

If you're feeling lonely

How to stay connected
in older age



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Thank you

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About this guide

Most of us will feel lonely at some point. Being alone doesn't always mean you'll feel lonely – people often choose to spend time alone and enjoy their own company. Others may feel lonely even when surrounded by people. Loneliness is the feeling of sadness that can come from not having the social contact you would like.

Some common experiences of older age could make you more likely to feel lonely. For example, adult children may have moved away, friends or partners may have died, and health problems may make it harder to get out and see others.

Loneliness is a personal experience and people find different ways to overcome these feelings. This guide has advice on simple things to try which could help reduce loneliness, and information on where to look for more help.

We spoke to people about their experiences of coping with loneliness. Their quotes appear throughout.

Why am I lonely?

Loneliness just creeps up on you. None of us think it will happen to us, but suddenly it's there – you're on your own.

People feel lonely for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes, a particular event or change in circumstances may trigger these feelings, or you may have felt lonely for a long time without really knowing why. Some people feel more lonely because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

You might find yourself feeling lonely if:

- a partner, close relative or friend has died
- you've lost contact with friends or family
- a relationship has broken down
- you no longer work and miss the social contact and sense of purpose this gave you
- you live alone

- you've moved to a new country or area
- you have an illness which makes you feel isolated from others, either emotionally or because it's hard for you to get out
- you're caring for someone and don't have many chances to socialise
- you don't feel close to those around you
- you're living on a low income and can't afford to socialise as much as you'd like
- you don't feel supported by your relationships
- you have one close relationship but have lost touch with others
- you're shy or have social anxiety
- you're feeling depressed.

These are just a few examples of why people feel lonely. Your loneliness may not have a direct cause and you don't need to look for one.

However, it could help to be aware of when you're feeling lonely. You may find you feel lonely at certain times or that particular things trigger these feelings. For example, many people find Sunday the loneliest day because it's traditionally seen as a day to spend with family. If you're aware of what brings on your loneliness, you can try to change things to improve this.

On Saturday, I was here all by myself, it was pouring with rain, not a great deal on the telly to amuse you – never is on a Saturday – and I got really down. I could have just sat and cried.



Keep a journal

You could try keeping a simple journal to record how you're feeling at different times. This could help you to work out what's making you feel lonely. Think about things you've enjoyed, things you've found difficult and whether certain days or times of day are better than others:

*Sunday lunchtime - I cooked myself lunch.
Felt sad that I wasn't having a roast dinner
with family like I used to.*

Try keeping the journal for a week. Is there one thing you could change to make a difference? For example, if you're loneliest at the weekend because no one is available to chat, could you sign up for an event like the monthly Sunday tea party groups organised by Re-engage ([0800 716543](tel:0800716543), reengage.org.uk)? Or if you feel better on days when you've done a certain activity – such as cooking yourself a nice meal or taking a walk – could you do that more regularly?

Thinking about yourself

I live entirely alone; I have no family. That takes a lot of thinking about, doesn't it – I am entirely alone. Life is really what I make it.

When you're lonely, especially if you've been feeling that way for a while, it can be hard to reach out. You might worry that others won't understand you or want to spend time with you.

Learning to feel comfortable with yourself and increase your self-confidence can be an important first step. Sometimes, you may need to address underlying feelings and anxieties before trying to spend more time with others. Otherwise, simply increasing the amount of social contact you have may not change how you feel, at least in the short term.

If your confidence is low, engaging with other people can be particularly difficult.

Try to challenge negative thoughts and remember to be kind to yourself.

Understanding yourself

You might want to make a list of things you like about yourself or that other people have complimented you on. You may find this difficult or silly to start with, but it can be a useful tool. It can help you to understand yourself and what you value, as well as increasing your confidence.

5 skills I have

1. I can play 10 different card games

2. I am a good listener

3.

4.

5.

5 things that went well this week

1. I made a really good omelette
2. I went for a nice walk by the canal
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

5 things other people have admired about me

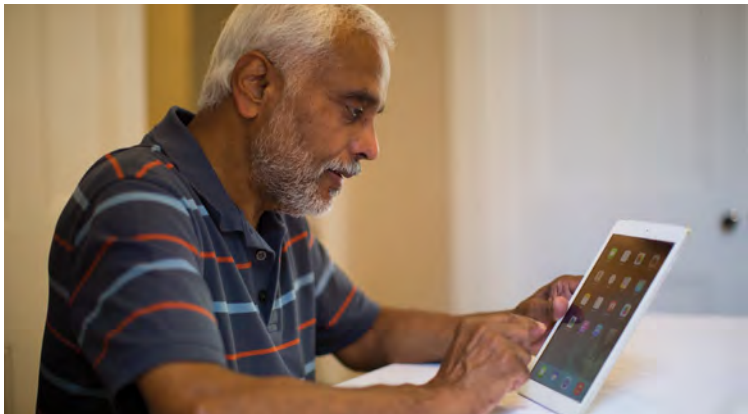
1. The postman said I'm always smiling
2. My cousin said it was so nice that I'd written to ask how she was after her operation
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

If you're feeling bad about yourself or anxious about how to change things, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) could help. This teaches you to break negative or unhelpful thought patterns. It can help you to challenge assumptions like 'No one will want to talk to me' or 'I've been lonely for so long – nothing will change'.

There are many self-help books and online resources available which use this approach.

You could try:

- The **Overcoming** series of self-help books, recommended by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Titles include **Overcoming Anxiety** and **Overcoming Low Self-Esteem** – [nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/self-help-therapies](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/self-help-therapies) has more information, or they're available from libraries and bookshops.
- The online mood self-assessment tool on the NHS site ([nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mood-self-assessment](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mood-self-assessment)). There is also lots of helpful advice about how to deal with common mental health concerns, like low mood, low confidence and anxiety.



Self-help isn't right for everyone. If you're feeling very anxious or depressed, or struggling to control your feelings of loneliness, talk to your GP. They may refer you to an NHS counselling service or you can refer yourself at [nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service).

You could call a helpline like Samaritans (116 123) to talk about what's worrying you. There are also organisations that can help with specific problems, such as:

- Cruse Bereavement Care (0808 808 1677, [cruse.org.uk](https://www.cruse.org.uk))
- Relate for relationship counselling (0300 0030396, [relate.org.uk](https://www.relate.org.uk)) – there's usually a charge for counselling sessions
- The Silver Line (0800 4 70 80 90, [thesilverline.org.uk](https://wwwthesilverline.org.uk)) – a helpline specifically for older people, providing emotional support and advice.

Although loneliness and depression are distinct experiences, the two things are linked. One can lead to the other. Our guide **Dealing with depression** has more information about where to go for help and how you can help yourself stay mentally well.

Talking about how you're feeling

Opening up to others can help you to feel less alone. If you have people around you but feel disconnected from them, try to talk to them about how you're feeling. It's easy to think that no one understands or cares what you're going through, but that's unlikely to be true. Most people have experienced loneliness, so should be able to empathise.

If you don't feel comfortable talking to people you know, you could try a support group instead. Ask your GP if they can recommend one. They may be for people with a certain illness or in a particular situation. For example:

- Mind offers support for anyone with mental health concerns (**0300 123 3393**, **mind.org.uk**). They also have an online community called Side by Side, for people to talk about their lives and help others (**sidebyside.mind.org.uk**)
- Carers UK offers support if you're caring for someone (**0808 808 7777**, **carersuk.org**)
- Macmillan supports people affected by cancer (**0808 808 00 00**, **macmillan.org.uk**)
- Parkinson's UK supports people affected by Parkinson's (**0808 800 0303**, **parkinsons.org.uk**).

It can be really reassuring to talk to people who have had similar experiences.

I've been living alone for the last 13 years and feel very lonely, which isn't a good feeling. The telephone groups I've joined have been fantastic – talking with others about my situation really helps. I've made new friends who I intend to stay in contact with. Picking up the phone once a week for an hour has really revitalised my life.



3 Looking for opportunities

Start by thinking about your current friends, family and acquaintances. Are there people you would like to talk to but have fallen out of contact with, or people who you'd like to get to know better? If the idea of a face-to-face meeting or phone call feels too daunting, you could send them a letter or email. Sometimes just thinking about the people you know, who care about you, could help you to feel less isolated.



If you don't have an existing group of people you're close to, think about the people you encounter in your day-to-day life. Perhaps you could say hello to a neighbour if you see them outside or chat to the newsagent who sells you your daily newspaper.

You don't have to be close to someone for a conversation to be meaningful. Any contact has the potential to make you feel more connected to those around you, even if it doesn't develop into a long-lasting friendship.

As a first step, just being around other people without talking to them can help you to feel more connected. You could try going to the local park, a cinema, café or public event. Spending time outdoors – even looking out of a window – can help you feel connected and ease feelings of loneliness.

If people don't always respond to you, don't take it personally. You're making a conscious effort to connect with other people, but they could have their minds on other things. Maybe they've had a bad day or are very busy. If one person rebuffs you, don't shy away from everyone. If you take every opportunity to smile or say hello, you're more likely to get a positive response from someone.

Set targets

Try setting yourself targets for the week and building up slowly:

This week I will...	Achieved?
• Phone Ann for a chat	✓
• Say hello to the new neighbours	✓

Overcoming practical barriers

There are many reasons why you may find it difficult to connect with people in the way you want to. Some of these might relate to how you're feeling, but others might be about the practical problems of getting out and about.

It's worth thinking about what's stopping you as you may find help is available to get round these difficulties. For example:

I've given up driving. How can I get around?

You could see if your area has a Dial-a-Ride scheme, which offers door-to-door transport to people who can't use public transport. Contact your local council or the Community

Transport Association ([0345 130 6195](tel:03451306195), ctauk.org/find-ct-provider).

If you can use public transport, make sure you take advantage of discounts for over-60s – for example, you could buy a Senior Railcard or Coachcard for a third off most train or coach journeys – and claim your free bus pass once you reach the qualifying age. Visit gov.uk/apply-for-elderly-person-bus-pass or ask your local council.

I don't have the money to go out with my friends.

Are you claiming all the benefits you're entitled to? Pension Credit is one that is very under-claimed. You just need to call the Pension Service on [0800 99 1234](tel:0800991234) to check if you qualify. Use our online benefits calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator) or call our Helpline on [0800 319 6789](tel:08003196789) to make an appointment for a full benefit check. Our free guide **Moneywise** has lots of tips on boosting your income.

Going out doesn't have to be expensive – community groups and charities may offer free events near you. Remember to ask about age-related discounts when you go out too, for example at the theatre or cinema.



My wife needs 24-hour care. I just can't leave the house.

Caring for someone can be very isolating. Ask your local council for a free carer's assessment as soon as possible. The council must carry this out for anyone who is an unpaid carer for a relative or friend.

It looks at what support you need in your caring role and how you can get it. Our free guide **Caring for someone** has more details or you can call our Helpline for advice ([0800 319 6789](tel:08003196789)).

Carer support groups can also be a great source of help – see page 12.

Your physical health

Loneliness and isolation can have a severe impact on your health, so make sure you're looking after yourself.

Eating healthily, getting enough sleep and being active can all have a positive effect on your outlook and sense of wellbeing as well as your physical health. Try to avoid drinking too much alcohol, as this can make you feel more depressed. You can use a journal – see chapter 1 – to keep track of what you do and what you eat, and the impact this has on how you feel.

Being unwell, particularly with a long-term illness, can lead to isolation. You may have a disability which makes it hard for you to get out, or think that others don't understand how you're feeling or what you're capable of.

If you have friends or family around you, try to talk to them about how you're feeling. They may be able to help you get the companionship you need, or just reassure you that they care.

There are also many support groups for people affected by illnesses or conditions. They can be an invaluable source of encouragement and moral support. See chapter 2 or our free guide **Living well with long-term health conditions** for suggestions.

Ways to stay in touch

There are many ways to stay in touch these days, even if you find it hard to leave your home. Phone calls can be very satisfying, but if it's hard to find a good time to ring people, try emailing or sending a text message or letter instead. If you've lost touch with old friends, a social networking site like Facebook could help you to reconnect.

When you've become socially isolated, for whatever reason, it can be hard to make contact with people again. Finding a means of communication that really works for you can help nudge you back into the habit of staying in touch.

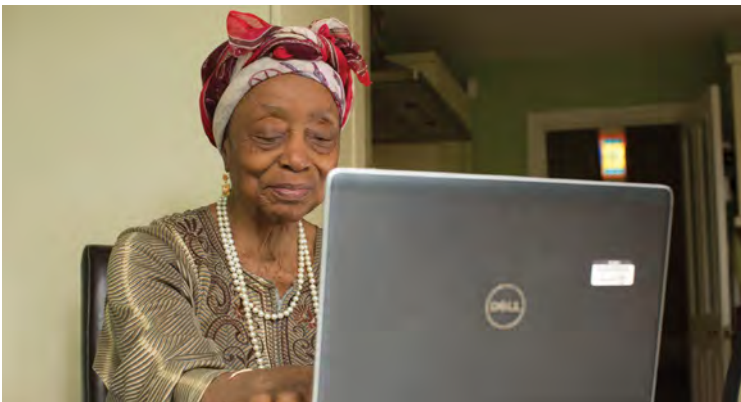
Online forums can be a great way to get in touch with people with similar interests. For example, Gransnet is a social networking site for over-50s. There are discussions on everything from genealogy to cooking and biscuit dunking.

Most forums will have rules, and advice on how to use them safely, but be careful when talking to strangers online. Our webpage independentage.org/information/personal-life/staying-safe-online has useful tips.

Hazel's story

Hazel bought her first computer 13 years ago after her husband died. She says, "I was feeling a bit lonely and my daughter suggested I get a computer. I took computer courses through my local council. I went partly for the company, but mainly because I like learning new things. It's made a great difference because instead of just sitting at home watching television every night, I'm sat talking to friends online."

You can use the internet to make new friends. Websites like [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) let you search for and contact people with similar interests in your area. If you plan on meeting up with a friend you meet online, make sure you stay safe – see page 29 for more information.



Getting technical support

If you're not a confident internet user, you can get support:

- find free or low-cost local courses through the Online Centres Network (**0114 349 1666**, **onlinecentresnetwork.org**) or visit **learnmyway.com**
- AbilityNet has a free technical support helpline for older and disabled people (**0800 048 7642**, **abilitynet.org.uk**)
- your local library may run courses.

If what you'd really like is face-to-face contact, try to arrange that instead. It's important to get the type of social contact that will help you, as well as the right amount.

Many venues, such as churches, music schools, cathedrals or universities have free lunchtime concerts, and they can be a good way to meet people.

Trying something new

Sometimes, the easiest way to break the cycle of loneliness is to meet new people. If you're trying to find new friends that you have more in common with, you could join a group based on an interest or hobby, such as:

- a local choir or orchestra
- a painting or drawing class
- a community gardening group
- a walking or swimming group
- a reading group
- a dance or tai chi class
- an LGBT group
- services or groups at a place of worship.

These types of groups will exist in most areas, but be imaginative. If you've always fancied flower arranging or playing the ukulele, see what's available!

If you'd like to learn or try something new, the University of the Third Age (U3A) has local centres in many areas, which offer a wide range of free or low-cost clubs and classes for older people ([020 8466 6139](tel:02084666139), u3a.org.uk).

You could also search online for courses at [findcourses.co.uk](https://www.findcourses.co.uk). These aren't free but there may be concessions. Joining a group that keeps you active can be particularly helpful. Exercise can boost your mood as well as keeping you in good health.

What's happening in your area?

There may be community events like village fairs you can get involved with, or talks offered by your local library. Your local council may be able to recommend local day centres for older or disabled people, which will offer a range of activities.

If you find it hard to get out or you live in an isolated area, try online groups instead. Many clubs meet online too – for example, there are many online reading groups.

One advantage of joining a group based around an activity is that there may be less pressure to speak to people immediately. Some groups might let you sit in on a meeting before you join in.

Take any new experiences at a pace that suits you. You may have to try a few things before you find one that you like, and it can take time to build trust with any new people you meet.

That was the start – through the coffee morning. I felt like for the first time in 20 years I'd actually laughed! I had a smile. And I thought, this is brilliant – you know, maybe my wish is coming true.



6 Partners and loneliness

I am almost 88 but amazingly healthy. I was widowed many years ago. My problem, really, is a feeling of redundancy. I have a good relationship with my three children and six grandchildren, but in some ways it would be unhealthy if they still needed me. I am not shy and am happy in a group but that is not what I need. I just want one person to care about and who cares about me.

For some people, the loss or lack of a partner can be the hardest thing to cope with. They may have a strong network of friends and family but find that they miss being part of a couple. This can be very hard, especially if you've lost a partner and are adjusting to spending more time on your own.

You may want to put all your energy into finding someone new – however, it can help to focus on other aspects of your life too.

Learning to be alone and to develop other interests and supportive relationships can help you to feel less lonely and increase your sense of self-worth, whether or not you're looking for a partner.

Coping with grief and loss

If you've lost a partner, it's normal to feel lonely and bereft. Give yourself time to come to terms with what has happened and how you're feeling. Grief causes many different feelings and may stay with you for a long time.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, Cruse Bereavement Care may be able to help ([0808 808 1677](tel:08088081677), [cruse.org.uk/bereavement-services/get-help](https://www.cruse.org.uk/bereavement-services/get-help)). Our free guide **Coping with bereavement** has more advice on living with grief and loss.

Separation and divorce

Divorce is becoming more common among older people and there is less stigma attached to it these days. While it may be the best outcome when a relationship breaks down, it can also lead to loneliness. You may have lost some of your social networks, your relationships with your children may be affected and there can be a financial cost as well.

It can take time to work through the issues that come with divorce and it may be helpful to talk to someone. An organisation such as Relate can help – you don't have to be in a relationship to seek advice ([0300 0030396](tel:03000030396), relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-separation-and-divorce).



New relationships

If you feel ready to start a new relationship, there are many ways to meet new people. Building close relationships can take time, so don't be disheartened if it doesn't happen immediately.

If the idea of meeting someone new feels daunting, you might want to start by taking up a new hobby or activity. Joining a group activity would let you spend time with others and start to talk to them at a pace that suits you.

Some people try online dating. This can be very convenient and is usually safe, but be careful when giving out personal information or arranging to meet people for the first time. Mind, the mental health charity, has advice on staying safe online and having healthy online relationships ([0300 123 3393, mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/online-mental-health/online-relationships](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/online-mental-health/online-relationships)).

Our relationship webpages have more advice on dating and relationships in later life [independentage.org/information/personal-life/relationships](https://www.independentage.org/information/personal-life/relationships).

Learning to be alone

If you're feeling lonely, you may try to avoid spending time alone. However, being on your own is not the same as being lonely. Learning to feel comfortable with your own company can help you to feel less lonely even when you don't have others around you.

Spending time apart from others can be a liberating experience – you can use it to do things you enjoy. You might want to learn a new skill or indulge an interest your friends don't share.

If you find it hard to relax or concentrate, you could try mindfulness (mind.org.uk/mindfulness). This is a way of focusing your mind on the present moment. For instance, you might focus on your breathing. It's a useful tool to help manage your thoughts and feelings.

Some people compare themselves to others, and worry that they have a lonelier life than those around them. Try not to do this. One of the drawbacks of social media, such as Facebook, is that we seem to have a constant window into other people's lives. You may see pictures of

people surrounded by friends and family, but this doesn't show the full picture – people often only share the positive parts of their lives.

Try to focus on yourself and how you are feeling. Not everyone needs the same number of companions or type of social contact.

If you want more companionship at home, you could consider getting a pet. Pets can provide unconditional love and company, and many people find them very comforting. Having a dog that needs walking can also give you a reason to go outside and do something active.

If you wouldn't be able to keep your own dog, you could help someone out by walking or looking after their dog through organisations like The Cinnamon Trust ([01736 757 900](tel:01736757900), www.cinnamon.org.uk) or Borrow My Doggy ([020 3826 8628](tel:02038268628), borrowmydoggy.com).

**If it wasn't for my dogs,
I don't think I could
have come through it.**

Helping others

Befriending is a vehicle to try and provide people with companionship – myself as well. I come away having a smile about the conversations we've had.

An Independent Age volunteer

Volunteering

Volunteering works both ways – you're helping other people or a cause you care about, but you can get a lot from it too. Most volunteers find it very rewarding and it can be a great way to meet other people with similar interests.

Some people find that their loneliness stems from feeling that they're not needed. Choosing to do something that makes a difference can show you that's not true and help you feel less isolated.

Have a look for volunteering opportunities in your area – many of them won't require particular skills. For example:

- Volunteering Matters can help you find ways to use your skills and experience in the community (**020 3780 5870, volunteeringmatters.org.uk/volunteering**)
- **Do-it.org** is a good place to search for local opportunities if you're online
- Re-engage hosts afternoon tea parties for over-75s. They need volunteer drivers and hosts, or you could sign up as a guest (**0800 716543, reengage.org.uk**)
- Organisations such as Independent Age look for volunteers to make regular phone calls or visits to older people. You could volunteer or request phone calls or visits for yourself (**020 7605 4255, independentage.org/volunteer**).

Homeshare

If you live alone and have a spare room, you could consider joining a Homeshare scheme. This would match you with someone who needs affordable housing. They would keep you company and help around the home if needed. Contact HomeshareUK for details (**0151 227 3499, homeshareuk.org**).

John's story

"My wife and I were married for 63 years. When she died a few years ago, I fell into a depression. I had this feeling of loneliness, emptiness and uncertainty. I couldn't plan anything; I felt lost. My two daughters were kind, but it's so difficult when you've been with someone for such a long time and they are no longer there.

"What finally saved me was making a lot of friends in the village. One in particular, Mary, encouraged me to meet people. She made me realise that I had to think about the future; it was no good spending all my time looking back. Thanks to Mary I started going out more. I love cooking so I made cakes for local coffee mornings. Once I got to know people there, I invited them home for lunch.

"I also asked Independent Age for a volunteer to visit me. Andrew and I always have a chat and a laugh. It's what you need. We both have engineering backgrounds which gives us a lot to talk about.

“Besides talking about work, we have a chat about family, we discuss things on the telly. Having a visitor has given me pleasures that I wouldn't have had. Andrew's someone I can rely on. His visits break up my day and mean I see someone I wouldn't normally see.

“I've realised that when I have nothing to do, I sit and think – and then I feel lonely. I know now I have to keep myself busy. I do believe that's the answer for all of us.”



Things you could try after reading this guide

- Keep a simple journal to record your feelings and track your progress – see chapter 1
- Try using self-help books and resources to change your thinking – chapter 2
- Contact a support organisation for more help – chapter 2
- Set yourself simple targets for getting in touch with people – chapter 3
- Find out if there are any benefits you could claim to boost your income – chapter 3
- Look for ways to improve your physical health – chapter 3
- Try something new – a course, a hobby or getting online – chapters 4 and 5
- Volunteer – or ask for a volunteer to support you – chapter 8.

Our practical, jargon-free advice guides give you the information you need to get the most out of older age.

To find out about our full range of guides and order copies, call 0800 319 6789 or visit independentage.org/publications

We want the UK to be the best place to grow older and we have ambitious targets to increase the number of older people we help and the difference we make. We receive no state funding and rely on income from individuals, trusts and other sources to continue providing our services to hundreds of thousands of older people in need.

Visit independentage.org to make a secure online donation and find out about other ways to support us. Alternatively, you can call us on **020 7605 4223** or email supporters@independentage.org



About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

For more information, visit our website **independentage.org**

Call us for information or to arrange free, impartial advice from an adviser. Lines are open 8.30am – 6.30pm Monday to Friday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **advice@independentage.org**



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