

## See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault

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### **Abstract:**

Existing research demonstrates the potential value of arts-based interventions for survivors of abuse and other forms of trauma. The See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops were designed to provide survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault with an opportunity to express themselves and connect with others through arts-based interventions. When appropriate, using the art developed through the workshops to create an art exhibit can be useful for raising awareness and giving voice to survivors in the local community. The preliminary results of the pilot evaluation suggest that the workshops were well-received and allowed participants to experience emotional expression, connection with others, and greater self-awareness.

**Keywords:** art | arts-based interventions | creative therapies | creativity in counseling | domestic violence | group counseling | intimate partner violence | sexual assault | trauma

### **Article:**

Intimate partner violence and sexual assault are major public health problems that have significant implications for survivors' mental health. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2015) defines intimate partner violence as "physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner" (para. 1). Thus, abusive intimate relationships can include one or more types of violent, abusive behaviors, and the severity of this abuse can range from one-time events to chronic patterns of violence that escalates over time (CDC, 2015). Sexual assault describes forced or coerced sexual contact that is attempted or completed by a perpetrator against a victim (CDC, 2015). Sexual assault can occur within intimate relationships, but it also may occur in other types of relationships (e.g., family or acquaintance), as well by a perpetrator who is a stranger to the victim.

Both intimate partner violence and sexual assault can carry significant consequences for victims (i.e., those who are currently at risk of abuse) and survivors (i.e., those who have experienced abuse in the past but are no longer at risk) (Murray & Graves, 2012). These consequences can impact multiple areas of their lives, including their social relationships, career and educational paths, financial resources, and physical and mental health. In particular, the mental health implications of intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault victimization can prompt victims and survivors to seek counseling services, both when they are in the midst of a crisis in the immediate aftermath of abuse and as they deal with the longer-term ramifications of the abuse, potentially for years after it occurred. Some of the most common mental health symptoms that victims and survivors may exhibit include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other trauma symptoms, depression, and anxiety (Murray & Graves, 2012). Relational concerns also are common among victims and survivors, as social support may be diminished as a result of the isolation that can occur within the context of an abusive relationship.

Despite the challenges that survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault may experience, there is growing attention to the strengths, resources, and resilience of abuse survivors (Ai & Park, 2005; Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Flasch, Murray, & Crowe, in press). In particular, there remains a need for increased intervention that aid survivors in overcoming past abuse, beyond the stabilization focus of many current practices (Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Flasch et al., in press). To that end, the purpose of the current study is to describe the development and pilot evaluation of an arts-based intervention for victims and survivors of intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault. The intervention, the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops, offers a flexible approach that can be tailored to different practice settings and formats. These workshops were designed to be conducted as trial interventions, in a number of settings, to determine the potential benefits of such a program. Given that this was the first time offering this type of intervention in the area, along with the smaller sample size, a pilot program evaluation was determined to be an appropriate fit for the current study.

In this article, we first review existing literature that supports the use and potential benefits of arts-based interventions with clients who have experienced abuse victimization. We then describe the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops, including how they can be used to produce a public art exhibit that provides a secondary benefit of raising awareness about intimate partner violence and sexual assault within the broader community. Next, we describe the pilot evaluation of the Workshops and offer illustrative quotes from participants to reflect their experiences in the Workshops. Finally, we discuss implications for future research and practice.

### **The uses and benefits of arts-based interventions with survivors of abuse**

In recent years, researchers and practitioners have offered a growing number of examples of applications of arts-based interventions with clients who have experienced different forms of trauma. For example, art therapy has been applied to the following client populations: survivors of intimate partner violence (e.g., Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Frohmann, 2005; Haymore et al., 2012) children who have been exposed to intimate partner violence in their homes (Buschel &

Madsen, 2006; Mills & Kellington, 2012); sexual assault and abuse (Pretorius & Pfeifer, 2010; Saltzman, Matic, & Marsden, 2013); incest (Huss, Elhozavel, & Marcus, 2012); and trauma in general (Mendez-Negrete, 2013; Rappaport, 2011). Other creative therapies, such as guided imagery (Binkley, 2013) and music therapy (Teague, Hahna, & McKinney, 2006), have been suggested as appropriate for fostering healing for survivors of intimate partner violence. Therefore, there is growing recognition of the potential value of these approaches for addressing trauma symptoms and promoting healing among survivors of past abuse and trauma.

There are several common themes in the proposed benefits of art and other creative approaches to therapy with survivors of trauma. A comprehensive review of these benefits is beyond the scope of this article, but the common benefits described in the literature include the following. First, the arts can help survivors to give voice to their experiences, and this is especially valuable because abuse often serves to silence victims (e.g., Binkley, 2013; Buschel & Madsen, 2006; Haymore et al., 2012). Arts-based interventions offer ways for survivors to share their stories and express themselves in ways that do not necessarily require verbalization (Binkley, 2013; Buschel & Madsen, 2006). Talk-based therapies may be threatening for clients impacted by abuse, as they may have a difficult time verbalizing their experiences or finding the right words to describe their emotional responses (Binkley, 2013). Although the current program described in this article is aimed at adult participants, research suggests that the nonverbal nature of arts-based interventions can be especially useful for working with children who have experienced trauma, given their potentially limited vocabulary and verbal abilities (Buschel & Madsen, 2006; Mills & Kellington, 2012).

Second, the benefits of art for expressing intense, difficult emotions have been noted in previous research. In particular, art can provide clients with a container for processing difficult emotions, such as anxiety and fear, by offering opportunities to reflect upon and discuss these emotions in symbolic and indirect ways (Buschel & Madsen, 2006; Malchiodi & Miller, 2003; Rappaport, 2011). Furthermore, the experience of creating and processing art can help clients heal by providing opportunities for them to integrate their emotions with their thoughts and physical experiences (Huss et al., 2012).

Third, creative interventions offer clients an opportunity to focus on themselves and practice self-care (Binkley, 2013). Whereas the dynamics of abuse can lead victims and survivors to feel that their own needs do not matter, creative and expressive therapies can grant them permission to prioritize and value themselves (Binkley, 2013). Similarly, although the focus in art therapy is not to create a masterpiece, but rather to experience the process of developing art, the creation of art can provide clients with a sense of mastery and accomplishment (Buschel & Madsen, 2006). This can contribute to an enhanced sense of self-worth and increased self-awareness of one's strengths and resources (Malchiodi & Miller, 2003).

Fourth, group-based arts-based interventions are especially useful for fostering social support and reducing isolation among survivors of abuse (e.g. Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Haymore et al., 2012; Huss et al., 2012). In particular, group-based approaches for trauma survivors are useful

because they provide corrective relationship experiences through interactions with the group, offer opportunities for participants to practice social skills and boundary setting, and allow participants to share their experiences with others who have had similar experiences (Huss et al., 2012; Pretorius & Pfeifer, 2010).

Finally, an optional secondary benefit of creating art within groups of survivors of abuse is the potential to use the created pieces in a public exhibit, with the goal of raising awareness about abuse in communities (Frohmann, 2005; Haymore et al., 2012). Although raising awareness can be an empowering tool for both individual participants and the community, it is important to emphasize the optional nature of the exhibit for participants, along with ensuring confidentiality of the artwork, given the sensitive and personal nature of the work. Furthermore, steps taken to ensure participant names are not visible in the exhibit are essential, given the safety issues inherent with this population. This type of exhibit can be a very powerful tool for raising awareness, because it allows for the voices and perspectives of survivors to be seen directly by community members who attend the exhibit. A similar approach to this public exhibit is often used in Photovoice, which is a research and intervention strategy that involves participants creating photographs to represent their experiences and sharing their stories by discussing these photographs (Haymore et al., 2012). However, both Frohmann (2005) and Haymore et al. (2012) caution that participation in a public exhibit should always remain the choice of participants as a way to honor and respect participants' autonomy and empowerment.

Previous researchers have also suggested useful and practical strategies for using arts-based interventions with clients impacted by intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault. Two recommended strategies that were incorporated into the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops described in this article include the counselors' intentional pacing of interventions to meet client needs and deliberate processing of symbols that were created in the artwork. First, arts-based interventions should be paced to reflect clients' unique needs and their current phase of the healing process (Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Malchiodi & Miller, 2003; Rappaport, 2011). Some interventions may be used to stabilize a crisis and foster a sense of safety in the immediate aftermath of the abuse, whereas others may focus on helping clients process their trauma experiences or move forward with their lives beyond the abuse (Buschel & Madsen, 2006; Rappaport, 2011). In addition, different pieces of art created over time can represent the client's change process as they move toward overcoming past abuse (Huss et al., 2012).

Second, it is useful for counselors to process with their clients the symbols that clients create in their art, as well as to discuss what these symbols mean to the client (Huss et al., 2012; Saltzman et al., 2013). When working with trauma survivors, it is especially important to empower clients by allowing them to interpret their own symbols in the art they create, rather than having the therapist impose interpretations onto their clients' experiences (Huss et al., 2012). Group-based approaches offer two levels of symbolic representations for clients. First, the interactions among the group can be symbolic for clients' relational experiences outside of the group. Second, the art itself offers symbolic representations of their experiences. Thus, both of these levels offer unique

opportunities for clients to process and examine their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Huss et al., 2012).

In sum, existing research supports the use of arts-based interventions with survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault. In light of the benefits described in the literature, we developed and implemented the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops. The next section describes the format and approach of these workshops, followed by the presentation of the results of a pilot evaluation of the workshops in three unique settings.

### **Description of the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops and exhibit**

The See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops were offered in various settings throughout the community. We connected with local agencies that work with survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual violence to facilitate the workshops within pre-existing open groups. The duration of these groups varied between a one-time workshop to four consecutive group sessions, depending on setting and accessibility. We also offered a 4-week closed group to students on a university campus who have experienced sexual assault and/or intimate partner violence. Group sizes ranged from three to 10 participants. Although the size and duration of the groups varied based on the needs of the setting in which they were conducted, the framework we followed was consistent. Each group lasted between 1.5 to 2 hrs. per session and began with brief introductions and/or check-ins with group members that lasted about 10–15 min. Introductions were intentionally focused on increasing participants' comfort level and building cohesion. For example, an initial introduction activity asked participants to share their names and what they hoped to gain from the program. Introductions in later groups included a brief check-in where participants rated themselves on a scale from 1 to 10 in regards to how they were feeling that day. Given the time constraints and the main focus on engaging in the creative process, we did not ask participants to verbally process or share their stories before beginning the art intervention. However, it was not uncommon for stories to emerge at the end of the session during the process portion of the group. Following introductions or check-ins, the art directive was then given to participants, and they were allotted 30–60 min to complete their artwork, depending on the size of the group and the complexity of the activity. Once the participants had completed their artwork, they were given an opportunity to process their experience in creating their piece. We used open-ended questions to facilitate discussion amongst group members.

#### **Art interventions**

The art prompts were designed to encourage self-introspection and exploration of participants' journeys following the abuse they experienced. Another purpose of using art with participants was to encourage an additional form of self-expression to offer them with ongoing tools to help them cope with experiences outside of the group. To choose an appropriate art intervention, the needs and goals of the group should be carefully considered. For example, if facilitating sessions for a pre-existing group, it would be important to build off of what the group has already processed and consider where their needs are in terms of the healing process. For new groups, it

is important to consider the needs of the target participants, along with what they hope to gain from the group, which could be gleaned from initial screening or during the first session. It is also very helpful to have a solid understanding of the challenges that face many survivors of IPV and sexual assault when choosing and implementing art interventions. Although there are numerous art activities that may be useful in encouraging exploration and expression, we provide examples of the types of activities that were included in the art workshops described. First, one of our art activities focused on the concept of exploring internal versus external perspectives. We used mask forms and prompted participants to depict the way that they portray themselves to others on the outside of the mask, and to represent how they experience life internally on the inside of the mask. Saltzman et al. (2013) described a case study of using a mask-making activity with a survivor of sexual abuse and reported that the client found that the activity was useful for uncovering her true identity behind the metaphorical mask that she had come accustomed to wearing. This activity prompted participants to reflect on the dissonance between how they feel internally versus how they feel they need to show up in the world.

Another activity that we used in our groups encouraged participants to identify the strengths and supports within their life, as well as the challenges that they have experienced as a result of the abuse they experienced. Participants were each given a canvas with a predrawn circle. They were encouraged to represent their strengths and supports on the inside of the circle and the challenges they may have faced or continue to be facing on the outside. This activity helped prompt group discussion around internal and external resources. Group members were also able to see potential connections between each other's experiences.

To facilitate the continued use of art as a form of healing, we also included an activity using creative journaling. Participants were given premade journals and asked to think about themes that they wanted to explore over time. They were given time to work on the cover of their journals as a group. Participants were encouraged to continue their journaling outside of the group and were given prompts to take with them to use in the future. The intention of this activity was to elicit ongoing creative expression beyond the scope of the formalized groups. For further examples of art interventions used and a resource for further details, see Table 1. Although the art activity differed for each session, it was essential to allow ample time for participants to process their experience as a group. This allowed participants to make connections with each other and process their experience in a different way. At the end of each session, we gave participants the option to submit their artwork for a survivor art exhibit at the local university's Multicultural Resource Center. Contribution to the exhibit was not a requirement to be involved in the art workshops, and participants could take their work home with them at the end of each session if they chose. After the completion of our workshops, 28 art pieces were submitted and displayed at the Survivor Art Exhibit. Participants, along with community members, were invited to attend a public reception for the exhibit, and the overall exhibit was on display for approximately 2 months.

**Table 1. See the Triumph Healing Workshops: art interventions.**

<b>Activity name</b>	<b>Activity overview</b>
Unveiling the mask	Creation of a mask to explore dichotomy of inner feelings versus how they portray themselves to the outside world
Strengths and challenges	Participants explore challenges in their journey along with sources of strength, working with a pre-formed circle
Finding healing in broken places	Clay pots are broken into pieces, and participants decorate their pieces and then glue them back into a whole pot
Creative journaling for self-healing	A creative journal is created so participants can continue creative exploration outside of the session

*Note.* Further description of each activity, including materials needed, directions, and sample process questions, can be found in the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops Facilitator Guide available at <http://www.seethetriumph.org/see-the-triumph-healing-arts-workshops.html>.

### **Pilot evaluation of the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops**

To learn about participants' experiences with the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops, we conducted a pilot evaluation and invited all participants in the workshops described above to provide feedback about the program. The pilot evaluation plan was approved by the University Institutional Review Board prior to implementation of the workshops. Participants were not required to complete the evaluation questionnaire to be eligible to participate in the Arts Workshop, as participation in the evaluation was entirely voluntary. Participants who agreed to be involved in the evaluation first reviewed and agreed to an informed consent document, and data were collected confidentially. The evaluation forms did not collect any identifying information about participants, but the study was described to participants as confidential because it was possible that the researchers/facilitators could have identified participants through their responses to the questionnaire. Of the 22 participants in the workshops across all settings, 16 completed the evaluation form. All participants were female. Their average age was 35.8 years old ( $SD = 11.21$ ). No additional demographic information was collected.

#### **Procedures**

All workshop participants were invited by the facilitators (i.e., Kelly Moore Spencer and Jaimie Stickl) to complete a questionnaire onsite during the final 10–15 min of the workshop session. Participants were instructed to submit their completed forms to the facilitators in a sealed envelope before they left, and facilitators were asked not to look at the forms before submitting them to the lead researcher for secure storage and data analyses. The questionnaire included 12 items. The first two questions asked about participants' age and gender. The third question asked participants to describe the location and date of the workshop(s) they attended. Fourth, participants were asked to describe briefly the nature of the abuse or assault they had

experienced. The fifth through 11th questions asked participants to provide open-ended feedback about their experiences with the workshops, including (a) how they learned about the workshops; (b) how they described their overall experiences with the workshops; (c) their opinions about the most valuable component of the workshops; (d) the impact, if any, of the workshops on their healing process; (e) how, if at all, their experiences in the workshops fostered connections with others; (f) their suggestions for changing the workshops; and (g) any additional feedback they would like to provide. The final question asked participants to rate, on a scale from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied) how satisfied they were with their overall experience in the workshops. No data were collected to evaluate the exhibit aspect of this initiative. Because of the preliminary nature of the pilot evaluation, an in-depth data analysis process was beyond the scope of the current study. However, participants' responses to the questions are summarized below.

### Participants' feedback about the workshops

Most participants reported that they learned about the workshops through one of the host agencies or by a referral from a mental health professional who had seen the flyer for the workshops. Participants' descriptions of their experiences were varied and included sexual, mental, and/or physical abuse. They reported a range of diverse experiences such as, "I was abused for years to the point I thought I was never going to get out;" "I survived a domestic violence act of assault by strangulation and kidnapping;" and "I was drunk at a party ... I remember saying 'no' before losing consciousness/blacking out, but he continued to have sex with me (or rather, rape me) anyway." Therefore, participants' experiences with past abuse were diverse and, in many cases, severe.

Overall, participants rated a very high level of satisfaction with the program, with a mean of 9.64 (SD = 0.84) on the 10-point satisfaction scale. Participants' comments to the other open-ended questions reflect some of the benefits they reported experiencing through the workshops, which were related to the enjoyment and positive experience of personal growth and the ability to express emotions. Some of their overall impressions of the workshops included "relaxing and expressing feelings;" "I enjoyed it. It got me in tune with how I want and deserve to feel and I'm working towards vs. how I never want to feel or my hidden emotions;" and "This was an amazing experience. It was very beneficial and helpful for self-growth."

More specific benefits mentioned by participants reflected many of the benefits of arts-based interventions that were similar to those in the literature review. First, some participants noted the value of expressing their stories through the nonverbal means of art. One participant said, "Everything was on paper to look at from my past." Another woman stated, "The most valuable part of tonight was being able to express my feelings without having to tell it verbally." A third participant said, "I became a lot more comfortable telling my story, and I was able to express myself in new, creative ways." Similarly, several participants noted the benefit of expressing their emotions through the art, as reflected in the following participant quotes: "It brought up old feeling that I didn't know that I still had ... It was painful at first but once I got started it became

easier and my feelings begin to come;” “Using art as a way to be expressive and healing. Release some tension I had from my experience;” “It felt really good to be able to express myself thru art. Sometimes I just don’t want to talk about it, doing the mask helped express my feelings;” “Getting those feelings off me and onto the mask, that way I don’t have to carry them any longer;” and “It helped me release some of my hurt and pain through this art. Feelings make me very uncomfortable, so have an artistic way to describe them and then people who could relate was very helpful in my personal reflections.”

Several participants noted that the art activities helped them to identify their strengths and how far they have come in the process of healing from past abuse. For example, a participant said, “It just showed me that I went through a lot and the sun do shine bright on my future. It all up to God and me.” Another said, “I still know who I am. I still see the positive and I’m going to keep pushing and keep learning and growing.” Another woman reported that the workshop provided an opportunity for “visually seeing how far I’ve come.” Still another said, “Less shame. More healing. Learning to trust again.”

Another major benefit that participants mentioned was the opportunity to connect with others. As examples, consider the following statements from participants: “I’m not alone ... It just helps me feel like I’m not alone;” “I got to see where other women like me were at and hear other people’s experiences and how they see themselves;” “It being exclusively for survivors is what made me want to go. I think being able to connect with them was the most valuable aspect of this”; “Knowing I’m not alone, there are others going through pain;” and “The most valuable component was hearing other stories and being able to share mine. I’ve never felt so comfortable right away with doing so.”

Very few participants provided suggestions for changing and improving the workshops. However, three participants suggested the workshops should provide more time (i.e., “Nothing but more time;” “I would suggest making this workshop longer. Four weeks flew by, and I would have loved to have more time and more activities;” and “Make it longer! Maybe 5–6 weeks”). The only other suggestions provided were as follows: “Have more men’s perspective;” “You should do art therapy groups with foster kids. Art therapy with males participating in the male batterers program;” “Painting portraits—family projects/scenery;” and “Make more accessible and spread the word.”

Overall, the pilot evaluation revealed both the satisfaction of those who participated in the program, along with a number of self-reported positive benefits. The use of art as a medium to help participants express and explore their feelings was seen by a number of participants as valuable. The workshops provided a space for women who had experienced diverse and often severe abuse to process their journey in a safe place with other women. Although some participants showed some hesitation at first in using art given their perceived lack of experience, the evaluations following the workshops revealed that they not only enjoyed the creative intervention, but also found it helpful in a variety ways.

## **Implications for future research and practice**

Overall, the pilot evaluation of the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops supports the potential benefits of arts-based approaches for survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault. In particular, arts-based interventions hold promise due to the opportunities they provide clients to express and process their experiences through nonverbal means (Binkley, 2013; Buschel & Madsen, 2006; Haymore et al., 2012; Malchiodi & Miller, 2003) and to identify their strengths and progress in the long-term journey of healing from abuse (Binkley, 2013; Buschel & Madsen, 2006). In addition, the group-based format of the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops provided participants with a chance to connect with others, give and receive mutual support, and feel less alone in relation to their experiences, which is similar to the benefits described in prior research (Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Haymore et al., 2012; Huss et al., 2012; Pretorius & Pfeifer, 2010).

Although the results of the pilot evaluation are promising, there is a need for future research on this specific intervention, as well as for other arts-based interventions for clients who have experienced past intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault. In particular, additional research can address the limitations of the current evaluation, such as by including a larger and more diverse sample, using more rigorous measurement instruments, and using independent evaluators who are not involved directly with the implementation of the program. In addition, more geographic variability is desirable, as the current evaluation focused on workshops delivered in one region of a state in the southeastern United States, and it's likely that regional influences impacted participants' experiences with abuse, as well as potentially their views of the workshops. In addition, the workshops described in this article were delivered in flexible formats (e.g., one session vs. three or four sessions) in order to meet the unique needs of the host organizations). However, this variability likely influenced participants' experiences, so future evaluations should examine more standardized formats, as well as test for differences in participants' experiences and outcomes based on the format of the workshops they attend.

Despite the methodological shortcomings of the pilot evaluation, the initial evidence suggests that arts-based interventions warrant consideration for clients who have past experiences of intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault victimization. Such interventions can prove useful for clients in a range of settings and at different points in their healing processes. For example, in the current study, participants were drawn from a community agency, a domestic violence shelter, and university populations, and overall, participants in each setting reported satisfaction with the intervention. However, practitioners who plan to use arts-based interventions with abuse survivors should ensure that their interventions are appropriate for clients' unique needs (Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Malchiodi & Miller, 2003; Rappaport, 2011), with particular regard for the impact of the trauma on their lives. Earlier interventions should focus primarily on safety and stabilization, and clients should only begin to engage with their traumatic memories and experiences once they have developed their coping resources and have established a sense of safety and stability in their lives (Murray & Graves, 2012). In addition, group-based approaches seem especially beneficial for this population, in light of the isolation and feelings of being alone

that often accompany experiences of abuse. Therefore, we recommend that practitioners consider helping their clients with relevant support and therapy groups, as appropriate for each client.

In sum, the See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops are grounded in research demonstrating the potential value of arts-based interventions for survivors of abuse and other forms of trauma. The workshops were designed to be able to be implemented in a flexible manner to reflect organizational and client needs. When appropriate, using the art developed through the workshops to create an art exhibit can be useful for raising awareness and giving voice to survivors in the local community. The preliminary results of the pilot evaluation suggest that the workshops were well-received and allowed participants to experience emotional expression, connection with others, and greater self-awareness. Overall, the intervention and participant feedback further contributes to the existing literature demonstrating the potentially powerful impact that arts-based interventions have for survivors in their process of healing from past abuse.

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