Narrative Progress Note Cheat Sheet

Reviewed by the BastionGPT Clinical Advisory Board · August 2026

A narrative progress note is a free-text progress note: it documents a therapy session in flowing prose instead of the labeled sections of SOAP or DAP. Use it when chronology and clinical reasoning matter more than a template; it is fully compliant as long as the required content is present. Most narrative notes run 150 to 500 words.

No format is mandated; every enforceable rule attaches to content. Frame the prose with the header facts (date · service and code · start/stop times for time-based codes · diagnosis · signature with credentials), write in any order, and hit all five anchors before you sign.

1 · Presentation — what the client brought

Do: state symptoms, functioning, and change since last session, with scores (PHQ-9, GAD-7) and your observations.
Pitfall: opening with logistics ("arrived on time, reviewed homework") and never stating symptom status; how the client is doing belongs in the first third of the note.

2 · Intervention — what you did, by name

Do: name the technique: cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, exposure planning, grief work. A named technique makes the note evidence of a psychotherapy service.
Pitfall: letting "discussed" and "explored" carry the whole note; unnamed interventions are the classic narrative omission because no field asks for them.

3 · Response — the golden thread to the plan

Do: record how the client responded and where that leaves progress toward a specific treatment-plan goal; one sentence ties the session to medical necessity.
Pitfall: a vivid account of the session with no sentence connecting it to a goal; in prose, the medical-necessity chain breaks silently.

4 · Risk — findable in seconds

Do: state current risk status either way when clinically indicated; a short labeled line starting "Risk:" stays findable without breaking the narrative voice.
Pitfall: burying a risk denial mid-paragraph or omitting it; a risk statement nobody can locate does the same work as one never written.

5 · Plan — end with dated next steps

Do: close with homework, changes in approach, coordination, and the next appointment date, specific enough to check the next session against.
Pitfall: trailing off with "will continue to work on goals"; end the story with dated, specific next steps.

Before you sign

- [ ] All five anchors findable in the prose
- [ ] Start/stop time in the header for the billed code
- [ ] Intervention named, not "discussed" or "explored"
- [ ] Progress tied to a numbered treatment-plan goal
- [ ] Risk stated either way, in a labeled sentence
- [ ] Fresh prose, dated plan, signed with credentials

Drafting with AI

Capture 30 seconds of bullets in session: presentation, named interventions, response, scores, risk status, plan changes.

> *"Draft a narrative progress note in flowing prose from these bullets, MDD, CBT with behavioral activation, session 8 of 16: …"*

Never paste client-identifying information into consumer AI tools. BastionGPT is HIPAA-compliant with a signed BAA on every plan.

150 to 500 words	10 to 25 min by hand	After any session	Therapist · auditors
typical length	clinical team estimate	when it's written	who reads it

Full guide, sample note, and compliance notes:
bastiongpt.com/template/narrative-progress-note

Narrative Progress Note Template

Copy or print for your practice · Adapt fields to your organization's, payer's and jurisdiction's documentation requirements.

Client (initials): | Date: | Session #:

Service: ☐ individual ☐ telehealth | Code: | Diagnosis (ICD-10):

Start/stop time:

Narrative

Write in any order the session demands; hit all five anchors before you sign.

[Presentation: symptoms, functioning, change since last session, scores, observations]

[Intervention: what you did, named]

[Response: client response and progress toward goal #___]

[Risk: current status, stated either way]

[Plan: specific next steps, dated]

Pre-sign check: ☐ time ☐ named intervention ☐ response tied to a goal ☐ risk stated ☐ dated plan

Clinician signature / credentials: | Date signed:

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