Developing an Innovative Mental Health Communication Resource for Professionals

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Background

It can be quite a challenge to communicate the concepts of psychiatric phenomenology to patients who have intellectual disabilities; to those without English-language skills and to people with literacy difficulties. However, the availability of 'easy-to-understand' symbols to conduct a mental state examination is limited.
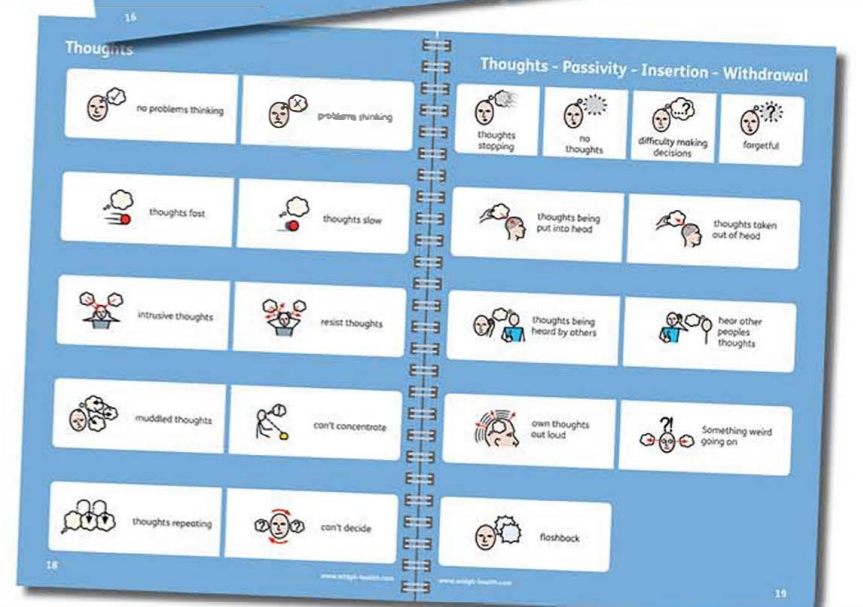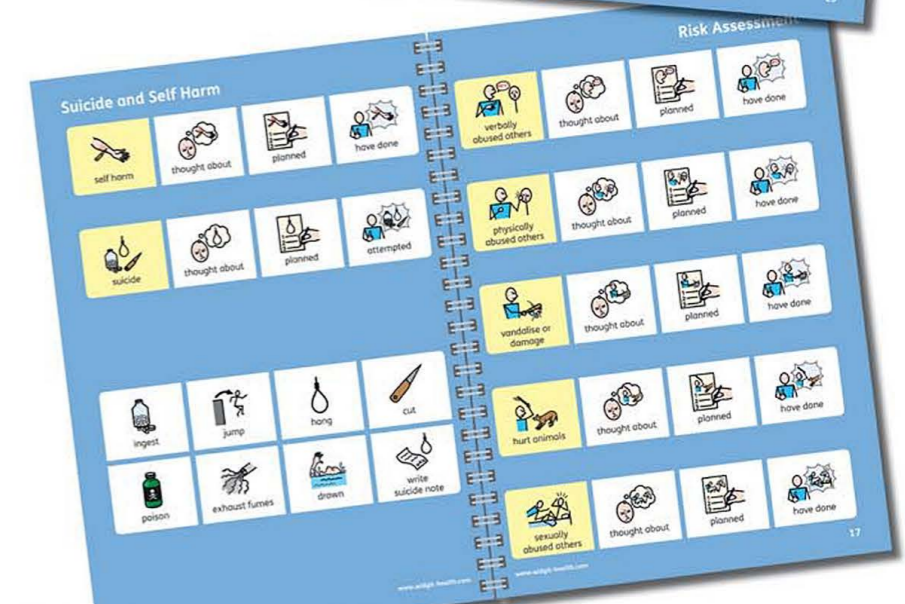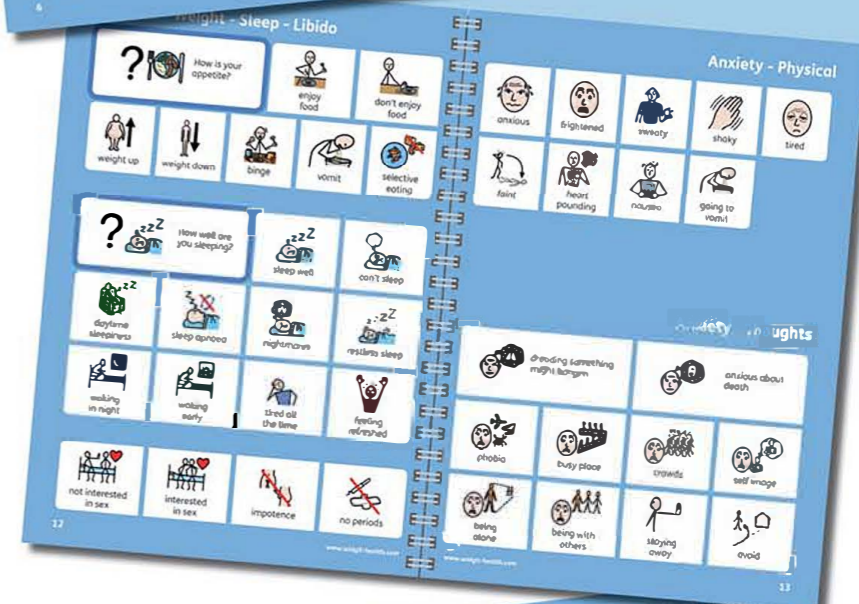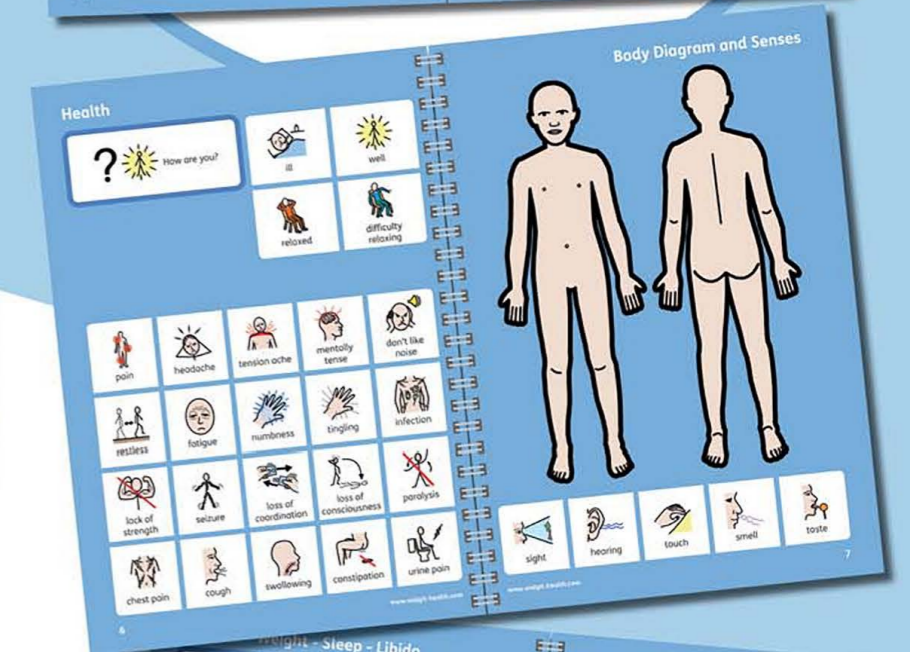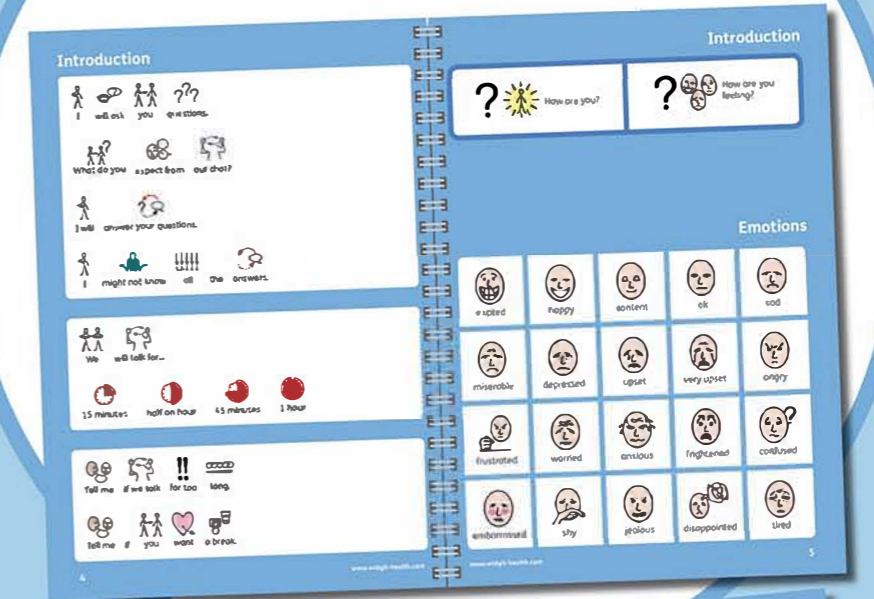
Aim

To address this gap, the medical authors worked with the communication and design team at Widgit Software; a company that has developed symbols over the last 30 years for use in a wide variety of settings from Education to Health and which have been published in multiple countries worldwide.

The team at Widgit has created a 'one stop' symbol resource to support mental health professionals to help them communicate more easily with their patients. Using terminology derived from the present state examination, clinical experience and the widely- accepted structure of the mental state examination, each phenomenological symbol was developed with a graphic designer.

These psychiatric symbols have been included in the library of existing Widgit Symbols to create a prototype booklet which follows the flow of a mental state examination. Key reference - Widgit Symbols (e.g. family members, time-lines) and rating scales were also included.

Once a prototype booklet was agreed, paper based versions and 'key card' symbols were printed to trial in clinical situations (work in progress). At the same time IT members of the Widgit team have created an electronic version of the booklet enabling symbols to be seen individually; and enabling these symbols to be used to create bespoke documents (using SymWriter 2). The Psychiatric Communication Books with Widgit Symbols are a dynamic resource which can be updated and modified according to feedback from wider clinical use.
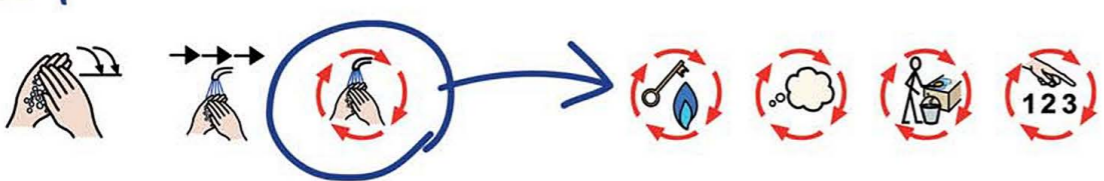
Communication Book

Implications and Limitations

Individuals have their own, specific communication needs, so no single system can meet the needs of all. However, a 'one stop' resource which provides a comprehensive collection of mental health related symbols will potentially benefit a wide range of patients. It may also enable health and legal professionals to enhance their communications; as well as those working in a variety of other settings, for example in the courts, penal establishments, and commercial companies.
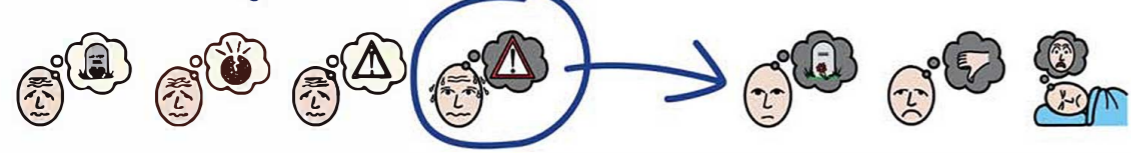
Symbol Development & Schema

compulsive behaviour...

negative thoughts...

binge

can't sleep

tv talks to you

neglect

special talents

special powers

intrusive thoughts

muddled thoughts

worthless

deserved punishment

More Information

If you would like to trial the Psychiatric Communication resource within your service, please contact Dr Geoff Marston:

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