

COVID-19 MENTAL HEALTH FORUM SERIES




# HOW THE DISCOMFORT OF GRIEF CAN HELP US: RECOGNIZING AND ADAPTING TO LOSS DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 2020 AT 11AM EST

AN ONLINE DISCUSSION WITH:

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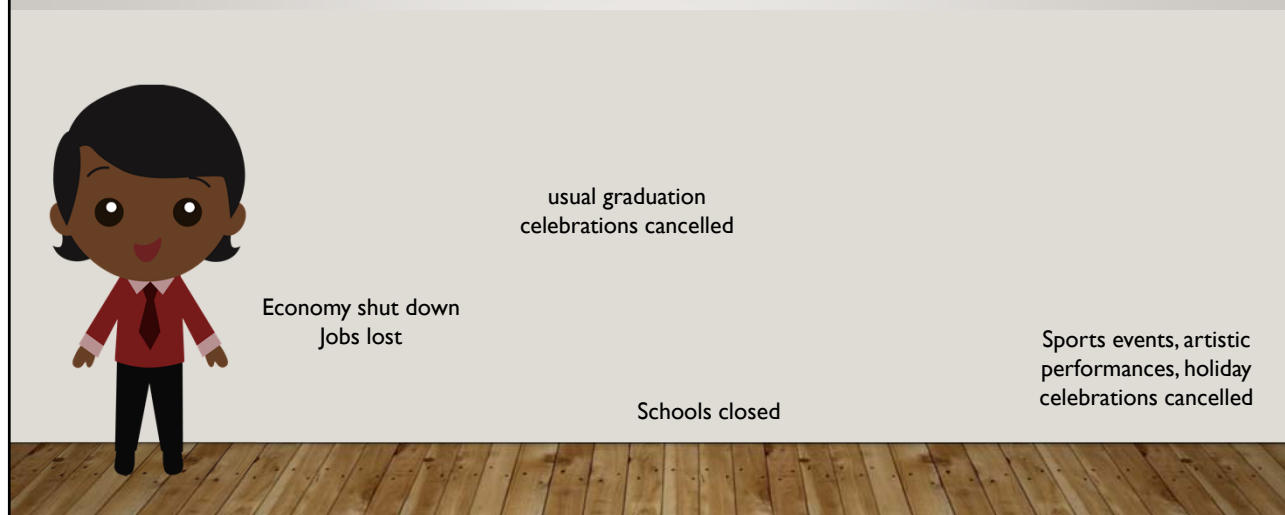
Part 1: Recognizing covid-19 loss and grief

- ✓ Understanding the impact of loss
  - ✓ Identifying risk factors
  - ✓ Identifying protective factors

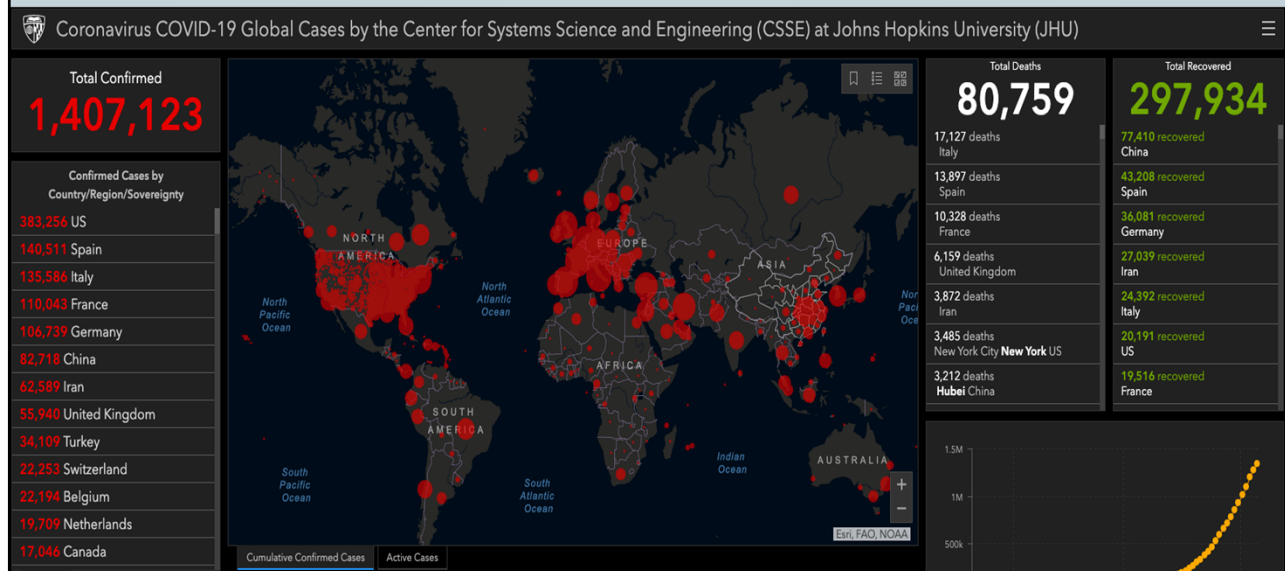
Part 2: An evidence-based framework for understanding covid-19 loss and grief

- ✓ Understanding grief
  - ✓ Understanding adaptation and how it can be derailed
  - ✓ Adapting to loss during the pandemic

# Losses are ubiquitous in a world closed down by the virus



# Loss of a loved one: the most painful and impactful of coronavirus losses



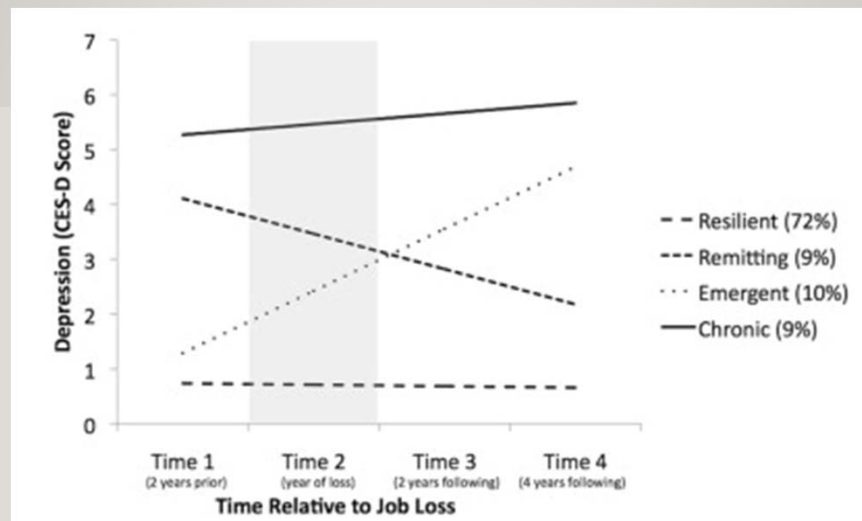
## Grief is a common human experience, and we have an innate capacity to adapt



*"Like tiny seeds with potent power to push through tough ground and become mighty trees, we hold innate reserves of unimaginable strength. We are resilient."*

—Catherine DeVrye, *The Gift of Nature*, 2018

## Resilience is the norm, rather than the exception



Stolove et al., 2017

## Factors that increase risk for complications after loss



Person-related  
history of depression, prior loss and trauma



Relationship based  
quality of the relationship, closeness, identity-defining



Circumstances of the death  
age of the person who died, how they died



Context of the death  
what else is going on in the bereaved person's life



Consequences of the death  
loss of income, need to move, loss of social connections

## Factors that reduce risk for complications after loss



Person-related  
hardiness, flexibility, coping repertoire, continued bonds



Relationship based  
social connections; support; social cohesion



Circumstances of the death  
end of life planning, developmental timing

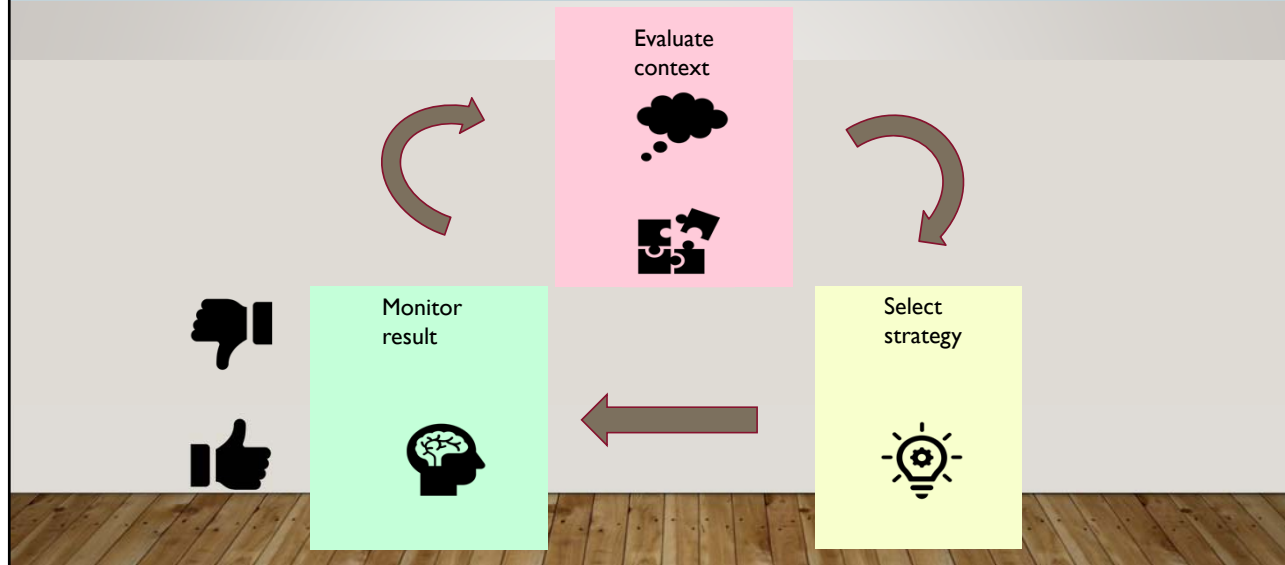


Context of the death  
lower trauma burden



Consequences of the death  
maintenance of income

## Flexibility in adjustment strategies that have a good person-context fit drive adaptation



Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it.

-Helen Keller



## Resources

Center for Complicated Grief

<https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/>

Human Flourishing Program

<https://mailchi.mp/05ee7322aa2b/positive-epidemiology-2638953>

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies

<https://istss.org/public-resources/covid-19-resources>

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health




<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Gp47v-KtK5JuexPnUrzNu33pgRbpVLF2?usp=sharing>

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### Part 2: An evidence-based framework for understanding covid-19 loss and grief

- ✓ Understanding grief
- ✓ Understanding adaptation and how it can be derailed
- ✓ Adapting to loss during the pandemic

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In a world of many kinds of loss, we are focusing today on loss of a loved one

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The Center for  
Complicated Grief

## Grief is the response to loss



Photo by Nancy Turret LCSW

- ✓ a natural, complex multi-faceted experience – the form love takes when someone we love dies
- ✓ permanent after we lose someone close
- ✓ unique to every person and there are important commonalities
- ✓ All grief is complicated and complicated grief is a diagnosable condition: **Prolonged Grief Disorder.**

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## Some reasons why all grief is complicated

- ✓ There are a lot of different thoughts, feelings and behaviors
- ✓ It changes – erratically at times
- ✓ It evolves over time but not in a smooth way and not in a defined time frame
- ✓ It's affected by other people and by things that are unexpected and uncontrollable
- ✓ There are a lot of mixed feelings and thoughts

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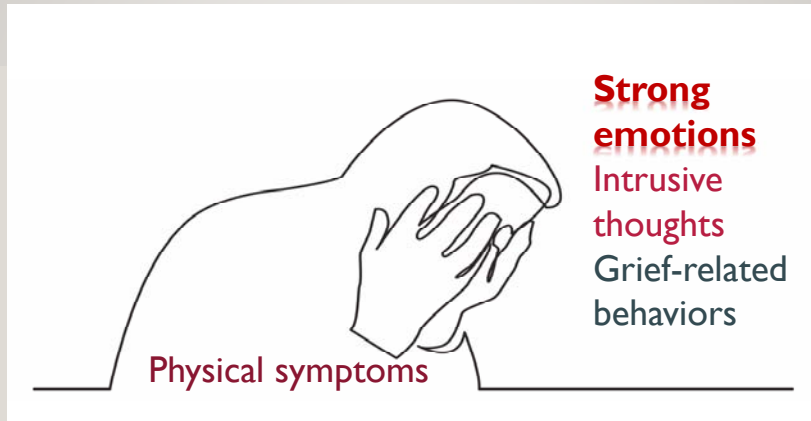
## A lot of mixed feelings and thoughts For example...

- ✓ We want to hold onto grief and we want it to go away
- ✓ We have severe mental pain that seems like it can never go away
- ✓ We want to go on but we have little enthusiasm for life
- ✓ We need other people but it's hard to feel connected
- ✓ We know the person died but we have trouble understanding it
- ✓ We crave connection to our loved one but think we need to avoid reminders of the loss
- ✓ We can't stop thinking about the person who died but we feel like we've lost them forever

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## Acute Grief: Commonalities



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## Grief is transformed as we adapt to the loss

Physiology is re-regulated

Thoughts and memories find a place in our life

**Grief is integrated**

Emotional intensity subsides,  
becomes more bittersweet

Thoughts recede, more  
distant, but still accessible

Behavior more connected to  
ongoing life

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## Bowlby: how we progress

Loss 1980

Recognition of changed circumstance; revision of representational models

Redefinition of life goals

*A mourner who does not progress remains in a state of suspended growth in life in which they are held prisoner by a dilemma they cannot solve.*

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### Accept the reality

## How we adapt after Loss

Accept...

Permanence of loss and grief

Changed circumstances

Changed relationship with the deceased; revision of representational models

### Restore wellbeing

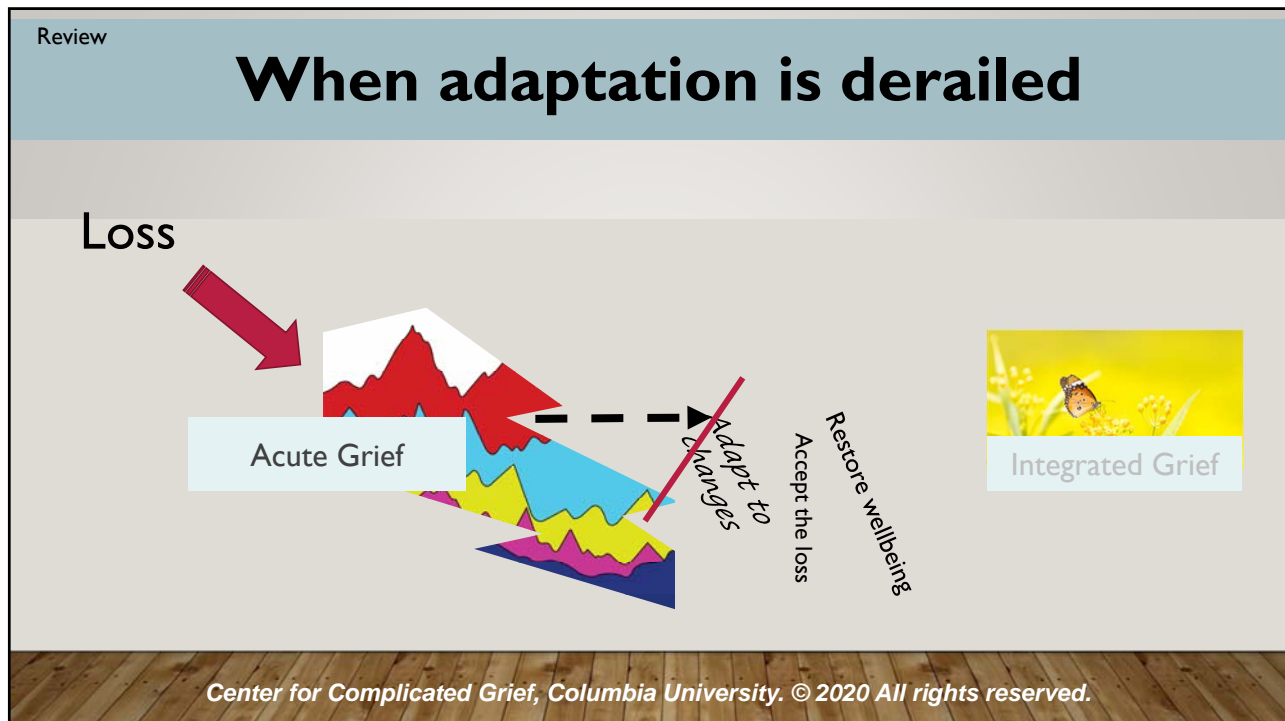
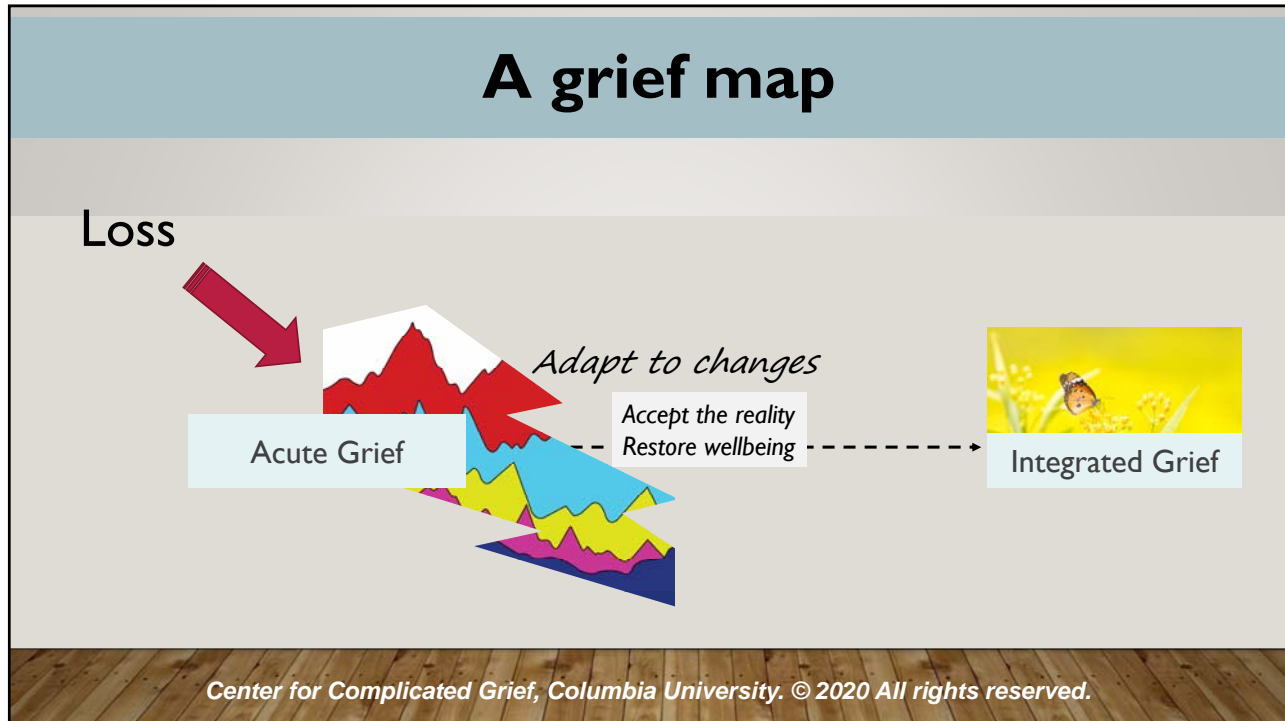
Restore:

Sense of purpose and meaning; possibilities for joy and satisfaction; a promising future

Feeling of competence

Feeling of belonging and mattering

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## Common kinds of derailers



- ✓ Protest and proximity seeking
- ✓ Guilt and anger, including survivor guilt
- ✓ Counterfactual thinking
- ✓ “Immune neglect” and “miswanting”
- ✓ Inability to balance avoidance of pain and confrontation

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## Risk factors enhance the likelihood that derailers can take over

Person-related  
Relationship with the person who died  
Circumstances of the death  
Context of the death  
Consequences of the death

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## Covid-19 deaths are likely to contain many risk factors, e.g.

Circumstances of the death  
Sudden, unexpected, seemingly preventable, seemingly random  
People are dying alone  
Need for physical distancing: Loved ones are unable to visit  
Context of the death  
Physical distancing  
Consequences of the death

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## How clinicians can help Covid-19 bereaved people

Active empathic listening, as always when supporting a bereaved person.

People may need to sideline their grief because of a need to take care of themselves or others and/or because of the unavailability of the physical presence of supportive friends and family.

They may worry that this means they are not grieving in the right way.

Clinicians can support them in finding their own balance between allowing their grief and taking care of their own life..

Screen and treat those with mental disorders, suicidal ideation and behaviors, and any worsening of medical conditions.

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## How clinicians can help

Clinicians can also help people after a COVID-19 loss in the following ways:

**Understand and accept grief:** it can help to understand that grief is natural after loss. It is a form of love; allow it to wax and wane naturally. Help people be alert to issues related to the COVID-19 death that are troubling to them

**Manage emotional pain:** accepting emotions and naming them can be helpful; let them wax and wane naturally as much as possible. Encourage the experience of positive emotions - doing something pleasant each day – almost as a kind of ritual.

**See some possibility of a promising future:** taking some time to begin to think about what is important, meaningful, intrinsically interesting and what kind of activities are in line with this; helping them recognize and manage survivor guilt which may be especially pronounced after a COVID-19 death

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## How clinicians can help

**Strengthen relationships with others:** encourage creative ways to stay connected with friends and family during period of social distancing; encourage the bereaved to find ways to honor the deceased person with loved ones or friends flexibly, even virtually.; encourage increased social connection where feasible and desirable; allowing others in, sharing stories, accepting support and comfort, lower expectations for reciprocity for a time, sharing memories;

**Tell the story of the death:** share the story, help the person deal with troubling aspects, honoring a loved one's death as a part of their life; helping people voice and come to terms with aspects of the COVID-19 death that are troubling or especially painful; validating these concerns and helping the person accept the reality; show respect for people who prefer not to share this story

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## How clinicians can help

**Learn to live with reminders:** gradually find ways to return to the world of reminders rather than avoid them; discovering meaningful and comforting memories in reminders; show respect for individuals finding their own balance between confronting emotional pain and avoidance or distraction: people need to find their own balance of these; those who wish to share photos and memories of the loved one should be supported to do so.

**Feel a sense of connection to memories of the deceased:** encourage recognition of a changed relationship with the person who died; understand that memories are a living part of connection to the deceased.

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## Summary

Grief emerges naturally after an important loss

We adapt naturally to even the most difficult losses

Supportive companions are important

Covid-19 deaths have many elements that are likely to be especially challenging and clinicians can help

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