

PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE SUBSTANCE USE

PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE SUBSTANCE USE IS AN APPROACH THAT PRIORITIZES THE INDIVIDUAL BEFORE THEIR CONDITION OR BEHAVIOR, EMPHASIZING DIGNITY AND RESPECT IN COMMUNICATION. THIS METHOD IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE, ADDICTION, AND RECOVERY, AS IT REDUCES STIGMA AND PROMOTES UNDERSTANDING. USING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE CONTEXTS HELPS TO HUMANIZE INDIVIDUALS, SHIFTING FOCUS FROM LABELS TO THE PERSON'S EXPERIENCE AND POTENTIAL FOR RECOVERY. THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE PRINCIPLES OF PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE, ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN SUBSTANCE USE DISCOURSE, AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FOR PROFESSIONALS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC. ADDITIONALLY, IT ADDRESSES THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE ON STIGMA, TREATMENT OUTCOMES, AND SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS. THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS PROVIDE AN IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION OF KEY CONCEPTS, CHALLENGES, AND BEST PRACTICES RELATED TO PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE SUBSTANCE USE.

- UNDERSTANDING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE
- THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE
- IMPLEMENTING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE: PRACTICAL GUIDELINES
- COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND LANGUAGE PITFALLS
- IMPACT OF LANGUAGE ON STIGMA AND RECOVERY

UNDERSTANDING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE

PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE IS A COMMUNICATION STYLE THAT EMPHASIZES THE INDIVIDUALITY AND HUMANITY OF PEOPLE BY PLACING THE PERSON BEFORE ANY DIAGNOSIS OR BEHAVIOR. IN THE CONTEXT OF SUBSTANCE USE, THIS MEANS REFERRING TO SOMEONE AS A "PERSON WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER" RATHER THAN LABELING THEM AS AN "ADDICT" OR "USER." THIS APPROACH ACKNOWLEDGES THE COMPLEXITY OF SUBSTANCE USE ISSUES AND RESPECTS THE PERSON'S DIGNITY. IT COUNTERS DEHUMANIZING LANGUAGE THAT CAN PERPETUATE STEREOTYPES AND BIAS, WHICH ARE COMMON CHALLENGES IN ADDICTION DISCOURSE.

DEFINITION AND PRINCIPLES

PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE INVOLVES STRUCTURING SENTENCES TO HIGHLIGHT THE PERSON FIRST AND THE CONDITION SECOND. THE PRIMARY PRINCIPLES INCLUDE RESPECT, DIGNITY, AND REDUCING STIGMA. FOR EXAMPLE, INSTEAD OF SAYING "DRUG ADDICT," ONE WOULD SAY "INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCING SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER." THIS SUBTLE SHIFT IN WORDING FOSTERS EMPATHY AND SUPPORTS A MORE COMPASSIONATE UNDERSTANDING OF SUBSTANCE USE CHALLENGES.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE ADOPTION OF PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE HAS EVOLVED ALONGSIDE CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION. HISTORICALLY, INDIVIDUALS WITH SUBSTANCE USE ISSUES WERE OFTEN MARGINALIZED AND LABELED IN WAYS THAT REINFORCED NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES. THE MOVEMENT TOWARD PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE EMERGED AS PART OF BROADER EFFORTS TO HUMANIZE AND DESTIGMATIZE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CONDITIONS, PROMOTING RECOVERY-ORIENTED CARE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE

USING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE DISCUSSIONS IS CRUCIAL FOR PROMOTING RESPECTFUL, NONJUDGMENTAL COMMUNICATION. LANGUAGE SHAPES PERCEPTIONS, INFLUENCES ATTITUDES, AND CAN EITHER REINFORCE OR DISMANTLE STIGMA. BY PRIORITIZING THE PERSON, THIS COMMUNICATION APPROACH SUPPORTS BETTER ENGAGEMENT IN TREATMENT AND FOSTERS A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR RECOVERY.

REDUCING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE CAN CREATE BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP AND ACCESSING CARE. LABELS SUCH AS “ADDICT” OR “JUNKIE” CARRY NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS THAT CAN LEAD TO DISCRIMINATION IN HEALTHCARE, EMPLOYMENT, AND SOCIAL SETTINGS. PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE HELPS TO COUNTERACT THESE EFFECTS BY NORMALIZING SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER AS A HEALTH CONDITION RATHER THAN A MORAL FAILING.

ENHANCING TREATMENT OUTCOMES

RESEARCH INDICATES THAT RESPECTFUL, PERSON CENTERED COMMUNICATION POSITIVELY AFFECTS TREATMENT ADHERENCE AND PATIENT ENGAGEMENT. WHEN INDIVIDUALS FEEL VALUED AND UNDERSTOOD, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY IN THEIR RECOVERY PROCESS. PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE THUS PLAYS AN INTEGRAL ROLE IN CREATING THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCES BETWEEN PROVIDERS AND CLIENTS.

INFLUENCING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

PUBLIC DISCOURSE SHAPES SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARD SUBSTANCE USE. MEDIA, POLICYMAKERS, AND HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS ALL CONTRIBUTE TO THE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT. PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE PROMOTES A MORE INFORMED, COMPASSIONATE VIEW THAT CAN INFLUENCE POLICIES, REDUCE SOCIETAL BIAS, AND ENCOURAGE INCLUSIVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS.

IMPLEMENTING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE: PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

ADOPTING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE REQUIRES INTENTIONALITY AND AWARENESS IN BOTH WRITTEN AND VERBAL COMMUNICATION. PROFESSIONALS, ADVOCATES, AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC CAN INCORPORATE THIS APPROACH BY APPLYING SPECIFIC STRATEGIES AND AVOIDING OUTDATED TERMINOLOGY.

RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE PRACTICES

- REFER TO INDIVIDUALS AS “PERSON WITH A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER” RATHER THAN “ADDICT” OR “USER.”
- USE CLINICAL OR NEUTRAL TERMS SUCH AS “SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER” INSTEAD OF “DRUG HABIT” OR “ABUSE.”
- EMPHASIZE RECOVERY BY USING PHRASES LIKE “PERSON IN RECOVERY” OR “INDIVIDUAL SEEKING TREATMENT.”
- AVOID DEFINING PEOPLE BY THEIR BEHAVIOR; FOCUS ON THE PERSON’S WHOLE IDENTITY.
- BE MINDFUL OF TONE AND CONTEXT TO ENSURE LANGUAGE REMAINS RESPECTFUL AND EMPATHETIC.

EXAMPLES OF PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE

TRANSFORMING SENTENCES TO REFLECT PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE CAN BE STRAIGHTFORWARD WHEN GUIDED BY CLEAR EXAMPLES. FOR INSTANCE:

1. INSTEAD OF “HE IS AN ALCOHOLIC,” SAY “HE IS A PERSON WITH ALCOHOL USE DISORDER.”
2. REPLACE “SHE RELAPSED” WITH “SHE EXPERIENCED A RELAPSE DURING HER RECOVERY JOURNEY.”
3. RATHER THAN “DRUG ABUSER,” USE “PERSON WITH A HISTORY OF SUBSTANCE USE.”

TRAINING AND ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

MANY HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS AND ADVOCACY GROUPS PROVIDE TRAINING ON PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE TO ENSURE CONSISTENT USE AMONG STAFF. IMPLEMENTING POLICIES THAT REQUIRE RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION CAN HELP CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT. THESE INITIATIVES TYPICALLY INCLUDE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS, WORKSHOPS, AND ONGOING MONITORING TO REINFORCE BEST PRACTICES.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND LANGUAGE PITFALLS

DESPITE THE BENEFITS OF PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE, MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND CHALLENGES REMAIN. SOME INDIVIDUALS MAY VIEW THIS APPROACH AS OVERLY POLITICALLY CORRECT OR CONFUSING. CLARIFYING MISCONCEPTIONS AND IDENTIFYING COMMON PITFALLS HELPS IMPROVE ADOPTION AND EFFECTIVENESS.

MISCONCEPTION: LANGUAGE DOES NOT AFFECT OUTCOMES

SOME ARGUE THAT TERMINOLOGY IS SECONDARY TO TREATMENT QUALITY. HOWEVER, EVIDENCE SHOWS THAT LANGUAGE INFLUENCES STIGMA, SELF-ESTEEM, AND WILLINGNESS TO SEEK HELP. PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE CONTRIBUTES TO A THERAPEUTIC CLIMATE THAT SUPPORTS POSITIVE OUTCOMES, MAKING IT A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF COMPREHENSIVE CARE.

PITFALL: INCONSISTENT USAGE

INCONSISTENT APPLICATION OF PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE CAN UNDERMINE ITS EFFECTIVENESS. MIXING PERSON FIRST AND STIGMATIZING TERMS WITHIN THE SAME CONVERSATION OR DOCUMENT CREATES CONFUSION AND MAY PERPETUATE STEREOTYPES. CONSISTENCY IS ESSENTIAL FOR REINFORCING RESPECT AND REDUCING BIAS.

OVERUSE OR AWKWARD PHRASING

WHILE PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE PROMOTES RESPECT, OVERLY COMPLEX OR CUMBERSOME PHRASING CAN HINDER COMMUNICATION. STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN CLARITY AND SENSITIVITY IS IMPORTANT. LANGUAGE SHOULD BE ACCESSIBLE AND NATURAL WHILE MAINTAINING A PERSON CENTERED FOCUS.

IMPACT OF LANGUAGE ON STIGMA AND RECOVERY

THE WORDS USED TO DESCRIBE SUBSTANCE USE AND THOSE AFFECTED BY IT HAVE PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS FOR STIGMA REDUCTION AND RECOVERY SUPPORT. PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE CONTRIBUTES TO SHAPING A CULTURE THAT VALUES RECOVERY AND HUMAN DIGNITY.

STIGMA REDUCTION THROUGH LANGUAGE

USING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE DIRECTLY CHALLENGES NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES BY REFRAMING SUBSTANCE USE AS A HEALTH CONDITION RATHER THAN A CHARACTER FLAW. THIS REFRAMING REDUCES BLAME AND JUDGMENT, FOSTERING MORE SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL AND CLINICAL ENVIRONMENTS.

EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS IN RECOVERY

LANGUAGE THAT RESPECTS THE PERSON CAN EMPOWER INDIVIDUALS BY AFFIRMING THEIR IDENTITY BEYOND SUBSTANCE USE. THIS EMPOWERMENT ENHANCES SELF-WORTH AND MOTIVATION, WHICH ARE CRITICAL FACTORS IN SUSTAINING LONG-TERM RECOVERY.

BROADER SOCIETAL BENEFITS

ADOPTING PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC HEALTH CAMPAIGNS, MEDIA, EDUCATION, AND POLICY HELPS TO CREATE A MORE INCLUSIVE SOCIETY. IT ENCOURAGES COMPASSION, REDUCES DISCRIMINATION, AND PROMOTES EQUITABLE ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IS PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF SUBSTANCE USE?

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE EMPHASIZES REFERRING TO INDIVIDUALS AS PEOPLE FIRST, RATHER THAN DEFINING THEM BY THEIR SUBSTANCE USE. FOR EXAMPLE, SAYING 'PERSON WITH A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER' INSTEAD OF 'ADDICT' OR 'DRUG ABUSER' TO PROMOTE DIGNITY AND REDUCE STIGMA.

WHY IS PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IMPORTANT WHEN DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE?

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT HELPS REDUCE STIGMA, PROMOTES EMPATHY, AND ACKNOWLEDGES THE INDIVIDUAL'S HUMANITY BEYOND THEIR CONDITION, WHICH CAN IMPROVE COMMUNICATION, SUPPORT, AND TREATMENT OUTCOMES.

CAN YOU GIVE EXAMPLES OF PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE VERSUS NON-PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE?

YES. PERSON-FIRST: 'PERSON WITH A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER' OR 'INDIVIDUAL IN RECOVERY.' NON-PERSON-FIRST: 'ADDICT,' 'JUNKIE,' OR 'DRUG ABUSER.' THE FORMER FOCUSES ON THE PERSON, WHILE THE LATTER LABELS THEM BY THEIR SUBSTANCE USE.

HOW DOES PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE AFFECT RECOVERY FROM SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS?

USING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE FOSTERS A RESPECTFUL AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT THAT CAN ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUALS TO SEEK HELP, ENGAGE IN TREATMENT, AND MAINTAIN RECOVERY BY REDUCING FEELINGS OF SHAME AND ISOLATION.

WHAT TERMS SHOULD BE AVOIDED WHEN USING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE RELATED TO SUBSTANCE USE?

TERMS LIKE 'ADDICT,' 'JUNKIE,' 'DRUG ABUSER,' AND 'CLEAN/DIRTY' TO DESCRIBE URINE TESTS SHOULD BE AVOIDED BECAUSE THEY ARE STIGMATIZING AND DO NOT RECOGNIZE THE PERSON BEYOND THEIR SUBSTANCE USE.

IS PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED IN THE SUBSTANCE USE FIELD?

WHILE PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IS WIDELY SUPPORTED BY MANY HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS AND ADVOCATES, SOME INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES PREFER IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE. IT'S IMPORTANT TO RESPECT PERSONAL PREFERENCES WHILE PROMOTING RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION.

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS IMPLEMENT PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN THEIR SUBSTANCE USE PROGRAMS?

ORGANIZATIONS CAN TRAIN STAFF ON PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE, UPDATE WRITTEN MATERIALS AND POLICIES, AVOID STIGMATIZING TERMS, AND FOSTER A CULTURE OF RESPECT TO ENSURE COMMUNICATION REFLECTS PERSON-CENTERED VALUES.

DOES PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE EXTEND TO ALL TYPES OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS?

YES, PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE APPLIES TO ALL SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS, WHETHER INVOLVING ALCOHOL, OPIOIDS, STIMULANTS, OR OTHER SUBSTANCES, TO ENSURE RESPECTFUL AND NON-STIGMATIZING COMMUNICATION.

ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR LEARNING MORE ABOUT PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE?

YES, RESOURCES INCLUDE THE SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (SAMHSA), THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON DRUG ABUSE (NIDA), AND VARIOUS ADVOCACY GROUPS THAT PROVIDE GUIDELINES AND TRAINING ON PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- 1. PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN ADDICTION RECOVERY: RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION FOR LASTING CHANGE*
THIS BOOK EXPLORES THE IMPORTANCE OF USING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE WHEN DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTION. IT EMPHASIZES HOW LANGUAGE SHAPES PERCEPTIONS AND PROMOTES DIGNITY AND RESPECT FOR INDIVIDUALS IN RECOVERY. THROUGH PRACTICAL EXAMPLES AND GUIDELINES, READERS LEARN TO COMMUNICATE IN WAYS THAT REDUCE STIGMA AND FOSTER EMPATHY.
- 2. WORDS MATTER: EMBRACING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE TREATMENT*
A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS AND COUNSELORS, THIS BOOK HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPACT OF PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE ON TREATMENT OUTCOMES. IT PROVIDES STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING RESPECTFUL TERMINOLOGY INTO CLINICAL PRACTICE AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE. THE AUTHOR DISCUSSES THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN REDUCING STIGMA AND SUPPORTING RECOVERY JOURNEYS.
- 3. CHANGING THE NARRATIVE: PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE AND SUBSTANCE USE STIGMA*
FOCUSING ON SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARD SUBSTANCE USE, THIS BOOK EXAMINES HOW LANGUAGE INFLUENCES STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION. IT ADVOCATES FOR PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE AS A TOOL TO CHANGE HARMFUL NARRATIVES SURROUNDING ADDICTION. THE BOOK INCLUDES CASE STUDIES AND PERSONAL STORIES THAT ILLUSTRATE THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION.
- 4. RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE, RESPECTFUL CARE: PERSON-FIRST APPROACHES IN ADDICTION SERVICES*
TARGETED AT ADDICTION SERVICE PROVIDERS, THIS RESOURCE UNDERSCORES THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN DELIVERING COMPASSIONATE CARE. IT OFFERS PRACTICAL ADVICE ON ADOPTING PERSON-FIRST TERMINOLOGY TO IMPROVE CLIENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT. THE BOOK ALSO ADDRESSES COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES IN SHIFTING LANGUAGE HABITS.
- 5. LANGUAGE OF HEALING: PERSON-FIRST COMMUNICATION IN SUBSTANCE USE RECOVERY*
THIS WORK DELVES INTO THE HEALING POTENTIAL OF LANGUAGE IN ADDICTION RECOVERY SETTINGS. IT DISCUSSES HOW PERSON-FIRST COMMUNICATION FOSTERS HOPE, EMPOWERMENT, AND SELF-WORTH AMONG INDIVIDUALS WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS. READERS ARE GUIDED THROUGH TECHNIQUES TO IMPLEMENT RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE IN PEER SUPPORT AND PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENTS.

6. STIGMA AND SUBSTANCE USE: THE ROLE OF PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC HEALTH

EXPLORING PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVES, THIS BOOK ANALYZES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STIGMA, LANGUAGE, AND SUBSTANCE USE OUTCOMES. IT PRESENTS EVIDENCE SUPPORTING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE AS A MEANS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND POLICY. THE AUTHOR OFFERS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDIA, POLICYMAKERS, AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS.

7. BREAKING BARRIERS: PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE AND INCLUSION IN ADDICTION RECOVERY

THIS BOOK HIGHLIGHTS HOW PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE PROMOTES INCLUSION AND EQUITY WITHIN ADDICTION RECOVERY COMMUNITIES. IT ADDRESSES ISSUES OF MARGINALIZATION AND ADVOCATES FOR RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS. THE TEXT INCLUDES FRAMEWORKS FOR TRAINING AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE.

8. FROM LABELS TO LIVES: UNDERSTANDING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN SUBSTANCE USE DISCOURSE

A SCHOLARLY EXAMINATION OF LANGUAGE USE IN SUBSTANCE USE DISCOURSE, THIS BOOK TRACES THE EVOLUTION FROM LABELING TO PERSON-FIRST TERMINOLOGY. IT CRITIQUES TRADITIONAL TERMS AND OFFERS ALTERNATIVES THAT HONOR INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY BEYOND SUBSTANCE USE. THE BOOK IS SUITED FOR ACADEMICS, CLINICIANS, AND ADVOCATES SEEKING DEEPER UNDERSTANDING.

9. EMPATHY THROUGH LANGUAGE: PERSON-FIRST COMMUNICATION FOR FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

DESIGNED FOR FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS, THIS GUIDE EXPLAINS HOW ADOPTING PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE CAN IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FOR LOVED ONES WITH SUBSTANCE USE CHALLENGES. IT PROVIDES PRACTICAL TIPS FOR EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS AND ADDRESSES EMOTIONAL BARRIERS TO RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION. THE BOOK FOSTERS EMPATHY AND REDUCES BLAME IN CAREGIVING CONTEXTS.

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