



# Walking through Grief

# Understanding grief and loss

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*by Focus on the Family Canada*

*"I never realised that grieving was about more than just someone dying," a friend once told me as we processed some losses she had experienced.*

## **Different For Everyone**

Most of us have either lost a loved one through death or sat with a friend who has done so. Perhaps we have heard of the "stages of grief," including bargaining, denial, anger, depression and eventually, acceptance. While referred to as "stages," they are not actually linear – people tend to cycle in and out of them, or even experience several at the same time. Maybe we have experienced these stages ourselves or watched our friend go through them. Everyone experiences and displays grief in a different way and it is important to allow each person to feel what they feel and not prescribe a certain way of grieving.

In every case, grief is about losing someone or something that mattered to us. When it is a person, others around us understand and empathise and it is often a fairly public event in our lives. Funerals and memorials are deeply meaningful rituals that offer us the opportunity to express our love and pay tribute to those we've lost.

## **Grieving in Private**

However, other losses are less public or obvious. Couples who assume they will have a family grieve when they learn they are infertile or experience pregnancy loss. Singles who planned to get married someday find themselves ageing and no one has come along. Individuals who have trained for careers and found success elusive lose promotions, or even jobs. Dreams come crashing down around us when disappointed expectations, illness, injury, divorce, abandonment, rebellion, conflict, natural disasters or financial hardships intrude into our lives. These are important losses as well, but often they are not grieved as they need to be.

## **Biblical Perspective on Loss**

Sometimes we are sent a subtle message that we should just "suck it up" or "rejoice in the Lord always" when these things happen. Christians in particular may feel they are not allowed to really experience and grieve these types of losses. But we need a biblical perspective on loss:

**1.** Scripture demonstrates and encourages honest and open expression of emotion; consider especially the Psalms, where pain is

lamented and feelings are aired freely  
(Psalm 38; Job.)

**2.** Honest questions are asked of God.

"Where are you, God?" (Psalm 79).

"Does this really need to happen?"

(Matthew 26:36-39). "Is there no  
alternative?" "Won't you rescue us?"

**3.** An invitation exists to join the  
community of faith in affirming that  
even in hard circumstances, God is  
there and God is good (Psalm 46:1-3).

**4.** The final word is that God remains  
faithful (Habakkuk 3:17-19). We are  
invited to rejoice, not in our pain, but  
in the continuing presence of God at  
work in us. This is a matter of trust  
and faith.

We need to acknowledge losses in  
our own lives; we need to validate  
losses in the lives of others. We need  
to recognise them, grieve them, and  
then put them into perspective. God  
remains faithful. If you need  
permission to mourn a loss, consider  
it given.

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# How to help a grieving friend

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by Shirley Thiessen

*"The more you encourage the mourner to teach you about their loss from a position of caring curiosity, the less you will feel the need to "fix things." You will be a comforting presence (Ephesians 4:29).*

**Finding the right words to say is not always easy. Here are some suggestions:**

1. You are not alone. We are grieving with you.
2. Honestly, I don't know what to say.
3. I miss him/her too. My favourite memory of your loved one is \_\_\_\_.
4. I'm available on Tuesday or Friday to walk your dog, do your laundry or take your kids to the park. What would be most helpful?
5. My heart is hurting with you.
6. I'm so sorry for your loss.
7. I'm here to listen.
8. I missed the chance to get to know your loved one. I'd like to meet him/her through your memories. What was he/she like?

9. I can't imagine how hard it must be to face these days without your loved one. Are there particular times of the day or days of the week you find especially hard?

10. I feel honoured as you share your pain with me by shedding tears. Tears are not a sign of weakness or a lack of faith. They are evidence of the deep love you have for \_\_\_\_.

## **Please don't say it!**

Although well-meaning, these sentences may feel wounding to a griever or fail to communicate the empathy you're intending:

1. Call me if you need anything. (Instead, choose #4 on the previous list.)
2. It's been a year. Are you over it now?
3. God won't give you more than you can handle.
4. Time heals all wounds.
5. God must have something to teach you through this loss.

6. At least you have other children. At least you can get married again. At least . . .

7. I miss the person you were before your loss. When will you be your old self again?

8. I know how you feel.

9. It's good that your loved one isn't suffering anymore.

10. It could be worse. I know someone who has experienced a more devastating loss than yours. Our ability to actively listen will effectively inform the words of empathy we choose to say. Thank you for being a compassionate grief companion (or what I call a "Hope Hero") to your bereaved friends. Edited for length and clarity.

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Shirley Thiessen is author of *The Little Black Funeral Dress* and founder of Corner Bend Ministries. Learn more at [CornerBend.com](http://CornerBend.com).



# Living through a season of loss

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"by Vicki Hooper

This life seems to be a journey full of losses and comes in many different forms: the loss of a job; loss of finances; changes in relationships; loss of connection; loss of routine; and sadly, the loss of a loved one.

All too often, loss is seen as a hindrance to joy and something to quickly move past or get over. We despise pain and, often without knowing it, we work to avoid it through things like comfort eating, watching Netflix or just being busy. For some, when the pain's too great, turning to a substance may be the answer to relieve the pain. These actions may bring temporary relief, but not one heals my wounded heart.

God designed pathways to healing and the antidote to the pain of loss is grieving. A loss not grieved only increases the grief with the next loss. So how can we walk through loss and grief in a way that leads us to health and wholeness? With the deepest respect and sensitivity for your loss, I give these points:

**\* Acknowledge the loss and the feeling.** No matter what the loss is, whether it is a job or a loved one, we feel great pain. Feelings such as grief, disappointment, isolation,

hopelessness, regret, sadness, guilt, feelings of failure, or fear are now a part of life. Instead of ignoring them, attempting to stuff them down or getting rid of them, I invite you to embrace the feelings, and name them. "I am feeling . . ." Like a small hole in a helium balloon, the act of acknowledging the feeling can begin to release the pressure.

## **\* Focus on the truth and Truth.**

When you feel hopelessness settling in, remind yourself of the truth or the facts: I do not know what life will look like now, but this is not the end. This is just a season. I will get through this. I have overcome other challenges. Better days will come. My heart will heal. Joy will come. Then, take time to focus on the big "T" Truth, or what God would want to say to me: God is with me and will never leave me (Deuteronomy 31:6). He loves me and his love surrounds me (1 John 4:15; Romans 8:37-39). He is my healer and provider (Psalm 6:2; Psalm 103). He promises to take care of me (Philippians 4:19).

**\* Care well for yourself.** This is challenging when sadness threatens to overwhelm us or there is very little personal space but let me encourage you to stop and plan ways that will encourage your health: physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally. Take those walks. Pour out the emotion through tears, or words. Spend time with God, in his word and in prayer. Be aware of what you are thinking about and adjust the thoughts from negative to positive. As I care for myself, I find myself able to care well for others.

**\* Take time for relationships.** When we grieve, it is tempting to isolate. Take time to connect with others. If you have lost your job, talk to others who are in the same place and encourage each other. If you have lost a loved one, set up a family online memorial service where each person can share a story or a favourite memory of your loved one.

**\* Find others to support you.** When we've been self isolating and are still physical distancing, it makes it difficult to connect with others, but a call, or an online face-to-face chat can be so life-giving. If it is the loss of a job, find a trusted other to talk to and share your feelings with. This could be a friend or pastor, or a counsellor. \* Honour your heart. Grief is unpredictable and cannot be put on a timeline.

Your heart does not know time and it cannot be ordered to heal. Listen to it. Care for it. Wait well for it. And while you wait, create a beautiful place for yourself while you heal. People will want to tell you to "move on," "get over it," or "aren't you past this yet?" Only you know your heart. Listen to it and validate what it is feeling. Then, allow it the time and space it needs to heal.

**\* Begin to dream.** This may take time, but as I allow myself to dream of what I desire and could do or be, I find hope grows within me. The Bible says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Proverbs 13:12). When I think about what could be, I find God meeting me and even leading me into better things. It may in fact be the opportunity for God to do something new in us, through us and for us. Before us is a beautiful invitation to embrace the healing God has designed for us through grief. When we give ourselves permission to grieve, we find that it empties the pain to make room for something new. May this be the beginning of our new story.

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# When you lose a spouse

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*by Wendy Kittlitz*

**Losses are not rated on a continuum, but for those who have been blessed with a loving, healthy marriage, losing a spouse is perhaps the deepest loss of all.**

Jordan's wife had a chronic underlying illness, yet no one expected it to take her life just 20 years into their marriage.

Cora's husband was larger than life – loved by all and cherished by his wife and family. Everyone was stunned when he suddenly died one day, not the least of whom was his devastated wife.

Daryl's wife of over 30 years was diagnosed with cancer and they fought together bravely for almost two years before the Lord took her home.

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Nearly 25 years ago, my friend and her recently widowed dad sat in my kitchen. I have not forgotten his determined assertion: "I have decided to make it my work to intentionally grieve the loss of my wife." I was so impressed by his courage and his purposefulness.

No two people's grief experience is the same, but I believe there is an

initial task that all grieverers need to do if they want to process loss in a healthy way:

Tell your story, repeatedly, to safe people. Safe people are those who will let you just tell your story without judging it or trying to fix it.

Telling your story is unique to you – what happened? How did you feel? What did he/she say or do? Who else was part of the story? How did you feel about what others did or did not do, or say or not say? Each detail matters and telling and retelling it is a way to process what has occurred. Each retelling lifts a tiny bit of the burden. It changes nothing externally, but it changes how you sit with the experience.

As you do the hard work of grieving, here are a few more important things to remember:

There is no "right" timeline for grieving. Take the time you need and proceed at your own pace. Resist those who would suggest that you should be "over it" by now.

Expect a range of emotions – that is normal. Anger, sadness, depression, loneliness, despair, blaming, the list



goes on. Tears are necessary as you feel the intense pain of loss. Don't be afraid of them or apologise for them. Some days you will smile and laugh and feel almost normal again. Sit with the feelings but don't get overwhelmed by them. Writing can be very helpful as you process. Speaking with a trusted friend, a pastor or even a counsellor can also help when you are beginning to feel overwhelmed.

Take care of your health. You might be surprised by the physical manifestations of grief. Fatigue, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, greater vulnerability to germs and loss of energy are all symptoms commonly experienced. Make a point of trying your best to take good care of yourself. Slow down, eat good food, nap, exercise, take your vitamins, take time off work if you need it.

There will be triggers you can anticipate but there will be others you will not. Your loved one's birthday, a special holiday or even the anniversary of their loss will be tough days. Think ahead by asking yourself, "Would I prefer to be alone or with others?" "Is there something special I/we could do to remember?" "Is there a special place I'd like to go to spend this day?" Plan when you can, not to distract yourself but to make the day meaningful, even if it's hard. Other triggers will occur unexpectedly – a

song, a casual comment, a place, a memory that appears out of nowhere. This can happen even years after the loss. Notice it, sit with the feelings, shed some tears or take time to remember. Find or build a support system. You will need others. Some, like family, will be deeply sharing your pain, but remember that you are each processing differently, so make space for each other. But you will also need people a step further away, like a friend, spiritual leader, counsellor and/or support groups. Hold on to hope. A researcher at Harvard University found that people coping with challenging life events usually did better than they anticipated they would. While it may not feel like it in the early days, you will find a way through this pain. Dr. H. Norman Wright says that people who deal best with trauma do so because:

- ★ They see the event as a challenge, not an overwhelming problem.
- ★ They're optimistic.
- ★ They connect with people.
- ★ They use their spiritual resources.

### **Finally, find comfort in God's promises:**

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Matthew 5:4

"The Lord is near to the  
brokenhearted and saves the crushed  
in spirit." PSALM 34:18

"He will wipe away every tear from  
their eyes, and death shall be no  
more, neither shall there be  
mourning, nor crying, nor pain  
anymore, for the former things have  
passed away." REVELATION 21:4

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**Only you know your heart.  
Listen to it and validate what it  
is feeling. Then, allow it the  
time and space it needs to heal.**

# Helping your spouse grieve loss

by Dr. Greg Smalley

Whenever we experience loss, we suffer a blow and are thrown off balance.

The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief is likely to be. We then become vulnerable to getting stuck in the grief process. Depression and anxiety can take over our lives. We need to grieve to restore the balance. And this is where a husband or wife can provide healing and balance for a grieving spouse.

## **Empathise with Your Spouse's Pain as They Grieve**

Make your goal to care – at the deepest emotional level – how grief is affecting your spouse. Sympathy is when you feel bad for your spouse: “I’m so sorry that you lost your job.” Empathy is feeling bad with your spouse, connecting with your spouse’s broken heart: “I can only imagine how devastated and overwhelmed you must feel right now. I have no idea what to say but I’m so glad you told me. We’ll walk this out together.”

Don’t allow your own fear and uncertainty to stand in the way of deeply connecting with your spouse’s pain. They need your “care” before they need your solutions. Avoid using

phrases like “at least” as a way of placing a silver lining around the loss: “At least we have some savings.” Or “At least you don’t have the coronavirus.” Or “At least they gave you severance pay. You have plenty of time to find a new job.”

Resist the urge to problem-solve before you empathise with your spouse’s pain.

Problem-solving or trying to fix the problem usually leads to relationship disconnect. Hearts, however, can be connected when you spend time caring and empathising with your spouse’s feelings during a loss.

Caring also means that you allow your spouse’s heart to hurt in a way that’s unique to him or her. Give your spouse a safe place to share their story and emotions. Be patient and accepting of their perspective and experience. It seldom helps to use phrases like “God’s in control,” “Maybe it was for the best” or “You’ll get over it in time.” Clichés usually reveal your own fear and insecurity. Besides, these words sound judgmental or marginalising, and your spouse will probably react negatively

or shut down.

After experiencing a loss, some people become angry and need to verbalise their frustration. Avoid judging how your spouse might express his or her pain. Resist telling them how they should feel or what they should do. Don't take your spouse's feelings personally. However, it's never OK for anyone to express their feelings at your expense. If that happens, gently say, "I love you and I really want to hear how you feel, but it can't be at my expense. If you're willing to do this differently, I'd love to listen and better understand how you're feeling." At other times, people may shut down or go silent. If your spouse doesn't want to talk about the loss, give him or her some space to internally process how they're feeling. Let your spouse know that you care. You could say something like, "I would love to better understand what you're going through and how you're feeling. Let me know when you're ready to talk."

### **Help carry their burden**

In addition to empathising with your spouse, you can also look for practical ways to help carry their burden. Galatians 6:5 says, "each one should carry their own load." The Greek word for load means "cargo." This is a "light" problem – like a backpack – and the

individual must carry it. We're fully capable of carrying our own load, and these personal burdens cannot be transferred or shifted to someone else.

Contrast the personal responsibility of carrying our own load to the directive given in Galatians 6:2 where we are told to "Carry each other's burden." The Greek word for burden here means something that is "heavy" or is too much for one person to bear alone. Whereas a load is like a backpack, a burden is like trying to carry a huge steamer trunk on your shoulders.

The Apostle Paul is saying that we shouldn't allow a person to be crushed under the excessive weight of their burdens. We should help our spouse when they're going through something too big to bear. Practically, this may look like taking on his or her household chores or child care responsibilities, giving him or her plenty of grace and extra patience, running interference with well meaning people who want to visit or hear about what happened, or encouraging him or her to spend extra time with a hobby or good friend. If you're not sure how to assist your spouse during the grieving process, ask, "As you're grieving the loss of your job, how can I best support you?"



Another part of carrying someone's burden is to encourage professional help. A registered counsellor that specialises in grief, trauma or major life transitions can be incredibly helpful in the grieving process.

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# Navigating the grief of infertility and miscarriage

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by Wendy Kittlitz

**Sandra's husband, Rick, clutched her hand as they walked down the hall to meet with the fertility specialist.**

After over two years of trying to have a baby unsuccessfully, they had been referred here and had completed the required physical examinations to see what might be preventing them from conceiving.

The doctor invited them in. "We have not found any medical reasons why you have not been successful in getting pregnant," she explained. "While that is good news, unfortunately between 15 to 30 per cent of the couples we see have no explanation for their inability to achieve a pregnancy. Let's talk about your options."

Sandra and Rick are among the approximately one in six couples in Canada who experience infertility, but that statistic is of little comfort to them.

Rick and Sandra were young professionals when they met and fell in love. After a year of dating, they planned a beautiful wedding. They spent the next two years saving for a home and upon moving in, decided

they were ready for the next step: starting a family. In their early thirties, they expected this to happen relatively quickly and were only a little alarmed when the first year went by with no pregnancy.

All around them, friends and family were welcoming little ones. They were among the last in their circle to begin their family.

Sandra was beginning to feel stressed and dreaded hearing another friend announce their first – and then second – pregnancies.

Each month when she did not conceive, she became increasingly disheartened. Month after month was another loss, one piling on top of another. Rick tried to support and understand her, but she felt the brunt of the pain, feeling like her body was letting them down. She felt responsible, deficient, disappointed and guilty that her grief was beginning to interfere with her rejoicing in her friends' excitement over their babies. It was also starting to cast a shadow

over their previously enjoyable sex life as they researched ovulation cycles and timing.

The fertility specialist gave them some hope again. They did their research, decided what interventions felt comfortable to them and embarked on some reproductive technology. Additional tensions began to arise as invasive treatments, more exacting timing and hormones took their toll on their relationship. Again, the higher their hopes, the deeper the disappointment when it took several more months to finally conceive.

But the day finally came; the test was positive! Sandra and Rick celebrated, called their family, told a few close friends and believed that God had finally blessed them. An ultrasound where they heard their baby's heartbeat was an amazing highlight – so incredible!

At about 10 weeks, though, Sandra noticed some spotting and a little bit of cramping. Initially she resisted the thought that anything could be wrong. "This is normal, right?" she would ask herself. After a few days, she called her doctor who told her to go to the lab for an ultrasound just to be sure.

There was no fetal heartbeat. It took two days for her body to expel the

lbaby they had longed for – two days of physical and emotional pain like nothing she had ever experienced. Rick took time off and supported his wife the best he knew how, bringing her medication, making warm drinks, rubbing her back and holding her hand. He was grieving as well, but the pain was different for him. He felt helpless, wishing he could ease her pain, doing what he could but fearing it was not enough.

When it was over, they both felt numb, not sure what to say to each other, not sure what to do, how to tell others, how to move on. Their faith was shaken. Both experienced some anger at God, wondering why he allowed this to happen, after all the pain they had already been through.

They both struggled with feelings of inadequacy. There were days when one wanted to talk and the other did not and the next day they switched. It felt like their lives were at a standstill. Hearing that these issues can be damaging to marriages, they decided to see a counsellor.

The counsellor was a tremendous help to Sandra and Rick. She encouraged them to focus on:

1. Validating each other's grief. Some great listening skills helped them to share what they felt and recognise that while their individual grief looked

different from one another, their underlying pain was similar.

2. Making their marriage a priority. They committed to being a team. For a decision to be a “win,” it needed to be a “win” for both of them, not just one of them.

3. Evaluating the importance of biological children. For Rick, having a child that was biologically his was of far greater significance than it was for Sandra. As they unpacked that, Sandra came to understand more deeply why this was significant for him and she was able to empathise more.

4. Considering alternatives. In a safe setting, Sandra and Rick explored the implications of either remaining childless, continuing with fertility treatments or pursuing adoption. After long, sometimes hard conversations, they concluded that they could be OK with any of these options if that was what God had planned for them.

5. Leaning more fully on the Lord. Sandra and Rick developed a stronger bond through taking this burden to the Lord together. Sandra and Rick left counselling feeling strengthened in their faith, in their marriage and in their confidence that they had gained important tools for facing grief and loss together. They were able to once

again find comfort in one another and in trusting God that his grace was sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9), even though they did not know when, how or even if he might bless them with children.

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# Navigating the grief of infertility and miscarriage

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*by Catherine Wilson*

**When the loss of someone precious suddenly becomes part of your family's story, it can take enormous emotional energy to do even the simplest thing.**

*by Catherine Wilson*

For you, if you're already grieving, this is a tough time to do extra work – the work of learning how to help your children grieve well. But you are wise to take that step – to do the work, to learn. You and your children will be much better for it. Your children need to learn from you how to approach their grief in a healthy way. In the end, healthy grieving helps you discover that sorrow and happiness can coexist. So what does healthy grieving look like for you and your kids? Here are some fundamental things you need to know.

## **Don't try to protect your child from the pain**

Grief is a necessary pain – and that's true for children as well as adults. We can't properly process the loss of our loved one without fully feeling the pain of their loss. We need to hurt in order to heal.

But a parent's instincts often work against that healthy grieving process.

We hate to see our child in pain. So what do we do? Parents often unconsciously model unhealthy strategies that teach kids to deny their painful feelings.

If you're grieving, be alert for ways you might be sending your children unhelpful messages about how to grieve.

## **Don't teach your kids to distract themselves from their painful feelings**

Faced with a young child who's missing Daddy, for example, and sobbing into their pillow at night, the remaining parent might be tempted to say, Granddad's taking us all to Disneyland in the spring. Why don't you think about that instead? What the child really needs, in that moment, is to talk through their feelings about missing their dad.

Staying busy is another way parents can teach grieving kids Distract yourself from pain – just like I do.

Raised with that model, teens can find all kinds of other ways to run from their feelings, be it endless online gaming, alcohol, drugs or the “thrill” of high-risk activities.

What helps instead: H. Norman Wright, trauma specialist and author of *It's Okay to Cry*, urges parents to help their children face their pain, not hide from it. “The ‘empty spot’ in your child’s life . . . teaches her how much she loved [that person] as well as how much she could love something or someone else,” writes Wright. “That’s good.”

To help your child, try to frame a number of your discussions so they convey a message like this: It was clear to everyone that you really loved your Dad, and he really loved you too. You’re a lovable kid. You still have many people in your life who love you.

### **Don't teach your kids to stay quiet about their "bad" feelings**

Many grieving parents fear that seeing their grief will add to their kids’ pain, so they stoically determine to “be strong in front of the kids,” only venting their grief in private.

However, in his book *Children and Grief*, grief-recovery specialist Joey O'Connor warns against this: “What some parents call strength, kids can and often do

interpret as indifference, coldness, lack of love or the unspoken message that death and grief are so bad that they shouldn’t be talked about.” What helps instead: Make sure your children know they have your permission to mourn and in as many ways as you can, invite your children to talk with you about how they’re feeling, so they can process their grief. When your children begin sharing, accept and affirm their feelings “as is.” Never try to “correct” their feelings, or tell your kids how they “should” feel. At this critical time, your children must be sure that they can trust you, so handle their feelings with care. When they begin to open up, be prepared for a full range of strong emotions – not just sadness – and for revelations that may surprise you. It’s perfectly normal for a grieving child to struggle with: Anger: I’m so angry that God let Dad die. Doubt: I want to believe Dad’s in heaven, but I’m not sure about anything any more. Regret: I should have visited Dad in hospital that one time, but I went to my friend’s place instead.

**Fear:** What if you die too? / Will we have to move now? Guilt: I was mad at Daddy and wished he would go away. And now he has. It’s my fault. Confusion: But why can’t Daddy visit us from heaven? As you affirm your child’s feelings, try to keep your

conversation hope-filled. You could say something like, I can understand why you feel that way. At times, I feel that way too. [Pause to encourage more sharing by your child.] We won't always feel this bad, but right now, it's perfectly normal for us to feel so upset. As difficult as this time may be for you, what you model for your children now is very important. It will very likely become your child's blueprint for dealing with all the painful losses they will face in life.

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