

AAC Mental Health Communication Strategies in Voco Chat and Grid 3



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Session disclosure:

Smartbox Assistive Technology has developed, and patented licensed technology trademarked as Grid 3 and Grid for iPad. This presentation will focus primarily on page-sets within Grid 3 and Grid for iPad.

Agenda

- AAC and Mental Health
- What is Grid?
- Mental Health Supports in Grid
- Case Studies
- What's Missing / Next Steps

AAC and Mental Health

Mental Health Influenced by:

- Organic (brain organization) & Context
- Personal awareness – Theory of Mind
- Ability to express emotions, mental state, relative balance
- Social connections
- Practice

Why talk about mental health?

- Increasing societal acceptance – more people feel more able to talk about their mental health
- Not just about mental health, but wider aspects of identity – sexuality, gender, race
- Acknowledging and accepting one's own identity is critical to positive mental health

Do our AAC vocabularies reflect this?



Mental Health

AAC users have:

- High risk of abuse or trauma
- Less access to mental health services
- Less opportunity/practice talking about mental health
- More exposure to factors that contribute to mental health challenges



**ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES REPORT
FREQUENT MENTAL DISTRESS
ALMOST 5 TIMES AS OFTEN AS
ADULTS WITHOUT DISABILITIES**

Screen patients for mental health concerns

[CDC.GOV](https://www.cdc.gov)

bit.ly/MMWRMentalDistress

MMWR

Risk Factors

Watson, Raghavendra, & Crocker (2021)

- Experience of discrimination and stigma
- Physical health concerns
- Difficulty with starting and maintaining relationships
- Difficulty engaging in education and employment
- Lack of trusted or skilled communication partners
- Exposure to trauma and abuse
- Reduced self-determination
- Loneliness
- Difficulty establishing regulation strategies

What about the people around them?



Tools

Few appropriate tools and resources for diagnosis and therapy specific to those who use AAC



Confidence

People working with AAC users lack confidence to identify and support mental health needs



Knowledge

Mental health professionals are unlikely to have experience of those who use AAC



Gatekeeping


We may limit access to required vocabulary or opportunities to talk about it



Advocacy

We need to advocate for AAC users at the appropriate time as well as laying foundations for positive mental health

Why are AAC users at high risk?



Predisposition
as part of their
condition

Social risk
factors

Risk of abuse /
trauma

Identification,
diagnosis and
therapy barriers

Reduced
opportunities
and access to
vocabulary

Protective Factors

What supports mental health?

- Active participation in diverse communities
- Self determination
- Meaningful relationships
- Access to employment
- Access to communication around mental health/wellness



Mental Health Supports in Grid



Text
communication



Symbol
communication



Computer
control



Environment
control



Accessible
apps



Interactive
learning



Education

Supports in AAC Platforms (e.g., Grid)

- Vocabulary strategies specifically designed to incorporate words/messages around mental health
- Visual scales
- Symojis
- Email
- Text
- Social media: Facebook, Instagram, etc.
- Phone access

Case Studies

Case Study 1

21 year-old female

- Cerebral palsy
- Uses wheelchair
- Pervasive developmental delay
- Aging out of school environment
- Emerging literacy; using symbol and some text AAC
- Socially well supported at school

Questions to consider:

- What risk factors may come into play?
- What changes may she experience during transition will increase those risks?
- What AAC tools may be of benefit to her?

Case Study 2

8 year-old male

- Severe apraxia of speech
- Ambulatory
- No other diagnoses
- In kindergarten was very engaged, but has started to withdraw in class and social situations
- Using high tech core-based communication system

Questions to consider:

- Why might this child be withdrawing in elementary school?
- What risk factors may come into play?
- What AAC tools may be of benefit to him?

What's Missing / Next Steps

What is still missing?

- High tech devices won't fix everything. A mix of modalities is needed, personalized to each AAC user.
- Devices are difficult to obtain and require training.
- Improvements are needed to make devices more accessible in all environments.
- Work with mental health professionals to incorporate additional vocabulary and tools into AAC.
- Communication partner training is needed.
- Consider how vocabulary available in AAC systems may need to be reconsidered in terms of how we view those with severe psychological disorders (i.e. "crazy", "psycho", etc).

What is still missing?

- More research is needed AAC and mental health to help guide our vocabulary selection and inform training needs for both support teams and mental health professionals.
- [Curtis, Mohesky & Good \(2023\) The use of AAC in psychotherapy](#)
 - Article recently published in collaboration with someone who uses AAC and is a mental health professional

Stay in touch

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