

Clinical Words for Progress Notes

A quick-reference descriptor cheat sheet for therapists. Keep it next to your keyboard.

Affect & Mood

Flat / reduced	Flat, blunted, constricted, shallow, dull, spiritless, detached, indifferent, impersonal
Low / depressed	Depressed, dejected, dispirited, disheartened, tearful, weepy, hopeless, desperate
Elevated	Euphoric, elated, buoyant, joyful, jovial, lighthearted, cheerful, optimistic
Calm / engaged	Placid, tranquil, restful, personable, affable, agreeable, amiable, enthusiastic
Qualifiers	Labile, euthymic, dysthymic, congruent / incongruent with mood, irritable, anxious, apathetic

Behavior & Activity

Activity level	Restless, agitated, hyperactive, sluggish, lethargic, psychomotor retardation, self-possessed
Interpersonal	Withdrawn, cooperative, guarded, spontaneous, over-cautious, uneasy
Impulse	Reckless, impulsive, impetuous, excitable, hasty, abrupt, organized

Thought Process (Cognition)

Form	Linear, logical, goal-directed, circumstantial, tangential, perseverative, flight of ideas, disorganized
Functions	Judgement, problem-solving, decision-making, comprehension, memory, concrete, abstract

Orientation

Intact	Alert, lucid, oriented x3 (person, place, time), oriented x4 (adds situation)
Impaired	Forgetful, confused, disoriented, distractible, detached, distant. Name the specific gap.

Speech

Quantity	Talkative, spontaneous, expansive, paucity / poverty of speech
Rate	Rapid, hurried, pressured, slowed, normal cadence
Volume / tone	Loud, soft, monotone, weak, strong
Fluency	Slurred, clear, well-articulated, hesitant, appropriately inflected, aphasia

Tip: Pair every affect descriptor with congruence, and anchor questionable observations with **"as evidenced by."**
 Example: "anxious, as evidenced by psychomotor agitation and rapid speech."

Intervention & Action Verbs (Plan section)

Psychoeducation	Educated, informed, taught, provided information on, normalized
Cognitive work	Cognitive restructuring, challenged, reframed, identified distortions, explored
Skills & coping	Practiced, modeled, rehearsed, role-played, coached, developed coping skills
Relational / supportive	Validated, empathized with, reflected, actively listened, supported, affirmed
Directive	Assigned homework, recommended, advised, set goals, established boundaries
Coordination	Consulted, referred, coordinated care, collaborated with [provider]

Words to Avoid → Use Instead

Manipulative	States needs indirectly; uses [behavior] to meet [need]
Non-compliant	Did not follow the agreed plan; declined [intervention]
Drug-seeking	Requested [medication]; reported [symptom]
Difficult / resistant	Ambivalent about change; guarded; declined to discuss
Frequent flyer	Presents recurrently for [reason]
Crazy / unstable	Experiencing [specific symptom]; mood labile

Vocabulary by SOAP Section

Section	What goes here
Subjective	Client-reported symptoms and emotions: anxious, racing thoughts, anhedonic, dysphoric
Objective	Observed: flat affect, pressured speech, psychomotor agitation, oriented x3
Assessment	Clinical judgment: thought process tangential, judgment impaired, low suicidal ideation
Plan	Lead with an intervention verb + client response + next-session focus

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A reference aid, not a substitute for your clinical judgment.