

Practical, Proven Strategies for Helping Adolescents Handle the Challenges of Teen Life

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Teens haven't changed, but the world
around them certainly has.

Today's teenagers are experiencing
unprecedented loneliness, aloneness, stress,
depression, anxiety and record levels of
suicide. These symptoms are exacerbated by
too much time on screens, and in isolation
from peers, family and friends. And a daily
fear-driven news cycle certainly complicates
matters even further.

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Today's Program

- ▶ Teens are presenting to offices and agencies in record numbers with a plethora of symptoms which are markedly affecting their personal, social, and academic well-being
- ▶ Take a dive into adolescent life and address what's going on and why
- ▶ Discuss the importance of working with the identified teen as well as the family system affected by these potentially troubling circumstances
- ▶ We'll take a problem-solution-benefit approach
- ▶ We'll address:
 - ▶ Obtaining PROPER social nourishment
 - ▶ Gaining self-mastery over depression, anxiety, ADHD
 - ▶ Overcoming defiance and improving emotional control
 - ▶ Staring down substance abuse
 - ▶ Tackling school pressure and college admissions

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Social Media and Proper Social "Nourishment"

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Social Media

- ▶ Pew research last year: More than 50 percent American parents are worried that social media could lead their teenagers to develop mental health problems - 28 percent were “extremely” worried
- ▶ Teens themselves are worried - at least about one another and 30 percent of those interviewed by Pew state that social media is mostly negative for kids their age - compared with 25 percent saying the effect has been mostly positive
- ▶ Social media effects seem to depend a lot on the person using it and their mindset: “Am I in control of this technology or is it controlling me?”
- ▶ Science as it stands right now, is all over the place: Are girls and boys equally affected? How about effects on well-being? Increased? Harmed? No effect at all?
- ▶ I guarantee you social media is not bad for all teenage boys or girls all the time

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Social Media (Cont)

- ▶ Both genders are using SM to find community they don't have offline; or to express creative impulses; or ask questions about their identity that their parents aren't open to
- ▶ What aspects of SM are riskiest? Cuts into sleep time? Diminishes “in-real-life” friend time and exposure to sunlight? Or is it the envy-inducing images inviting comparison and self-doubt? Should we worry most about bullying? Or the dread of counting “likes”?
- ▶ If any of the those just above apply, we'd likely have to examine parenting practices and do a dive into examining the teen's self-esteem, self-image, and confidence components

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Other Associated Issues

- ▶ Girls are much heavier users of visually oriented platforms, primarily Instagram; Instagram can loom in a girl's mind even when the app is not open, driving hours of obsessive thought, worry, and shame
- ▶ Boys aren't using social media as much per se, they spend far more time playing video games
- ▶ Wait! Not to worry, Congress will intervene and pass legislation compelling social media platforms to clean up their act because the mental health of our young people is important
- ▶ Instead, how about mobilizing groups of parents to work with the principals of their local elementary and middle schools to delay entry to the worst social media offenders (Instagram) until high school?

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How About Some Realistic, Common Sense for Parents

- ▶ Seriously, how well do you know your children? Can you predict how well they're equipped to handle the allure, pressures and intimidations of social media
- ▶ Then, carefully consider what age you believe they can handle it
- ▶ Have regular sit-downs about their experiences, monitor for their thoughts and feelings about what they're consuming
- ▶ There's no sensible reason for them have a phone during sleep time
- ▶ The number of hours of daily screentime is variable - but 5 hours per day is beyond excessive

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Common Sense for Parents

- ▶ Model the screen time behavior you're asking or requiring of your teen
- ▶ If nothing else, curtail doomscrolling
- ▶ Make your teen aware that their phones and yours will be utilizing parental monitoring apps

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Services to Help with Monitoring

Net Nanny

Bark

Our Pact

KidsGuard Pro

- ▶ These apps block questionable or dangerous content before a child sees it.
- ▶ They can filter certain websites and monitor a child's digital activity and can also monitor and limit screen time.
- ▶ The apps monitor texts and emails, along with YouTube and over 30 social media networks for questionable content a child might be searching or viewing.
- ▶ Alerts are sent to parents if signs of cyberbullying, depression, online predators, adult content and more are detected.

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Helping Teens Obtain Proper Social Nutrition

- ▶ # 1 goal here: Get your teens into the best positions and circumstances possible to develop all-important strong, social-emotional skills, self-mastery, healthy esteem and image by encouraging these self-statements....
- ▶ To know oneself, and to become a happy, well-adjusted, loving, caring, powerful, motivated, determined, and spiritual being, "I cannot be glued to screens"
- ▶ "Getting out into the world and not isolating will help me avoid becoming self absorbed"
- ▶ "Taking an active part in my family, will teach me responsibility and self-sufficiency"
- ▶ "The more time I spend with my peers, the stronger my social skills will become"
- ▶ "Some type of daily exercise will not only strengthen me physically, and emotionally, it will build self-discipline
- ▶ "15 minutes of daily quiet time will help me take an inventory of myself, and what I'm grateful for
- ▶ "I'll build my confidence and conversational skills by having my parents introduce me to new people"

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Gaining Control Over Depression, Anxiety

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Demoralization Issues

- ▶ I see many kids with disturbed mood and unhappiness related to challenging life circumstances: bad schools, problematic family or parents, poor peer relationships, poverty, trauma, violence, social media conflict
- ▶ All can profoundly affect how these kids do in school, behave at home and in social settings
- ▶ The number of kids suffering from clinical depression is small compared to those who are demoralized
- ▶ Think of demoralization in youth as akin to adjustment disorder with depressed mood in adults

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Management Options

- ▶ Medication
- ▶ Counseling (Cognitive-behavioral)
- ▶ Mindfulness breathing
- ▶ Get them moving!



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Contemporary Antidepressants: NOT THE WAY TO GO!

- ▶ Prozac - FDA approved for kids 8 and older
- ▶ Zoloft
- ▶ Paxil
- ▶ Celexa
- ▶ Lexapro - FDA approved for kids 12 and older
- ▶ Effexor
- ▶ Wellbutrin

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Children Taking Antidepressants

- ▶ Antidepressant effectiveness today is no better than the 1950s
- ▶ The journal *Lancet*: "Antidepressants provide small or modest efficacy in the majority of adult users"
- ▶ What does this translate to in youth with only growing and developing neurotransmitter systems?
- ▶ Side effects can be persistent (anxiety, sedation, insomnia)



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CBT For Depression With Youth: Understanding Your Mood: I Want To Make Them Think

- ▶ **What does having a low mood feel like?** Describe how you feel. What are some of your thoughts? How do you act when you're feeling down?
- ▶ **What does having a good mood feel like?** How does your body feel and how are you acting?
- ▶ **Tell me about the last time you felt low.** What was going on, where were you?
- ▶ **How could things have turned out better?** Can you think of anything you could have changed to make it better?
- ▶ **When it comes to managing depression and anxiety (coming up next) in teens, I'd much rather SHOW them how to manage these conditions, rather than just TELL them**

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Reaching Out To A Trusted Friend Or Adult For Support

What is my problem?



Who can I talk to?

How would they deal with this problem?

What's my next step?

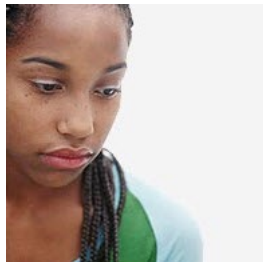
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Mindfulness Breathing; Exercise

- ▶ Draw a picture of yourself feeling calm and cool, and taking slow, deep breaths on purpose
- ▶ The brain simply cannot function at peak capacity if we aren't moving, so if we're not moving, overall mental health suffers
- ▶ Exercise makes the brain more ready to learn, is good for improving attention, and is also a natural anti-anxiety and antidepressant treatment, improves sleep and boosts self-esteem
- ▶ Most importantly, exercise doesn't have to be complicated and can easily turn into a family affair

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Anxiety and Worry



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“We Suffer More Often in Imagination Than in Reality”

- ▶ From the 2020 journal *Behavior Therapy*: 91 percent of the things participants in a study worried about did NOT come true
- ▶ So, for every bad outcome we experience, worriers suffer for 10
- ▶ Regardless of age, all worriers deal poorly with uncertainty and worrying exacerbates depression, increases perception of pain, and encourages procrastination and perfectionism
- ▶ Credo of the worrier: Worry will help me learn how to increase control of a situation and doing so will ward off negative events and keep them from happening

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4 steps I Offer Worrying Teens

- ▶ **Write the worry down.** We work on one worry at a time. I have them write the worry down on a sheet of paper to make them more emotionally manageable I ask them to assign a feeling to this worry and encourage them to draw an image next to it that displays that feeling
- ▶ **Then we focus next on outcomes, not the problem.** I ask them to write down the best outcome for the worry, then the worst outcome, then the most likely outcome. Then add what they could do in each instance. Now they've got a management plan because the source of the worry is now specific
- ▶ **Fight off superstition.** I have them memorize this phrase: “More worry will not change anything.”
- ▶ **Declare their intention to stop wasting time worrying.** I show them the serenity prayer and we recite it together, then have them draw another image depicting how they're feeling now

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Humor the Anxiety or Worry

*“So, I’ve taken this test, I did my best,
I’m handing it in, though anxious within”*

*“We’ll win this game cuz losing would be lame, and we’d
have no fame, and that would be a shame”*

Humoring worry and anxiety does 3 things:

- ▶ 1. It helps to “air out” concerns
- ▶ 2. It helps avoid getting in a struggle with it
- ▶ Humor is disarming

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Medicating Pediatric Anxiety

- ▶ Oh, Please!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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Overcoming Defiance, and Improving Emotional Control

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Oppositional Defiance

- ▶ Arguing mostly with adults
- ▶ Temper tantrums
- ▶ Snubbing rules and chores
- ▶ Frequent anger bordering on rage
- ▶ Vindictiveness and revenge
- ▶ Harsh speech
- ▶ Manifested by school defiance, hostility in the home, and public unruliness
- ▶ WHAT'S INFLUENCING OR CAUSING THIS RISE IN HOSTILE BEHAVIOR?

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Communication Breakdowns

- ▶ Most of the communication and interaction today's kids experience takes place on screens showcasing unhealthy and inappropriate content, which shapes their thoughts, beliefs, and actions
- ▶ The concern here is that regular exposure to violent and aggressive acts desensitizes the brain to violence, and eventually the brain begins processing these acts as normal
- ▶ In addition, every mainstream news story now funnels through social media, and most of these stories are doom, gloom and fear, agitating people - and doing a good job at it
- ▶ The disconcerting thing about all of this is the vast majority of what unfolds online would never happen in face-to-face communication - which fosters social skills development and emotional regulation
- ▶ Social media has turned into a laboratory experiment for me, and I'm shocked by posts, comments, etc., coming from adults. There's so much anger, and if I'm seeing this and you're seeing it also, you better believe children are also!
- ▶ We're becoming inured to it!

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Other Influencers

- ▶ **Instant Gratification:** Today's children inhabit a world where anything they want can be accessed instantaneously, with very little effort.
- ▶ Fosters possible feelings of entitlement, and if they don't get it, they throw a fit.
- ▶ Experienced this with your children or children you're working with? If you haven't congratulations!, you're doing something right!
- ▶ **Chasing Dopamine:** Stimulating activities like video games, for example, causes a release of dopamine, producing instant satisfaction.
- ▶ But the moment the behavior is stopped, a withdrawal ensues, ushering in irritability, anxiety, insomnia
- ▶ ODD is then the behavioral manifestation of withdrawal due to craving

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And Really Important...

- ▶ Teens are like sponges, they observe everyone around them, and they pay close attention to those they love and trust
- ▶ And they are watching how their caretakers, usually parents treat each other, resolve conflict, how they handle social situations, so modeling respectful behavior is a must
- ▶ If basic needs aren't met, mental wellness cannot exist, teens must feel safe to thrive
- ▶ Emotionally reactive parents put children into fight or flight: this leads to teens having difficulty expressing emotions; people pleasing; being the "easy" child; fear of conflict; hypervigilance - always on edge, thinking someone is mad/upset
- ▶ Are there marital issues? Frequently disagree on parenting issues?
- ▶ When working with parents, caretakers emphasize that they **MUST** take on the role of co-regulator of the child's behavior, and in doing so, must be appropriately regulated themselves

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Commanding Respect

- ▶ **Gain your child's attention and respect.** Here's the drill: Say to the child or adolescent: "Do not speak to me that way;" "Do not interrupt me;" "Do not make that face." "Sit down and make eye contact with me when we're talking." And the catch is - keep saving it until they stop, while remaining calm with a poker face.
- ▶ **Set expectations.** (1). Rules and consequences must be clear, and preferably, in writing. (2). Spell it out: In no uncertain terms, clearly state what is considered unacceptable behavior. (3). Tell them directly what the consequences will be if this happens.
- ▶ **Consequences.**
 - ▶ Remove reinforcers (video games; phones; access to music; bikes; the list goes on - then set terms for earning the items back as a reward for acceptable behavior
 - ▶ Don't overdo consequences - grounding your kid for a month will be harder on you than on the kid
 - ▶ Swift and logical consequences work best
 - ▶ I like community service
 - ▶ Doing something nice or helpful for the person that was hurt - chores; helping with homework
 - ▶ This is a "learning consequence" not a punitive one; doing something helpful for someone fosters generosity which, in turn, creates compassion

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Commanding Respect

- ▶ Then...go one offensive and lead with some love, soothing, and nurturing
- ▶ This is not always easy at first, as previous negative behavior patterns became ingrained
- ▶ Target only a few important behaviors, don't try to fix everything
- ▶ Decide what to ignore

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Staring Down Substance Abuse: Marijuana; Fentanyl

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Impacts of Drug Use on Adolescent Brain Functioning

- ▶ Brain pruning is vital to the growing and developing brain
- ▶ (1) Pruning clears out unused wiring to make way for better informational processing (2) Pruning helps build longer chains of nerve cells needed during adulthood for complex decision making
- ▶ Socio-emotional development - limbic region
- ▶ Reasoning and decision-making - prefrontal cortex
- ▶ Prefrontal cortex functions lag in development, when compared to limbic region functioning
- ▶ Risk-taking is in the driver's seat during adolescence
- ▶ The teen brain is much like a car with a fully functioning accelerator but a weak braking system

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Impacts of Drug Use on Brain Functioning

- ▶ Drug use affects cognitive functioning, new learning, language acquisition, memory development
- ▶ These are pre-frontal cortex functions - which already lag in development, as such, the brain can just remain fixated on obtaining more drugs
- ▶ All psychoactive substances, including cannabis, can adversely affect normal brain maturation during adolescence, increasing the likelihood of developing a substance abuse disorder

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Cannabis (Marijuana)

- ▶ Legal in 24 states for recreational use; 38 states for medical use
- ▶ In the 1990s, the average THC content was 4 percent; by 2014, it averaged 14 percent; while today marijuana averages 40 percent, but can be as high as 90 percent
- ▶ I've studied and researched cannabis for decades now, and have taken mostly a neutral stance on it, but no more; if adults choose to use it, it's their choice, but for adolescents, it's a completely different story
- ▶ 14-year-old high school freshman
- ▶ Teens have been smoking marijuana for years, but not at this potency
- ▶ Hard core substance abusers - without exception - begin with marijuana first; it is NOT a benign gateway anymore, and it can destroy lives just like the so-called "more dangerous" drugs do
- ▶ At today's potency and considering the adverse effects, there's not a single cannabinoid I would recommend for the treatment of any psychiatric disorder, to anyone, regardless of age. Certain medical disorders, yes, mental disorders, no

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Signs and Symptoms of Opioid Intoxication

- ▶ Opioids are depressants...so everything slows down
 - ▶ Breathing becomes slow and shallow
 - ▶ Choking sounds
 - ▶ Vomiting
 - ▶ Pale face, clammy look
 - ▶ Fingernails and lips turn blue
 - ▶ Slow pulse
 - ▶ Pinpoint pupil

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Fentanyl

- ▶ Children younger than 14 are dying of fentanyl poisoning at a rate faster than any other age group; fentanyl deaths among toddlers more than tripled between 2019-2021
- ▶ First developed in 1959 for use as a pain reliever in hospital settings
- ▶ 100 times more potent than morphine; 50 times more potent than heroin per dosing equivalency
- ▶ No unique smell
- ▶ Lethal dose: 2 milligrams
- ▶ How Fentanyl gets to the U.S.
- ▶ Easy to purchase any illicit substance on the street and be completely unaware it contains Fentanyl
- ▶ Xylazine (Tranq)

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Two days after Christmas 2020, Chris Didier went into his son Zach's bedroom in their home near Sacramento. Zach was an accomplished student, as well as a school theatre actor and athlete. Zach was unresponsive at his desk - his head lying on his arm.

Chris, Zach's father, immediately began CPR, pending the arrival of the 911 medical response team. The medics began trying to resuscitate Zach, but they stopped after mere minutes.

The Placer county coroner soon arrived and spent several hours looking around the home and examining Zach's room. They eventually came downstairs and told Chris they had two initial theories regarding Zach's death: An undetected medical condition or fentanyl poisoning.

After investigating Zach's phone, they found the answer. Using the popular social media app Snapchat, Zach and a friend had contacted a drug dealer who was advertising various products he was selling near the mall's food court.

The two teens purchased what they were told was the opioid Percocet. But they were duped, they were sold a counterfeit pill which contained a lethal dose of Fentanyl.

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Access

- ▶ Dealers post ads and photos with hashtags, emojis, and instructions for how to contact them
- ▶ Product may be shipped directly to the home or buyer may meet up with the dealer in-person

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Emojis and Slang

Emojis

- ▶ Drug dealer = “plug”
- ▶ Getting high = “rocket ship”
- ▶ Opioids = “different colored capsules”
- ▶ Methamphetamine = “blue crystal”
- ▶ Cocaine = “snowflake”

Slang

- ▶ DOC = “drug of choice”
- ▶ P911 = “parent alert”
- ▶ KPC = “keeping parents clueless”
- ▶ PAL - “parents are listening”

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Must-dos for Parents or Caretakers

- ▶ We must adopt zero tolerance for all drugs, including marijuana, and do our best to reinforce this message constantly
- ▶ Start the conversation when children are young by addressing dangers, consequences and the risk of adulterated products
- ▶ Search your teens drawers, backpacks, and phones - be aware as possible of what's going on in their lives
- ▶ Keep an eye out for changes you may see - if they suddenly lose interest in activities they enjoy or if their grades are dropping
- ▶ Don't be naïve - that vape pen in their possession doesn't belong to a friend, and this isn't their first time using it
- ▶ Legal consequences: Law enforcement uses social media in 90 percent of busts

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College Pressure and Debt

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Pressure

- ▶ High school seniors experience a lot of pressure when it comes to college applications - letters of recommendation, essays, GPA, test scores, volunteerism, extra curriculars - all to showcase excellence - it's all emotionally exhausting
- ▶ The implied message from college admission committees is to do whatever it takes, at any cost, to be accepted into your chosen "prestigious" institution
- ▶ The average tuition increase is nearly 3 times the current rate of inflation, while the value of the average wage has stagnated and is still going down
- ▶ The financial benefits of a bachelor's degree continue to decline

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The Inconspicuous College Degree

- ▶ I could wax on ad nauseum about people I know who sent their teens to expensive universities who graduated with invisible degrees that proved to be useless in the real world
- ▶ Many such students have wonderful experiences at such universities, but their tuition unfortunately was an expense rather than an investment
- ▶ This begs the question: What is a college or university education for? Pursuing a field of study that will lead to a meaningful, well-paying job
- ▶ Student loan debt is currently 1.75 trillion dollars - as such, either those sharing in this debt load went to colleges they couldn't afford, or they pursued a course of study that doesn't pay enough upon employment to pay back the loans
- ▶ Excessive college debt is a top stressor for millennials, forcing them to live with their parents well into their twenties or thirties

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Community College; Alternatives To The College Degree

- ▶ Many community colleges across the country provide excellent standard curriculums in addition to “trade” learning opportunities that are second to none
- ▶ Motivated students can attend a community college for 2 years, then transfer to a four-year institution to finish up and save a significant amount of money
- ▶ “Tech Elevator” is an organization offering in-person and remote learning that teaches in-demand technology skills for the modern workforce; graduates have a 90 percent employment rate getting jobs in software development
- ▶ Invariably I’m telling students and their parents: Attending an overpriced college is NOT a magic ticket to wealth, so pick the least expensive option that helps you get to where you’re going
- ▶ And to remember, you don’t have to have it all figured out by age 18-22; doing so causes immense pressure, so it’s OK to change your life’s direction

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Resources

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