

Catch Word #226 – I can't help but ...

Episode description

We all have moments in our lives when we want to say, "I can't help it!" Sometimes we're looking for an excuse. Sometimes we really can't change something about our lives. In this Catch Word episode, Andrew and Kassy look at the different ways this phrase can be used.

Fun fact

In this episode, our hosts talk about food cravings. There are a lot of possible reasons you might have a craving. It could be caused by a hormonal imbalance, a lack of certain nutrients in your body, or simply an abundance of pleasure associated with special foods.

Expressions included in the study guide

- I can't help (-ing)
- I can't help (can't change something)
- I can't help but [do something]
- To get turned up
- To munch
- Dark



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew.

Kassy: And I'm Kassy.

Andrew: And you are listening to Culips.

Andrew: Hello there, everyone. You are listening to Catch Word, the Culips vocabulary series where we teach you useful and interesting English idioms, expressions, and phrasal verbs, and all of these great things. Today, I am joined by my cohost Kassy. Kassy, hello.

Kassy: Hey, how's it going?

Andrew: I'm doing really well, Kassy. And, actually, today is a great day for us, because we are going to answer a listener's email. And I love these kinds of episodes when our listeners send us a message and they request for us to cover a topic, because it's just fun for us, I think, right? It's cool to be helpful in this way.

Kassy: Yeah. It's a great way to interact with listeners, right?

Andrew: Totally. And our email today comes from Russia. And it was sent to us by a listener named Vera. And Vera said, "Hello, my name is Vera from Moscow, Russia. Thank you guys for what you're doing. I listen to your podcast every day and the hosts are like members of my family already. You are great." Well, thank you for that kind compliment, Vera. And she goes on to say, "I wanted to ask you to record an episode on this topic. It is: **I can't help but do or doing something**. So what does it mean? How can we use it if I translate this phrase verbatim? It sounds strange." Translating verbatim means translating word for word. So I guess when she takes this phrase **I can't help but do something** and translates it into Russian, then it gets confusing. "So maybe you could explain the meaning and enlighten us." So that's what we'll do here today, Kassy. And I can understand where Vera is coming from, I think. Once I started thinking about this expression, I realized, yeah, it actually is pretty difficult, isn't it?

Kassy: Yeah, sometimes you find a really cool phrase and you want to try to, you know, piece it together and use it yourself. And when you put it in the translator to, you know, make sure you are using it correctly, it just comes out as gibberish.

Andrew: Exactly, so we'll try and clarify that for Vera and all of our listeners here today. But before we get started, guys, I want to let you know that you can get the study guide for this episode on our website, which is Culips.com. And the study guide is jam-packed with lots of things that will help you improve your English, like the transcript, and there are vocabulary definitions, example sentences, dialogue examples, there's a quiz, there's lots of good stuff in the study guide. We really think that it is the best way to study with us, and we highly recommend that you check it out. So just visit Culips.com to give it a download.

Andrew: So, Kassy, let's take a close look at this tricky expression that native speakers actually use all the time in our everyday speaking, but can be very difficult to learn. And that is these expressions or phrases that are based around the words **can't help**, OK?

Can't help. And I brainstormed three different ways that native speakers use this **can't help** expression. And so what we'll do here in this episode is take a look at all of those three different usage patterns. And then we'll give you guys some example sentences and a dialogue example, as well, for each one of those usage patterns. OK? Does that sound OK for you, Kassy?

Kassy: That sounds great.

Andrew: The first pattern is when we use **can't help** plus a gerund, OK? So a gerund is a verb that has been turned into a noun with the help of the -ing grammatical suffix, OK?

Kassy: Can you give some examples, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, it's getting a little technical. So let's give some examples. For example, sleeping, eating, running. These are all gerunds, right? They're originally based on an action, but they have been transformed into a noun through the use of that -ing that we've attached to the end, OK? So if you **can't help sleeping**, if you **can't help running**, if you **can't help playing** a computer game, for example, then this means that it's impossible to stop doing that thing, right? It's something that is so attractive, so desirable, that it's impossible to stop doing that thing.

Kassy: I agree. It's good for things that are so amazing that you can't stop doing them. But sometimes it's also something like a bad habit. For example, I have a really hard time, I can't stop biting my nails when I'm nervous.

Andrew: Yes. So it could be that something is so fun that you don't wanna stop. It could also be that something is just like a habit or ingrained, like you said, and it literally is almost impossible to stop unless you really force yourself and will yourself to stop, right?

Andrew: All right. So with that being said, I think maybe the best way to get a sense for the meaning of this first usage pattern is to listen to some example sentences. And, everyone, this is kind of a new experiment here, in the Catch Word series. Usually, we give you a dialogue example, and we will give you a dialogue example in a moment, but we thought we'd also give you some example sentences so that you can hear these expressions used in a sentence context. And so what we'll do is I will read the sentence, then Kassy will read the sentence, and then we are going to give you some space where you can read the sentence or you can repeat the sentence. So you can actually get some speaking practice this way, too, because we know a lot of our listeners actually have the problem of not speaking English very much. So this will be an opportunity for you to move your mouth and to actually produce English.

Andrew: All right, so first, it's me, and it's Kassy, and then it's you, listeners. So here we go. Let's listen to the example sentences now.

Kassy: OK.

Andrew: I **can't help dancing** whenever I hear that song.

Kassy: I **can't help dancing** whenever I hear that song.

Andrew: OK, so this means that the speaker has to dance when they hear that song, right? It's impossible for them not to start dancing, they have to dance. Even if they wanted to not dance, they can't. They **can't help it**.

Kassy: Andrew, do you have an example of a song when you use this type of sentence?

Andrew: Ah, yeah, actually, this is a little bit of a funny aside, Kassy, but I saw on the internet this wee, kind of meme, a joke, that it was a list of 50 songs that Canadian people **get turned up** to. So **turned up** is a slang expression that means they get really excited when they hear these songs.

Kassy: I can just imagine a group of Canadians **getting turned up**. Anyway, enlighten me, please.

Andrew: Well, most of them were songs that get played in hockey arenas when a hockey game is on. And I actually found myself kind of agreeing with a lot of the songs on the list. And one of the songs that was really high on the list is called Cotton Eye Joe. I don't know if you know this song, Cotton Eye Joe?

Kassy: I do know that song.

Andrew: It's a really catchy song and, listeners, if you don't know this song, you can google it and listen to it on YouTube. But that's an example. I think if I'm at a hockey game, and the energy is high, and they turn on Cotton Eye Joe, I **can't help but dance**. I can't get help. I **can't help but get caught up in the music**.

Kassy: I feel the same way for the Macarena.

Andrew: Yeah, try to not dance when you hear the Macarena. It's impossible. You **can't help it**. Let's listen to the next example sentence.

Andrew: She **can't help crying** when she watches sad movies.

Kassy: She **can't help crying** when she watches sad movies.

Andrew: So this sentence just means that this woman always cries during sad movies, right? It's impossible for her to watch a sad movie and not cry.

Kassy: I think that's a common thing that happens for emotional people.

Andrew: Mmhmm, mmhmm. Let's listen to the final example sentence.

Andrew: They **can't help cheering** whenever their team scores a goal.

Kassy: They **can't help cheering** whenever their team scores a goal.

Andrew: So when their team scores a goal, they cheer, right? They can't resist.

Kassy: Yeah, there's too much energy, too much excitement.

Andrew: Too much energy, too much excitement, so they always cheer. And it's impossible to not cheer. This is what that means. All right.

Andrew: And, finally, we are going to listen to one longer dialogue example with this usage pattern. So let's do that now.

Friend 1: Hey, check it out, an ice cream shop. Want to grab a cone?

Friend 2: I thought you were on a sugar-free diet?

Friend 1: I am, but I just **can't help craving** a snack in the afternoon. I always need **to munch** on something.

Friend 2: OK, well, sure. I could go for some ice cream.

Andrew: So in this example, we heard someone say I just **can't help craving** a snack in the afternoon. So this means it's impossible to resist this craving, right? Whether this person likes it or not, every afternoon they want to eat a snack. They **can't help craving** that snack. And craving means, like, a desire or something you want to eat, right? A lot of people crave sweet foods or crave a cigarette or crave attention. These are common usage patterns with this word.

Kassy: Usually I use craving the most with some sort of food I really want if I'm bored, like I'm really craving chocolate right now.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. I think I crave some kind of food almost every day.

Kassy: Don't we all? I mean.

Andrew: Let's move on to the second usage pattern with **can't help**. And so this is similar, but it's a little bit different because we can also use it to not be able to help something when we're talking about something that is impossible to change. So, you know, Kassy, we are talking about, like, I **can't help dancing** or I **can't help biting** my nails. But this is actually true that we can resist, right? We're using it in that sense to, almost to emphasize that this song is really good or that my habit is really ingrained and difficult to break.

Kassy: Yeah, like it's not really impossible, but our willpower isn't strong enough.

Andrew: Right, I **can't help but crave** an ice cream, like, it's almost an excuse. Like, I can't control myself, I'm just going to eat an ice cream, right? It's, like, it's almost like a metaphorical use of the expression. But here in this usage pattern and this usage sense, it's true that it's impossible to change. Like maybe if you have a disease, right? You can't change your disease. You can't undo a disease or some sort of physical characteristic. These things that we can't change or, you know, we can't change the colour of our skin or where we were born or what kind of family we ended up with. These are things that are beyond our control, and we actually **can't help it**. Again, the meaning is similar, but this is more of a literal sense that it is impossible to change our situation.

Kassy: I think we need some examples to put it into perspective.

Andrew: Yeah, good call. Let's listen to the example sentences. And again, guys, I will say it, Kassy will say it, and then it's your turn to say it. OK, here we go.

Andrew: He would like to live a normal life, one without his disease, but he **can't help it**.

Kassy: He would like to live a normal life, one without his disease, but he **can't help it**.

Andrew: Very sad sentence. So, yeah, just like I was saying a moment ago. You know, if you're born with a disease that we haven't discovered a cure for yet, then you **can't help it**, right? You **can't help that you have a disease or a medical condition**.

Kassy: Yeah, there's nothing you can do.

Andrew: Nothing you can do, just have to live with it. All right, example sentence #2.

Andrew: I feel really bad for those kids. They **can't help it** that their mom is an alcoholic and their dad is a criminal.

Kassy: I feel really bad for those kids. They **can't help it** that their mom is an alcoholic and their dad is a criminal.

Andrew: Wow, we're getting **dark** here. These are two negative sentences in a row.

Kassy: Yes, super **dark**. But, I mean, that's reality, right? It happens.

Andrew: Some children are born into these families where, unfortunately, their parents aren't the best. And it's not the children's fault, right? They didn't have any choice. They can't change their situation. So this is the perfect context for using this expression, they **can't help it**. They **can't help it**. They can't change their situation.

Andrew: And this next one really rings true for me, Kassy. Let's listen to example sentence #3.

Andrew: If I could grow some hair and not be bald anymore, I would, but I **can't help it** that I lost my hair.

Kassy: If I could grow some hair and not be bald anymore, I would, but I **can't help it** that I lost my hair.

Kassy: I hope that never happens to me.

Andrew: Yeah, me too. Me too. So, exactly, this is another context where we could use this sentence that I **can't help it** that I lost my hair, right? For listeners that don't know, I unfortunately am going bald way faster than I would like.

Kassy: It's OK, Andrew.

Andrew: OK, Kassy, let's listen to a dialogue example now using this—I **can't help it** to mean it's impossible to change something.

Friend 1: Let's go to the park on Saturday.

Friend 2: I don't think I can. I gotta work.

Friend 1: That sucks.

Friend 2: I know, but I **can't help it**. Sorry.

Andrew: So in this example conversation, two friends are talking about going to the park, but one can't go to the park because he has to work. And he says I **can't help it**, here meaning that it is impossible for him to change this reality, right? Maybe he needs the money and so he can't not go to work or he just values his job, right?

Kassy: This is a great sentence to make an excuse to, because it makes it sound like, you know, you really wanna go but it's not up to you. You don't have a choice. You **can't help it**.

Andrew: Right, right. That's true. That's something that I didn't think of, but native speakers will often use a sentence pattern like this when they are giving an excuse for a reason why they can't do something. Ah, I'd love to go to your birthday party, but I have a doctor's appointment and I can't cancel now. I **can't help it**. I'm sorry. I'll see you next time, OK? Right? Something like this.

Kassy: Yeah, it's, like, a good way to turn someone down, even if you don't really want to go. You make it sound like you want to go, but you can't.

Andrew: Yes, exactly. Very good. All right.

Andrew: And we have one final usage pattern that we are going to look at today. This usage pattern is I **can't help but do something**. I **can't help but do something**. And so, again, this is very similar to the other patterns that we looked at and it just means that it's impossible to stop doing something. So we use it more with verbs, instead of using it with gerunds or with conditions like diseases or physical conditions or situations that are beyond our control. This pattern we use with verbs when we wanna say that we can't stop doing that action, that it's impossible to stop doing that action.

Kassy: We're going to look at some examples in a minute. But when I think of this phrase I think of I **can't help but love him**. Maybe you have a really annoying little brother and he really gets on your nerves. But when I say the expression I **can't help but love him**, the verb is love with the expression I **can't help but**, and means that no matter what he does, it's impossible for me to stop loving him.

Andrew: Right. Even if he is super annoying, and drives you crazy, he's still your brother and, at the end of the day, you still love him. So **you can't help but love him**.

Andrew: Let's listen to the three example sentences with this usage pattern. And then we'll listen to a dialogue example.

Andrew: I **can't help but appreciate** the nurses and doctors who work so hard to keep us healthy and safe.

Kassy: I **can't help but appreciate** the nurses and doctors who work so hard to keep us healthy and safe.

Andrew: OK, so it's impossible to not appreciate the nurses and doctors. This is the meaning of this sentence.

Kassy: This is a great phrase to learn in this time period right now.

Andrew: Yes, maybe this is the sentence of the year for 2020.

Andrew: OK, example sentence #2.

Andrew: She **can't help but wonder** at the marvels of the universe when she stares up at the night sky.

Kassy: She **can't help but wonder** at the marvels of the universe when she stares up at the night sky.

Andrew: OK, so to wonder here means to be in awe of something, really just amazed, right? So I feel this way too when I look up at the night sky. And on a really clear night and you see all of the stars shining, maybe you see a shooting star, you're like, wow, it's so amazing, right? You **can't help but wonder** at it.

Kassy: Yeah, it's impossible not to be amazed by how beautiful and big it is.

Andrew: Exactly.

Andrew: All right, and example sentence #3.

Andrew: We **can't help but think** about picking up some fresh bread whenever we walk past the bakery and smell all the delicious smells of freshly baked goods.

Kassy: We **can't help but think** about picking up some fresh bread whenever we walk past the bakery and smell all the delicious smells of freshly baked goods.

Andrew: I feel this one hard because I have a bakery near my house and, when I walk past it, I always wanna stop and pick up a snack.

Kassy: Yeah, those cravings, that word we used earlier, I get real cravings when I passed by, like, a delicious-smelling bakery.

Andrew: Oh, yeah, it's a great smell. So here, we **can't help but think** about picking up some fresh bread. That is a long and complicated sentence, but we **can't help but think** about picking up—picking up here means to buy, right? To pick up some fresh bread means to buy some fresh bread. And we **can't help but think**. So do they buy fresh bread, Kassy?

Kassy: They don't necessarily buy fresh bread. They're just thinking about buying it.

Andrew: Right. So they can't control that thought, right? Whenever they smell that delicious bread, then that thought happens in their head that they ... Hmm, should we pick some up? Should we not pick them up? They **can't help but thinking about it**. It's impossible to stop that thought.

Andrew: All right, and finally we'll listen to a conversation example. So let's do that now.

Friend 1: You sure look tired today.

Friend 2: I know, right? I am so stupid. I stayed up until 2 a.m. last night.

Friend 1: Dude, why would you do that?

Friend 2: I started watching a movie around midnight and then, once I started, I just **couldn't help but watch** it all the way to the end.

Kassy: I have definitely experienced this many times.

Andrew: Are you a late-night movie watcher, Kassy?

Kassy: Movies or books. I am addicted to reading.

Andrew: Ah, OK, so maybe if you're tired in the daytime, it's because you stayed up reading too late at night. You just **couldn't help but turn the next page**.

Kassy: Exactly.

Andrew: Well, everyone, I think that about brings us to the end of today's episode. We definitely hope that you found it useful and that you learned something new. Again, a big thanks to our listener from Russia, Vera, for the great episode suggestion. It was a fun one to talk about.

Andrew: Guys, don't forget that the study guide for this episode is on our website, Culips.com. And if you want to stay up to date with all of the latest Culips news, you can do that by following us on social media. We are on Facebook and Twitter and YouTube and probably these days most active on Instagram. So if you're an Instagram user, you can check us out there. All you have to do to find us is search for the Culips English Podcast and we'll pop right up. If you, like Vera, would like to suggest an episode topic for an upcoming Culips episode, then shoot us an email. Our address is contact@Culips.com.

Andrew: We'll be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye, everyone.

Kassy: Catch you later.

Detailed Explanations

I can't help (-ing)

Idiom

The first pattern in this episode is **I can't help** plus a gerund. A gerund is a verb turned into a noun using the suffix -ing. For example, sleeping, eating, and running are gerunds. These gerunds can be used with **I can't help**, such as **I can't help dancing** whenever I hear that song. **I can't help** plus a gerund is used when something is so good that you can't prevent yourself from doing it. Sometimes it's a bad habit, like when you can't stop biting your nails. It should be said that it is possible to prevent yourself from dancing when a song comes on, but we use this expression figuratively.

Here are a couple more examples with **I can't help (-ing)**:

Blaine: Are you OK?

Devon: I'm all right. Why do you ask?

Blaine: It looks like you're nervous. I can see you shaking your legs.

Devon: Oh, yeah. I am a little nervous. I have a job interview in 20 minutes, and **I can't help shaking** when I get nervous.

Blaine: Is it for the computer analyst job? Don't worry about that. You'll be fine!

Tristan: Yahoo!

Alessia: Wow, I didn't know you liked basketball so much.

Tristan: Actually, I don't particularly like basketball.

Alessia: Then why are you cheering so much?

Tristan: You see number 34? He's from my hometown. **I can't help cheering** for him. Go, number 34!

I can't help (can't change something)

Idiom

The second pattern using **I can't help** is matched with a condition you can't change. The examples our hosts give are diseases or medical conditions. If you were born with cerebral palsy, that is something **you can't help** but have. The same thing goes for skin colour or the parents you have. You were born with these things. You can also use this expression when there is a situation you can't change. You **can't help it** if you have to work on Saturday and are unable to meet up with your friend.

Here are a couple more examples with **I can't help (can't change something)**:

Angus: Wait a minute. I need to go back inside and get some sunscreen.

Betty: You don't need sunscreen. It's not really sunny outside.

Angus: Trust me. I do.

Betty: Don't bother. It's going to rain this afternoon.

Angus: Look, **I can't help it** if I'm a redhead and I've got such pale skin. I'm very much at risk for skin cancer.

Betty: OK, I understand.

Alex: You seem down. What's the problem?

Sofia: I had to cancel my plane tickets for this summer.

Alex: Don't do that. You got them at such a good price.

Sofia: I know. I wanted to see my parents in Canada, but the borders are closed because of this pandemic. **I can't help it.**

I can't help but [do something]

Idiom

The third pattern is similar to the first one. The main difference is grammatical. Instead of using a gerund, this time it's a verb. Kassy uses the example of a little brother. **You can't help but love him** even though he drives you crazy. Just like the first pattern using gerunds, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is physically impossible to stop. Another example our hosts talk about is buying bread when you pass a bakery: **you can't help but** buy some tasty bread. It is possible to not buy some, but the expression is a fun excuse explaining why you buy so much bread.

Here are a couple more examples with **I can't help but [do something]**:

Beck: I heard you were struggling little bit at the marathon this morning.

Minnie: I was.

Beck: Tell me how it went.

Minnie: I woke up feeling terrible this morning. But once I started running, **I couldn't help but finish the race**. In the end, I now feel pretty good about it.

Beck: Congratulations!

Octavia: What's the name of the book you're reading?

Blythe: It's called The Cry of the Cuckoo.

Octavia: Is it any good?

Blythe: For sure. It's a real page-turner.

Octavia: Page-turner? What does that mean?

Blythe: It means that when you start reading the book, **you can't help but turn to the next page** and keep on reading.

Octavia: Cool. Do you mind if I borrow it after you're finished?

To get turnt up

Idiom, slang

In this episode, Andrew jokes about 50 songs Canadians **get turnt up** about. By this, he's talking about songs that Canadians really get excited about. This expression comes from getting turned on by something. In the past, it meant getting turned on by alcohol, drugs, or sex, but now it can mean getting excited by anything at all. You can **get turnt up** by music, art, movies, nice cars, or sports, for example.

Here are a couple more examples with **to get turnt up**:

Graham: I heard you went to a music festival last night. How was it?

Oliver: It was pretty good, but it started off slowly.

Graham: What do you mean?

Oliver: The first few bands weren't very exciting. But once The Goodfellers took to the stage, the whole crowd **got turnt up**. After that, it was a rocking party.

Helen: Did you see the final Star Wars movie?

Morgan: No. Not my thing.

Helen: I thought you loved that kind of movie.

Morgan: Me? No way. You're the one who **gets all turnt up** watching Star Wars. I only kind of like it.

Helen: Do you want to watch it anyways?

Morgan: I guess. If it will make you happy.

To munch

Verb

In one of the example dialogues, one person talks about always needing **to munch** on something. **To munch** is to eat something. However, native English speakers use the term in a few different ways. **To munch** can mean to chew something continuously. You can say she's been **munching** on the same piece of chicken for 4 minutes now. **To munch** can also mean to snack. You can say he **munched** on some potato chips while watching a movie.

Here are a couple more examples with **to munch**:

Amira: Hey, Finn, we're heading out to get something to eat in a couple of hours. Want to come?

Finn: I'll pass.

Amira: But we're going to your favourite pizza place.

Finn: Actually, I'm not hungry. I've been **munching** on crackers and cheese all afternoon. Maybe another time.

Gareth: I was thinking of inviting my buddy John to join us at the picnic. Is that OK?

Anja: John? I'd rather you didn't.

Gareth: How come?

Anja: Well, there's no nice way of saying this. When he eats, he **munches** too loudly. It's kind of disgusting.

Gareth: I've noticed that, too. But we'll be in a park with a lot of different sounds. I don't think we'll hear him.

Anja: Trust me. I can hear him!

Dark Adjective

One of the example sentences used in this episode mentions alcoholism and bad parents. Andrew comments that the episode is starting to get **dark**. He says this because there were two negative example sentences in a row. He uses the adjective **dark** to mean tragic or grim. You can say a person is **dark** because he keeps talking about depressing things. You can say the economy looks **dark** because the future doesn't look good.

Here are a couple more examples with **dark**:

Emme: I saw you talking to Kevin. How was it?

Stephen: That guy is **dark**!

Emme: What makes you say that?

Stephen: As soon as he said hello, he started talking about how the end of the world might be coming soon. I just met him!

Emme: He can be like that sometimes.

Stephen: Immediately after that, he talked about how his dog died last week. He's a gloomy character.

Fern: Hey, what were you watching just now?

Norman: It's a short film called The Witness.

Fern: I heard some of the music. It sounded like there was a lot of action.

Norman: Yeah. A lot of action and a lot of violence. It was **dark**.

Fern: Would you suggest I watch it?

Norman: Only if you think you can handle it.

Quiz

1. What does to munch mean?

- a) to drink noisily
- b) to snack
- c) to play video games
- d) to be mean

2. Which of the following has a different meaning than to get turned up?

- a) to get excited
- b) to get turned on
- c) to turn over a new leaf in your life
- d) to be energized

3. True or false? When I say, "I can't help dancing when I hear that song," I mean it literally.

- a) true
- b) false

4. Which of the following is NOT a synonym of dark?

- a) nostalgic
- b) gloomy
- c) dismal
- d) depressing

5. What is a gerund?

- a) it's a verb turned into a noun using -ing
- b) it's a small animal
- c) it's an adjective for animals
- d) it's a preposition before a verb

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. What are some foods that you can't help but eat?
2. What are activities you absolutely cannot live without?
3. What food do you tell other people you don't really like but you munch on anyways?
4. What kinds of things get you turned up?
5. If someone suggests a dark movie for you to watch, how do you respond?

Quiz Answers

1. b 2. c 3. b 4. a 5. a

Episode credits

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