

# Archives of Disease in Childhood

## The potential of using visual imagery to revolutionize measurement of emotional health

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Complete List of Authors:	Herring, Amy Mary Rose Craven, Michael; University of Nottingham, Institute of Mental Health Mughal, Faraz; Keele University, School of Primary, Community and Social care Rawsthorne, Mat; University of Nottingham, Institute of Mental Health Rees, Kathie Walker, Leanne Wolpert, Miranda; University College London, Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, Brain Sciences
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3 **Review Article: The potential of using visual imagery to revolutionize measurement of**  
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10  
11 **Authors**  
12

- 13 • Amy-Mary-Rose Herring (Corresponding author) – Canterbury, UK;  
14 amymaryroseherring@gmail.com  
15
- 16 • Dr Michael P. Craven – University of Nottingham, Institute of Mental Health,  
17 Nottingham, UK; michael.craven@nottingham.ac.uk  
18
- 19 • Dr Faraz Mughal – Keele University, School of Primary, Community and Social care  
20 Staffordshire, UK; f.mughal@keele.ac.uk  
21
- 22 • Mat Rawsthorne – University of Nottingham, Institute of Mental Health, Nottingham,  
23 UK; Mat.Rawsthorne@nottingham.ac.uk  
24
- 25 • Kathie Rees – Nottingham, UK; K.Rees@sherwood.notts.sch.uk  
26
- 27 • Leanne Walker – London, UK; leannewalker19 @googlemail .com  
28
- 29 • Professor Miranda Wolpert – University College London, Dept Clinical, Educational  
30 and Health Psychology, Brain Sciences, London, UK; miranda.wolpert@ucl.ac.uk  
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49 **Abstract**  
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51 Appropriate measurement of emotional health by all those working with children and young  
52 people is an increasing focus for professional practice.  
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54 Most of the tools used for assessment or self-assessment of emotional health were designed  
55 in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century using language and technology derived from pen and paper written  
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3 texts. But, are they fit for purpose in an age of pervasive computing with increasingly rich  
4 audio-visual media devices being in the hands of young people?  
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8 This thought piece explores how the increased use of visual imagery, especially forms that  
9 can be viewed or created on digital devices might provide a way forward for more effective  
10 measuring of emotional health; including smiley faces, other emojis and other potential forms  
11 of visual imagery. The authors bring together perspectives from healthcare, counselling,  
12 youth advocacy, academic research, primary care and school based mental health support  
13 to explore these issues.  
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#### 24 What is known about this topic is that

- 25 • There are existing measurement methods which use non-verbal tools, such as smiley  
26 faces.  
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- 28 • There is existing research of how visual imagery is used as a method to measure  
29 feelings and perception.  
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- 31 • Children and young people are increasingly using forms of imagery to communicate  
32 to their peers and adults.  
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#### 40 What this study adds

- 41 • Brings the existing research into a cohesive review to provide a stimulating  
42 perspective around measuring emotional health in children and young people.  
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- 44 • Demonstrates why and how visual imagery could be used as a measurement as well  
45 as the challenges in developing for wider use amongst children and young people.  
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### 55 **Introduction**

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57 There is no objective measure of emotional health problems in children and/or young people;  
58 no radiography, no blood test, no biopsy. The traditional way that doctors and others have  
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3 sought to assess levels of problems is by observation or questioning. This generally involves  
4 questions being asked of the child or parent in relation to their internal feelings and thoughts.  
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6 These are often captured in the form of words, asking children and young people or families  
7  
8 to express difficulties or states of wellbeing, which include choosing appropriate phrases or  
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10 rating them against an interval or analogue scale. For example, one common measure of  
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12 depression used for children is the Moods and Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ) which asks the  
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14 child to consider how they have been “feeling or acting...in the past two weeks”, [1]. It then  
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16 offers a range of statements and asks the child to choose between “not true” (if never  
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18 applied), “sometimes” (if sometimes applied) and “true” (if applies a lot). Example statements  
19  
20 include “I felt miserable or unhappy” or “I didn’t enjoy anything at all”. The most commonly  
21  
22 used questionnaire for depression for older adolescents (Patient Health Questionnaire  
23  
24 v9/PHQ 9) asks: “Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the  
25  
26 following problems?” Statements the adolescent is asked to consider include “Little interest  
27  
28 or pleasure in doing things” and “feeling down, depressed or hopeless etc” These are rated  
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30 on a scale of “not at all, several days, more than half days, nearly every day”, [2].  
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35 Children and young people’s mental healthcare exists within a fast changing environment in  
36  
37 which visual imagery is ever more prevalent. A recent children and parents media use and  
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39 attitudes report, [3] showed that in the 12-15 age range 69% had a social media profile and  
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41 89% used YouTube where predominantly three quarters of those used it to watch funny  
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43 videos or ‘pranks’ and the same proportion watched music videos. Whereas a smaller  
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45 proportion of 18%, of younger children aged 8-11 had a social media account, 77% were  
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47 reported to use YouTube with a similar proportion of those watching funny videos/pranks  
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49 compared to the older age group and 58% watched music videos, [4]. It is perhaps no  
50  
51 wonder that children and young people are referred to as the digital generation when we can  
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53 see such a high percentage in use of social media which relies so heavily on visual imagery,  
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55 [3, 4].  
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3 Coming from a perspective where individuals potentially see visual imagery as a  
4 measurement method for emotional health within the future (see Appendix 1), we explore  
5 throughout this thought piece the existing methods, the advantages of this approach and  
6 where the challenges are for developing this approach into a formal measurement method.  
7 We suggest that the potential for visual imagery, in the form of emojis and other readily  
8 accessible media such as animations or video, as a way to express and measure emotional  
9 health of children and young people is currently underexplored. Furthermore we argue that  
10 the forms of visual imagery already available do not adequately represent emotional health.  
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### **Current visual approaches**

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26 In the measurement of emotional wellbeing of children and young people there are currently  
27 few examples of the use of visual imagery. Where they do exist they are very circumscribed  
28 and tend to be limited to smiling or sad faces at the end of scales. One example available  
29 within the range of tools supported by both the British Council for Counselling and  
30 Psychotherapy,[5] and the Child Outcomes Research Consortium is the Child Outcome  
31 Rating Scale (CORS),[6]. The CORS, based on a text-based scale for older children,  
32 features happy and sad smileys at the extremes of a visual analogue scale for the age range  
33 of 6-12, which is a very limited use of visual imagery. Smileys are also used in the Child  
34 Session Rating Scale (CSRS) and patient experience questionnaires such as the  
35 Commission for Health Improvement Experience of Service questionnaire,[5] and are also  
36 commonly used for pain measurement.  
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### **Use and adaptation of visual scales**

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55 It has been suggested that traditional methods of gathering children and young people's  
56 thoughts and ideas including verbal questionnaires may reduce the autonomy a child has,  
57 causing a limit within their response to what they feel is important and relevant in a research  
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3 context,[7]. Furthermore, it is already known that when given the opportunity to do so,  
4 children and young people are willing and able to modify text scales to their preferences.  
5 This was seen in the evaluation of the *In Hand* well-being app where children and young  
6 people in an advisory group added dimensions to the Short Warwick- Edinburgh Wellbeing  
7 Scale which already asks about wellbeing on a number of items such as “I’ve been feeling  
8 relaxed” and “I’ve been feeling useful”. The children and young people consulted added:  
9 ‘More able to take control’, ‘Ready to talk to someone else’ and ‘Less stressed’ as  
10 meaningful dimensions. The modified scale was then included in a survey of app users with  
11 the goal of enabling individuals to better express whether and how the app was helpful in  
12 improving mental health,[8]. Therefore we can see from recent perspectives of children and  
13 young people that traditional methods are already being adapted by them as they are not  
14 deemed necessarily best or most comprehensive ways of capturing emotional health in  
15 children and young people of today. This customisation of scales could potentially be  
16 extended by the addition of visual imagery.  
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### **Emerging approaches and tools that use visual imagery**

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38 Looking as to whether anything already exists as a widespread adopted and developed  
39 measurement approach that uses imagery, we can in general say (mostly) no because as  
40 previously highlighted, widespread adopted approaches tend to consist of words largely in  
41 questionnaires in both research and practise. Here we will provide an overview of some of  
42 the innovative measurement tools that have utilised visual imagery as a measurement tool to  
43 capture perspectives on emotional health.  
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52 Craven et al,[9], as part of a study exploring representations of wellbeing in adult mental  
53 health, reviewed the literature to highlight the range of pictorial scales, symbolic,  
54 metaphorical and other sensorial representations of wellbeing e.g. gestural, textural/tactile or  
55 thermal either in use or suggested by researchers or practitioners. The review also cited co-  
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3 production with young people such as the set of twelve emojis selected and deployed in the  
4 Power Up app study,[10]. Furthermore, the review identified a recent mental health app  
5 *MentalSnapp* using video and highlighted the increased availability of tools to create  
6  
7 personalised animations in social media such as *BitMoji*. In the study of Craven et al [9],  
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9 when prompted to do so in a workshop setting, people with lived experience of mental health  
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11 difficulties created very personal visualisations that could not readily be expressed by  
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13 graphs/scales (Figure 1). They articulated variation in their state of well-being with a variety  
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15 of audio-visual elements such as colour saturation, speed of movement or loudness and with  
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17 changing metaphorical representations such as growth of a flower in the sun and rain versus  
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19 a drooping or dying one, or increasing distance from a problem through a door. One  
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21 participant created a set of fifteen graphical emotion cards so they could pick an appropriate  
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23 one depending on their mood with pictures, alongside text descriptions, to show head in  
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25 hands, worry lines, sweating, dancing etc. Craven et al,[9] concluded from their study that  
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27 visualisations already available in digital health apps were not rich enough to adequately  
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29 represent emotional health; thus further arguing the case for innovations in the usage of  
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31 visual imagery.  
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37 A richer usage of smiley faces compared to that of the CORS scale was implemented in a  
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39 mobile phone mood diary,[11]. Mood diaries are a common tool used with children and  
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41 young people as well as other demographics, comprising of singular entries for an entire day  
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43 or multiple entries for throughout the day at various times to monitor and track a person's  
44  
45 emotions and feelings,[11].The use of imagery in this way may also help a child  
46  
47 communicate their emotional health to their parents without the pressure for them to have to  
48  
49 verbalise overwhelming or uncomfortable feelings or help aid conversations that  
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51 professionals working with children and young people need to have with parents.  
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55 Another example of emojis used as measurement comes from a proposal to use them for  
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57 psychometric testing,[12]. Here each emoji symbol was weighted against five personality  
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59 types. We can also note an example of the use of imagery other than emojis in a psycho-  
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3 emotional context, in the 'Blob Tree' tool a person is asked to identify with or discuss the  
4 feelings of one or more of a set of expressive manikins occupying a tree,[13].  
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### 10 **Future ways forward for use of visual imagery?**

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13 Whilst there have been some innovations attempting to use visual imagery as a  
14 measurement tool in emotional health, there are questions around how we actually do the  
15 measuring. Here we share our thoughts around how we could create an effective  
16 measurement tool to capture dimensions of emotional health and the challenges that would  
17 need to be considered when using visual imagery as a measurement.  
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25 Imagery can potentially augment the clinical assessment and enhance the monitoring of  
26 mental health in children and young people as imagery can provide a range of useful  
27 features that verbal communication cannot, as suggested above. More so it may aid  
28 expression of emotion when children and young people have limited facial movement or  
29 vocabulary [14]. Imagery may be used jointly with other methods of measurement because  
30 imagery has the ability to engage with strong emotions and feelings,[15].  
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38 As demonstrated in the report by OFCOM cited earlier, younger people are significantly  
39 involved with digital technology and social media on a daily basis, so being able to measure  
40 forms of visual imagery which commonly appear on digital platforms, such as emojis,  
41 animations and videos, could provide an additional dimension for assessing children and  
42 young people's emotional health in clinical practice. Assessment using digital tools is already  
43 becoming invested in as a way forward in the future,[16]. This is not to rule out traditional  
44 verbally-based assessments, but the suggestion could be used alongside traditional  
45 methods to create more of an understanding about the individual as the case of triangulation  
46 of data amongst methods was argued by Ernala et al,[17]. In Figure 2 we suggest one way  
47 of how visual imagery can be used as a measurement alongside other used ways of  
48 measuring emotional health.  
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3 Further supporting the use of visual imagery as a method of measurement is that it has been  
4 shown through Marengo, Giannotta and Settanni,[12] that a quantifiable scale with assigned  
5 numerical values to emojis can be used to measure perceptions. Whereas in other studies  
6 individuals such as Johnson,[18], Radley,[19] and Reavey,[15] have widely developed the  
7 practise of using imagery to interpret experiences in psychological research. Therefore  
8 imagery can be used as a multi-measurable model encompassing both quantitative and  
9 qualitative evidence to aid the measurement of emotional health in children and young  
10 people.

11  
12 In support of exploring the possibility of using imagery to measure emotional health in  
13 children and young people it has been suggested that imagery is a universal language that  
14 overcomes verbal language barriers. In conversations between individuals who use emojis  
15 as forms of expression it will typically be found there is also the use of emojis consisting of  
16 body gestures, animals, food, objects and other subjects which appear to form a shared  
17 interpretation of what is being expressed. Comparing emojis to words, they can be used in  
18 patterns to construct a variety of expressions and can even imply non-verbal tones,[20, 21].  
19 Although it should be noted that there are particular challenges around how some forms of  
20 images are interpreted amongst cultures and other demographic groups, as not all symbols,  
21 colours or gestures come with the same meaning between age groups and cultures,[22, 23].  
22 However the same could be said of words and issues of translation of these between  
23 cultures and relevant to the challenges of measurement more generally as discussed by  
24 Jessica Flake and Eiko Fried,[24].

25  
26 There are clearly challenges to using imagery as a measurement. The main challenge  
27 featured consists of being clear around our interpretations of images and that if images are  
28 constructively combined (in cases of emojis) that we are clear on what different  
29 combinations represent and imply. A further challenge is that if this was to be developed as  
30 a tool for measurement then we would need to complete a broad investigative task across  
31 cultures and generations to gain a firm understanding of interpretations across forms of  
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3 imagery, whilst also ensuring the inclusion and involvement of children and young people in  
4 this investigative process.  
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### 10 Conclusion

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13 When systematically developed, visual imagery as a form of measurement in emotional  
14 health has been shown so far in its development to be interpretable in providing accurate  
15 and reliable results, but there remains challenges which need to be addressed if the method  
16 of measurement is to be both reliable and valid. However, imagery does provide  
17 opportunities for different ways of clearly expressing emotional health, and imagery can  
18 provide another medium for expression, as well as increasing choice and an element of  
19 personalisation for children and young people, which perhaps in turn would enable more  
20 children and young people to feel able to access the support they need.  
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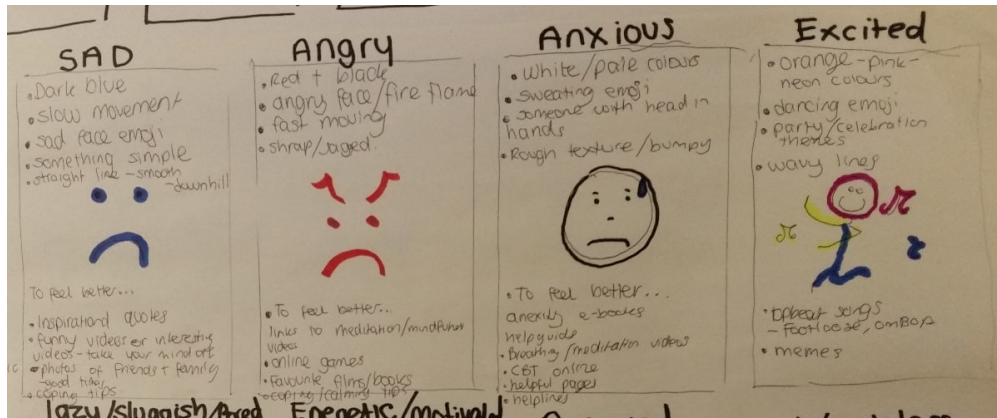


Figure 1: Examples of adult personal representations of well-being from Craven et al,[9] [Creative Commons attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)]

423x175mm (72 x 72 DPI)



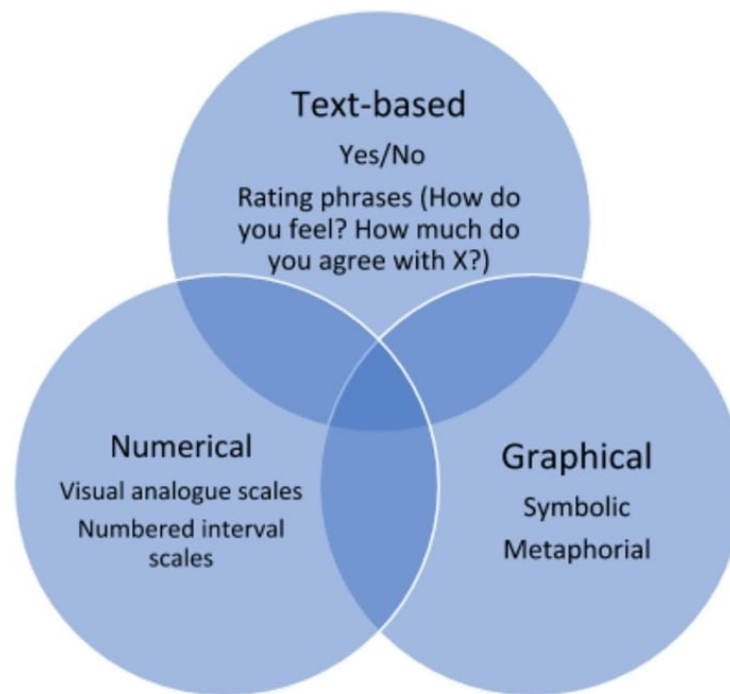


Figure 2: A formulation of how we as authors see the category of visual imagery as a measurement method of emotional health amongst the current measurement method categories

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## Appendix 1

### How this article came about

On 23rd April 2019 one of the authors (MW) re-tweeted a link to a suggested measurement tool that had emojis instead of verbal descriptions for levels of happiness/distress (the original tweet has since been deleted so we cannot reproduce it below). MW asked for comments from others on twitter as to whether this might be a good way forward for measurement in mental health contexts. Various people responded and the debate got quite heated- in particular between those with lived experience of mental health problems (many of those who thought it might be a good way forward) and some leading professionals in the field who felt it was not a good idea. On 27th April MW wrote "I know many of those involved in this thread and really respect them all for their passionate commitment to youth mental health. I also know how hard it is for those without the status of academic or equivalent jobs to get their voices heard. I have a proposal would people be interested in writing a joint piece on this issue (best ways to discuss monitor and measure MH). I am happy to convene and coordinate and we could look to post or publish somewhere suitable. Could air different views in a coordinated way. If so do dm or email". The current authors (AH, MC, FM, MR, KR and LW) are those that emailed. AH, who comes from a position of lived experience of mental health difficulties and Aspergers, agreed to lead the piece and MW to support with the other authors agreeing to work as co-authors. The group were then approached by an editor of ADC (DH) who invited them to submit a piece once written for consideration by the journal. The rest is as you see below. AH agreed to lead the piece as through her experience of championing non-verbal communication she believes visual imagery is an under explored, but vital area to look into: "Sometimes it is really difficult to describe how you are feeling, not only to a clinician but also to family and friends. It is sometimes easier when you can pick out an image or an emoji to represent how you are feeling. There is less pressure to think of a way to verbalise your emotions or to explain it in a style that someone else will understand. From my particular experience, there is sometimes a struggle getting my point across when explaining my emotions through speech; but there is no problem

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2  
3 communicating my emotions to people around me with an emoji which is symbolic of an  
4 emotion - the problem is this is not a formal way for clinicians to capture how people are  
5 emotionally feeling. It is not a lazy substitution for verbal language, it is about putting people  
6 first, allowing and enabling people to express how they are feeling in a way that is effective  
7 for them” (AH).  
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