

GIRLS, WOMEN, AND ADHD



ADHD
samtökin

adhd.is

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a neurodevelopmental disorder that causes brain centers in the frontal lobe to develop more slowly than usual. As a result, nerve endings in specific frontal lobe areas cannot transmit electrical signals between them as they should. In other words, these brain centers are underactive. The extent to which this affects an individual's daily life varies greatly from person to person. Today, we know that girls struggle with ADHD just as much as boys. However, there has been a significant lack of education and awareness regarding ADHD in girls and women, as symptoms and manifestations are often different from those seen in boys and men.

This brochure aims to shed light on the situation of girls and women with ADHD and how ADHD affects their well-being and daily life.

FEWER GIRLS DIAGNOSED THAN BOYS

ADHD symptoms in girls and women are often overlooked as they tend to be more inward-directed and less visible to others. Until now, diagnostic checklists have been based on boys and men. As a result, they can give an inaccurate picture of women's symptoms, as women face different challenges and experiences. It is more common for women to remain undiagnosed until adulthood, and there is also an increased risk of misdiagnosis, such as anxiety or depression, instead of considering whether ADHD might be the real underlying cause.

**"Women are more often diagnosed
with issues other than ADHD"**

It is important that doctors and other healthcare professionals better understand and recognize the symptoms of ADHD among women so that they can provide appropriate treatment and support.

**"It is necessary to identify ADHD in
girls early in order to provide appropriate
education and support"**

FREEDOM FROM SHAME

It is common for women with ADHD to have difficulty identifying with other women, feel less worthy, have a damaged self-image, and low self-esteem. If you recognize these feelings, a diagnosis might be the right path for you. As a result, you may feel a sense of relief, as the diagnosis provides an explanation for your feelings.

Perhaps you have a self-condemning attitude, feel like you're not meeting expectations, and struggle with constant guilt. You may be harsh on yourself, often setting unrealistic and excessive expectations for yourself while trying to hide your inner feelings. Learn to reduce demands and show yourself some self-compassion.

Be proud of yourself and hold your head high.

Despite facing constant headwinds, you've made it to where you are today.

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"It's important to gain freedom from shame and let go of self-judgement"

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"Learn to know yourself, your strengths and your challenges"

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YOU CAN

- Learn about ADHD
- Educate family and friends about ADHD and how it affects your daily life
- Get a diagnosis if you feel it's necessary
- Seek support, within the family, from friends, or others with ADHD

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

Executive functions are a complex interplay of processes in the brain that affect many aspects. Impaired executive function causes difficulties in processing information and enables individuals to assess the consequences of their actions, make sensible decisions, and shape thoughts and behaviors.

Individuals with ADHD do not outwardly show that they struggle with impaired executive functions, but the consequence is, among other things, difficulty with various tasks that others generally find easy.

This includes impaired working memory, attention, organization, time management, prioritization, emotional regulation, and goal setting, to name a few. It is evident that this has complex effects on those struggling with ADHD.

MANIFESTATIONS OF ADHD

ADHD is often categorized into three types:

- ADHD with predominant hyperactivity and impulsivity
- ADHD with predominant inattention
- ADHD in a combined form where inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity are equally prominent



CORE SYMPTOMS

Inattention

Difficulty staying focused on the task at hand and living in a dream world (daydreaming). May struggle with attention, concentration, organization, and time management, as well as dealing with internal challenges such as anxiety, worry, and negative self-talk.

Impulsivity

Can manifest as a tendency to talk a lot and loudly, interrupt other's conversations and say what's on their mind at any given moment. It involves difficulty reading situations, often showing strong emotional reactions, and may have difficulty realizing the consequences of their actions. Sometimes, impulsive decisions are made, and all future plans can change in an instant.

Hyperactivity

Hyperactivity is not limited to physical hyperactivity. Women tend to struggle more with inner restlessness and tension rather than physical hyperactivity. Inner restlessness can manifest as impatience and difficulty controlling one's thoughts (jumping from one thing to another). Those dealing with physical hyperactivity are always on the go and find it hard to sit still. Physical hyperactivity can also manifest in intense physical exertion.

OTHER COMMON SYMPTOMS

Hyperfocus

One of the characteristics of ADHD is the unique ability to immerse oneself in a task or anything that captures the mind. Hyperfocus involves the ability to put one's heart and soul into a task and exclude everything else. The flip side of the same coin is completely losing track of time, which can have its consequences.

Procrastination

Procrastination is one of the symptoms of ADHD, and is often misinterpreted as laziness or lack of willpower, which couldn't be further from the truth. In reality it stems from challenges in task initiation - particularly when it comes to repetitive, uninteresting or overwhelming activities. It can take the form of struggling to tackle tasks that aren't enjoyable or monotonous. Often, something more interesting catches your attention and distracts you. You

might have difficulty getting started - particularly on repetitive household chores—simply because the motivation isn't there. That's why you often need to create external pressure for yourself. Many women mention that when unexpected guests are on their way, they spring into action, tapping into a burst of energy to get everything done — driven by the pressure of external motivation. It's also possible to experience the situation as too overwhelming, feeling helpless and not knowing where to start. It can be difficult to prioritize and evaluate the importance of tasks. In such cases, it can be helpful to have a friend over to help you. Often, it is enough for them to be present and chat with you while you tidy up - there's the external motivation again. Keep in mind that it is important to reward yourself after a job well done.

"ADHD is not about not knowing what to do – but about executing what you know you should do"

USEFUL TIPS

- Do things immediately – don't wait
- Break tasks down into smaller parts
- Focus on one item at a time
- Choose a specific task and complete it
- Consider what motivates you to take action
- Get someone to join you in the task
- Reward yourself after completing the task



Time Management

Poor time management is well-known challenge among individuals with ADHD and often leads to a poor sense of how time passes. You may underestimate how long tasks actually take, overestimate your ability to stay within the time limits, and forget that each activity takes its own time. You might recognize the tendency to plan to leave for an appointment just ten minutes before it's due, believing that's enough time, only to forget to account for traffic or finding parking. The same pattern generally applies to tasks and other aspects of daily life. We must not overlook the common trap that many women with ADHD fall into: placing greater importance on events that are closer in time, regardless of whether they are actually more significant than future ones. Additionally, many women with ADHD tend to prioritize immediate tasks over future ones, whether justified or not. Believing that there will always be more time later often leads to procrastination - and that has a way of spiraling into bigger challenges.

USEFUL TIPS

- Triple your estimated time
- Set rules for yourself
- Do not multitask excessively
- Reduce distractions
- Prioritize
- Slow down
- Delegate tasks and ask for help

Organization

Good organization and consistent routines are crucial in daily life. Organizational skills are generally not a strong suit for people with ADHD, which makes it especially important to establish a system that provides a sense of security and predictability. Many women report that they struggle to create order - especially at home - but once a system is in place, it becomes easier to maintain. When everything has its own designated place, it's easier to find what you need when you need it. This also saves time that would otherwise be spent looking for lost items. If you find this challenging, it can be very helpful to get assistance from close friend or family member.

USEFUL TIPS

- Use a planning system that works for you
- Engage your family in participation
- Set time limits and reward yourself for a job well done
- Create consistent routines and stick to them

FEELINGS

Inner Restlessness

Far from all girls and women with ADHD show visible symptoms; instead, they manifest as attention and concentration deficits. You may be perfectly capable of waiting in line, restrain yourself from interrupting conversations, and sitting still for extended periods. This can be misleading to those around you. As a result, you may face a lack of understanding, and people have difficulty realizing that you are dealing with ADHD. The symptoms manifest in inner restlessness, impatience, rumination (repetitive thoughts that are difficult to let go of) that maintain discomfort, sleep difficulties, irritability, and increased risk of social isolation.

Putting on a Mask

Part of the reason why ADHD is underdiagnosed in girls and women is that they often struggle with internal challenges that don't align with recognized descriptions of ADHD. You may be skilled at hiding your emotions and putting on a mask, which in turn means that those around you don't realize your difficulties. Inside, there's a lot of discomfort bubbling beneath the surface – something you've become an expert at hiding. For example, you might always play the role of the cheerful one on the outside, despite your inner feelings being quite different.

Self-Image and Social Interactions

Many women with ADHD struggle with a lack of self-confidence, often from an early age. Consistently performing below their potential and facing challenges in areas that others find effortless can deeply impact their self-image.

As we grow older social interactions become more complex and this can be particularly challenging for girls and women with ADHD. The teenage years are especially difficult, as many girls may not have a strong foundation in social skills. You might struggle to understand unspoken communication, often miss body language cues, and have difficulty reading your environment and social situations. This leads to conflict, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings. Most girls place high value on social connections, and a lack of such relationships can take its toll, reducing self-confidence and resulting in a damaged self-image. As a result, you're likely to withdraw and begin to doubt yourself – which further negatively impacts your self-image. This simultaneously causes difficulties in maintaining friendships or form new ones. In addition, the condition can cause negative self-talk and self-destruction.

"It is not about being the most popular girl - research shows that having one good friend can make all the difference"

On the other hand, there are many strengths that make girls and women with ADHD fun and caring friends. There is often a lot of energy and liveliness around them as they are typically cheerful, light-hearted, have a good sense of humor, are honest, caring, generous, kind-hearted and willing to do anything for those they care about.

Emotions

Emotions aren't simply black or white; they vary widely and depend on how well each person manages their feelings. Girls and women with ADHD often experience stronger emotional reactions than usual, face quicker mood swings, struggle to regulate their emotions, and their responses are frequently shaped by negative past experiences. You might feel like you're constantly riding an emotional rollercoaster. It's common to let your initial feelings drive your actions and to find it challenging to separate your emotions from the situation itself. You may also be highly sensitive to other's emotions, often taking things personally. Among girls and women, emotions tend to be expressed more through tears than anger.

We should not forget the positive aspects of being emotionally expressive. Girls and women with ADHD are passionate, determined, and full of energy - and they experience positive emotions with greater intensity than most. They have a great aura, aren't afraid to express happiness, joy, gratitude, and satisfaction, and they wear their hearts on their sleeves. They are often loyal, caring friends with many wonderful qualities.

Warmth, trust, empathy, care, sensitivity, and loyalty are characteristic traits in their behavior.

HELPFUL TIPS

- Learn to recognize your feelings and put them into words.
- Notice in which situations your emotions flare up and try to find new and more constructive ways to deal with them
- Focus on your own strengths
- Surround yourself with people who appreciate you

CHALLENGES

Close Relationships

As mentioned before, women with ADHD are often deeply emotionally, which is frequently reflected in close relationships. They possess many positive traits, making them loving, lively partners. They're spontaneous, follow their energy in the moment, and bring excitement and color to relationships. With big hearts, they often lead with their feelings rather than logic. They are affectionate, gentle, and emotionally open with their partners. Their creativity and zest can help keep the relationship fresh and enjoyable.

However, ADHD can also significantly impact close relationships, and it is necessary to understand the difference between an individual with ADHD and one without. For example, how they see things from different perspectives. Your partner needs to gain an understanding of the challenges you face, so it is important that you discuss ADHD with them and how it affects your life. This reduces the risk of misunderstanding - you are two different individuals with different needs.

It is common for individuals with ADHD to choose partners who possess qualities they themselves may lack. It seems like a perfect blend at first glance, with each complementing the other, often leading to successful relationships. But over time, conflicts can arise in the relationship, typically related to forgetfulness, impulsivity, disorganization, and poor emotional control.

You might find it difficult to set boundaries and thus become your own worst critic. If you already have a damaged self-image, you are more likely to have lower expectations in the relationship and may even feel that you don't deserve better. Women with ADHD are at higher risk of being in codependent relationships. It is essential to learn to love, respect, and accept yourself as you are. With a stronger self-image, you're more likely to make the right decisions in choosing a partner.

Loyalty is one of the positive traits of ADHD, but at the same time, there's a risk of holding on too long to a relationship that negatively affects you. You might take on the role of a redeemer trying to change your partner's behavior - but rarely see the fruits of your labor. Always prioritizing your partner increases the risk of forgetting yourself and neglecting your own needs.

One of the most important foundations of close relationships is communication and trust. To build a strong relationship, it is necessary to address conflicts. It is essential to be able to talk things through – that means neither getting defensive nor placing blame. Share your perspective, but also take time to truly listen to your partner's point of view. Be clear but patient. Remember, mutual respect and consideration for each other's opinions are key. Resolving conflict is a skill that requires time, effort and practice. Mistakes are almost inevitable, but they should be used as learning opportunities – to reflect, reassess, and move forward. Don't give up.

It goes without saying that not all problems can be solved, but many can be negotiated. It is important to acknowledge the problem, work towards solutions, and be willing to change behaviors. You are a team - don't forget that.

USEFUL ADVICE

- Does your partner know about your feelings and desires
- Create understanding – talk openly together
- Acknowledge each others feelings
- Write down how you feel – it is useful to put thoughts into words
- Speak from your own perspective
- Let go of resentment
- Take responsibility for your own behavior
- Nurture each other

"The measure of good relationships lies in knowing how to deal with conflict"



Hormones

The sex hormone estrogen has widespread effects on brain growth and function. With increased amounts of estrogen, concentration and other brain activities are enhanced, meaning estrogen greatly influences cognitive function. Natural fluctuation in the sex hormones estrogen and progesterone within the menstrual cycle also affects various areas of the brain, including those that influence decision-making, emotions, and social skills.

During the first two weeks of the menstrual cycle, estrogen production increases. At the same time, the body produces only a small amount of progesterone. Estrogen influences the production of serotonin and dopamine, and studies have shown its positive effects on the brain. Many women with ADHD report experiencing fewer ADHD symptoms during this period and find it easier to cope with daily life.

In the third and fourth weeks of the menstrual cycle, progesterone activity increases while estrogen levels decrease. Many women with ADHD then experience worsening symptoms, complain of poorer emotional control, and feel lethargic. They also struggle with increased mood swings and lack of concentration, become more impulsive, and find it more difficult to cope with daily life.

The significant changes that the brain and body go through during adolescence often bring a risk of increased stress, social insecurity, and mental health problems. This appears to be even more common among girls with ADHD. Research also shows that unintended pregnancy is more frequent, and girls with ADHD tend to become parents earlier than their peers.

Remembering to take the birth control pill can be a particular challenge for women with ADHD. Therefore, it is worth considering other forms of contraception that do not rely on daily intake.

There is currently limited research on the effects of menopause on ADHD, but in recent years, it has received more attention. During this stage, hormonal changes begin with significant fluctuations in estrogen levels, and at the same time, its production decreases. This can have a significant impact on ADHD symptoms, making menopause a considerable challenge for women with ADHD. Hormonal changes may also influence the effectiveness of ADHD medications.

IT IS GOOD TO

- Be aware of the effects of hormones on the body
- Get to know your own menstrual rhythm
- Write down how you feel in the days before and during menstruation to recognize the symptoms
- Discuss contraceptive options with a doctor
- Discuss the effects of menopause on the effectiveness of ADHD medications with a doctor

The Role of Motherhood

Struggling with the role of motherhood is something many women with ADHD mention. In modern society, it is necessary to juggle many responsibilities at once, and the characteristic features of ADHD - such as difficulties with organization, attention deficit, mood swings, and low stress threshold - can negatively impact how one manages the role of motherhood. Perhaps this is something you can relate to.

You may be the one who bears the brunt of child-rearing and all the responsibilities that come with it. It may often fall on you to help the children with school supplies, sports gear, swimwear, and everything else related to school - not to mention participating in parent- teacher meetings, class events, and other school related social activities. Many children engage in extracurricular activities, and someone needs to remember to drop them off, pick them up, and take care of all that comes with it. On top of that you may still need to go grocery shopping, cook, clean, and - last but not least - tend to your own social life, hobbies, and physical well - being. This can lead to significant pressure and stress. Since ADHD is hereditary, it increases the likelihood that you are the mother of a child with ADHD, leading to further challenges. The fear that your children might face the same difficulties you did can be an overwhelming thought. You may suffer from guilt because your own ADHD symptoms make it difficult to remember, follow through, organize, and keep track of all aspects of daily life - both your own and your children's. You might fear that you are not living up to the role of motherhood and fear judgements from others.

Burnout is more common among women with ADHD as the disorder brings increased stress, more energy is spent on daily tasks, and women with ADHD often go to great lengths to meet others' expectations - frequently resulting in exhaustion. Anxiety is also more common among women with ADHD and can increase the risk of burnout.

Do you find it difficult to say no and feel like you need to please others and perform perfectly? By constantly taking on new tasks, you're likely making your life more complicated and increasing your stress. You might find it easier to complete tasks outside the home where you are in control, receive praise, and feel that it compensates for the negative experiences amidst all the chaos at home and the feeling of being overwhelmed. You must always pay attention to your own well-being. A good rule of thumb is to complete one task before taking on another. This way, you can significantly reduce the risk of burnout.

Let's not forget, however, that parents with ADHD often find it easier to empathize with their children who also struggle with ADHD. They are often more willing to deal with unexpected situations, don't overthink things or get caught up in details, but instead tend to see the fun or positive sides of the situation.

USEFUL ADVICE

- Avoid comparing yourself to others
- Maintain a structured home environment
- Minimize external distractions and stimulation
- Distribute tasks within the family
- Seek support from others

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**"Don't judge yourself too harshly
- remember that we all make mistakes
and no one is perfect"**

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Education

In order to support girls with ADHD in their education, it is essential to first recognize them. This can prove to be extremely difficult, as they often go unnoticed and tend to blend in with their peers. Therefore, it's especially important that teachers are familiar with and understands ADHD.

Girls with ADHD are more likely to display behaviors aimed at compensating for the challenges caused by ADHD. To meet academic demands, they often push themselves harder than their peers, refusing to give up, exhibit perfectionistic tendencies which increases stress and discomfort, and may as a result develop anxiety.

Boys with ADHD usually need support related to behavior and impulse control. Girls, on the other hand, require a different kind of support. Quiet, daydreaming girls may need help standing up for themselves, overcoming fear of asking for assistance, or the feeling that they are doing things wrong. Energetic girls also need support to channel their energy and it is important to create environments where their energy can be given a free rein. Impulsiveness in girls with ADHD often manifests as excessive talking, so it is helpful to seek positive and constructive ways for them to express themselves.

Even though some girls with ADHD are quiet, obedient, and academically above average this doesn't change the fact that they may have increasing need for support as they reach adolescence - with all the challenges that come with that stage of life. The academic demands grow, and their difficulties become more apparent. Studies shows that during adolescence, girls with ADHD are more likely to struggle with anxiety, depression, or self-harming behavior. Furthermore, studies indicate that, on average, girls with ADHD tend to complete secondary education somewhat later than their peers and may drop out of school due to learning difficulties, social challenges, or for example, unintended pregnancies. Therefore, it's crucial to support them and provide appropriate assistance, - both at school and at home.

This does not mean that girls with ADHD is incapable of succeeding in their studies - on the contrary. With individualized learning support, proper methods, and encouragement, they can truly flourish.

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"Girls with ADHD often underestimate their own abilities and consequently miss out on new opportunities"

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POWER AND BENEFIT

Exercise

Research has shown that exercise is especially beneficial for individuals with ADHD. Physical activity affects development and daily functioning, and it appears that the type of exercise doesn't matter – any kind can be helpful. It is very useful to establish a routine and engage in regular exercise. You might find it difficult to get started, despite realizing the benefits of exercise. But with perseverance, you can overcome that obstacle. All physical activity increases dopamine production and supports normal functioning in the prefrontal cortex. In addition to strengthening the body, exercise reduces lifestyle – related illnesses. Anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties are common complications in girls with ADHD but you can reduce their effects with regular exercise.

HELPFUL TIPS

- All movement helps, choose the stairs instead of the elevator, for example
- Create an exercise plan
- Make exercise a part of daily life
- Get someone to join you

Don't Forget all the Benefits that Follow

ADHD has many positive aspects. Women and girls with ADHD possess unique abilities that make them valuable in many areas. Be proud to be a person with ADHD and nurture the strengths you possess. Your positive qualities can help you go further and achieve greater things.

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|-----------------|--|
| ■ Creative | ■ Unafraid to take risks |
| ■ Hyper-focused | ■ Persistent |
| ■ Passionate | ■ Innovative in thinking |
| ■ Fun | ■ Brave |
| ■ Diligent | ■ Compassionate |
| ■ Imaginative | ■ See things from a new perspective |
| ■ Romantic | ■ Invincible when you believe in the cause |
| ■ Generous | |
| ■ Loving | |
| ■ Driving force | |

Treatment

Medication treatment for ADHD is by far the most effective form of treatment, and many women report positive experiences. The medications provides the brain region in the frontal cortex with more time to utilize neurotransmitters necessary for nerve signals to be transmitted between nerve endings. As a result, these brain regions function more normally, and the main symptoms of ADHD are reduced. In this way the medications helps you to accomplish specific tasks and also gives you the opportunity to organize the chaos that may have accumulated over the years. In the small doses recommend by doctors, ADHD medications are not mind-altering, but some people need time to adjust to the changes and may need support during that period. As with any medications, ADHD medications can come with unwanted side effects, and it often takes time to find the right medication and dosage. During this process, it's essential to be patient and follow the specialist's instructions. Sometimes, side effects can make certain medications unsuitable for a person. Likewise, some may choose not to rely on medication at all. ADHD medication primarily allows you to cope with daily life and work on your issues. Therefore, medication should never be the only solution, and a combination of treatment methods provides the best results. This could include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), psychological counseling, and/or working with an ADHD coach.



RESOURCES

- Girls with ADHD tend to feel easily overwhelmed. Teach methods to cope with stress and/or anxiety. Give them time to calm down after incidents or conflicts. Agree on a quiet area they can retreat to when needed.
- Girls with ADHD often suffer from low self-esteem, so keep corrections and criticism to a minimum. Make a conscious effort to counter negative remarks and experiences with compassion, positive reinforcement, and togetherness.
- Girls with ADHD may experience negative situations and poor interactions on a daily basis. Make sure that home is a place where they can relax, talk about how their day went, and recharge their batteries.
- Girls with ADHD often feel they can't do anything right. Help them find hobbies they are good at, enjoy, and that provide positive experiences. This could be related to sports, creative activities, choir, music, dance, or drama, just to name a few.
- Girls with ADHD sometimes tend to overreact, especially when they are stressed, hungry, or in the days leading up to their period. By identifying which situations are stressful, it is possible to be prepared and reduce difficulties, while also showing patience and understanding.
- Girls with ADHD tend to feel different or stupid. As they grow older, they need to learn about their diagnosis in order to increase understanding – both for themselves and, importantly, for others. Knowledge makes it easier for them to help others understand their own needs.
- Girls with ADHD often struggle with organizing daily life and have poor sense of time. To help remind them of events or class times, the mobile phone can be set with different ringtones as reminders.

- Girls with ADHD can either be very disruptive in class or go unnoticed. Attention needs to be paid to their seating placement in the classroom, as it can affect their behavior. Discuss with the teacher possible strategies to address these challenges. Ask the girl – often she knows the best solution.
- Girls with ADHD often struggle with sleep difficulties. ADHD symptoms tend to worsen with insufficient sleep. Ensure they get the sleep they need in order to function in daily life. To achieve the best possible sleep, it's important to maintain consistent sleep habits, such as fixed bedtime, and also for the day to include both physical and mental challenges. It is crucial to avoid caffeine intake/energy drinks in the evening and screen time one hour before bed.
- Girls with ADHD often struggle with significant mood swings. There can be many underlying reasons for this, such as low blood sugar. Therefore, it's important to eat regularly to keep blood sugar levels balanced, ideally every 3-4 hours.



DID YOU KNOW

That girls and women with ADHD are often an invisible group and are usually diagnosed later than boys and men

That girls and women with ADHD are more likely to struggle with internal difficulties related to ADHD that are invisible to others

That girls and women with ADHD often need to spend a lot of energy and time on activities that others find easy

That girls and women with ADHD can have difficulties in social interactions



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