

Sounding for Well-Being: Kalimba

By Mark Holdaway, extending Gary Diggins' exercise

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Play Therapy and the Kalimba

Gary Diggins has written an exercise for using the kalimba in play therapy in which two kalimba players have a conversation. The therapist uses the kalimba to phrase a question, and then gives control to the client who answers with notes on the kalimba. A main benefit of this exercise is that it gets the client to play at being musically expressive in a permissive environment where there is no right or wrong way to answer. This exercise requires that the therapist's musical questions be clear and supportive. Of course, this exercise could be accomplished on any instrument, but an advantage of using the kalimba is the scale is already set up by the therapist and there literally are no wrong notes. The unassuming nature of the kalimba can facilitate fairly impressive-sounding phrases in the hands of the novice kalimba player. One need not have mastery over the instrument to make magic on it.

Here is a twist to Gary Diggins' exercise. The third law of thermodynamics states that entropy tends to increase, or that there are more ways to get the worms out of the can than to put them back into the can. In music, it is easier to make a phrase that ends in uncertainty and instability than it is to make a phrase that resolves or ends with an exclamation mark. So, after you try Diggins' exercise, switch roles. Let the client phrase the question on the kalimba, which will tend to end off balance, in tension, or raising a question. Then the therapist should answer the question. For this to work, the therapist needs to have some understanding of the tuning of that particular kalimba. She needs to know which tines correspond to the major and minor roots, and perhaps their respective 5ths. Then, when given something out-of-balance by the client, the therapist can respond with something that resolves and emotionally resounds. Question mark? Exclamation mark!

If the client returns to these exercises repeatedly, they will sometimes hit a resolving answer by accident, or by copying the sorts of things the therapist is doing, and they will internalize the regions of stability and instability if they return to the same kalimba. This process can symbolize progressing in different life activities where one may learn that simple guidelines and guiding principles are often more helpful than trying to stick to preconceived ideas of right and wrong.

When the client becomes comfortable with the stability/instability regimes of a particular kalimba in a particular tuning, they can pick up a kalimba in a different tuning where they will relearn how to form questions and answers. This process can symbolize for the client the growing and deepening of relationships or a life path.