

## Communication Openness, Anxiety and Stress among Young Adults: A Correlational Study

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines communication openness between young adults and their parents and its effect on the anxiety and stress levels of the young adults. The family being at the center of India's social structure, relationships formed within the family shape all other interpersonal relationships that individuals form in their life. Hence, it is important to focus on communication openness between young adults and their parents to plan effectual interventions while treating anxiety and stress, whose prevalence increases day-by-day in today's world. We chose a sample of 51 individuals falling between the age range of 18-25 years using purposive sampling and we used SPSS to analyze the data collected. We found the correlation between communication openness and anxiety and stress to be -0.425 and -0.277 respectively, which indicates that while anxiety has a strong negative correlation, stress has a weak negative correlation. Anxiety, being a cognitive disorder based on worrying, reduces when individuals communicate openly. Stress, on the other hand, is based on real events, in which case talking about it rarely reduces it. These factors can change how family interventions are planned involving young adults to treat their anxiety and stress levels.

**Keywords:** *Communication Openness, Anxiety, Stress*

**Y**oung adulthood is the developmental age comprising the late teens and the early twenties, i.e., between 18-24 years of age and precedes the stage of middle adulthood. This developmental period of transition from adolescence to adulthood is characterized by numerous lifestyle changes and the addition of new responsibilities, along with changes in relationship dynamics. This stage is, therefore, also referred to as a "problem age" (Hurlock, 2001), where young adults shift from dependence on their parents to independence and maturity.

**Young adults go through various physiological, sexual, cognitive and emotional changes.**

- a) **Physiological Changes** - Early adulthood is mainly a phase of transition, characterized by the development of sexual characteristics in an individual as well as physical maturation. An individual undergoes complete physical maturation, attaining full adult height and noticing an increase in weight. Secondary sexual

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characteristics, like the size of the penis or breasts, are also complete. They also establish their own sexual identity and incorporate it into their own identity.

- b) **Cognitive Changes** - Neuroimaging studies have shown that the brain fully develops around the age of 25 years (Johnson, Blum, & Giedd, 2009), i.e., when the individual transitions to middle adulthood. The brain of young adults is still not fully developed and hence, is not capable of taking completely rational decisions. While adolescents use their amygdala to process information, which is the emotional part of the brain, adults use the prefrontal cortex, the brain's rational part. During early adulthood, young adults, thus, experience significant development in their decision-making skills and abstract thinking skills. They also develop the ability to see things from others' perspectives and take others more into consideration.
- c) **Psychological and Emotional Changes** -As young adults end their phase of adolescence, they move away from their caregivers, become self-reliant and develop a firmer self of sense. They re-establish their relationship with their parents which is balanced between independence and connection. (Committee on Improving the Health, Board on Children, Medicine, & Council, 2015) Erik Erikson has described the young adulthood phase as the "intimacy vs. isolation" phase. Young adults in this phase learn to develop satisfying relationships with their peers, family and romantic partners to fulfil their need for intimacy and sex. Successful completion of this stage results in healthy, satisfying relationships, while failure results in isolation. (Batra, 2013) Unmet needs and unsuccessful events lead to feelings of inadequacy as well as an inferior sense of self.

With so many changes occurring in the lives of young adults, any maladjustment becomes a stressor and leads to anxiety and depression. A lot of research has been conducted which indicate that young adults are experiencing an increased level of stress and depression. (Meyers, 2018) In the year 1971, the legal adult age was shifted from 21 to 18. This resulted in the reduction of the adolescent phase and resulted in young adults facing new obstacles they are unprepared for. Being "adults" now, young adults are expected to adjust to these new changes by themselves and are termed "immature" if they ask for guidance or support while dealing with new challenges. Thus, unprepared and alone, young adults find it hard to cope successfully with the sudden shift in adjustments and experience a lot of stress and anxiety, sometimes leading to other mental illnesses.

### *Anxiety among Young Adults*

Earlier studies have shown that anxiety and different types of anxiety, especially panic attacks and social anxiety, have constantly been on the rise and are affecting young adults even more than ever before. Anxiety, commonly characterized by excessive worrying, a constant state of fear and dread, irritability and isolation, is a result of high levels of stress, trauma, hereditary traits or substance abuse. A survey conducted by Statista (2017) in 2016 showed that 55% of 6122 Indians between the age of 15-34 years were "highly anxious". Young adults are highly vulnerable to the onset of anxiety-inducing conditions. The most common reasons stated for their anxiety were parents' health, personal health, family problems and jobs, in that order. A study conducted in the USA by Goodwin et. al. (2020) showed that in the group of 18-25-year-old respondents, anxiety has increased from 7.97% in 2008 to 14.66% in 2018, being the most rapid change in all the age groups. Anxiety, apart from having an impact on the functionality of mental health of a person, also has an effect on brain development and leads to other concurring disorders like substance abuse, sleep disorder, depression and ADHD can also be indicators of anxiety in an individual.

### ***Stress among Young Adults***

Stress is the result of or a general response to an action or situation arising from the interaction between the individual and his environment that place special physical or psychological demands on the individual. These demands, commonly labelled as stressors, and the individual reaction to them take various forms and depend on the individual's coping mechanism and other genetic factors. (Singh & Gururaj, 2014) All the simultaneous changes in almost every aspect of their life can cause a lot of stress for some individuals, especially if they are unable to cope up with the pressure and don't meet the expectations of their immediate circle. A disparity in the coping mechanisms can lead to a range of developmental disorders, both internal and external. Being in a constant state of stress also affects the immune system and can make the person mentally paralyzed while dealing with such situations. Typical causes of stress in daily life include academic pressure, parental and peer pressure, determining their own self-identity and social media.

### ***Communication Openness***

Verbal communication is of different types, depending on the setting and relationship between two people. Communication is defined as the flow of information between two or more persons and is a deciding factor in any relationship. Being aware of one's communication style helps one resolve differences and build a strong relationship by putting information across more effectively. Different people tend to have different communication styles, viz. Open, Closed, Direct, Indirect, Passive, etc. This research studies the effect of open communication.

Open Communication occurs when all participants involved can freely express themselves, feel heard and accepted and are able to contribute equally to the conversation. It allows full expression of ideas, thoughts and emotions (Open Communication in the Workplace: Definition, Skills and Benefits, 2015) and creates space to discuss and deal with these feelings. It is a slower process compared to closed communication.

### ***Role of Parents***

In a collectivist society like India's, the family is the smallest unit and is a major source of support for individuals. Considering the family's crucial role in the development of an individual, interpersonal communication within a family, especially between the young adult and the parental figures, is of utmost importance to understand the development of a young adult's personality and their reaction to stressful situations. Families promote cohesion and co-dependence and hence, prove to be excellent resources for mental health. (Deb & Chadda, 2013) Studies have shown that social support from family, including siblings, parents and spouses, can reduce the prevalence of mental disorders in young adults.

The societal and cultural background determine family dynamics, structure and functioning by outlining boundaries, interaction and communication patterns, practices as well as discipline in the household. (Deb & Chadda, 2013) Therefore, it is important to study the impact of family functioning and communication patterns between young adults and their parents and their effect on young adults. Family relationships and early experiences with the parents can either be positive or negative and can either promote or harm the development of an individual. A positive and warm early relationship fosters trust, constructive communication patterns and a well-developed coping mechanism in later adulthood. On the other hand, a negative early relationship, resulting from low levels of cohesion, instils a negative interpersonal style and leads to poorer development of coping mechanisms.

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Young adults go through different obstacles in their relationships depending on their upbringing and behavior and seek guidance and support from their close ones. However, as the majority of the Indian families are still very conservative, these young adults are unable to talk about their problems with their parents out of fear of rejection or punishment and are left alone to deal with their pain. The developmental changes that young adults go through can have a great effect on their mental health and often lead to stress, depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication openness refers to open disclosure of thoughts and feelings and a healthy engagement in discussions. (Arieti & Bemporad, 1978) It is an indicator of intimacy, relationship satisfaction and liking between two or more individuals. (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006) Calculated self-disclosure and perceived parental responsiveness determine the openness of communication between young adults and their parents. (Jiang, Yang, & Wang, 2016) Individual disposition (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004), topic valence (McManus & Nussbaum, 2013), family structure (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007) and parenting styles (Tilton-Weaver, 2014) have been shown to determine the openness of communication.

#### *Communication Openness and Anxiety among Young Adults*

Very few studies have been conducted to analyze the relationship between communication and its effect on psychological aspects. A study conducted by Lutz, Hock and Kang (2007) showed that communication openness has proven to be an essential component in dealing with anxiety. Theoretical perspectives like cognitive and psychodynamic theories have proposed that communication openness and healthy coping mechanisms are directly related to each other and result in mental well-being, better overall functioning, better physical health, better immune responses and resolution of the stressor. (Lutgendorf & Antoni, 1999)

Open communication in families has also shown to improve socio-emotional competence in children by increasing their emotional awareness and understanding (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991) and increasing empathy (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Individuals with open communication styles have shown to have developed enhanced abilities to accurately process and resolve stressors. The advanced development of coping mechanisms helps young adults deal effectively with anxiety-causing situations and engage in conversations with their parents to seek support. If the young adults view their parents as supportive, they are more likely to communicate freely and keep lesser secrets. (Tilton-Weaver, 2014)

#### *Communication Openness and Stress among Young Adults*

Expressing emotions and distress has proved to be a good way to cope with stress (Schüler, Job, Fröhlich, & Brandstätter, 2009) and has shown to reduce young adults' stress, facilitate insight, and develop interpersonal relationships in a desired way. (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001) Opening up about experiences has also been shown to play an important role in building resilience to stressful situations (Hetherington & Blechman, 2014). Easterbrooks, Biesecker, & Lyons-Ruth (2000) found that young adults raised in an environment of open communication since early childhood were more open and engaged in efficient emotional dialogues as adults. Communication openness and quality of relationship mutually affect each other; openness in communication depends on the quality of the relationship between young adults and their parents and the quality of the relationship depends on how open the communication is. (Pilkington, Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993)

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In a study conducted by Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, (2001) they found that, although sharing negative experiences led to revisiting the unpleasant feelings for participants, they were still willing to talk about the stressful or other emotional memory because it helped reduce the emotional load of the incident and reduced stress. Talking about the stressful experience changes the cognitive and emotional processing of the experience and prevents it from distracting cognition, affecting emotion and triggering physiological stress in the individual. (Lepore & Smyth, 2002) On the other hand, persistent concealment of emotions led to poor psychological and physical well-being and caused an increase in blood pressure and heart rate. (Disclosure and health - Health psychology, 2020)

Research on communication openness has shown that it is especially effective in coping with high degrees of stress, thus being most useful for young adults going through major life changes. According to Koepke & Denissen (2012), the separation-individuation orientation of young adults also decides their openness in communication with their parents. Young adults with dysfunctional independence tend to engage in closed communication patterns with their parents, while those with dysfunctional dependence exhibit high levels of communication openness in an attempt to establish closer ties. (Maunder, Lancee, Nolan, Hunter, & Tannenbaum, 2006) Apart from the communication styles adopted by young adults, the psychological well-being of the parents also affects communication between parents and young adults. Children of depressed parents are subject to negative affective styles (Davies & Cummings, 1995) which affects the quality of communication and causes more stress instead of resolving the existing stressor. According to Schug, Yuki, & Maddux (2010), communication openness is not practiced widely in Asian families, who exhibit closed communication styles within the family and open communication styles with their peers.

### ***Anxiety and Stress***

Stress has been defined as a physiological or psychological response to an internal or external stressor (APA dictionary of psychology) or as a physiological response to threatening situations. Stress directly affects an individual's psychological and physiological health by causing mind-body changes and reducing quality of life. Anxiety, on the other hand, is being in a constant state of worry, even when an internal or external stressor is not present. Stress is characterized by symptoms like irritability, fatigue, digestive problems, etc. while typical symptoms of anxiety may look like insomnia, muscle tension, irritability, etc.

Stress and anxiety are very similar and can be resolved with similar coping mechanisms (APA, 2020). A study conducted by Ranjita Misra and Michelle Mckean (2000) showed that young adults experiencing academic stress also suffered from anxiety, thus proving that anxiety and academic stress are positively correlated. Exposure to stress in early life impairs the hippocampus, which is responsible for regulation of stress response (Levone, Cryan, & O'Leary, 2015). This permanently alters cognition, emotion and stress responsiveness in an individual and contributes to numerous psychopathologies like anxiety, PTSD, depression, etc. (Kim, Kim, & Pellman, 2015)

### ***Rationale***

India, being a collectivist society, has family as its core institution. A family is the main source of support, motivation and learning for an individual and plays a vital role in the development of an individual. Communication shapes the relationships formed between the members of a family, which is reciprocated with relations made outside the family with

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friends, relatives, etc. Interpersonal communication within a family not only instils social skills in a person but also teaches an individual to deal with difficult situations effectively.

Stress and anxiety are some of the most common mental illnesses prevalent among young adults in India. These problems further translate into other illnesses such as depression, poor health and in the worst situations, suicide. India has a suicide rate higher than the global average of 10.6 at 15.7/100,000. (Srivastava, Chatterjee, & Bhat, 2016) In the age group of 15-29 in India, suicide is the most common cause of death. A recent study by a matrimonial website showed that 68% of the youth are unwilling to share their problems with their parents, citing generational gap and discomfort as the reasons. However, 53% also shared that this led to more anxiety and stress for them, even though 92% of the parents were ready to have conversations with their offspring about relationships. (Desai, 2020)

The growing stress and anxiety among the youth, owing to different factors like a surge in the use of social media, the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying lifestyle changes, change in socialization patterns, etc. further lead to other mental illnesses and result in gross maladjustment in social and professional situations.

Family, thus, is an important source of stimulation and determines how an individual is shaped. The parenting style and communication patterns within family members play a huge role in deciding an individual's stress response and are therefore essential in understanding how it affects a young adult's mental health.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Research Problem:***

The present research aims to study the correlation between communication openness between young adults and their parents and its effect on anxiety and stress among young adults.

#### ***Objectives:***

1. To study the correlation between communication openness and anxiety among young adults
2. To study the correlation between communication openness and stress among young adults
3. To study the correlation between anxiety and stress

#### ***Hypotheses:***

1. Communication openness shows a negative correlation with anxiety
2. Communication openness shows a negative correlation with stress
3. Anxiety is positively correlated to stress
4. Communication openness would be a good predictor of anxiety and stress

#### ***Operational Definitions:***

- **Communication Openness** - Communication openness is defined as the ease of talking to each other and the extent of understanding gained when talking to each other (Ayoko, 2007) and is used synonymously with listening, honesty, trust, supportiveness, etc. in many types of research. It is the ease and willingness of young adults to communicate with their parents, measured through a test studying the level of intimacy the subject feels while sharing their feelings and thoughts with their parents.

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- **Anxiety-** The Encyclopedia of Psychology (2000) defines anxiety as an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure. It is usually caused by recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns regarding certain consequences or perceived threats and a persistent feeling of dread.
- **Stress** - Stress is a feeling of mental pressure and tension. Stress is experienced in response to a stressor, which is defined as anything that threatens homeostasis. (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005) Various situations elicit different responses in different individuals based on their coping skills. Stress is caused by any physical, emotional or psychological strain and leads to chemical changes in the body that can result in high blood pressure, increased heart rate and high blood sugar levels. Chronic exposure to stress can lead to tissue damage and disease. (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005)

### *Sample*

The sample of this research consisted of both male and female young adults between the age of 18-25 years from the state of Maharashtra (India), selected using purposive sampling. The total sample size is 51 across different socio-economic levels.

### *Research Design*

The research is a correlational study between the communication openness between young adults and their parents and their anxiety and stress levels. This design aimed to help study and understand the effect communication has on the mental health of young adults and whether it has a positive, negative or no correlation with anxiety and stress.

### *Tools*

To test the hypothesis mentioned previously, we collected data using the following tools. The description of the instruments used is given below.

1. **Perceived Stress Scale by Sheldon Cohen (1983):** The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a classic stress assessment tool which helps us understand how different situations affect our feelings and our perceived stress. Participants score the 10 items on the scale from 0 to 4 based on their own experience. The total score is then tallied and the perceived stress is measured according to the range specified in the scale. The standardized cutoffs are 0-13 low stress, 14-26 moderate perceived stress and 27-40 high perceived stress. The scale has reliability of 0.78 and validity of  $r = 0.39$  at  $p < 0.001$ .
2. **Beck Anxiety Inventory by Aaron T. Beck (1990):** The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) is a 21 item self-report inventory. It is used for measuring the severity of anxiety in children and adults. The items are related to common symptoms of anxiety that the subject has experienced in a month before answering the inventory. The items are scored on a 3-point scale ranging from not at all to severely. The standardized cutoffs are 0-7 normal to minimal anxiety, 8-15 mild anxiety, 16-25 moderate anxiety and 30-60 severe anxiety. The test has high internal consistency with Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$ .
3. **Communication Openness Test:** A test for Communication Openness was constructed for the purpose of this study. The test consists of 15 items that covers different aspects of conversation between parents and young adults, thus measuring communication openness between them. A 3-point Likert scale was used to measure each item where 1 – Disagree, 2 – Neutral and 3 – Agree. We distributed the test randomly to a sample of 160 respondents between the age of 18-25 years, including both male and female, with

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adequate representation from each age group. We found the reliability to be 0.77, as shown in the table below:

**Table 1: Reliability of Test for Communication Openness**

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.756	.769	15

The items were constructed based on the FACES-IV (Olson, 2011) and on characteristics of communication openness defined by previous researchers.

### **Statistical Analysis:**

We used Pearson's Product Moment Correlation in SPSS to test the relationship between communication openness and anxiety and stress, and regression to predict anxiety and stress with communication openness.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

We analyzed the data collected from 51 participants between the age of 18-25 statistically using SPSS. Given below are the descriptive and inferential statistics:

**Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation for Communication Openness, Anxiety and Stress Descriptive Statistics**

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication Openness	34.06	6.256
Stress	19.69	7.479
Anxiety	18.73	12.279

**Table 3: Pearson's Correlation for Communication Openness, Anxiety and Stress Inferential Statistics**

Variables	Anxiety	Stress
Communication Openness	-0.425	-0.277
Level of Significance	<0.001	0.049

Table 3 shows the obtained results for Pearson Product Moment Correlation for anxiety, stress and communication openness for the total sample. It can be observed that the correlation 'r' between communication openness and anxiety is negative and statistically significant ( $r = -.425$  at  $p = 0.01$ ).

1. The correlation between communication openness and anxiety is negative and statistically significant at  $r = -0.425$  at  $p < 0.01$  level.
2. There is a negative correlation between communication openness and stress, but it is not significant, with  $r = -0.277$  at  $p < 0.49$  level.

**Table 4: Pearson Correlation between Anxiety and Stress**

Variables	Anxiety
Stress	0.669
Level of Significance	<0.001



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- Anxiety and stress are positively correlated and statistically significant at  $r = 0.669$  at  $p < 0.001$  level.

### Inferential Statistics for Communication Openness and Anxiety

*Table 5: Model Summary of Regression Values for Comm. Openness and Anxiety*

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
.425	.181	.164

*Table 6: ANOVA Values for Comm. Openness and Anxiety*

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Regression</b>	1364.728	1	1364.728	10.832	.002
<b>Residual</b>	6173.428	49	125.988		
<b>Total</b>	7538.157	50			

- Communication openness predicted 16.4% of anxiety at  $F = 10.832$  and  $p < 0.01$ .

### Inferential Statistics for Communication Openness and Stress

*Table 7 Model Summary of Regression Values for Comm. Openness and Stress*

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
.277	.077	.058

*Table 8: ANOVA Values for Comm. Openness and Stress*

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Regression</b>	214.623	1	214.623	4.072	.049
<b>Residual</b>	2582.357	49	52.701		
<b>Total</b>	2796.980	50			

- Communication openness predicted 5.8% of stress at  $F = 4.072$  and  $p < 0.05$ .

## DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis stating that communication openness shows a negative correlation with anxiety was supported, as the Pearson's correlation coefficient was negative and statistically significant at 0.01 level ( $r = -0.425$ ). This means that higher the score on communication openness, lower the anxiety experienced by the young adult. This finding is consistent with previous research by Lutz, Hock and Kang (2007) and also with the study by Ghazavi, et al (2016) in which they found that poor family communication can induce anxiety and is an important aspect of well-being.

The second hypothesis that states that communication openness shows a negative correlation with stress with  $r = -0.277$  with  $p < 0.05$ . Thus, the hypothesis was accepted, as communication openness shows a weak relation with stress. This is consistent with Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, (2001) study where they found that talking about stressful events reduced stress experienced in a situation, and improved coping skills.

The third hypothesis, which states that anxiety and stress are positively correlated, was also accepted as they showed a strong positive correlation of  $r = 0.669$  at  $p < 0.01$  level. This is

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consistent with a wide range of existing literature, for example in (2020) Georgia Konstantopoulou, et al's study showed high association between stress and anxiety.

The fourth hypothesis stated that communication openness would be a good predictor of anxiety and stress. This hypothesis was also accepted for anxiety at  $F=10.832$  at  $p<0.01$  and stress at  $F=4.072$  at  $p<0.5$ . Adjusted  $R^2$  for anxiety 0.164 shows that communication openness can reduce anxiety by 16.4% in most cases, while stress, at adj.  $R^2 = 0.058$ , reduces by 5.8%.

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From the study, it can be concluded that communication openness has a negative correlation with both, anxiety and stress, and thus affects the mental health of young adults. Hence, it is an important aspect of focus while planning and implementing interventions for the improvement of mental health among young adults.

As has been shown in previous research, anxiety and stress co-occur in most of the cases and often have similar intervention techniques. Moreover, communication openness can also be a predictor for anxiety and stress and can be used effectively to improve communication openness.

### DELIMITATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

#### *Delimitations of the Study*

We conducted the study on a sample of 51 males and females between the age of 18-25 years. Their economic status was not taken into consideration and the population was selected based on purposive sampling.

#### *Limitation of the Study*

The researcher was not able to find an equally representative sample for all age groups considered for the study. We obtained more responses from the age group of 22-25 while very few were obtained from 18-21 age group. Whether the young adults were living with their parents or not at the time of answering the tests was also not taken into consideration, which can highly affect their levels of stress and anxiety.

#### *Suggestions for Further Research*

Future research should focus on studying how communication openness varies with income levels and socio-economic classes, along with the stress and anxiety levels. Further improvisation of the test for communication openness can also help strengthen the validity of the test. The correlation between communication openness and other variables like depression, substance abuse and suicidal tendencies can also be checked in further research.

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