

The Etiology (!) of Childhood Trauma

By George M. Prince

An infant comes equipped with three sensitive survival mechanisms: fear/pain, anxiety and sensations of joy; She feels fear or pain when there is a specific event or cause she can focus on, like fear of falling off the stairs, or the pain of hunger. She feels joy when she makes connections to increase her growth and understanding; She feels anxiety in her first six months when she feels the threat of abandonment (Mom goes away for longer than baby feels is safe for her) and when she catches anxiety from an anxious mother and when confronted by inexplicable "strangeness" like the clap of thunder.

"The tension called anxiety, in early experience, is differentiated from all other reductions in euphoria by the absence of anything specific, and consequently there is in the infant no capacity for action toward the relief of anxiety...anxiety is not manageable." (Sullivan)

Anxiety arouses uncanny emotion like awe, dread, horror, or loathing. "I believe it is fairly safe to say that anybody and everybody devotes much of his/her lifetime, a great deal of his/her energy...and a good part of his effort in dealing with others, to avoiding more anxiety than he already has and, if possible, to getting rid of this anxiety." (Sullivan)

The Physiology of Anxiety

"...we have two minds, one that thinks and one that feels; There is a steady gradient in the ratio of rational-to-emotional control over the mind; the more intense the feeling, the more dominant the emotional mind becomes--and the more ineffectual the rational." (Goleman)

"Over millions of years of evolution, the brain has grown from the bottom up, with its higher centers developing as elaborations of lower, more ancient parts." (Goleman)

"When we are in the grip of craving or fury, head-over-heels in love, or recoiling in dread, it is the limbic system that has us in its grip." (Ibid.)

"The neocortex is the seat of thought; it contains the centers that put together and comprehend what the senses perceive; It adds to a feeling what we think about it." (Ibid.)

"But those higher centers do not govern all of emotional life; in crucial matters of the heart--and most especially in emotional emergencies—they can be said to defer to the limbic system." "This gives the emotional centers immense power to influence the functioning of the rest of the brain—including the centers for thought." (Ibid.)

The Anatomy of Emotional Hijacking

"The hijacking occurs in an instant, triggering this reaction crucial moments before the neocortex, the thinking brain, has had a chance to glimpse fully what is happening, let alone decide if it is a good idea." (Ibid.)

The Seat of All Passion

"The hippocampus and the amygdala were the two key parts of the primitive "nose brain" that, in evolution, gave rise to the cortex and then the neocortex...these limbic structures do most of the brain's learning and remembering." (Ibid.)

The amygdala is the specialist for emotional matters; It acts as the storehouse of emotional memory, and thus of significance itself. INCOMING SIGNALS FROM THE SENSES LET THE AMYGDALA SCAN EVERY EVENT FOR THREAT; This puts the amygdala at a powerful post in mental life...a sentinel challenging every situation, every perception, with but one kind of question in mind, the most primitive: is this a threat? If the answer is yes, the amygdala reacts instantaneously, like a neural tripwire, telegraphing a message of crisis to all parts of the brain. Its extensive web of neural connections allows it, during an emotional emergency, to capture and drive much of the rest of the brain—including the rational mind. (After Goleman)

The Learning Process

What happens to us are EVENTS. They have no meaning until we convert each one into a story. Then it becomes an EXPERIENCE containing information we can use to help us live our lives intentionally. Experience is the internal component of an event. (Sullivan) In the event of feeling abandoned, the infant is not yet able to tell herself a coherent story about it. It gets recorded as overwhelming dread of ceasing to exist; of annihilation, becoming meaningless. The feeling of anxiety will always have an unconscious underlayment of dread of death.

Danger versus Anxiety

There are two kinds of emotional emergency: physical danger and threat to meaningfulness. The amygdala does not differentiate. It signals an emergency in EITHER case and triggers a shot of adrenaline and other arousal chemicals to prepare for fight, freeze or flight. If the threat is physical the energy can be discharged in physical defense or offense. When the threat is emotional we cannot manage that energy with physical action and it becomes, to some extent, internalized as resentment, rebellion or anger against self or substitute persons. (Miller)

Infants and children and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD is not only an emotional response to troubling events, it is the expression of a persistent dysregulation of body and brain chemistry.

It is normally a description of extreme abuse like rape, assault, or combat. It does not matter if it was the incessant terror of combat, torture or repeated abuse in

childhood,....all uncontrollable stress can have the same biological impact. (Katy Butler--Researching PTSD) I believe that the special situation of children--of helplessness and dependence-- makes them vulnerable far more than we adults can comprehend. Every adult action that coerces, shows disregard for the infant and Child's feeling of meaningfulness is identified by the amygdala as a threat and triggers anxiety and reactivity. Such an event is converted by the child into a story which contains a perturbation--a little knot of energy that upsets the sense of the story with a shot of adrenaline and other chemicals that fragment and confuse the story and interfere with meaning and understanding. Every time this type of event happens it is experienced by the child as a discount--an action that demeans her. It leads toward low self-regard. The more times this low level kind of "insult is repeated, the more sensitive the "tripwire" reaction becomes, and the less willing the child is to risk making connections to learn, to invent, or to understand because it is anxiety laden.

("In infants who are separated from their mothers, changes have been observed in hypothalamic serotonin, adrenal gland catecholamine synthesizing enzymes, plasma cortisol, heart rate, body temperature, and sleep. These changes are not transient or mild, and their persistence suggests that long-term neurobiological alterations underlie the psychological effects..." (van der Kolk P.43)

Divorce From Self

In the only scientific research into marital relationships, John Gottman discovered that a marriage, to be successful, depends upon the ratio of discounts to validations. When there is more than ONE discount to every FIVE validations, the marriage will be unstable. Using different words, when the field of a relationship has more than one discount per five validations, the people are involved in a toxic relationship, one that will bring out the worst in them. Any action or event that contains disrespect will be interpreted into a story that demeans and triggers anxiety.

I believe that this ratio applies to my dealings with myself. If my actions toward myself are punishing more than once to every five approvals, I will be depressed or otherwise unhappy with myself and will be handicapped in my competence. In a sense, I have an unfriendly, non-supportive relationship with myself. We tend to be brought up to avoid self-appreciation.

Relationships PERSIST

The work of the Stone Center at Wellesley has led to the belief that the relationship between two people is like a third entity. It lasts and it keeps track of all the inputs--the messages sent by both parties. I speculate that the one to five ratio holds. Field theory holds that the positive or negative valence of the field determines whether one will bring out her best or something less.

The Family Field and Trauma

In my limited observation of families, the ratio of one discount to five validations is almost never maintained. All the correcting, punishing and complaining with relatively rare validations means that the field is bringing out something less than the best in all hands. Given the extreme sensitivity of children to discounts, even the most fortunate of us has a mild case of PTSD.

What this suggests is that in addition to rethinking the way we deal with setting limits and teaching our children, we need to invent many, many large and small rituals that demonstrate love and appreciation to offset the unwitting discounting. We need to focus on the LEARNING CURVE, not on instant correctness. [Marilyn Yas, the teacher who uses Mind-Free, NEVER says "no". She asks, "How did you get there? What was your thinking process?" Appreciates that, "That is a good guess", "How can you do more guessing to find the correct answer?" I am not sure how she manages this all the time, but she seems to. I am impressed because when I think of how I managed with my children I would have been lost without "NO"]

The creating/learning process

1. Perceiving--becoming aware/observing
2. More or less confusion and uncertainty
3. Trial connecting of the new to something known
4. Tentative connecting to form a new idea or understanding.
5. Testing to see if this new idea matches reality
6. Repeat 2 through 5 until it works.

Connecting to Create a New Idea

Sally needed a better place to study for exams. Her roommates distracted her and she did not want to go to the library. She needed a new way to think about it so she went on an excursion. The image of mushroom popped up in her mind. She pretended she was inside a mushroom. It was cool and damp, as though in a cave. The wall were nubby and moist. There was a faint pulse as though the mushroom was breathing--it was a little like a heartbeat...

Sally thought, "Heartbeat...it would be comforting, as though I am in a womb. It would block our other distracting noise. That is what I will do. I will record my heartbeat and then play it back into earphones. Wherever I am will be a place to study."

Connecting to create meaning and understanding

Grandson, six year old Max, is with me on a boat. He is pumping water, invisible beneath the floor-boards, out of the bilge. It is his first time. The pump sucks air. I say, "What does that mean?" Max says, "It means I have pumped out all the water." "How do you know that?" I ask. "From sucking a soda with a straw."

Connecting to form a new idea or understanding causes a shot of endorphin—a feeling of joy. It is nature's way of keeping us learning so that we will be more likely to survive. When a child's anxiety trigger is sensitized by trauma, she is reluctant to accept confusion and trial connecting on the way to learning. She will forego the joy in order to avoid the anxiety.

With this awareness I wish I were starting over with my kids.

Now I know they need boundaries and some discipline, and I also know they need five times as many appreciations and loving reassurances as negative inputs.

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How a Child Operates

(A speculation by George M. Prince @80)

Organisms organize, and what a human organism organizes is meaning. He or she does this by making connections to form ideas. (Kegan. p.13) An idea or thought is a mental picture of something not actually present, and thinking is a succession of such pictures. (Dewey. p.5)

A child learns to make connections and create ideas through experiment. These are physical experiments in the beginning making connections between those wiggling fingers and the tensing of muscles in the arm and hand. Learning to crawl and walk are accomplished through an almost endless series of experiments, each leading to an approximation and a modification so that the child gets successively closer to the move he intends. As we watch a child stagger upright and collapse, we do not say, "No, No, that is wrong, do not fall down. Correct standing up is staying on your feet." We do not say that because we know the child is trial and erroring connecting to what helps stay up and what does not. When a child is trial connecting to make meaning out of something new, we seem to lose our understanding. A child sees her first horse. "Daddy, there is a big cat!" "No, Sally, that is a horse." We are so committed to correct answers that we punish the process the trial connection thinking process that is essential in making meaning.

Connection Making

This is the heart of making meaning. To learn to understand is to grasp meaning (Dewey. p. 132) and it depends upon the capacity and willingness of the learner to risk trial connecting that may be "mistaken".

Everything the parent or teacher does and the way s/he does it creates a field that either encourages the child to make connections or discourages connection making.(Dewey. p. 59)

The other action that is most damaging to training the mind is parents and teachersÆ dominating belief that "getting it right" is the most important concern.(Dewey.p 65)ùthat goals are everything. To help a child develop his or her thinking power we need to understand what is going on with a child.

We need to know about anxiety and it's central role in learning.

Anxiety

"...the role of anxiety in interpersonal relations is so profoundly important that its differentiation from all other tensions is vital." (Sullivan. p. 49)

"...anxiety arouses uncanny emotion" (Sullivan. p.9) It is akin to awe...dread...horror...loathing. Unlike the pain of hunger or a blow, there seems to be

no source, it is manageable only with careful attention and knowledge of its underlying meaning.

Neurophysiology

Anxiety originates in an organ of the brain. The amygdala acts as the storehouse of emotional memory and thus of significance itself. The signals from all the senses are received by the thalamus which routes them to the amygdala which scans for crisis. The neocortex—the reasoning/thinking part of the brain—receives the information split seconds later. If the amygdala detects danger, it flashes an emergency signal to all parts of the brain to mobilize. This signal is sent before the neocortex has had a chance to analyze the situation to determine the reality of the danger.

(Goleman. p.15 & shy; 17)

History

An infant first experiences anxiety at about six months when s/he senses that he has been abandoned by Mother, or that Mother is gripped by anxiety, or when the infant is confronted with a stranger. (Kagan.p 43.) The emotion remembered by the amygdala is an unspecific fear of ceasing to exist-failing to survive the feeling we call anxiety. Because the amygdala is approximate rather than precise, this dread feeling will later be triggered whenever any event resonates with that emotional memory of abandonment-any event that even remotely conveys "you are unimportant", or that demeans him, discounts him; suggests that he does not matter, that he is meaningless.

It appears that all punishment, criticism, even disapproval, triggers this anxiety to some degree and arouses the impulse to react defensively. Some people with a solid sense of self are able to handle this with less damage than others less fortunate, but it impacts all.

Further, concern with anxiety is a continuing preoccupation for most people throughout life. (Sullivan. p.11, 26) In marriage, it has been scientifically established that there must be five times as many positive moments as negative if the marriage is to remain stable.(Gottman. p 29)

Certainly the same proportions apply to children. Unfortunately, bringing up a child is far too often "correcting".

Anxiety and Learning

Anxiety interferes with any activity that is going on. A child quickly learns to stop whatever she is doing that triggers anxiety. When a child is discounted, demeaned, she is emotionally "hijacked" and will have the impulse to stop making connections and fight, freeze, or flee.

In most situations she must transform this impulse into compliance with the adult's order, but it leaves a residue of anger and rebellion that interferes with connecting.

The relaxation of the tension of anxiety brings the experience of interpersonal security. In this state the child is free to make the connections of learning.

Relationship, Field and Learning

A relationship is formed of all the messages that pass between two people. These messages create a field that, like a magnetic field, exerts a force on the parties. Relationships persist over time and affect interpersonal security. When some of the messages sent by a parent or teacher are disrespectful and demeaning, they trigger anxiety in the child and it has a continuing effect on the relationship. A single discount has more force than five validating, appreciative actions.

When there are discounts in the field, everyone tends to become defensive, antagonism increases, and trial connecting slows. When the field is unfailingly respectful, the child feels safe and can self ?; soothe her "normal" anxiety about making trial connections.

Expectations- Pygmalion in the Classroom, how expectations influence the field and become self-fulfilling

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one's transmissions to another without demeaning or diminishing the other while maintaining one's integrity. An emotionally intelligent person knows how to create relationship fields that advance interpersonal security, reduce defensive perversity and invite collaboration and synergy. S/he also knows how to handle destructive inputs to damage control.

To a large extent, how one manages relationships determines the quality of his or her life.

To determine whether a transmission is emotionally intelligent, answer the following two questions: does this help me to be and feel meaningful?

Will this transmission help xxxxx be and feel meaningful? If the answer to either question is no, the transmission is EQ negative and it will damage the relationship.

<p>Emotional Intelligence and Self

<p>To operate at our best, each of us needs inner personal security
ùan

internal field that unfailingly supports us. This requires that we learn to deal with ourselves with emotional intelligence to nurture learning and growth. Our internal field tends to break down when we do

not live up to expectations or make a mistake. A mistake is an event and when we convert it into information tell its story if we begin by discounting and demeaning ourselves, it triggers the inevitable anxiety and we greatly reduce the possibility of connection making and learning.

<p>It is emotionally intelligent and a far better learning experience if we are mindful of the learning curve and tell the story of our mistake without punishment and with a beginning, middle, and conclusion creating well organized information to guide us to a new level on the curve. Only in a positive field does our full potential come into being.

Learning from Events

<p>There is a widespread belief in the saying, "We learn from experience" as though the experience is the teacher. When we analyze how we learn

from what happens to us, it is clear that the teacher is "us"! What happens is an event. It is neutral and meaningless until we process it into an a story. We connect it to other experiences; determine the significance

of it and flesh it out with feelings and reflection so that it becomes an experience organized into information we can use in the future. Its information is most useful if our story has a beginning, middle and ends with a conclusion a therefore.

<p>It always begins with telling the story to myself. This is a monologue. It can be enriched by then telling it to another person.

<p>Skill with language is important, for language is the way we transform events, and to capture meaning one needs words. "Language is the transformation of experience, and at the same time it transforms what we can experience." (Goolishian) "We could not experience love as we do if we had not learned to talk of love.." (La Rochefoucauld, quoted by Goolishian).

<p>Vocabulary and storytelling are critical assets in growth.

<p>Dialoguing Getting the Most Out of Our Stories

<p>The purpose of most exchanges, when there is no hostility, is to make connections to create new meaning, and to forge a mutually beneficial relationship.

<p>Such a relationship has definite characteristics: "A" truly listens to

"B" and makes connections to his own information. When "A" responds

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he opens with an acknowledgment of "B"s message. His reply will have some connections to what "B" has spoken of, and it will contain no refutation

or disagreement. When his view is different from "B"s, he does not hesitate to voice it not as a refutation, rather as a different view.

<p>"B" responds in the same way. The result is a non­defensive field. One exchange builds upon the preceding without opposition which invites the development of new connections and new meaning.

<p>When the urge to persuade, teach or control takes over, the mutuality tends to disappear and the field is transformed to invite distancing and defense; the exchanges are likely to become sequential monologues.

<p>Autonomy and Responsibility

<p>The ultimate expression of respect is to help the child be in charge of him or her self. It is critical for each to learn all the strategies

that lead to defensiveness, opposition and antagonism (emotionally stupid transmissions such as contempt and blaming) and to learn the processes that allow the same sort of information to be put in a way that invites collaboration and synergy (Emotionally intelligent Itemized Response and Self­Focus).

<p>Whenever a problem arises, whether it is behavior or learning, it is an opportunity for the problem owners to go into a creative idea­getting mode and develop options to solve it.

<p>In addition it is important for the children to operate in small groups where they can experiment with the various ways of managing the field. Most of their lives will be lived in such groups.

<p>The goal is to have each child experience that the field of the group is the sum of their transmissions and learn to discriminate emotionally intelligent from emotionally stupid; to realize that it is within her or his capacity to manage her own transmissions to impact the field.

They are not powerless.

<p>Creative Field

<p>Everyone needs to know the language of harmony the emotionally intelligent

way of managing transmissions. Each child learns to use the Think Tank flow chart and gets to know the roles of Facilitator, client, and participant.

This is a structure that gives practice in managing for a positive field.

<p>Regular Practice EQ Groups

<p>In the everyday give and take between people there tends to be a level of unwitting demeaning that causes a negative field. It requires

considerable energy to maintain our EQ gold standard. We need regular reinforcement

and to provide this it is useful to have "EQ groups". These are small (eight people) groups that meet regularly to self-reflect.

Through experience exchange, problem solving, and attention to EQ skills, we learn to manage our mental processes and refresh our commitment

to positive fields.

At the same time, because interpersonal security is high and defensiveness

low, innovation is fostered by the new connections made possible in these exchanges. There is a great deal of building and discovery. Members are helped to be in touch with their own meaningfulness. Positive attitudes

are generated.

Change Agents

Ideally everyone is a member of an EQ group. Through membership everyone is exposed to the gold standard and becomes "field conscious", aware of the destructiveness of actions that demean. Organizational change,

even in large systems, can be created by these small groups. (Wheatley, p 96)

Imagining the Future - Visioning

A vision is an imagined narrative of what I want the future to be. A vision

has a powerful impact on outcome, if I own the vision. In situations where there is a problem and an action is required, imagining (visioning) how I want to feel afterwards can have a strong influence

on getting there. It can be a useful tool in managing my part of a field.

We

need to be explicit about it.

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that don't fit previous convictions."

<p> "By methodological belief, then, I mean the disciplined procedures

of not just listening but actually trying to believe any view or hypothesis

is that a participant seriously want to advance."

<p>Pg. 261 "...we must not ask, "What are your arguments for such a silly view as that?" but rather, "What do you see when you see [it] that way?" Give me the vision in your head. You are having an experience

I don't have: help me have it."

<p> "...we are not trying to construct or defend an argument but rather

to transmit an experience, enlarge a vision. The focus is not on propositions and validity of inference but on experiences or ways of seeing."

<p>Pg. 262 "Says Augustine: I believe in order that I may understand."

<p> "Experiences...indicate that people understand sentences they believe more quickly than sentences they doubt."

<p>Pg. 263 Doubtersù"There is an inevitably combative or adversarial element here."

<p> "Methodological doubt represents the human struggle to free ourselves

from parochial closed­mindedness, but it doesn't go far enough. p;

Methodological belief comes to the rescue at this point by forcing us genuinely

to enter into unfamiliar or threatening ideas instead of just arguing against

them without experiencing them or feeling their force. It thus carries

us further in our developmental journey away from mere credulity."

<p>Pg. 268 "We can seldom see clearly a position or point of view we inhabit

till we inhabit one that is genuinely differentùnot just a denial."

 "...we cannot harness that power dependable until we learn to deploy doubting and believing consciously and by the rulesù not

just when they come naturally."

<p> "A method doesn't tell us how to make final decisions, it only tells what preparatory activities or processes to go through...Æ

<p>Pg 269 "...by insisting that methods are gamesùallay some fear about systematic belief...you won't bind yourself to anything. You get

gritty of my becoming.

<p>An example

<p>Let's say that I want to help teachers become coaches to their students.

First I help them connect to the learning/creativity process (perceiving, confusion, trial and error connecting, etc.) Then help them see the effect of disrespect and punishment on the kid's being and becoming all they

can be.

<p>Say this experience is effective. Suddenly one of the teachers has this

flash of understanding and belief and changes her mind from traditional

punishment and rewards to total appreciation with constant respect for the child's process of becoming and no punishment. This shift is the first

stage of the quantum leap that can lead to lasting change. She still does not have any idea of how to implement this change and in fact is feeling confused and uncertain. The thought is so different from her accustomed, "tried and true" approach.

<p>I reassure her that this is the way to feel at this point. Of course she is uncertain and confused. Don't worry about that, concentrate on how wonderful it will be when she gradually invents ways and means. I somehow guide her in feeling and thinking her way into that future way of being.

<p>When successful it alters her becoming and her way of being. The instant choices of the way she responds will be moving her in ;the direction

of her vision and that is the next step in her quantum leap from traditional

to respectful teaching (to coaching rather than bossing!). She is

simultaneously being her vision and becoming her vision.

<p>We don't know how to do this yet, and if we all vision it as above, we will invent something that will make our coaching course a quantum leap

over anything we have done.

<p>Vision as a means to quantum Change

<p>Something like:

<p>"I would like to introduce you to the next x days by asking you to create

a vision---you will see that we consider goal/vision an important part of accomplishment.

<p>"Right now, I want to guide you toward an ambitious vision of what you

are going to accomplish. Try not to be concerned with how or why.

"Please close your eyes and imagine this is next Friday at 6:00 PM. You have become skillful in creating an inner field that is totally supportive

of you. In addition, you have become skillful in deliberately creating

a field that brings out the very best in a co-worker, your child, your wife or a friend. You are confident that you can depend on your skills even in difficult circumstances.

"Imagine and accept that you can do this. Now, focus on how it feels to be able to do this. Think of two words that capture the way you feel about yourself. Remember those two words. Write them down

"Now, consider yourself thoughtfully and think of two words that capture

what you think of yourself. Write them down.

"Now, I want you to select a symbol of this new you something in your

pocket or purse that will represent this changed person you have become.

Whenever you see or feel this symbol it will bring to mind those words that describe what you think of and feel about the new you.

"In the next x days we are going to be working together to make visible

all the factors you need to be able to develop these capacities.

Stay in touch with your vision of yourself use your symbol often and you

will invent your own way of getting there."

And perhaps give out something about George Land and Beth Jarman's

Creativity, connectedness and future pull (self-fulfilling prophecy).

The Quantum worldview

In quantum physics the behavior of sub-atomic matter is governed by three established facts:

1. A bit of matter exists as a particle

2. At the same time it exists as a wave

3. Whether it manifests as a particle or wave is determined

by invisible fields

Everything is in a constant state of change

The implication is that a person is in two different states;

Each of us exists simultaneously in two forms: being and becoming. Like sub-atomic matter has the potential to manifest as either a particle or a wave, we, at any moment are becoming and also being.

Becoming is powered by nature's focus on growing; in us it is an instinctually rooted life force—differentiation which propels each of us toward autonomy and togetherness—toward wholeness and deep connectedness.

Field

The governing factor in both being and becoming is field, internal and external.

Internal Field

Our beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, expectations, prejudices, dreams, wishes, visions, self-awareness are our internal representations of being and becoming. They are our particle and our wave and they govern our choices.

At the same time, our internal field radiates out from us in visible

and invisible transmission which impact the field of those we come in contact

with—to create a new field.

The Quantum worldview

Creativity, Relationship, Future Pull

Connecting

The idea is to shift from Newtonian logic to using these three cornerstones

of reality in designing developmental actions

1. How do I want to feel and think (self-awareness wheel) when I have resolved this problem, accomplished this objective or realized this goal?

2. What is my wishful vision of a satisfying resolution?

(Design a self and vision "wheel" that takes one through this quantum worldview procedure. Develop thinking skill to use creativity, relationship/connecting

and future pull as an habitual way of approaching one's life situations

...with

co-workers, spouse, children etc.)

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