



# TALKING MATS®: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A PICTURE SYMBOL COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IN HELPING PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS

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## Background

The deterioration of communication between people with dementia and their caregivers is one of the most distressing aspects of the illness. It can become increasingly difficult to ensure decisions are made with their involvement. Talking Mats is a low cost, low technology system that has been developed at the University of Stirling to help people with dementia express their views. It uses a simple system of picture symbols placed on mats that allows people to indicate their feelings on various topics. It is easy to learn, accessible, inexpensive and can be used in any setting.



**Joan Murphy**  
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*"The deterioration of communication between people with dementia and their caregivers is one of the most distressing aspects of the illness. This low cost, low-technology communication tool offers a valuable resource to people with dementia, family, friends, care practitioners, service commissioners and all those who are interested in improving the quality of care delivered to people with dementia."*

## Aims and methods

The research had two main aims – to establish if Talking Mats helps people with dementia to communicate and to examine how effective the system is at different stages of the illness. Interviews were conducted with three groups of people with dementia - 10 at the early stage, 11 at the moderate and 10 at the late stage of the illness. Each person was interviewed three times using first an unstructured, ordinary conversation, then a structured conversation and lastly a conversation using Talking Mats. The interviews were videotaped and analysed using a communication effectiveness scoring system.

## Key findings

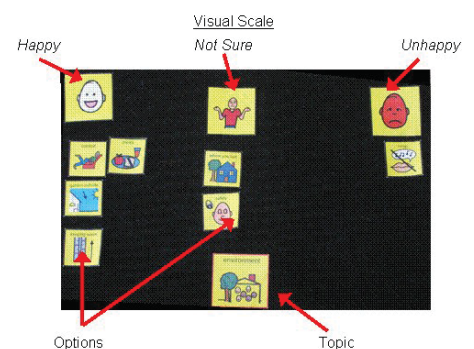
- People with dementia show improvements in the effectiveness of their communication when using the Talking Mats system compared to structured or unstructured conversation. This is particularly significant in moderate and late stage dementia.
- People with early stage dementia can usually communicate well in ordinary conversations but Talking Mats improved the amount of time that their conversation stayed on-track and the extent to which a third party understood their views.
- Talking Mats can aid communication and decision making and may be helpful in allowing people with dementia to express their views about a wide range of topics more easily.
- Photographs of the completed mats provide an instant record of what people with dementia have said

and can be added to an individual's notes and /or shown to their families.

- However, Talking Mats may not be suitable for everyone. Three people in the late stage group were unable to use the Talking Mats system effectively.

## Conclusion

This low cost, low-technology communication tool offers a valuable resource to people with dementia, family, friends, care practitioners, service commissioners and all those who are interested in improving the quality of care delivered to people with dementia. The Talking Mats framework could extend the period during which people with dementia can play an active role in making decisions about their lives.



**Further information: full report available on request**

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