

Art therapy as a complementary therapy in the treatment of depression: a case study

La arte terapia como terapia complementaria en el tratamiento de la depresión: estudio de un caso

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Abstract

This article refers to the case of a 27 year old female diagnosed with depression, whose treatment included Jungian Therapy with Transpersonal Art Therapy as a complement. The Art Therapy consisted of working with mandalas, visualization practices, energy therapy, and attending the Creativity and the Brain course. During the mandala sessions, the archetype of the Great Mother represented by the African goddess figure of Iemanjá was used as a focal point. Soothing music was played in the background during every therapy session. Physical hugging upon the client's arrival and departure was also considered part of the therapy. Because this young woman experienced significant recovery in a short period of time, Art Therapy is indicated as an important component in the treatment plan of patients suffering from depression.

Key words

Complementary Therapy, Mandala, Art Therapy, Archetypes

Resumen

Este artículo relata el caso de M.S., mujer de 27 años, médico residente diagnosticada por depresión, cuyo tratamiento consistió en terapia jungiana y arte terapia transpersonal como terapia complementaria. La arte terapia de M.S. consistió en trabajos con mandalas, prácticas de visualización y terapia energética, a la vez que asistiendo al curso "Cerebro y Creatividad". Durante las sesiones con mandalas, se usó como punto focal un arquetipo expresivo de la Gran Madre, representado por la figura de la diosa Iemanjá. Durante todas las sesiones sonó una música relajante de fondo. Un abrazo de bienvenida y otro de despedida formaba parte de la terapia. A la luz de la significativa recuperación que esta joven mujer obtuvo en un breve periodo de tiempo, consideramos la Arte Terapia como una posibilidad en el tratamiento de pacientes depresivos.

Palabras Clave

Terapia complementaria, Mandala, Arte Terapia, Arquetipos

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“It is much more important to know what sort of a patient has a disease than what sort of a disease a patient has.”

William Osler

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, depression has become a real epidemic. It has affected people of all social classes from developing countries to the most developed nations around the world - mainly in metropolitan areas.

According to recent studies conducted by the World Health Organization, 10% of men and 25% of women are suffering or will suffer from depression at some point in their lives. In the year 2000, depression was recognized as the fourth main cause of disability around the world and was foreseen to become the second main cause by 2020 (THASE, 2005).

In Brazil the same ratings are found to apply to medical offices and other working environments, as well as family homes. It is estimated that 75% of the affected will neglect searching for medical help, putting off their symptoms for a period of about 5 years before obtaining a diagnosis.

According to INSS (Brazil's National Social Security Institute) there were 74,418 idle employees, who were victims of depression in the year of 2007.

In Salvador, as well as in other state capitals, the number of people suffering from depression is shocking, which has caused health professionals to be alarmed, especially therapists who dedicate their work to treating psycho-affective disorders.

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Complementary and alternative therapies have shown themselves to be more relevant in addressing the several problems that can impede or hinder a person from living a healthy style of life.

Complementary therapies are therapeutic practices aimed at the reducing symptomatology allowing patients to have a better quality of life. They do not derive from conventional allopathic medical practice and are generally regarded as academic orientations (NCCAM, 2006).

Alternative Therapies are understood as substitutes for conventional treatments, although in reality, many are also used in conjunction with some type of allopathic treatment.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) classifies the Complementary and Alternative Medicine therapies in five categories or spheres:

1. Alternative Medical Systems: Homeopathy and Naturopathy, Acupuncture, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Ayurveda (from India).
2. Focus on Mind and Body: Meditation, Prayer, Mental Suggestive Healing, and therapies that use creative solutions, such as Art, Music and Dance; Some of these have already been formalized: Patients' Supporting Groups and Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy.
3. Biological Therapies: the use of substances found in Nature like herbs, food and vitamins.
4. Manipulation Methods: body manipulation methods; Chiropractic, Osteopathic, and Massage.
5. Therapies based on energy: Biofield therapies; directed toward energy fields that surround and penetrate the human body, such as Chi gong, Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, Tai Chi Chuan.
6. Bio-electromagnetic therapies: unconventional use of electromagnetic fields, such as impulse fields, magnetic fields and alternating or direct current (RESTREPO, 2006).

ARCHETYPES

Carl G. Jung designated the term *archetype* to refer to images surfacing from the collective unconscious, which is a construct of contents and patterns shared by every human being, which constitutes in turn a common psychic substrate of a psychic supranatural nature. (JUNG, 2002).

In Bahia, psychiatrist Dr. Rubim de Pinho completed detailed research on the effect of religion in the psyche. He identified relevant archetypes expressed or manifested in the 'Mãe D'água' (Mother of the Waters) myth and its regional variants within Brazil. (CONCEIÇÃO *et al*, 2002).

Jung proposed the use of artistic work as means to reveal the affective issues that are in the unconscious of the depressed patient, which would enable an integration of the conscious in the patient's pursuit of psychic balance. (JUNG, 1984).

ART AS THERAPY

Around 1910, Sigmund Freud published several papers on the analysis of artists and their art, establishing the fact or belief that the unconscious appears or surfaces through images, which represents a catharsis, constituting an escape from the censorship of the conscious, while facilitating access to the most secret issues of the Being. (CARVALHO, 1995).

The late Dr. Nise da Silveira, a well know Brazilian psychiatrist, has played an important role in the validation of art as a therapeutic method. His work drew on Jungian psychology and involved the development of the creative function of psychiatric inmates in Rio de Janeiro, (Brazil). (SILVEIRA, 1992).

Art Therapy, a new kind of complementary therapy, gained credibility with the creation of the AATA (American Art Therapy Association in the United States) in 1969. Art Therapy Associations settled in various Brazilian states, deepening the studies in this field. As time progressed, Art Therapy became integrated into medical practice, as evidenced during the 1st and 2nd Congress of Medicine and Arts in Salvador (Bahia, Brazil) in 2004 and 2006, respectively.

My team and I have been in the process of developing independent research in the city of Salvador since 1992. Upon the formation of the first Art Therapy course following the creation of the *Creativity and the Brain* course, we began to notice a significant reduction in the psycho-affective disorder symptomatology of depressed patients. This work entailed treating depression by using non-invasive resources through a relevant playful and affective approach, while recovering the patients' taste for life through art (CARNEIRO, 2004).

MANDALA

Mandala means "circle" in Sanskrit. It is used as an instrument during magic rituals, and it has been included in the design of sacred architecture expressed in a group of temples to facilitate meditation, self-knowledge, and understanding one's relation to the outside world.

Carl G. Jung studied mandalas in depth, noticing his patients' progress in the direction of an energy centered in the most intimate part of the psyche, while the development and structuring of personality progressed. Together with other scientists, Jung applied his drawing technique to patients and thereby stimulated the growth process of a being in search of individuation.

While painting or creating a mandala through the use of diverse materials, the patient typically organized him-/herself externally and internally, focusing attention on the center of his/her being - the Self.

MUSIC

Music has influenced human beings since the beginning of their existence. Its proper use in therapy would reduce the tempo of the brain, providing a relative silence, and balance the use of the brain hemispheres. Such an effect can in turn facilitate self-knowledge.

The act of listening to music while mental images are evoked can lead to a state of synchronization of music, feelings and images, breathing and pulsation. When this link happens, it increases the healing effect on the whole body and mind (BUSH, 1999: 38).

THE HUG

Hugs are gestures of affection that have arguably typified humankind since the most remote period of time. Even so, they also can be seen to occur between (other) animals.

Recently, neuroscientist Francis McGlone (2008), from the University of Liverpool, presented the results of research on the 'loving touch' at the British Association Science Festival for the Advancement of Science in Liverpool. It confirmed the therapeutic effect of 'touch' in treatments for depression and its supportive role in the development of children. (BBC Brasil, 2008).

Research conducted by Harry Frederick Harlow on *rhesus* monkeys shows that starving monkeys can prefer to huddle together around a frame imitating a mother figure, covered with a soft cloth, rather than feed from a bottle of milk attached to a hard wire without cloth (CARDOSO, 2008).

ENERGY THERAPY

For those who are acquainted with Eastern medical traditions, talking about Energy Therapy, such as Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda Medicine, in the Western world is like describing a landscape to someone looking through a window, while the window of that person - who is listening - is opposite to the one who is speaking.

In the book *Fora da Casinha*, the Brazilian neurologist Dr. Paulo Rogério Bittencourt discusses the experiences of madness and genius through time, recognizing that we have no 'perception of the diversity of mental realities that exist in 2/3 of the planet, which are now more mixed than ever.' Bittencourt says that if Leonardo Da Vinci had been born in Nigeria, Munch in Belo Horizonte, Einstein in Hanoi, and Newton in Mumbai, they might have deteriorated into a psychiatric illness, given the lack of institutions and people with enough power to allow their ideas and contributions not only to be heard, but to be registered, passed on, and recognized.' (BITTENCOURT, 2009).

Energy Therapy is related to the Field of Human Energy. Quantum Physics is now bringing into light explanations that Eastern Medicine has already proposed in relation to what we call the quantum vital body.

Dr. Amit Goswami states:

Modern medicine makes more sense if we add the concept of quantum vital body. This allows us to make a connection between Western and Eastern medicine. Western medicine is strictly based on materialism: life is chemistry, disease is chemistry which went wrong; something that must be fixed with chemical substances external to the system. In opposition, Eastern medicine knows that the vital body has the originals (the morphogenetic fields) that are represented by the physical body. The Eastern concept recognizes disease as an imperfect chemistry in the physical representations of the vital body organs, without any doubt, however, it concedes that its imperfections can originate in the vital body.

(GOSWAMI, 2006: 210)

TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

In the second half of the 19th century, psychology was recognized as a science in its study of human behavior, psychic life, and consciousness. Since then, psychology has passed through several phases, also called 'forces', in terms of which Transpersonal Psychology is considered to be the 'fourth force'. Such status was recognized by psychologists such as Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Viktor Frankl, James Fadiman, and Anthony Sutich by the end of the 60's, and it was then more widely or officially recognized in those terms in 1968 (SALDANHA, 1999).

Preceding this, eminent humanists had already recognized a therapeutic approach that came to be viewed as purely material. It derived from a search for new ways to treat patients who presented with an unusual form of reality. It was an approach that was unacceptable to those who were devoted to the idea of man as a mere thinking machine.

Carl G. Jung's Analytical Psychology opened gaps to recognize transpersonal reality. Transpersonal Psychology intends to integrate the following functions of human experience: thinking, feelings, intuition, and sensation. It investigates several states of consciousness: wakefulness, sleep, and dreaming, as they may occur within the various epistemological approaches of Science, Religion, Philosophy, Art, and Spiritual traditions that are directed to understanding the essence of whole being, going beyond the personal, the visible, and the apparent.

CREATIVITY AND BRAIN COURSE

This is a course including relaxation and self-knowledge development activities, which involves using art in a Zen meditation state.

This form of meditation is to be performed along with the various tasks of one's everyday life, which can enable one to be present in every single action, to live in the present moment, and to become more aware of reality by overcoming illusions of attachment.

Zen enables one to appreciate the great importance art, aesthetics, calligraphy, gardening, tea ceremony, flower arrangement (ikebana), silence, and the void. It facilitates the power of concentration, and an increase in visual perception, attention, memory, and intuition. One learns to observe closely and carefully one's internal day-to-day movements, so that one learns more about one's self. One becomes thereby a better being, more affectionate and happier, and all in all one's quality of life improves concomitantly with one's consciousness. (CARNEIRO, 2004).

During this course, while listening to music for relaxation, the patient is engaged in special drawing exercises that stimulate the whole mind while in complete silence

My team and I have tirelessly sought partners who are interested in conducting experiments in the field of medicine, particularly in the use of MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), in order to test the results of this therapeutic work.

The methodology used in this course can be found in the book by the same title *Criatividade e Cérebro (Creativity and the Brain)*. (CARNEIRO, 2004).

CLINICAL CASE REPORT

My team and I can report one of the cases treated through Art Therapy. The patient achieved significant improvement after seven visits, which included attending the *Creativity and the Brain* course twice.

THERAPEUTIC MEETINGS

1ST MEETING – June 2nd, 2005: Maria (fictitious name) was sent to me by both her psychologist and physician for art therapy that uses the mandala technique. She wanted to attend the *Creativity and the Brain* course, conducted for a small group, as well as undergo individual care twice a week.

When the time came for Maria's treatment, I noticed a very devitalized young woman with a disorganized energy field. She had been taking antidepressants and seemed doped.

Maria told me that she was indeed feeling depressed, and that her mentor from the Medicine Residence had given her a one-month deadline to get better, otherwise he would have to cancel her course altogether. Maria felt under pressure, because, she really wanted to continue studying.

I asked Maria if she wanted to have her energy field harmonized right away (energy chelation) (BRENNAN,1992), which would balance the vital centers. She agreed enthusiastically. When we finished the procedure that day, Maria was feeling much stronger.

In order to feel and notice this Energy Field, I use Extra Sensory Perception, which I have practiced over several years, given that 'Alternative Medicine takes into consideration not only the physical body, but also its close connection to its psychological and vital energy systems. Consequently

with the connection that exists between each of these individual systems, such as the physical, the vital, and the mental energy systems of the environment, as well as of the universe, including their own or common pace'. (WEIL, 2000).

At the same time, it is also possible to check the status of this Energy Field through instruments such as the AMI – a machine created by Dr. Hiroshi Motoyama 'to measure the functional status of the meridians and corresponding internal organs' (MOTOYAMA, 2003). Other instruments would be Kirlian photography, the use of electrodes to provide an electromyogram, which is a technique used by Dr. Valerie Hunt from the University of California in Los Angeles (GERBER, 2004), and the crystal pendulum, as described by Barbara Ann Brennan (BRENNAN,1992). I believe that on-going psychosomatic research carried out by multidisciplinary teams and advances in relative technology will show changes in the subtle body to have corresponding changes on the dense, physical body – changes that will show up on brain scans.

Dr. Richard Gerber says:

Combining formation systems of magnetic resonance imaging, computed tomography, and Kirlian photography may allow us to go beyond the current resonance technologies and penetrate even deeper into the subtle energy structure of human beings.

And further:

When the flow of vital energy to a certain organ is deficient or unbalanced, patterns of cellular disruption appear. The capacity to measure electromagnetic disturbances in meridian systems (with AMI) and find imbalance in the ch'i energy flow, permits not only the detection of a pathogenesis presence in a certain part of the body, but also predict future organic disorders. (GERBER, 2004, p.168)

2nd MEETING – June 2nd, 2005: That same day, in the afternoon, Maria attended the *Creativity and The Brain* course. As customary during the first class, I asked Maria for a free drawing and encouraged her to use any material that she felt like in order to complete it.

In the upper right quadrant she designed and drew a boat with three sails that looked like spears aimed at the sun.

While going over Maria's drawing, I considered the possibility of three suicide attempts being expressed in her composition, as if trying to attack her father.

We started the therapeutic treatment the following week.

An Art Therapy drawing analysis is based on studies that associate feelings with compositions as a whole. Guidance in this process has been provided by authors like Jungian Analyst Dr. Gregg Furth (FURTH, 2004): first pay attention to the initial impression caused by the drawing, then analyze each element within it; then check the results of your initial analysis with what the patient says about it.

3rd MEETING – June 7th, 2005: Maria begins by sharing that she wanted to be a surgeon like her father, but that she couldn't bear the surgical studies. She had been attending Medical Residence and wanted to be a Pediatrician.

As Maria fell into a state of serious depression, she obtained a medical leave of absence from the Medical Residence program in order to rebalance her health. She underwent psychiatric treatment that included taking psychiatric medication that made her feel 'like a caged lion'.

I asked Maria if she had been treating "the lion", and she responded by stating that she had been undergoing Jungian psychotherapy, attending yoga classes, and taking painting classes.

Maria and I talked about the drawing that she had created in the course, and she stated that the drawing was the same kind of drawing that she has been producing since she was a child. I asked her to talk about the sea that was expressed in her composition, and Maria told me that she has tried committing suicide twice: once upon entering the sea, and another during a hunger strike. I asked her about a third time? She replied: I haven't tried a third time. There was another time, when I almost drowned, but it was 'accidental'...

I asked Maria to tell me about her father. She said that he had died not too long ago, fifteen days after a cancer diagnosis that shocked her very much.

Maria didn't get along with her mother; hence, she lived with her grandmother and had spent some days at another relative's house.

I suggested that she create a mandala. She imagined it to consist of her favorite fruits, starting with a lilac flower in the center, surrounded by strawberries, grapes and watermelon. Everything formed a small version. As the time was up, she was asked to finish the drawing afterwards.

I suggested the possibility of working with different types of material, like beads, vitrilhos (small pieces of mirror or glass), etc. and realized that there was a nutritional aspect within her being that she wanted to share.

Work with collages generally produces good (positive) results in those who are depressed. Small objects that can be freely arranged on a surface made of cardboard, fabric, wood or any other firm material, will help organize the psyche and bring it into balance and well-being.

The suggested materials were appropriate for their relation with the sacred, as expressed in the design, where the purple flower was at the center.

4th MEETING – June 09, 2005: Maria arrived feeling lighter. She had changed psychiatrists and the new doctor reduced the dosage of her psychiatric medication.

Excited, she brought a round canvas, many "vitrilhos", beads, shells, bronze powder and paint to make a mandala on canvas. She wanted to honor Iemanjá.

Iemanjá is an Orixá (god) from African Tradition and represents the female element, the maternal, sensitivity, the emotions. Within everyone there is a quest for the universal archetype of the Great Mother, present in the collective unconscious of humanity.

We can say that the deities of Cadomblé and Umbanda inhabit the symbolic psyche of most Brazilians, in the same way as the Hellenic gods populate the symbolic dynamics of ancient Greece.

The knowledge of the content and symbolic meaning contained in the worship of Orixá provides understanding keys for the psychological processes, whether individual or collective'. (ZACHARIAS, 1998)

We began the session by choosing the materials- for the collage on the round canvas- and Maria was excited to have the chance to create a mandala honoring Iemanjá.

The mandala with these materials, in a context like this, is considered a Sacred Mandala in which the honored being is from the African Tradition. The contact with the Sacred part of Being has a great healing power.

The spiritual well-being is a dimension of health in the body, including psychic and social dimensions (World Health Organization,1998). Considering the mystical and meditative experiences as measurable and quantifiable processes based on medical literature and practice, World Health Organization through the Quality of Life group, included in its generic instrument for evaluating quality of life the Religiosity, Spirituality and Personal Beliefs domains with 100 items. (PERES, 2007)

5th MEETING – June 9th, 2005 Maria came in the afternoon to *Creativity and Brain* course. We worked with Attention, Concentration, and Meditation Exercises.

6th MEETING – June 15th, 2005: We allotted 2 hours for individual care in this session: Maria arrived late and began by working on the canvas collage.

Continuing with what she had begun in the previous visit, she started gluing chosen pieces, allowing some free space between them. Maria placed the beads close together, creating a distorted pattern, which differed from the beads' idealized nature. When she began the assignment, she arranged the pieces at the center as if they were rays of sunshine. However, the collar could not maintain the same shape. She puts shells around the canvas edge, four of which were bigger in size, thereby framing the corners.

I looked at Maria's work, which at first transmitted a sense of torment, distress, and despair. I felt her frustration at not being able to place the pieces in harmony within the equidistant spaces, as if in an attempt to form a beautiful and balanced center.

As I looked at the mandala, I thought to myself: My Gosh, how can I see beauty in this work? How can I rescue her healthy part of the Self? How can I bring Maria back to what she used to be?

Then I noticed that the awry center of Maria's composition resembled the movement of a twisted skirt, similar to that worn by someone while dancing! Its expansion and contraction appeared to have been registered in the collage and I was delighted with this view.

A few minutes prior to closing our session, I asked Maria: What do you think of your mandala? She replied: 'It's not beautiful, it's not centered, and the pieces look sort of squeezed together... I'm sorry!...'

I told her: It's neither out of center nor ugly. Look at it again: Doesn't it resemble a skirt in movement, as if worn by someone who'd been dancing?

Maria's eyes shined!

She says: 'You are right! ... I remember when I was a child, and we had a party at school, and I danced representing Iemanjá! It was such a beautiful party! It was a presentation of Orixás. My friend danced in the center of the stage wearing a crooked white skirt that was decorated with fish, while other girls and I held its tips and danced, full of happiness!... That skirt was so beautiful! I'm going to do the mandala this way'

I said to Maria: Since you are creating Iemanjá's skirt, as if you were dancing... invite her to have a meditation and visualization moment with you.

During Maria's meditation, I suggested that she take the happiness of that dance with Iemanja' and feel the Orixás protection, represented by the shells that were surrounding the canvas.

Maria told me that she was back at her mother's house.

Roberto Crema and other humanist authors state that one has to search for that which is healthy within a human being, to rescue the light that is inside each, as it is in every one of us, and to see the beauty in spite of everything. Crema states: Put your attention on that which is not ill inside you. (CREMA, 1995: 143)



The Center of Maria's mandala

7th MEETING – June 21st, 2005: Two hours of individual care; Maria arrived feeling happy, (she didn't seem the same person), and she came with ideas to finish her mandala.

Maria went downstairs to purchase the missing material. She bought a doll with long hair just like Iemanjá's, dressed in a blue and lilac (like the flower she drew in the first mandala). She separated the doll's body parts and added them specifically to the finished collage. The doll's head was put just above the center, where the puffy skirt was represented. The arms that were dressed in a shining cloth were placed on each side within the skirt, as if holding a fish net (made out of a hairnet) adorned with shining beads. Maria sprinkled white bronze powder on the net and stuck to that a few small fish made of silver paper. She also cut out sea stars and placed them near Iemanjá's feet.



Maria's Mandala

Maria was very happy, feeling that her mandala expressed exactly what she had intended to do in the first place.

She said that she was anxious to go back to work. She confessed: I'll never do what I did again - to drink to the point of starting a depression crisis...

To finish our session, I led her in meditation, looking at her mandala. It became an instrument of balance, protection, and strength to overcome life's challenges while working in a rapport-therapeutic alliance.

Maria hugged me happily, and left on a trip to the countryside to spend the holiday of Saint John's - S. João is a religious folkloric holiday typically celebrated in the northeast part of Brazil. There Maria will continue her Medical Residence.

In all the therapeutic meetings held with Maria, we embraced each other, as previously mentioned, in accord with documented research studies. Besides relieving pain, depression, and anxiety, hugs make people feel better, producing a positive physiological change in both people sharing the hug - the one who is giving it, and the one who is receiving it.

The Art Therapy work that Maria completed will bring back to her mind the health and beauty that once existed. It will provide her with the spiritual protection, strength, and hope necessary for her to achieve her ideals, giving her a new meaning of life.

Months after that, during an Art Therapy Symposium, a lady embraced me and said: *You don't know me, but I want to thank you for what you did for my daughter. She is well, she is studying, and she is attending a painting course.* The lady was Maria's mother.

Three years later, in 2008, I remembered this case during a presentation I gave at the Transpersonal Psychology Congress held by ALUBRAT, in Évora, Portugal. I had not taken any pictures of Maria's work. I talked to Maria by telephone, and she answered me in a happy voice. I asked her if she would authorize me to present her case, and if possible, if she would provide me with some photos of the Mandala in honor of Iemanjá, if she still had it.

Maria promptly gave me authorization to present it, and asked her sister who lives in Salvador, where the mandala was located. The sister agreed to take photos of it and to forward them to me by e-mail. Her sister then added a note stating how happy Maria felt to be contributing to my presentation.

CONCLUSION

This therapeutic work lasted less than a month, however, its effect was profound and liberating for the respective patient.

Other patients suffering from depression that I have been working with have stayed with me for a longer time - about one and a half years. Some patients do not interrupt their allopathic medical treatment or stop taking prescribed medication. However, in some cases, medications are gradually diminished or stopped all together.

It is valuable to note that this kind of care is one way that helps the patient who is suffering from depression to achieve cure. It is similar to several roads leading to one specific city. This therapeutic approach can be viewed as a short cut to accelerate arriving safely at one's destiny.

Our report is meant to invite health professionals to consider other possibilities of treatment, so that together we can identify the best alternatives for providing our planet population with a better quality of life. We too are part of it.

In view of this result, we can consider Art Therapy to be an aid in the improvement of human life, particularly for those who have been diagnosed with depression.

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