

trauma +

**substance
use**



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ABOUT THIS BOOKLET:

This booklet is part of a series on mental health and substance use funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Substance use in this booklet refers to the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

Other booklets in this series include:

- *Anxiety and Substance Use*
- *Mood and Substance Use*
- *Psychosis and Substance Use*
- *Personality and Substance Use*

Available at www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au

WHO IS THIS BOOKLET FOR AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

- This booklet has been written for people who use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs who have gone through a traumatic experience.
- It aims to:
 - Help explain why people feel the way they do after having gone through a trauma.
 - Give suggestions about things people can do to help recover from the trauma.

WHAT IS A TRAUMATIC EVENT?

- A traumatic event is any event where someone's life or safety is at serious risk.
- People can experience them themselves or they might witness them happening to someone else.
- They can be one-off events, like car accidents, armed robberies, or natural disasters (e.g., bushfires, floods, earthquakes).
- Or they may be drawn out, like being exposed to war, domestic violence, or physical or sexual abuse.

HOW COMMON ARE TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES?

- Traumatic experiences are very common — three out of every four people in Australia have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime.
- Traumatic experiences are even more common among people who have alcohol, tobacco or other drug problems. Almost everyone who has an alcohol, tobacco or other drug problem has experienced a traumatic event.
- If you have experienced trauma, you are not alone.

**What are some of the traumatic events you have experienced?
You may wish to write them down here.**

COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

- Each person is different and responds to trauma in their own way. However, there are particular types of reactions that are common (see Table 1).
- Many people have strong emotional or physical reactions after going through a trauma. Traumatic events may also affect the way a person thinks and behaves. These are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- For most people, these feelings start soon after the traumatic event has occurred. For some, however, these feelings may not appear until months or years after the event.

Table 1: Reactions to trauma

Trauma can affect the way you feel emotionally and physically, the way you think, and the way you behave. This table shows some common symptoms of trauma.

Have you experienced any of these reactions? Tick (✓) the box next to the reactions that you have experienced.

Physical reactions

- ☐ Feeling on edge and on the look-out for signs of danger
- ☐ Being easily startled (e.g., by loud noises or sudden movements)
- ☐ Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- ☐ Sweating or having a racing heartbeat when reminded of the trauma

Changes in thinking

- ☐ Intrusive thoughts — memories of the event you can't control
- ☐ 'Flashbacks' — feeling as if the trauma is happening again
- ☐ Nightmares about the event
- ☐ Trying to block out thinking about the event
- ☐ Finding it hard to concentrate and remember things
- ☐ Having an altered perception of yourself (e.g., I am a bad person) and the world (e.g., the world is a dangerous place)

Emotional reactions

- ☐ Fear or anxiety
- ☐ Sadness or depression, hopelessness and despair, thoughts of suicide
- ☐ Anger or irritability
- ☐ Guilt and shame
- ☐ Loss of control
- ☐ Numb and distant from others
- ☐ Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- ☐ Loss of interest in sex

Changes in behaviour

- ☐ Avoiding thinking about, or letting yourself have feelings about, the trauma
- ☐ Avoidance of people, places or activities that remind you of the event
- ☐ Using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope
- ☐ Withdrawing from others

TRAUMA AND SUBSTANCE USE

- Some people increase their use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope with how they are feeling after experiencing trauma. This is often called 'self-medication'.
- While this often gives some short-term relief, unfortunately, in the long-term it can make things worse.
- Alcohol, tobacco and other drug use can interfere with the brain's natural processing of the trauma. People often say that when they reduce or stop drinking, smoking or using, their trauma reactions become more frequent or intense. This is the body's way of saying that the trauma is unfinished business that needs to be dealt with.
- Some people find that they develop alcohol, tobacco or other drug problems because they need to drink or use greater amounts more frequently to keep the trauma reactions at bay. This can lead to a cycle where reactions to trauma and alcohol, tobacco or other drug use feed off each other (see Figure 1).

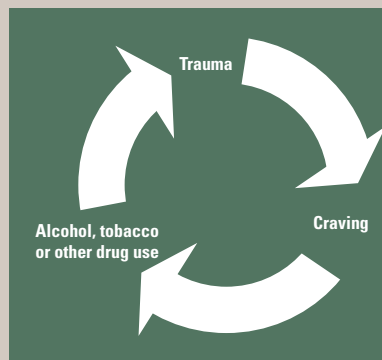


Figure 1: Cycle of trauma, cravings, and alcohol, tobacco or other drug use

What happens to your trauma symptoms when you reduce or stop using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs? Do you notice any changes?

What happens to your alcohol, tobacco or other drug use when you are experiencing trauma symptoms?

WHEN SHOULD I SEEK HELP?

- Most people who go through a traumatic event will not require treatment.
- For many people, the feelings they experience will be distressing, but they will settle within a month or so. But for some, the symptoms may continue or get worse. In a few cases, these may develop into more serious conditions such as depression, post traumatic stress disorder, or other anxiety disorders.
- You should seek professional assistance if you answer yes to any of the following questions (see pages 14–16):
 - ☐ Are your symptoms very distressing?
 - ☐ Have you had them for more than a couple of weeks?
 - ☐ Do they interfere with your home, work, study, relationships or social life?
 - ☐ Do you use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope?
 - ☐ Have you thought about harming yourself or others?

HOW ARE TRAUMA SYMPTOMS TREATED?

- Effective treatments are available. Both psychological therapy and medication can help people affected by traumatic events recover.

Psychological therapy

- Psychological treatments usually involve trauma-focused therapy. These focus on providing education, stress management techniques, and helping the person to confront feared situations and distressing memories.
- If you're interested in seeing a psychologist, your GP can help you by preparing a mental health plan, and referring you to an appropriate psychologist.

Medication

- Medication, particularly some of the anti-depressant drugs, may also be helpful alongside trauma-focused psychological therapy.

- Medications can be helpful in managing your trauma symptoms; however, some people experience unpleasant and distressing side effects. In most instances there is a choice of medication available, but it may take time to establish which medication is best suited to your needs. Tell your doctor about any side effects that are distressing you.

Interactions with alcohol, tobacco or other drugs

- It is very important that you follow your doctor's instructions when taking any medication that has been prescribed to you.
- Before being prescribed medication it is important to tell your doctor about your alcohol or other drug use so that they may give you the best possible care. Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs can interact with some prescription medications, and this interaction may alter the effectiveness of the medication. Mixing prescribed medications with alcohol or other drugs can also have dangerous consequences including overdose and possibly death.
- If you use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs and are on medication, let your doctor know if you are planning to stop using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. When you stop drinking, smoking or using, the blood concentrations of other medications can also be affected so the doctor may need to adjust the dose of your medication.

TIPS FOR STAYING WELL

There are a number of things you can do to look after yourself and help recover from a traumatic event.

- **Take care of yourself.** Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and allow yourself to experience some reaction to it — don't be angry with yourself for being upset. Make sure you eat healthily and get regular exercise.
- **Make time for rest and relaxation.** Stress and anxiety can make many problems seem worse. Try to reduce stress and anxiety by giving yourself time to rest and relax. You can use techniques such as *controlled breathing*, *progressive muscle relaxation*, or *mindfulness* (these techniques are described on pages 7–11, or any other activity you find relaxing (e.g., reading, listening to music, going for a walk). These techniques can also help you manage your cravings or urges to use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.
- **Avoid or limit your use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.** Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs can intensify some trauma symptoms. It is recommended that no more than two standard drinks should be consumed each day (for further information refer to the Australian Drinking Guidelines). Avoid high doses of substances, and risky drug taking behaviour, such as injecting drug use. Take regular breaks from drinking or using, and avoid using multiple different types of drugs. If you have been drinking, smoking or using regularly it can be difficult to cut down. The activities listed on pages 7–13 of this booklet may help you cope with your cravings and urges to use.

- **Take medication as prescribed.** Avoid mixing medication with alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, as this could have dangerous consequences, such as making prescribed medication ineffective or increasing the effects of alcohol or other drugs.
- **Try not to block out thoughts of what has happened.** Although this is hard, it is important to let your mind process what has happened. Listen to your thoughts, but do not pay too much attention to them. Do not think of them as 'good' or 'bad' thoughts, but just as thoughts that are equal to each other. Remember, while the memories may be distressing, the event is not happening again — it is only a memory and the memory cannot hurt you. This can be seen as nature's way of helping.
- **Seek support.** Everyone needs support. Share your experiences with people you trust or write them down in a diary. The services listed at the end of this booklet may also be useful.
- **Plan to do something each day that brings a sense of achievement.** Often everyday tasks like washing, cleaning, paying bills or returning phone calls, tend to pile up when a person is going through a hard time. This can become overwhelming as the pile gets bigger and bigger. By just choosing one of these activities to do each day, you can prevent things piling up, which can help you feel a bit more in control of your life. The flow-on effect can be a real sense of achievement (or relief) that this activity has been completed.
- **Monitor your emotions.** Try keeping track of your emotions and trauma symptoms in a diary. Write down how you have felt at different times of the day. When were your trauma symptoms highest, when you felt the worst? When were your trauma symptoms lowest, when you felt best? What were you doing and what were you thinking at those times? When did you have cravings to use alcohol, tobacco or other substances? How much sleep did you have each night? Keeping a diary of your anxiety and emotions can help you learn the patterns between the way you feel, the things you do and the way you think.

**What strategies do you find help
manage your trauma reactions?**



TECHNIQUES FOR STAYING WELL

The activities and techniques on the following pages can be used to help manage trauma symptoms and cravings to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. You can also use them every day as part of a general plan to stay well. While many people find the techniques on the following pages useful, they don't work for everyone. Do not use them if you find them distressing or unpleasant — it is important to find what works best for you.

Controlled Breathing Exercise

Have you noticed sometimes that you're breathing too fast? Stress can affect your heart rate and breathing patterns.

A relaxed breathing rate is usually 10 to 12 breaths per minute.

Practise this exercise three to four times a day when you're feeling stressed or anxious so that you can use this as a short-term coping strategy.

- 1 Time the number of breaths you take in one minute. Breathing in, then out is counted as one breath.
- 2 Breathe in, hold your breath and count to five. Then breathe out and say the word 'relax' to yourself in a calm, soothing manner.
- 3 Start breathing in through your nose and out slowly through your mouth, in a six-second cycle. Breathe in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. In the beginning, it can be helpful to time your breathing using the second hand of a watch or clock.
- 4 Count to yourself.
- 5 Continue breathing in a six-second cycle for at least five minutes or until the symptoms of over breathing have settled.
- 6 After practising this exercise, time the number of breaths you take in one minute. Practise the controlled breathing exercise each day before breakfast, lunch, dinner and bedtime. Use the technique whenever you feel anxious. Gradually, you'll be familiar enough with the exercise to stop timing yourself.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing different muscle groups one after the other. It helps to reduce physical and mental tension. A full session of relaxation takes about 15 to 20 minutes.

1	Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room.
2	Put your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands in your lap.
3	Close your eyes.
4	Do the controlled breathing exercise for three minutes.
5	After three minutes of controlled breathing, start the muscle relaxation exercise below.
6	<p>Tense each of your muscle groups for 10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds, in the following order:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Hands: clench your hands into fists, then relax » Lower arms: bend your hands up at the wrists, then relax » Upper arms: bend your arms up at the elbow, then relax » Shoulders: lift your shoulders up, then relax » Neck: stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then backwards in a slow rolling motion, then relax » Forehead and scalp: raise your eyebrows, then relax » Eyes: close your eyes tightly, then relax » Jaw: clench your teeth, then relax » Chest: breathe in deeply, then breathe out and relax » Stomach: pull your tummy in, then relax » Upper back: pull your shoulders forward, then relax » Lower back: while sitting, roll your back into a smooth arc, then relax » Buttocks: tighten your buttocks, then relax » Thighs: push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax » Calves: lift your toes off the ground, then relax and » Feet: gently curl your toes down, then relax
7	Continue controlled breathing for five more minutes, enjoying the feeling of relaxation.

Grounding

There may be times when you are suffering emotional pain that you want to detach yourself from. A helpful technique often used by people when they are feeling this way is to focus on the outside world instead of focusing on what is being felt internally. This technique is called grounding. There are many types of grounding exercises people use with different types working best for different people. Here are a few different types of exercises you might find useful.

Examples of mental grounding:

- Describe objects in your environment in detail using all your senses.
- Describe an everyday activity, such as eating or driving to work, in detail.
- Use a grounding statement. "I am Jo, I am 23 years old, I am safe here, today is..."
- Say the alphabet slowly.
- Counting backwards from 20.

Examples of physical grounding:

- Run cool or warm water over your hands.
- Press your heels into the floor.
- Touch objects around you as you say their names.
- Jump up and down.
- Change your posture to a more upright one.
- Stretch.
- As you inhale say "in", and when you exhale say "out" or "calm" or "easy" or "safe".

Examples of soothing grounding:

- Rub nice smelling hand cream slowly into hands and arms and notice the feel and smell.
- Say encouraging statements to yourself such as "You're okay, you'll get through this".
- Think of favourites of any kind of object (e.g., cars) or animal.
- Think of a place where you felt calm and peaceful, describe where you were, what was around you and what you were doing.
- Plan something nice for yourself such as a bath or a good meal.
- Think of things you look forward to doing in the next few days.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a technique that helps you focus on your internal or external environment, without being distracted or concerned by what surrounds you. Mindfulness can be applied to any task that you do, such as doing the washing up, or brushing your teeth for example. This particular activity is to show you how to use mindfulness skills to pay particular attention to a routine activity (walking). This technique might seem difficult to start with, but if you practise, it will become easier.

- 1 First, find a place where you can walk up and down without worrying about who might see you. It doesn't matter where you are, as long as you can take about 10 steps.
- 2 Stand in a relaxed posture with your feet pointing straight ahead and your arms hanging loosely by your sides. Look straight ahead.
- 3 You will practise walking like it is the first time you have ever walked. Start walking and while you are walking, practise paying attention to all the physical and other sensations that occur — sensations that you probably would not normally be aware of. Start by bringing your focus to the bottoms of your feet, noticing what it feels like where your feet contact the ground. Feel the weight of your body transmitted through your legs and feet to the ground. You may like to flex your knees slightly a couple of times to feel the different sensations in your feet and legs.
- 4 Next, transfer your weight onto the right foot, noticing the change in physical sensations and your legs and feet as your left leg 'empties' of weight and pressure and your right leg takes over as support for your body.
- 5 With the left leg 'empty', allow your left heel to rise slowly from the floor, noticing the change in sensations in your calf muscles as this happens. Allow the entire left foot to lift gently off the floor until only your toes are still in contact with the ground. Slowly lift your left foot completely off the floor and move your left leg forward, noticing the physical sensations in your feet, legs and body change as your leg moves through the air.
- 6 Place your left heel on the ground in front of you and allow the rest of your left foot to make contact with the floor. As this happens, notice the changes in physical sensations that occur as you transfer the weight of your body onto your left foot from your right foot. Allow your right foot to 'empty' of weight.

- 7 Repeat this process with the right foot. First lift your right heel off the ground, then the rest of your foot, and move it slowly forward, noticing the changes in physical sensations that occur throughout this motion.
- 8 Keep repeating this process as you slowly move from one end of your walk to the other, being aware of the particular sensations in the bottoms of your feet and heels as they make contact with the floor, and the muscles in your legs as they swing forward.
- 9 Continue this process up and down the length of your walk for about 10 minutes, being aware as best you can.
- 10 Your mind will wander away from this activity during your 10 minutes of practice. This is normal — it's what minds do. When you notice this has happened, gently guide the focus of your attention back to the sensations in your feet and legs, paying particular attention to the contact your feet have with the floor. This will help you stay in the present moment, concentrating on what is happening now, rather than worrying about the past or the future.
- 11 To begin with, walk more slowly than usual, to give you a better opportunity to practise this exercise. Once you feel comfortable with the exercise, you may like to experiment with different speeds of walking. If you are feeling agitated, you may like to start off walking fast, with awareness that this is what you are doing, and then slow down naturally as you begin to settle.
- 12 Try to work this activity into your daily routine — practise when you are walking to the bus, or to the shops, or around the house.



Coping with Cravings

The easiest way to cope with cravings or urges to use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs is to **try to avoid them** in the first place. This can be done by reducing your exposure to craving triggers (e.g., getting rid of drugs and fits/pipes in the house, not going to parties or bars, reducing contact with friends who use, and so on). Sometimes cravings can't be avoided, and you need to find ways to cope with them.

Cravings are time-limited, that is, they usually last only a few minutes and at most a few hours. Rather than increasing steadily until they become unbearable, they usually peak after a few minutes and then die down, like a wave. Every wave/craving starts small, and builds up to its highest point, before breaking and flowing away.

Cravings will occur less often and feel less strong as you learn how to cope with them. Each time a person does something other than use in response to a craving, the craving will lose some of its power. The peak of the craving wave will become smaller, and the waves will be further apart.

Below are some things for you to try out, to cope with the symptoms of cravings. Put a tick (✓) in the box next to those things you think you could do.

☐

Eat regularly, even when you don't feel like it.

☐

Drink plenty of water — especially when you get a craving.

☐

Instead of drinking, smoking or using, **drink water or chew gum**.

☐

Use **'Delaying'** and **'Distraction'** when your craving is set off. When you experience a craving, put off the decision to drink or use for 15 minutes. Go and do something else like go for a walk, read, listen to music, or do the dishes etc. This will help you to break the habit of immediately reaching for alcohol, tobacco or other drugs when a craving hits. You will find that once you are interested in something else, the craving will go away.

What are some things you could do to distract yourself?

Use the **relaxation** and **deep breathing** techniques described earlier to cope with a craving once it is set off. If a craving develops in response to stressful situations, relaxation techniques and deep breathing exercises are really useful.

Ride out the craving by 'urge surfing'. Form a picture in your mind of a wave at the beach. This is a craving wave, and remember that the craving wave will build up to its highest point, and then fall away as it rolls into shore. Picture the craving wave building up, getting ready to break, see it break, see the foam form, and see the wave fade away as it rolls into shore. Now, picture yourself riding the wave, surfing the craving wave into shore. You don't fall off, you don't get dumped and churned around, just picture yourself calmly surfing the craving wave into shore.

Talk to someone, perhaps a friend or family member, about craving when it occurs.

Use **positive self-talk.** Tell yourself that cravings only last about 10 minutes. Tell yourself 'this feeling will pass'. You will find that the urges and cravings themselves will be easier to deal with. Say to yourself, 'yes, this feels pretty bad, but I know it will be over soon'.

Challenge and change your thoughts. When experiencing a craving, many people have a tendency to remember only the positive effects of using drugs and often forget the negative consequences of using. Remind yourself of the benefits of not using and the negative consequences of using. This way, you can remind yourself that you really don't feel better if you have 'just one drink' and that you stand to lose a lot by drinking, smoking or using.

Are there other things you do that help you cope with cravings?

WHERE TO GET HELP

The best place to start is to **see a doctor**. They can provide you with further information and a referral to an appropriate health professional. The organisations below may also be useful.

Talking with trusted **family members or friends** can also be very helpful. Your support network can assist you in making decisions, help you access services, and give you vital support through your recovery.

National

Domestic Violence Hotline:	1800 200 526
Lifeline:	13 11 14
Quitline:	13 78 48
SANE Helpline:	1800 187 263
Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service:	1800 011 046

ACT:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	(02) 6207 9977
Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy:	(02) 6279 1670
Canberra Rape Crisis Centre:	(02) 6247 2525
Domestic Violence Crisis Service:	(02) 6280 0900
Victim Services Scheme:	1800 822 272

NSW:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	(02) 9361 8000 or 1800 442 599
NSW Users and AIDS Association:	(02) 8354 7300 or 1800 644 413
NSW Rape Crisis Centre:	1800 424 017
Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors:	(02) 9794 1900
Traumatic Stress Clinic:	(02) 9845 7979
Victims Access Line:	(02) 8688 5511 or 1800 633 063

NT:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	(08) 8922 8399 or 1800 131 350
Domestic Violence Counselling:	(08) 8945-6200 or (08) 8952 6048
Northern Territory AIDS & Hepatitis Council:	(08) 8953 3172
Sexual Assault Referral Centre:	(08) 89 227 156
Victims of Crime:	1800 672 242

QLD:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	(07) 3837 5989 or 1800 177 833
Domestic Violence Mensline:	1800 600 636
Domestic Violence Womensline:	1800 811 811 or 1800 812 225
QLD Injectors Health Network:	(07) 3620 8111 or 1800 172 076
Sexual Assault Helpline:	1800 010 120
Victims Assist QLD:	1300 546 587

SA:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	1300 131 340
Domestic Violence Helpline:	1800 800 098
Rape & Sexual Assault Service:	(08) 8226-8777 or 1800 817 421
South Australian Voice in IV Education:	(08) 8334 1699
Victims Support Service:	(08) 8231 5626 or 1800 182 368

TAS:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	(03) 6230 7901 or 1800 811 994
Family Violence Counselling and Support Service:	1800 608 122
Sexual Assault Support Services:	(03) 6231 1811
Tasmanian Council on AIDS, Hepatitis & Related Diseases:	(03) 6234 1242
Victim Support Service:	1300 300 238

VIC:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	(03) 9416 1818 or 1800 888 236
Domestic Violence Crisis Service:	(03) 9322 3555 or 1800 015 188
Harm Reduction Victoria:	(03) 9329 1500
Sexual Assault Crisis Line Victoria:	1800 806 292
Victorian Drug Users Group:	(03) 9329 1500
Victorian Victims of Crime Helpline:	1800 819 817

WA:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:	(08) 9442 5000 or 1800 198 024
Domestic Violence Womensline:	(08) 9223 1188 or 1800 007 339
Domestic Violence Mensline:	(08) 9223 1199 or 1800 000 599
Sexual Assault and Referral Centre:	(08) 9340 1828 or 1800 199 888
Victim Support and Child Witness Service:	(08) 9425 2850
Western Australia Substance Users Association:	(08) 9321 2877

There are also some **helpful websites** which give information and guidance.
Here are some:

Adult Survivors of Child Abuse:	www.ascasupport.org
Anxiety Online:	www.anxietyonline.org.au
Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health:	www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au
Australian Drinking Guidelines:	www.alcohol.gov.au
Australian Drug Information Network:	www.adin.com.au
Beyondblue:	www.beyondblue.org.au
Black Dog Institute:	www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
Dual Diagnosis: Australia and New Zealand:	www.dualdiagnosis.org.au
Drug information and advice:	www.saveamate.org.au
Drug information and research:	www.druginfo.adf.org.au
Drug information, services, information and shared stories:	www.somazone.com.au
Family Drug Support:	www.fds.org.au
Headspace:	www.headspace.org.au
HIV, sexual health and drug information for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities:	www.acon.com.au
Mental Health Net:	www.mentalhelp.net
Mental Illness Fellowship:	www.mifa.org.au
Quitnow:	www.quitnow.info.au
Reach Out!:	www.reachout.com.au
SANE:	www.sane.org





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