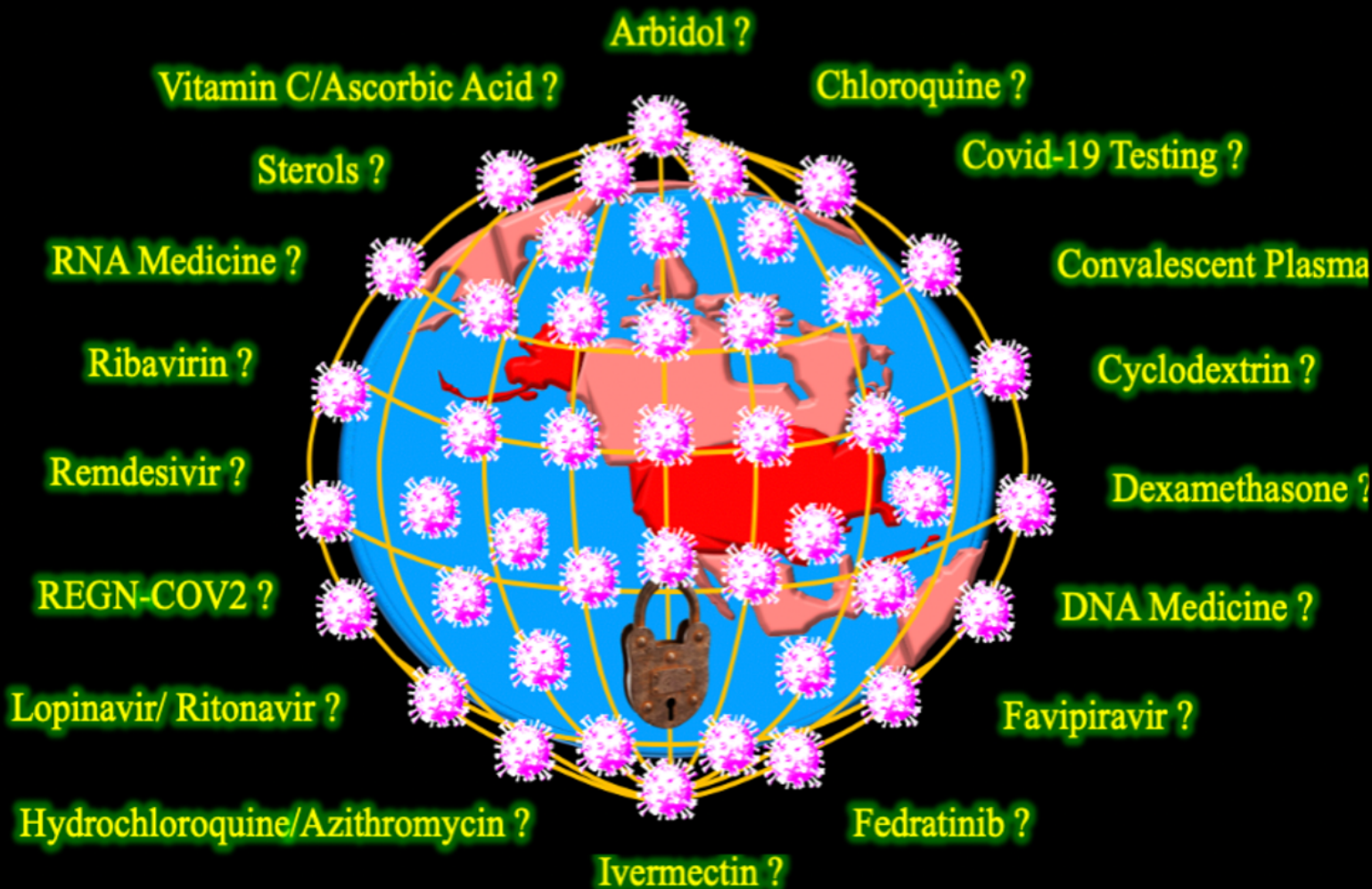




# Science Documents®



Fear of coronavirus locks down the world  
and resets activities on the earth

## The Visible Psychological Impacts of the Invisible Virus (COVID-19)

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on psychological welfare on public health across countries. It is well-known and experienced that the pandemic has caused changes in lifestyle, social interactions, work life etc. This paper aims to explore how the pandemic has affected different strata of society (children, migrant workers, factory workers, office staff, healthcare workers, women and elderly) on a psychological level. Aspects related to relationships, lack of human touch and coping strategies have also been looked at in this paper. The pandemic has hit various strata of society differently and a high number of divorces and fallouts in the relationships have been reported during this time. Adverse effects of lack of human touch during isolation on the human psyche are evident. The reasons and effects of the ‘new normal’ have been explored as well as ways of adjusting to it.

Key words: COVID-19, psychology, coping, pandemic, human touch

### Timeline and spread of COVID-19

Ever since the first corona virus outbreak identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, there have been many cases reported all over the world in 215 countries and territories with confirmed cases of 191,065,110 globally and counting.<sup>1</sup> With the rapid spread of this virus the WHO declared it a ‘pandemic’—an epidemic that travels over multiple countries or continents— on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The pandemic has already caused major changes in our lifestyle, work, and interactions with others, as people has been shifting to primarily online based interactions to help prevent the spread of the virus — while doing their utmost to continue their work life and social life as best as they can.

### The human psyche

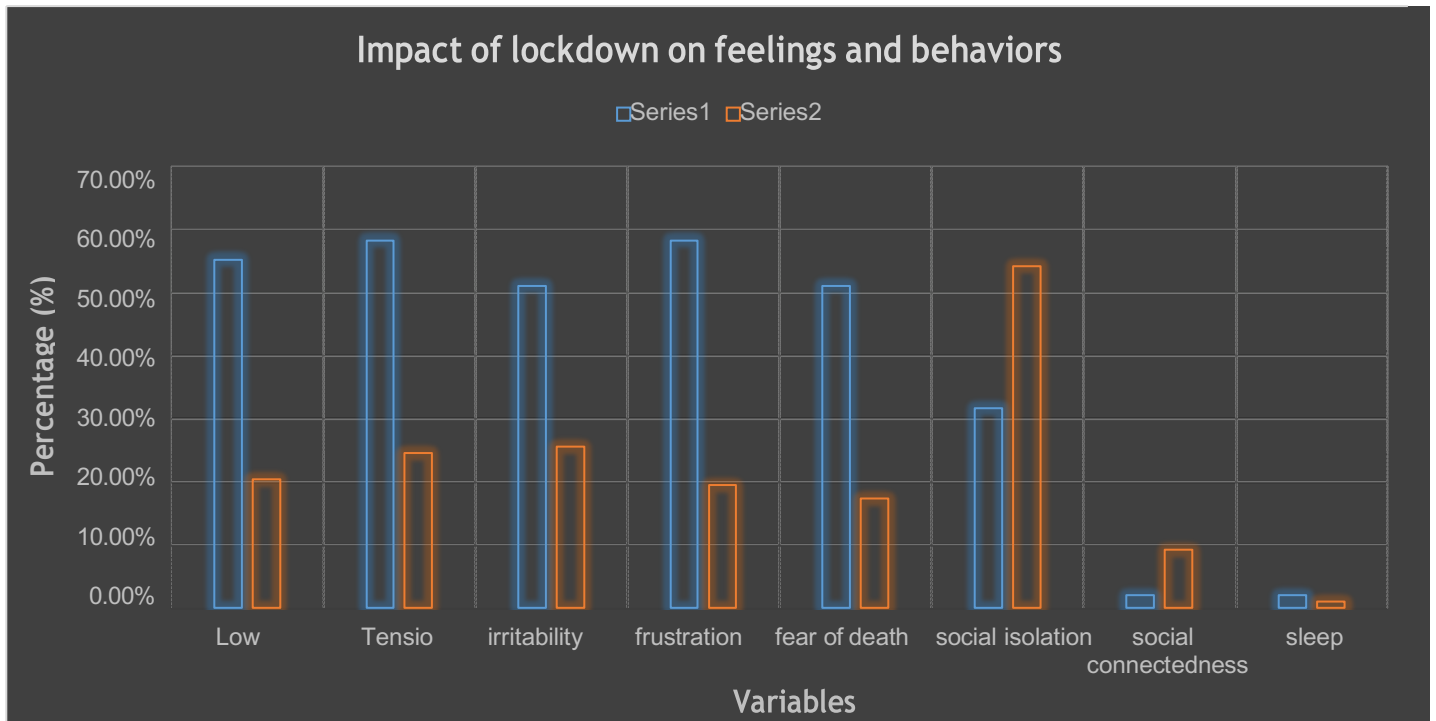
As the pandemic crisis evolves and persists, people are facing unprecedented global psychological distress and mental health issues. While the causes are multifactorial in nature, the essence of this threat is posing grave damage to our interpersonal connections, interactions and social life. People see that we are being deprived of innately human aspects of life, by isolation and aversion to close contact. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fundamental weaknesses in our global systems and relationships. With the digital transformation are we becoming somehow less human? The outbreak also provoked social stigma, prejudice and discriminatory behaviors. In accordance with John F Kennedy’s statement, “*Our task is not to fix the blame for the past but*

*to fix the course for the future*” it is more than just an obligation or duty to prevent a parallel pandemic of negative long-term effects of mental health.

**COVID-19 and its psychological impact** According to the WHO, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused fear, worry and concern across the population globally, especially among older adults, care providers and people with underlying health conditions.<sup>2</sup> There have been several reports showing elevated levels of stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 outbreak around the world<sup>2</sup>. The introduction of preventive measures such as self- isolation and the disruption of people’s daily habits and routines these have also caused a rise in depression and loneliness rates<sup>2</sup>. According to the WHO, this is leading to increased levels of self-harm and suicidal behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

### Human touch and its psychological impacts

Interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic are becoming primarily online based type interactions, leading to lack or elimination of physical contact. This is especially true for people who are in isolation alone. Touch deprivation is known to have negative psychological effects; namely stress, anxiety, and depression. Stress suppresses the immune system due to activation of the fight or flight response mechanism in the body. This can increase risk of infection by the COVID-19 virus or other microbes during the pandemic.



**Fig. 1.** Impact of lockdown on feelings and behaviors of migrant workers.

Touch deprivation has been found to cause a worsening of mental health issues in the general public.<sup>26</sup> Long periods without physical contact can even lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is unfortunate, since mental health plays a crucial role in the recovery among those recovering from COVID-19 or other physical diseases during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

#### Psychological Impacts of COVID-19 on various Strata of Society

The various strata of society, for the purpose of evaluating their mental health, have been divided into students (school and university), migrant workers, factory workers, office staff, service sectors, women and elderly. Finally, the impact of COVID-19 on relationships has also been considered as well.

#### Children and university students

According to the WHO, the most dominant emotions felt by children during the pandemic have been worry, anxiety and fear. The fear experienced by children includes fear of dying, fear of their relatives dying or fear of what it means to receive medical treatment.<sup>4</sup> Schools have been closed and courses have resumed on online platforms involving the use of video conferencing, online interactive platforms and different digital tools. The initial excitement seen in school children due to the closing of schools during the early stages of virus' outbreak, quickly faded due to the prolonged period of lockdown and quarantine. These

measures led to restricted social interactions with their friends— interactions which would provide invaluable social support for a sound mental health and wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> Students have been missing out on the emotional, social, and mental interactions that the school experience provided. From the moment the child gets on the bus to school, his/her mischievous interactions with their friends— including their team-spirited interaction on the playground and their competitive and social interaction in classrooms— all build the foundation for a healthy, mature and socially equipped child. According to the WHO, the longer periods of isolation may have led to school children no longer having a sense of structure and stimulation that is associated with the school environment.<sup>5</sup>

On the university level, students are still adjusting to the online learning format, which is expected to further aggravate academic stress. According to a studies examined the impact of academic disruption on students, it is reasonable to suggest that students may experience lack of motivation, increased pressure to learn independently, high dropout rates and a disruption of their daily routine of going to classes etc.<sup>6,26</sup> Some students may also be concerned with the quality of online learning and with developing appropriate skills for the marketplace. They face additional challenges finding internships or jobs in this economic downturn. International students studying abroad may face a higher level of stress and anxiety due to

the sudden travel restrictions or fulfilling new legal requirements, which have left them deserted in their host country.

**Migrant Workers – the vulnerable workforce** Many factors make migrant workers a more vulnerable workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. Migrant workers are more vulnerable than the natives as they experience less socio-economic integration in the host country.<sup>7</sup> Their earnings are comparably lower than that of their native counterparts hence they have less ability to collect savings.<sup>8</sup> The migrants are more susceptible to social, psychological, and emotional trauma during the pandemic due to their fear and concern for their family's wellbeing and safety as they are being overlooked by the people of the host country. Migrants are a section of the society that are largely alienated or sidelined by the public. They are economically deprived as they are dependent on daily wages for their livelihood thus require help and support of the community and government in such situations.<sup>8</sup> A cross-sectional study conducted in Chandigarh, India, of 98 migrant laborers took a self-reported questionnaire found that a significant proportion of participants reported an increase in negative emotions and feelings such as loneliness, tension, frustration, low mood, irritability, general fear and fear of death in physical isolation.<sup>9</sup>

In the self-report questionnaire, about two-thirds (63.3%) of the participants reported increased feelings of loneliness. More than half of the participants reported a significant increase in tension (58.2%), frustration (58.2%), low mood (55.1%), irritability (51.0%) and fear of death (51.0%). Other common responses were fear (41.8%) and social isolation (31.6%). There was also a clear reduction in social connectedness (48 %) and sleep (44.9%) among the participants (see Figure 1). The study shows that the lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic had a significantly negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the migrant laborers.<sup>9</sup>

### **Factory Workers - a mixed impact**

The pandemic has affected different industries differently some are seeing an efflux in terms of production whereas others are slowing or shutting down. Some industries that were experiencing the surge of production were going through a shift towards people buying products that are being delivered to their homes and, as a result companies like Amazon needed to hire extra people. Such shifts in consumer needs and behaviors may lead to more job security during the pandemic and hence reduced fear for job loss.<sup>10</sup> This is also observed in the sector of providing equipment and materials related to COVID-19 pandemic such as personal protective equipment (PPEs).<sup>11</sup> Whereas for industries that are experiencing a slump their employees are

facing fear of losing jobs, pay cuts, lay-offs and reduced benefits, which make many workers question their future. Job insecurity, economic loss and unemployment can have severe impacts on the employees' mental health.<sup>12-16</sup>

### **Office Staff – the less visible impact**

Although office staff across businesses does not seem to be hit by the full blow of the pandemic in terms of their work situation, it has still changed the daily work routines and way of work for many employees. A great part of their work has shifted to online platforms, and they have been expected to do their work from home. Many office workers have reported increased levels of stress, worry and anxiety during these times. Fear and anxiety about the pandemic and other strong emotions such as worry, and grief can be overwhelming and work-related stress can lead to burnout.<sup>17</sup> According to research by the Society for Human Resource Management, between 22% and 35% of U.S. employees reported that they have experienced symptoms of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>18</sup>

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### **Healthcare Workers**

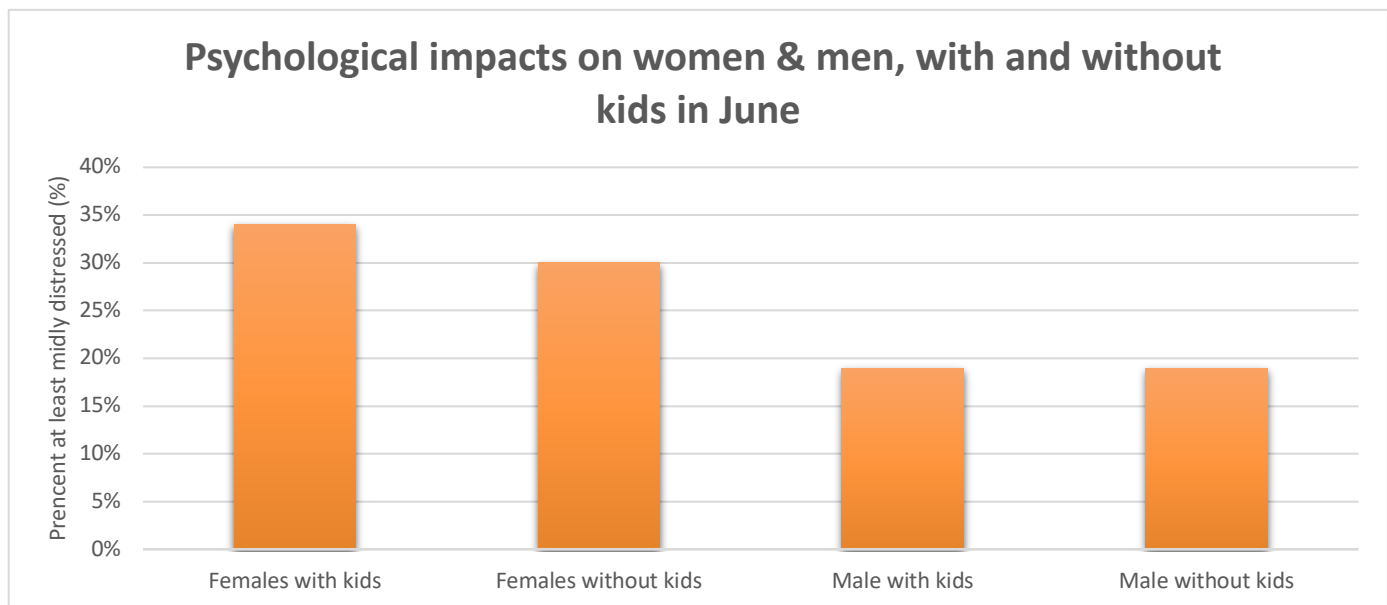
Health workers are especially essential for the fight against the virus. Preventive measures like physical distancing and isolation are helping to contain the virus and slow its spread, but healthcare workers face immense pressure from the accelerating needs for healthcare within the general population. The long and irregular hours and heavy workloads of the healthcare workers increases stress and causes mental health issues, including burnouts.<sup>17,18</sup> Extraordinary demand of their time, efforts and skills makes it difficult for them to take time off. There is also a constant fear of being exposed to the virus and unknowingly spreading it to their patients or family members.<sup>2,19</sup>

Due to the risk of spreading the virus to their family members, healthcare workers need to avoid contact with them causing further social isolation. Moreover, media scrutiny and a lack of understanding from the community (hostility at times) adds to the stress. These compounding pressures can lead to anxiety, depression, PTSD and burnout which may have long time consequences.<sup>17,18</sup>

**Tourism and other Service Sectors** Tourism and other service sectors have been severely affected by the pandemic as the demand for such services has greatly decreased.<sup>20,21</sup> This has led to high rates of unemployment in such industries and the employees employees still working in these sectors also fear their

### Elderly

The part of the population that are most physically and mentally vulnerable to the virus are the elderly people. The knowledge of their vulnerability during the pandemic can raise feelings of fear, anxiety, and anger in the elderly people.<sup>5</sup> Older people may already be physically and socially isolated in homes for the elderly, etc., experiencing loneliness which can worsen mental health.<sup>5</sup> According to the WHO's data, this group is about 20% more likely to develop mental disorders than other age groups. The older population can protect their mental health with the help of their caretakers, by undertaking physical activities, keeping routines, and creating new ones or doing activities that give a sense of achievement.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining social connections through digital means can also be helpful for them.



**Fig. 2.** Psychological impact on men and women, with and without children.

job security. The stress experienced due to job insecurity adds to the stress and anxiety already caused by the pandemic.<sup>20-21</sup>

**Women** Psychological distress during the pandemic have been reportedly higher in women than in men; that is women have been feeling greater feelings of anxiety and depression during these conditions. About 19% of men on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020 — with and without kids — reported being at least mildly distressed, as compared to 30% of women without kids and 34% of women who are moms (see Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> Moms or women with children face more psychological distress as compared to women without kids and to all men.<sup>23</sup> Women in general, are more likely to be affected psychologically due to the pandemic<sup>29</sup>.

### Impacts on Relationships

The COVID-19 crisis has seen a spike in divorce rates all over the world. For example, in the city of Xi'an, China, saw an unparalleled number of divorce requests in the marriage registration office.<sup>22</sup> Unemployment, economic hardship, work stress and other external stressors due to the pandemic can make it more difficult for partners to be responsive to each other. In times like these with increasing external stress, individuals are more likely to communicate in ways that are overly condemning or argumentative. This increases the frequency of the blame game in the relationship and leads to inability to see their partner's point of view, eventually leading them to be dissatisfied with their relationship.<sup>24</sup> However, spouses who can communicate effectively and can engage in positive interaction with each other when solving issues will be

more likely to maintain a good relationship despite the pandemic.

### Coping Strategies to Build Resilience

Physical isolation does not mean isolation from social contact and connection via online platforms. It is important to stay connected to feel less lonely as well as to maintain strong relationships. Further, during stressful times it is necessary to take time out to look after your emotional wellbeing. Practicing mindfulness exercises or meditation, as well as other self-care activities such as reading self-help books and joining online forums to engage in community, is important to protect one's mental and emotional health<sup>29</sup>. Also, it is very important to look after your physical health. This can be achieved by eating regular healthy meals as well as exercising and getting enough sleep can help in keeping the body healthy and fit and building immunity. Having a daily routine for taking care of your body during the pandemic can also prevent people from falling into self-harming or unhealthy habits.

Staying informed is highly important during the pandemic. However, fear can lead to spread of misinformation in online communities. Hence, fact-checking stories and sources will be helpful in reducing panic and fear. Educating oneself about symptoms and approaching authorities in case of doubt is important. Finally, taking breaks from digital screens and constant news streams is highly needed. Because constant stimulation by digital screens, as well as being exposed to constant news about recent developments about the pandemic and its spread, can lead to overstimulation, and cause accumulation of tension, stress and anxiety. Thus, it is important to be mindful about how many hours one spend in front of screens; and making sure to take regular breaks from both digital screens and from media updates.

### Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly had clear negative impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of the general population. Although some parts of the population have been hit harder than others, it has led to increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression and fear across most sectors and strata of society. Future research will reveal the wider mental health impacts and its consequences in the longer term. However, the pandemic is not all bad, as it has had positive impacts on the environment and wildlife. It has reduced pollution and replenished the resources and biodiversity of many places. It has also served as a catalyst of individual, organizational and societal transformations towards more sustainable ways of living. The pandemic has not only called for a

reinventing of our lifestyles, but also of our relationships. On the bright side, we also find the explosion of innovative responses to the pandemic, despite limited time and resources available. In the healthcare sector for instance, these have resulted in an accelerated pace of innovations in drugs and vaccines.<sup>25</sup> As we know, COVID-19 affects all forms of life.<sup>26-30</sup> In many ways, the current pandemic can be seen as a universal call for 'change'. The central question is whether we as an international society will answer this call accordingly, and whether we will be able to work together towards more holistic and sustainable solutions to the health related and societal issues that have been highlighted during these times of crisis and disruption.

**Conflict of Interest:** None

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