

WHITEPAPER GUIDE

Managing Trauma in the Workplace





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Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves.

Bessel A. van der Kolk
The Body Keeps the Score:
Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

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Introduction

Globally the world has seen an unprecedented growth in the number and scale of traumatic incidents. The headlines report large scale events such as flooding, wildfires, pandemics and terrorism; all of which have the potential to create suffering with post-traumatic distress or mental health problems within the workplace. But there are many other events that can cause workplace trauma. This practical guide explores the types of trauma that can affect your organisation, the impact of trauma and sets out practical steps that your organisation can implement to help and support employees.

As an employer, you cannot guarantee that employees will never be exposed to trauma. You can, however, take action to prevent the most debilitating effects, from the exposure to trauma, by adequately preparing employees. Having systems and processes in place ensures you can respond quickly to a traumatic event and provide access to coping strategies and social support in the immediate aftermath of the incident.

So, what events are likely to be perceived as traumatic? Traumatic events are typically:

- Unexpected
- Unpreventable
- Uncontrollable
- Something the organisation or person was unprepared for
- The result of intentional cruelty
- Related to childhood or home / family events

In a workplace setting, trauma includes exposure to events such as:

- A toxic workplace environment
- Uncertainty
- Chronic pressure
- Downsizing, or fear of unemployment
- Harassment
- Bullying
- A chaotic or noisy environment
- Fear of physical safety
- Evacuation
- Lockdown
- Fire
- Bombings
- Robbery
- Suicide
- The death or murder of a colleague
- And many more

When an individual is confronted with an extreme situation that includes a perceived or actual threat to their life, safety or wellbeing, the stress, fear, shock and anxiety they experience can overwhelm their ability to cope. Whether the trauma is momentary or experienced over a short, or prolonged period of time it can lead to emotional or psychological harm and be disruptive to normal functioning. Even individuals indirectly affected by such events can be affected.

When the work people undertake presents them with a traumatic event or brings them into contact with people who are affected by trauma, the organisation has a responsibility to recognise this and to adjust how people work, so they can take account of the trauma and respond in ways that improve their recovery.

Organisations that employ first responders are 'de facto' more likely to have exposure to traumatic events. But all sectors and job roles have varying degrees of potential exposure and will benefit from being trauma informed.

1. Types and impact of Trauma in the workplace

There are two main types of workplace trauma which can be summarised as follows:

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious Trauma occurs when an individual is exposed to multiple, cumulative traumatic events. They may have experienced interpersonal trauma themselves or may be subject to the same 'triggers' that affect the people they are seeking to support.

Being asked to do 'more and more, with less and less' is a recurrent theme of underlying work experiences that threaten to overwhelm the coping abilities of an individual. Factors such as their personal history (including prior traumatic experiences), coping strategies, support networks and other factors can interact with their work environment and give rise to vicarious trauma.

Secondary trauma

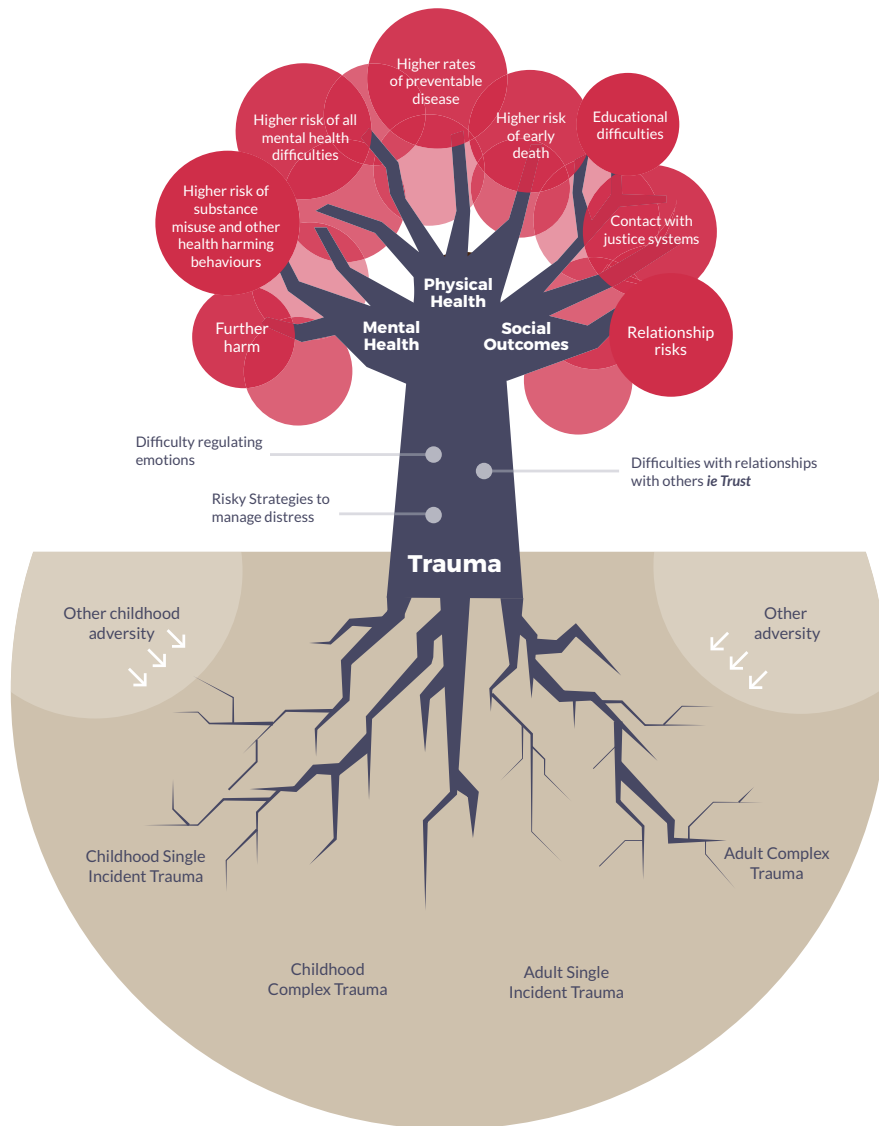
Secondary trauma stress (STS) is the emotional distress that occurs when an individual hears about the trauma experiences of another. Individuals experiencing secondary trauma find themselves experiencing personal trauma which can lead to avoidance reactions, mood changes, memory problems and a disruption in their perception of safety, trust and independence. Severe symptoms can lead to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The impact of trauma on employees:

There are many factors that determine how an individual will react to trauma, including their prior exposure and their general resilience. Typical consequences of trauma include:

- Compassion fatigue, which can affect anyone as a result of working in a helping capacity. Especially if their work involves listening to painful events.
- Burnout, which describes the experience of anyone whose health is suffering or whose outlook on life has turned negative because of the impact of the overload of their work. It is usually characterised by exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced feeling of individual accomplishment.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be a consequence of vicarious trauma and result in the following behaviours:
 - Dreams/nightmares, flashbacks, obsessive thoughts, physiological reactions and other persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event.
 - general numbing in responsiveness and avoidance (particularly of things related to the traumatic material).
 - Hyper-vigilance and difficulty concentrating.
- Changes in a person's beliefs about themselves, the world, and other people within it. Leading to issues with safety, dependency, trust and self-esteem.

The impact of trauma



PTSD

In extreme cases trauma can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); as a direct response to specific traumatic events; requiring clinical intervention or professional support. The symptoms of PTSD can start immediately or after a delay of weeks or months, but usually within six months of the traumatic event.

The condition occurs after the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. The person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

Individuals will react differently to traumatic incidents, so a range of responses can be expected. Typical symptoms of PTSD include:

- Shivering, confusion, disorientation, tearfulness and inability to speak
- Sleep difficulties; including inability to fall asleep, stay asleep, or the experience of frequent nightmares.
- Irritation and anger; the individual may experience frequent anger outbursts that are difficult to control.
- Difficulties in concentration, tiredness and thought processes
- Destructive behaviour including drug, alcohol abuse and eating disorders
- Numbness and disconnection. Trauma victims frequently report feeling disconnected from others. They may also feel numb and have difficulty feeling warmth and connection to loved ones.
- Memory loss, negative thinking and feelings, detachment, decreased mood, interest & interaction;
- Depression; including mood swings, feelings of hopelessness, and a loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities.
- Anxiety; feeling on guard and hyper-vigilant, as well as the inability to relax and unwind.
- Flashbacks; including distressing thoughts and memories of the event, intense feelings of fear or impending doom even when no danger is present.
- Feeling suicidal.
- Intrusive, recurrent, involuntary thoughts, feelings and nightmares.
- Avoidance of people, places, discussions, objects & situations.
- Significant deterioration in normal functioning; including daily social and occupational activities.

Costs associated with trauma in the workplace

To remain competitive, organisations need to ensure that their employees are safe, effective and able to positively contribute to the organisation's development. Ineffective handling of traumatic events can lead to:

- Higher levels of absence
- Poor motivation in teams and individuals
- Higher incident levels
- Damage to reputation
- Loss of business
- Re-traumatisation of employees affected

It can also lead to behavioural and morale issues such as:

- Individuals being dismissive of others
- Defiance of and resistance to (even hostile of) change
- Lack of self-reliance and ability to work in teams.
- Individuals feeling uncomfortable and anxious with others. Often blaming of others to deflect from their own issues.
- Individuals seeing constructive feedback as criticism and rejection.
- Employees being highly dependent, passive, aggressive or angry

2. Managing trauma in the workplace

Whilst it's normal, and even healthy, for a workplace to occasionally be stressful. Trauma is an entirely different level stress and can be brought upon by organisational practices that increase risk factors for vicarious trauma and burnout, such as: management style, inappropriate demands, unrealistic expectations and an abusive workplace. Organisations that prepare and respond to potential trauma, in a way that minimises the risk of harm, are better placed to overcome the potential disruption that can follow a traumatic event.

Vicarious trauma and burnout can occur when people struggle to maintain high levels of empathy and caring. Resulting in the setting of unrealistic expectations, pushing people to accomplish goals too quickly or to work in ways that mitigate against self-care – for example, working extra shifts, not taking breaks and not taking vacation days. Inappropriate multitasking demands can also contribute to feeling overwhelmed.

What should managers do after a traumatic event?

Managers are usually the first point of contact after a traumatic event, but not all employees will be so open. So, it's important that managers are aware, understand and look out for possible indicators of trauma, such as:

- Changes in behaviour (as detailed above)
- Changes in the atmosphere and mood of employees
- Reduced performance
- Increase requests for time off
- Increased conflict in the workplace
- The avoidance of certain areas or tasks

By recognising and responding to some of the indicators above, managers can help employees with trauma issues, even if the trauma itself is not immediately apparent.

When dealing with trauma there are a number of practical and effective ways that managers can provide constructive support and help:

- Acknowledge the trauma. By demonstrating that you understand and recognise that an atypical event has taken place, you can help the employee deal with the situation and return to work.
- Listen to and demonstrate empathy with the individual; without making judgements or jumping to conclusions about the causes of the event.

- Ask open ended questions and seek to understand what could be done to help the individual in that moment. This might include contacting someone they trust or getting them to a place where they feel calm.
- Identify support options for the employee, including appropriate breaks and seeking medical attention.
- When an employee returns to work, make reasonable allowances for their working routine. Whilst attempting to keep things as 'normal' as possible
- Develop a plan and clear steps to address any issues arising from the event. Being clear to address urgent steps first
- Be professional and empathetic but understand your limitations. If professional help is needed, you should seek to identify who, or which organisations can help.
- Maintain regular contact with employees that are absent because of a traumatic incident.

A traumatic event can be a shock both physically and psychologically. Ensure you give your employees time to comprehend, adjust and recover from its impact. Including:

- Encouraging the employee to build their resilience by focusing on what's positive. See our resilience quiz or download our resilience whitepaper to find out more.
- Encouraging them to keep up communications with friends, family and colleagues and to maintain their usual routine
- Encouraging them to avoid making major decisions and to give themselves time to adjust before they move forward
- Arranging time to bring colleagues together, to help them establish stronger connections. Such as team building, fundraising or events to mark what has happened.

Practical steps to help manage potential trauma in the workplace

No businesses are immune to the potential for a traumatic event to occur and with the potential costs of disruption, developing a trauma plan makes sense. Doing so enables the organisation to respond quickly and effectively and the affected employees to cope and recover more quickly.

Some practical steps that your organisation can take include:

- Using an existing health and safety group to explore and identify potential trauma risks for your industry, type of organisation and the job roles employed.
- Simulate potential traumatic events that are relevant to your workplace. This can include simulating stressful situations such as abusive telephone calls, crisis management scenarios and how to deal with confrontation or the threat of life-threatening incidents. You should identify and role play situations where employees, clients and suppliers are in distress. These can be planned and managed in-house or there are specialist organisations that can help. Real life type scenarios, handled in a safe way, can help employees should they be faced with a real-life situation in the future.

- Draft protocols for handling each incident type with clear roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. Include standard reporting protocols, documentation and details of who should be notified, where applicable. If you are faced with a trauma, you will be thankful that you have something to follow and don't have to think through the next steps at a time of high stress.
- Create a safe room where employees can go if they are feeling distressed or need time out.
- Consider who will take calls from concerned employee families in the event of a trauma. This could be people with occupational health or HR experience. Ensure they receive training and support so they can be effective in this role.
- Encourage leaders to maintain regular communication throughout a traumatic period.
- Help employees feel valued by increasing social support before, during and after a trauma occurs. This could include team-building activities, one-on-one time with line managers, team collaboration events, mentoring or volunteer exercises.
- Provide training for all employees about emotional intelligence and how to manage and support others.
- Encourage downtime after a stressful project has been completed.
- Maintain records of trauma or stress related incidents. Track progress and outcomes.
- Consider developing a workplace peer support group. Employees with personal experience of mental health issues and who have been trained how to provide support to other colleagues.

Practical steps for helping affected employees:

How people respond to stress or trauma varies greatly from individual to individual.

- Recognise that there's a balance between supporting someone and re-traumatising them, by forcing them to talk about a traumatic event.
- Encourage people to reach out for help and ensure they are aware of resources and help that is available to them.
- Ensure adequate time and space to grieve or come to terms with the trauma and to process their feelings; especially if the event was out of their control and they feel responsible.
- Ask struggling employees what they need and what they want their team to know. Respect that they need to feel safe at work.
- Keep the focus on 'today' when asking questions of affected employees. Questions such as 'how are you doing today' are easier to handle than open ended 'how are you feeling' type questions.
- Be mindful of employees with specific disabilities or of absence processes that may be stressful.
- Keep employees informed. Take the time to keep in regular contact with employees and ensure there are no surprises when it comes to any claims or plans for supporting their return to work.

When an organisation provides support from the perspective of being 'trauma informed' it reduces the risk of re-traumatising individuals and improves their sense of safety, helping them overcome the experience. Trauma-informed support takes account of the individuals' current circumstances and behaviours, so they are understood, as a result of the trauma they experienced.

There are four key aspects of supporting individuals who have experienced trauma:

- Creating a trauma-informed workplace environment
- Developing employee knowledge and training about possible trauma events
- Supporting employees through self-care by making available to them appropriate resources and guides. Both those developed internally and those, through your scenario planning, that have been sourced from external agencies, charities and specialist trauma providers.
- Communication in a sensitive and strengths focussed way.

When these aspects are underpinned with strong, supportive relationships you are ready to provide proactive, sensitive and practical support to employees that encounter traumatic events.

Organisational strategies for managing trauma in the workplace

Regardless of the organisation size, being able to constructively contribute to the recovery process for employees, following a traumatic event, is dependent upon the company's work culture. There are a number of stages and frameworks for managing trauma in the workplace:

Planning and preparation

By ensuring established procedures are in place for critical events, you ensure that all relevant parties are fully aware of what is expected of them in the event of a trauma event. Developing clear guideline helps to quickly assess and respond to a situation and react to the immediate needs of the business and affected employees.

Adaptability and flexibility.

When a company's culture develops resilience and encourages creative thinking it is more able to quickly respond to trauma events and the challenges involved in helping people cope and recover.

Communication

Keeping people connected and informed with regular, relevant information helps them cope and provides a sense of stability and control. Maintaining a regular flow of information is one of the most important factors when handling traumatic situations.

Empathy and commitment

Expressing a genuine interest and understanding of the experience that colleagues and employees are facing, along with an acknowledgement of the situation, helps foster a positive experience for affected employees and can help achieve a faster recovery process.

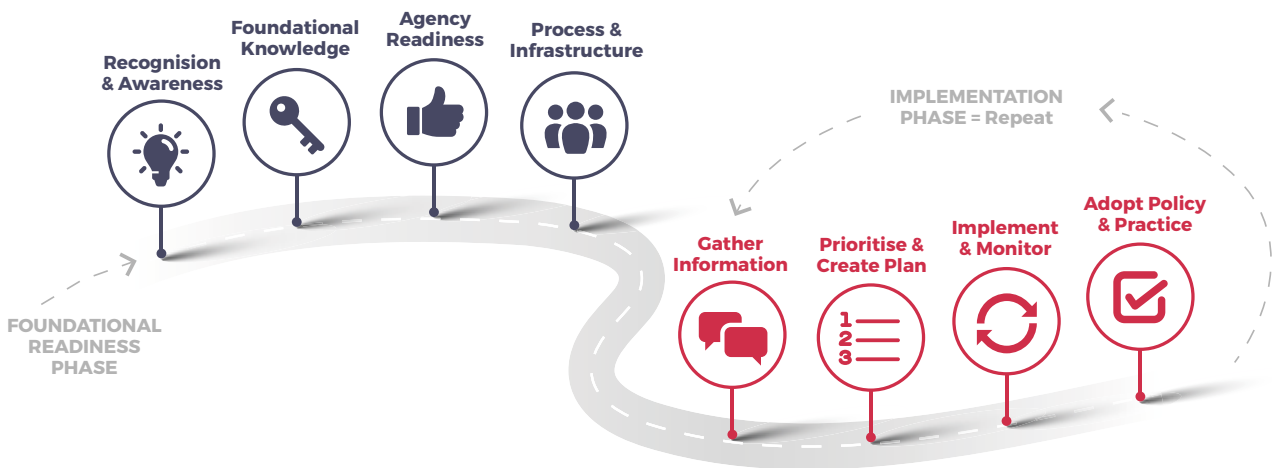
Acceptance and inclusion of diversity

People will respond to trauma in different ways. Accepting and understanding the diverse ways in which people will react, is key to helping them and your organisation move forward. And drawing upon experts to assist in the process will help you guide and work with people as they deal with trauma.

3. Becoming a trauma informed organisation

When an organisation develops a trauma-informed workplace they are able to transform the mental health of their employees. By being structured around the recognition and acknowledgement of trauma they become sensitive to its dynamics and support, processes and collaboration needed to successfully navigate traumatic events; whilst ensuring business continuity and a thriving culture.

Roadmap to Trauma Informed Care



Agency-wide Communication | Ongoing Education & Training

There are several stages to becoming a trauma informed organisation. The cornerstone of which is to create a culture where the framework can flourish. Core principles, or values, include:

- Emotional and physical safety for all
- Clear, consistent policies and trustworthiness
- An inclusive, collaborative approach
- Supportive, skill and self-esteem building empowerment.

Organisational self-assessment

The organisation must start with a comprehensive assessment of current policies and practices. Including, but not limited to:

- Policies and procedures manual
- Reporting mechanisms
- Analysis of current experiences, potential risks & scenarios
- Training records
- Trauma roles, responsibilities and champions
- Employee feedback

Your audit process should be appropriate to the size of your organisation and the trauma risk of your industry, but it's important to develop a meaningful report; as this will form the foundation of your future plans. Ensure the audit is supported at all levels within your organisation, identify a champion to lead its development and include participants from across your organisation.

Be curious about what will impact your business and what positive change might look like.

Determine priorities and check your organisational experience

When you understand things such as sickness and absence prevalence, retention and staff experience (of trauma), you are better informed about the issues the organisation faces and the changes that will be necessary to enable the organisation to migrate to being trauma informed. Take account of all available data sources and other sources of information.

Create a realistic action plan that identifies specific tasks, responsibilities and timeframes for completion. Be sure to include a process for monitoring progress.

This stage is not about jumping to solutions, use the process to better understand the organisational experience.

Implementation; taking action and bringing about change.

Psychological wellbeing will directly contribute to your organisation's goals. Developing a trauma informed organisation will bring about change. Start with the priorities identified and reflect on what the information you have gathered in stage 2 is telling you. Explore the approaches, actions and interventions you have identified and challenge yourself to assess whether the implementation of them will bring about the change you had intended. When you're satisfied with your plan, identify the key stakeholders and champions that will drive its implementation.

Final thoughts....

Trauma has the power to shape and inform our interactions with ourselves and others. It can have a profound impact on our body, mind and spirit. Healing from trauma is possible for all. The experience is transformative.

“Beneath the surface of the protective parts of trauma survivors there exists an undamaged essence, a Self that is confident, curious, and calm, a Self that has been sheltered from destruction by the various protectors that have emerged in their efforts to ensure survival. Once those protectors trust that it is safe to separate, the self will spontaneously emerge, and the parts can be enlisted in the healing process”

Bessel A. van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

4. Next steps

At Pinnacle Wellbeing Services, we provide Gold-Standard trauma care consultancy that can be tailored to help your teams navigate challenging times and contribute to consistent organisational growth. We help you build the wellbeing and resilience of your organisation, teams and individuals by ensuring they are equipped with the practical tools, experience and therapies and techniques they can use to overcome trauma and immediately improve their performance.

When your business faces unprecedented times or needs to improve its performance, you need your people to be at the absolute top of their game. We're here to help you achieve that.



Schedule a call back
now to find out how

Additional resources / reading

MIND

www.mind.org.uk

MIND provides advice and support to anyone dealing with a mental health problem. They also campaign to improve services, promote awareness and understanding

Health & Safety Executive

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/violence/toolkit/postincident.htm>

The HSE's website includes information for employers and a comprehensive list of mental health support organisations.

National Institute for Health & Care Excellence (NICE)

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg26>

NICE provides national guidance, advice, quality standards and information services for health, public health and social care. They also provide resources to help maximise use of evidence and guidance.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/copingaftertraumaticevent.aspx>

Helpguide.org

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm>

Responding to people who have experienced trauma

[http://westminsterhnp.org/Resources\(4\)/Responding%20to%20people%20who%20have%20experienced%20trauma%20toolkit%20-%202018.pdf](http://westminsterhnp.org/Resources(4)/Responding%20to%20people%20who%20have%20experienced%20trauma%20toolkit%20-%202018.pdf)

Trauma informed care and practice organisational toolkit (Ticpok) – Stage 1

<https://mhcc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/TICPOT-Stage-1.pdf>

Trauma informed care and practice organisational toolkit (Ticpok) – Stage 2

<https://mhcc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/TICPOT-Print-Stage-2-3-V1-20181119-FINAL.pdf>

The NHS Workforce Stress and the Supportive Organisation

https://www.hee.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Workforce%20Stress%20and%20the%20Supportive%20Organisation_0.pdf

Frameworks for becoming trauma-informed

https://www.actionaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Frameworks-for-Becoming-Trauma-Informed_FINAL-PDF-v3.pdf

Healing psychological trauma

<https://www.madintheuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Healing-Psychological-Trauma.pdf>



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first step to improvement**

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