PROMOTION OF IDENTITY AND COPING STRATEGIES: A MODEL OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract:
Stress is described as cause for a lot of diseases and affecting the positive well-being. Furthermore, it is obvious and hidden –chronic stress - that remains unnoticed until there are some physical reactions, eg. sleep disorders, etc. The dynamic of the life today poses a lot of requirements: self-improvement, being competitive all the time. Economic and social changes, migration flows, abundant information and news, strive after being popular and so on, increase the stress levels. Again the general context leads to procrastination of identity commitments in the different life domains. Only one of the examples in this line is the implemented recently concept of "emerging adulthood"– the extended period from 18-19 to 29 years. What describes the life today are is the plenty of choices that impose the need of more time for roles exploration and decision-making and the related stress. This provoked our interest to study the relations between identity and coping strategies and propose a model for stress management as both identity and coping determine the positive self-perception and well-being. Article summarizes the results from a study with 350 Bulgarians, administered self-assessment instruments, describing identity statuses and coping strategies relations, underlying the implemented training and proposed model of stress management. The main idea is that stress is positive, so the focus has to be on its recognition and management. We suggest the idea that the successful reactive coping strategies can become a domain of the psychosocial identity in the form of proactive coping.

Keywords: coping strategies, stress management, identity, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity crises and coping strategies describe the personal self-perceptions and the behaviour aimed at maintaining balance in the course of the individual development and adaptation to the requirements of the environment. Both process of making commitments and behaviours are preconditioned by reactions in response to external events and strive after circumventing, getting ahead of preparing for the forthcoming events. The reactive and proactive strategies are interconnected and often gradate one into the other.

Our main objective is to outline one of the two aspects of inner transformations and commitments in the course of lifelong development – the reactive – as a step to the differentiation and comparison to the proactive. During the recent decades with emergence of the positive psychology the research interest turns the more and the more to the constructive forms of development, proactive behaviour, and maintaining high level of well-being. Our focus is on the dynamic of commitments – the conscious or perceived process of active or forced experimenting or postponement and avoidance of the stable commitments. We are interested in the process of awareness and choice of self-definitions and coping strategies mainly in result from the changes, provoked by the interrelated inner stimuli and external factors.

Both identity and coping as process and result describe the most adaptive mechanism and response for the person in each individual moment, context and situation in view to the optimal balance of the person-environment transactions. Identity and coping as process are the choices underlying behaviour and as result reflect the general framework of self-definitions and controlled levels of stress. We suggest the idea that the successful reactive coping strategies can become a part of the identity in the form of proactive coping strategies.

2. COPING AND IDENTITY

2.1. Coping and coping strategies

Biological stress models underlie the psychological theories of coping style and strategies. The focus first had been on the two basic emotions – fear and anger – which prepare the organism for reaction. This biological reaction is well known as "fight or flight", aiming to overcome the stressful situation. Selye defines the stress as a non-specific response of the body to all external requirements (Selye, 1976). He is one of the first researchers who gives attention to the biological stress and who evidences that psychic processes as emotional human reactions to stress make people vulnerable to a number of diseases. Today the more and the more researches have replicated the relation between stress and various disorders. Stress has significant effect on psychological well-being and health.

Coping became of key interest for psychologists during the second half of the past century. As a general term coping relates to the psychoanalytical defensive mechanisms described in the behaviour avoiding threats to the Self. Within the psychodynamic approach is elaborated the hierarchical model of the coping, treating the defenses as healthy behaviour (Menninger, 1954; Haan, 1977; Vaillant, 1977). In the end of the 70s the hierarchical approach and traits approach have been displaced by the concept of coping as a process. In this approach *coping is perceived as changing in time depending on the specificity of the situations and the context.* Cognitive-phenomenological approach considers the coping a two-stage process, comprising cognitive processing of the information about the stressful situation and assessment of the available coping resources and possibilities that relate to the behavioural efforts aimed at mastery, acceptance or decrease of the external and internal needs and the conflicts between them. Coping has two main functions: management of the human-environment transactions that are the source of stress (problem focused coping) and regulation of the emotions evoked by the stress (emotion focused coping). The possible ways of the response or coping are problem or emotion focused engagement and disengagement (Lazarus, 1966; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In personal aspect the stress reaction is a transaction with environment through cognitive processes - assessment of the threat and coping with the stress. The active coping strives to change the person – environment transaction and comprises coping strategies as active coping, planning, search for instrumental support, suppressing competing activities. The second group of strategies strives after avoidance of direct problem confrontation – decrease of the negative emotions, regulation of the emotional distress, whereas the objective is reformulation of the significance of the event / problem and thus of the emotional response.

Coping with stress includes both problem and emotion focused coping. Preferences to one strategy is a function of the assessment process: events that are assessed as providing less possibilities for favourable change will more probably provoke emotion focused coping, whereas events assessed as giving options for improvement through personal efforts will probably predict problem focused coping responses. The two factors having effect on the processing and assessment are the variables situational features and personal traits. Situational variables comprise factors as uncertainty and support network; but personal traits comprise factors as motivational model and personal control. Nevertheless coping strategies cannot be divided into "good" and "bad" (Wrosch et al., 2003), active engagement with problems and search of support are related to better physical and physic health while avoidance usually has negative effects (Compas et al., 2001; Connor-Smith & Frachsbart, 2007).

Most important seems to be the issue of coping resources. Three principles have been proven: 1. Loss of the resources is main source of stress; 2. Recourses serve for conservation and preservation of the remaining resources; 3. After the stressful event resources are exhausted and this leaves the person without resources for the next situation. This means that main point for investment is not the result itself, but the availability of adequate recourses (Hobfoll & Leiberman, 1987; Hobfol & Lilly, 1993).

2.2. Identity status

The concept of identity has a long history in social sciences, commencing from the early interactionism and especially those perceiving the identity a collectively defined dynamic symbol mediated process. Later identity used to be treated as a construct aimed at impressions management that changes daily in the course of interactions (Goffman, 1959). In this sense identities are supposed to be situational – flexible social objects corresponding to the interpersonal relations (Stone, 1962). According to the postmodern psychologists the identities are multiple and the symbol means for their construction become the more and the more fragmented and boundless with the progress of globalization. In this sense the identities are mobile constructs, unlimited combinations of cultural alternatives the person can select from (Hall, 1996).

We are focused on psychosocial identity as a meta-level construct. Personal traits and social context can determine the ways of identity attainment, however are not direct determinants but have effect in aggregate - the contextual factors determine the range of options for exploration but the individual factors determine the form of the commitments. Identity is dynamic construct and after its initial attainment it is reformulated and verified throughout the life cycle depending on the most adaptive ways for the individual to cope with the occurring intrinsic and extrinsic changes. The identity is the conceptual framework for personal processing and consideration of the identity and self-related issues, the life purpose and self-perceptions as completed wholeness. Each person individually construes her reality – extends or limits the borders of the identity explorations, making the choices and commitments within the predetermined options provided by the context (Kroger, 1993). Erikson suggests the solution achieved identity vs. identity diffusion (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Marcia differentiates two bipolar dimensions "commitments vs. lack of commitments" and "exploration vs. lack of exploration". Thus four identity statuses are formed: achieved identity, moratorium, foreclosed identity and diffusion (Marcia, 1966). Two of the statuses are described by commitments (achieved and foreclosed vs. moratorium and diffusion) and two are described by active exploration (moratorium and achieved vs. foreclosed and diffusion). This reflects the two aspects of the identity status paradigm – the contents of the identity (stable commitments) and the exploration in pursue of commitments. Passive identity means postponing the identity commitments either conformity to external social standards (diffusion and foreclosed). Active identity is based on exploration behaviour and self-determinations (moratorium and achieved).

Achieved identity (high exploration, stable commitments) is attained after completion of the identity crisis, when person has explored the possible alternatives and made own commitments. *Moratorium* (high exploration, no commitments (postponement of the commitments) is the period of identity crisis prior to stable commitments. Moratoriums are actively involved in exploration without (and prior to) making stable commitments. *Foreclosed identity* (no exploration, stable commitments) is identity taken from significant others, self-determination and commitments through the objectives and values of others without personal exploration. *Diffusion* (no commitments, no exploration) – diffusers have not made personal commitments and are not exploring the alternatives. They are completely passive. In general the exploration means consideration and reconsideration, choice of identifications, experiencing the new commitments, roles and ideals (Marcia, 1980). Progressive identity pathway is

transition from diffusion to foreclosed or moratorium or from foreclosed to moratorium or from moratorium to achieved identity status (Waterman & Archer, 1993).

The same factors that invoke the initial identity crisis can occur later - the identity cycles AMAM (achieved-moratorium-achieved-moratorium) and MAMA (moratorium-achieved-moratorium-achieved) and FAFA (foreclosed-achieved-foreclosed-achieved) are only three of the dialectical models of identity attainment and re-attainment throughout life cycle. In adulthood the identity is strengthened, it is not achieved for the first time but is re-attained and enriched as a result from the new alternatives people face (Waterman, 1982). Identity cycles in adulthood not always follow the pathways from adolescence (Schwartz et al., 2000). Furthermore, the identity cycles are not always from immature to mature identity statuses. Identity transitions can be regressive, not always progressive, whereas achieved status shall not be considered the best solution. There are a lot of variations, which are best adaptive for the situation. Exploration is in-depth aiming at maintenance and validation of the commitments. Exploration in-width leads to new choices and commitments (Luyckx et al., 2004). Openness to new experience in adulthood reveals the resilience and flexibility of the identity (Whitbourne, 1986). *Mature identity is resilient and reveals the most adaptive personal solution for the individual situation in time*.

2.3. Identity statuses – coping strategies relations

In our study aimed to outline the relations and effect of identity on coping strategies in adulthood participated 350 Bulgarians (aged 20-65). They were administered self-assessment questionnaires measuring identity status and coping strategies, completed by a semi-structured interview. Both identity and coping are viewed as process and most adaptive response to the situation (Bakracheva, 2017)

There is a clear tendency of significantly higher orientation towards active coping for this sample. Probably, active coping is much more adaptive for the current situation, notwithstanding the age, gender and other individual differences. Personal active position (behaviour and thoughts) is preferred as more effective response to stressful situations. On the other hand, the context and perceived uncertainty make people postpone stable identity commitments. In this way it can be concluded that the environment promotes postponed and passive identity exploration but active coping strategies due to the perceived daily pressure. The main conclusion is that active coping is related to active identity and vice versa. This means that the more self-determined people are and the more stable commitments attained through personal exploration they have, the more problem focused and active they are in overcoming stressful situations. This supports the idea that active coping is healthier compared to passive. Interesting result for this sample is the significantly higher preference to active coping nevertheless the age, gender, and other within-sample individual differences.

For the Bulgarian sample adaptive and preferred are the active coping strategies. This means that when people face stressful and problem situations they rely mainly on their personal resources, notwithstanding the age, gender, and affiliations. This is replication in support of the situational approach to coping and the way identity statuses are perceived today – as most adaptive response to the effect of external forces and contextual effects.

In personal aspect identity status also has some effect on coping preferences. Adults who maintain passive identity exploration and have no stable commitments are much more inclined to prefer passive coping strategies compared to the those with stable self-determinations and commitment to values and goals. In support of our expectations are the reported relations between identity status and coping strategies. Active identity is related to active coping and vice versa. This supports the position that both identity and coping are dynamic constructs that are flexible or resilient and depend on the external contextual forces and features. They reveal what is most adaptive for the situation and context. This main effect if of the situations that determine the preferred coping strategies in aggregate of course, with the some effect of personal and individual preferences.

The summarized results stress on the strong dynamic and the daily reformulation in the course of decision and choice-making that are determinants of the subjective well-being. Promotion of skills for recognition and management of the individual reactions can significantly improve the level of satisfaction and perception of own life as full of meaning and having life purpose and the happiness in general. Outlined is the role of the social context both on identity and coping. Individual variables have also their effect.

The general portrait of the volunteers reveal that the way they perceive the environment results they to describe their life as torture and to perceive lack of perspectives and hope for a positive change in future. In respect to identity the most often used coping strategy is of postponement of the commitments due to the lack of alternatives and the second ranged in view to adaptiveness strategy

is of maintaining passive position in respect to self-definition. The main coping strategies employed reported by the volunteers as escape from problems are the well known and proven ones – thinking about intimate relations and love experiences and other forms of conscious search for escape from reality in fantasies and virtual activities or in reality, eg. hobby and amusement that ensure them resources and energy to cope with the daily tasks. The generally reported trend is in two directions: perceived pressure for forced adaptation in response to the external requirements, which impedes acceptance and following strong identity commitments and at the same time well expressed orientation towards active coping strategies in daily life, provoked by the need solutions to be found nevertheless the difficulties.

The conclusion is that contextual insecurity and instability provoke higher lack of commitments in personal aspect on the one hand, but on the other hand facilitate active daily coping strategies. Below are summarized some of the main features and characteristics of the studied volunteers divided in two groups as individual variables and coping preferences.

more positive attitudes maintain	*more negative attitudes maintain*
This are middle-aged persons, with university degree, having children, who have hobby, spend less hours in the social networks, are involved in club/community activities, irrespectively have or not permanent intimate partner. These people have clear self-definitions; they are problem-oriented and active in exploration and behaviour. They perceive of reformulate life situations as structured and under control. They maintain good social relations and do not avoid difficulties. Focused mainly on the problem, which gives them sense of autonomy and personal growth and results in less perceived loneliness. These people are not afraid to express emotions, which promotes their better self-perception. They have clear answer to the question "Who am I?" and make individual choices.	People below or above the middle age, without university degree, without children and hobby, spending more hours in the social networks, active in club activities. They often demonstrate defensive behaviour and avoid problems. Focused mainly on personal emotions but have not the capacity to express them, so prefer to suppress and hide emotions. They have no clear choices and attained identity. They perceive the environment as unstructured and dislike social communication; avoid problems but the defensive social isolation exhaust a lot of their resources and lead to higher perceived loneliness and lower sense of personal growth. The passive attitude explains also their lower sense of life purpose and life satisfaction. They prefer to follow foreclosed choices of others and often avoidance makes them expect problems will fix themselves and escape in fantasies.

3. STRESS MANAGEMENT MODEL

In addition to eustress (Selye, 1976) the proactive coping theory is fully focused on long-future oriented behaviours that occur prior to the real stress episode. Thus we can differentiate coping strategies as follows: reactive, anticipatory, preventive, and proactive coping. *The reactive coping* is the response to the occurred event; *the anticipatory coping* aims most to the immediate threat in close future; *the preventive coping* is focused on the potential threats in longer future, and the *proactive coping* perceives the challenges as opportunity for development. The proactive coping comprises strategies and vision for future and leads to accumulation of resources. The cognitive experiential theory describes the preconscious experiential system and the conscious rational system, which are interrelated and promote each other (Epstein, 2003).

The optimal identity is attained through involvement and behaviours resulting from the awareness. The theory of eudemonic identity accents on the strive for self-improvement and happiness based on inner motivation and pursue of personally chosen self-actualizing activities (Waterman, 2011). In general, proactive coping is a healthier stress management approach and adaptation to the context and situations.

In-depth coping could hardly be differentiated. It always remains a combination of unconscious reactions, existential anxiety and cognitive-experiential strategies. Each act is more or less coping – escape from confronting the existential questions of life sense, death, inner insecurity and the uncertainty of the environment. Smoking, drawing, children, workaholism, love, and all the related activities, are a specific coping aimed to defend the person from the sense of existential loneliness, fear and anxiety. Namely for this reason we made the link to the basic construct identity, i.e. the general self- definition. If person fails to employ enough adaptive strategies of reactive and proactive coping consecutively and coherently the basic sense of self-authenticity and self-integration is compromised.

Main accent is the adaptive feature of the identity statuses and coping strategies to the changing environmental conditions, as well as in result from their internal relations. When there is option for personal control and influence effective are the active identity and coping strategies. Passive

exploration and procrastination of self-definitions and avoiding coping have their positive role in situations that give no room to personal control.

Personally the active coping strategies promote identity attainment, while the emotional focused coping and avoidance facilitate postponement of commitments and stable identity. This gives unlimited opportunities for models and trainings focused on promotion of self-reflection skills and improvement of personal stress management skills. This can result in better ways for coping with stress and accumulation of resources ensuring better adaptation to the environmental requirements and inner transformations throughout life cycle and advanced proactive self-preservation.

The active coping with situations stimulates the personally chosen commitments and the identity in general. Key role, of course, have also the passive coping strategies of problem avoidance and postponement of the commitments in ideological and interpersonal domains. This is due to a great extent to the environmental influences. When the contextual or situational parameters do not allow control and prediction, adaptive are the ineffective at first glance coping strategies and passive identity statuses. They ensure defense and preservation or time for finding personal resources that to be used later. The described explanation of the attained and stable identity due to the preferred coping strategies on the one hand and of the preferred coping strategies depending on the identity status on the other – is the model of practical interventions.

The main position we suggest is that promotion of self-reflection and successful reactive responses can transform into proactive behaviour and become a component of the optimal identity.

The life statements "I depend just on the destiny, power is out of my control" or "I am responsible for my life" describe the passive and active personal attitudes. The deep anxiety provokes the position "I am helpless and powerless". The passive response to this position is self-isolation. People do not need to feel a real control as to cope with life, they have to realize that the control is something that has to be pursued and won. The existential question concerning identity is to what extent it is internally conditioned or personally attained. "You tell me who I am" or "I know who I am". These and other existential questions can be solved using the interrelations between self-perceptions and coping. Learning how to manage the stress and experimenting with the coping strategies leads to lower stress kept in in normal levels and active identity position. Promotion of personal active position and identity attainment stimulates orientation and more often approaching healthy coping strategies (fig. 1).

Picture 1: The model of individual trainings and programmes
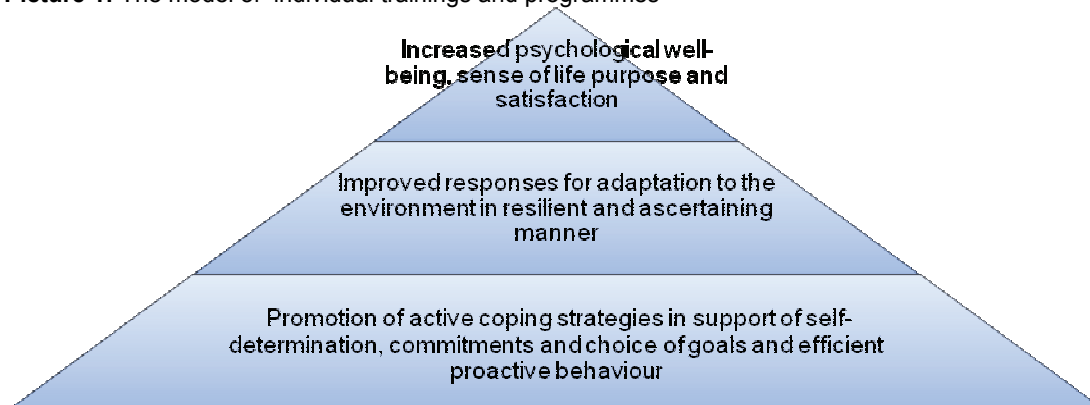
The intervention techniques and promotion of the resources and adaptive responses in the relations with the environment can be effective after maximum differentiation of the life domains and roles and awareness of the coping strategies that are most adaptive responses for any them. The efficiency of the stimulation is directed to self-reflection and outlining the preferred behaviours in the field of the conscious choices. This general framework applies to each life domain: profession, life philosophy, intimate relations, friendships, etc.

As an exemplary training programme we propose the Three steps for promotion of identity and proactive coping strategies

Within the terms of our approach, the summarized target results are participants always to be aware of their desires, advantages and disadvantages, to accept them without troubles, to undertake acts, identical and coherent to their wishes and objectives. The change of the attitudes and acceptance and tolerance include the past, the present and the future. First of all people have to confess what like and dislike. Afterwards to interpret and reinterpret this in a new light. *Self-knowledge* – the first step - means the person to become aware of her goals, motivation, and strives. The second step, *self-acceptance,* means unconditional acceptance of own advantages and disadvantages. The third step –

self-expression is behaviour, consistent with personal goals and affiliations. These steps ensure balanced and integrated self.

We access the entry and exit attitudes in the different life domains with administration of an instruments and semi-structured interview. Volunteers in the programme have been adults aged 20-65 years. Programme (training) usually lasts three months with one session weekly, lasting 1,5-2 hours, based on the phototherapy techniques. *The expected outcome after the end of the programme cycle is participants* to have new skills, to be better aware of themselves and their emotions, to plan multi-directionally the possible paths for their development, to assess objectively situations in general, to master new skills for self-assertive behaviour, to appraise their efforts and attainments, to find more sources to promote their life satisfaction and subjective well-being, to have better interpersonal relations, to be able to set their priorities and objectives in a better way and design strategies for their achievement.

What is the most frightening for people is the loss of sense of control and confrontation with the unknown and uncertain. The basic need of people, who have undertaken a change, is to become confident that their life situation will have positive outcome. Change indirectly suggests to participants that their internal world follows the external changes and vice versa. This promotes the component *self-knowledge*. In this way each look to the past can be experienced in a new way. Empathy underlies the overall process. Initially people have some troubles and are thinking are they performing in the rights way. Lack of evaluation and full and unconditional empathy and support in the present facilitate the unconditional *self-acceptance.* Successful completion of the "homework" tasks, photos and symbols generated by the participants, facilitates the component of *self-expression*. In general, the objective assessment of the participants is much clearer self-definition, target orientation, preparation and readiness to planning and action.

Experiencing conflict, disagreement, aggression, lack of tolerance or tension and stress is revealed during the first cycle of interpretations. The new models, however, have to be found in the process of *questioning on cognitive level (self-knowledge). Afterwards change has to be emotionally accepted as to extend but not to confront to the old attitudes (self-acceptance). Finally comes the behavioural moment (self-expression) and ascertaining the new values and attitudes.* In broad framework we can assume that the three steps are along the continuum past-present-future. Consolidation of these three steps ensures a sense of stability, internal coherence and continuity and behaviour, based on really internationalized values.

The first cycle of sessions is focused on *self-knowledge*. *Objective* is person to be challenged to reveal the unexpressed and hidden thoughts; to search new opportunities that has previously been neglected; to get a better knowledge of her and others. During this first cycle the discussion and analysis are focused on the *past experiences* - photos from the albums (*past moments*). Topics are like What do you like less / most, Which is your favourite memory here „What is the best (worst) experience from this? Why have you selected these photos?, etc.

The *second cycle of sessions* is devoted to *self-acceptance.   The objective* is each participant to accept and integrate strengths and failings, to follow the related feelings and emotions and express them freely and the in-depth self-knowledge to be integrated and to become coherent with the previous self-perceptions and expand them, but not confront them. Discussions are on topics related to the *current experience*. Photos targeted to capture current moments and themes (*expression of the present emotions*). Topics discussed refer to "here and now"- Do you feel satisfied? What do you wish to change? In what direction?, What new happened now? Have you some insight or some lessons learnt?, etc.

The *third cycle of sessions* is devoted to *self-expression*. The purpose is the new self-knowledge and self-acceptance and acceptance of others to be demonstrated. *Objective* is participants to master skills to express themselves in an open manner, to set effective goals and develop plan for their attainment. Discussions are projective, focused on the *future. Phototherapy sessions* follow a screenplay of the future life. Each cycle summarizes the attainments and client symbolizes the work done to that stage in the form of a drawing or writing, or photo.

Most important for the programme is its *cyclic nature*. The three steps are along the continuum past-present-future not only in general, but in each time interval. Everyone, at any moment is in a specific situation, determined by her past experience, current emotions and active involvement in acts for future. For this reason the key is these three steps to be completed in an individual manner because we often have to make a step back before making several steps forward as maximum sustainable positive results to be ensured.

4. DISCUSSION

The general idea is not the strict adherence to the schedule, but flexible adaptation and integration of cognition, emotion and behaviour, the past, the present and the future. Integration of these three elements promotes internal balance and well-being. Results reveal that effective coping strategies promote identity and vice versa. The more particular are the roles and life domains and the situations discussed, the more coping options can be found and explored. Learning skills how reactions, states, and emotions to be realized and recognized gives better idea of the best response and promotes active behaviour and proactive coping – accumulation of resources. The set of coping strategies and acceptance of uncertainty as inevitable and that the sense of control is inner, promotes resilient identity and healthy coping. This is a proposed stress management model, preventing increase of the invisible chronic stress and increasing the levels of subjective well-being. Nevertheless the limitations of the sample and the country specificity, it can be extended in future and allows modifications of the general framework to a number of situations.

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