

PRACTICAL GLOSSARY OF KEY SOCIAL WORK TERMS

Save time and quickly master essential terms to feel confident
during the exam!

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Key Social Work Terms

Selected Essential Terms for Social Work Practice

This section includes approximately 300 terms and concepts that are essential for social workers preparing for licensing exams. These terms correspond to core areas covered by the exam and can appear in questions testing memory, application, or critical thinking through scenarios. Even when specific terms are not mentioned, understanding their related concepts is often necessary.

A

aberrant: noticeably different from societal norms; describes behavior that is deviant, unusual, or nonconforming.

abstinence: the conscious choice to refrain from certain actions, commonly used in contexts such as avoiding alcohol or sexual activity.

act of commission: knowingly committing a wrongful or illegal action.

act of omission: neglecting a duty or responsibility, particularly when a social worker fails to act despite professional standards requiring intervention.

acuity: sharpness or keenness, especially regarding mental, visual, or auditory abilities.

acute: sudden in onset and intense in nature; not chronic or long-term.

ad hoc: created or used for a specific, temporary purpose.

advance directive: a formal document that outlines a person's healthcare preferences in situations where they are unable to express them directly, such as living wills or DNR orders.

adverse event: an unexpected negative outcome, often medical in nature, such as complications from treatment or surgery.

age of consent: the legally defined age at which a person can engage in certain behaviors without needing parental approval; this varies based on jurisdiction and context.

agranulocytosis: a severe drop in white blood cell count, often linked to certain medications like antipsychotics including clozapine.

altruistic: acting with genuine concern for the welfare of others.

amelioration: actions taken to reduce the severity of a condition or resolve a social issue.

antecedents: events or circumstances that occur prior to others and may contribute to problematic behaviors.

antianxiety medication: medications, such as tranquilizers, that help alleviate anxiety by influencing brain chemicals to reduce tension and unease.

antidepressant medication: drugs aimed at treating depression by modifying neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, or norepinephrine.

antipsychotic medication: prescribed to control symptoms of psychosis, including hallucinations and disorganized thought patterns.

antisocial behavior: actions that violate societal norms and the rights of others, such as criminal acts or aggression.

apathy: lack of interest or emotional involvement, often associated with conditions like depression.

assent: expression of approval or agreement by someone who is legally unable to give formal consent, such as minors or individuals with cognitive impairment.

assisted suicide: ending a person's life with their consent and the aid of others, typically in cases of terminal illness; distinct from euthanasia in terms of legal and ethical context.

attachment theory: psychological model explaining how bonds formed with early caregivers influence later emotional development.

atrophy: the decrease in size or function of body tissues or organs, caused by aging, illness, or disuse.

authoritarian parenting: a strict parenting approach where rules are enforced rigidly and failure to comply results in punishment.

authoritative parenting: a balanced parenting style that sets rules but remains nurturing and open to communication.

aversion therapy: behavioral technique that links unwanted habits with unpleasant experiences to encourage cessation.

avolition: a significant lack of motivation, often impairing one's ability to initiate or complete tasks.

B

barbiturates: sedative medications with a high risk for addiction and dangerous withdrawal symptoms; usage has declined due to safety concerns.

bartering: exchanging services or items instead of monetary payment; in social work, this practice is generally discouraged due to boundary concerns, except in rare cultural circumstances.

beneficence: ethical principle of acting for the benefit of others and avoiding harm.

benign: non-threatening or non-harmful; commonly used to describe non-cancerous growths.

benzodiazepines: drugs that reduce nervous system activity, often used for anxiety or sleep disorders, and for managing alcohol withdrawal symptoms; considered safer than barbiturates.

bereavement: the period of mourning following the death of someone close.

biofeedback: methods that help individuals regulate physical responses such as heart rate or muscle tension through mental control; used to alleviate stress.

biopsychosocial assessment: a comprehensive evaluation considering biological, psychological, and social factors affecting an individual's wellbeing.

boundary crossing: minor or unintended departures from professional norms that are generally non-harmful.

boundary violation: serious breaches in professional conduct that may exploit or harm the client.

broker: a social work role focused on linking clients with appropriate community services and resources.

C

callous: emotionally unresponsive or indifferent to others' feelings or needs.

capitation: a healthcare payment model in which providers receive a fixed amount per person regardless of the actual services provided.

case advocacy: working directly with individuals or families to help navigate systems and achieve necessary changes.

catastrophizing: expecting or assuming the worst possible outcome, often linked to anxiety.

catalyst: a role focused on initiating positive change, especially in the context of social justice and systemic improvement.

catatonia: a condition marked by motor immobility or abnormal movements, often associated with psychiatric disorders.

catharsis: the release of deeply held emotions, often necessary for healing after trauma.

cause advocacy: efforts aimed at institutional or policy-level change to benefit broader groups; also called class advocacy.

chaining: a step-by-step learning method in which each part of a task is taught and reinforced sequentially until the full task is mastered.

chronic: ongoing or long-lasting, often referring to medical or psychological conditions.

cisgender: someone whose gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth.

civil commitment: legal process through which a person may be involuntarily hospitalized for psychiatric treatment due to danger to self or others.

client-centered therapy: therapeutic approach emphasizing self-exploration and personal growth through empathetic and non-judgmental support.

client self-monitoring: clients track their own thoughts, behaviors, and emotions to support self-awareness and therapy progress, often in cognitive behavioral therapy.

close-ended questioning: asking questions with limited answer choices (e.g., yes/no) to efficiently gather specific information.

codependency: an unhealthy emotional reliance between individuals, often involving enabling behaviors and poor boundaries.

cognitive dissonance: psychological discomfort resulting from holding contradictory beliefs or attitudes.

cognitive distortions: irrational or exaggerated thought patterns that negatively influence mood or behavior.

cognitive restructuring: therapeutic method to challenge and replace harmful thinking patterns with more constructive alternatives.

collateral contact: third-party individual with direct knowledge of a client's circumstances, used for additional information.

collateral information: documentation or reports from external sources used to support client assessment and planning.

color blindness: the failure to recognize systemic racism and racial disparities, often under the guise of treating everyone equally.

comorbidity: co-occurrence of two or more conditions, such as mental illness and physical health issues.

compassion fatigue: emotional and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to others' trauma and suffering; also called "the cost of caring."

complementarity: mutually enhancing dynamics in a relationship where each person contributes unique strengths.

complementary medicine: non-traditional treatments like acupuncture or massage that are used alongside conventional medicine.

compulsion: a repetitive behavior performed to reduce anxiety or distress, often despite knowing it's irrational.

compulsory: something that is required by law or rule.

confabulation: the creation of false memories to fill in gaps, typically without intent to deceive; common in memory disorders.

confirmation bias: tendency to focus on information that confirms pre-existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory evidence.

conflict resolution: the process of resolving disagreements in a constructive and mutually agreeable way.

confrontation: therapeutic technique used to draw attention to inconsistencies in behavior or thought.

congenital: present at birth, whether due to genetic or environmental factors; also used metaphorically for ingrained behaviors.

congruent communication: alignment between what is said and how it is expressed nonverbally; vital for healthy relationships.

conjoint therapy: therapeutic sessions involving couples or family members together to address relationship dynamics.

consent: informed, voluntary agreement to engage in a service or action; must be legally and cognitively competent to provide.

consultation: expert guidance given on a temporary basis; non-binding but informative.

continuity of care: seamless coordination of services to avoid disruptions when transitioning between providers or settings.

continuum of care: a full spectrum of services ranging from least to most intensive, tailored to client needs as they evolve.

contraindication: specific reason a treatment should not be used due to potential harm or lack of benefit.

convalescence: recovery period following illness or injury, aimed at restoring strength and functioning.

conversion therapy: discredited practice attempting to change a person's sexual orientation; considered unethical and harmful by major health organizations.

cooptation: involving those with opposing views in decision-making to reduce resistance and gain their support.

corroboration: supporting evidence that confirms the validity of a statement or claim.

countertransference: emotional reactions a therapist has toward a client, often based on the therapist's own experiences or unresolved issues.

court-appointed examiner: a professional assigned by a court to evaluate a person and provide an objective report for legal use.

cultural humility: an ongoing practice of self-reflection and openness in engaging with diverse cultures while acknowledging one's own limitations.

cultural pluralism: embracing and respecting diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic practices while promoting cooperative coexistence.

D

decompensation: deterioration in normal functioning, which can affect clear thinking, emotional regulation, daily tasks, and/or mental processes.

defense mechanism: an often unconscious mental strategy used to avoid emotional conflict or anxiety.

deleterious: causing harm, damage, or negative effects.

delirious: displaying disorganized thoughts or speech; may also describe someone acting in an extremely excited or irrational manner.

delirium: a temporary mental state involving confusion, disorientation, hallucinations, restlessness, and misperceptions; it can develop rapidly and fluctuate over time and is generally treatable.

delusion: a firmly held belief that contradicts reality or evidence.

delusion of grandeur: an exaggerated and false belief in one's abilities, power, or importance.

dementia: a term for progressive cognitive decline—affecting memory, reasoning, and communication—that interferes with daily activities; primarily affects older adults, especially over age 65.

depersonalization: a sensation of being detached from oneself or the surrounding world; often linked to trauma or mental health disorders.

desensitization: a gradual decrease in emotional responsiveness to a stimulus, often through therapeutic exposure techniques aimed at reducing anxiety.

detoxification: the medically supervised process of eliminating drugs or other harmful substances from the body; withdrawal management is critical due to potential dangers.

developmental disability: a long-term impairment beginning before adulthood, affecting functions like cognition and mobility; may stem from congenital or early-life conditions or injuries.

deviance: behaviors that significantly differ from societal norms or expectations.

diagnostic-related groups: a classification model used in healthcare billing where hospitals receive set payments for treating patients with similar conditions.

diagnostic overshadowing: a tendency to attribute all client symptoms to an existing mental health diagnosis, which may lead to missed underlying issues.

dialectic: a therapeutic process involving the examination of opposing viewpoints to find balance; used in dialectical behavior therapy to manage intense emotions and build acceptance.

differential diagnosis: the method of distinguishing among conditions that produce similar symptoms to identify the root cause of a problem.

discounting the positive: a thought distortion in which an individual minimizes or invalidates positive experiences or achievements.

double bind: a situation where conflicting demands make any possible response result in discomfort or negative consequences.

dual relationship: a scenario where a professional has more than one type of relationship with a client (e.g., friend, coworker), which poses risks to professional boundaries.

dysphoria: a general state of unease or dissatisfaction.

dysthymia: a chronic but mild form of depression that is generally treatable.

E

eco-map: a visual tool that displays the various systems and relationships in a person's life, often used in assessment.

echolalia: the involuntary repetition of words or phrases, typically seen in certain mental health conditions or during childhood language development.

eclectic therapy: a flexible treatment approach that draws from multiple theoretical models to best address a client's individual needs.

ecological perspective: a view that emphasizes the connection between individuals and their environments, including social and cultural systems.

ego: the aspect of personality that mediates between instinctual drives (id) and moral standards (superego), enabling rational thought and decision-making.

egocentric: lacking consideration for others' perspectives, concerns, or values.

ego dystonic: thoughts or behaviors that feel inconsistent or unacceptable to one's own self-concept; often experienced as intrusive.

ego psychology: a focus on rational thinking, impulse control, and adaptation to external reality; emphasizes problem-solving and planning.

ego syntonic: thoughts or actions that are in harmony with an individual's self-perception and values.

elimination disorder: a condition involving repeated defecation or urination in inappropriate places; typically seen in children or individuals with cognitive impairments.

emancipated minor: a person under the legal age of adulthood who has been granted adult legal status, often due to living independently.

enabler: a social work role centered on empowering clients by building coping abilities and fostering change; within families, may refer to someone who supports dysfunctional behavior by minimizing consequences.

encopresis: involuntary bowel movements, often linked to emotional or behavioral issues; medical causes should be ruled out and behavioral therapy is commonly used.

endogenous depression: depression that arises internally and is believed to be biologically or genetically caused rather than triggered by external events.

enmeshed family: a family structure where individual members lack personal boundaries and independence.

entitlement: the belief that one has a right to special treatment, benefits, or privileges; may also refer to legally guaranteed benefits.

entropy: a measure of disorder or chaos within a family or system.

enuresis: involuntary urination, typically in children; can have medical or psychological origins.

equifinality: the idea that different paths or experiences can lead to similar outcomes.

equilibrium: a condition of balance or stability within a system.

equity: a principle of fairness where resources are distributed based on individual needs rather than equally, aiming to level the playing field.

ethnocentrism: the belief in the superiority of one's own cultural, ethnic, or racial group, leading to biased judgments of others.

etiology: the origin or underlying cause of a disease, condition, or behavior.

euphoria: an unusually elevated mood not tied to external events; can be a symptom of mania.

euthanasia: intentionally ending someone's life to relieve suffering, typically done by another person; differs from assisted suicide.

evidence-based practice: the use of proven scientific methods and data, particularly from research, to inform and improve professional interventions.

existential therapy: a therapeutic model that emphasizes free will, responsibility, and personal meaning; promotes self-awareness and authenticity.

exogenous depression: depressive symptoms brought on by external events or circumstances; also known as reactive depression.

expressive communication: the capability to convey thoughts and emotions through verbal or nonverbal methods, such as speech, writing, or gestures.

extinction: the gradual disappearance of a learned behavior when it is no longer reinforced or rewarded.

external locus of control: the belief that outside forces, rather than personal actions, determine life outcomes.

external validity: the degree to which research results can be generalized to real-world settings.

expressive therapies: treatment approaches that involve creative expression—such as art, music, and movement—to facilitate emotional healing and personal development.

F

factitious disorder: a serious psychological condition in which a person pretends to be ill, induces symptoms, or harms themselves to appear sick (self-imposed); can also involve a caregiver making another person, such as a child, appear ill (formerly known as Munchausen syndrome or Munchausen by proxy).

false memory syndrome: a condition where someone recalls an event—often childhood sexual abuse—that did not actually occur.

false positive: a test result that incorrectly indicates the presence of a condition or illness when it is actually absent.

feasibility study: an evaluation of whether proposed goals, actions, or plans can realistically be carried out given the available resources.

feces: waste material (stool) excreted from the intestinal tract.

fee splitting: the unethical practice of accepting payment for referring clients to other professionals; considered a conflict of interest in social work.

fee-for-service: a payment model where providers set and receive fees for services, either fully or partially covered by clients or insurers.

fetish: an object, body part, or idea that provokes sexual arousal; can also refer to excessive or irrational devotion.

fixation: an obsessive focus on a specific idea, desire, or objective.

flashbacks: intense, intrusive memories of past traumatic experiences, commonly associated with PTSD.

flooding: a behavioral intervention that repeatedly exposes individuals to anxiety-inducing stimuli in order to decrease their response over time.

folie à deux: a shared mental disorder that affects two or more closely connected individuals, often involving similar delusions, such as paranoia.

formative evaluation: gathering feedback during the development or execution of a project to guide improvements and effectiveness.

formulary: a list of prescription medications approved for coverage under a particular insurance plan.

free association: a psychoanalytic technique encouraging clients to speak freely, allowing unconscious thoughts and feelings to surface for therapeutic interpretation.

G

generativity: a desire to contribute positively to society, often seen in midlife, characterized by a sense of caring for others and leaving a legacy.

genogram: a visual chart of a client's family structure and medical history, used to identify patterns and hereditary factors in behavior or health.

gestalt therapy: a therapy model emphasizing present awareness, personal responsibility, and insight through techniques like reenactment and role play.

ghost sickness: a culturally held belief involving symptoms like nightmares, weakness, and confusion, attributed to spiritual or supernatural causes.

grandiosity: an exaggerated perception of one's own worth, abilities, or significance; in extreme cases, considered a delusional belief.

groupthink: a dynamic in which group members prioritize agreement and harmony over critical analysis, often leading to poor decision-making.

guided imagery: using relaxing mental images to promote calm, healing, or enhanced focus; also known as "visualization."

gustatory hallucinations: experiencing taste sensations without a physical source, sometimes of unusual or inedible items.

H

hallucination: perceiving something that isn't actually present, such as seeing or hearing things; common in psychotic episodes or substance-related conditions.

health care proxy: a legal document designating someone to make medical decisions on behalf of another person if they are unable to do so; differs from a living will, which outlines specific medical wishes.

hematuria: the presence of blood in urine, either visible to the eye (gross) or detected only through microscopic analysis (micro).

hero: a family role adopted by someone who excels or overachieves to shift focus away from family dysfunction.

histrionic behavior: overly dramatic and attention-seeking behavior that may include manipulation and excessive emotional expression.

homeopathy: an alternative healing practice based on the use of natural substances in small amounts to stimulate the body's own healing processes.

homeostasis: the condition of maintaining internal stability and balance within a system.

humanistic psychology: an approach that centers on individual growth, self-worth, autonomy, and fulfillment, opposing the idea that behavior is solely shaped by external forces.

hypochondriasis: intense worry about having a serious illness despite medical reassurance; also known as illness anxiety disorder.

hypomania: a less severe and shorter-lasting form of mania, marked by elevated mood, energy, irritability, and confidence, without major functional impairment.

I

id: the most primal part of personality, located in the unconscious, driven by instinctual urges and the desire for immediate gratification.

ideas of reference: the mistaken belief that unrelated events or remarks refer personally to oneself; also referred to as "delusions of reference."

ideation: the process of developing thoughts or beliefs; in mental health, suicidal ideation refers to contemplating self-harm, requiring assessment.

identification with the aggressor: a trauma response in which victims empathize with or defend those who have harmed them; also called “Stockholm syndrome.”

idiopathic: a condition or disease with no known or identifiable cause.

illusion: a distorted or incorrect perception of reality, frequently seen in people with schizophrenia.

imaginary friend: a mentally constructed companion, often in childhood, considered developmentally normal and not indicative of mental illness.

impaired colleague: a coworker whose job performance is affected by personal issues such as addiction, illness, or burnout; addressing the issue can allow for appropriate support or accommodation.

impotence: the inability to maintain an erection; may result from physical health issues or, less commonly, psychological causes.

in vivo: referring to real-life or live settings, such as direct observation or hands-on supervision.

incoherent: lacking clarity or logic; difficult to understand or follow.

insomnia: trouble falling or staying asleep, or poor sleep quality; often associated with mental health disorders.

interdisciplinary: combining and coordinating knowledge from various fields into a unified approach; differs from multidisciplinary, which keeps disciplines separate.

intermittent reinforcement: a learning technique in which only some responses are rewarded, making the learned behavior more resistant to extinction.

internal locus of control: the belief that one’s own actions and choices largely determine life outcomes.

internal validity: the degree to which a study proves that the changes in the dependent variable are caused by the independent variable.

intersectionality: the interconnected nature of identity categories (like race, gender, and class) and how overlapping systems of discrimination contribute to disadvantage.

involuntary commitment: a legal measure allowing a person to be hospitalized without consent when they pose a risk to themselves or others; requires regular review.

L

learned helplessness: the feeling of powerlessness due to repeated exposure to uncontrollable events, often leading to a lack of motivation to change.

least restrictive environment: a setting that imposes the fewest limitations, often used in educational or care decisions for people with disabilities to encourage integration.

lethality: the capacity to cause death or serious harm.

lethargy: a condition marked by lack of energy or motivation, frequently linked to depression or other medical conditions.

locus of control: a concept reflecting whether individuals perceive outcomes as within their control (internal) or outside their influence (external).

lost child: a family member who isolates themselves to avoid attention or involvement in family conflict, often seen as quiet or independent.

M

magical thinking: the belief that personal thoughts or actions can directly influence unrelated external events; commonly linked to superstition.

malaise: a general feeling of discomfort or a vague sense that something is wrong.

maleficence: engaging in harmful or unethical behavior; prevented through adherence to best practices and standards of care.

malinger: deliberately faking or exaggerating symptoms to gain an external benefit, such as avoiding responsibilities.

managed care: a healthcare delivery system in which services are coordinated and costs are managed by a third party, typically an insurance provider.

mania: an extremely heightened state of arousal, energy, and activity, which can include poor judgment, grandiosity, and impulsive behavior.

mascot: a family role where humor is used to reduce tension and shift focus away from dysfunction.

mediator: a social work role that involves helping resolve conflicts between individuals or groups.

medical model: a framework for understanding health problems through diagnosis, classification, and treatment based on observable symptoms and testing.

medical necessity: services or treatments deemed essential to appropriately address a medical or mental health condition.

medication-assisted treatment: an evidence-based approach that uses medication alongside counseling to treat substance use disorders and manage withdrawal symptoms.

mental status exam: an evaluation of a client's mental functioning, including mood, appearance, thought processes, and cognitive abilities like memory and orientation.

mood stabilizer: a medication used to reduce fluctuations in mood, often prescribed for conditions such as bipolar disorder.

morbidity: the rate or presence of illness or psychological issues within a population.

motivational interviewing: a collaborative counseling method that encourages clients to resolve ambivalence and use their own motivation for change.

multidisciplinary: involving multiple professional fields that work independently but coordinate services for the client; differs from interdisciplinary approaches.

N

narrative therapy: a therapeutic method aimed at helping clients separate themselves from their problems by externalizing those issues and rewriting their life narratives, often through written exercises.

narcolepsy: a neurological disorder marked by excessive sleepiness during the day and sudden sleep episodes that may occur during waking activities, such as driving; chronic and manageable with medication and lifestyle adaptation.

negative entropy: the process of a system becoming more organized or structured over time, rather than increasingly disordered.

negligence: the failure to take reasonable precautions or provide proper care, leading to harm or risk.

neurotransmitter: a brain chemical responsible for carrying messages between neurons, playing a key role in regulating brain activity and behavior.

O

object permanence: the awareness that an object or person continues to exist even when it cannot be seen or sensed directly.

object relations theory: a psychological concept explaining how early childhood experiences with caregivers shape one's ability to form stable, long-lasting emotional bonds.

ombudsman: a representative who investigates and addresses complaints about human rights or systemic problems, often serving in a public advocacy role within government institutions.

olfactory hallucinations: detecting smells that are not present in the environment; these may be pleasant or unpleasant.

organic brain syndrome: a long-term cognitive disorder affecting awareness, thinking, mood, and behavior, often caused by medical conditions such as dementia, infections, or substance use.

P

palliative care: medical treatment focused on comfort and symptom management, rather than curing a disease; aims to ease pain and slow disease progression.

paradoxical directive: a therapeutic strategy where clients are instructed to engage in the very behavior they are trying to change, encouraging self-awareness and control; often called "reverse psychology."

paranoia: an irrational belief of being targeted, threatened, or betrayed, typically associated with mental illness.

paraphrasing: a counseling technique in which a therapist restates a client's message in different words to ensure clarity and deepen understanding.

parasomnia: a category of sleep disorders involving unusual behaviors such as sleepwalking, night terrors, or talking during sleep.

parity: the principle that different types of care—such as mental and physical health services—should be provided equal attention and funding.

partialization: the process of breaking down complex issues into smaller, manageable tasks to make problem-solving more effective.

permanency planning: creating long-term care strategies for children in out-of-home placements, including family reunification or stable housing alternatives.

permissive parenting: a relaxed parenting style characterized by a desire to avoid conflict, offering minimal discipline and allowing children to act freely.

polarized thinking: a cognitive pattern of viewing situations in extremes, such as all good or all bad, without recognizing nuanced alternatives.

positive regard: the unconditional acceptance and support of a person, regardless of their behavior or circumstances.

prescribing the symptom: a treatment approach in which the therapist encourages continuation of a problematic behavior to highlight the client's control over it and prompt change.

privileged communication: the legal protection that prevents disclosure of private conversations between professionals (like therapists or lawyers) and clients.

prognosis: a clinical prediction about the likely outcome, severity, and duration of an illness or condition, which helps clients consider treatment options.

pro bono: professional services offered voluntarily and without payment, typically for those who cannot afford them.

projection bias: the assumption that others share the same attitudes, beliefs, or priorities.

projective testing: psychological assessments that use vague or ambiguous stimuli to uncover hidden emotions or thoughts, commonly used in psychotherapy.

prosocial behavior: intentional actions designed to help others, such as donating, cooperating, or volunteering.

proxy: someone authorized to act or make decisions on behalf of another individual.

psychodrama: a therapeutic process in which individuals act out scenarios involving themselves or others to gain insight and reduce emotional stress.

psychodynamic theory: a form of therapy that explores unconscious thoughts and early life experiences to understand current behavior and promote personal growth.

psychopharmacology: the study and use of medications to treat mental health conditions, especially those involving psychosis or mood disorders.

psychosis: a severe mental state involving distorted perception, thinking, and emotions; often includes hallucinations, delusions, and impaired reality testing.

psychosomatic: physical symptoms that arise from psychological stress rather than a medical cause.

psychotherapy notes: private records made by a therapist during sessions, kept separately from the official client file and not typically shared.

psychotic break: a sudden intensification of psychotic symptoms, often involving a loss of connection with reality.

power of attorney: a legal document that permits someone to make decisions for another individual if they become unable to do so.

R

rapid cycling: a pattern in bipolar disorder marked by frequent and rapid changes between different mood states such as mania, depression, or hypomania.

rapprochement: a developmental phase, around 18 months of age, where children seek independence from caregivers while still relying on them for support.

reality testing: the ability to distinguish between internal perceptions and the external world; often used to assess delusional thinking.

receptive communication: the capacity to understand spoken or written language; relates to interpreting or processing language input.

redaction: the process of concealing or removing sensitive information from documents for privacy or legal reasons.

reflection: a counseling method that involves restating or expanding on a client's words to encourage insight and deeper understanding.

reframing: changing the way a situation or behavior is viewed by highlighting its positive or alternative aspects; also known as cognitive reframing.

residual: symptoms or effects that continue after the main issue has been treated; also refers to policy models where government support is a last resort.

respite care: short-term caregiving assistance that allows regular caregivers to rest and avoid burnout.

role complementarity: fulfilling expected behaviors within assigned roles in relationships; the opposite of role conflict.

role reversal: the act of switching roles or responsibilities, often used in therapy to build empathy and perspective.

rumination: either physically regurgitating and re-swallowing food or persistently dwelling on negative or intrusive thoughts.

S

scapegoat: a person blamed for problems or mistakes, often in family systems, to divert attention from the real issues.

secondary prevention: early detection strategies aimed at identifying diseases before symptoms appear, to allow for early treatment.

secondary trauma: emotional strain resulting from indirect exposure to others' traumatic experiences; also referred to as vicarious trauma.

self-actualization: the full expression of a person's creative, intellectual, and social potential, driven by internal motivation.

self-efficacy: an individual's belief in their own ability to succeed or achieve specific goals.

serotonin: a neurotransmitter in the brain that significantly influences mood, often targeted in depression treatments.

shaping: a behavioral technique where successive steps toward a desired behavior are reinforced incrementally.

sliding scale: a flexible payment system where the amount paid depends on the client's income level.

social work interview: a structured conversation with a client that collects relevant information using both verbal and nonverbal communication.

somatization: when psychological stress presents as physical symptoms without an identifiable medical cause; often unconscious and without personal gain.

splitting: a cognitive distortion often seen in borderline personality disorder, where individuals struggle to integrate both positive and negative traits in others or themselves.

standard of care: the level of service or professionalism expected from practitioners with similar training and experience under the same circumstances.

strategic family therapy: a treatment model focused on using innovative, solution-oriented interventions to change behaviors, rather than analyzing root causes.

structural family therapy: a therapeutic approach that improves family dynamics by addressing roles, rules, and boundaries.

stupor: a condition of mental numbness, confusion, and immobility often marked by a lack of responsiveness to surroundings.

suicidal ideation: thoughts or considerations about ending one's own life, which may range in intensity and require clinical assessment.

superego: the part of personality that internalizes moral standards, societal rules, and personal values, often in opposition to basic impulses.

symbiotic relationship: a mutual dependency between individuals; in families, this often starts with infants relying on parents but may persist in unhealthy forms as co-dependency.

systematic desensitization: a behavioral therapy method that gradually exposes individuals to feared situations to reduce anxiety over time.

T

tactile hallucinations: feeling physical sensations, such as being touched, when no physical cause is present.

Tarasoff decision: a legal precedent requiring therapists to warn potential victims if a client poses a credible threat to them; establishes a "duty to warn."

tardive dyskinesia: an involuntary movement disorder caused by long-term use of certain psychiatric medications; typically managed by stopping or reducing the drug.

task-centered treatment: a short-term, goal-focused intervention that identifies specific issues and sets a clear timeline for resolving them; client is actively involved.

task group: a group organized for the purpose of solving a problem, performing a task, or delivering a service.

tertiary prevention: strategies aimed at helping people already affected by illness or injury to minimize complications and enhance quality of life.

third party payers: insurance companies or government agencies that reimburse providers for client services.

toxic stress: an intense and prolonged stress response, especially without protective support systems, which can lead to long-term negative health outcomes.

transference: the redirection of a client's unresolved feelings toward others onto the therapist, often rooted in unconscious conflict.

trauma bonding: a dysfunctional attachment formed between an abused person and their abuser, often maintained through cycles of abuse and reconciliation.

triage: prioritizing care in emergency situations to ensure those with the most urgent needs receive treatment first.

triangulation: a dynamic in which a third party is used to reduce tension or gain control in two-person interactions; also a research method involving multiple data sources.

U

unconditional positive regard: a practice of offering full acceptance and support to someone regardless of their words or actions.

uninvolved parenting: a parenting style marked by emotional detachment and lack of supervision; often due to caregiver stress or difficulties.

unspecified mental disorder: a diagnosis given when symptoms cause significant impairment but do not meet the full criteria for a specific disorder.

utilization review: the process of evaluating whether provided health or mental health services are appropriate and necessary, usually conducted by insurers.

V

vicarious liability: a legal concept holding supervisors, employers, or instructors responsible for the actions of those they oversee.

vicarious trauma: psychological distress resulting from indirect exposure to others' traumatic experiences, often building over time in helping professionals.