

## Talking Mats

**Alayne McKee, Sally Kedge, and Polly Thomas interviewed by Kelly Howard**



**Alayne McKee** is a speech-language therapist with a special interest in working with children, young people, and whānau involved in care and protection, justice, and mental health services. She is also an Accredited Talking Mats Trainer



**Sally Kedge** is a speech-language therapist and court-appointed Communication Assistant. She runs Talking Trouble Aotearoa NZ (TTANZ), a team of SLTs passionate about making communication easier for children, young people and adults. She is also an Accredited Talking Mats Trainer.



**Polly Thomas** works as a resource teacher for TalkLink. The TalkLink team are specialists in the area of Communication Assistive Technology/Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Polly has a psychology degree and a primary teaching qualification from the UK, and has been a special needs teacher, both in New Zealand and overseas. She is also an Accredited Talking Mats Trainer.

I first learnt about Talking Mats in December 2017 when I attended a workshop on enabling effective communication with children and young people run by Talking Trouble Aotearoa New Zealand ([www.talkingtroublenz.org](http://www.talkingtroublenz.org)). Talking Mats are an incredibly simple, but effective communication framework that I have since utilised in my doctoral research with young people who have communication difficulties and who have been appointed a communication assistant to facilitate their participation and understanding in youth justice processes. I also regularly use Talking Mats in my day to day work as an intern psychologist at a Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service. I have found Talking Mats to be an effective medium through which children and young people can express themselves. This has

been especially helpful for children and young people with whom I am struggling to build rapport, and who only give the odd shrug, nod and head shake to questions asked. I have been wondering whether other psychologists are aware of or are utilising Talking Mats in their work. With the aim of sparking interest and spreading awareness among readers of *Psychology Aotearoa*, I decided to approach and interview Alayne McKee, Sally Kedge and Polly Thomas, as accredited Talking Mats trainers, about Talking Mats.

***Kelly: Firstly, thank you for your time Alayne, Sally and Polly and for agreeing to be interviewed for this article. For our readers who are not familiar with Talking Mats, can you start by explaining what they are?***

### **Alayne, Sally and Polly:**

Talking Mats® is a visual framework, which helps people to think about issues and provides them with a way of expressing their views more easily e.g. how they feel about their activities, their skills, where they live, the care they receive. It can also help them to reflect on and express their opinions on topics that might be difficult to discuss e.g. their mental health, their safety, and their future.

Talking Mats can be used with people of all ages and abilities. Some people think that Talking Mats are only used with people with communication needs or other disabilities e.g. intellectual disability, stroke, dementia, neurological difficulties, and mental health issues. It's true, Talking Mats can be really helpful with these populations but it is also

appropriate to use Talking Mats with people who do not have disabilities or communication needs.

This reflective listening tool uses three sets of picture symbols - topics, options, and a visual scale – and a space on which to display them. The person who facilitates Talking Mats is called the Listener. The person who reflects on the topic and gives their views is called the Thinker. In this fictitious example the topic is Thoughts and Feelings, and the options show a range of thoughts and

Foundation Training) ensure that the tool is used with integrity. Research in a range of contexts has shown that when Talking Mats is used the quality and quantity of information provided by the Listener increases.

**Kelly: How have you used Talking Mats in your work?**

**Sally:** I have used Talking Mats to enable people (children, teenagers and adults) to express their views about many topics - activities they enjoy/don't enjoy, their opinions about where they are living or what is

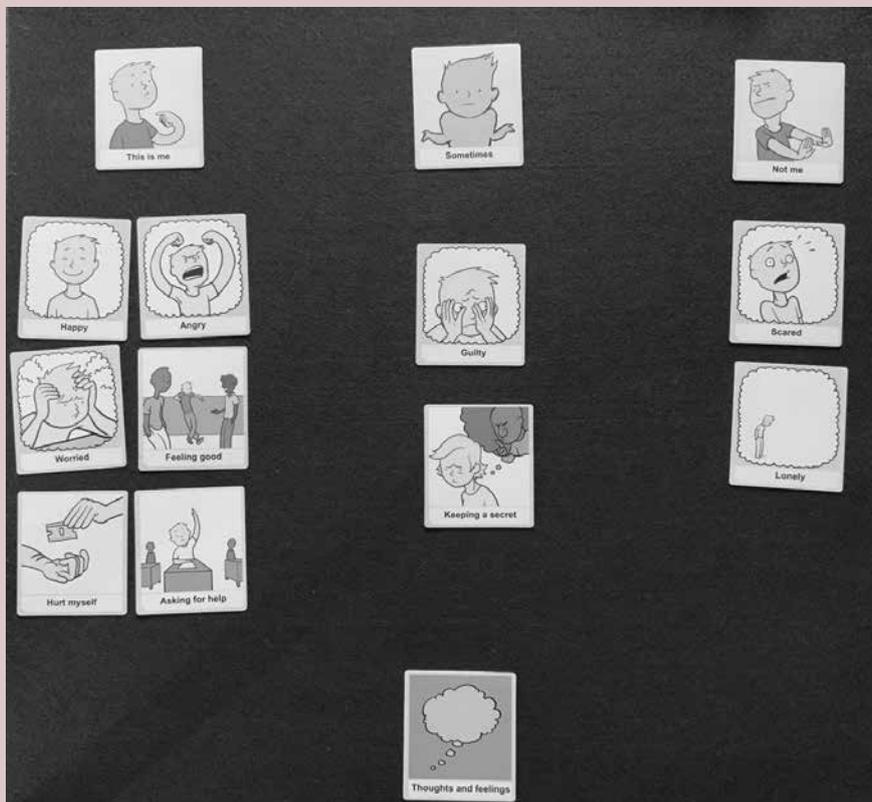
in the situation, helped her identify aspects of his life that she realised she had not considered yet or needed to follow up on.

**Polly:** I've used Talking Mats:

- At Individual Education Plan (IEP) times to help students have a say about what is important to them to learn more/do more of during their time at school.
- For all transition meetings as our students transition out of school.
- At the end of a trial of a communication device to see what the client thinks of the device and if it meets their needs.
- As an ice breaker to get to know a client with communication difficulties at a first appointment.
- When there are behaviour issues and we are trying to find out what is going on for the student.
- When a family member says one thing on behalf of their child and the client says something else.

**Alayne:** Like Sally and Polly, I've used Talking Mats for a range of purposes but mostly:

- To find out what the person thinks about things like their own communication skills – this process enables the person to identify their own strengths and needs, and advise their whānau, and support networks about how to support them. The information provided goes into a communication passport and into the person's report so that they are acknowledged as being experts about themselves
- To help whānau and the support people living or working with the person to formulate their views about the person's communication skills, and on topics related to



feelings that one might experience. The visual scale ranges from 'This is me .....Sometimes .....Not me.'

The strength of Talking Mats comes from its commitment to the belief that people need to have space and time to form their views, share their views, and influence decisions about their own lives. The simple but specific principles (that are introduced and practised during the Talking Mats

important to them about where they might live in the future, how school is going for them, their views about their own skills and many other topics. I've used a Talking Mat with another professional to help her reflect on what was happening for a young person she was involved with. The Talking Mat allowed her to consider how she felt things were going in the young person's new placement. This helped her identify both strengths and needs

lived experiences, relationships, emotions, transition planning, readiness for independence etc. Invariably the whānau and support people are surprised by what they learn through this reflective process and how easy it is to see gaps in their own knowledge or thinking, the person's strengths and needs and potential action plans

**Kelly:** *What have been the benefits of using Talking Mats in your work?*

**Sally:** Talking Mats creates space for reflection and consultation, particularly if talking is tricky, but it can still be very valuable for people who can communicate easily. It's adaptable for all sorts of situations, easy to whip out - no equipment beyond some little cards or sometimes just blank post-it notes are all that is needed - really the framework in your head is the most important thing.

**Polly:** For me the benefits of Talking Mats are:

- Hearing the client/student's voice.
- Having a visual representation of the client/student's viewpoint that we can keep and attach actions to and revisit to keep everyone on track.
- Actively involving the students in planning as they leave school.
- Students love being the centre of the discussion and being listened to.

**Alayne:** I believe that the carefully designed Talking Mats framework creates a sort of bubble around the Thinker so that they feel like they have all the time and space they need to form an opinion. The physical set up of Talking Mats means that there is something to look at, both people tend to focus on the mat, or the options cards and so there's no pressure from eye contact or time passing. Furthermore, the Listener has clear boundaries around what they can or can't say so that they can't take over or bias the Thinker's views. I have frequently done a Talking Mat where I have been the Thinker to help me sort out my thinking and even though I'm a competent adult (some may disagree) I have found the process so useful in helping me to physically see the possible next steps.

**Kelly:** *What have been the challenges or barriers to using Talking Mats in your work?*

**Sally:** No major challenges - I often wonder if a Talking Mat might be a useful way to address an issue when that would not have been a solution I would have previously considered. Some people think they are only for non-verbal people but it's a framework that works for anyone. I've been

interested in exploring how we can use them in interview or supervision processes within our own team. We are developing some New Zealand bilingual options cards sets that reflect New Zealand cultural activities, world views and imagery but they're not ready yet. Carving out time to carefully plan the best Talking Mat scale and options card for a particular situation has been important.

**Polly:** None

**Alayne:** None really. As long as you are clear on what you are trying to achieve, and that a Talking Mat is the right tool for that task, and that the Thinker's views will genuinely be listened to and considered then there should not be any problem. Of course, some people may choose to decline the opportunity to do a Talking Mat, that's ok, they have the right to say no. Sometimes people try to use Talking Mats as an assessment, or to elicit a narrative around something that happened, that's not really what Talking Mats was designed for and so other tools would be more effective.

**Kelly:** *What disciplines are currently using Talking Mats in New Zealand?*

**Sally and Polly:** Teachers, teacher aides, special education advisors, social workers, psychologists, paediatricians, doctors, community workers, speech-language therapists, and researchers.

**Alayne:** Sally and Polly have already covered what's happening in New Zealand so I'll just add that professionals using Talking Mats internationally include occupational therapists, dieticians, doctors, nurses, advocacy workers, service planners, social workers, speech-language therapists, lawyers, care workers, teachers, rehabilitation assistants, researchers, and psychologists.

**Kelly:** *How do you think Talking Mats could help psychologists in their day to day work?*

**Sally:** Consult with people about their views and feelings about topics that relate to the past, present or future. We've used them with people who have no apparent communication needs to create a reflective opportunity, but we have also used them with people who find communication challenging and who might find it hard to use words or speech to express views.

**Alayne:** In my experience psychologists are interested in learning more about people's lives and how they perceive themselves; their identity, the protective and risk factors that are present such as relationships, their strengths and needs, things that motivate them, their goals and their self-efficacy. Talking Mats can be used to explore all of these

areas. It's not the only tool that can be used for those purposes but it is a valuable addition to a psychologist's toolkit.

Some psychologists may also be involved in finding out people's thoughts around palliative care and end-of-life decision-making and Talking Mats has an excellent set specifically around this topic called Thinking Ahead.

**Kelly: What Talking Mats training is available in New Zealand?**

**Sally, Polly, Alayne:**

TalkLink in partnership with Talking Trouble Aotearoa New Zealand offer the one-day foundation course throughout country. In the next few months there will be one in Nelson, Christchurch and Paeroa. We'll be sorting out dates for next year soon. Organisations can also contact us if they want us to run a course just for their workforce. To find out more: <https://talklink.org.nz/talking-mats-courses>

**Kelly: What feedback have you had from people who have completed the training?**

**Sally, Polly, Alayne:**

People leave the training feeling inspired and seeing Talking Mats huge potential. They start 'buzzing' about who they are going to use a Talking Mat with. Some of their comments are:

- "Talking Mats gives a person a voice"
- "How flexible and

dynamic this [Talking Mats] is as a way of getting insight & supporting autonomy"

- "I'm going to try doing a Talking Mat with a new young person and also with his parent to see their priorities, opinions etc"
- Going to include Talking Mats "in reports or medical letters/notes so that it is in patients own words, not our interpretation"
- "I definitely want to use them to capture ....voices when target setting/ planning."
- "Can be used with my students but also with their teachers. Good tool for lots of people not just people with disabilities. Can start a conversation around something tricky"

**Kelly: Where can readers go for more information about Talking Mats?**

**Sally, Polly, Alayne:**

The Talking Mat website has a wealth of information for anyone interested in finding out more, everything from research articles to a blog that practitioners from across the world contribute to. Check out: <https://www.talkingmats.com/>

## From whakamā to Karis Knight



*E hara taku toa i te toa takitahi, he toa takitini –  
My strength is not as an individual, but as a collective.*

*Ko Hikurangi te maunga  
Ko Waiapu te awa  
Ko Horouta te waka  
Ko Te Whānau-a-Ruataupare te Hapū  
Ko Ngāti Porou, ko Rongowhakaata, ko Pākehā ōku iwi  
Ko Tuatini, ko Pahou oku Marae  
Ko Karis taku ingoa  
No reira tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa.*

I am a taurira (student) in my second year of a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology at the University of Auckland. I am passionate about working to uplift Māori whānau in mental health spaces. It was a privilege to have received the 2018 Karahipi Tumuaki President's Scholarship from the New Zealand Psychological Society. The following article is a summary of findings drawn from my Doctorate rangahau (research) that hopes to offer insight into how Māori understand, experience, and cope with whakamā, and with particular focus given to exploring whakamā in mental health contexts. Note that I am still in the process of collecting kōrero (conversation) and analysis is yet to be finalised so these are preliminary findings.