xolacers

Xolacers are trained peer listeners. They are not therapists, and Xolace is clear about that. They are people trained to listen without judgment, to hold space for what someone is carrying, and to be there without trying to fix. Becoming a Xolacer is not automatic. Anyone can apply, but not everyone qualifies. Applicants go through testing and interview rounds to see whether they have the care, the temperament, and the ability to hold space for someone in a vulnerable moment. A Camper can browse available Xolacers and ask for a private conversation. Nothing begins without consent. The conversation only starts when the Xolacer accepts.

The Safety layer

Safety is not something added on. It is part of how Xolace is built. When what someone writes suggests they may be in serious danger, including signs of self-harm or crisis, the platform responds differently. It does not carry on as though nothing has changed. It quietly surfaces real resources and points the person toward proper help. This is treated with the same seriousness as any other part of the product, because the moments it exists for are the ones that matter most.

Xolace Plus

Xolace Plus is an optional subscription that goes deeper for Campers who want more. It offers personalized patterns, personalized quotes and reflections, and insight into the emotional patterns that show up over time. It gives custom themes and a range of Mirror tones and voices. It raises the session limit, raises the venting limit, lets a Camper reach more Xolacers, and gives an unlimited session timeline. But the core is never locked away. The Mirror, venting, the Echo, the Trusted Bridge, and the ability to reach a Xolacer are all free. Xolace Plus adds depth for those who want it, but it never becomes the wall between a person and the help they came for.

7. Why Now: Four Things Coming Together

Good ideas are not enough on their own. Timing matters. Xolace can exist now, and could not have existed the same way ten years ago, because of four things that have come together at the same moment.

One. The crisis has reached a scale the world can no longer ignore.

In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic alone, the World Health Organization reported a 25 percent rise in anxiety and depression worldwide.[10] Demand has grown far faster than the systems meant to meet it. The gap between need and access has never been wider, and it is widest in the places Xolace was built to serve.

Two. Smartphones now reach the people who were never reached before.

For most of history, mental health support needed physical access. A clinic. An office. A professional within reach. That left out most people in low and middle income countries entirely. Today, phones are in the

hands of people across Africa who have never had access to any form of emotional support. The distribution problem that made mental health support impossible to scale has quietly been solved.

Three. Technology can now help people find the words, at scale, for the first time.

Helping a person turn a shapeless feeling into words was not something you could do at scale until recently. Now it is. This is what makes the Mirror possible. Not as a replacement for human care, but as a tool that can meet millions of people at the moment they cannot find the words, and hand those words back to them.

Four. Institutions are finally treating mental health as a priority.

Mental health is now named directly in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals under Goal 3, Good Health and Wellbeing. Universities, employers, governments, and development organizations are all starting to see that emotional wellbeing is a foundation, not a luxury. This creates a real and growing set of institutions actively looking for what Xolace offers.

Any one of these alone would not be enough. A crisis without reach cannot be addressed. Reach without the right tool is just a phone. A tool without institutional support has no path to the people who need it. But all four are true at once, right now. The need has never been greater. The reach has never been wider. The technology has finally caught up. And the institutions are finally ready. Xolace is not early and it is not late. It is exactly on time.

[10] World Health Organization. COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. WHO News Release, 2 March 2022. <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>

8. Building Infrastructure, Not Just a Product

Xolace is not being built to reach a finish line. It is being built to keep going.

The way we think about building was shaped by something Brian Chesky, the co-founder of Airbnb, has talked about. He describes building a company in three stages. The first is building the product and finding the fit between it and the people who need it. The second is building the company itself, hiring, earning revenue, turning a working product into a working business. The third is building the organization, where roles, teams, and leadership take shape and the company learns to run at scale.

But the part that matters most is what happens after the third stage. The best companies do not stop there. They use that stability as the ground to build the next thing. Airbnb began with letting people rent out rooms. It carried that through all three stages until it worked. Then it reached for more, experiences and beyond, building each new thing through the same three stages. It grew from a single product into an ecosystem, one layer at a time. Amazon is the clearest example. It began by selling books and never stopped building. In time it needed stronger systems to run itself, so it built those too, and what it built became one of the largest businesses in the world, a foundation countless other companies now run on.

This is exactly how Xolace intends to build. Right now, we are in the first stage. We are proving the product and learning from every Camper who arrives, sharpening the Mirror, the Echo, venting, and the human

connection layer until they fit the people we serve. As that foundation settles, we will build the company around it, and then the organization that can carry it.

And then we will not stop. We will take up the next layer that mental health needs, and build it from the first stage again. And the next after that. Each new layer carried through the same three stages. Each one making Xolace do more for the people who depend on it.

This is what we mean when we call Xolace emotional infrastructure. Not one app that ends when it works, but a foundation that keeps growing until everything a person needs for their mental health can be reached in a single place. The way businesses run on the systems Amazon built, and travelers move through the platform Airbnb built, Xolace is being built to become the thing the mental health of a generation runs on. A product is finished when it works. Infrastructure keeps growing for as long as people need it. Xolace is being built to keep growing, and to keep caring, for a very long time.

9. Privacy and Trust

We built Xolace to hold what people cannot say anywhere else. That means trust is not a feature to us. It is the whole foundation. If someone cannot trust us with what they are carrying, then nothing else we have built matters. This is why we did not add privacy to Xolace later. We built it into how the platform works from the very beginning. Our rule is simple. What you share with Xolace belongs to you, and to no one else.

Anonymous by design

On Xolace, you are not a profile. We do not ask you to build a public identity, collect followers, or attach your name to what you feel. What you share is kept separate from who you are at the level of the system itself. When a Camper chooses to share a moment as an Echo, it carries no identity with it. No name, no account, nothing that traces back to the person. We made it anonymous in the design itself, not as a setting you switch on, because we did not want anyone to have to trust a toggle. We wanted them to trust the way the whole thing is built.

Encrypted and protected

Everything you share with us is encrypted, both while it travels and while it is stored. We treat what people bring to Xolace with the seriousness that any system handling deeply personal information should. Because that is what this is. It is some of the most private information a person has, and we handle it that way.

No ads, no selling of your data

We do not run on advertising, and we will never sell your data. This is a deliberate choice about what kind of company we want to be. The moment a platform starts making money from attention, or from selling what it knows about people, its interests quietly turn against the very people it claims to serve. We refuse that. The trust of the people who use Xolace is worth more to us than any money we could make by breaking it.

Safety without watching over people

We include a safety layer that responds when what someone writes suggests they may be in real danger. We built it to protect people, not to watch them. It is not surveillance. It is the difference between a space that quietly leaves someone alone in a crisis and one that makes sure real help is within reach at the

moment it matters most. For us, safety and privacy are not in conflict. They come from the same place. Treating the person, and whatever they are carrying, with care.

We know trust is not something you claim. It is something you earn, slowly, and can lose in an instant. Every decision we make about how data is handled, how we keep people anonymous, and how safety works comes back to one goal. That you can come to Xolace, say the truest and most vulnerable thing you are carrying, and know, without a second thought, that it is safe with us. That certainty is what makes everything else possible.

10. Conclusion

We started Xolace because we kept running into the same moment ourselves. Something heavy, sitting on the chest, with no words for it and nowhere to put it. We looked for something that could help, and found that nothing existed. Not for us, and not for the millions of people around us carrying the same thing in silence. So we built it. Four students at Koforidua Technical University, starting from somewhere, learning as we went, and refusing to stop.

Everything in this document comes down to one belief. That the hardest part of mental health is not treatment. It is the distance most people never cross to reach it. The stigma. The missing words. The fact that almost nobody gets help before things pile up into a crisis. We built Xolace to stand in that gap. To be the place people can reach first, before the words exist, before it becomes too heavy to carry alone.

We asked ourselves a simple question as a team. If Xolace wins, what happens? Our answers, put together, are the clearest picture of why we do this.

Andrew put it as freedom. A place where people no longer have to hide what they feel, where they finally have the clarity and the freedom to say it.

Acquah put it as trust. Mental health becomes something known and spoken. When you feel something inside, you know there is a place you can go, and that the support you need will come.

Somuah put it as purpose. A dream fulfilled. Making an impact in our society, on this continent, and in the world, by building something real to solve a genuine human problem.

Nathaniel put it as prevention. Fewer people ever reach the crisis point that puts them in the queue for help, because we catch the feeling early, before it grows into something that needs the system at all.

Freedom. Trust. Purpose. Prevention. Different words for the same thing. A world where mental health is no longer carried alone in silence.

We know we are early, and that building infrastructure for something as big and as human as mental health is the work of many years. We are ready for that. We did not build Xolace to reach a finish line. We built it to keep going, for as long as people need somewhere to turn.

The most important thing is to be able to name what you are carrying. Once you can name it, you can begin to do something with it. That is what Xolace gives people. The words. And with the words, everything that becomes possible after them.

A quiet place to be human. For the moments that do not have a name yet. That is what we are building. And we are not going to stop.