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PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS AND PRACTICAL MODEL OF GROUP WORK WITH PARENTS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH EMOTIONAL, BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES/DISORDERS

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Abstract

The results of increasing number of studies show the importance of cooperation between parents and school. However, in practice such cooperation in general does not provide information about an individual child due to insufficient knowledge of those institutions as regards establishing cooperative relationship. The issue is in particular emphasised by parents of children with emotional, behavioural and social problems/disorders. These parents are due to lack of motivation and dysfunction recognisable as "heavy partners" of the cooperation. Firstly, the paper presents the benefits and obstacles in partnership with parents in general. In the following basic elements of establishing a quality partnership with parents of children with emotional, behavioural and social problems/disorders are underlined. Finally, as a special kind of work a model of group work with these parents as only one possible form of a good work with them is presented.

Keywords: parents and school partnership, involvement, emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders, group work

Introduction

Cooperation between school and parents is not a recent phenomenon as it seems at first impression. Interestingly, back in 1889 the Slovenian Anton Kosi in a booklet entitled *Starši podpirajte šolo!* (Parents do support school!) (Intihar and Kepec, 2002) pointed out (ibid.) the importance of interaction between school and home conditions for a successful education of children.

Such cooperation and interplay between home and school performance in learning and education seems quite logical and necessary for laymen

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as well as experts at home and around the world. And if there is a cooperation between the family and school, it is beneficial for all involved; however, the issue is: what such cooperation should look like, to what extent should it be implemented, where it should be directed, who should have and what kind of benefit should have from it, what should anyone invest in etc. Parents are primarily oriented towards their own child and its benefits; school however is not so much focused on an individual child, in general just carrying out the program to all students involved in the education programme.

Impact of parental involvement in education on the child's functioning

Brain and Reid (2003) and initially also Epstein (2001) considered parents "as a child's first teachers", i.e. co-educators of their children. Later Epstein with Salinas (2004) modified this model and largely emphasised the mutual interaction and more equal partnership between school and parents. School is expected to be adapted in relation to the shape and frequency of communication with the aim to be properly understood in all families. According to Epstein school should act as home and vice versa, home as a school.

If in the past bearing in mind that the functioning of parents has a direct impact on the child functioning in school, modern researches also deals with the study of indirect effects.

The longitudinal study of Morrison et al. (2003) showed that the interaction between mother and preschool children is related to social behaviour and learning success in high school. Barnard (2004) found that parental involvement at an early stage of education provides lower percentage of not finishing study, termination of study within the time limits and even a higher level of education. Parental involvement with school and the impact of this cooperation is also associated with socio-economic status of parents and their ethnicity (Domina, 2005). Simpkins et al. (2006) observing children from lower socio-economically families stressed that the success in the mathematical and literary field is significantly associated with a positive relationship with their mother.

Izzo et al. (1999) found that the contribution of parents in home work for school is significantly linked with a wide range of children's activities (in particular, the performance area and work habits). Most studies emphasise the important role of mother, but as noted by McBride et al. (2005) the father's involvement is also important, namely involvement of fathers in school, their participation in meetings and cooperation with school counsellors contributes significantly to children's success in

school. As emphasised by Caspe et al. (2006), a variety of longitudinal studies shows that it is never too late for cooperation between parents and school. In this context, school readiness for cooperation with parents is of paramount importance. In line with the research, school with its carefully planned, inclusive and open approach with regard to inclusion of parents contributes significantly to success of students.

Stright et al. (2001) found that parents that explain educational tasks at the appropriate level of child development and at the same time provide emotional support to their child have children who are often willing to participate in school classes, seek assistance from teachers when they need it and are responsible in their work. Amato and Rivera (1999) found that these children cause fewer disciplinary problems and have fewer social and emotional difficulties if their parents devote more time to them, show their own feelings and develop closer relationships with them at various ages. Furthermore, the research showed that students with such support at home are capable to act more responsibly, even in classes that are unstructured and with numbers of disciplinary problems. Newman (2005) outlined that the support of parents is in particular important for all children with special needs.

According to researches by Marshall et al. (2001) the so-called social network which includes the family as a whole is of outmost importance. They pointed out that social support and social network diversity through parental education are in indirect relation to social competence, behavioural problems as well as child's welfare. In the event of parental involvement in school also the psychological constructs of parents (their beliefs about the collaboration, perceptions of invitation to participate and perceptions of other life circumstances) are of significant importance (Green's et al. 2007). Elias et al. (2007) believe that parental involvement in school need to take into account the specifics of a particular period in child's growing up.

On the other hand, Elias et al. (2003) believe that the participation of parents should not be focused solely on the educational area, but also to the development of children's social-emotional competencies. Program of participation should be therefore carefully planned; it should take into account the needs of all participants and should be implemented consistently and faithfully. Davies (2000) points out that the program can really be implemented only if it is guided by the principal. Elsewhere Davies (2002) warns that too many cooperation plans are actually made without teachers.

Problems of parent's school cooperation

Brain and Reid (2003) pointed out the shortcoming of the research on the participation of parents in school, many of them focused on success, thus ignoring the problems. They argue Dyson and Robson (*ibid.*, p. 292) "even the best-researched and most carefully developed initiatives (in, say, parental involvement in literacy or business mentoring) do not come absolute guarantees of effectiveness. Much seems to depend on the particulars of the implementation process and the characteristics of the partners - teachers, parents, pupils and others who are involved." Some studies even suggest that parental involvement could reinforce the already existing power division between schools, teachers and parents and in addition, cause inequalities between individuals in terms of gender and ethnicity, maintain poor quality work in the classroom etc. All this is however based on the assumption that parents, schools and pupils are a relatively homogeneous unit and that they all agree on what constitutes and what should be the objective of parental involvement.

Some schools develop so-called policy of parental involvement or integration of parent's social and cultural capital in their area only for their own promotion and not because it would increase school's performance standards. School should help to develop social and cultural capital in the event of problems, in particular for underprivileged parents and families. Thus, school is presented as an area that takes advantage of the existing opportunities in the environment and the parents for themselves and at the same time a field that should be utilised by parents and that should allow the regeneration of communities. Miretzky (2004) also reminded that parents and teachers are not a democratic community "per se".

Wilkins (2003: 6) pointed out that some schools really believe to have established a partnership with the parents, but more in terms of being provided with help by parents. Thus traditionally oriented schools hide behind the barrier of authority. Krumm (1998) stressed that a major part of the problems of cooperation between parents and school teachers is on teachers' shoulders. They are namely in the cooperation with parents rather reserved. Krumm (*ibid*) attributed this to particular tradition of separation of the two learning environments, i.e. schools and families. He pointed out that literature repeatedly asserted that teachers are afraid of increasing pressure at work due to greater participation of parents. Also Brain and Reid (2003) warn that school on the declarative level supports parental involvement in school, but the school itself would decide about the objectives and methods of cooperation. In our region Resman (1992) and Marinšek (2006) wrote about the fact that only certain forms of parental involvement are desirable. Marinšek (*ibid.*, p.

14) underlined "School staff ... accepts only the forms of involvement of parents that support the school."

It can be concluded (Vec, 2009) that the role of school parents is subject to formal instrumentalisation since they are treated as an object that is in the function of school in order to achieve some of its objectives. In this way parents become extended arms of teachers. In this light, school imposes a responsibility to them even for things they have little opportunity to influence on (e.g. responsibility for behaviour and learning in school). If we ignore the fact that this is far from parental direct potential impact, we should not ignore that such a principle indirectly also introduces a "philosophy of guilt". If parents accept their responsibility for behaviour and learning of their child in school, they are quickly confronted with the fact that children regardless of their treatment often act contrary to their expectations and desires. Therefore it can be concluded that they are "guilty" for behaviour problems and that children do not learn enough and similar.

Reasons of work with parents of children and adolescents with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders and most common obstacles

It's more and more obvious that working with all the other relevant members of the family is at least as important as appropriate (educational-pedagogical, therapeutic, etc.) work with the child itself. Often the distortion is most visible in the child's behaviour, even though the cause of it lies not only in an individual's psychodynamics, but also exists and pertains in particular interactions between the child and the group where it arose (most often the family), even in the dynamics of all social subsystems in which the child exists (family, children of its age, school, clubs...) (Bečaj, 1986: 29). The child for example, often plays the role of a "discharger" of conflicts in the family dynamics. Such a role appears in every family and is not considered pathological in itself, it becomes such when there is only one member of the family who plays it. Within the family, the manifestation and largest intensity of the distortion is demonstrated in the weakest link of the chain (weakness is relative; the "weak" in the family very often have extraordinary power). The family as a system would have lost its balance when its member lost its weakness. When losing the point where a great deal of energy is directed to, the family would have to confront loss of functionality in relationships.

It is the group dynamic rules which dictate action on all the levels which can most determine and influence changes. Regarding the evolutionary specifics of with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders,

the major attention and role in the treatment should be dedicated to the family as a whole. Since the process of emerging of emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders is specific in every family, we could actually search for the most appropriate approach for every family.

Family dissocial syndrome

According to Bečaj (1984: 124), when facing a child demonstrating a dissocial behavioural syndrome, we are not facing the only member of the family not functioning according to norms and the rest of the family being relatively stable, we are facing a community where pathological relationship is the one determining the individual's dysfunctioning. Our observations (Vec, 1998) research in institution for emotional and behavioural disturbed children confirm thesis, that we could, equivalently to "dissocial behaviour syndrome" demonstrated which a child demonstrates (Bečaj, 1986), also observe a dissocial syndrome of parents and even of a whole family:

Family dissocial syndrome (Vec, 1998):

- parents of the children who are at the educational institution are for the most part professionally unsuccessful, often unemployed, frequently changing employment, are only temporary employed...
- many have problems with alcoholism (as much as 75% of the families, whose children have been placed into an educational institution, at least one of the family members was abusing alcohol), various diseases, large generation gaps,
- often a lack of active interests has been observed, passiveness and easiness (most practised common activity is for example watching TV),
- families are frequently excluded from or in conflict with their social environment (most commonly because of linguistic and cultural differences and barriers, 46% of children had at least one parent not of Slovene origin, which is very strongly expressed in the field of social role playing; in stronger hierarchical structure, greater differentiation between man's and woman's role and the role of children in families etc.),
- very often we find there are conflicts either in the previous or present relationship between parents, which result in divorce, unstable relationships etc. (54% of the children came from one-parent-families, 19% from newly completed families and only 27% from complete families),
- with some parents we have observed that due to their own unresolved anxieties and problems, they tend to chaotic upbringing of their child. Confused in the sense, that parents aren't neither predictably authoritative nor predictably permissive, but rather

unpredictably changeable. Therefore the children often have no orientation as to what in their behaviour is actually acceptable and what not, how they can achieve approval, affection, love and how they can lose it.

In the contributions which describe work with parents of "behaviourally problematic" children there is a thesis, that the work is difficult because of lack of motivation of parents themselves. It can be remised, that very often the grounds are misunderstood, "work with someone", namely, usually includes "to do something to somebody or with somebody", aiming to change the person. And when this "someone" does not reach our idealised expectations, we tend to be disappointed and say that "there's nothing we can do about it" or "we shouldn't have expected any other from such parents (for example that they won't reach what we wish from them). The conclusion is thus obvious: with the "disturbed parents who aren't able to arrange their own life" nothing can be done, they aren't ready to change, so we won't work with them.

Instead of reaching partial, short-termed, reasonably attractive goals limited to certain subsystem, attempts to change fast and thoroughly can end with failure and disappointment. The causes are the facts that we either:

- haven't correctly assessed the capabilities, possibilities, flexibility, strong points, etc. of the child and all subsystems and their members, who the child interacts with (especially parents), or
- changes in the system collide with the existing norms, which because of their issue (internalisation and confirmation by majority) are deeply rooted, stable, even rigid, tending to homeostasis, etc.)

Contact and responsibility in partnership with parents

Already at the first contact we should convince parents (and the child) that we are always ready to talk with them and listen to all the aspects involved. Basic aim of the first meeting, to which all other aims are subordinated, is to make and maintain contact with parents or the family as a whole. We have to strive for the parents accompanying the child also at the next meeting (that they remain active in resolving their problems). Of course the optimal balance is hard to maintain while taking care of feelings of trust and contact and at the same time facing (therapeutically) the members of the family with some of their dysfunctional behaviour and unrealisable expectations.

So they are encouraged to describe their view of the grounds for visiting the expert, wherewith we wish to check the goals and expectations of the whole family. The parents who are experiencing their first contact

with such help most commonly exhibit two unrealisable expectations; they expect the expert to punish their child on their behalf or take care of "therapeutical treatment", which they usually identify (equalise) with "cure". Both misunderstandings lead to delusions and fears (as for example: coming to psychologist is an expression of inappropriateness, incompetence etc. of their family and its members or after a certain number of treatments the child will be "fixed", changed or "reshaped" according to the norms and values of the parents and the social environment. Common feature to such delusions is a kind of distance to the problem - at least regarding the responsibility for its solving, which is so rarely accepted on the other side, where the role of "omnipotent saviour" is a rather pleasant experience.

For the same reasons it is important to direct all the members of the family into taking responsibility and activating their own changing (reforming) from the very first moment of the meeting, especially because they have been very often denied such a possibility in numerous treatments in the past. Repeated mistake, leading to such malfunction in some families is moralistic and "superior position" treatment point of view. We are inclined to such mistake from the position of our behaviour, knowledge of how "good" families should be like (exp. open communication, understanding, respect, flexible limits, transparent rules, etc.). Our wishes to bring these families to the ideal as soon as possible, only add to this. And it should be accomplished by giving recipes, advice, suggestions, etc.

We also need to take into account that the whole school system is regulated by productivity and temporal efficiency (Vec, 2009, 2010). So it drives the experts who are meeting parents (teachers, tutors) to striving to "make the most of" the time they have at their disposal. It means using mostly one-way communication (from expert to the parents). However, advice and directions do not cause long-term changes. Most commonly the effect is reverse, causing the parents to feel the expert as not understandable and unreachable. The expert's idealised image, introduced to the parents as the only appropriate has an effect of a pressure which makes them feel even more insecure and less aware of their strong points, thus faced again with their own incompetence and inappropriateness. Such a work jeopardises also those aims, which could be reached through lesser expectations and not rarely it results in loss of the co-operation with the family. Through confirmed theory, we broaden our own self-confirmation and abilities.

Adequate Communication as important background of group work

One of the most important aspects appears to be our view of co-operation with parents in a way that they understand us. Starting with the use of terms, not common to the group members, we start building up hierarchically formed roles. We are the ones, namely, who must and can adjust information so that it is clear, not ambiguous, understandable and precise, easy for them to understand what their gain from co-operation in the process is. In the first stage of establishing contact with parents, they should be convinced they will not be forced into any changes, which they would not accept (with the exception of those, connected with safety, abuse or similar). It should be stated very clearly that we accept their readiness for activity and of their limits of expression and self-reform.

The parents are told that they know their children best, and are therefore expected to assist us in our efforts. In contrast with their previous experience of being given advice about how to treat their child, we put communication paradoxically reverse; we ask them for advice. Thus we accomplish the following:

- the parents take active position in changing life style, and on the other hand,
- we set actual (usually lower) expectations about the influence of an expert on the current removing dysfunctionality.

The most effective changes (those actually accepted by individual subsystem) are possible only when we succeed to avoid feelings of fear and polarisation as well as more intense desire for homeostasis, restoration of the present condition. Not being aware of the features of the dysfunction in interaction with pressures of environment and desire for solving problems using common sense usually results in setting unreachable aims (Bregant, 1987: 60).

Goals of the group work with parents

Actuality of the desired outcome is thus of crucial importance, which means we are directed not to our ideal vision, included in the term therapy (when one has concluded the therapy, one is "cured") and is mostly unrealisable, but rather towards optimal changes, meaning those partial interventions, which, according to objective possibilities, can actually be realised.

The goal of the initial stage of group work with parents is, as already stated, to establish and maintain communication area; the goal is to be reached before the parents are included in the group. We are aware of

the fact that the contents of the communication at this stage of secondary importance, the form of solving problems agreed upon with parents is of much higher priority. It is not until the necessary trust and security are created, that we can start opening up also the "less pleasant" topics. For this purpose it is appropriate to offer as wide a range of possibilities of co-operation on the whole continuum of voluntarism and intensiveness adapted to the features and dynamical characteristics of individual family. The most important goals towards which work with parents is oriented, and which are at least partially reachable (Vec, 1998) I see through:

- developing higher quality of co-responsibility for the child, which could contribute to better self-image and greater satisfaction and prosperity for children and parents,
- defining more realistic goals in all subsystems, which also means better differentiation of roles and aims of individuals included in the interaction, better learning, co-operating, defining various goals, expectations and roles,
- clearer orientation about the child and oneself, interactions and demands, so that the child can easier reach his/her goals and that parents and other adults can more foundedly form the requirements they have towards their child,
- diminishing of superintendent's functions and creating firmer emotional links (identification through transfer) which is connected to the sense of belonging, acceptance, security, success, less aggressive behaviour, lesser feeling of being in danger and less ill health affecting the child and parents,
- solving specific problems appearing when the child comes home or when living together,
- creating conditions for more effective communication between children, parents and institution,
- exchange of experience about how to avoid conflicts and how to solve them better,
- constant revision and solving actual problems, searching for new methods, agreeing upon more important questions, defining roles, goals, expectations and approaches which are optimal as well as co-ordinated with systematic reality,
- giving more attention to eliminating feelings of disability and lack of success because of aims that can't be realised.

Practical implementation of group work

Work in groups is only one of possible forms of co-operation with parents of children with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders. We have started leading the first group of parents

in institution for behavioural and emotional disturbed children in Smednik in 1990 with the cooperation of two social pedagogues and a psychologist. Such work is, however, in Slovenia, as well as abroad, rarely practised because of disregard of the above listed goals (in Slovenia such forms of work appear only in the recent years, before that, with the exception of the described group, there has not been any similar, continuing group, operating for a longer period of time). The parents are informed about how the group functions already at the first visit of the institution, if we presuppose such a group would be suitable for them. Later on the information is repeated and specified, trying to eliminate their fears and their (and our) prejudice, advantages and barriers in joining the group. Usually there is enough time for preliminary conversations, since we start the group meetings in October while the candidates are being chosen during the whole year. In September we invite the parents who have during the first conversations shown interest in joining the group - we inform them about exact time of meetings, about some of the experience of other parents who had attended the group previously and put emphasis on the following:

- our awareness that they have often not been understood - also in the closest environment, when discussing the problems with their child - the group definitely offers understanding,
- conversation is easier in a group, where experience can be shared about how to avoid unconstructive conflicts and how to accomplish their more effective solving,
- everyone is welcome to speak about one's own, specific problems and discovers some directions of how to react in actual situations,
- such conversations can contribute to more harmonious and functional living together with the child; for parents as well as for the children.

To make the sessions as accessible as possible and out of domination of the institution, they are later held in Counselling Centre in Ljubljana. There are 12 to 13 sessions per year from October till June. During several years of such practical work we have determined that one session in three weeks is the optimal number of meetings; it is the number the parents can still realise (regarding their motivation as well as other circumstances like remoteness of their dwellings from the place of the meetings) and at the same time it still guarantees the continuity of the group work.

Besides creating first contact (described above), we try to help the parents also in the field of organisation (since most of the parents work in the morning, the meetings are organised in the afternoon, when

necessary, we help arrange the possibility of meeting in the morning also, the parents are acquainted with the exact dates of the sessions in order to facilitate their presence, etc.).

The contents of the sessions is defined by the parents; at the end of each meeting they give a suggestion for the basis of the next one - except for the first encounter, which is dedicated to getting to know each other and establishing of basic rules (trust, regular attendance, activities, etc.). There is always a rule, however, that the problem has priority to the planned contents, when a parent expresses a wish to speak about something he/she feels as a problem and more important than the foreseen theme. Parents suggest the same topics, which bother every family, every year, for example: how to react when the child is lying or stealing, how to prevent him/her from joining bad company, how to lead conversation with the child, how to accomplish the child will do things, he/she regularly refuses to do, how to make him/her realise certain facts (exp. that he needs to learn), how to encourage the partner to take more active part in the upbringing, how to find time for oneself besides handling the problems one is facing, etc. However these and similar topics present grounds for conversations and learning of activities needed for more functional acting of parents (from our point of view) and what could be characterised as the most common goals of group work:

- clear distinction of roles and responsibility in the family,
- recognising a problem (when one of the parents or a child has one),
- finding the one responsible for solving specific problems,
- how to make sense, set limits and ways of setting them,
- discovering more functional ways of communication and ways of using them in every day life,
- expressing ways and methods of forming agreements between parents and children as well as ways and methods of expressing requests

From an individual, limited problem, we try to extract the essence that contributes to the conflicts within the family and between family and other subsystems and of course, what is it that for the most part maintains chaotic upbringing and relationships in the families. These activities are constantly going on two levels:

- through reflection and conversation about how different factors are expressed within their families (and how can they do about it) and
- through creating of these principles on the group sessions (make disturbances appearing at group work transparent and make better ways of functioning)

The first meeting is, as regards the contents, always referring to the suggestions of the parents - from this point of view we try to see the

problem and it's solving on a very vivid and comprehensible level. However, within the actual, specific problems, we also search for general features (i.e. the most common aims of work in the group of parents). These goals are prepared by the group leaders according to the foreseen topics, the stage which the group has reached, foreseen needs and the development of individuals, etc. While working with groups we have also observed that such a form of work offers more possibilities than mere concentration upon contents; that is analysis of group dynamics. Its goal is to make the group dynamics transparent (roles, limits, ways of communication, appearance of emotional expressions, creating subgroups, etc.), thus through learning from experience create better functioning of parents in group and presupposing they'll use the learned also outside the group.

At the end of each meeting (lasting for 90 min.) a short evaluation is made, and together with my colleague we thoroughly analyse the happening after the meeting, which serves as a basis for planning the next session. The experience we have gathered so far, confirm that most of the group work is happening outside the group (through preparations and analysis). This makes good preparations and good analysis as important as appropriate as managing the session itself.

The effectiveness of group work with parents

The most visible result is the fact, that with parents of children and adolescents with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders we can and should work in groups. With the approach, which is at the first stage rather supportive, we have succeeded to diminish numerous and various fears usually exhibited by such parents from whatever intervention into their families. The result of moderation and observation of limits these parents have by exposing their own problems is low drop-out rate, every year only one or two stop attending the group work.

Frequently the question is asked whether parents' attending such group is affecting their children in any way. We can claim with assurance, that we haven't found a direct connection between parents' attending the group work and changes in their child. Even in cases when the parents started to use consistently different patterns of communication, as they did before their child was placed into the institution, we have noticed no changes in their child. When the child starts to act more functional, it is usually due to impact of other factors which have in the period of youth greater impact on a child than different communication pattern their parents are using.

There is a lot to gain from the group work for parents themselves on the whole (defined in detail in the goals). Most often the parents express the

feeling of gratitude for redirecting attention from their children to themselves and their distress (mostly they meet misunderstanding and accusing of their environment or as a mother expressed: "I couldn't even talk to my sister, for she was constantly asking me if I have done enough for my boy".).

Some of the parents solve some of their problems and reach some changes in their functioning. The changes are usually demonstrated in setting limits in relationship with the child in readiness to accept more responsibility for their own actions and less responsibility for their children's actions. Sometimes they even result in planning and realising their own special plans, like increasing possibilities of true communication in the family (exp. regular "family meetings").

One of the most important achievements of such work with parents is undoubtedly also our own acquiring experience in more effective communication and natural contact with parents. The group is not only a promise of "growing and developing" to the parents, but also to those co-operating with it.

It can be concluded that working with parents is at least as important as appropriate work with the "behaviourally problematic" child itself. As we wrote "work with someone", shouldn't mean "to do something to somebody or with somebody", but to build a real cooperation between the family and school. We believe (and our experiences show the same) that is beneficial for all involved in this partnership. It is also our responsibility (on the shoulders of experts), that participation should be therefore carefully planned; it should take into account the needs of all participants and should be implemented consistently and faithfully (as we point out in our model of group work with parents of children and adolescents with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders). If I underline once more: in this context is work in groups only one of possible forms of co-operation with parents of children with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties/disorders.

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