



## The essence of counsellors in the fight against drugs and substance abuse

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### ABSTRACT

The main thrust of this qualitative case study research was to establish the essence of counsellors in the fight against drug and substance abuse, informed by Beck's (1960) Cognitive Behavioral Theory. While both convenience and purposive sampling techniques were adopted in the selection of participants, qualitative data gathering instruments namely semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. A phenomenological analysis (PA) was utilized to analyse the lived experiences and meanings of participants. The study established that counsellors are pivotal in the management and reduction of drug and substance abuse as they adopt counselling and relapse management. They also help in educational circles by ensuring that mental health is stabilised as youths are made to focus on education and development of the economy. To this end, the research recommends that counsellors should foster collaborative relationship and use multidisciplinary approach in addition to staying updated and using a variety of public awareness activities for both abusers and would be abusers. Overall, the study is significant to policy makers and professionals as they will make informed decisions that are research-based.



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## INTRODUCTION

Drug Abuse has become a global pandemic which is threatening development and calls for urgent action if the future generation should be drug-abuse free. This immolating pandemic has reached alarming levels among youths of today. Fisher and Harrison (2023), advanced that the number of drug users among students between 8 and 17 years has steadily increased from 20 million in 2012 to 66 million in 2022 across the world, an observation reiterated by both the UNODC World Drug Report of 2024 and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020). These alarming statistics and revelations are a cause of concern to the young generation and education, hence calls for prompt action to alleviate such a social vice lest we ruin the future of our nations. The menace at our disposal calls for us to establish drug and substance management systems that are aimed at assisting drug abusers and would be drug abusers.

This study aims at finding how counsellors could be of great value in ensuring drug and substance abuse can be minimized. The counsellor skilled in the art of listening and empathic response, who has understanding of the defense mechanisms of a person feeling trapped and overwhelmed, and who has the ability to maintain the person in positive regard, is crucial to the success of this enterprise (Maté, 2008). Unegbu (2020) revealed that social workers and addiction counsellors play a critical role in minimizing the substance abuse epidemic through treatment and recovery.

This study is significant in that it calls upon all professional counsellors not to provide their mandate in the traditional "business as usual" approach. Rather a paradigm shift towards being socially innovative so as to perceive drug and substance abuse not as a personal challenge but an international social justice issue. This is against the background that drugs are being trafficked globally, thus collaboration amongst international counsellors is apparent.

## **1. Essence of Counsellors in Drug and Substance Abuse Management**

### **1.1 Education and awareness of the dangers of drugs**

Uwadia et al. (2024) advanced that counsellors provide enlightenment programmes and guidance where they can organise such programmes to educate students about the dangers of drug abuse, its consequences on health, academics, and relationships. This role is quite important as it is preventive highlighting dangers of drugs and substance abuse permeating into schools and adolescents.

Ekpenyong & Aakpege (2014) pointed that low self-esteem can lead to detrimental redefinition of self-concept and this in turn can lead the student to indulge in escapist behavior such as drug and substance abuse. The counsellor therefore needs to make people aware of efforts of drugs so that informed decision is undertaken. It is the duty of the counselor in collaboration with other stakeholders to assist clients understand the detrimental effects of drugs.

The awareness programmes that counsellors should utilize include presentations, workshops, and guest speakers who share their experiences. Counsellors can also distribute informative materials and resources to raise awareness among students about the risks associated with drug abuse. Uwadia et al. (2024) pointed that counsellors conduct assertiveness training sessions to empower students to resist peer pressure and make informed decisions about drug use. This is an important role of counsellors and can be achieved through role-playing exercises and discussions. Such roles are critical in preventing would be drug abusers to say no to substance abuse in an assertive but respectful way. Uwadia et al. (2024) further pointed out that, this form of training enhances students' confidence and self-esteem. The development of such skills in adolescents by counsellors would provide much needed skills to resist peer influence. Their education endeavours would get priority over drugs and this is positive to education and development. Counsellors also make use of education in spelling out the benefits of a healthy lifestyle into their counselling sessions and awareness programmes thereby empowering people to make informed decisions against abuse of drugs. Forewarned is forearmed.

Substance abuse counsellors must educate families and families about addiction and recovery and provide them with resources that will help them support their loved ones in recovery (Stone et al., 2012). These resources would include therapy sessions and support groups. Support and therapy help to ensure youths are assisted to have a mental health that focusses on education and development. Learners are indeed made to be assertive and make informed decisions that have a bearing on education, career and development.

### **1.2 Provision of Counselling**

Aeni & Irfan (2021) advanced that one way to deal with drug addiction is by counselling. Counselling is a regular development and adjustment experience that focuses on helping clients overcome their adjustment and self-acceptance. Unfortunately, as opined by Flanagan (2013), the addicted person fails to see reality of their dangerous situation yet the drug abusers would feel shame, guilt, failure and suicidal tendencies associated with addiction. Such people are entrenched into dysfunctional states where they can minimise their situations. Counselling therefore is a required component to address these issues. Counselling programmes should be initiated to increase protective factors as to reduce substance abuse (Nwobi et al., 2021).

Similarly, Weiss et al. (2014) noted that, patients who had used heroine and received drug counselling were likely to manage recovery. This could be done effectively by creating a counselling environment of respect, confidentiality and trust. Since the drug and substance abusers are labelled, stigmatized and even feared by the community, it is prudent for the counsellor to take the initiative to provide unconditional love and care as they offer individual counseling. Aeni & Irfan (2021) advanced that individual counselling services with Self-Positive Conversation Techniques can contribute to increasing self-confidence in individuals who experience drug and substance abuse problems. The idea of counsellors dealing with drug and substance abuse was also echoed by Dwi Putra et al. (2023) who pointed out that positive self-talk approach helps individuals to change negative thought patterns related to abuse to more positive ones.

Counselling has proven to be more effective in handling drug abusers (Widyaningrum, 2014). Thus, the use of counselling by counsellors serves to provide encouragement and motivation to make behavioural and psychological changes in the individual's mind set. Based on research by Aeni & Irfan (2021), group counselling is more effective in notifying the motivation to recover in victims of drug abuse. Counsellors should manage group counselling by setting goals and objectives with clients and encouraging active participation and engagement. This would facilitate open communication and sharing of experiences where venting out of emotions is possible. As such, counsellors provide a fundamental service to drug abusers to a greater level that would momentarily reduce drug and substance abuse.

According to McHugh et al. (2021) counselling provides interactive exercises performed by individuals and families thereby providing interpersonal skills in drug and substance management. They also play a strong part in creating relationships with clients and families which would provide the will power and psychological support to enhance positive changes expected after the counselling sessions. The counselling service is essential in preventing abuse of drugs and substances (Banda, 2023). A free mind without an unfinished business would focus on acquiring much needed education, hence counselling helps to promote healthy coping mechanisms in youths and all adolescents in particular. Parents also get to reason and focus on providing the much-required support to their children's educational journeys.

### **1.3 Behaviour modification**

According to Isaac (2016), teacher counsellors in educational settings are expected to monitor drug abuse situation in their schools for adequate time and therefore be able to effectively identify the causes, symptoms and solutions. This will then be the basis and grounds for behavior change programmes. Ekpenyong & Aakpege (2014) advanced that teacher counsellors in schools are expected to monitor drug abuse intervention approaches, which though reactive, respond to problems as they arise. This is an approach that is concerned with the modification of behavior through positive and negative reinforcements.

Professional counsellors who are quite knowledgeable about techniques can correctly modify behavior through the use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which helps clients develop coping strategies, enhance problem-solving skills, and build resistance to peer pressure. Ekpenyong & Aakpege (2014) further elaborated that CBT addresses underlying issues such as low self-esteem, stress and maladaptive coping mechanisms that may contribute to drug abuse. Use of the CBT can be quite helpful in managing and reducing Drug and substance abuse. CBT assists in improving coping skills, reducing cravings, providing self-awareness and empowering clients to manage recovery. In addition, in educational settings, classroom management is enhanced out of behavior modification thereby improving student engagement since drug and substance counsellors also assist in reducing problem behavior such as aggression, disruption and non-compliance. The ultimate performance of learners and the country at large are ultimately improved.

### **1.4 Collaboration with other professionals and Referral**

The war against drug and substance abuse cannot be won single handedly by counsellors. So, counsellors need to make collaborative partnerships through having contacts of other service providers in the fight against drug abuse menace. As such, counsellors are duty bound to ensure timely service is provided warranting that they always do good to clients.

Uwadia et al. (2024) highlighted that there is need for guidance counsellors to collaborate with other school personnel, parents, healthcare and community organisations to address drug abuse comprehensively. As they practise their mandate, counsellors should be seen to coordinate referrals to external resources such as drug abuse treatment centres, mental health clinics and community support services. In so doing, these counsellors would also ensure students receive the holistic support they need for recovery and long-term success. Nwobi et al. (2021) advanced that counsellors play an important role in corroboration with the community in reducing substance abuse through training of community members and agencies in substance abuse education and prevention.

### **1.5 Relapse Prevention**

Jackson, Kristman-Valente, Peavy, and Well (2013) cited by Unegbu (2020), concur that, sSocial workers and addiction counsellors play a critical role in minimizing the substance abuse epidemic through treatment and recovery. This is clarified by Uwadia et al. (2024) that, guidance counsellors can develop relapse prevention programmes tailored to youths who have previously struggled with drug abuse or are at risk of relapse. These programmes typically involve identifying triggers, developing coping strategies, and creating personalized relapse prevention plans. Counsellors provide ongoing support and guidance to help students implement these strategies effectively and maintain their sobriety.

Another role of counsellors is that, they enhance family bond to enable the parents communicate better with their adolescent children whom they serve as models through organising recreational activities. Ekpenyong & Aakpege (2014) highlighted that the more protective factors that are present, the less likely a person is to become involved with drugs such and such factors include attachments to people such as family members and peers, and institutions. Drug and Substance can be managed in a better way considering the above statement. It is the duty of the counsellor to ensure and make links for support to be available. Thus, positive role models and anti – drug campaigns along with guidance and counselling services will assist to manage drug and substance abuse in respective and affected communities.

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

A qualitative research approach was selected as it provided a thorough understanding of feelings and rich knowledge of participants whose multiple-perceptions were thematically analysed on the essence of counsellors in Drug and Substance Abuse Management. A single case study was adopted as ideal for this study since Yin (2017) advanced that, case studies are used as empirical inquiries which investigate phenomenon in their natural and real-life contexts. Thus, participants in this case, were interrogated in the comfort of their established counselling clinics. Individual face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions with drug abusers and counsellors were thoroughly used to gather the lived experiences and insights into the roles of counsellors in Drug and Substance Abuse Management. The researchers also made follow-up discussions to authenticate ideas and views that were not exhausted during interviews, including gestures manifesting attitudes of drug abusers as individual persons with own perceptions on drug abuse.

Purposive sampling of counsellors and drug abusers was used since the researchers wanted participants with lived experiences on the issues under discussion. To this effect, Creswell (2010) asserts that, purposive sampling should be done of information-rich participants who are knowledgeable of the studied phenomenon. Consistently, convenience sampling was also utilized as all participants were found within proximity to the researchers, allowing them more frequency of visits to collect data until they attained what Lincoln et al. (2011) call data saturation. The sample constituted eight counsellors of 1:1 sex ratio who had at least a Bachelor of Science honours degree in counselling and two male and female parents of drug abusers. The remaining participants were three male and two female drug abusers aging between 14 and 17.

The present study, as it focused on the essence of counsellors in the fight against drug and substance abuse, was guided by the following critical research questions as its framework:

- i). How do counsellors and drug abusers perceive the concept of drugs and substance abuse?
- ii). What strategies do counsellors use to manage drug and substance abuse?
- iii). What is the impact of counselling to adolescents who abuse drugs and substances?

#### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis of data followed, guided by Braun & Clarke (2006) six phases of analysis applied from a phenomenological perspective which was used to explore the meaning and value of participants' experiences. The participants' expressions were treated as excerpts to support claims found after coding and thematically organizing them. Robins & Eisen (2017) acknowledge that open coding

is also a component of processing qualitative data. This assisted in making a deeper understanding of the content and meaning derived from the focus group discussions. Written notes from Focus Group discussions were also put into appropriate themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Presentation of Findings

Findings obtained from interviews, focus group discussions and follow-up discussions were put under themes for presentation and discussion. Below is a discussion of the themes which are supported by relevant excerpts from the views of interviewed participants.

#### Education/Awareness

All 15 participants (100%) unanimously shared similar sentiments that education and awareness campaigns should be done to show the dangers and effects of drug and substance abuse. This was noted to have a deterrent effect to both Drug Abusers as noted by one of the participants;

*I have been assisted by Counsellors through Education and Awareness Programmes. Use of edutainment activities such as drama, poetry and art have provided me with much needed information. While social media is awash with lies, Community Awareness Programmes are rich in meaningful education. [Participant F].*

These findings are in sync with those from Focus Group Discussion as 92% indicated that counsellors play a very significant role in providing education and correct information to reduce Drug and Substance Abuse.

The Zimbabwean Government has designed taskforce teams that have qualified Counsellors and other professionals to spearhead drug and substance abuse reduction. Use of posters, media advertisements, short speeches and marches in various places has disseminated much needed information. Counsellors in these platforms have taken varied roles to include being teachers/educators, facilitators, group leaders and advocates.

**Participant B** pointed out that;

*If I had received this education I wouldn't have spoiled and wasted my life to this extent. I regret. (sobbing). I thank Counsellors for providing us with this education and assistance.*

Use of a variety of awareness programmes can be very effective in providing education aimed at reducing and preventing Drug and Substance Abuse. Participants viewed use of interactive television in town, radio stations and posters can be very effective in the fight against Drug and Substance Abuse. The participants pointed that counsellors can be crucial in the creation of the content that may reach the hearts of people with suitable terminology.

**Participant L** had this to say:

*There are a number of ways that can be used to cascade correct information that will help reduce drug and substance abuse. Use of Diamond Fm and other radio stations can be quite influential in providing awareness. I noted one Programme on radio that features the Provincial Psychotherapist which teaches about Drugs and Substance issues is greatly helping people in Mutare.*

#### Counselling

Parents may fail to provide counselling to their children. Denial, shock, shame, disappointment and helplessness are some of the emotional feelings parents face due to their children's drug abuse attitudes. The excerpt below from one parent of a survivor of drug and substance abuse had this to say;

*I was devastated and expelled the shameful drug abuser from our home. He was later taken to Police Counselling department where counsellors assisted him. I was called for counselling and after three sessions I realized I had also contributed to worsening of the situation. Counselling helped both the child and myself. (Participant C)*

**Participant T** went further to say:

*I am quite happy to acknowledge after surviving the destructive thoughts of suicide that I was assisted by one committed counsellor. That lady is one in a million. She was always by this family and she willingly assisted me to see reasons for living. Chido, the pride and intelligent child had turned into drugs which I couldn't accept. She counselled the entire family and Chido finally reformed and left drugs.*

Focus group discussion also revealed the significance of counselling as this was noted to be the driver for providing information, support and only avenue for unconditional love. Participants reviewed that counsellors created a free and supportive caring environment where they felt at ease in reaching for support.

### **Behaviour modification**

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can be used to identify and change negative thought system and distortions.

**Participant B** had this to say in this regard;

*All is just our mind games that distort and fabricate issues. People can change their views by adopting a positive view point replacing misconceptions and lies we all hold about drugs. Drugs are just dangerous and there is nothing good about these.*

**Participant D** concurred with participant B but further pointed out that;

*Advertisements and social media portray a seemingly attractive package and picture about these drugs. These distortions affect our minds but this can be removed from our minds thereby returning to our original behavior and functioning. It's quite possible. Anything learned can be unlearned.*

Use of Focus group Discussion also created support groups and sharing of experiences and encouragement. Lived experiences under the guidance of counsellors assisted to strengthen coping mechanisms thereby creating room for behavior change.

### **Collaboration with other professionals and Referral**

A number of professionals can work hand in hand with Counsellors in the battle to reduce Drug and Substance Abuse. Counsellors can play a significant role in networking, collaborating and referring Drug and Substance Abuser for specialized services. This was well explained by **participant F** who had this to say;

*The role of managing Drug and Substance abuse cannot be won by a single profession. Counsellors can work with Nurses, Pharmacists, Addiction Psychiatrists, Rehabilitation Officers and Physicians. Counsellors should refer where they feel the services required are beyond their competence.*

Focus Group Discussions also revealed that the involvement of varied professionals was timely and assisted to provide holistic and comprehensive well-coordinated management. The officers interviewed highlighted that costs are reduced with high accessibility to services.

**Participant K** had this to say;

*Time is saved by having a multidisciplinary approach to Drug and Substance since correct decision and service is provided by the right profession promptly. There are situations that if delayed will be detrimental to life so the involvement of a team of specialists is life-saving.*

### **Relapse Prevention**

Counsellors can identify and challenge negative thoughts that are developed by Drug and Substance Abusers. Regular follow-ups can aid Drug and Substance Abusers from relapse. Counsellors can be handy in planning and managing Relapse Prevention Programme with clients. Counsellors with their good therapeutic relationship with the clients can manage to motivate clients to set Relapse

Prevention goals and strategies. This was highlighted in the following excerpts. **Participant A** had this to say;

*As a result of good working relations between Drug Abuse clients and Counsellors, clients agree to plan for Relapse Prevention and share relapse triggers openly.*

Recovery from Drug and Abuse is a complex process that goes beyond the Abuser as this calls for a well-designed programme with commitment. **Participant G** explained that;

*It is not easy to avoid Drug Abuse if one is into drugs. This calls for a trusted individual to monitor and support the Abusers to avoid relapse.*

### Advocacy and Support

There are a number of organisations that advocate and support Drug and Substance Abuse Management that include Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Faces and Voices of Recovery and a number of online support groups. All these work in a multidisciplinary team of professionals to support information dissemination, treatment and recovery services. Counsellors are key members of such teams and critical in ensuring the harmonious team work for the good of clients. It is against the notion of BENEFICENCE that counsellors advocate and support services that are tailor made to reduce Drug Abuse.

**Participant H** acknowledged and pointed that;

*I am delighted to acknowledge the support I received from my counsellor who also made my parents understand and forgive me. I managed to reunite with a number of people as a result of this counsellor. I was quite lonely, living in isolation with labels but here I am. This support I received also aided me to completely leave Drug Abuse.*

The above idea was also supported by **Participant M** who further pointed that;

*My counsellor had quality skills in making one to see beyond the immediate. She managed to restore communication, acceptance and working together as a family. Unity had ceased to exist in our family due to Tinashe's drug abuse attitude. She provide support, knowledge and monitoring through home-visits.*

### Discussions

Since this qualitative study had a thrust on establishing the essence of Counsellors in the fight against Drugs and Substance Abuse, the subsequent discussion is done in light of previous studies that revealed different but often a time similar findings. Its current results are thus challenging previous literature. This is mainly due to the fact that most previous studies failed to consider drug and substance abuse as an international issue that is affecting the global populace hence this study's main essence.

Participants understood the major roles of counsellors and pointed counselling as the major and key that should be provided by only qualified counsellors. Counselling was noted to identify issues affecting drug abusers and all affected members. With counselling emotional regulation is enhanced. Counselling was noted as a form of empowerment to drug abusers and their families. This concurs with the findings of Aeni & Irfan (2021) as well as Widyaningrum (2014). Interpersonal relationships are created that allow drug abuser and parents to be free and divulge their concerns. This creates willingness to change misconceptions and strive towards rewarding and satisfying life. The foregoing finding aligns well with previous studies by McHugh et al. (2021) who established that counselling provides relationships that work positively for change. The study revealed that counselling is critical in ensuring that the effects of drug and substance abuse do not escalate into dangerous scenarios. The results highlight the importance of counselling that it should be provided unconditionally and agrees with literature reviewed.

The research also established that counsellors have an important role of educating the public through a variety of awareness programmes to include drama, poetry, art, speeches and music. Counsellors knowing well the correct language to use can make and post posters on platforms that are accessible by both drug abusers, survivors and parents of abusers as well as prospective abusers. This was also observed by Stone et al. (2012).

It also surfaced that, it's possible to have behaviour change and abandon drug abuse as some participants were greatly affected by social media and peer pressure. However, counsellors can use behavior modification techniques to effect change. This finding is in agreement with observations highlighted by Ekpenyong & Aakpege (2014) and Isaac (2016). The use of the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy provides better emotional regulation, improved relationships and enhanced motivation for recovery.

Participants all agreed on the role of counsellors in coordinating and networking for a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach in assisting drug abusers and their families. It revealed that this collaboration helps to provide efficient and easily accessible service. Authorities such as Uwadia et al. (2024) and Nwobi et al. (2021) also pointed this in their previous researches. This research established that counsellors are also critical in providing relapse prevention through helping clients identify triggers, manage triggers and develop personalized relapse prevention plan. Counsellors' monitoring and follow-up activities help to monitor would prevent relapse. Uwadia et al. (2024) in their research also established that counsellors are important in relapse prevention. The results are in synch with previous related literature.

The study also revealed that counsellors also have another role of advocacy and support to parents, survivors and drug abusers. This is done through promoting varied awareness and education programmes. This is important as it reduces stigma and discrimination thereby influencing policy formulation and harm reduction. Counsellors through their collaborative approach also ensure community-based programmes are used to support families. The use of peer groups and other varied groups ensures maximum support and reduction of drug and substance abuse. The research assisted in revealing that involvement of varied support groups remove stigma, shame and work towards policy formulation. In support of this, Ekpenyong & Aakpege (2014) established in related literature review that involvement of parents, peers and varied groups assists in management of Drug abusers and all affected. Counsellors play a pivotal role in ensuring there is such coordination and support.

### **Educational implications of the essence of Drug and Substance counsellors to education**

Provision of education and awareness opens mirrors into windows where adolescents and all learners begin to visualize and value education. The focus of the learners become positive and direction is attained. Such learners with focus are able to set objectives and track these with parents in their sober sense managing to provide and support for educational advancement. Drug and substance counselling also assists to provide academic, personal, social and systemic support to learners. Creation of a conducive environment with sobriety helps educational goals to be attained. School climate is made positive without bullying and provides a safety net for all learners. The home environment is also made free of drugs and assists all to concentrate on education and achievement. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2019) pointed that drug and substance counsellors contribute to creating a positive school climate, addressing safety and student engagement.

Community partnership with teachers and all other stakeholders provides learners with the much-needed resources and services for equitable education. Collaboration and consultation that happens during drug and substance counselling provides solutions for precisely providing exact resources for learners to advance and excel in education. With proper support, learners are set to enjoy education and realise quality education. Counsellors also provide teacher support on strategies of effectively managing various behaviours (NASP, 2019).

Academic support is provided through career guidance, academic advising and provision of learning strategies. Counsellors as they work on drug and substance rehabilitation teach students effective learning strategies such as time management, prioritizing, note-taking and test taking skills. This enhances quality education and achievement. Open communication is also enhanced as the counsellors teach learners and parents to be open and say their worries and anxieties with a confidante or counsellor. Learning is improved as learners work without any burdens of stress or problem. Problems shared are half solved.



## CONCLUSION

It was concluded from the study that counsellors are critical in the management and reduction of Drug and substance abuse as they play a critical role in the education of people and learners in particular. Since drugs are being trafficked globally, implying that all nations are at risk as they fall victim to this social vice, it is prudent that collaboration amongst international counsellors is ostensible, in an effort to curtail and minimise cross border drug and substance trafficking.

Recommendations in this research focuses on three basic areas which are Policy, Practice and Research. In light of the key findings of this study, the following recommendations were made; **Policy** : The government should ensure employment of qualified counsellors in schools in order to ensure correct approaches are used in education and awareness programmes. Competent and knowledgeable personnel can make significant changes thereby making preventive and corrective action in time guided by well-crafted policies that are deterrent. **Practice** : Counselling should only be provided by qualified and licenced counsellors to avoid doing more harm than good. Drug and Substance Abusers by nature of their problems are delicate and dangerous to have anyone trying to provide counselling without professionally acquired counselling ethical.

This study was limited by the small sample of 15 which had the potential to affect generalization of study findings to similar other situations and elsewhere. Thus, future research should utilize a bigger sample representative enough of the counsellors and drug abusers.

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