

Self-harm

This factsheet looks at what self-harm is and what causes someone to self-harm. It could help if you are harming yourself or are thinking about it. It explains what support you can get and how to help yourself if you are self-harming. There is also information for friends, carers and relatives.



KEY POINTS

- Self-harm is when you hurt or harm yourself on purpose.
- Self-harm is most common among young people, aged 11-25.
- Drinking a lot of alcohol or taking drugs may increase your risk of self-harm.
- Self-harm is always a sign that something is wrong. However, it doesn't always mean you have a mental health condition.
- You may self-harm because you find it difficult to cope with your moods or share how you are feeling. Everyone has their own reasons for self-harming.
- If you self-harm you are more at risk of suicide than someone who doesn't.
- Your doctor can help if you want to stop self-harming. They might offer medication, counselling or both.
- Sharing your feelings with someone you trust can help you self-harm less and make you feel less alone.
- It can be hard to know how to support someone who self-harms. Being patient and learning about why they self-harm can help.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What is self-harm?](#)
2. [Who self-harms?](#)
3. [Why do people self-harm?](#)
4. [Is self-harming a mental health problem?](#)
5. [Do people repeatedly self-harm?](#)
6. [Self-harm and suicide](#)
7. [What help can professionals give me?](#)
8. [How can I help myself?](#)
9. [Dealing with scars](#)
10. [How can I tell someone if I have a problem with self-harm?](#)
11. [Information for friends, carers and relatives](#)

[Top](#)

1. What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when you harm or hurt yourself on purpose. There are many ways people self-harm.

- Cutting
- Burning
- Scalding with hot water
- Banging or scratching your body
- Breaking bones
- Hair pulling or picking your skin
- Self-strangulation
- Sticking sharp objects into your body
- Taking things that are poisonous

Self-harm can include taking drugs or drinking too much alcohol to harm yourself. This is different to drinking or taking drugs for pleasure.¹

You can rarely overdose safely and it can have a serious effect on your health.

Self-harm and suicidal thoughts are different. People who feel suicidal want to take their own life. If you self-harm it does not mean you want to end your life.

[Top](#)

2. Who self-harms?

Not everyone who self-harms will go to their GP or the hospital. This makes it hard to get a true picture of who is more at risk of self-harming. But there has been some research into who is more likely to self harm.

In the UK, around 1 in 20 people have self-harmed. Anyone can self-harm, but the risk may be higher if you:²

- are female.
- are a young person.
- are an South Asian woman, aged 16-24 were found to have higher rates of self harm than Caucasian women in the same age group. But there was less self harm in South Asian men than Caucasian men. Overall though South Asians were more likely to seek help than Caucasians and so the risk of ongoing self harm was lower.³
- have had traumatic life events, abuse or bullying.
- feel isolated.
- have a mental illness.
- are in prison.
- have a learning disability.
- have problems with drugs or alcohol.

People in prison are more likely to self-harm. Up to 3 in 10 people in prison have a history of self-harm.⁴

Men are more likely to self harm by cutting rather than poisoning, and women may be more likely to poison themselves than men.⁵

[Top](#)

3. Why do people self-harm?

People self-harm for different reasons. You might self-harm to:

- deal with strong emotions like anger or sadness,
- punish yourself for things you think you've done wrong,
- make yourself feel normal, or
- distract yourself from feelings.⁶

If you self-harm a lot you might do it for different reasons every time. It can help to try and work out what that problem is. This can mean you get the right help or treatment.⁷

If you self-harm you might:

- have a difficult family life,
- feel bullied,
- have depression, anxiety or personality disorder,
- have issues with housing and relationships,⁸ or
- take drugs or drink too much alcohol.⁹

Dealing with your feelings

You might find it hard to cope with emotions and feelings. You may self-harm because you feel overwhelmed.

Physical pain can distract you when you are in emotional pain.¹⁰ When you are in physical pain your brain releases chemicals which can make you feel better.

Communication

You may self-harm to try and show others how you feel.¹¹ Some people may think that this is attention-seeking, but they are wrong.

You might have tried other ways of letting other people know how you are feeling. You may find it hard to understand how you feel and self-harm to make sense of it yourself.

Control

Self-harm can be a way of feeling in control of your body.¹² You may have gone through some traumatic experiences in your life. This could include emotional, physical or sexual abuse. You may self-harm as a way of managing memories of trauma.

Punishment

Some people who self-harm may do it as a way of punishing themselves for feelings or behaviour that they think are their fault. You may feel 'bad' or that you 'hate yourself'.

No matter what reason you harm yourself, there is help available to overcome the feelings you have been dealing with.

[Top](#)

4. Is self-harming a mental health problem?

Self-harm is a sign of distress, and can show that someone has a mental illness. But not everyone who self-harms will have a mental illness.

Self-harm is not a mental health problem in itself, but could be a part of a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder or post traumatic stress disorder.¹³ It is important for your doctor to find out why you are self-harming so you can get the right treatment.

There are many people who self-harm but who don't contact mental health services and so do not have a diagnosed mental health problem.

Go to www.rethink.org for more information on:

- Anxiety disorders
- Schizophrenia
- Eating disorders
- Borderline Personality Disorder
- Depression

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy.

5. Do people self-harm more than once?

People self-harm to deal with distress when these feelings happen. This means that people may self-harm several times a year or several times a day.

The earlier on you get help the easier it will be to learn other ways of coping. People who have self-harmed for many years can find it difficult to stop and it takes a lot of work.

6. Is there a link between self-harm and suicide?

Self-harm does not normally mean you want to end your life. People self-harm for different reasons, but there are links between self-harm and suicide.

People who self-harm are at more risk of suicide than people who have never self-harmed. It is 66 times more likely that someone will end their life if they have recently had treatment for self-harm.¹⁴ Women who self-harm are at a greater risk of suicide than men.¹⁵ People with schizophrenia who self-harm are at an increased risk of suicide.¹⁶

If you don't self-harm safely, there is a risk that you could accidentally end your life. Some methods of self-harm are more dangerous than others.¹⁷

7. What help can professionals give me?

The reason you self-harm is unique to you. Because of this there are different types of treatments that can be helpful. Be honest when telling professionals why you self-harm. This will help them find the right support for you.

If the first treatment you try doesn't work, be persistent. Other treatments might be more effective for you.

If you need to go to hospital

The National Institute for Care and Excellence (NICE) produces best practice recommendations for health care providers. The NHS doesn't have to follow them, but they should. NICE recommends the following.¹⁸

Triage

If you need to use emergency services because of self-harm, healthcare staff should do an assessment with you to see how urgently you need treatment and what your mental state is. This is called 'triage'. You may have to be admitted to hospital.

Physical treatment

Even if you don't want any mental health support, the NHS will offer you treatment for any serious injuries you have as a result of self harm.

Detailed assessment

Healthcare staff should do a full assessment of your needs. They will ask you about what caused you to self-harm, if you have any mental health issues and if you are thinking about suicide.

Risk assessment

When they are doing the assessment with you they will think about your risk of harming yourself again. They may think you are at risk if you have:

- been drinking or taking drugs,
- a history of self-harm, or
- mental health conditions.

Assessment outcome

The NHS has different options depending on your risk.

- **Discharge.** They may feel that you are not a risk to yourself and do not need to stay in hospital. They will discharge you back to your GP so you can discuss treatment with them.
- **Stay in hospital.** They may decide that you are a risk to yourself and they need to keep you in hospital overnight. In this situation they may only keep you 1 or 2 days depending how you are the next day.
- **Treatment.** If you need treatment they might refer you to local mental health services. They should include you in making this decision if they can.

Talking treatments, medication or social care

Professionals should make sure you understand all the treatment options that are available. They should explain the benefits and any possible downsides of treatment.

Long-term management of self harm

If you self-harm regularly, then the steps above still apply if you need hospital care, but there are some other recommendations to make sure you get the right support.¹⁹

Who should help?

Some people may be able to get enough support from their GP, but NICE recommends that mental health services should usually be responsible for your treatment. When specialist mental health services help you, this is usually under the 'Care Programme Approach' (CPA).

Care Plans

If you are under specialist mental health services, you should have a care plan that explains what the aims of your treatment are. You and your care coordinator should review your care plan every year. You can update it by adding new goals. These can include:

- not letting the self-harm get worse,
- stopping risky behaviours such as using drugs,
- improving your social skills and support, and
- getting into training, work or employment.

Risk management plans

This should be part of your care plan. It should look at:

- long term and current risk issues,
- triggers that increase your risk of self-harm, and
- a crisis plan – this should tell you what to do in a crisis and some things you should do for self management.

Treatments

Your mental health team should normally offer you 3 – 12 sessions of therapy to help you stop self-harming. Your therapist should work with you to find the reasons why you self-harm, and should make sure your therapy is tailored to your needs.²⁰

Your doctor should not give you medication just to help you stop self-harming, but they may offer you medication if you have a mental illness. If they do this, they have to think about the risk of overdose.²¹

The NHS may offer different treatments if you self-harm. They will only offer you some of these treatments if you self-harm and have mental health issue.

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- Cognitive analytic therapy (CAT)
- Psychotherapy
- Medication
- Dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT)
- Interpersonal therapy

Harm Reduction

If you can't stop self-harming altogether, you and your care coordinator can talk about safer ways to self-harm.

Go to www.rethink.org for more information on:

- Talking Therapies
- Care Programme Approach
- Medication – choice and managing problems

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you copy.

[Top](#)

8. How can I help myself?

If you have been self-harming for a while, it can be hard to stop. The first step is deciding you want to stop. You might not want to at the moment, but thinking about it is the first step.

You could keep a list of reasons you want to stop and why you don't want to stop. This might help you decide what you want to do. You may need support from family or friends before you can think about stopping.

Deciding to stop

You need to be sure you want to stop. If you aren't sure, it will be more difficult. You shouldn't agree to stop just because other people want you to.²²

Once you have decided to stop, there are things you can do to control your self-harm. Everybody is different and what works for someone else may not work for you. Try different things to find out what works for you.

Delay self-harm

You may self-harm straight away when you are distressed. By telling yourself to delay it you might not self-harm as much or as often.²³

Start by waiting 15 minutes after you want to self harm. Over time, extend the length of time you wait. This gives you time to try some other ways to manage how you feel.

Non-harmful ways to manage how I feel

Talk to someone who understands. This could be a friend, a relative or another person who self-harms. There may be a local support group you can join or a helpline you can ring.

If you feel angry you could try the following.

- Write down how you are feeling and then tear it up or rip it up
- Punch a punch bag or kick something soft
- Scream into a pillow
- Play a sport, exercise or go to the gym
- Bite into a piece of ginger or a chilli
- Squeeze an ice cube as hard as you can
- Snap elastic bands on your wrist

If you are feeling low or anxious you could try the following.

- Go to a friend or relative's house
- Pamper yourself - have a bath with bath oil
- Do something active - clean up or clear out your wardrobe
- Go for a walk

- Choose a random object and think of 30 different uses for it

Before harming, write down the answers to these questions.

- Why do I feel I need to hurt myself? What has happened to make me feel like this? How do I feel right now?
- Have I been here before? What did I do to deal with it? How did I feel then?
- What have I done to make myself feel better before? What else can I do that won't hurt me?
- Do I need to hurt myself? How will I feel when I am hurting myself?
- How will I feel after hurting myself? How will I feel tomorrow morning?
- Can I avoid what has made me feel like this, or deal with it better in the future?

There are free self-help guides you can use to help you.

- www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp
- www.getselfhelp.co.uk/mobile/docs/DealingwithDistress.pdf

How can I stay safe?

Your aim might be to stop self-harming but you might feel you can't do it right now. In the meantime, you might want to reduce the damage you do when you self-harm. This is called harm-minimisation. There are some suggestions below.²⁴

- Do not share self-harming tools with other people. There is a risk you could get a disease including chlamydia, syphilis, hepatitis B, HIV and AIDS
- Don't self harm on areas you have lots of scars. Scar tissue may not be as strong as your skin
- Avoid drugs or alcohol, which can affect your judgement
- Keep first aid supplies close and learn some first aid
- Have an emergency plan, for example, dial 999 if you need an ambulance
- Before you start self-harming, set yourself limits and stick to them. Decide how many cuts and how big they will be, so that they are just enough to relieve distress but no more. This is a good way of learning the skills you need to stop eventually
- Think of options that do not break your skin or involve taking substances

[Top](#)

9. How can I deal with my scars?

If you have harmed your skin, you may have scars. Some people find that their scars remind them of a difficult time or give them painful memories. Accepting your scars can be an important part of recovery. This can take time, but it is important not to feel bad about yourself because of them.

How can I deal with questions?

If people see your scars they might ask what happened. They may not realise that you have self-harmed. They are likely to be genuinely concerned rather than trying to make you feel uncomfortable on purpose. You have a few options, and there is no 'right' way to respond. You might deal with things differently depending on who asks you.

Being honest

You may want to tell people that your scars were caused by self-harm. You can do this in a way that feels comfortable. Don't reveal more than you are happy to. Don't feel under pressure to tell anyone anything.

It might be worth deciding in advance what you want to say if someone asks you.

Avoiding the question

If you don't want to tell someone you can say:

- "it's a long story",
- "everything's OK now", or
- "I was in an accident".

If they press you for more details you could say "I'd rather not talk about it if that's OK."

In the end it's up to you what you say. You don't have to explain or justify your scars to anyone. It isn't anything to be embarrassed or ashamed of. It might be worth thinking about some responses you are happy with. Waiting until someone asks can put you on the spot. In those situations you may not say what you wanted to.

How can I reduce my scars?

There are ways you can treat and disguise scars if you want to.²⁵ Not all of these will suit every type of scar. You can talk to your doctor about your scars and how to deal with them.

- **Clothes** - Long sleeved tops and trousers can hide scars.
- **Corticosteroid injections** – these are small injections into the scars to help reduce any swelling. They won't make them disappear completely.
- **Scar Plasters** – these are silicone plasters you stick directly onto your scar. A popular one is called hydrocolloid dressings. It can reduce swelling and redness which make it less noticeable but it won't disappear completely.
- **Surgery** – depending on the size of the scar and where it is surgery may help. This is usually if the scar is causing issues with your movement or health.
- **Dressings** – some bandages may help to reduce the swelling of scars. This is used more when there is a large area such as a burn or

skin graft. It won't make the scars disappear but will help them become smoother and softer.

- **Make-up** – You can use special makeup for scars such as Varma Cover Cream or body makeup. Scar cover cream can be a bit more expensive than normal makeup. If you want to consider this you can do some research on the internet and see what suits you. There are some online and telephone self harm services you could ask if they have any more information. Their details are in the Useful Contacts section.
- **Laser therapy** – this can be useful for light scarring. If you have heavy or deep scars this might not work for you. If you want to discuss this option make sure the professional is medically trained.
- **Scar creams and oils** – there isn't a huge amount of research into how effective creams like vitamin E, Bio oil or coconut oil are for reducing scars. However, the massage effect of rubbing them in and the moisture for the skin are good at softening scars.

You should not use scar plasters, make-up, creams or oils on fresh wounds. If you have a fresh injury you should use first aid to keep it clean and infection free. If you get good first aid or care for your wound in the first place, this can reduce scarring.

[Top](#)

10. How can I tell my someone if I have a problem with self-harming?

If you self-harm, you might feel that you are the only one. You might feel like people close to you won't understand. This can make you feel more alone and could make your self-harm worse.

Sharing your experiences can play an important part in your recovery. Eventually you may decide to talk to somebody about what has happened. This could be a friend, family member or someone else you trust. You don't have to tell someone in person, it might be easier to write it in a letter.

Being prepared for these conversations can help. Giving them the right information can avoid them making assumptions about why you self-harm or why you told them about it.

Below are some things to think about when you are going to tell someone.

Who

Decide who you want to tell first. You might want to speak to a close friend or family member. Choose someone you trust and feel comfortable with. By telling one person first can help you figure out how you feel about it. It may make you feel relieved and more confident to discuss it with others.

It might feel daunting telling certain people in your family about your situation. If so, decide if you want to tell a friend or another family member there to support you.

What

Think about what you are going to say in advance. Thinking 'on the spot' can be hard. It can help if you know what you want to say and how you want to say it. You might want to say it out loud once or twice to hear how it sounds.

You don't have to describe your self-harm in detail when you first tell someone. If you want to, you can talk about it in more detail another time.

When

Try to find the right time to tell someone. Make sure they aren't distracted with something else. Make sure you are not upset or angry. Even something as simple as being hungry or tired can make it hard to focus and deal with information. Choose a time that suits you both.

Where

Think about where you are going to tell them. Make sure it is private so you aren't interrupted or other people can overhear. You might want to ask them to go for a walk with you and tell them then. Pick a place that you feel safe and are both comfortable in.

Why

Don't assume they understand why you're telling them. Let them know. You might tell them because:

- you love and trust them,
- you might feel that you have given them the wrong impression about how you feel or why you self-harm, or
- you want support to stop self-harming.

They might have questions, so be ready to talk about it. Think about the questions they may ask and your answers. The more they understand the better able they are to support you. The most likely questions they will ask are 'why?' questions.

If they find it hard to understand, be patient and realise that it may be a lot for them to take in. Don't get upset if they ask questions you think are insensitive.

[Top](#)

11. Information for friends, carers and relative

If someone you know self-harms, you may be feeling all sorts of different things. Here are some tips on how to deal with the situation and support the person you care about.

Reaction

Don't take it personally. Self-harm is the way the person you care for deals with their distress. People do not harm themselves to be dramatic, annoy others, or to make a point. It is not your fault, even if the person says it is.

Be honest with yourself about how this self-harm makes you feel. It is ok for you to feel frightened, uncomfortable or provoked. But try not to react to stressful or emotional situations with anger or blame.

Learn about self harm

Get as much information about self-harm as you can. It will help you understand what the person is going through. There are good books and information resources out there. You can look on some websites about self-harm. There are details of books and services in the Useful Contacts section below.

Your role

Tell them you care for them if they self-harm or not. If possible make sure they have a safe place and be as available as you can be. Set aside your personal feelings about self-harm and focus on what's going on for them.

Be honest and realistic about what you can and can't do. If you feel that you can help with something, offer the person support. But do not try to impose yourself or tell them that they have to change.

You may think about removing sharp objects or pills from the house. This can be an option if the person feels suicidal and you need to do something in a crisis. In other situations, the person may just try to find other ways to harm themselves and so it may not be helpful.

Using punishments or trying to make them feel guilty is not helpful and is likely to make things worse.

Accepting and understanding that someone is in pain doesn't make the pain go away. But it can make it more bearable for them to know that someone understands. Be hopeful about the possibilities of finding other ways of coping rather than self-harm. If they are willing, discuss possibilities for treatment with them, but don't push them into anything. They will decide when they feel the time is right.

Be patient. You might find it difficult if the person rejects you at first but they may need time to build trust.

Self-care

Take care of yourself. You can be more supportive of the person you care about if you aren't exhausted and emotionally drained. Don't be afraid to take a break. Explain you still love the person but you need some time to recharge your batteries.

Get support. You can use online forums, support groups and telephone support services. Support groups for friends and family of people with mental health problems may be useful. While they may not only focus on self-harm, group members will understand how a caring role can affect you.

Look in our Useful Contacts section for contact details of some relevant services.



FURTHER
READING

Self-Harm: The ‘Secret Self’

This is a publication by Sane based on research they did. It explains what they found about why people self harm and ways to support people. You can download it from their website.

Website: www.sane.org.uk/uploads/self-harm.pdf

Self-Harm: A self help guide

Northumberland, Tyne and Ware NHS Foundation Trust have produced a self help booklet for people who self harm. You can download it for free from their website.

Website: <https://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp/>

The Scarred Soul: Understanding and Ending Self-inflicted Violence

– by Jan Sutton

This is a book that has new research, statistics, diagrams, some resources, case studies and practical self-help activities.

101 Distractions from Depression, Self-harm (and other Soul-destroyers) – by Sophia Gill

This book is by someone with lived experience of depression and self-harm. She writes about what helped her distract herself and overcome her self-harming behaviour.

National Services

National Self-harm Network

This has an online forum where you can chat with other people affected by self-harm.

Website: www.nshn.co.uk/

Self Injury Support

This is a national service that helps women and girls affected by self harm. They have an instant messaging service, helpline, information resources, and self help groups.

Telephone: Cass 0808 800 8088 Monday – Friday 7PM – 10PM & Thursday afternoon 3PM – 6PM.

Text: TESS 0780 047 2908 (Sunday – Friday 7PM – 9PM for women up to 24 years old)

Website: www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk

Harmless

This is a charity that supports people who self-harm, their family, friends, relatives and professionals.

Telephone: 0115 934 8445

Address: PO Box 10136, Nottingham, NG1 9HL



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CONTACTS

Email: info@harmless.org.uk
Website: www.harmless.org.uk

LifeSIGNS

This is a self-injury advice and support organisation. They have information, support forums. They have practical articles like what you can wear in the summer if you don't want anyone to see your scars.

Website: www.lifesigns.org.uk

Changing Faces

Changing Faces offers information, advice and support to children, parents and adults with scars, marks or conditions that affect their appearance.

Telephone: 0845 4500 275

Address: The Squire Centre, 33-37 University Street, London WC1E 6JN

Email: skincam@changingfaces.org.uk or support@changingfaces.org.uk

Website: www.changingfaces.org.uk

Recover Your Life

This is an online forum that is run by and for people who self harm. They have information and advice about different issues. They have some bracelets for people who want to stop self harming and who have. They have different coloured bracelets for different stages – 'Trying to Stop', 'One Month Free'.

Website: www.recoveryourlife.com

Shop: <http://shop.recoveryourlife.com>

The Samaritans

This is a listening service for anyone in distress including people who self-harm.

Telephone: 116 123

Address: Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Website: www.samaritans.org

Self Harm Service

This is an NHS treatment service for people who self-harm a lot and have problems with their relationships with other people. You cannot refer yourself but you can ask your GP or your community mental health team if they would refer you. You should also ask your GP if your local trust has any self-harm services or look on the trust website.

Telephone: 020 3228 4414

Address: Self-Harm Outpatient Service, Outpatient Department, Maudsley Hospital, London, SE5 8AZ
Email: crisisrecoveryunit@slam.nhs.uk
Website: www.national.slam.nhs.uk/services/adult-services/selfharm/

Local Services

42nd Street

This is a mental health service for Manchester young people aged 15 to 25 who have problems including self-harm and suicide. They offer a different services including groups based at the resource.

Telephone: 0161 228 1888 (Mon, Thu & Fri 2.00-5.00pm)
Address: 42nd Street, the SPACE, 87-91 Great Ancoats Street, Manchester, M4 5AG
Email: theteam@42ndstreet.org.uk
Website: <http://42ndstreet.org.uk>

Brent Centre for Young People

They give help and therapy to young people in Brent. They can help people who self-harm.

Telephone: 0207 328 0918
Address: The Brent Centre for Young People, Laufer House, 51 Winchester Avenue, London, NW6 7TT
Email: info@centre.org.uk
Website: www.brentcentre.org.uk

[Top](#)



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³ Cooper J, Husain N, Webb R, et al. (2006). *Self-harm in the UK : Differences between South Asians and Whites in rates, characteristics, provision of service and repetition*. Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology. Oct;41(10):782-8.

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- ¹⁷ As note 7 page 35
- ¹⁸ As note 2
- ¹⁹ As note 7
- ²⁰ As note 7
- ²¹ As note 7 para 1.4.9
- ²² Middleton, K. & Garvie, S. (2008) *Self Harm – The Path to Recovery.* A Lion Book: Oxford. page 57
- ²³ As note 23 page 62
- ²⁴ As note 23 page 68
- ²⁵ NHS Choices. Scars.
www.nhs.uk/conditions/Scars/Pages/Introduction.aspx [Accessed November 2015]

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Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
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