



ADVANCING EXCELLENCE IN TRANSGENDER HEALTH

# Family Systems of Transgender Children

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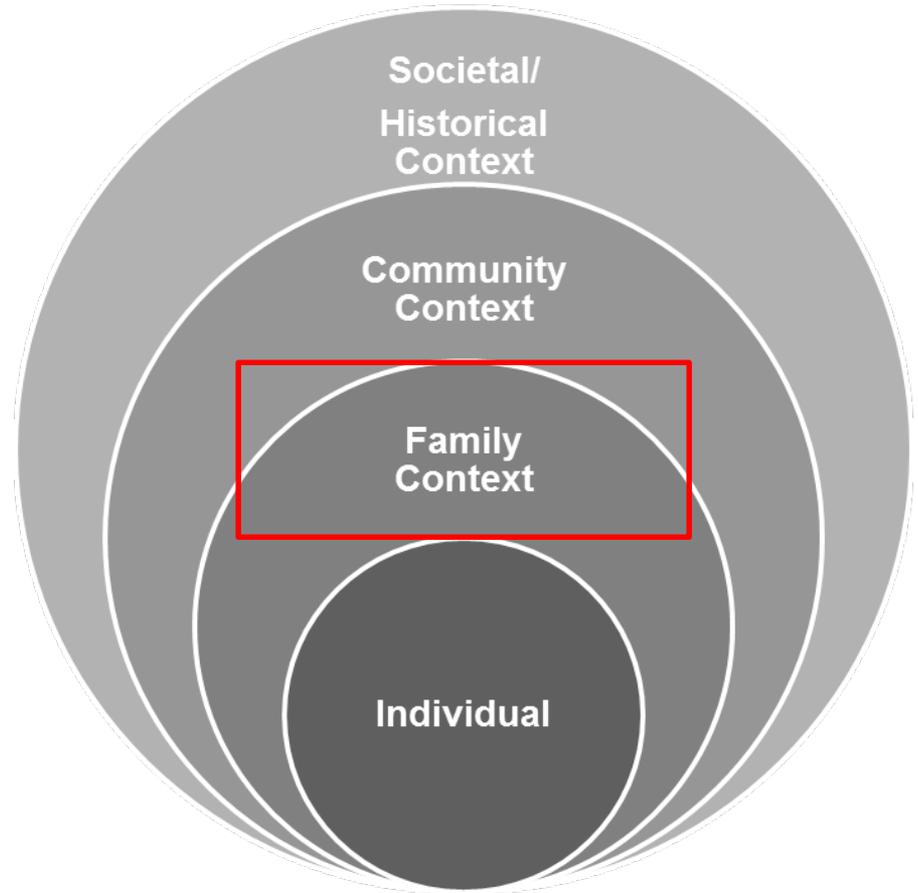
# Outline

1. Family systems and minority stress
2. Findings from the Trans Youth Family Study
3. Findings from the Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project



# Family Systems Theory

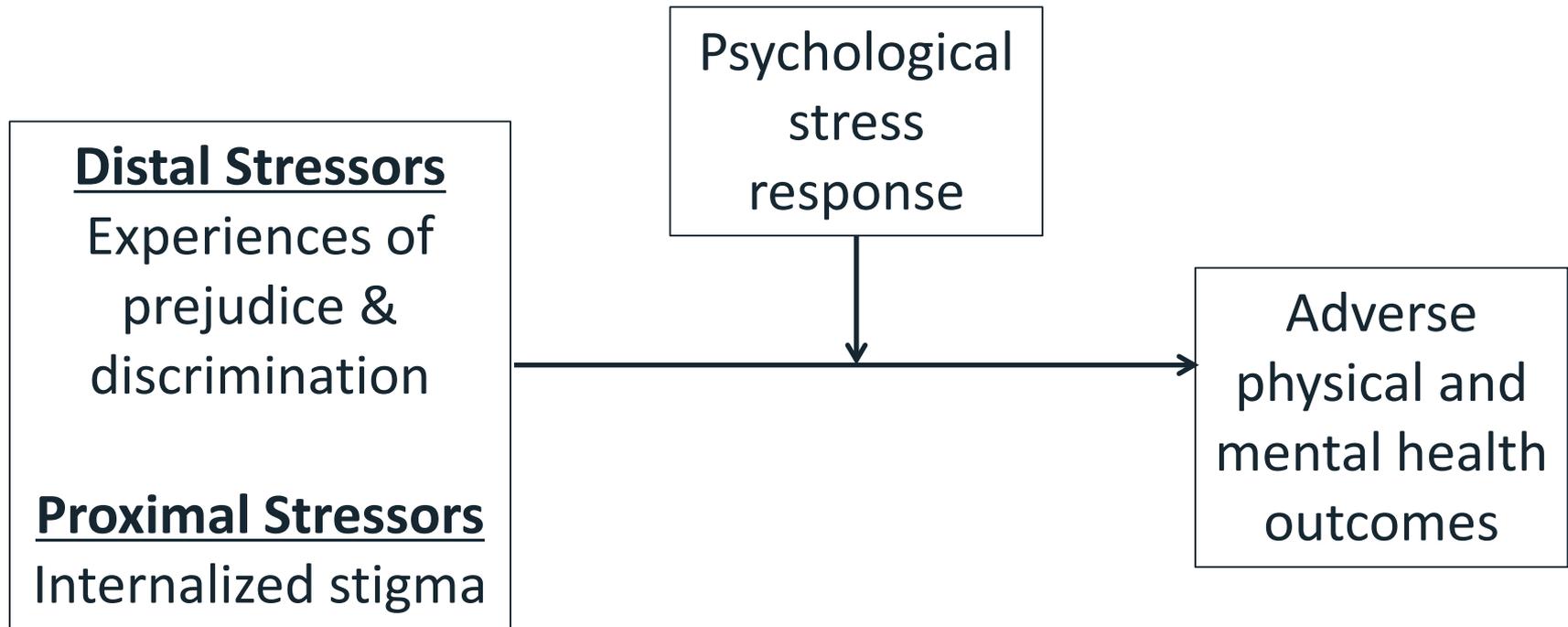
- Family members are interdependent
- Individual experiences must be considered within functioning of family system
- Transition for one family member challenges entire family system



Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985



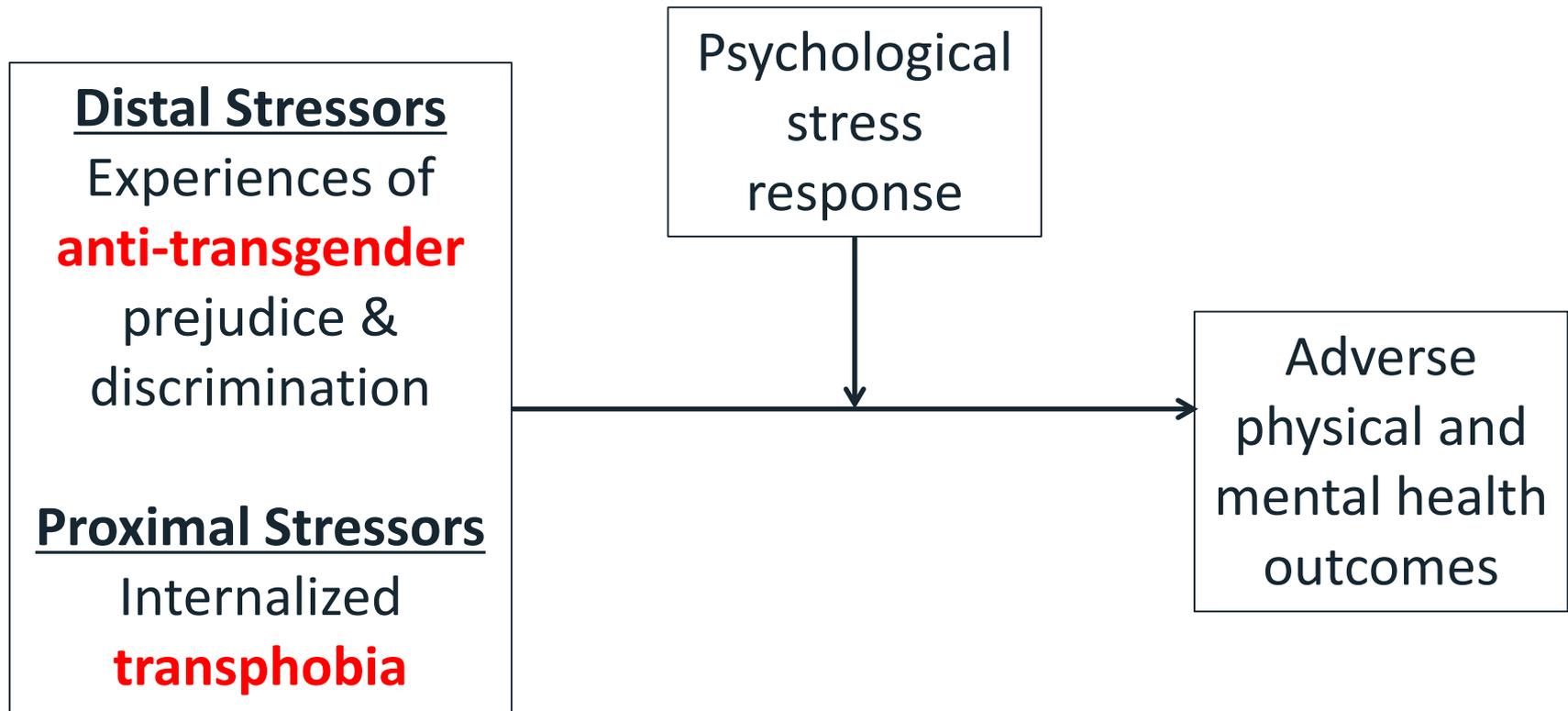
# Minority Stress Theory



Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 1995, 2003



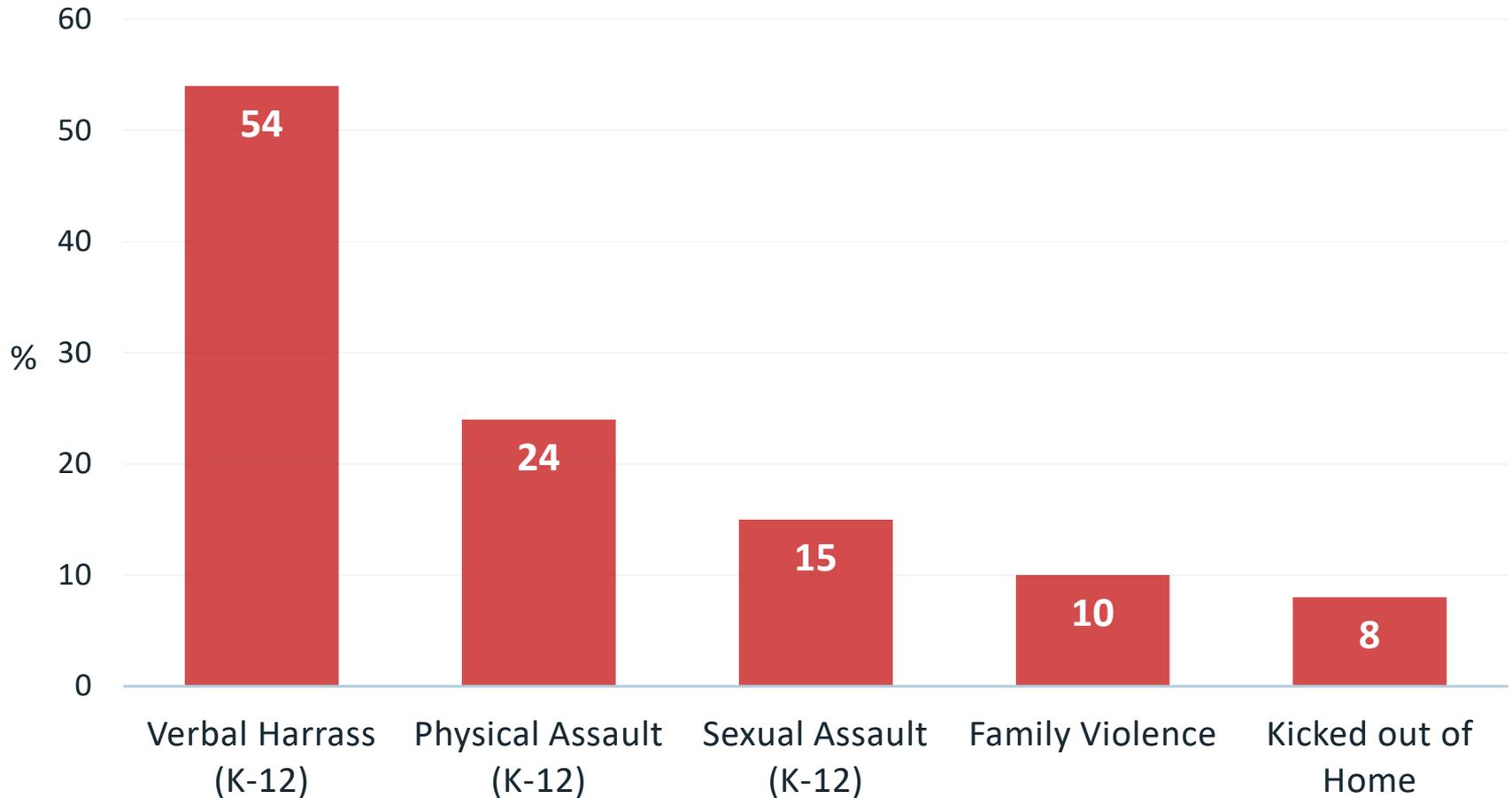
# Minority Stress Theory Applied to Trans Individuals



Hendricks & Testa, 2012



# Trans Discrimination



N = 27,715 Trans Adults

2015 U.S. Trans Survey



# Trans Youths' Mental Health

- Compared to cisgender youth, trans youth have:
  - Higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, self-harm, use of inpatient and outpatient mental health services
  - Less family connectedness
- Adverse mental health among trans youth attributed to:
  - Gender minority stress
  - Lack of family support

Eisenberg et al., 2017; Reisner et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2016



# Protective Role of Family

- Socially transitioned trans children who are supported in their gender identities have normative levels of depression
- Parental support associated with higher life satisfaction, lower perceived burden of being trans, fewer depressive symptoms among trans adolescents
- Trans youth with higher levels of family support and connectedness report better health

Olson et al., 2016; Simons et al., 2013; Veale et al., 2015



# Trans Youth Family Study (TYFS)

- 16 families
  - 16 trans and gender nonconforming (TGN) youth, ages 7-18 years
  - 29 cisgender caregivers
- Recruited from support networks in Northeast, Midwest, and South U.S.
- Longitudinal (baseline, 6-mo follow-up)
- Mixed methods (qualitative interviews, brief survey)



# TYFS: Identity Processes

- *How do TGN youth and caregivers describe the youth's transgender identity development?*
  
- Salient qualitative themes included:
  - Pronoun use
  - Parental reactions
  - Social support

Katz-Wise et al., 2017



# Pronoun Use

“If there were five genders, I wouldn’t be female—I’d be somewhere in the middle. But I’m definitely more on the side of, in terms of if there’s a line down the middle of the spectrum, I’m definitely more on the female side, and so I choose female pronouns.”

Trans girl, age 14 years



# Parental Reactions

“I mean it was hard, it wasn’t automatic but I always hoped that it would go away, I really did, I just hope he’s gay and he’ll grow out of this part of it.”

Father of a trans girl, age 15 years



# Social Support

“We went to [support group], you know, we dropped him off and picked him off like two hours later and the kid said, ‘This is the first time I have ever walked into a room full of kids and felt like I belong.’”

Mother of a trans boy, age 14 years



# TYFS: Future Orientation

- *How do TGN youth and caregivers perceive the youth's future considering their gender identity?*
- Salient qualitative themes included:
  - Is my child really trans?
  - Uncertainty about the future
  - Worries about physical and emotional safety

Katz-Wise et al., 2017



# Is My Child Really Trans?

“...he will say technically ‘I’m a boy,’ but...one day there was just me, my younger sister, and him and he put his arms around us and was like ‘I guess it’s just us girls now.’ So I think he really identifies and whether that’s just a super sensitive new age guy or maybe he’s just really meant to be a girl. I don’t know.”

Mother of a girlish boy, age 8 years



# Uncertainty about the Future

“...when I start thinking about the future I get very scared, and I don't know what it holds but I'm sure we'll meet it head on and that's all I can say. Yeah, I really don't know, it gets me nervous.”

Father of a trans boy, age 15 years



# Worries About Physical & Emotional Safety

“[I worry that child] will go to a playdate at someone's house and they'll be like a psycho-conservative person who goes and kills children like that 'cause they're doing a favor to the world”

Mother of a trans girl, age 7 years



# TYFS Summary of Findings

- Identity development is transactional between TGN youth and caregivers
- Trans identity development differs across age groups
- TGN youth and caregiver perceptions of the youth's future influenced by social contextual factors
- Themes highlight importance of caregiver and community support for TGN youth's well-being



# Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project (TTFN)

- Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach
- Mixed methods (surveys and interviews)
- Longitudinal (5 waves across 2 years)



# Study Aims

1. To describe mental health of trans youth in a community-based sample of families
2. To examine associations of family functioning from multiple family members' perspectives and trans youths' mental health



# Sample

- 33 families (96 family members)
  - 33 TGN adolescents, ages 13-17 years
  - 48 cisgender caregivers, 37-69 years
  - 15 cisgender siblings, ages 14-24 years
- Recruited from multiple sources across New England to obtain diverse range of experiences and family functioning
- Completed in-person qualitative interviews and surveys at Wave 1



# Sample Gender Identity

	<b>Trans Youth n (%)</b>	<b>Caregivers n (%)</b>	<b>Siblings n (%)</b>
<b>Trans feminine</b>	<b>12 (36.4)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>
<b>Trans masculine</b>	<b>17 (51.5)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>
<b>Non-binary</b>	<b>4 (12.1)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>
<b>Cisgender girl/woman</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>	<b>32 (66.7)</b>	<b>7 (46.7)</b>
<b>Cisgender boy/man</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>	<b>16 (33.3)</b>	<b>8 (53.3)</b>



# Sample Characteristics

- Race/ethnicity
  - Trans youth: 73% White, 15% mixed race/ethnicity
  - Caregivers: 92% White
  - Siblings: 73% White, 13% Asian
- Caregiver education level
  - 40% Master's degree or higher
- Urbanicity
  - 85% Metropolitan



# Measures

- **Family functioning:** Completed by trans youth, caregivers, siblings
  - Family communication
  - Family satisfaction
- **Mental health:** Completed by trans youth and caregivers
  - Negative outcomes: Suicidality, self-harm, depression, anxiety
  - Positive outcomes: Self-esteem, resiliency



# Analysis

- Descriptive statistics to describe trans youths' mental health in this sample
- Linear regression models to test associations of different family members' perspectives of family functioning and trans youths' mental health
  - Models adjusted for trans youths' age and gender identity



# Results: Trans Youths' Mental Health

Suicidality (youth report)	n (%)
Suicidal thoughts	10 (30)
Suicide plan	8 (24)
Suicide attempt	5 (15)
Hospitalization for suicide	5 (15)



# Results: Trans Youths' Mental Health

Self-harm	n (%)
Lifetime (youth report)	16 (49)
Self-injury disorder diagnosis (caregiver report)	8 (17)
Depression	n (%)
Depressive symptom score ( $\geq 10$ ) (youth report)	20 (61)
Depression diagnosis (caregiver report)	19 (40)
Anxiety	
Anxious symptoms (range: 6-24), M (SD) (youth report)	14.55 (4.64)
Anxiety disorder diagnosis, n (%) (caregiver report)	23 (48)



# Results: Quality of Family Communication Predicting Mental Health of Trans Youth

	Self-Harm $\beta$ (SE)	Depressive Symptoms $\beta$ (SE)	Anxious Symptoms $\beta$ (SE)	Self-Esteem $\beta$ (SE)	Resiliency $\beta$ (SE)
Trans Youth Report	-.29 (.01)	<b>-.65 (.16)***</b>	<b>-.52 (.12)**</b>	<b>.70 (.15)***</b>	<b>.58 (.01)**</b>
Caregiver Report	.12 (.02)	.11 (.31)	.22 (.20)	-.05 (.31)	-.06 (.02)

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001



# Results: Family Satisfaction Predicting Mental Health of Trans Youth

	Self-Harm $\beta$ (SE)	Depressive Symptoms $\beta$ (SE)	Anxious Symptoms $\beta$ (SE)	Self-Esteem $\beta$ (SE)	Resiliency $\beta$ (SE)
Trans Youth Report	-.30 (.01)*	-.47 (.13)**	-.40 (.09)*	.65 (.11)***	.31 (.01)
Caregiver Report	.26 (.01)	-.01 (.22)	.17 (.14)	-.08 (.22)	.13 (.02)
Sibling Report	.14 (.01)	.12 (.19)	.20 (.15)	.08 (.17)	.02 (.01)

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001



# TTFN Summary of Findings

- Trans youth in this sample have alarming rates of mental health concerns, considering that their families are supportive enough to participate in research together
- Better family functioning was associated with better mental health outcomes among trans youth
- Significant associations were found for trans youths' report of family functioning, but not caregivers' or siblings' reports



# TYFS and TTFN Limitations

- TYFS did not include siblings
- Families were largely supportive (though not always initially), limiting generalizability to non-supportive families
- Families were primarily White and higher SES
- In TTFN, no sibling data was collected for quality of family communication



# Conclusions

- Family systems approach is necessary for caring for trans youth
- Trans youths' own perception of family functioning may be most relevant for mental health and should be prioritized in research and clinical work
- Findings inform interventions to improve family functioning in families with trans youth, which will in turn provide protective factors for youth



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# Thank you!

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