Therapy Progress Notes Examples

INTRODUCTION: THE BACKBONE OF EFFECTIVE THERAPY DOCUMENTATION

Clinical documentation is far more than a regulatory requirement or an administrative burden. For mental health professionals, therapy progress notes serve as the living record of a client's journey, capturing clinical observations, interventions, and responses to treatment. Well-crafted notes not only ensure compliance with insurance and legal standards but also enhance continuity of care, support clinical reasoning, and provide measurable evidence of progress. However, many practitioners struggle with balancing thoroughness with efficiency. This article presents a variety of **therapy progress notes examples** across different therapeutic approaches, formats, and scenarios. By examining these examples, you will learn how to structure your own notes to be clear, concise, and clinically meaningful, ultimately improving your documentation workflow and client outcomes.

WHAT ARE THERAPY PROGRESS NOTES?

Therapy progress notes are chronological records of each client session. Unlike intake assessments or treatment plans, progress notes capture the immediate details of a single encounter: the client's presenting concerns, the interventions used, the client's response, and the plan moving forward. They are distinct from psychotherapy notes (process notes) which are kept separately and contain more subjective impressions. Progress notes must be objective, factual, and focused on observable behaviors and measurable outcomes.

These notes serve multiple purposes:

- **Clinical continuity:** Allow any provider to pick up where the last session left off.
- **Legal protection:** Demonstrate that standard of care was provided.
- **Billing and reimbursement:** Justify medical necessity for insurance claims.
- **Outcome tracking:** Monitor progress toward treatment goals.

The following **therapy progress notes examples** illustrate common formats and best practices.

KEY COMPONENTS OF A PROGRESS NOTE (REGARDLESS OF FORMAT)

While different therapeutic orientations may emphasize different elements, nearly all progress notes include these core sections:

- **Client identifier and session date**
- **Subjective (client's self-report)**
- **Objective (clinician's observations)**
- **Assessment (clinical impressions, risk factors, progress toward goals)**
- **Plan (next steps, homework, future session focus)**

Beyond these basics, clinicians also include the intervention used, modality (individual, group, family), duration, and signatures. The examples below demonstrate how to weave these components together effectively.

THERAPY PROGRESS NOTES EXAMPLES BY FORMAT

Three widely used progress note formats are SOAP, DAP, and BIRP. Each has its own structure but covers the same essential information. Below are **therapy progress notes examples** for each.

SOAP Note Example (CBT Session – Anxiety)

Session Date: 2025-03-10
Client: Jane D., age 32
Modality: Individual therapy (50 minutes)
Diagnosis: F41.1 Generalized Anxiety Disorder

S (Subjective): Client stated, "I've been feeling on edge all week. I couldn't sleep before my work presentation." She reported frequent worry about performance evaluation, racing thoughts, and tension headaches. She rated anxiety at 7/10 overall.

O (Objective): Client appeared alert but restless, frequently shifting in her seat. Speech rate was slightly increased. She completed a GAD-7 questionnaire with a score of 14 (moderate anxiety). Therapist provided psychoeducation on the cognitive model of anxiety and guided client through a thought record regarding the upcoming presentation.

A (Assessment): Client's anxiety symptoms continue to interfere with sleep and occupational functioning. She demonstrated good insight into the link between catastrophic thinking and her physical tension. However, she struggles with self-soothing strategies. No suicidal ideation or self-harm risk. Progress toward goal of reducing anxiety to manageable level (score <10) is partial.

P (Plan): Continue weekly CBT sessions focusing on cognitive restructuring and relaxation techniques. Client agreed to practice diaphragmatic breathing daily and complete a thought-challenging log for three identified triggers. Next session: review thought records and introduce behavioral experiments.

DAP Note Example (DBT Session – Borderline Personality Disorder)

Session Date: 2025-03-11
Client: Marcus T., age 27
Modality: Individual DBT (45 minutes)

D (Data): Client arrived on time, tearful after an argument with his partner. He reported using TIPP skills (temperature change, intense exercise, paced breathing, paired muscle relaxation) but only after the conflict escalated. He shared that he felt "out of control" and had urges to self-harm but did not act on them. Diary card showed three episodes of intense anger, one binge-

eating episode, and no self-harm.

A (Assessment): Client is actively using DBT skills but often applying them after the emotional peak, reducing effectiveness. He continues to struggle with interpersonal effectiveness during conflicts, especially with romantic partners. Risk for self-harm is low but present; safety plan reviewed. Progress toward goals: partial. He is able to identify triggers and describe emotional states with increasing accuracy.

P (Plan): Focus next session on chain analysis of the recent argument to identify earlier use of skills. Therapist will role-play validating communication and "DEAR MAN" technique. Continue diary card monitoring. Client agrees to call therapist before engaging in self-harm. Return to weekly individual sessions and skills group.

BIRP Note Example (Trauma-Focused Therapy – PTSD)

Session Date: 2025-03-12
Client: Elena R., age 45
Modality: Individual trauma therapy (60 minutes)

B (Behavior): Client presented with flat affect and averted eye contact during initial minutes. She avoided speaking about the traumatic event directly and redirected to current stressors at work. Therapist used grounding techniques to help client stay present. Client engaged in a safe-space visualization and identified two coping images.

I (Intervention): Therapist provided psychoeducation on the window of tolerance. Together they created a hierarchy of triggers (low to high distress). Therapist taught the client bilateral stimulation (EMDR preparation phase) and guided her through a brief resource installation using a nurturing figure image.

R (Response): Client reported feeling "more settled" by the end of session. Her breathing normalized, and she made brief eye contact while stating, "This feels less scary than I thought." She agreed to practice the resource installation twice daily.

P (Plan): Continue phase 1 stabilization next session. Introduce simple trauma narrative if client remains within window of tolerance. Meet weekly. Client will use grounding skills when intrusive thoughts arise and track in journal.

THERAPY PROGRESS NOTES EXAMPLES BY CLINICAL SCENARIO

Beyond format, examples tailored to specific situations can help clinicians adapt their documentation. Below are two additional **therapy progress notes examples** demonstrating common real-world contexts.

Example: Couples Therapy Session

Session Date: 2025-03-13
Clients: Sarah and Alex P.
Modality: Couples therapy (50 minutes)

Subjective: Sarah reported feeling "invalidated" after Alex criticized her parenting. Alex stated he feels "shut out" because Sarah talks to friends rather than him. Both expressed a desire to improve communication but blamed the other for the pattern.

Objective: Therapist observed interrupting and defensive body language in both partners. Used the "speaker-listener" technique to structure a 10-minute exchange about a recent conflict. Both clients were able to paraphrase each other's statements with coaching. Alex's tone softened when Sarah acknowledged his feelings.

Assessment: Couple is stuck in a pursue-withdraw cycle, with Sarah pursuing emotionally and Alex withdrawing. They demonstrated willingness to attempt structured communication but require ongoing practice. No domestic violence or imminent safety concerns. Progress is early but positive.

Plan: Continue practicing speaker-listener technique. Assign reading on love languages. Next session will focus on identifying unmet emotional needs and using "I statements" during disagreements.

Example: Child Therapy Session (Play Therapy)

Session Date: 2025-03-14
Client: Leo, age 7
Modality: Individual play therapy (45 minutes)

Objective: Client selected sand tray and miniature figures. He constructed a scene with a monster attacking a small house, then placed a superhero figure to defeat the monster. He narrated the scene with raised voice and excitement. Therapist reflected feelings ("The superhero seems very strong and brave."). Client then added figures of parents watching from the side.

Assessment: Leo's play suggests themes of mastery over fears, consistent with trauma from witnessing domestic arguments at home. He demonstrates increasing resolution in play narratives. He made eye contact and smiled when the superhero won. No behavioral concerns during session.

Plan: Continue weekly play therapy to facilitate processing of emotions. Meet with parents separately for parent management training. Focus on reinforcing positive coping at home. Next session: free play with option of art materials.

BEST PRACTICES FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE PROGRESS NOTES

Learning from **therapy progress notes examples** is only half the battle. To write notes that are both clinically useful and legally sound, adhere to these principles:

- **Be specific and behavioral.** Instead of "client was anxious," write "client tapped her foot and spoke rapidly; reported heart racing."
- **Link interventions to client responses.** Show that what you did had an observable effect.
- **Use neutral, nonjudgmental language.** Avoid labels like "manipulative" or "resistant."
- **Document risk assessments thoroughly.** If suicidality is mentioned, note the assessment and plan.
- **Include the client's voice.** Quoting directly (in moderation) adds authenticity.
- **Write immediately after session.** Memory fades quickly; accuracy matters.
- **Tailor detail to setting.** Hospital notes require more medical jargon; private practice notes can be more narrative.

COMMON MISTAKES IN PROGRESS NOTES (AND HOW TO AVOID THEM)

Even experienced clinicians slip into bad habits. Here are pitfalls seen in **therapy progress notes examples** that fail to meet standards:

1. **Vagueness:** “Client discussed feelings” — what feelings? About what? Add specificity.
2. **Overly lengthy narratives:** Stick to relevant clinical info; omit unnecessary personal details.
3. **Copy-paste syndrome:** Each session should be distinct; avoid generic templates that never change.
4. **Failing to note no-shows or cancellations:** This is critical for tracking engagement.
5. **Using jargon without explanation:** If you write “CBT,” it’s fine, but also describe the technique (e.g., cognitive restructuring).
6. **Neglecting the plan:** A note without a forward-looking component is incomplete.

HOW TO USE THERAPY PROGRESS NOTES EXAMPLES FOR TRAINING

Clinicians in training often find it helpful to study annotated examples. Supervisors can use the examples above to discuss what makes a note effective. Consider the following exercises:

- Compare a weak note vs. a strong note for the same session.
- Rewrite a vague note using the SOAP format.
- Identify the missing component in a partial note.

By internalizing these patterns, new therapists develop documentation habits that support their clinical work rather than hinder it.

TECHNOLOGY AND PROGRESS NOTE TEMPLATES

Most electronic health record (EHR)