

Maintaining The Golden Thread

Documentation is one of the most important components of delivering services. The best progress notes are succinct descriptions of an interaction, focused primarily on the way the interventions connect with the individual's treatment goals and objectives.

If you are the kind of person that thinks "more is better," this may feel strange. After all, to write a quality note, you may need to leave out details about the interaction that are not relevant to the individual's treatment goals. The connection between assessment, goals and objectives in the plan, and services the individual actually receives is known as the Golden Thread.

The Golden Thread begins with an assessment that details areas of clinical concern. Assessment findings are then used to formulate personalized goals and objectives, as well as interventions that reflect best practice and evidenced-based treatments. Progress notes then demonstrate that the interventions delivered are connected back to the treatment goals.

Establishing a link between what happened during an interaction and the individual's treatment goals is important for at least two reasons:

- **Staying focused:** A lot happens during interactions and it is very easy to lose sight of what the individual wants to achieve. When progress notes stay connected to the treatment or service plan, you and the individual are more likely to work on, and achieve, their goals.
- **Medical Necessity:** Services and programs that are reimbursed by Medicaid or other health insurance need to demonstrate medical necessity. The best way to do this is by ensuring progress notes reflect activities related to assessment findings and goals and objectives.

Medical Necessity

Medical necessity refers to a determination that *"a treatment, test, or procedure is necessary to a person's health or to treat a diagnosed medical problem."* (Journal of the American Medical Association, Vol. 297 No. 10, March 14, 2007).

New York State Department of Health states *"Medically necessary means health care and services that are necessary to prevent, diagnose, manage or treat conditions in the person that cause acute suffering, endanger life, result in illness or infirmity, interfere with such person's capacity for normal activity, or threaten some significant handicap."* (N.Y. Soc. Serv. Law, §365-a).

Thus, when providing a service, it is imperative that your documentation supports the medical need for the service rendered.

An Example of the Golden Thread



Below is an example of how the assessment, treatment plan, and progress note are linked together to meet the needs of the individual.

Derrick and his family have recently been referred for services due to Derrick's aggressive behaviors in the home, school, and community.

- **Assessment:** Upon completion of the assessment, it was determined that due to a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Derrick’s verbal and physical outbursts, he would benefit from counseling.
- **Treatment Goal:** Improve overall behavior
 - **Objective:** Derrick will develop two coping skills over the next 3 months that will increase his ability to express his anger in a productive manner without destroying property or personal belongings when upset.
- **Progress Note:** During today’s session, this writer met with Derrick and his family to explore triggers that often lead to Derrick’s aggressive outbursts. His parents indicated that Derrick has difficulty accepting the word no and when he is unable to get his way, resorts to verbal and physical aggression. Derrick stated that he finds it hard to “control himself” when upset and would like to learn better ways to “keep his emotions in check.” This writer and the family discussed strategies to assist and support Derrick in developing the necessary coping skills. Derrick was able to identify one coping strategy (verbalizing he needs a time out) that he would be willing to use when feeling upset. The family and Derrick will update this writer as to how effective this strategy was during the week when we meet next week for our scheduled session.

The Golden Thread Checklist



Use the checklist below to make sure your documentation maintains the Golden Thread:

	Yes	No
1 Did the assessment identify symptoms and behaviors to be addressed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Was a primary diagnosis identified?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Did the treatment plan identify activities to accomplish the identified goals/objective using specific interventions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Were all of the concerns in the assessment addressed on the treatment plan?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Are the interventions aligned with the problems identified in the assessment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Are the goals and/or objectives measurable?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Was the progress note reflective of activities identified in the treatment plan?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Did the note reflect active involvement from the individual and/or family members?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Was a plan identified for next steps?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Did each piece of documentation (assessment, treatment plan, progress notes) flow logically so the reviewer could see the connection?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Common Golden Thread Errors When Writing Progress Notes



Maintaining the Golden Thread requires a constant focus on meeting the needs of individuals and documenting in a way that both establishes the need for the service (medical necessity) and provides information that supports decisions, interventions, and overall service provision.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we write progress notes that do not maintain the Golden Thread. Some common ways in which documentation falls short in maintaining the Golden Thread are identified below.

- Progress notes do not link to goals and objectives in the service or treatment plan
- Progress notes address issues that have not been noted in assessments
- Specifics of interventions used in sessions are not described clearly
- Goals and objectives are not individualized, or are not connected to assessment findings
- Treatment goals, objectives, and clinical strategy are not updated when new issues emerge, objectives are achieved, or the individual is not progressing

Making the Connection



It is not always easy to make a connection between what actually happened in an interaction and a person's goals and objectives. But that doesn't mean they aren't tied together. Learning deep breathing skills could be a tool for someone learning to manage conflict with others, or for someone who experiences anxiety when speaking to strangers. The progress note could state:

Takia and I practiced deep breathing skills together. I reminded Takia that this is a tool she can use when she is feeling anxious about meeting new people.

Making the connection between what happens in sessions and the individual's treatment may require some creativity. You'll need to consider all the skills that are required to accomplish an objective, and detail how your interaction with an individual helps them move towards their goals. If you stay focused on the person's goals and objectives, this should not be too difficult. Of course, it is not enough to link the concepts only in the note. You should make sure the individual also understands the connection between the interaction and their goals and objectives.

If documented accurately, each decision, intervention, and progress note will support and contribute to a complete record of the individual's care.

Practice: Make the Connection



Use the examples below to practice making a connection between the goal/objective and what happened in the interaction. We've done the first one as an example:

- ➔ **Elliot's goal:** Fewer fights with siblings (For example: Elliot has lots of arguments with his sisters about Elliot's lying)
- ➔ **What happened yesterday:** Elliot reported he got caught sneaking out of the house to meet his girlfriend.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Elliot's goal: Honesty is a way to restore trust and good will with siblings

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. Talked about sneaking around as a form of dishonesty, and the importance of honesty in reducing conflict in families

Now fill in the links in the following examples:

- 1 **Josie's goal:** Improved hygiene (For example: Josie comes to program sometimes wearing unwashed clothing, with noticeable stains and odor)

What happened yesterday: Josie talked about how she is spending too much money on her drinking.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Josie's goal: _____

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. _____

- 2 **Stacy's goal:** Independent housing (For example: Stacy has been denied apartments several times following rudeness to potential landlords)

What happened yesterday: Stacy reported she was frustrated with traffic getting to the program, and cursed out the traffic officer.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Stacy's goal: _____

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note.

- 3 Soraya's goal:** Feel more comfortable speaking up for her child's needs when talking to school professionals (For example: Soraya is angry that the school has denied several requests for services for her son that she thinks are necessary)

What happened yesterday: Soraya reported that she resolved an argument with her partner by finding common ground.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Soraya's goal:

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note.

- 4 Brendan's goal:** Saving money to buy a dog (For example: Brendan maintains a Pinterest account of pictures of dogs he likes but cannot afford)

What happened yesterday: Brendan explained that he doesn't know how to cook and just eats frozen dinners.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Brendan's goal:

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note.

5 Jacob's goal: Taking responsibility for misbehavior (For example: Jacob has taken money from his aunt several times without asking, but denies doing it because he is embarrassed)

What happened yesterday: Used play therapy to talk about Jacob missing his recently deceased grandmother.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Jacob's goal:

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note.

6 Allan's goal: Finding a part-time job (For example: Allan has skipped several job interviews in the past few months)

What happened yesterday: Allan talked about meeting a woman he really likes and might want to date.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Allan's goal:

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note.

Look at Your Own Work



Step 1 Now, go back to review the treatment goals and progress notes you've written in the past for two different clients.

Step 2 Read through the notes carefully and make as many corrections as possible. Ask yourself:

- ▶ Does every note include information directly related to assessment findings, goals, objectives or service needs in the plan (Golden Thread)?
- ▶ Are activities and progress related to those goals and objectives the primary focus of each note?
- ▶ Are unexpected issues the primary topic of the note, and if so, is there a need to amend the individual's goals?

Step 3 Share your "corrected" notes with a supervisor or colleague. Ask this person to review your note and provide you with any additional feedback.

Remember



- The Golden Thread is the connection between the assessment, goals and objectives in the plan, and the services the individual receives
- Medical necessity is a part of the Golden Thread
- Progress notes should demonstrate connection to the treatment plan
- Maintaining the Golden Thread requires a constant focus on meeting the needs of individuals

This material is to be used for training purposes only. This material is intended to assist helping professionals as they strive to improve the quality of documentation. This information must be understood as a tool for improving documentation, rather than an exhaustive statement of an employer's legal obligations, which are defined by statute, regulations, and standards. Please consult state guidance documents and state oversight agencies for specific requirements. For more information, please contact ctac.info@nyu.edu

Answer Key



Practice: Make the Connection

Josie's goal: Improved hygiene (For example: Josie comes to program sometimes wearing unwashed clothing, with noticeable stains and odor)

→ **What happened yesterday:** Josie talked about how she is spending too much money on her drinking.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Josie's goal: *Finances can play a role in maintaining laundry and ADLs, and frequent intoxication is a barrier to ADLs.*

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. *We talked about the impact that using too much money to drink has on her ability to buy detergent and pay for laundry regularly.*

Stacy's goal: Independent housing (For example: Stacy has been denied apartments several times following rudeness to potential landlords)

→ **What happened yesterday:** Stacy reported she was frustrated with traffic getting to the program and cursed out the traffic officer.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Stacy's goal: *Ability to manage frustration gets in the way of effective communication.*

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. *We discussed how her frustration with the traffic affected her ability to communicate effectively and the way that might also be happening in housing interviews.*

Soraya's goal: Feel more comfortable speaking up for her child's needs when talking to school professionals (For example: Soraya is angry that the school has denied several requests for services for her son that she thinks are necessary)

→ **What happened yesterday:** Soraya reported that she resolved an argument with her partner by finding common ground.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Soraya's goal: *Ability to use effective communication to resolve conflict.*

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. *I commended Soraya for her ability to use effective communication in resolving a conflict and discussed ways she could use these same skills with school administration.*

Brendan's goal: Saving money to buy a dog (For example: Brendan maintains a Pinterest account of pictures of dogs he likes but cannot afford)

→ **What happened yesterday:** Brendan explained that he doesn't know how to cook and just eats frozen dinners.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Brendan's goal: *Money spent on frozen meals could be saved to buy a dog.*

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. *We talked about the high cost of frozen meals and how that impacts his ability to save money. We also talked about ways he could learn to cook meals as a way to save money.*

Jacob's goal: Taking responsibility for misbehavior (For example: Jacob has taken money from his aunt several times without asking, but denies doing it because he is embarrassed)

→ **What happened yesterday:** Used play therapy to talk about Jacob missing his recently deceased grandmother.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Jacob's goal: *Talking about grief and loss is an uncomfortable feeling, like admitting you've behaved badly.*

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. *Jacob and I talked about uncomfortable feelings, and how we cannot avoid feeling them. We also talked about the ways honesty can make those uncomfortable feelings better.*

Allan's goal: Finding a part-time job (For example: Allan has skipped several job interviews in the past few months)

→ **What happened yesterday:** Allan talked about meeting a woman he really likes and might want to date.

Possible link between what happened yesterday and Allan's goal: *Going on a date requires money which he could earn by having a job.*

Write this link into a sentence for the progress note. *We spoke about asking someone out on a date, and how much that would cost. We also spoke about how employment might make him more attractive to the woman, and also provide money for going out.*