



# The Social Roots of Youth Suicide Clusters

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*If you or someone you care about are in a crisis,  
call the lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) or text at  
[www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org)  
24/7*

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# Funding



**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK any time**

If you or someone you care about are in a crisis, call the lifeline



# Take home point

1. Youth suicide and suicide clusters have social roots
2. Addressing root causes of suicide will help improve youth suicide pre- and post-vention
  - Diminish environmental vulnerability to suicide clusters



# Mental Health in Adolescence

1. Most youth do reasonably well
2. But adolescence is a period of developmental vulnerability
  - So much is changing!
3. Significant increases in youth suicide since 2007



# Youth Suicide

- Etiology of youth suicide and suicidal behaviors (SSB) is challenging to determine
  - Cha et al. 2018; Nock, et al. 2009
- Numerous risk and protective factors for SSB, none *causal*
  - Affective processes, interpersonal experiences, trauma, mental illness, etc.
    - Cha et al. 2018; Franklin et al. 2017
  - Challenging to identify why one youth with a risk factor escalates from suicide ideation to a suicide attempt or even suicide while seemingly similar youth do not



# Youth Suicide Clusters

- Extremely limited knowledge re suicide clusters
  - Youth, males, and individuals with pre-existing risk factors more likely to die in a suicide cluster
    - For reviews: Cox et al. 2012; Haw et al. 2013



# Upstream Solutions

- Change the question...
- Focus on upstream solutions
  - Promoting mental health & help-seeking
  - This is where the social roots of suicide can really matter...



**In-Depth Case Study:**

**Poplar Grove, USA**



# In-Depth Case Study: Poplar Grove,\* USA

- Affluent, educated, privileged community
  - Homogeneous population
  - Enduring suicide problem
    - Focused on the local high school PGHS
      - 15 former or current PGHS students died by suicide since 2000
    - 3 youth died during our fieldwork
    - Echo suicide clusters

*\*All names of people and places are pseudonyms*



# In-Depth Case Study: Poplar Grove,\* USA

- 3 years of fieldwork (2013-2016)
  - In Poplar Grove
    - ~100 interviews & focus groups
    - Participant observation
    - Youth, Parents, Mental Health Workers, Religious leaders, Teachers, etc.
      - » BROAD community approach to the research
  - With suicide bereaved individuals outside of Poplar Grove
    - ~50 interviews



# Results Overview

- Describe the 3 social roots of suicide
  1. Rigid cultural expectations
  2. Mental health stigma
  3. Intense social connectedness
- Connect these social roots to individual vulnerability to suicide



# Rigid Cultural Expectations

## Douglas (Mental Health Worker):

“The expectation and the performance of students at Poplar Grove High school and the whole cluster that feeds into Poplar Grove has been one of **athletic excellence**, **academic excellence**, and I use the word expectation on purpose because the kids impose much of that need on themselves, but **there’s also a community expectation that we are Poplar Grove and that we are going to achieve.**”



# Rigid Cultural Expectations *Valued in the Adolescent Society*

Samantha (young adult):

**“The more [advanced placement (AP)] courses you take the better, the more sports you’re involved with the better; the more trophies in your bedroom, the better.”**

Shannon (teen):

**“I don’t wanna sound cocky, but I tend to be exactly what the Poplar Grove ideal is...Like I said, I’m in [student government], team captain, varsity sport..., but I still go out every single weekend.”**



# Rigid Cultural Expectations

## *Amplified Mental Health Stigma*

- Having a mental health problem is seen as contrary to the ideal of a “perfect” kid or family
- People hide mental health problems or don’t want to discuss them
  - When they are discussed its more to deflect or place blame on others



# Mental Health Stigma

## Hannah (teen):

**“All the bad stuff gets covered up.** So nobody wants to be like ‘I have an issue.’ And nobody wants to come out and be honest about it. **So kids cover it up and try to act like they are doing well in school and they are being the Poplar Grove kid that they are supposed to be.** So it gets covered up, and then when it gets to the point where it's so bad that somebody would consider suicide, it's too late...”



# The Role of Social Connectedness

## Community was very socially connected

- **Isabelle (teen):** “For me growing up...if I got hurt...I could just walk in [to any house], crying with a busted knee, and they would help...I love that sense of community that we feel”
- **Victoria (mom):** “Nobody ignores a request for support – somebody will always rearrange their commitments. It's pretty amazing.”
- **Jim (dad):** “it's a very tight-knit community...we have a [community] pool and everybody knows everybody and we know all the kids, so you feel like there's network, a safety net around you all the time.”





# The Role of Social Connectedness

- People cared about what other people thought
- Kids' actions were tied to families' reputations
- Private information easily became public through gossip

- **Margaret (mom):**

“So....**I do not know this family very well, I only know what I've heard through the grapevine.** Emmett who had committed suicide....he was in and out of a mental institution a couple times is what I understand. He was on medication. He had had counseling, supposedly he had threatened many times....His parents knew about it. The last fight that they had was ‘Emmett - you're getting really bad again, I think it's time for you to go back to the hospital’ and shortly after that he killed himself. That's the rumor I heard. It's qualified, but it's still a rumor.”



# The Power of Reputation

- Poplar Grove is an elite community
- **Sarah (mom, young child):**

**“People live in Poplar Grove because they want the best schools. They want the best for their children.** I grew up in Annesdale [a nearby community]. I moved to Poplar Grove [as an adult] because having gone to Annesdale High School, I wasn't going to send my kid there. There wasn't anything wrong with it, but **Poplar Grove ... is Poplar Grove...Everybody wants to get in because they think they're missing out if they're not in.** And then the people that are in feel pressure to maintain that level of what people associate with the area.”



# Consequences for Youth Mental Health



# Amplification of Emotional Distress

- Hard to escape the expectations
- To illustrate this, meet Scott
  - A teen from Poplar Grove



# The Challenge of Escaping Expectations

Scott understands the cultural expectations:

- **“You have to play a sport, you have to have at least four or five APs and we are pressured into this”**
- **“We’re so achievement conscious...We’re an upper middle class neighborhood. A lot of people don’t want to, I don’t think, give that up. There’s a lot of doctors and lawyers here. We have a lot of tech entrepreneurs, which is a real high paying job so I don’t think people are willing to accept that being successful and having money is not necessarily the same thing. I don’t know.”**



# The Challenge of Escaping Expectations

Rejects them:

- “**I made a choice to break away from the culture** and do something that made me happy.”
- “I think **it’s not a good culture**...I’m not saying its bad to get a good education...You need to get an education but **you also need to make sure you’re living life**”
- “**If I start a family I won’t start it here.** I would start it in a middle of the ground neighborhood where they can be children. **I made the choice that I wasn’t going to force myself to do too much. I was going to do what I needed to do to be happy.** I wasn’t going to slack off. I was going to do work, but I wasn’t going to work to the point of where I would have lost my childhood because you’re only young once. **I made that decision.**”



# The Challenge of Escaping Expectations

- Damages his sense of self (at least somewhat)
  - **Scott:** I feel stigmatized. **I feel I'm not at the educational level that I should be** with everyone else. I should be up there but I'm just not that academic....I'm okay with it sometimes. Sometimes **I feel like bad about it**, ya know...Sometimes I wake up in the morning and wonder why I even try because I know I'm not academic. **We are a very academic town.**
  - **Interviewer:** Do you feel like you're mismatched?
  - **Scott:** Yeah. I feel like I'm mismatched. **Fish out of water.**



# The Emotional Struggle to Meet Expectations

Vanessa (young adult):

- “Yeah, **I definitely put a lotta pressure on myself though, just because I saw all those people doing so well,...**it's also a very toxic thing because you compare yourselves to others so often that it just gets crazy because you're trying to do better than everyone else...**the pressure kinda got to me, though, sometimes. I definitely – I get overwhelmed very easily...– there were times where I had mental breakdowns because of it.**”





## Suicide & the Struggle to Meet Expectations

- Molly, young adult (lost her best friend Michelle):
  - “[Michelle] never felt like she could be perfect in her own eyes, and she had explained this to me just a week and a half before she died...Even though on the outside it's like [she's] super athletic, varsity athlete, stellar grades, headed for a great college to play lacrosse...but...**she felt like she wasn't doing everything right**...That was not very long before [her suicide].”



# Suppression of Help-Seeking

- Youth reported an unwillingness to ask for help
  - Recall Hannah (teen):
    - “All the bad stuff gets covered up. So nobody wants to be like ‘I have an issue.’ And nobody wants to come out and be honest about it...”
- Poplar Grove (youth and young adults), **32%** were classified as help-seekers
  - Youth who sought help from an adult, not a friend
- Comparison sample: **67%** were classified as help-seekers



# Suppression of Help-Seeking

- Confirmed by mental health workers
  - Bill: “As professionals, we try to get the parents on board with [coping with their kids problems] but they don’t want to deal with it. I think that’s my biggest issue. **You can see the red flags all over the place and the parents don’t want to do anything, even to the point to where kids can even threaten to kill themselves and you call [the parents] and [they say] “oh they’re just playing around,”** or [I’ll call and say] “I think you need to take them in...” [and they’ll respond] “oh they’ll be perfectly fine,” and it just tears you up inside.”
- 60% of mental health workers reported this
  - (11 out of 17)



# Suicide & Suppression of Help-Seeking

- Many who died by suicide were surrounded by friends who offered help
- Carrie (young adult, suicide attempt survivor):
  - “the best way I can explain [my refusal to seek help even though I had amazing friends] is it’s kind of the person I became. I don’t know if this goes back into **that mentality of where I was just like I gotta be a good person, where I just sort of became the person I was known as** and then I saw myself as was this strong, independent **person that...didn’t need anybody guiding me.** “



# Passive Views of Suicide

1. School does not want to talk about suicide with youth
  - No QPR; No SOS; No Sources of Strength
2. **BUT**
  - **Youth are talking about suicide**
    - amongst themselves at school, over text, online after a suicide
3. Youth were largely making sense of suicide on their own



# Passive Views of Suicide

## 1. Suicide as something that can just “happen” to you

- **Grace:** I think a lot of the kids were just like “Oh my gosh, that’s gonna be us [meaning someone who dies by suicide]. **We’re all gonna stress out and lose it, even if your life is great you can still snap one day.**”



# Expansion of Suicide as an Option

**Becca**, who has a history of suicide ideation and self-harm:

- “I’ve wanted to get away from having all these problems. Seeing all these other people go through all these problems, **their answer is suicide so why can’t my answer be suicide.**
- (Abrutyn, Mueller, Osborne 2019; Mueller 2017)



# Summary

1. The social connectedness, mental health stigma, and homogeneous and narrow culture in Poplar Grove generated additional stress & pressure for youth
  - Being a “good” Poplar Grove kid is deeply important to youth
2. Resulted in
  - Increased emotional distress
  - Suppression of help-seeking
3. Combined with exposure to suicide and the interpretation of suicide as a means to escape the oppressive context → amplified vulnerability to suicide





# Why do suicide clusters form?

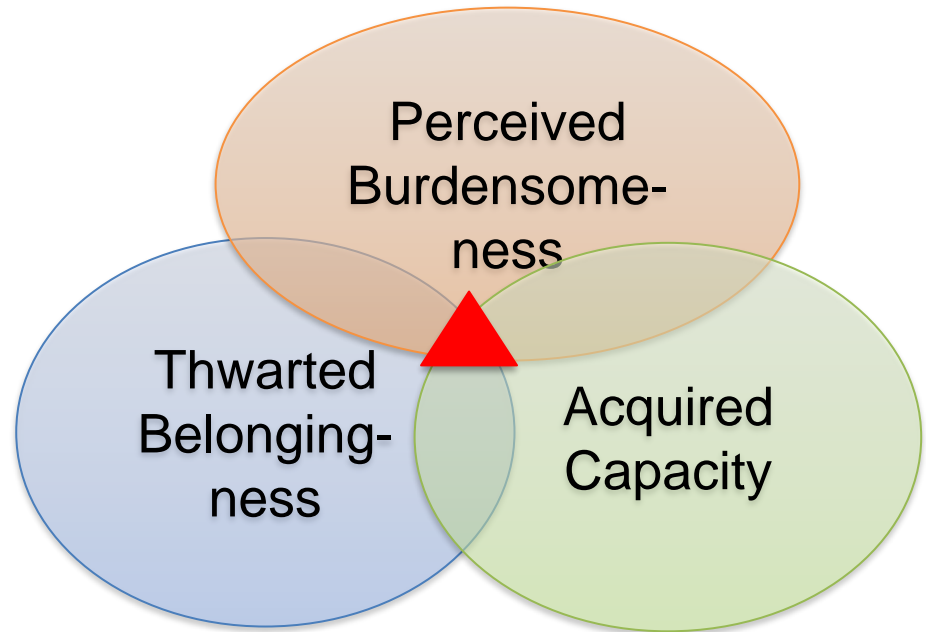
## Environmental Pathway:

- Suicide clusters emerge when the social environment does not satisfy youth's psycho-social developmental needs.
  - E.g., places where:
    - Youth struggle to have their psychological needs met
    - Cultural values or social relationships thwart help-seeking
    - Mental health safety systems are not sufficient\* (current project)



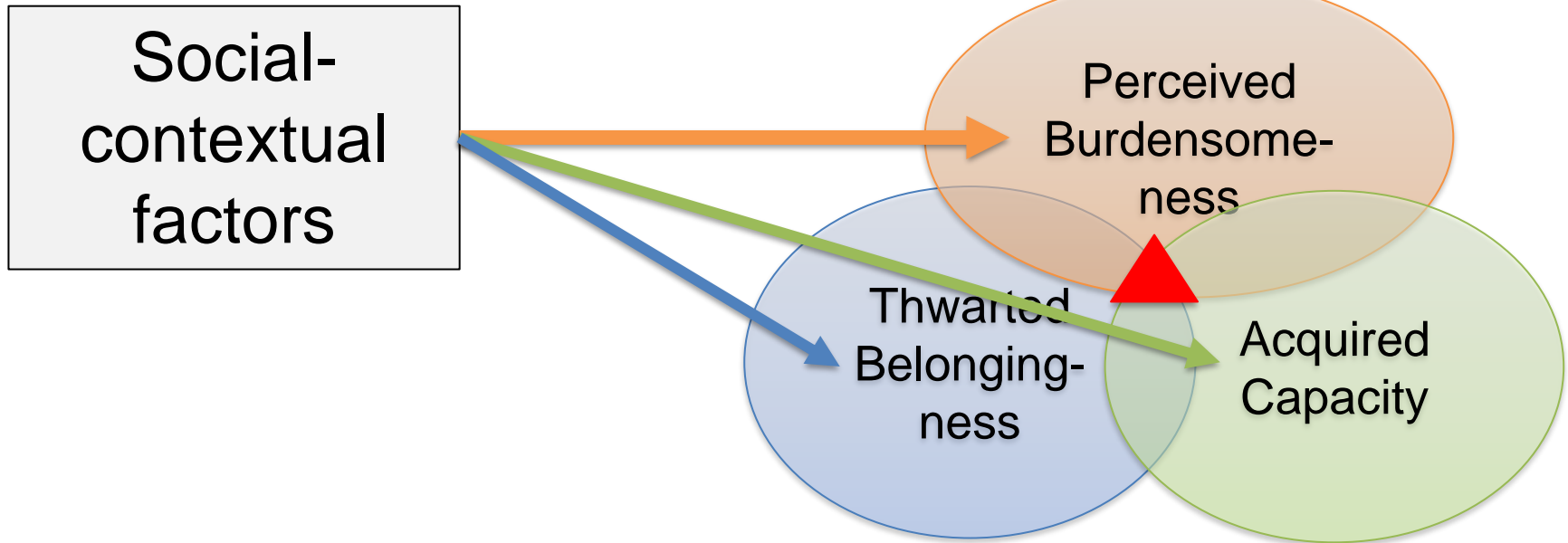
# Improving our Understanding of Suicide

## Interpersonal Theory of Suicide



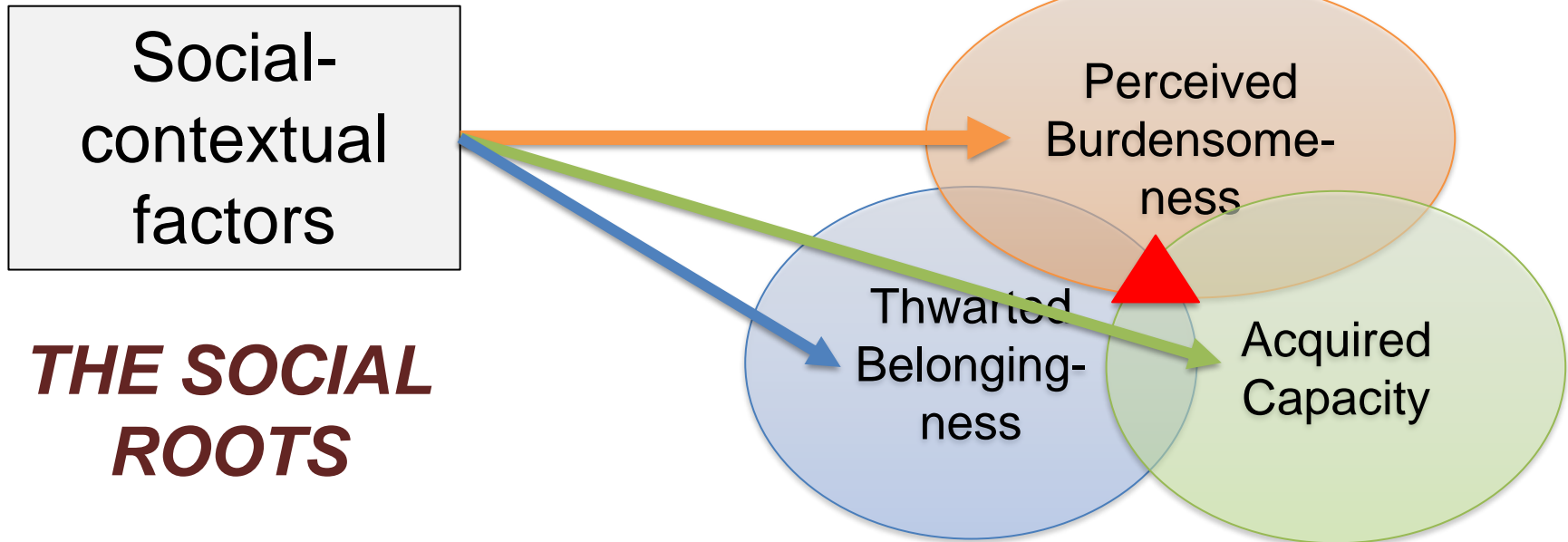
# Improving our Understanding of Suicide

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# Improving our Understanding of Suicide

## Interpersonal Theory of Suicide



# Suicide prevention must

1. Incorporate interventions that address suicide's social roots
2. Opportunity!
  - Expands our toolkit for suicide prevention
    - Whole Child Educational Interventions
    - Interventions to diminish academic pressure



# IN PURSUIT OF SOLUTIONS



# Empower Youth

## 1. What makes youth miserable?

- Poplar Grove
  - Academic and social pressure to be perfect
  - Gossip and rumors
- LGBTQIA Youth
  - Social rejection
- 13 Reasons Why
  - Sexual assault, bullying, rumors
  - My take on 13 Reasons Why:
    - <https://contexts.org/blog/13-reasons-why/>

**Engage  
youth in  
finding  
solutions**



# Challenge Narrow Ideals

1. Not fitting in is extremely painful and stressful
2. Celebrate diverse forms of success
3. School-based interventions may help





# Challenge Mental Health Stigma

1. Mental health problems are no different than other forms of medical problems
  - They do not diminish other aspects of people
  - They deserve respect and treatment



# Shifting Culture is Possible

## (Though a Challenge!)

1. Evidence based programs for shifting culture exist
  - **Challenge Success** (for problems with academic pressure)
    - [www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org)
  - **Bring Change to Mind** (for mental health stigma)
    - <https://bringchange2mind.org/>
  - **Seize the Awkward** (talking about suicide)
    - <https://seizetheawkward.org/>
  - **JED Foundation** (for mental health promotion & suicide prevention)
    - [www.jedfoundation.org](http://www.jedfoundation.org)
  - **Sources of Strength** (mental health promotion & suicide prevention)
    - <https://sourcesofstrength.org/>



# Acknowledge Community Problems

## 1. Necessary first step

**Sonia:** Because I feel like here, it's not like normal, but we are comparing it to other places and [suicides like ours] would be like such a shock for them. And we're always like, "it was tragic," but we we're not shocked anymore, by it.

**Danielle:** Which is really sad.

[Several Teens]: Yeah. Yeah.

**Danielle:** We really should be, and I feel like. I don't know, does the community not feel like perceive it is like, that shouldn't be happening? Like, like it messes up the whole community. The whole community grieves over it, and it's just like...

**Louisa & Danielle (in unison):** And then it happens again.



# Avoid Passive Language for Talking About Suicide



# Avoid Passive Language for Talking About Suicide

1. Suicide is not “contagious” like a virus
2. There are no “copycat” suicides
3. Suicide cannot happen to you via a “ripple effect”
4. Metaphors matter
  - Neuroscience shows they shape our understanding and emotions!



# Exposure to suicide does, on average, increase risk of suicidality

1. It is a very hard experience for youth
  - Youth grieve for years, just like an adult would
2. If youth don't understand suicide and what to do if they feel suicidal, *that* is risky
3. If youth are left alone to make sense of their friend or classmate's motives for suicide
  - Suicide can seem like an option



# Talking about suicide does not increase risk

1. Experimental evidence shows this

- Matt Nock's team at Harvard, Madelyn Gould's team at Columbia...etc



# Talking about suicide does not increase risk

1. Experimental evidence shows this
  - Matt Nock's team at Harvard, Madelyn Gould's team at Columbia...etc
2. Adults have one option
  - Do they share in the conversation?
  - Or do they leave youth to figure it out on their own?





# Educate Yourself re Talking about Suicide

- Be prepared to talk to youth in a compassionate, helpful way about suicide
  - Don't assume this won't happen to your family or to a youth that you know
    - 18.8% of U.S. teens seriously considered attempting suicide in 2019
  - Be proactive; Be a part of the solution
- Online trainings available [www.livingworks.com](http://www.livingworks.com)



# Educate Yourself re Talking about Suicide

- Don't try to change their mind
  - Invalidate how they are feeling
- Instead listen non-judgmentally and affirm their experience
- Helpful, 14 minute podcast from Short Wave
  - <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/02/983823424/how-to-reach-out-when-someone-you-know-may-be-at-risk-of-suicide>



# What **Not** to Say

- “How could you think of suicide? Your life’s not that bad”
- “Don’t you know I would be devastated if you killed yourself? How could you think of hurting me like that?”
- “Suicide is selfish”
- <https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/2015/03/03/what-not-to-say/>



# What to Say

1. “I’m so glad you told me that you’re thinking of suicide”
2. “I’m sad you’re hurting like this”
3. “What’s going on that makes you want to die?”
4. “When do you think you’ll act on your suicidal thoughts?”
5. “What can I do to help?”
6. “I hope you’ll keep talking to me about your thoughts of suicide.”

<https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/2017/10/03/10-things-to-say/>





# Thank you

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