MARLUC

CASE STUDY · MARLUC SYNOPSIS

NEDA Tessa chatbot withdrawn

IMPLEMENTED 2022–2023 · CHARITIES AND NONPROFITS · US · BAND F · REVERSED

VERSION 1.0 · PUBLISHED 25 NOVEMBER 2026 · UPDATED 25 NOVEMBER 2026 · FACTS CHECKED 25 NOVEMBER 2026

An eating disorders charity closed its long-running helpline and promoted a chatbot, Tessa, then took Tessa down after users reported it gave weight-loss and dieting advice.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

This is MarLuc's summary and grading of publicly available sources, for information only. It is not investment, legal, financial or professional advice, and should not be relied on for any decision. Readers must validate it against the original sources and, where appropriate, challenge its conclusions.

Facts and figures are as reported by the sources listed below, which may be incomplete, self-reported or out of date. Check the original source before relying on any figure.

The impact band, proof marker and SEAM view are MarLuc's opinion. The organisation is not a MarLuc client and has not reviewed or endorsed this synopsis. Names and trademarks belong to their owners.

NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

What went wrong: AI output or malfunction; Weak oversight or controls.

AI and automation used: Chatbot, originally rule-based, to which an operator added a generative question and answer feature.

Implemented: 2022–2023. Grade: band F, Failure, Reversed.

Headline result, as reported: NEDA disabled its Tessa chatbot on 30 May 2023 after users reported weight-loss advice; NEDA and the chatbot's operator gave different accounts of whether the generative feature was agreed

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 3 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA). US nonprofit supporting people affected by eating disorders. In 2023 it closed a helpline that had run for more than 20 years and promoted the Tessa chatbot as a prevention resource. Headcount and income: Not reported. Canvas block: 8. Governance and risk. Also 3. Customers and proposition, 6. Data and technology.

Business challenge

The challenge. NEDA decided to close its helpline after "3 years of analysis" and to invest in more online resources, its chief executive told NBC News; NPR reports NEDA said the volume and severity of contacts were not sustainable. NEDA later said the decisions about the helpline and

Who implemented it

Cass (X2AI) (Software vendor): Operated Tessa for NEDA as a free service..
Dr Barr Taylor and Dr Ellen Fitzsimmons Craft (University or research lab): Led the team that built the original rule-based Tessa, funded by NEDA..

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: T1 Chat assistants. Deployment: Vendor SaaS. Vendors and products: Cass (also reported as X2AI), Tessa.

Where it was built in: A chatbot on NEDA's website, operated by Cass as a free service to NEDA.

What changed

Before: a human helpline and a rule-based chatbot. After: the helpline closed by a separate decision, and the chatbot was taken offline less than 24 hours after the screenshots reached NEDA. Usage and outcome figures: Not reported. [1] [2] [3]

Cost of failure

Cost of failure: Not reported. The sources give no damages, fines, refunds or write-offs. The helpline, closed by a separate decision, ceased operations on 1 June 2023, two days after Tessa was taken down, per NBC News.

What it saved

Not reported [1] [2] [3]

Governance and control

NEDA's chief executive says NEDA was never advised of the generative feature and that the advice was against NEDA policy; Cass's chief executive says the change was part of NEDA's contract. NEDA says Tessa underwent rigorous testing for several years before launch. NEDA was aware of some problems months earlier: in October 2022 it passed along screenshots of Tessa recommending "healthy" snacks, and the language was removed. Accountable owner: Not reported.

S2 · Accountable owner · Not reported
Not reported who at NEDA owned the chatbot; the chief executive spoke for the charity. [1]

A1 · Safe use · Claimed
The original design kept responses prewritten because 'AI isn't ready for this population', per its creator. [2]

A2 · Human in the loop · Not reported
Not reported whether any person reviewed generated answers.

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Claimed
NEDA says Tessa underwent rigorous testing for several years; the problems were publicised by outside users. [3]

A4 · Vendor AI · Missing (independent source shows it was absent)
NEDA's chief executive said NEDA was never advised of the generative feature the operator added; the operator's chief executive said the change was part of NEDA's contract. Neither account describes NEDA reviewing the feature before it went live. [1]

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
Not reported.

A6 · Standards and regulation · Not reported
Not reported.

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– NEDA took Tessa down less than 24 hours after screenshots reached it, per NPR.

– The "healthy snack" language reported in October 2022 was quickly removed, per NPR.

– The original rule-based design was kept narrow on purpose, per one of its creators.

DID NOT

– Users reported advice to lose 1 to 2 pounds a week, eat no more than 2,000 calories a day and keep a deficit of 500 to 1,000 calories a day.

– NEDA was aware of some issues months before: in October 2022 it passed along screenshots in which Tessa advised avoiding "unhealthy" snacks, per NPR.

– NEDA and Cass disagree about whether the generative feature was agreed; NPR reports both accounts.

UNPROVEN

– Whether any user was harmed beyond the reported conversations.

– Which party approved the generative feature.

– Whether the generative feature or prewritten language produced the October 2022 reply; Cass says it was prewritten, the creators deny writing it.

Timeline

Feb 2022 Tessa launches quietly, per NEDA's chief executive [3]

Oct 2022 NEDA passes along screenshots in which Tessa advised a user to avoid "unhealthy" snacks; the language is removed [1]

Mar 2023 NEDA's chief executive tells helpline volunteers NEDA will pivot to the expanded use of AI-assisted technology, Tessa [1]

May 2023 Sharon Maxwell publishes screenshots of weight-loss advice from Tessa; NEDA announces on 30 May that it has taken Tessa down [1]

Jun 2023 Helpline ceases operations; NEDA says it will not relaunch Tessa until everything is ironed out [3]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: F, Failure. Proof: Reversed. Level of change: Not graded.

No level assessed: band F, a withdrawn deployment after reports of harmful advice to a high-risk group. Marked reversed, as no court or regulator found fault.

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The sources point to the join between the charity and its vendor: a generative feature was added to a chatbot designed with prewritten answers, and the two organisations disagree about whether that change was agreed. Problem language had also appeared in October 2022, which Cass says was prewritten. The helpline closure happened in the same period, so the sources do not separate the chatbot's part from the wider service decision. A leadership team should ask who must approve a model change in a vendor's product, and what stays available to users if the bot is withdrawn.

1. Require written approval for any model change by a vendor.
2. Test high-risk topics again after every upgrade.
3. Keep a human service running until a replacement is proved.

Evidence

Score 2 of 4. Independent reporting: NPR and NBC News, with statements from NEDA, its operator and the chatbot's creators; no court or regulator finding.

Evaluation method. Press reporting with attributed statements from NEDA, Cass and the creators. No regulator or court finding.

Sources disagree. NEDA's chief executive says NEDA was never advised of the generative AI changes; Cass's chief executive says they were part of NEDA's contract. They also differ on the October 2022 "healthy snack" reply: Cass says it was prewritten language, while one of the creators says her team did not write it. NBC News reports Tessa was set to completely replace the phone line by 1 June 2023; NEDA's chief executive said it was never meant to replace the helpline, and NEDA later said the two decisions had become conflated. NEDA's chief executive said Cass reported a 600% surge in traffic and bad actors trying to trick Tessa.

Status. Closed: Tessa was disabled on 30 May 2023 and NEDA said it would not relaunch until the problems were fixed. Later status: Not reported in the sources opened.

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/neda-tessa-chatbot

[1] NPR: An eating disorders chatbot offered dieting advice, raising fears about AI in health
https://www.npr.org/2023/06/08/1180838096/an-eating-disorders-chatbot-offered-dieting-advice-raising-fears-about-ai-in-hea

[2] NPR (All Things Considered transcript): Eating disorder helpline takes down chatbot after it gave weight loss advice
https://www.npr.org/2023/06/08/1181131532/eating-disorder-helpline-takes-down-chatbot-after-it-gave-weight-loss-advice

[3] NBC News: National Eating Disorders Association pulls chatbot after users report harmful advice
https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/neda-pulls-chatbot-eating-advice-rcna87231

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) website: https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

Version 1.0 · Published 25 November 2026 · Updated 25 November 2026 · Facts checked against sources 25 November 2026 · Downloaded 26 November 2026. This PDF may be out of date: the latest version, and a way to report an error or a better source, is at https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/neda-tessa-chatbot

VERSION HISTORY

v1.0 25 November 2026 First published