

# Sounding for Well-Being: Kalimba

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## Play Therapy and the Kalimba

Simply put, play is good therapeutic medicine. If a client was brought up in a home where children were arbitrarily contained and controlled, an explorative session where there are no 'right or wrong' expectations can free up a lot of restricted energy. The following exercise incorporates a user-friendly instrument, the Kalimba, which is ideal for play therapy.

One of the most immediate ways to encourage risk taking, foster a sense of confidence, or soften a client's self-criticism is to introduce a spirit of play into your soundwork sessions. Playing with sound, while it fosters qualities of self-discipline and tenacity, also removes judgment around what we deem to be mistakes. Sonic play is about discovery through exploration and honouring a childlike energy, one that follows curiosity. In this regard, the following exercise promises to cultivate a spirit of joy through sounding and listening.

### *Kalimba Exercise*

The Kalimba is an African instrument made of a wooden resonating box and metal tines that are plucked with the thumbs. It requires little or even no instruction to produce a satisfying sound. The notes are typically arranged from a lower note positioned on the middle followed by ascending notes on both the right and left sides. The number of tones available to each player varies according to an instrument's distinctive design. In other words, the scale system of a Kalimba can be tuned to Major, Minor, Lydian, Middle Eastern, Dorian, Mixolydian, or even some dissonant scales with some notes OFF from traditional Western scales.

Purchasing a Kalimba is simple. The best product is the Hugh Tracy design available through [www.kalimbamagic.com](http://www.kalimbamagic.com) Mark Holdaway, who runs Kalimba Magic is knowledgeable and helpful. He'll assist you in choosing the right model and even tune the Kalimba to your preference. Mark's website gives you ample tips for playing and caring for your Kalimba.

Begin by inviting your client to sit or stand opposite you. You each hold a Kalimba tuned to the same scale. Begin the exercise by asking the client to engage in a conversation with you. The difference in this dialogue is that no words will be shared. The interchange will solely take place through the medium of sound. I generally structure the first part of this exercise around the framework of questions and answers. You, as the soundwork practitioner, will improvise a musical question. The client can answer any way he or she wants on the Kalimba.

Here are a few helpful hints. Keep your questions short, at least in the initial stages. Intention is important. Feel a genuine question forming internally before you make that into sound. "How are you feeling today?" "Do you want to play with me?" "Can you have fun like a child?" Think about when you verbally ask a question of someone. The pitch of your voice tends to rise on the final word or words. Consequently, in your musical phrases, imitate the way we incorporate ascending or descending pitches into speech, as well as how we integrate rhythmical variation.

As you become familiar with making up questions, your range of possibilities will naturally expand. For instance, you might vary the volume or speed of your inquiries. Variation is important because the way you say it will elicit diverse responses from the client. Be gentle, assertive, quick, slow, even long-winded on a couple of questions. Above all, make it a fun experience for the client. This type of sonic play generally courts confidence in a client since there are no right or wrong exchanges. Two people are simply sharing a conversation.

There is a second stage to this exercise. You can determine whether you want to include this or save it for a follow-up session with your client. The second stage progresses from a back and forth exchange into an improvised duet.

A Kalimba duet can be delightfully mesmerizing since it is full of surprises for both parties. Since creating musical patterns or phrases is new ground for most people, I usually begin by suggesting to the client that I will start a simple, improvised pattern and then I invite the individual to “jump in” whenever he or she feels ready.

As the initiator, do not get too fancy or start too fast. Make this experience accessible to the client by playing a repetitive, moderate paced phrase that leaves room for the other player to contribute. Once the two of you have synchronized, or entrained, shifts will spontaneously emerge. You may find that you speed up together, or vary your volume together. Always be conscious of supporting the client. Obviously, this is not an opportunity to demonstrate your artistic skills. It is a chance to draw out the client’s ability to take risks and to further that person’s self-assurance. Find ways to support a “solo” by the client by playing a recurring pattern. At the same time, be aware of natural points where you can instigate change. Maybe a change from a four beat framework to a six beat feel might challenge the client to adapt.

One of the primary goals in this Kalimba exercise is to help a client develop confidence in self-expression. Both the sonic richness of the Kalimba and the joy of collaboration are guaranteed to achieve this objective. Pick up your Kalimba and have fun!