



Creating a mentally healthy workplace

A guide for managers



The information in this document is general advice only. The advice within it may therefore not apply to your circumstances and is not intended to replace the advice of a healthcare professional.

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What are the benefits of a mentally healthy workplace?

The benefits of a mentally healthy workplace can be seen at a range of levels – individual, organisational, financial and legal.

A healthy workplace can improve staff morale and engagement, reduce staff turnover and improve relationships among employees, resulting in fewer conflicts and complaints. Workers' compensation claims are also halved in organisations that provide support.²

Staying at work can play a vital role in the recovery of someone who has experienced a mental health condition, helping build self-esteem, confidence, coping skills and promoting social inclusion. At the same time, the business retains valuable skills and experience, avoiding the costs associated with retraining or hiring new employees.

Poor mental health in Australian employees costs businesses around \$10.9 billion every year due to absenteeism, reduced productivity and compensation claims.²

However, research by PricewaterhouseCoopers has shown a well-implemented plan to promote a healthy working environment and culture has financial benefits. For every dollar businesses invest in creating a mentally healthy workplace, they get an average return of \$2.30 in improved productivity and profitability.²

Multiple actions, tailored to an organisation's specific needs, are likely to result in a much higher return on investment. As well as reducing the costs arising from those working with mental health issues, an organisation is likely to see even further improved productivity from a healthier more engaged broader workforce. Small businesses tend to receive a strong return on investment as it's easier to involve their people in the process.

The other benefit is to the business's reputation as a fair and healthy workplace among potential clients, customers and employees.

From a legal perspective, a healthy workplace ensures that employers meet their ethical and legal obligations to protect employee health and safety.

BENEFITS OF A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE INCLUDE:

- improved productivity
- increased staff engagement
- lower staff turnover
- ethical and legal obligations are met
- preferred employer status with current and potential employees.

SOME KEY FACTS

- It is estimated that 45 per cent of people in Australia will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. These conditions tend to affect individuals during their prime working years.¹
- At any given time, around one in five Australian workers will be working with a mental health condition.¹
- Mental health conditions are common and don't discriminate – even the most resilient person can be affected by stress related to their work, as well as other life challenges.
- Poor mental health costs Australian businesses \$10.9 billion every year in absenteeism, reduced productivity in the workplace, and compensation claims.²
- There is an average return on investment for employers of \$2.30 for every \$1 invested in creating a mentally healthy workplace.²
- Mental health conditions result in around 12 million days of reduced productivity for Australian businesses annually.²
- Although anxiety and depression can be as debilitating as a serious physical illness, less than half of those experiencing these conditions seek support.



Understanding mental health

Mental health is a positive concept related to the social and emotional wellbeing of people and communities.

The concept relates to the enjoyment of life, ability to cope with stress and sadness, the fulfilment of goals and potential, and a sense of connection to others. Mental health is about wellness rather than illness and is not merely the absence of a mental health condition. Like physical health, mental health is not fixed. Mental health exists on a continuum, or range: from positive, healthy functioning at one end through to severe symptoms of mental health conditions at the other.

A person's mental health moves back and forth along this range during their lifetime, in response to different stressors and circumstances. At the **green** end of the continuum, people are well; showing resilience and high levels of wellbeing. Moving into the **yellow** area, people may start to have difficulty

copng. In the **orange** area, people have more difficulty coping and symptoms may increase in severity and frequency. At the **red** end of the continuum, people are likely to be experiencing severe symptoms and may be at risk of self-harm or suicide.

Risk factors and protective factors influence mental health and can nudge people back and forth along the continuum. They can be individual or related to family, work or other life circumstances.

Risk factors may increase the strain on our mental health, while protective factors can counteract these by helping us to stay or become well. With much of people's time each day spent at work, the workplace is a very influential environment when it comes to mental health and wellbeing. A positive and supportive workplace can mean the difference between being 'in the green' or 'in the orange'.



Positive, healthy functioning

Severe impact on everyday functioning

Adaption based on Corey Keyes' mental health continuum model³

What is a mentally healthy workplace?



The mental wellbeing of people at work is good for everyone and enhances personal and organisational resilience, and success. Everyone has a role to play, both in looking after their own mental health and creating a mentally healthy workplace.

While the places we work come in all shapes and sizes, mentally healthy working environments generally have a few things in common:

- **Positive workplace culture.** Put simply, they're places where people feel good about coming to work, and everyone's encouraged and supported.
- **Stress and other risks to mental health are managed.** Stress, heavy workloads, unrealistic deadlines, poor communication and uncertainty – these and other factors can all contribute to anxiety and depression, and it's up to managers and leaders to keep them in check.
- **People with mental health conditions are supported.** Helping employees to stay at or return to work has clear benefits, both for the individual and the business.
- **Zero-tolerance approach to discrimination.** As well as being a legal requirement, protecting employees from discrimination encourages a diverse workforce and ensures everyone gets a fair go.

Workplace stress



It's widely recognised that work is generally good for our health and wellbeing. However, when risk factors are ongoing and excessive, like stress at work, an employee's mental health can be adversely affected and this may impact their ability to perform their best at work.

Stress is a normal response to the demands of work. It can be beneficial in short bursts, helping us stay alert and perform at our best. However, prolonged or excessive job stress can be damaging to our mental health. Stress can contribute to the development of anxiety and/or depression, and may cause an existing condition to worsen. As well as affecting our relationships and life outside work, stress can increase our risk of injury, fatigue and burnout.

Many factors can contribute to work-related stress and poor health. These often influence each other and the likelihood of stress is increased when a number of factors occur simultaneously.

Factors that contribute to work-related stress include:

Unreasonable work demands – physical, emotional and mental

The work demands are greater than the person's capacity, knowledge or ability to cope.

Unrealistic deadlines or excessive workloads can lead to high levels of stress, with people working long hours, constant overtime or not taking breaks in an effort to complete tasks.

Low levels of control

A person has little influence or control over their work, both in what they do and how they do it.

Poor support from managers and supervisors

Employees receive a low level of support, affecting their ability to cope with their roles and responsibilities.

Role conflict or a lack of role clarity

Employees do not have clarity regarding work objectives, accountabilities, and the overall scope and responsibilities of their job. Role conflict occurs when employees are given two different and incompatible roles at the same time, or their role overlaps with another employee or team.

Poorly managed relationships

Supervisors or other employees do not intervene to improve negative relationships or interactions.

Low levels of recognition and reward

Employees feel undervalued due to a lack of appreciation or acknowledgement.

Poorly managed organisation change

Inadequate consultation, communication and consideration of employees at times of change within organisations can lead to distress for employees.

Organisational justice

The working environment is perceived as being unfair, either in terms of business practices and procedures, and/or the ways in which staff and managers interact.

Industry-specific issues

Some risk factors are specific to an industry. For example, mining industry employees are often isolated from family and friends and have fly-in-fly-out rosters. Doctors, nurses and those in police and emergency services have high levels of exposure to death and suffering, and people working in customer service roles may deal with unrealistic expectations and verbally aggressive customers.

Bullying and harassment

This can take the form of abusive behaviour or language, unfair or excessive criticism, intentionally ignoring someone's point of view, tactless remarks or actions, and malicious rumours.

Discrimination

Experiencing discrimination in the workplace – whether based on gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, or pregnancy and parental status – increases a person's risk of developing a mental health condition. Discrimination may occur in the recruitment process, in negotiating conditions and benefits of employment, and in selection for training, transfer, promotion, retrenchment or dismissal.

Tips for managers to create a mentally healthy workplace



Managers play a critical role in creating a mentally healthy workplace.

In many organisations Health and Wellbeing Managers, people in HR or with responsibility for the Work Health and Safety function will develop an overall mental health at work strategy and implementation plan. In other organisations, particularly smaller ones, the responsibility will fall to individual managers and supervisors.

See *beyondblue's* booklet *Developing a workplace mental health strategy: A how-to guide for organisations* available from www.beyondblue.org.au/resources.

Regardless of the organisation size, managers dealing with employees day-to-day, play a crucial role.

They have close contact with their direct reports, can observe their behaviour and have the means to influence their work environment.

And staff will look to managers for leadership, guidance and support. Whether or not the workplace currently sees mental health as a priority, there are many things managers can do to improve the workplace environment.

1. Increase your own knowledge about mental health and be aware of the support available

This will help you to better understand what someone with a mental health

condition may be experiencing and how you can best support them. Knowing the signs and symptoms of conditions like anxiety and depression will also help you to identify early if anyone in your team might be struggling. This will help you as a manager to suggest appropriate supports within the business (e.g. wellbeing staff, peer support programs) and externally (e.g. *beyondblue* Support Service, GPI).

2. Educate your staff about mental health in the workplace

Educating and training your staff in mental health conditions gives them the information and tools to better understand if they are starting to struggle, and to keep an eye out if any of their colleagues, friends or family are as well. It can also give them the skills and confidence to approach someone that they are worried about.

Education and training helps to decrease stigma around mental health in the workplace, which means staff are more likely to speak up and seek help early, before symptoms get too severe.

3. Talk openly about mental health at work and encourage others to do the same

Sharing any personal experiences about mental health can make a real difference in creating a working environment where people are comfortable seeking support if they need it. Talking about mental wellbeing the same way you would physical health is a good place to start.

4. Provide support to team members struggling with their mental health

The support of a manager is very important for someone going through a tough time, and can mean the difference between that person being able to stay in their role or leaving the workplace. Supporting someone to stay at work has a number of benefits, for both the employee and the business.

It might feel like a lot of responsibility, but you don't need to be a mental health expert to be understanding and provide support. Every workplace has a legal responsibility to make reasonable adjustments so that a person with a mental health condition can remain at work, provided the person can meet the core requirements of the job. This may include offering flexible working hours, adjusting the person's workload, and providing additional guidance and support.

5. Communicate regularly with your team

Communicating regularly with your staff and ensuring they can provide feedback helps to keep staff engaged and provides opportunities for any questions.

It is important to make team goals clear to your staff and communicate key achievements, activities, issues and developments. The communication should occur in a timely manner and consideration should be given about the best ways it should be done. Communicating important issues are best undertaken face-to-face to ensure open discussions can take place and concerns can be raised immediately. For other announcements, a staff newsletter or email might suffice.

Remember that a big part of effective communication is listening. Make sure you listen to any feedback your staff might have and take that feedback into consideration.

6. Encourage respectful behaviour and communication by team members

It is critical to set an expectation that all employees respect and listen to each other at all times and that you, as a manager and leader, model this behaviour day-to-day. This may mean you need to educate your team about bullying behaviour, so they understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviours.

7. Improve work design by addressing potential workplace stressors

As a manager, there are many things you can do to address potential workplace stress in your team, including:

- regularly review workloads, timelines and resources.
- improve role clarity by ensuring your staff have well-defined roles and the expectations of them are clear.
- provide adequate resources and training to your staff so they are able to perform their role confidently and competently.

8. Demonstrate healthy work habits

Leading by example is essential including demonstrating a work-life balance. This may include taking regular breaks, avoiding emailing and work calls outside of work hours and leaving on time. Encourage your staff to do the same.

Being a manager is in many respects just like being an employee. It can be demanding, challenging and sometimes

isolating, so make sure you take time out to look after yourself. If your organisation has a Manager Assist Program (MAP), use this to assist you during stressful periods or seek out colleagues you trust and respect, as well as mentors.

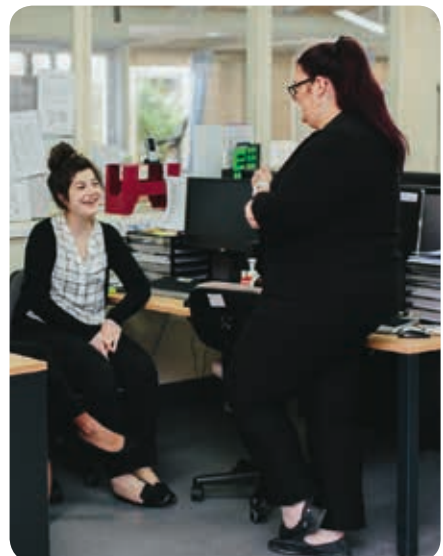
9. Be an influencer in your organisation

Speak to your colleagues and senior leaders and encourage them to make mental health a priority in the workplace.

10. Work with your team to develop a plan

Develop a plan with your team on how you can all work to create a more mentally healthy workplace. Work with your immediate team to identify priority areas that need attention and agree on actions that can be implemented to achieve your goals.

For more see the 'Resources and useful information' section on page 17.



Noticing changes in employees' behaviour that causes concern

We spend a lot of our time at work. This puts us in a good position to notice changes in a workmate's behaviour or mood, which may indicate that they are not coping. Learning about the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression will help you to understand what is going on for them, and provide more confidence for you to ask if they are OK.

It's important not to make assumptions or attempt to provide a diagnosis or counselling – but if you are concerned about someone, you can encourage them to seek support and let them know you are there to help.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

- turning up to work late
- finding it hard to meet reasonable deadlines
- withdrawing from colleagues
- relying on alcohol and sedatives
- taking excessive sick leave
- having difficulty concentrating or managing multiple demands

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

- avoiding certain workplace activities, such as meetings
- urges to perform certain rituals in a bid to relieve anxiety
- not being assertive (e.g. avoiding eye contact)
- difficulty making decisions
- appearing restless, tense and on edge
- being startled easily



Supporting a team member



As we know from research, most workplaces are likely to have employees managing mental health conditions, but it won't always be obvious who those people are. It might be surprising to some to realise the significant positions many people with mental health conditions hold in our community and the huge contribution they are already making in their workplaces. Often affected people only need occasional, minor support to manage their condition.

However, if one of your staff members is clearly experiencing stress or a mental health condition it is critical that you are supportive and proactive.

Managers have a vital role to play in supporting an individual's recovery. There will be times when an employee requires support and reasonable

adjustments at work to help them get and stay well. What this support looks like will vary greatly from one individual to another and from one workplace to another, so it is important to take the time to discuss with your employee what they need, and review this frequently.

Approaching someone you may be concerned about

Many people, including managers, will be hesitant to start a conversation out of fear of:

- causing offence or making things worse
- harming their working relationship
- getting too involved
- not being sure how to respond.

If you're concerned about someone, approach them and start a conversation. Try to understand their situation and encourage them to seek support.

Helping the person find further information and support services can also be really useful, as this step can seem overwhelming for someone with anxiety or depression.

Remind yourself that this is no different to talking about how someone's feeling. Remember you may be the only person to have noticed changes in their behaviour or have the courage to start a conversation. This may be pivotal in them getting the support they need to get and stay well.

Preparing to speak to your employee

When you're preparing to approach someone, it can be helpful to:

- find out what help is available within your workplace. If you work in a larger organisation, does it have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or peer support program?
- find out what other support services are available, not just through your organisation.
- consider who should be having the conversation. Are you the best person or would another workmate or someone from HR be more suitable?
- think about the most appropriate time and place. Find somewhere private where the person will feel comfortable.

Planning the conversation

The following tips will help you have a conversation about it. Don't worry if you don't quite know what to say. Just by being supportive and listening will help make a difference. However, there are some good approaches that will help make the conversation worthwhile.

How to start

- There's no one right way of expressing things – the main thing is to be thoughtful and genuine.
- You don't need to have all the answers – it's about having the conversation and the support you offer by talking.
- Identify the behaviours that are concerning you but keep the focus on your team member's welfare, not any potential consequences for the organisation.
- Say what feels comfortable for you.
- If what you say doesn't sound quite right, stop and try again. It doesn't have to be the end of the conversation.

Listen carefully

- Remember that this is their story, so don't try to guess how it plays out. Instead, listen and ask questions.
- Be aware of your body language. To show you're listening, try to maintain eye contact and sit in a relaxed position.
- Repeat back your understanding of what they've said and make sure it's accurate.

Respond

Think about the best way to respond. It's not your role to fix things, but you can help them along the way. You might:

- decide that initially you're just there to listen and offer support
- set a time to talk about it again
- follow up afterwards by checking in with them
- reassure them that you'll respect their privacy
- think about what they need now and ask what you can do to help.

Managing team related concerns

When a staff member experiences a mental health condition, it can affect the entire team. Without clear communication from managers, there's a risk that colleagues may judge the person to be 'slacking off' or not pulling their weight. To protect the employee's right to privacy, you may need to communicate what's going on without providing specific details of their condition.



It's important to:

- protect the employee's right to privacy and confidentiality. Ensure all staff are educated about mental health to address any misconceptions team members may have about it. You could do this by putting educational information and/or posters around the workplace, delivering a series of short educational talks, such as the Heads Up tool box talks, watching webinars as a team or listening to personal stories and case studies.
- communicate information to the team regularly, giving them updates about how the situation is being managed.
- manage the impact of any absences on the team and distribute the workload appropriately. If someone is unwell for a period of time, ensure you check in regularly with the other team members to review their potentially increased workload, and re-prioritise things as required.
- consider swapping tasks within the team to avoid other colleagues taking on excessive workloads.
- recognise when conflicts, gossip and bullying occur and be proactive in dealing with the situation. As a leader, demonstrate zero tolerance to this type of behaviour, and remind your staff to be respectful of each other at all times.

Legal responsibilities

Employer legal requirements

Both employers and employees have formal rights and responsibilities under discrimination, privacy, and work health and safety legislation.

Discrimination

The Australia-wide Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and equivalent state and territory laws make it unlawful to discriminate against, harass or victimise people with disabilities – including temporary, permanent, past, present or future, actual or just presumed mental health conditions.

In a workplace setting, discrimination could occur:

- during the recruitment process, in advertising, interviewing and selecting of candidates
- when determining terms and conditions of employment such as pay rates, work hours and leave entitlements
- in selecting or rejecting employees for promotion, transfer and training
- through dismissal, demotion or retrenchment.

The Act defines ‘discrimination’ to include both direct and indirect discrimination.

Under the Act, employers must make reasonable adjustments to support people with a disability (including a mental health condition). This means an employer’s failure to make reasonable adjustments for a worker with a mental health condition may constitute discrimination, even when on the face of it no ‘direct’ discrimination has occurred.

Making reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments are changes to the workplace or an employee’s role to help them stay at or return to work after an absence. These changes can be temporary or permanent, and are required as long as the employee can otherwise fulfil the core requirements of the job, i.e. the elements that can’t be altered.

It also makes good business sense (e.g. retaining skilled/experienced staff) to make temporary adjustments for staff, even if they cannot meet the core requirements of their role. However, this is not a legal requirement.



Maintaining healthy and safe workplaces

Workplace health and safety (WHS) legislation requires workplaces to be, as far as is reasonably practicable, physically and mentally safe and healthy for all employees. This means steps must be taken to ensure that the working environment does not harm mental health or worsen an existing condition.

This legislation acknowledges that employees have a responsibility for their own health and safety as well.

Privacy

Under the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) that applies nationally and similar legislation in some states and territories, employers must observe confidentiality and respect the privacy of each employee.

This means that an employee's mental health condition can't be shared with anyone without their permission, unless there is a direct risk to their health and safety or that of others. Any information can only be used for the purposes for which it was disclosed, such as arranging adjustments in the workplace to support the employee.

Employee legal requirements

If a mental health condition does not affect how an employee does their job, there is no legal obligation for them to tell their employer about it. This applies whether they are a current employee, or a potential employee going through the recruitment process.

WHS laws protect an employee's right to a safe workplace, but employees also have responsibilities under the same legislation. They must take care of themselves and others and cooperate with their employer in matters of health and safety. This applies to all workers, whether they have a disability or not.

If the employee's disability, which in law covers a mental health condition, could reasonably be seen to create a health and safety risk for other people at work, then not telling anyone about that risk could be a breach of the employee's obligations under WHS legislation. An example of where a person's mental health might impact theirs and others' safety at work, is any side-effects of medication if the job involves operating machinery.

Resources and useful information

Tips for managers to create a mentally healthy workplace

Increase your own knowledge about mental health and be aware of the support available

beyondblue's mental health awareness online training program is a great way to start increasing your knowledge of mental health conditions and to learn what you can do to support others: headsup.org.au/beyondblue-resources

Educate your staff about mental health in the workplace

Provide educational information and/or posters in the workplace, organise for personal stories to be told as a team or undertake a face-to-face or online training course.

Deliver a series of short educational talks, such as the Heads Up tool box talks: headsup.org.au/toolbox-talks

Talk openly about mental health at work and encourage others to do the same

Share any personal experiences: headsup.org.au/telling-your-story

Provide support to any team member who is struggling with their mental health

Find out how a manager can support their staff: headsup.org.au/if-you-manage-others

Help an employee with a mental health condition stay at work: headsup.org.au/help-others-stay-at-work

Provide ongoing support to an employee: headsup.org.au/providing-ongoing-support

Understand your legal rights and responsibilities: headsup.org.au/rights-responsibilities

Encourage respectful behaviour and communication by team members

Educate your team about bullying behaviour so they understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour:

headsup.org.au/workplace-bullying
safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/guide-preventing-responding-workplace-bullying.pdf

Improve work design by addressing potential workplace stressors

As a manager, there are many things you can do to address potential workplace stress in your team:

headsup.org.au/workplace-stress

The Heads Up Managing Mental Health Risks at Work training helps managers and employees better understand how to minimise risks related to mental health:

elearn.headsup.org.au/course/view.php?id=2

Demonstrate healthy work habits

Take care of your mental health in the workplace: headsups.org.au/taking-care-of-yourself

Be an influencer in your organisation

Encourage colleagues and senior leaders to make mental health a priority in the workplace: headsups.org.au/why-it-matters

Work with your team to develop a plan

Develop strategies for creating healthy workplaces: headsups.org.au/strategies-workplaces

Managing team related concerns

Participate in or watch webinars as a team: headsups.org.au/webinars

Protect an employee's right to privacy and confidentiality: headsups.org.au/rights-responsibilities

Review personal stories and case studies: headsups.org.au/stories

Suicide prevention – things you should know

Set the tone for how the rest of the workplace will respond to a suicide: headsups.org.au/supporting-others/suicide-prevention

If you are a small business owner

Create a mentally healthy working environment: headsups.org.au/beyondblue-resources

Support an employee with a mental health condition: The Australian Human Rights Commission has developed a brief guide to the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth): humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/guides/brief-guide-disability-discrimination-act

Making reasonable adjustments

Information on making reasonable adjustments to help someone with a mental health condition: headsups.org.au/help-others-stay-at-work

Maintain healthy and safe workplaces

Gain an overview of existing and proposed WHS laws at SafeWork Australia:

For guidance on the standard of health and safety that a person conducting a business or undertaking must meet, see: safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/how-determine-what-reasonably-practicable-meet-health-and-safety-duty

Find your local WHS regulator:

Commonwealth of Australia: comcare.gov.au

Australian Capital Territory: accesscanberra.act.gov.au/app/home#/workhealthandsafety

New South Wales: safework.nsw.gov.au

Northern Territory: worksafe.nt.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx

Queensland: worksafe.qld.gov.au

South Australia: safework.sa.gov.au

Tasmania: worksafe.tas.gov.au

Victoria: worksafe.vic.gov.au

Western Australia: commerce.wa.gov.au/WorkSafe

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HOPE. RECOVERY. RESILIENCE. Find out more at www.beyondblue.org.au

Where to find more information

Heads Up

www.headsup.org.au

Heads Up is all about supporting Australian businesses to create more mentally healthy workplaces. Access a wide range of resources, information and advice for all employees, and create a tailored action plan for your business.

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance


www.workplacementalhealth.com.au

A national approach by business, community and government to encourage Australian workplaces to become mentally healthy for the benefit of the whole community and businesses, big and small.

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

 1300 22 4636

 Email or  chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Head to Health

www.headtohealth.gov.au

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.



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