



SunCloud Health Continuing Education Series

Transdiagnostic, integrated care for people with complex co-occurring disorders.

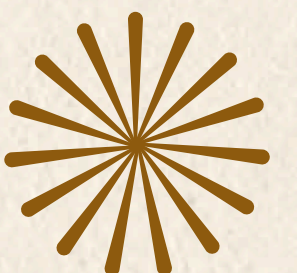
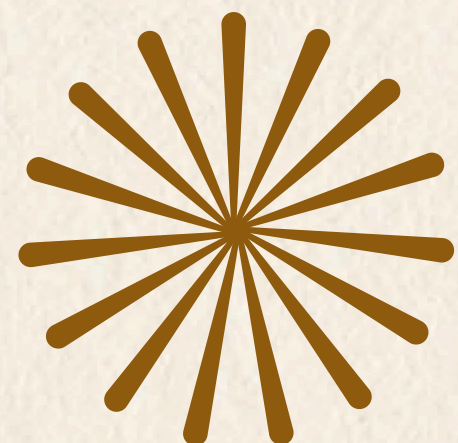
Reading Between the Lines: Supporting Subtle Dysregulation in Neurodivergent Children

Katrina Gainey, MSW, LCSW

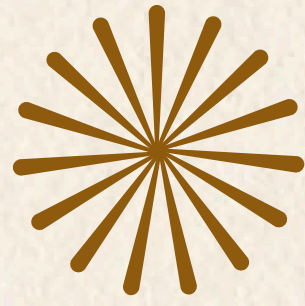


APRIL 17, 2026

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: SUPPORTING SUBTLE DYSREGULATION IN NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN



BY: KATRINA GAINEY, MSW, LCSW

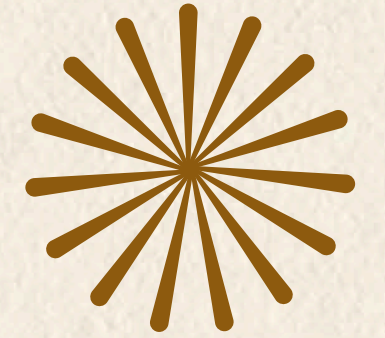


WHO AM I & WHY THIS MATTERS TO ME

- LCSW | Clinical Supervisor and Lead Child & Adolescent Therapist at Phoenix Rising Counseling & Guidance
- Works with children and teens primarily with ADHD, ASD, behavioral challenges, and anxiety
- School-based + group therapy experience
- Focus: play therapy, relational approaches, and neuroscience based + real-time regulation



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

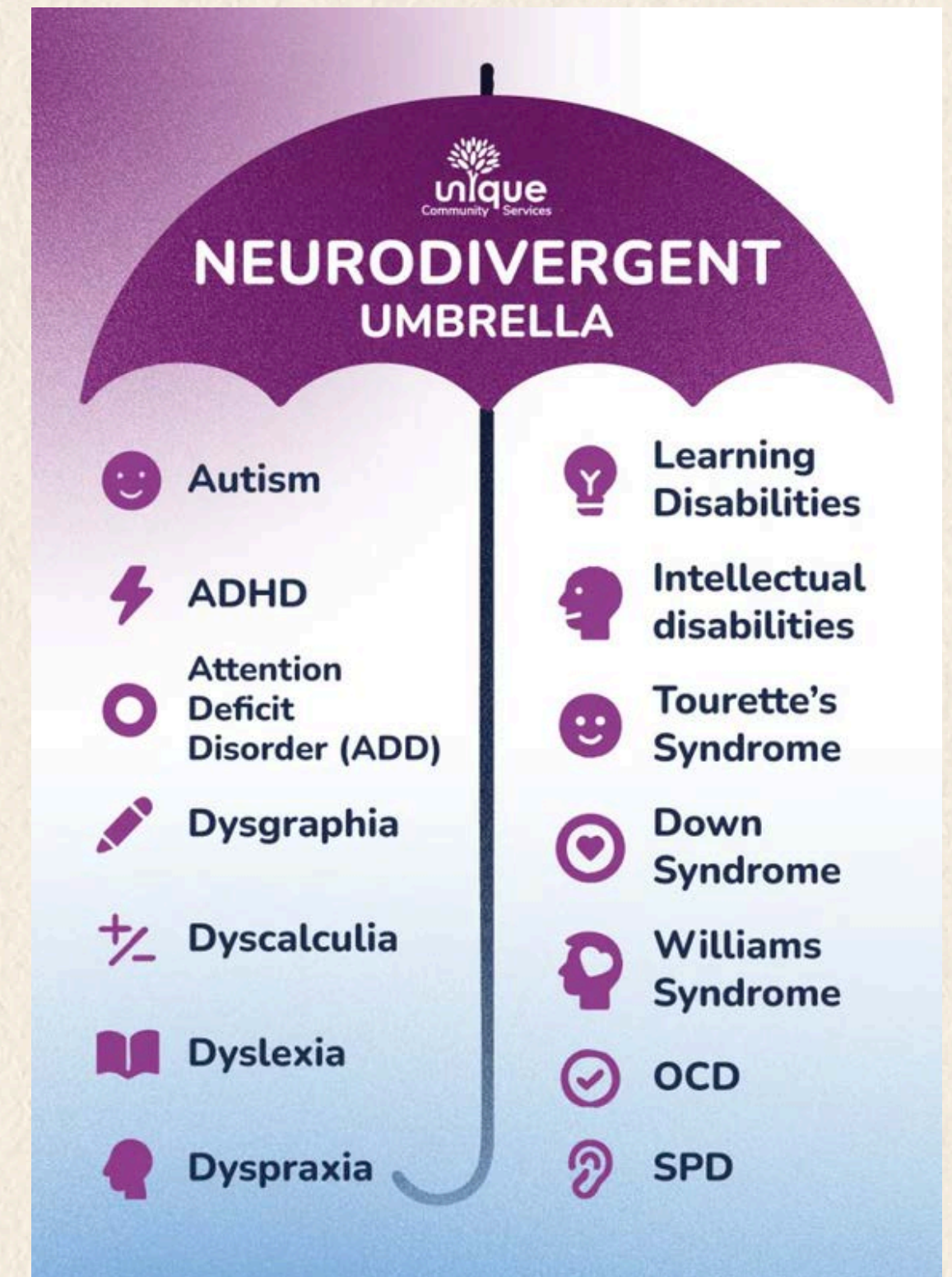


- Detect early behavioral, physiological, and cognitive cues that signal subtle dysregulation.
- Utilize real-time interventions to co-regulate and support self-regulation in therapy or school settings.
- Integrate diversity-informed strategies that respect cultural, racial, and environmental contexts when supporting neurodivergent children.



What is Neurodivergence?

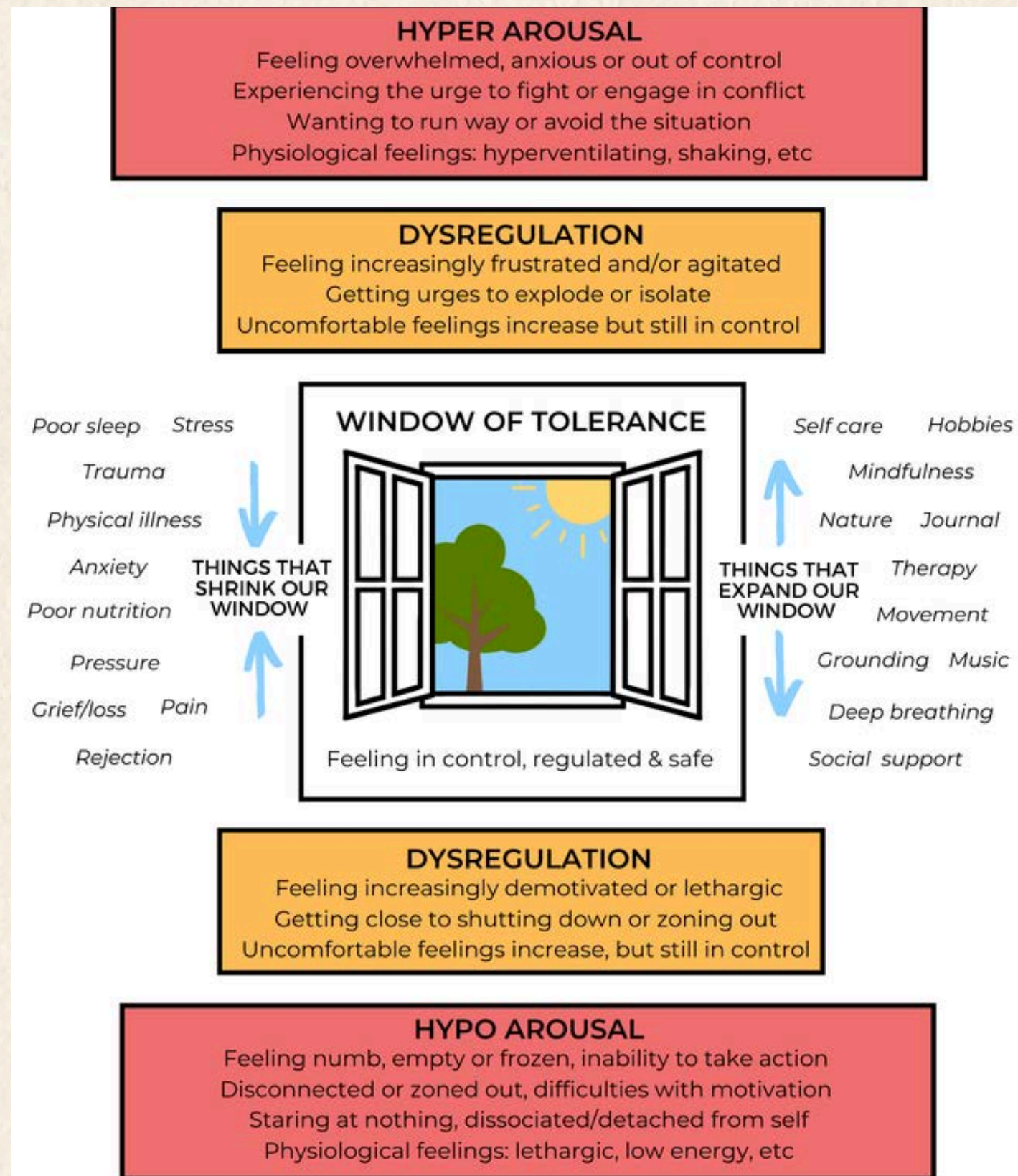
- Neurodivergence refers to natural variations in brain functioning
- Includes differences in attention, sensory processing, communication, learning, and emotional regulation
- **Commonly associated with:**
- ADHD
- Autism
- Learning differences (e.g., dyslexia)
- Sensory processing differences
- Not a deficit-based framework — a difference, not a disorder
- Neurodivergence impacts how dysregulation looks, not just whether it exists



“The kid who looks fine... until they're not.”



Window of Tolerance: Supporting Subtle Dysregulation



- Behavior = nervous system expression
- Focus on early dysregulation (yellow zone) before full escalation

Within Window (Green)

- Calm, flexible, socially connected

Subtle Dysregulation (Yellow)

- Mild agitation or fidgeting
- Scripting, looping, or repetitive behaviors
- Attention shifts, reduced reciprocity

Full Dysregulation (Red)

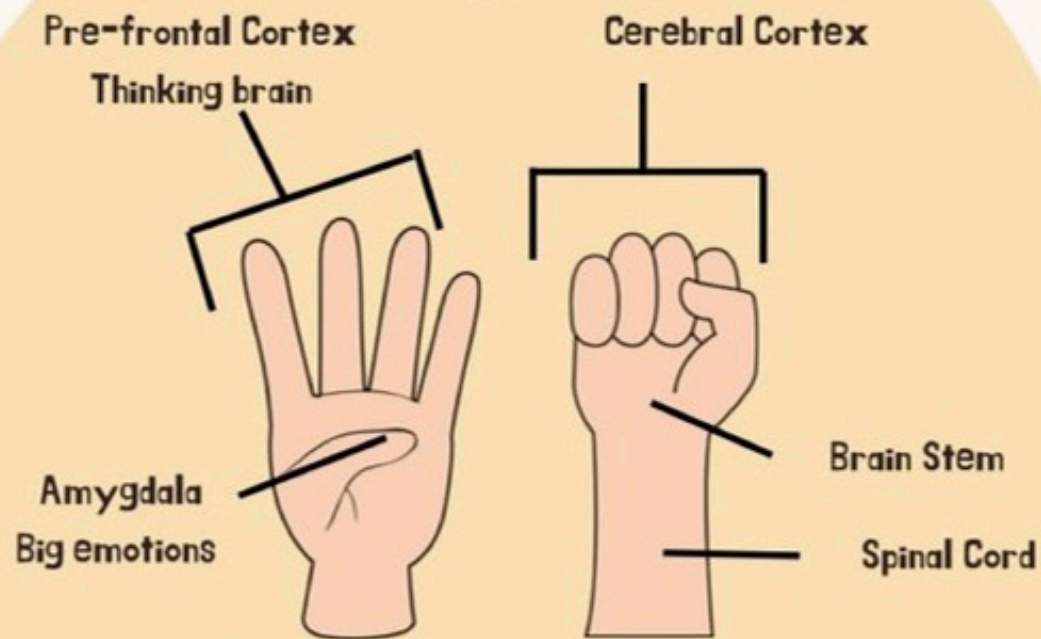
- **Hyperarousal:** physical behaviors (e.g. hitting, pushing), elopement, yelling
- **Hypoarousal:** withdrawal, shutdown, refusal, mutism
- Interventions focus on safety and containment, not skill-building

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Behaviors are nervous system signals, not intentional misbehavior
- Early dysregulation is the optimal point for intervention
- No state is “bad”—support regulation, not compliance

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Flipping Your Lid



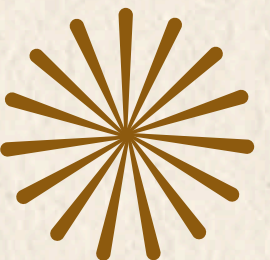
Flipped Lid
When we flip our lid, our ability to think rationally and manage emotions effectively is impaired, leading to impulsive reactions and decreased problem-solving skills.

Calm Mind
Thoughts and emotions are balanced, allowing for clarity and focus.

Flip Your Lid (Dan Siegel)

- Stress “flips the lid” → thinking brain offline
- Amygdala (alarm system) responds even to subtle triggers
- The child may show Yellow Zone cues (fidgeting, scripting, emotional outbursts)
- **Goal:** co-regulate first → learning comes after.

Regulation before expectation





Behavioral & Body Micro-Signals



- **Behavioral:** Silliness, withdrawal, small refusals, minor repetitive behaviors
- **Body:** Jaw clenching, micro-freezes, posture changes, fidget shifts, shallow breathing
- **Note:** Micro-signals are baseline-relative, not “bad”

Cognitive & Emotional Micro-Signals



- **Cognitive:** Rigidity, repeated questions, loss of focus, "I can't" statements
- **Emotional:** Whispered "I don't know," minimizing feelings, over-apologizing, masking

Cultural & Racialized Considerations



- Adultification bias & emotional containment culture
- Hypervigilance & safety adaptations
- Masking, code-switching

Culturally Responsive Micro-Attunement Phrases



- I'm noticing a shift, what's going on in your body right now?
- "Would it feel more helpful to take space or a brief movement break?"
- "I'm here with you, you don't have to carry this alone."

Micro-Intervention Examples



- Movement / Stretch Reset
- Breathing with Visual Anchor
- Child-Chosen Fidget or Grounding
- Humor or Co-Regulation Phrase

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Micro-interventions prevent escalation and allow for early Yellow Zone support.
- They maintain engagement and support co-regulation, rather than focusing on compliance or behavior control.
- These strategies are neurodivergent-affirming: they respect differences in self-regulation, sensory needs, and coping.

Micro-Mirroring & 5% Shift



- Micro-Mirroring → Match energy, not emotion
- 5% Shift → Small, achievable adjustments
- Tone > Words → Subtle cues matter
- Gradual changes prevent escalation

Pre-Correction & Co-Regulation



- Pre-Correction: Set expectations gently (“Remember walking feet”)
- Co-Regulation: Model calm → invite child to join
- Telehealth adaptation: Emoji or hand signals
- Focus on presence, not punishment

Embedding Micro- Attunement

- **Transitions & Waiting:** Silent cues & brief resets
- **Group & Classroom:** Subtle movement & nonverbal adjustments
- **Arrival / Pre-Task:** Soft-landing rituals or short mindfulness
- **Routine Check-Ins:** Quick body scans or feelings check-ins
- **Cultural & Sensory Adaptations:** Offer choice; align with norms



Advanced Therapist Tips

- Respond to subtle cues first
- Eyes first → words second
- Use play & humor strategically
- Allow regulated fidgeting (unless safety risk)
- Embed regulation through repetition



Reflection / Interactive Prompt



Write in the chat:
What is one micro-attunement strategy you will try this week with a student or client? How might you notice it working?



Wrap-Up & Key Takeaways

1. Subtle cues = early warning signs
2. Micro-attunement prevents escalation
3. Small, context-sensitive strategies = big impact
4. Cultural & sensory context matters
5. Supports brain regulation (Siegel's Hand Model & Mindsight)
6. Children who are neurodivergent process information differently. When provided with appropriate regulation supports, these differences can support the development of meaningful strengths.

PRACTICE AND CONTACT INFORMATION

- Phoenix Rising Counseling & Guidance
- **Website:** <https://phoenixrisingcg.com/>
- **Email:** katrina@phoenixrisingcg.com
- **Intake/ Referral email:**
hello@phoenixrisingcg.com
- **Phone:** 708-942-1716
- **Address:** 542 S Dearborn, Suite 580.
Chicago, IL 60605

FOLLOW UP / NEXT STEPS:

- What's one micro-attunement strategy that you will try this week? What is one subtle cue you will now notice differently?"



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LEARN MORE ABOUT PRCG

QUESTIONS AND
DISCUSSION

Closing & Thank You





Starved for Sleep: The Overlooked Role of Sleep in Eating Disorders

Wednesday, May 6, 2026
12:00-1:30PM (CST)
1.5 CEUs available.

Join our webinar presented by

Colleen Kestel, MBA, RDN, LDN | Martha Curtin, MSPA, PA-C
VP of Operations



One Client, Many Models: Integrating CPT, TF-CBT and RO DBT Through a Transdiagnostic Lens

Thursday, June 4, 2026
12:00-1:30PM (CST)
1.5 CEUs available.

Join our webinar presented by
Lacey Lemke, PsyD

Associate VP of Clinical Services



Intersection of PTSD with Eating Disorders and Addiction

Tuesday, July 7, 2026
12:00-1:30PM (CST)
1.5 CEUs available.

Join our webinar presented by

Kelsey Fontano, LCPC, CADC | Michelle Duda, LCPC, CADC
Clinical Director for Adolescent Services | Clinical Director for Adult Services



First Do No Harm: Practical Guidance for the Discussion of Health, Wellness, and Body in Clinical Settings

Wednesday, August 5, 2026
12:00-1:30PM (CST)
1.5 CEUs available.

Join our webinar presented by
Elizabeth E. Sita, MD

Medical Director of Adult Services



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