

WORKING TOWARD WHAT MATTERS:

Occupational Therapy Student Services and Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) at the University of Alberta Career Centre

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What is Acceptance & Commitment Therapy?

Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a 3rd wave cognitive behavioral therapy that uses mindfulness and acceptance strategies to help people work through difficulties, towards the end of taking life in a valued direction (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012).

To explore a client's experience of doing, the ACT Psychological Flexibility Model is used, which describes 6 processes to promoting psychological flexibility (Hayes, 2019): present moment awareness, self-as-context, cognitive defusion, acceptance, values, and committed action (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012).

ACT enhances discussion of engagement in meaningful occupation via addressing values identification and committed action, as well as the client's experience of doing via present moment awareness, acceptance, cognitive defusion, and self-awareness (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012) – all of which are intended to promote more flexible engagement in meaningful activities.

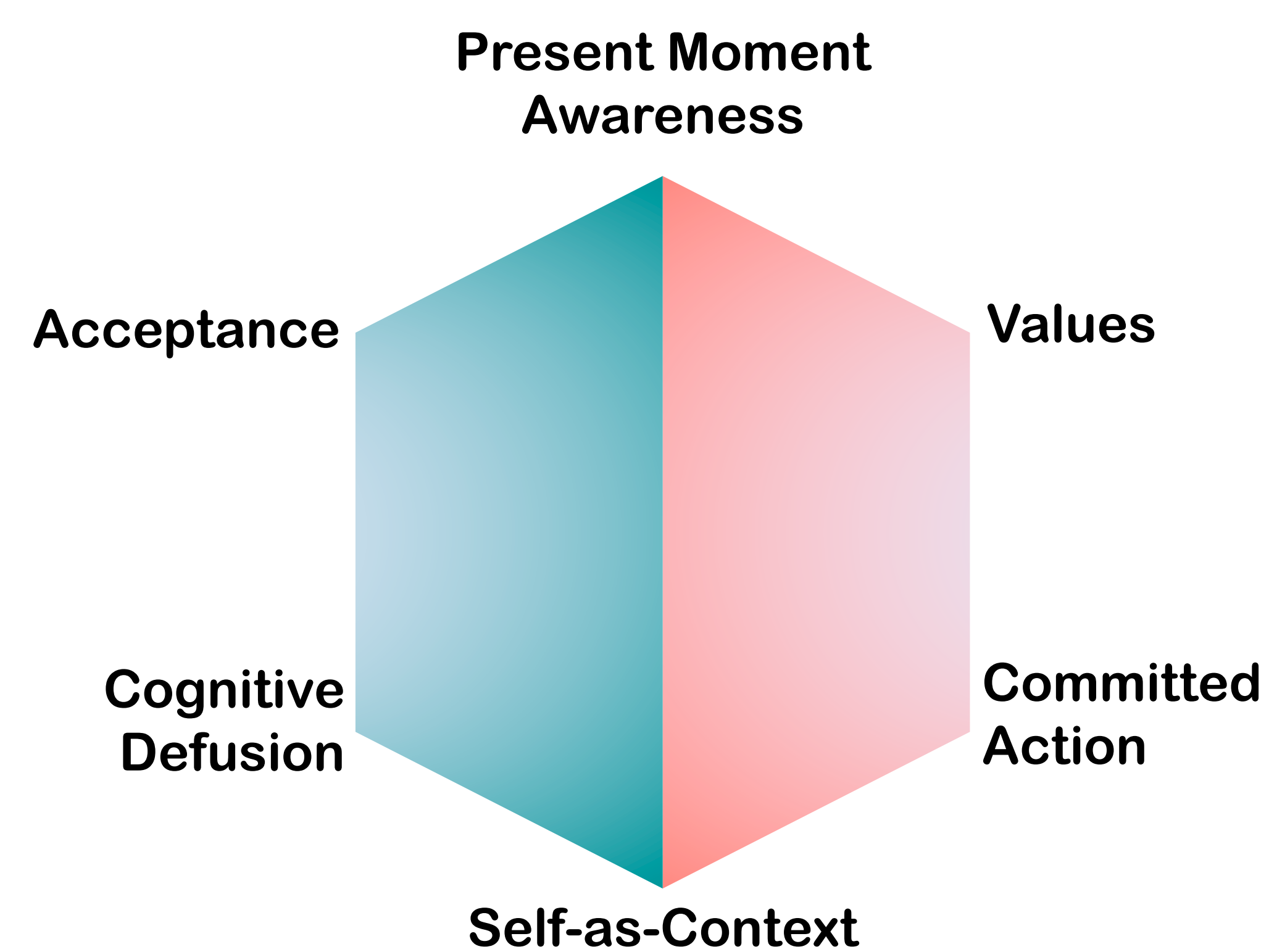


Figure 2. The ACT Psychological Flexibility Model (Harris, 2019).

Use of ACT in Canadian Post-Secondary Education

Mental health problems can have a significant impact on a student's academic performance, school engagement, and quality of life. There is growing evidence to support the use of ACT interventions to promote students' psychological flexibility and to positively impact students' mental health and wellbeing.

- ACT intervention in post-secondary settings have been offered through self-help books, classes, workshop formats and through counselling services (Grégoire et al., 2018).
- Results studies of ACT-based group intervention among Canadian university students demonstrate a positive effect of the intervention on student's psychological flexibility, psychological health and their academic commitment (Grégoire et al., 2016; Grégoire et al., 2018; (Morin et al., 2020)
- Current research suggest that ACT interventions, especially those that target psychological flexibility processes through experiential and contemplative exercises, may be effective in helping university students manage stress, anxiety, and depression and may promote improved engagement in academic activities and a greater sense of well being (Morin et al., 2020).

Occupational Therapy Student Services

Occupational Therapists (OTs) help individuals participate in activities that they want or need to do. OTs focus on an individual's unique life situation, taking a person-centered approach to help them move towards the things in life that matter.

OT Student Services at the University of Alberta Career Centre offer a variety of services to promote the health and wellbeing of students and alumni.

The aim of OT Student Services is to promote participation in meaningful activities, which can include:

- Lifestyle needs (rest, stress, self-care, leisure, work/volunteer, time use, community engagement, etc.)
- Physical health needs (ergonomics, physical disability, fatigue, chronic pain, sleep hygiene, etc.)
- Psychosocial needs (cognition, stress management, addictions, anxiety, autism spectrum, ADHD, depression, sensory needs, etc.)
- Contextual/environmental needs – all in service of more fully establishing vitalizing habits, roles, and routines

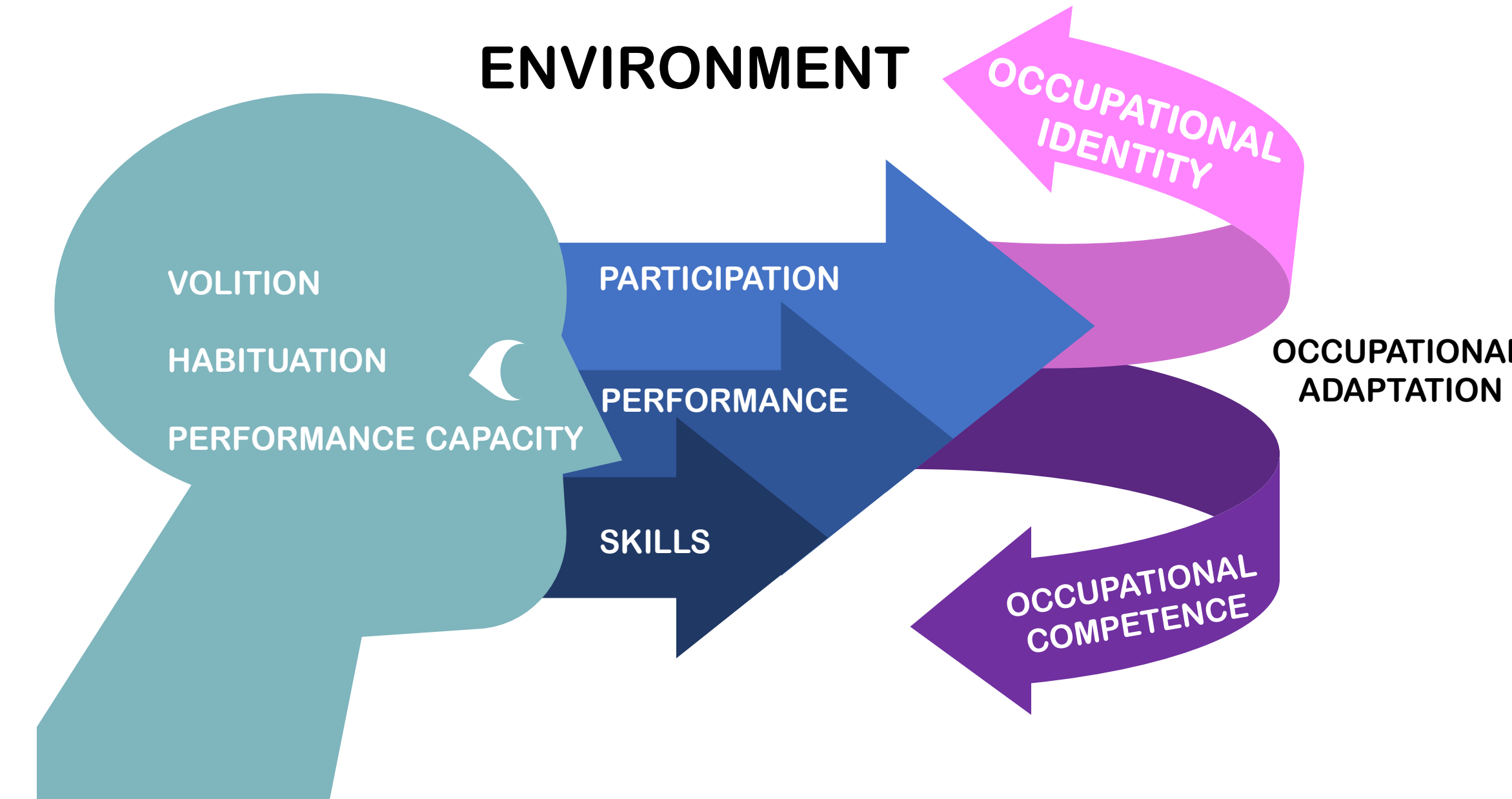


Figure 1. The Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) (Taylor, 2017).

OT Student Services uses MOHO as an occupation-focused conceptual framework to approach therapeutic services. In this model, a person is viewed as a system that is changing and reorganizing itself through occupational engagement. OT focuses on doing to enable an individual to reshape their occupational competence and identity, therefore becoming more adaptive.

Service Delivery & Approach

- OT Student Services offers 50-minute sessions - following either brief, time-limited, or single-session delivery.
- Model of Human Occupation (Taylor, 2017) and Recovery Philosophy (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020) are used to frame the therapeutic approach.
- Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT, pronounced 'act') is used to structure occupation-focused interviewing, and provide a method for exploring clients' experiences of doing (Polk et al., 2016).
- Sessions focus on the client's experiences of doing and how it shapes their ability to participate in meaningful activities.
- Sessions are experiential in nature as they incorporate awareness exercises, activity, and skills practice.
- Clients are provided home practice materials to work on skills explored in session.

"Having OT services [at] the Career Centre [gave] students the options to talk about some of the barriers and difficulties they were facing with finding a job or engaging in university life, and then be able to discuss how to overcome these barriers during individual sessions."

- MScOT Student (on working with UofA students & alumni)

Accessibility Work Experience Program

The Accessibility Work Experience Program (AWEP) within the Career Centre provides students and alumni of the UofA who have permanent disabilities and/or mental health diagnosis with employment opportunities to develop meaningful employable skills and professional networks.

Opportunities are created through collaboration with employers who are offered a wage subsidy of between \$10/hour and \$15/hour for a 4-6 month position. Employers are found based on positions that best fit the students needs, level of education and experience. AWEP is funded by the Government of Canada's Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities.

To be eligible to apply for AWEP individuals must be a Canadian citizen, permanent resident or refugee legally entitled to work in Canada and not eligible for the assistance under Employment Insurance

"I loved working with students because of their drive and because they're at such an exciting, complicated, monumental stage in their lives. I feel like they were still figuring out who they were as well as who they wanted to be in the future. I found them open to trying new things and exploring new concepts, which was helpful when using ACT."

-MScOT Student (on working with UofA students & alumni)

MScOT Student Experiences & Perspectives

Since January 2019, 10 students have completed a role-emerging placement at the Career Centre as part of a fieldwork education component of the University of Alberta MSc in Occupational Therapy program.

OT students who have completed a fieldwork placement at the Career Centre describe the OT service provision at this site as collaborative, client-centered, and important for supporting student autonomy and success.

OT students express that they enjoy working with students and alumni and find them to be a humbling and exciting population to work with. They note that it is inspiring to work with these individuals because they are open, motivated and dedicated to making changes in their lives to meet their goals.

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