



YOU DON'T NEED MORE WILLPOWER

**The 5 Keys for
Forming Stronger Habits**

by **PETE LEIBMAN**

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Introduction

So, how do you form stronger habits? Well, despite what many people believe, you don't need "more willpower." People who are excelling in any area of life are not "willing" themselves to greatness. They are forming stronger habits by thinking differently and by engineering their lives in a very methodical way. They are tapping into a different kind of P.O.W.E.R. that we will cover in this eBook.

Before we dive into the 5 keys for forming stronger habits though, let's first discuss why habits matter. Advertisements can mislead us and suggest that there are shortcuts to success. Billions of dollars are spent every year promoting products and services that promise you can look, feel, and perform better with little or no effort.

Life would be much easier if we could become our best over a weekend. Unfortunately, we cannot summon change in our lives as quickly as we can summon our next Uber. Significant changes occur slowly and with effort.

When you see people who are thriving in any area of life, it is also easy to assume they were born with better DNA. Your genetics can absolutely put you at a disadvantage or at an advantage. However, they only determine where you start. Your *habits* determine where you finish. Isolated behaviors might not seem like a big deal. However, they add up quickly.

Consider the impact of one seemingly small bad habit. If you drink one sixteen-ounce sweetened iced tea today, that's only 150 calories and thirty-seven grams of sugar. That by itself is not a big deal. However, that becomes a big deal when you do it every day, which would result in you consuming over 54,000 calories and over 15 pounds of sugar over the next year. That's the same amount of sugar found in over 16,000 Skittles ^[1]. And, that's one "small" bad habit.

The good news is that positive habits obviously add up as well. Consider the impact of one seemingly small good habit. If you eat one serving of spinach today, that's only three ounces of spinach. That by itself is not a big deal. However, that becomes a big deal – in a good way - when you do it every day, which would result in you consuming over sixty-eight pounds of one of the world's most nutrient-dense foods over the next year. And, that's one "small" good habit.

You can achieve massive results in any area of your life by making changes that are simple and that might seem small. Stronger habits (not willpower, gimmicks, or genetics) are the key to achieving and sustaining high performance over the long-term.

Research by Duke University has demonstrated that at least 40 percent of our daily behaviors are habitual ^[2]. When you take control of your behavior and form stronger habits, you will be amazed at what you can achieve, who you can become, and how you can impact the world.

My Story

As a fifteen year-old student, I was 5'10" and had size thirteen sneakers, while only weighing 119 pounds. I looked like a "human L." There is no way that either of us would have predicted then that I would eventually create a web site and write a book with the word "stronger" in the title.



A picture of me in high school (with my Dad).

After transforming my body at the end of high school, I became obsessed with seeing what else could be improved. Since then, I have completed a degree in Psychology at Johns Hopkins University and spent more than fifteen years studying behavior change, psychology, and high performance.

Since 2009, I have coached people privately and taught weekly Sports Conditioning classes for hundreds of people who live in the Washington, D.C.

area. I have also competed in endurance obstacle races, including the Obstacle Course Racing (OCR) World Championships, an international event with athletes from more than forty countries.

Most of my career has been spent inside of an office, perhaps like you. Currently, I work at Heidrick & Struggles, a leadership advisory firm that serves the majority of the Fortune 500. Since joining H&S in 2013, I have networked with, interviewed, and assessed hundreds of leaders.



Pictures of me today: at work (left) and completing an obstacle right (right).

Over the years, many people have asked me how to form stronger habits, so that they can have more energy, less stress, and higher performance. I created StrongerHabits.com to try to answer this significant question. My mission is to help ambitious people like you become the healthiest, strongest, and highest-performing person that they can become. Nothing brings me more joy than seeing other people overcome challenges and achieve their dreams.

Key #1: Purpose

On April 6, 2007, businesswoman Arianna Huffington collapsed from exhaustion and lack of sleep. When she fell, she hit her head on the corner of her desk, spilling blood on the floor of her home office. She also broke her cheekbone and cut her eye. At the time, she was working over one-hundred hours a week. This painful incident served as a major wake-up call for her.

In *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder*, Huffington writes, “In terms of the traditional measures of success, which focus on money and power, I was very successful. But I was not living a successful life by any sane definition of success. I knew something had to radically change. I could not go on that way ^[3].”

This event propelled her to overhaul her life and to start using her influence to dismantle the widespread delusion that burnout is a price that you must pay to be successful. In addition to authoring *Thrive*, she wrote *The Sleep Revolution: Transforming Your Life, One Night at a Time*. She also launched Thrive Global in late 2016 with the mission “to end the stress and burnout epidemic ^[4].”

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When people decide they want to make changes, they usually begin by thinking about what to start doing or stop doing. Obviously, you need to change

your behavior if you want to change your life. However, you have to change your beliefs first because your beliefs drive your behavior. Your mindset will ultimately serve as the key driver or as the key obstacle for whatever you want to achieve. In the example above, Arianna Huffington needed to change her definition of success before she could start living a healthier life.

Forming stronger habits can be simple and straightforward. However, that does not mean the process will be easy. When change is tough- and it will be tough- you will consciously or subconsciously ask yourself, “Why am I doing this?” ... “Why am I not eating a piece of cake when everyone else around me is?” ... “Why am I exercising today instead of taking it easy at home?” ... “Why am I going to bed early instead of watching TV?” ...

Where there is a ~~will~~ why, there is a way. The first key for forming stronger habits is **purpose**. Before you think about what behaviors to change and how to change those behaviors, make sure you are clear on *why* you want to change. You don't need to have an epiphany, like Arianna Huffington did. However, you do need to be clear on why you want to change.

Key #2: Optimism

In the early 1980s, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company was losing over seventy-five million dollars a year in hiring costs for sales agents. Fifty percent of their agents were quitting in the first year alone, given the high frequency of rejection they experienced in their roles.

John Creedon (the head of Metropolitan Life at the time) was eager to address this expensive problem. He teamed up with Dr. Martin Seligman, a leading authority in the fields of optimism, pessimism, resilience, learned helplessness, depression, and Positive Psychology. In his book *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, Dr. Seligman discusses some of the findings of their work.

They started with a simple correlational study to determine if agents who were already successful were also extremely optimistic. They surveyed one hundred sales agents who were considered productive, along with one hundred sales agents who were considered unproductive. They found that agents who scored in the top 10 percent on optimism sold 88 percent more than those who scored in the bottom 10 percent on optimism.

Their next objective was to measure if optimism had produced success or if success had produced optimism. They began that analysis by surveying 104 agents

who were hired in western Pennsylvania in 1983. The following year, they looked at those prior survey results for the fifty-nine sales agents who ended up quitting within their first twelve months.

They found that agents who had initially scored in the bottom 25 percent on optimism were three times likelier to have quit than agents who had initially scored in the top 25 percent. They also found that agents who had initially scored in the top 50 percent on optimism sold twenty percent more than those who had scored in the bottom 50 percent. In addition, the gap between optimists and pessimists kept getting wider, because optimism produces more persistence. As Dr. Seligman writes, “optimism predicted who survived, and it predicted who sold the most ^[5].”

Dr. Seligman’s research has demonstrated that optimists succeed more at work. His research has also demonstrated that optimists lead healthier, longer lives. Various other studies have also proven the link between optimism and better overall health.

In one experiment, scientists from Harvard and Boston University evaluated a group of 1,306 men. At the start of the study, each man’s optimism was measured, along with his family history of heart disease. Over the next decade, the most optimistic men were found to be less than half as likely to develop heart

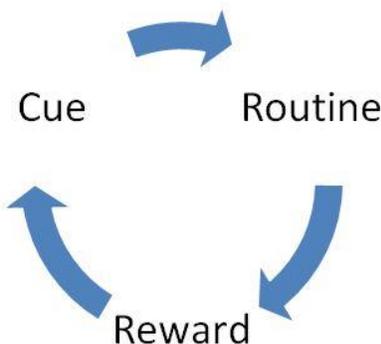
disease as the most pessimistic ones, even after other risk factors were taken into consideration ^[6].

The second key for forming stronger habits is **optimism**. Before you think about what behaviors to change and how to change those behaviors, make sure you believe that you can change. When you want to change (purpose) and believe that you can change (optimism), you will have the mindset required to achieve anything.

Key #3: The Way

When people typically think of *the way* to form stronger habits, they usually just try to stop doing or start doing a certain behavior. This approach is rarely effective because habits do not occur in a vacuum. In *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, Author Charles Duhigg shares an excellent framework on how our brains form habits. He refers to this process as “The Habit Loop ^[7].”

As Duhigg writes, “This process within our brains is a three-step loop. First, there is a *cue*, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then, there is the *routine*, which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally, there is a *reward*, which helps you figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future ... Over time, this loop-cue, routine, reward; cue, routine, reward-becomes more and more automatic. The cue and reward become intertwined until a powerful sense of anticipation and craving emerges ^[8].”



“The Habit Loop” by author Charles Duhigg

While bad habits provide dangerous or even deadly consequences over the long-term, they form because of the rewards they provide in the short-term. Habits - both the good kind and the bad kind - get stronger and stronger as you begin to yearn for the reward at the end of the loop. That is essential. The cue and reward are not sufficient on their own. As Duhigg writes, “Cravings are what drive habits. And figuring out how to spark a craving makes creating a new habit easier ... every morning, millions put on their jogging shoes to capture an endorphin rush they’ve learned to crave ^[9].”

If you eat a lot of junk food, snooze through your alarm every morning, or do any other bad habit, it is not because you lack willpower. It is because you have succumbed to the dark side of “The Habit Loop” that all of our brains are governed by. If you eat a lot of kale, crush it at the gym at 6:00 a.m. each morning, or do any other good habit, it is also not because of willpower. It is because of the bright side of “The Habit Loop” that all of our brains are governed by. Our brains form habits as a way to conserve energy. That way, you do not have to think about how to tie your shoes, how to brush your teeth, how to drive a car, and so on.

To be clear, you don’t have to eat kale or exercise before work, if you don’t want to. That’s not the point. The message is that virtually every behavior – good or bad – is simply the result of a process that you can change.

You become what you repeat. The third key for forming stronger habits is **the way**. By identifying the individual components (cue, routine, reward) in “The Habit Loop” that you want to break or make, you can create a strategy for forming any new habit. This does not mean that change will be easy or that change will happen quickly. However, you will be clear on what you need to do.

Key #4: Environment

Dr. Brian Wansink is Professor and Director of the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab, where he is a leading expert in changing eating behavior. In his book *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*, he talks about one study that he conducted in 1999 on a group of unsuspecting moviegoers who purchased a ticket for a Saturday showing of *Payback*, an action movie starring Mel Gibson.

Each person who bought a ticket was given a free soft drink and a free bucket of popcorn (either a “medium” size or a “large” size). They were told that the theater hoped they would answer a few questions after the movie about the concession stand. The participants were not told they were part of an experiment on eating habits. They were also not told that their popcorn was stale- it had been popped five days earlier.

When the movie ended, each person was asked to complete a brief survey. Each person was also asked to turn in their container of remaining popcorn. All participants were given a bucket designed to be too big to finish. Each person’s bucket was then weighed for the remaining contents.

The people who had been given the “large” buckets were told that some other people had been given smaller buckets. They were also told that the average person given a larger bucket tends to eat more than the average person given a

smaller bucket. They were then asked if they ate more because they were given a larger container.

Most people were convinced that the size of their bucket would not influence them. However, the data proved otherwise. On average, someone who received a larger bucket ate 53 percent more than someone who received one of the smaller buckets. Remember that this popcorn wasn't any good either. It was so stale that two people actually asked for their money back after the movie. They were reminded that the popcorn had been given to them for free.

As Dr. Wansink writes in *Mindless Eating*, “Everyone- every single one of us- eats how much we eat largely because of what’s around us. We overeat not because of hunger but because of family and friends, packages and plates, names and numbers, labels and lights, colors and candles, shapes and smells, distractions and distances, cupboards and containers ... Most of us are blissfully unaware of what influences how much we eat ^[10].”

While Dr. Wansink studies eating habits, his work provides a powerful lesson for changing habits in any area of life. Your surroundings (physically, digitally, and socially) influence all of your behavior. The fourth key for forming stronger habits is **environment**. Engineer your environment to support your desired behaviors, and change will occur much more quickly and naturally.

Key #5: Reinforcement

Imagine if there were no laws for driving. In such a world, all of us would be able to drive in any lane, go as fast as we wanted, and race through intersections when we did not feel like stopping. Think of the pandemonium that would result. Think of how much better off you are because of the various laws that we all follow on the road.

Unfortunately, there are few boundaries around our habits in today's society. Social media allows us to broadcast our thoughts, pictures, or videos 24-7 at the click of a button. Smartphones allow us to work 24-7 and from virtually anywhere in the world. Drive-through restaurants and convenience stores provide us with 24-7 access to artificial "foods" that our bodies are not built to consume.

You can either allow yourself to be controlled by our turbulent world, or you can bring order to life and take control of your behavior. You do not need to live like a robot. However, a reasonable amount of structure helps you form habits more easily and makes change much easier.

Structure prevents chaos. The fifth key for forming stronger habits is **reinforcement**. Implement systems to track your behavior and hold yourself accountable, and change will occur much more quickly and naturally.

The #1 Strategy for Breaking a Bad Habit

Have you ever blamed one of your bad habits on a lack of willpower? Maybe you eat more junk food than you would like. Maybe you hit the snooze button more often than you would like. Maybe you drink more alcohol than you would like.

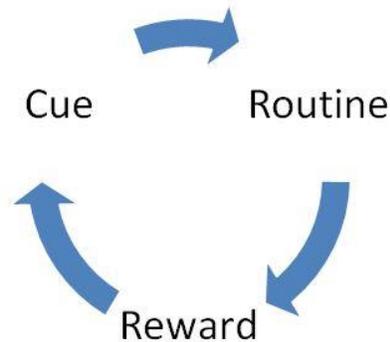
Regardless of what your bad habits are (and, we all have them), lack of willpower is actually not your problem. Much of what is believed about willpower and self-control has been disproven by recent scientific research.

For example, in one experiment conducted by Dr. Wilhelm Hofmann of the University of Cologne, researchers gave 205 participants beepers that would go off at random. During those times, participants were asked about temptations and desires that they were currently experiencing.

The research discovered an interesting finding. The people who said they were the best at self-control reported fewer temptations during the course of the study. In other words, the people who said they were the best at self-control were the ones who were testing their self-control the least ^[11].

If you want to break a bad habit, you could just try to muster up more willpower to stop doing your bad habit. While this is unfortunately what most people do, this approach is rarely effective or sustainable over the long-term.

As discussed earlier, habits do not occur in a vacuum. Habits (good or bad) are caused by triggers ^[12]. Therefore, a much more effective approach for breaking a bad habit is to **remove or reduce the cue(s) that trigger the bad habit.**



“The Habit Loop” by author Charles Duhigg

Cues can be visual, emotional (i.e. due to stress), mental (i.e. due to boredom), physical (i.e. due to exhaustion), or social (i.e. being with certain people). A certain day or time can also be a cue. Here are some examples of habit loops for negative behaviors:

- You see candy on your desk (visual cue), so you eat the treat (routine) in order to enjoy something sweet (reward).
- You feel stressed (emotional cue), so you smoke a cigarette (routine) in order to feel relaxed (reward).
- You are bored (mental cue), so you scroll through your Facebook news feed (routine) in order to receive intellectual stimulation (reward).

- You are exhausted (physical cue), so you consume an artificial energy drink (routine) in order to feel more alert (reward).
- Your friends stay out until 2:00 a.m. getting drunk on a Saturday night (social cue), so you drink with them and stay up late as well (routine) in order to feel like part of the group (reward).
- It's the weekend (time-based cue), so you eat a huge ice cream sundae (routine) in order to enjoy something cold, sweet, and creamy (reward).

Research by Dr. Hofmann has also found that, on average, we feel some sort of desire about half of the time that we are awake, and almost half of those desires conflict with our goals, values, or motivations ^[13]. Rather than waste time and energy struggling to resist the endless forms of temptation that surround us in today's world, why not try to remove some of them altogether?

Visual cues (like candy on your desk) are the easiest to remove. You can often eliminate other cues though as well. As an example, consider the bad habit of drinking an artificial energy drink. Better nutrition and better sleep might remove or reduce the cue of feeling exhausted, thereby decreasing the craving for a routine that helps you feel more alert.

Other bad habits can be broken by *reducing* your exposure to the cue. For example, consider the late-night drinking habit above. By socializing less often

with certain people (or by socializing with them at different times or at different venues), you could cut back on alcohol consumption and late nights that reduce your sleep quality and your overall energy.

Just relying on willpower is a weak strategy for breaking a bad habit. The #1 way to break a bad habit is to remove or reduce the cue(s) that trigger it. Test it out for yourself. Select one bad habit that you want to break and try to identify the cue(s) that bring it on. Then, look for ways to remove or reduce those cues.

The #1 Strategy for Making a New Habit Stick



My first job after college was in an office with very little natural light. My cubicle was also surrounded by high walls, and I rarely went outside during work hours. As a result, there were some workdays in the winter when I experienced little or no sunlight. Sounds kind of depressing, huh?

One day, I decided that I wanted to form the habit of leaving the office each day for a short walk outside. I wanted to be able to clear my head and get some fresh air (and Vitamin D). Rather than trying to go for a walk at an unspecified time each day, I decided to use the end of my lunch as a trigger to do my new habit.

One of my former colleagues once decided that he wanted to take a break from work each day to get outside as well. However, he just tried to find random times each day for his walk.

What happened with each of our behavior change efforts? My former colleague's new habit lasted less than one week before he forgot about it, while my new habit is still going strong years later.

The difference in our results has nothing to do with how much discipline or self-control each of us has. My former colleague is actually one of the most disciplined people that I know. The only reason why he was less successful than me in forming this habit is because of our respective approaches.

The #1 strategy for making a new habit stick is to hook it onto an existing routine or activity^[14]. (Note: Credit for this term goes to Brendon Burchard. He writes about the strategy of hooking a habit in his excellent book *The Charge*.)

Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. In an experiment led by Dr. Peter Gollwitzer of New York University, college students were given a chance to earn extra credit by writing a paper on how they spent Christmas Eve. However, they were told that they would only get the credit if they turned in the paper by December 26.

Half of the students in the study were required to decide in advance when and where they would write the report (i.e. they hooked the task onto another

action). The other half were not asked to be as methodical. This led to very different results for the two groups. The reports were turned in on time by 75 percent of students who “hooked” the task, while the reports were only turned in on time by 33 percent of those who did not ^[15].

Here are six examples of existing routines/activities that you could hook a new habit onto:

1. Your morning routine
2. Your commute to work
3. Your lunch hour
4. Your commute home after work
5. Your bedtime routine
6. Your meals

You could also hook a new habit onto any other activity that you do each day or week, such as showering, brushing your teeth, checking your email, shopping for food, doing laundry, cooking, and so on.

Here are three of the endless examples of how you could put this strategy into practice to make a new habit stick:

- If you want to form the habit of stretching, you could hook this new habit onto your morning routine.
- If you want to form the habit of drinking more water, you could hook this new habit onto one or more of your meals.
- If you want to form the habit of meditating each day, you could hook this new habit onto your bedtime routine.

To further increase your chances of making your new habit stick, you could also use a post-it note for a visual reminder. For example, you could place a post-it note on your nightstand as a reminder to meditate before bed.

If you want to make a new habit stick, don't rely on willpower or try to find random times to do your new habit. Hook your new habit onto another routine or activity that you are already doing, and you will turn it into a habit much faster and much more naturally.

How Long Does It Really Take to Form a New Habit?

In a study conducted by University College London, researchers had 96 volunteers choose a healthy drinking, eating, or exercise activity that they wanted to turn into a habit. The study participants were asked to perform their chosen behavior every day in the same context (i.e. during lunch or before dinner) for twelve weeks. Each participant's chosen behavior needed to meet three criteria:

- The participant could not currently be performing the behavior
- The behavior had to be performed in response to a daily cue
- The cue needed to occur every day and only one time per day

Based on these guidelines, the participants chose behaviors like “drinking a bottle of water with lunch,” “eating a piece of fruit with lunch,” or “running for 15 minutes before dinner.”

During the study, participants were asked to log onto a web site each day to report whether they had performed the behavior the previous day and to complete the self-report habit index (SHRI) for the behavior. The SHRI is a self-reported measure of how automatic a behavior has become.

The researchers found that the median time for participants to form their habit was 66 days, with a range of 18 to 254 days ^[16]. (Since the study only took

place over a period of 84 days, the researchers used their data to extrapolate and conclude 254 days as an upper limit for habit formation.)

The researchers also found that the group who chose to form an exercise habit took 1.5 times longer to form their habit than the groups who chose to form an eating or drinking habit. (More complex habits will take longer to form than simpler habits.)

Manage your expectations accordingly, and be kind to yourself when you are trying to form a new habit. True, long-lasting behavior change usually takes longer than you think. This is not because you lack willpower. This is simply the reality of behavior change that everyone experiences.

Conclusion

Want to change your habits? You don't need more willpower. You need a different kind of P.O.W.E.R. There are many factors that influence the speed and difficulty of behavior change. You can make the process much faster and much less painful by utilizing the five keys for forming stronger habits.

When you have a *purpose* for change, when you have *optimism* that you can change, when you are clear on *the way* to change, when your *environment* encourages your desired behavior, and when you have *reinforcement* to keep you on track, you can accomplish anything.

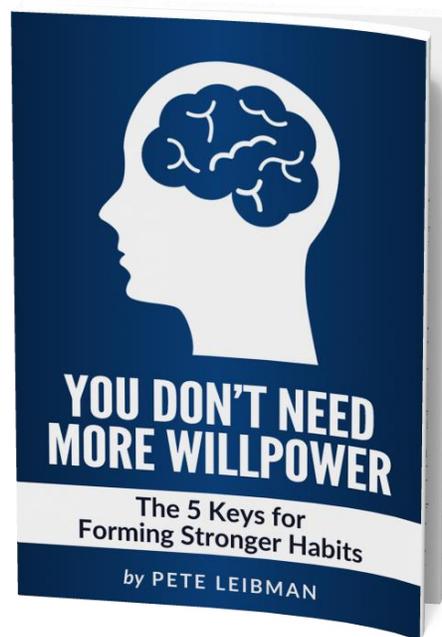
Focus on forming one new habit each month. Sometimes it will take longer for you to form a new habit, and sometimes you will be able to form a new habit more quickly. When you are trying to make a new habit, choose one behavior at a time that you can perform every day (or every weekday), so that you can build momentum quickly.

If your chosen behavior does not feel automatic after thirty days (it will take longer, on average), then keep working on it. If/when it feels automatic, then identify the next habit that you want to change.

This methodical, science-based approach to behavior change will be much more effective and sustainable than relying on willpower and/or attempting to change everything at once.

Form one new habit every 1-2 months for the next twelve months, and you can transform your life (if you want to) over the next year. “More willpower” is not required.

P.S. I’d appreciate if you would share this report with anyone you think who might benefit from it. You can send them to the following web page where they can download a free copy: <http://StrongerHabits.com/ebook>.

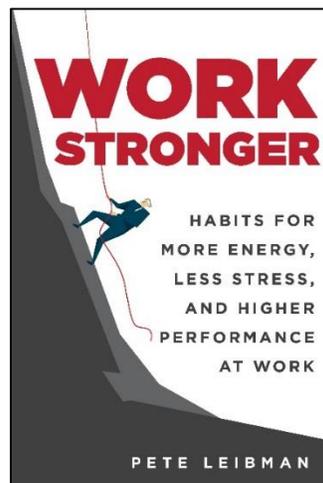


About The Author

Pete Leibman has been featured on Fox News, CBS Radio, and CNNMoney.com, and he is also the author of *Work Stronger: Habits for More Energy, Less Stress, and Higher Performance At Work* (due out in 2018). Currently, Pete works at Heidrick & Struggles, a premier leadership advisory firm that serves the majority of the Fortune 500. In his free time, he is a certified fitness trainer, and he has competed in the Obstacle Course Racing (OCR) World Championships. You can meet Pete at <http://StrongerHabits.com>.



Pete Leibman at work (left) and competing in an obstacle race (right)



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