

ADHD-Processing Disorder and Depression with Ginger Ragaishis

Speaker Key:

VO Voiceover

CB Chantal Boyle

GR Ginger Ragaishis

00:00:01

VO

Welcome to the Sunflower Conversations, where we explore the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower and its role in supporting people with hidden disabilities.

CB

I'm Chantal, and today I have the pleasure of being joined by Ginger Ragaishis. Ginger is Miss Vermont Teen, and currently, a junior in high school. Ginger has ADHD and learning disabilities.

She uses her lived experience to deliver talks to younger students, to give them the confidence to be their true selves. While, at the same time, raising awareness to everyone on how to be accepting and not judgemental. Ginger, welcome to the Sunflower Conversations, how are you today?

00:01:02

GR

I'm doing great, how are you?

CB

Yes, I'm good, thank you. The first thing to note is that Ginger is wearing her crown and her sash. Ginger, is it heavy? Is it difficult to attach?

GR

It is a little heavy. When I first was crowned, it was quite difficult to get on. It would constantly slide around my head, and it was super wobbly. But I now have different clips in, which help a lot better.

But yes, like yesterday, I had an appearance and it was still a little wobbly. But that's okay. I have ten more months to master it.

CB

The reason that you got into it was, initially, just from an educational point of view because you needed the topic, but you've gone with the whole theme of community service, and that's engrained in you now.

GR

Exactly.

CB

You describe yourself of having learning disabilities, what does that mean for you?

GR

Well, I was diagnosed with my processing disorder in about third grade, so I was about eight years old. I've had it, I've known about it, for almost ten years. I think that people underestimate people with learning disabilities or hidden disabilities. I feel like I'm constantly having to break other people's boundaries about myself.

00:02:37

What it means for me is it's someone who knows how to push through in times of struggle. I have found that I have become so much more resilient and so much more hardworking because of my learning disability. [coughs] Excuse me. Because I've had to deal with that hardship my whole life, now, when other challenges come about in my daily life, I know how to push through.

I don't just give up. I know that I can do it and I know I can achieve it. And that's something that I've learned, and what it means for me to have a learning disability.

CB

Your processing disorder, can you tell me a bit more about that? Is that dyslexia, or is it processing information coming in verbally?

GR

My processing disorder, it doesn't have a specific name, it's lack of crystal knowledge. Basically, when I'm in a classroom setting or when I'm just in everyday life, when people are talking to me, it pretty much goes in one ear, out the other. But also, I have a limit on what I can learn, and basically, if I take in too much information at once, it all just goes out the window, I can't remember any of it.

It's really a struggle when I'm in a classroom, especially AP classes because they go pretty fast.

CB

What's an AP class?

00:04:11

GR

Advanced Placement. So, basically, there are regular classes, college prep classes, and then there are Honours classes, generally, a bit harder. And then there are AP classes, Advanced Placement, which are college-level courses.

And so, I took a college-level class for AP Language, and it was a little bit tricky because we would move at such a fast rate, and I would constantly miss things, and I would have to ask my teacher all the time after class. I'm like, wait, I don't remember you talking about this, can you explain it, and she was like, we went over this yesterday. I was like, I don't remember. I don't remember anything that you said.

But also, it's tricky in everyday life when my friends are talking to me, or my parents are talking to me, and I just constantly forget what they're saying. And then, sometimes, they get mad at me, but I have to constantly reassure them that it's not my fault, it's my processing disorder. It can be a little tricky, but I've managed to cope with it.

CB

And, sorry, what age did you say you were when that became apparent?

GR

I don't really remember this, but my mom tells me about this, but I was in second grade, and my second-grade teacher...

CB

You would be about, what, six years old?

GR

Yes, six or seven in second grade. My second-grade teacher, she had both my older brothers, because I have two older brothers, and they are wildly smart. They are crazy smart. My second-grade teacher was like, oh, I have another Ragaishis, this is great, and everything.

00:05:56

But then, as the year went on, she talked to my mother, and she was like, your daughter can't read. She's not at the right age... She's not reading at the age that she is, and she's not understanding it. And so, then, that's when my teacher said you need to get her tested for something because there's something not clicking in her brain. There's something not computing.

So, about a year later, when I was in third grade, I went to go get tested. I remember getting pulled out of school a couple of days a week, which is so fun. But I remember, I went to, I don't know, I was in New York at that time. But we went to the building, and they gave me a series of tests, a lot of memory stuff.

They showed me a bunch of photos of people. That's the main one I remember. They showed me pictures of people's faces and they would ask me do you remember this face, or do you not remember this face, and everything, have I showed you this face before. That's the one I remember.

And then the results came back, and I had a processing disorder. I didn't really know what it meant at the time, I was just like, okay, what does that do for me? But then we set up accommodations, and really, I kind of realised it once I was in middle school. I was like, oh, I have this processing disorder, it's strange. Because I had a lot of smart friends, and I would always get separated from the kids with learning disabilities and the kids without, so I would constantly be separated from them.

00:07:37

I don't know, I would feel called out and it would suck a little bit. I hated that. Yes, it was better for my learning, but I did not like constantly being pulled out of class.

CB

Yes, understandably.

GR

And then, my whole life, I thought that I was just going to settle for a B student. I thought that I could never achieve As. I was constantly just getting Bs, and I thought that was okay, until I got to high school and I realised that I craved academic validation.

But yes, I got to high school and something really switched in my brain. I don't know what it was, but something was like, I know I can do better and I know I can strive for excellence. And so that's what I did. I joined this programme.

CB

Yes.

GR

I worked and I worked, and I don't think that 12-year-old me would believe that I have almost a 4.0 GPA.

CB

I'm so sorry, what is a 4.0 GPA?

GR

Oh, so, basically, all the grades that you get, they tally up into what's known as your GPA. I don't know what GPA stands for, but basically, if you have a 4.0 GPA, it means that you're top of your class, really high grades. And basically, it's the average of all of your grades, throughout your whole years of high school, or whatever. But yes, that's [overtalking].

00:09:11

CB

Well, congratulations.

GR

Thank you.

CB

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You've got ADHD, as well, how does that manifest itself in you?

GR

Well, I was diagnosed fairly recently. I was diagnosed in high school with ADHD. During quarantine, I was bored a lot, and I was really looking into other learning disabilities and everything. I was like, wait a minute, I don't want to self-diagnose myself, but I feel like I have ADHD.

And then I said to my mom, I was like, mom, I need to get tested. She was like, oh, you're fine. I was like, no, I want to get tested. So, then I got tested, and sure enough, I had ADHD. But yes, I got tested last year. It's like I daydream a lot, I lose focus very quickly. That's also due to my processing disorder, as well, they go together, almost.

Yes, I also procrastinate a lot. I have a very, very hard time sitting down and getting work done, especially when it's designated time. I can't just sit down and when a teacher tells me to work, I can work. It has to be at my own pace and my own time, which is very frustrating at points because I want to just get it done, but sometimes it's a little bit tricky.

00:11:02

Yes, that's where it mostly comes out, pretty much, in school, when I'm doing those things, and just can't focus, I'm super restless, I just need to do something. I'm not super-hyper, which is kind of common in girls with ADHD. Girls with ADHD are not as hyper as boys with ADHD. But yes, mostly, there's a lot of stuff constantly running through my brain, and everything. It's very hard to focus on one thing at a time. I just [overtalking] with the big picture, I can get overwhelmed.

CB

Yes, it's like it's scattered on [?].

GR

Yes, and then I get overwhelmed by them and then I have to talk to my therapist, because I have a therapist, and she says well, start with one point, and I was like, oh, yes. Now that I think about it, it's actually less of a problem than I thought it was going to be, which I did in my head, and everything, and it's a bit confusing.

CB

Yes, what you're saying resonates with me quite a bit because I'm a little bit like that in there's just lots of things and I really have to say to myself you can do one thing at a time. One thing at a time. You shut everything else out and do this one thing at a time. Because I find that I'm doing a bit of this and a bit of that, and then completely distracted, and it is exhausting.

00:12:23

GR

Yes, it definitely is.

CB

Yes. So, you've, obviously, managed to get all of these As and a 4.0 on the GPO, whatever it was, without taking medication. Have you looked at that route for medication, or you can manage without it?

GR

Well, I do take medication, but not for my ADHD. This is a different route... So far, I think I've been fine without medication for ADHD. I've never really thought about it before, and I'm not really sure how it would affect me. But I haven't really looked into it because it's never been a severe point. I have coping mechanisms and I know how to push through a little bit.

When I was diagnosed, I was 15, I've lived 15 years of my life not knowing that I had ADHD, and nothing was really new, it was just like, oh, this makes sense. I do take medication but for something else. Last year, I was not doing very well. It was after the pageant, and it was in May and June, I was really struggling emotionally and mentally, and so that's when I got my therapist, and everything. I started going on antidepressants this year, in the fall. I feel like that's greatly helped. I love my antidepressants.

I was really not doing well. My therapist helped a great deal. I knew that I didn't want to be sad all the time because I was constantly sad, and it was, literally, killing me from the inside out. I was like, I can't deal with the sadness anymore, and I need something to help me. So, I went on antidepressants, and it helped me balance out a little bit.

00:14:44

CB

Did it take you a long time to recognise it was your mental health? Was it your parents that saw it?

GR

Actually, I don't think so. I knew that people could tell that I wasn't doing well, and I lost interest in so many things that I did. I'd be in my room and my parents would call me down for dinner, and I would feel like it was the most exhausting thing to go downstairs and eat dinner with them. I would not talk at dinner and I would barely touch my food.

And then, when everyone else was done, I would be like, can I go upstairs, I don't want to be here anymore, and they were like, yes, you can go upstairs. But then, when I went to the doctor's office and they were asking me all these questions, my mom was like, yes, she's definitely lost interest in things that weren't exhausting for her.

CB

That was diagnosed as depression, was it?

GR

Yes. It's not a severe case of depression. I was still a little bit depressed, and then I went on meds in about November, or December, and I think that I've benefited from them a lot. When I first went on them they said if you get any more depressed, stop taking them. I said okay, but it was the complete opposite.

I started doing things that I still love to do. I was in theatre, and everything. And of course, there were moments where I was sad and stressed, but I had a reason to be sad and stressed. Unlike me, a year ago, when I would just come home and just sob into my pillow for now reason at all.

00:16:43

It was exhausting just crying all the time. I really, really hated it.

CB

I think it's great that you're sharing that with us on the podcast because it will be helpful for other people to recognise, maybe, in themselves, if they're experiencing sadness and the lack of enthusiasm for life. And just not being able to... And actually, how seeking help has been a massive turnaround. Because if you hadn't, we wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation now. Potentially, you'd still be sobbing into your pillow, but a lot, lot worse. So, getting help is crucial, isn't it?

GR

Yes, definitely. Help in anything. With my learning disability, I'd get help. With my depression, I got help. Help, although it seems like a scary thing, and although it seems like people might judge you for getting help, you will only benefit from getting help.

That's all I can say is that you will benefit so much from getting help because you won't have to deal with that burden alone. You have these other people. You have a support system to help you through it and can provide insight into your life. No one should have to go through any of these things alone.

00:18:01

I shouldn't have to deal with my processing disorder alone, or my ADHD alone, or my depression alone because it's not something I want to be doing alone. It's something I want to be sharing and something that I want to get help from because I'll only benefit from it.

CB

Yes, absolutely. What are your... I can't speak. What are your relationships like with your family and friends? It sounds to me that you've got... You said you've got a group of friends, particularly you were in the lower school that... Because you were separated from them because you had to do different classes and everything. Do you find making friendships and bonds, does that come easy to you, or is it difficult?

GR

Well, okay, so when I was in middle school, when I was in sixth through eighth grade, I came to school with a couple of friends I already knew. And then, through that, I branched out and made more friends. Back when I was that age, I found it really easy to make friends. I would go around the classroom and make friends with different friend groups because that was the kind of person I was. I would be a social butterfly, but also, shy at the same time.

It didn't really hit me that I was an extrovert until COVID came. I realised, I was like, I need to make friends. I need to see people. This is not doing well for me. Of course, I loved staying home for nine months and doing nothing, but at one point it was like, I just want to be a teenager and live my life.

00:19:51

It was a little rocky when I moved to Vermont. I went to a whole new school, with a completely different range of people. I made a couple of friends, at first, not really close ones. And then around October, two months into my freshman year, my ninth-grade year, I made a really close friend. And then, from there, I had a whole friend group by second semester of my ninth-grade year. And that was great.

I'm going to be a senior, I'm going to be a twelfth grader in the fall, and I like making friends with people I might not, necessarily, hang out with outside of school, but I like just seeing them at school, it gives me a chance to meet a bunch of new people that I'm not familiar with. I think it's a lot of fun.

CB

Your ADHD and your processing disorder is not holding you back because your extrovert characteristics mean that you naturally want to be engaging with new people, and you're interested in people.

GR

Yes.

CB

So that's a great quality to have. You were eight when you got diagnosed with your processing disorder, and yes, just recently with ADHD. Your family, how do they feel about that? You said that your brothers are super-bright and intelligent, and they don't have any learning difficulties at all, no disabilities, non-visible. How did your family react to your diagnosis, has it changed anything?

00:21:35

GR

I think when I was younger, my diagnosis might have been a little bit stressful. I didn't know, really, what was going on. My mom is someone that would do anything for her children, and I think it was a little bit rocky at the start, she didn't really know how to handle it, a little bit.

I switched schools in fifth grade because I wanted to get into the middle school that I wanted to get into, and we thought that switching schools to get me better accommodations for school would be better.

As I've grown up, I was... My hand was held a lot when I was first diagnosed, and everything, because I, like I said, did not know what was going on, but as I got older, the hand let go a little bit, and I learned how to do it on my own. Of course, I'm not alone, but I have learned to be more independent with it and to stand up for myself when my mom can't.

I think that every day we learn something new. My two older brothers did not have learning disabilities, but they had their own problems going on. They had their own hidden disabilities going on, but they were always super-smart. My oldest brother, when we lived in New York City, he went to Bronx High School of Science, which is a very, very good school in New York City. He was very bright, and then he went on to Notre Dame in Indiana.

And then, my middle brother, he went to the High School of American Studies in New York City, and then later went on to University of Southern California. University of Southern California is actually my dream school.

00:23:42

CB

Oh, is it? Okay, so you're going to follow in your brother's footsteps.

GR

Yes. A little bit. But yes, we learn something new every day, and just figuring out how the school can help me with my learning disabilities and how I can benefit from their accommodations, and everything.

CB

What kind of accommodations have they made for you, then?

GR

I get extra time on tests, so I get time and a half. I can, also, for tests, if I take a math test, or something, I can go into another room and take the test without... Not being in the larger group.

CB

That's a good idea, isn't it because if everybody gets up and leaves and you're still in there, as well, it's... Very self-conscious.

GR

Right, yes. Let's see. Oh, there's one where I can take a test if I choose to, over three or four days. Like the SAT or ACT, I can take over a course of four days for each section. So, I'm only in there for an hour-and-a-half, instead of five hours, which is super, super beneficial, I think, because my brain gets overloaded very quickly.

CB

Out of interest, what would happen if you had to do it in the same way as somebody without... If you didn't have accommodations what would the outcome be if you had to sit there for that long?

00:25:13

GR

Well, because I get time and a half, it's longer. I recently took my Advanced Placement exam, so we had an exam at the end of the year, and I got there at around 08:15 in the morning, and we took the test, we started the test. I finished at around 02:00 or 03:00 in the afternoon, while everyone else finished at around 12:00, at noon.

So, I get the extra time to take in the information, really understand what I'm reading. But if I was in the normal class where I ended at noon, I don't think I would have finished, and because it was an essay writing, I don't think that my essay writing would have been the best I could have done. I feel like it would have been rushed because I really need to take time and read the articles and understand what I'm reading.

Because if I understand what I'm reading, I'll have a better time writing the essay, but if I just skim through it, my essay is going to be worse and it's going to feel rushed. And also, I don't think I would have finished.

CB

Yes, do you find that when you're reading that in that pressurised situation that you have to re-read a couple of times? Do you have to read it a couple of times for it to sink in?

GR

Yes. That is the frustrating part, when I'm reading an article, and I read a whole article, and I'm like, what did I just read? I have no idea what I just read. I wasted five minutes, or ten minutes, which is precious time in a timed test. I have to go back and I have to read with my pencil, and I have to carefully understand what I'm reading so that I can do well on the multiple choice or the writing.

00:27:06

But sometimes, I read... Also in books, I read a sentence or a paragraph and I read it five times, and I don't understand what I'm reading. And then I'm like, wait. Stop. Focusing on other things. Look at the words and read it carefully. You know what you're reading, it's just it's all [overtalking] out everywhere.

CB

Yes. I can relate to that, as well. I haven't had a diagnosis, but reading, I really struggle with. I have to read things several times and really be in the zone to absorb what is on the page or on the screen. Usually, on the screen these days. It's tiring. As you said, it takes a lot longer to get to where everybody gets a lot quicker.

GR

Definitely.

CB

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So, you do a lot of advocacy in middle schools, can you tell me about that? How do you do it, what do you do, and what's the feedback been like?

GR

Before my title Miss Vermont Teen, I was Miss Southern Vermont Teen. I would go to a bunch of schools and I would have a presentation, and I would talk about my learning disability and I would share my story with them.

00:28:35

My presentation went along the lines with my name and everything, and then be what are three things that you can physically see about me. And pretty much, everyone hit the nail on the head, I'm wearing a sash, I'm today's speaker, and I'm a redhead. The little kids really like it, and they'd raise their hand and be like, oh, you have red hair, so that was super cute.

And then I would click one that says what are three things that you can't see about me? And then I showcase the three things that you can't see about me. And then I would just explain my story. I would talk about how help is great. You always can ask for help. When in doubt, ask for help.

I talked about my passion, which is theatre, and I talked about University of Southern California. I talked about that's where I want to go. I talked about my brothers a little bit. I talk about how they inspired me a little bit. And then they asked questions at the end, whether it's fun questions or some more serious questions.

There was this one question that I got at my first time presenting, and this little girl asked me are you going to become a model one day. I thought that was the cutest little thing. I was like, I don't know, maybe, we'll see. We'll see what happens.

But then there was another girl at another school, this one I'll remember forever, she said if you could choose to be born without a learning disability, would you be born without a learning disability?

CB

That's a good question, how old was she, roughly?

00:30:15

GR

She was in elementary school. She was not middle school. I thought oh, my God, that is such a deep question I would never have thought of. I was like, I would not want to be born without this learning disability because it made me who I am today. I'm creative, and I'm fun, and I'm outgoing, and I have all these artistic traits about myself that I think would be completely different if I didn't have my learning disability. I thought that was super important.

And also, I talk to these kids, I talk to them and say I don't want to stand up here and lie to you guys. I don't want to be that person that's like, oh, it's all jolly and dandy all the time because I found these coping mechanisms. No, that's not the case.

I remember there was this one time, I told them, I said two days ago, I was sobbing into my pillow, wishing that I never had a learning disability. It's the truth. It's not every day that I can wake up and just be proud of who I am. There are days when I can't, and there are days when I really, really wish that I didn't have it.

Most of the days, I'm fine with it, but on those days, it takes a toll on who I am and it takes a toll on my mental health because there's no cure for it. I can't fix it in any way. The only way

I can help it is by having these coping mechanisms that I've learned to deal with over the past 17 years of my life.

CB

Just picking up on that, are there triggers that result in you having those down days? What kind of things make you feel like that?

00:32:17

GR

I think it all depends. Like is said in the beginning of this, I crave academic validation, and that's, pretty much, where the source of all of my problems come from.

When I get a bad grade on a test... It's not even bad, but I've programmed my mind to think you need to be as good as your brothers are. They were smart, they took Advanced Placement classes their whole high school career. You need to be up to par with them. I constantly have to live in their shadow, almost.

I want people to know that I can do it, and I'm not dumb because of my learning disability, and that I can be as good as they are at school, but it would take a lot out of me. Sometimes I get bad grades on tests, or sometimes even my friends, just talking about their grades, or whatever, I see that their grades are better than mine, and I'm like, oh, this makes me feel really bad about myself.

Or sometimes I come home from a really exhausting day of just not understanding anything, and that is really what triggers it. Or homework, I'm sitting in my room doing homework, and I'm like, I don't know what I'm doing.

CB

Yes, and it's the wasted time, I guess, you must feel, because you've had a day of being in school, sitting in the lesson, being taught, and you're going to go over that again, or somehow teach yourself what you missed out on for the day.

GR

Yes.

00:34:07

CB

So, I understand that. It must be tiring and disappointing, in a sense of I was there, it wasn't like I was skipping school, and smoking fags behind the bike shed, or whatever. Cigarettes, you don't say that in America. Smoking cigarettes behind the bike shed. You were there. You were present.

GR

Yes, exactly.

CB

But it's the retaining of the information, isn't it?

GR

Yes. It's rough, but I've managed to deal.

CB

Yes, well, you're doing a great job. So, what's your experience of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, and what do you think about it?

GR

I only recently found out what it was, maybe, this year, the fall, or something, when I thought this was a great organisation, and everything. Having to deal with my platform, and everything, and I thought this is great, more people are advocating for hidden disabilities.

I like that it's being talked about a little bit more because I feel like mental health is talked about, but not specifically struggles with hidden disabilities. Both my brothers have hidden disabilities, I have a hidden disability. And it just shows that a lot of people can have them and you might not know.

Yes, actually, a fun fact, but when I turn 18, I really want to get a tattoo, and I want it to be of a sunflower.

00:35:47

CB

Nice choice.

GR

Yes, because it really shows who I am, and that's what I want to get, a little sunflower. Because it shows who I am and it shows that I've had years of struggle, but I come out light at the end of the tunnel.

CB

Yes, good for you. I think it's one of the things that we really encourage, to open up the conversation about disability and how it's not the same for everyone. You could be chatting to somebody else with sensory... I keep saying sensory processing, sorry. You could be chatting to somebody else with processing issues, and that might be a different processing.

So, we all have different effects and reactions to what our health conditions are, and some people don't even recognise that their health condition would be classified as a hidden

disability or invisible disability. It's so important to have these conversations, and the sunflower is a great way of starting those conversations.

GR

Yes. Definitely.

CB

What would you say to a young person who is, perhaps, masking and not being their authentic selves?

GR

Well, I would say why. If it was a one-on-one conversation I would ask them why, what's stopping you from being your authentic self, is it the pressure of other people, is it your parents, is it your friends? Or is it that little voice inside your head telling you can't be your authentic self?

00:37:36

I have dealt with a lot of insecurity. I still do. A lot less than I used to. But it takes time to become who you truly are. Freshman year, I was very shy, I was not willing to speak up, I was so worried about what other people thought of me. And now, going to my last year of high school, honestly, I don't really care.

I've learned to deal with... People are going to have their opinions about you, but you can't change that. You can't change the way other people think about you. You can only change the way you present yourself and how you carry yourself.

Why waste your time trying to change other people's opinions, when you can just live your life? Honestly, live your life and stop caring what other people think because life is short and you're only going to be a teenager once. Make the most of it and just live like today is your last. Of course, safely.

CB

Always, safety first, everybody.

GR

Safety first. But if you're scared to try something or you're scared to do something, or you're scared to even just speak up in class, just do it. What's the worst that can happen? You mess up a word, people laugh, who cares? Once in a while, you can laugh at yourself, like, ha-ha, that was kind of funny, and just go on with your day.

00:39:14

I have this thing in my mind that I think about constantly. I think about embarrassing things that I've done at school or stupid things I've said, and I take a moment to stop and think,

and I think what was this person wearing yesterday, for clothing? And you can't remember, right? Nobody ever remembers stuff like that. If you think that your outfit looks stupid, the next day, no one's going to remember what you wore. I guarantee you.

People are so focused on themselves, if you don't remember what this person wore yesterday, or what this person said yesterday, chances are no one's going to remember that you said that or you wore that yesterday. Because everyone, constantly, is focusing on themselves, they're focusing on other things besides you.

So, just focus on yourself and not what other people think of you. I think that's a super-important thing to know. That's what I think about all the time is if I remember what people wore yesterday, and I don't.

CB

I think that they are very wise words to end on, Miss Vermont Teen. Thank you so much, I think that's brilliant. It's been a pleasure talking to you on the Sunflower Conversations podcast.

Wishing you well for your year of service for what you're doing, and your continued work for advocacy in middle schools. Giving young people the opportunity to explore what a hidden disability is and what that might mean because guaranteed that somebody in their class will have something, as well, or they, themselves, might have.

00:40:57

So, yes, you are a really great ambassador for young people, and for older people.

GR

Thank you.

CB

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VO

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