Mindful Self-Compassion: Core Skills

Handouts

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The Science of Self-Compassion

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Self-Esteem

- Self-esteem is a global evaluation of self-worth
- For years self-esteem was seen as the ultimate marker of wellbeing
- Potential problems with high self-esteem Not if you have it, but how you get it
 - The need to be special and above average
 - Social Comparison
 - > Narcissism
 - Bullying and Prejudice
 - Contingency of Self-Worth
 - Inevitable Feelings of Inadequacy

Self-Compassion

- The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003)
- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
 - > Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
 - Actively soothing and comforting oneself
- Common humanity vs. Isolation
 - Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
 - Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)
- Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
 - > Allows us to "be" with painful feelings as they are
 - > Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings
- Physiological underpinnings of self-criticism
 - Threat defense system
 - Cortisol and adrenaline
- Physiological underpinnings of self-compassion
 - Mammalian care-giving system
 - Oxytocin and opiates

Research on self-compassion

- Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade
- Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003)

Self-compassion strongly linked to wellbeing

- Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, shame
- Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, connectedness, selfconfidence, optimism, curiosity, gratitude

Self-compassion leads to wellbeing by holding negative thoughts and emotions in loving, connected, presence

Self-compassion vs. self-esteem

- Offers same wellbeing benefits without pitfalls
 - Fewer social comparisons
 - Less contingent self-worth
 - No association with narcissism

Linked to coping and resilience

- More effective coping with divorce, chronic pain
- Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma
- Less anxiety coping with HIV

Linked to motivation

- Intrinsic motivation, desire to learn and grow
- Personal standards just as high, not as upset when don't meet them
- Greater perceived competence
- Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after failure

Linked to personal accountability

- More conscientiousness
- Taking greater responsibility for past mistakes
- Disposition to apologize

Linked to health

- Healthier behaviors
 - More exercise, safer sex, helps smokers quit, less alcohol use, more doctors visits
- Better physical health
 - Enhanced immune response and heart rate variability when exposed to social stress
 - Buffers impact of diabetes (HbA1c)
 - Fewer physical symptoms (aches, colds, etc.)

Linked to healthier body image and eating behavior

- Less body preoccupation and body shame
- Less likely to binge after blowing diet
- Fewer weight worries, less disordered eating
- More intuitive eating

Linked to other-focused concern

- Linked to better romantic relationships
 - > More caring and supportive relationship behavior (as rated by partners)
 - Less controlling and verbally aggressive
- More forgiveness and perspective taking
- More compassion, empathy, altruism for others
 - > Link is weak because many people are compassionate to others but not to self

Self-compassion for caregivers

- Less burnout and "compassion" fatigue
- More satisfaction with care-giving role
- Increased wellbeing and coping for parents of autistic children

Family Influences on Self-Compassion

- Attachment security
- Parental criticism
- Conflict in home
- History of abuse

How to Increase Self-Compassion?

Mindfulness-Based approaches

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy have both been shown to increase self-compassion
- Self-compassion appears to be a key mechanism of program effectiveness

Compassion Focused Therapy (Paul Gilbert):

- Less depression, anxiety, shame, dysfunction
- Effective with a variety of clinical populations

Self-compassionate letter writing (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010)

- Participants wrote SC letter for seven days
- SC letter (N = 63) vs. early memory control (N = 70)
- Significantly less depression (3 months later) and greater happiness (6 months later)

Self-compassion meditation and body image (Albertson, Neff, Dill-Shackleford, 2014)

- Women with body image concerns listened to guided self-compassion meditations for three weeks
- More SC and body appreciation, less body dissatisfaction, self-worth contingent on appearance
- Gains maintained three months later

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) Program (Neff & Germer, 2013)

- 8-week workshop designed to explicitly teach skills of self-compassion
- Uses meditation, informal practice, group discussion and homework exercises
- Randomized clinical trial of MSC with intervention group vs. wait-list control group
- MSC led to significantly greater gains in self-compassion, mindfulness, compassion, life satisfaction, as well as greater reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, emotional avoidance
- All well-being gains maintained for one year
- Degree of formal and informal self-compassion practice both related to gains in selfcompassion
 - Days per week spent meditating
 - > Hours per day spent in informal practice

Self-compassion calculator, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises available at: www.self-compassion.org

MEDITATIONS



AFFECTIONATE BREATHING

- Please find a quiet, comfortable place to sit. Position yourself in a way that your bones are supporting the muscles and you don't need any effort to remain in one position for the whole exercise.
- Take a few slow easy deep breaths to relax and let go of any unnecessary burdens you're carrying. Then let your eyelids gently close, partially or fully. If you wish, put your hand over your heart, or wherever it is comforting for you, to remind yourself that you are bringing not only attention, but *kind* attention, to your experience and to yourself.
- Now finding your breath, wherever you can feel it most easily. Perhaps at the tip of the nose, the belly, or perhaps as a gentle movement of your whole body? Letting yourself notice the simple sensation of breathing. Just feeling your breath for awhile.
- Letting yourself incline inwardly toward your breathing as you might incline toward a child or a beloved pet, with curiosity and tenderness.
- Don't worry about how often your mind wanders. When your mind wanders, gently escorting it back to the sensation of breathing like redirecting a puppy or a child who has wandered off.
- Noticing how your breath nourishes your body even when you're not paying any attention to it. Letting your body *breathe you*. There is nothing you need to do.
- Now feeling your *whole* body breathe, gently moving with the rising and falling of the breath, like the movement of the sea.
- Or, if you like, allowing your body to be caressed by the breath.
- Perhaps giving yourself over to the breath, *becoming* the breath.

(long pause)

- And now, releasing the breath, and allowing everything that comes to awareness to be just as it is, just for now.
- Slowly and gently open your eyes.

LOVING-KINDNESS FOR A LOVED ONE

- Allow yourself to settle into a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down. If you like, putting a hand over your heart or another location that is soothing as a reminder to bring not only awareness, but loving awareness, to our experience and to ourselves.
- Bringing to mind a person or other living being who naturally makes you smile. This could be a child, your grandmother, your cat or dog—whomever naturally brings happiness to your heart. Letting yourself feel what it's like to be in that being's presence. Allowing yourself to enjoy the good company. Create a vivid image of this being in your mind's eye. (Pause)
- Now, recognize how this being wishes to be happy and free from suffering, just like you and every other living being. Repeating softly and gently, feeling the importance of your words:
 - May you be happy.
 - May you be peaceful.
 - o May you be healthy.
 - May you live with ease.

(Repeat twice, slowly, pause)

- When you notice that your mind has wandered, returning to the words and the image of the loved one you have in mind. Savoring any warm feelings that may arise. Taking your time.
- Now, adding *yourself* to your circle of good will. Creating an image of yourself in the presence of your loved one, visualizing you both together.
 - May you and I (we) be happy.
 - May you and I (we) be peaceful.
 - May you and I (we) be healthy.
 - May you and I (we) live with ease.

(Repeat twice, slowly, pause)

 Now, letting go of the image of the other, and letting the full focus of your attention rest directly on yourself. Putting your hand over your heart and feeling the warmth and gentle pressure of your hand. Visualizing your whole body in your mind's eye, noticing any stress or uneasiness that may be lingering within you, and offering yourself the phrases.

- May I be happy.
- May I be peaceful.
- May I be healthy.
- May I live with ease.

(Repeat twice, slowly, pause)

- Finally, taking a few breaths and just resting quietly in your own body, accepting whatever your experience is, exactly as it is. You may be feeling good will and compassion or you may not, it doesn't matter. We are simply setting our intention to open our hearts and seeing what happens. (pause).
- Gently ring the bell.

GIVING AND RECEIVING COMPASSION

- Please sit comfortably, closing your eyes, and take a few deep, relaxing breaths. Allowing yourself to feel the sensation of breathing in and breathing out. Noticing how your breath nourishes your body as you inhale and soothes your body as you exhale.
- Letting your breathing find its own natural rhythm. Continue feeling the sensation of breathing in and breathing out. If you like, putting a hand over your heart or another soothing place as a reminder to bring not just awareness, but *loving* awareness, to your experience and to yourself.
- Now, focusing your attention on your *in-breath*, letting yourself enjoy the sensation of breathing in, one breath after another, noticing how your in-breath nourishes every cell in your body....and then releasing your breath.
- If you wish, you can also carry a word on each in-breath, such as "love," compassion," "ease," or "peace"—giving yourself whatever you need in this moment. Or else you can imagine inhaling warmth or light—whatever you need.
- Now, calling to mind someone to whom you would like to send warmth and goodwill, either someone you love or someone who is struggling and needs compassion. Visualize that person clearly in your mind.
- Shifting your focus now to your *out-breath*, feeling your body breathe out, sending warmth and goodwill to this person with each exhalation. (pause) If you like, you can add a kind word with each out-breath, or an image, or just offer the comfort and ease of your exhalation.
- Now feeling your body breathe *both in and out*—breathing in for yourself and breathing out for another. One for me, one for you. Just feeling the breath now. One for me, one for you.
- Allowing your breathing to flow in and out, like the gentle movement of the sea, flowing in and flowing out. Letting yourself be a *part* of this limitless, boundless flow, breathing in and breathing out.
- If you wish, you can focus a little more on yourself or on the other person—whatever you need.
- And as you breathe out, feel free to send love and compassion to other persons, to *groups* of people, or to the *world in general*.
- Gently opening your eyes.

COMPASSIONATE FRIEND MEDITATION

- Please sit in a comfortable position, reasonably upright and relaxed. Gently close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths to settle into your body. Put one or two hands over your heart for a moment to remind yourself to give yourself *loving* attention.
- Now imagine yourself in a place that is safe and comfortable—it might be a cozy room with the fireplace burning, or a peaceful beach with warm sun and a cool breeze, or a forest glade. It could also be an imaginary place, like floating on clouds...anywhere you might feel peaceful and safe. Let yourself enjoy the feeling of comfort in this place. (Pause).
- Soon you'll receive a visitor, a warm and compassionate presence who embodies the qualities of wisdom, strength, and unconditional love.
- This being may be a figure like Christ or Buddha, it can be a compassionate person from your past like a grandparent, or it may not have any particular form, perhaps just a glowing light. This being loves you and would like you to be happy, and would like to visit you for a little while. Really imagine this being in as much detail as possible, especially how it feels to be in its presence. (Pause)
- You can go out and meet this visitor, or you can receive him or her into your safe space. Please greet, and be with your visitor wherever you are most comfortable.
- Place yourself at just the right distance from your compassionate friend whatever feels right. If it's someone you feel close to, this may even include resting your head on this being's shoulder. If it's the Dalai Lama, perhaps you want a little respectful distance. Hold your friend in your heart and mind and enjoy his or her good company. There is nothing special you need to do except savor the moment. (Pause).
- Now allow yourself to recall any difficulties that you may have in your life right now. Your compassionate friend is wise and all knowing, and has come to tell you something, something that is *just what you need to hear right now* in your life. Listen carefully to what your compassionate friend has come to say. If no words come, that's okay, too—just share his or her good company. That's a blessing in itself. Just be with your friend, listening if there is anything you should hear. (Pause).
- And perhaps *you* would like to say something to your compassionate friend. Your friend listens deeply, and completely understands you. Is there anything *you'd* like to share? (Pause).
- Soon your friend will be leaving again, but before that happens, your friend would like to give you something—a material object. As you place your hands together,

your friend reaches out and puts an object in your hands, or an object simply appears in your hands—something that has special meaning for you. Wait and see what comes. What is it? Look it over carefully. (Pause).

- Now, thank your friend, enjoy your friend's good company for a few last moments, and then bid your friend farewell.
- You are now alone in your safe place again. Let yourself savor what just happened, enjoying the words and the object that was given to you. (Pause).
- Now, remember that your compassionate friend is *part of you*. Therefore, you can invite your friend back anytime you wish. Your visitor is available with words of wisdom and compassion whenever you need it the most.
- And when you're ready, slowly open your eyes.

adapted from Gilbert, 2009

COMPASSION MEDITATION FOR SELF AND OTHERS

- Please sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and take three, deep, relaxing breaths.
- Open your awareness to the sounds in your environment. Coming into the present moment by simply listening to whatever presents itself to your ears
- Noting your posture as if you were seeing yourself from the outside.
- Next, bringing your awareness *inside* your body. Noting the world of sensation occurring there in this very moment—the pulsation and vibration of your body—just as you sat in the midst of the world of sound.
- Begin to repeat the following phrase, over and over, or different one that reflects a deep wish you may have for yourself:

May I be happy and free from suffering

• When you are ready, allowing yourself to be aware of any people or other living beings that enter your mind. When you notice someone arise, gently offering:

May you be happy and free from suffering

- Repeating this phrase as long as you wish, and then wait for the next person to appear in your mind. Take your time.
- Feel free to return to yourself at anytime, especially if you need to anchor your awareness in your own body, or if you need to comfort yourself.
- Gently opening your eyes.

INFORMAL PRACTICES



SOOTHING TOUCH

One easy way to soothe and comfort yourself when you're feeling badly is to give yourself a gentle hug or caress, or simply put your hand on your heart and feel the warmth of your hand. It may feel awkward or embarrassing at first, but your body doesn't know that. It just responds to the physical gesture of warmth and care, just as a baby responds to being cuddled in its mother's arms. Our skin is an incredibly sensitive organ. Research indicates that physical touch releases oxytocin, provides a sense of security, soothes distressing emotions, and calms cardiovascular stress. So why not try it?

You might like to try putting your hand over your heart during difficult periods several times a day for a period of at least a week.

Hand-on-Heart

- When you notice you're under stress, take 2-3 deep, satisfying breaths.
- Gently place your hand over your heart, feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, place *both* hands on your chest, noticing the difference between one and two hands.
- Feel the touch of you hand on your chest. If you wish, you could make small circles with your hand on your chest.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.

Some people feel uneasy putting a hand over the heart. Feel free to explore where on your body a gentle touch is actually soothing. Some other possibilities are:

- One hand on your cheek
- Cradling your face in your hands
- Gently stroking your arms
- Crossing your arms and giving a gentle squeeze
- Gently rubbing your chest, or using circular movements
- Hand on your abdomen
- One hand on your abdomen and one over heart
- Cupping one hand in the other in your lap

Hopefully you'll start to develop the habit of physically comforting yourself when needed, taking full advantage of this surprisingly simple and straightforward way to be kind to ourselves.

SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now, say to yourself, slowly:

1. This is a moment of suffering

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- This hurts.
- This is tough.
- Ouch!

2. Suffering is a part of living

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- Other people feel this way.
- I'm not alone.
- We all struggle in our lives.

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands.Say to yourself:

3. May I be kind to myself

See if you can find words for what *you need* in times like this. Other options may be:

- May I accept myself as I am
- May I give myself the compassion that I need
- May I learn to accept myself as I am
- May I forgive myself.
- May I be strong.
- May I be safe

(pause)

If you're having trouble finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one had a similar difficulty as you. What would you say to this person?

Now see if you can offer the same words, the same message, to yourself.

SOLES OF THE FEET

This is a very effective way to anchor your awareness in body sensation, especially when you're upset and would like to help calm and anchor yourself.

- Stand up and feel the soles of your feet on the floor. Rock forward and back a little, and side to side. Make little circles with your knees, feeling the changes of sensation in the soles of your feet.
- When you notice your mind has wandered, just feeling the soles of your feet again.
- If you wish, you can begin to walk slowly, noticing the changing sensations in the soles of your feet. Noticing the sensation of lifting a foot, stepping forward, and the placing the foot on the floor. Doing the same with both feet as you walk.
- As you walk, perhaps also noticing for a moment how small the surface area of your feet is, and how hard your feet work to keep your body off the ground. See if you can notice that with appreciation or gratitude.
- When you are ready, returning to standing.

COMPASSIONATE MOVEMENT

Compassionate Movement can be practiced with open or closed eyes. It follows the steps of (1) anchoring, (2) opening, and (3) responding compassionately.

- Anchoring: Please stand up and feel the soles of your feet on the floor. Rocking forward and backward a little, and side to side. Making little circles with your knees, feeling the changes of sensation in the soles of your feet. Anchoring your awareness in your feet.
- *Opening:*Now opening your field of awareness and noticing other sensations in your body, particularly noting any areas of tension or discomfort.
- Responding Compassionately: Gradually beginning to move your body in a way that feels really good to move—giving yourself compassion. For example, letting yourself gently rock back and forth, rolling your head, twisting at the waist, dropping into a forward bend...whatever feels just right for you right now.
- Letting your body move as it would like to move. Giving your body the movement it needs. As poet Mary Oliver said, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."
- Finally, coming to standing again and feeling your body again, noting any changes.

COMPASSIONATE LETTER TO MYSELF

- Everybody has something about themselves they don't like; something that causes them to feel shame, insecure, or not "good enough." Please think of an issue you have that tends to make you feel bad about yourself (a mistake you made, your appearance, relationship issues, etc.)
- Now think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally wise, loving and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and weaknesses, including what you don't like about yourself. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature, and is kind, accepting, and forgiving.
- Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, focusing on the perceived inadequacy you tend to judge yourself for. What would this friend say to you from the perspective of unlimited compassion? And if you think this friend would suggest possible changes you should make, how might these suggestions embody feelings of care, encouragement, and support?
- After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back to it and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you. Love, connection and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

If you prefer, you can also:

• Write a letter *as if you were talking to a dearly loved friend* who was struggling with the same concern that you are. What words of compassion and support would you offer? Then go back and read the letter, applying the words to yourself.

SOFTEN -SOOTHE-ALLOW

The following exercise is a combination of the following three practices. You can practice them all together, or separately.

- Labeling emotions
- Mindfulness of emotion in the body
- Soften Soothe Allow

Please find a comfortable position, close your eyes, and take three relaxing breaths.

Place your hand on your heart for a few moments to remind yourself that you are in the room, and to bring kindness to yourself.

- Now let yourself recall a mild-moderately difficult situation that you are in right now, perhaps a health problem, stress in a relationship, or a loved one in pain. Do not choose a very difficult problem, or a trivial problem—choose a problem that can generate a little stress in your body when you think of it. Now clearly visualize the situation. Who was there? What was said? What happened?
- Now that you're thinking about this situation, see if you can't name the different emotions that arise within you-- anger? sadness? grief? confusion? fear? longing? despair? Shame?
- Now see if you can *name* the strongest emotion—a difficult emotion—associated with that situation: Repeat the name of the emotion to yourself in a gentle, understanding voice, as if you were validating for a friend what he or she is feeling: "That's longing." "That's grief." Use the same warmhearted tone of voice that you would use if you were validation how a friend feels.
- Now expand your awareness to your body as a whole.
- Recall the difficult situation again and scan your body for where you feel it the most. In your mind's eye, sweep your body from head to toe, stopping where you can sense a little tension or discomfort.
- Now choose a single location in your body where the feeling expresses itself most strongly, perhaps as a point of muscle tension or an achy feeling.
- In your mind, incline gently toward that spot.
- Then *soften* into that location in your body. *Let* the muscles be soft without a requirement that they *become* soft, like simply applying heat to sore muscles. You can say, "soft...soft...soft..." quietly to yourself, to enhance the process. Remember that you are not trying to make the sensation go away—you are just being with them with loving awareness.

- If you wish, let yourself just soften around the edges, like around the edges of a pancake. No need to go all the way in.
- Soothe yourself for struggling in this way. Put your hand over your heart and feel your body breathe. Perhaps kind words arise in our mind, such as, "Oh my dear, this is such a painful experience. May I grow in ease and well-being."
- If you wish, you can also direct kindness to the part of your body that is under stress by placing your hand in that place. It may help to think of your body as if it were the body of a beloved child. You can say kind words to yourself, or just repeat, "soothe...soothe...soothe."
- *Allow* the discomfort to be there. Abandon the wish for the feeling to disappear. Let the discomfort come and go as it pleases, like a guest in your own home. You can repeat, "allow...allow...allow."
- "Soften, soothe, allow." "Soften, soothe, allow." You can use these three words like a mantra, reminding yourself to incline with tenderness toward your suffering.
- If you experience too much discomfort with an emotion, stay with your breath until you feel better.
- Slowly open your eyes when you're ready.

MANAGING COMPASSION FATIGUE

- Please bring to mind someone you are caring for who can exhaust you or frustrate you, or someone who suffers with whom you feel sympathy. For this introductory exercise, please choose someone who is not your child, as this can be a more complicated dynamic. See the person clearly in your mind and feel the struggle in your own body.
- Now please listen carefully to these words, letting them gently roll through your mind:

Everyone is on his or her own life journey. I am not the cause of this person's suffering, nor is it entirely within my power to make it go away, even though I wish I could Moments like this are difficult to bear, yet I may still try to help if I can.

- Now, aware of the stress you are carrying in your body, inhaling fully and deeply, drawing compassion inside your body and filling every cell with compassion. Letting yourself be soothed by inhaling deeply, and by giving yourself the compassion you need when you experience discomfort.
- As you exhale, sending out compassion to the other person who is associated with your discomfort, or exhaling compassion to living beings in general.
- Continue breathing compassion in and out, letting your body gradually find a natural, relaxed breathing rhythm. Breathing in for yourself and out for the other. *One for me, one for you.*
- Occasionally scanning your inner landscape for any distress and respond by inhaling compassion for yourself and exhaling compassion for the person who needs it. If you find that you, or the other person, needs *extra* compassion, feel free to focus your breath more in that direction.
- Noticing the gentle rocking motion of your body as you breathe, like the tides flowing in and out on an ocean of compassion. A limitless ocean that embraces all suffering.
- And listening to these words once again:

Everyone is on his or her own life journey. I am not the cause of this person's suffering, nor is it entirely within my power to make it go away, even though I wish I could Moments like this are difficult to bear, yet I may still try to help if I can.

• Slowly open your eyes.

Resources

Self-compassion calculator, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises available at: **www.self-compassion.org**

Information on the MSC program available at: www.CenterforMSC.org

Books and Audio:

Germer, C. K. (2009). The mindful path to self-compassion. New York: Guilford Press.

Gilbert, P. (2009). The compassionate mind. London: Constable.

Neff, K. D. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself.* New York: William Morrow.

Neff, K. D. (2013). Self-compassion step by step. Sounds True. (6hr. audio training.)

Poems

John Austin: *Awareness* Naomi Shahib Nye: *Kindness* Mary Oliver: *The Journey* Danna Faulds: *Allow* Derek Walcott: *Love after Love*

Film clips

Moments: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNVPaINZD_I The Fly: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSsAEWkmBFU Twin Boys Talking: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JmA2CIUvUY Empathy Fatigue: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khjPsVG-6QA How my Son Ruined My Life: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRbL46mWx9w

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