

# Culturally responsive approaches to mitigate mental health stigma in Japan

By Saya McCarthy

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## ABSTRACT

Billions of people struggle each year with mental health issues. Japan in particular has seen a decline in mental health, shown by the nation's record high suicide rate set in 2022, reflecting the severity of the issue. The rise in suicide and depression rates is compounded by the stigmatization of mental health care. While stigmatization is the main factor for the mental health decline, underlying factors such as cultural beliefs and social structures also contribute to the issue. This thesis reviews approaches to mitigate stigma and increase mental health hygiene in Japan, focusing on collectivist approaches to best fit Japanese cultural beliefs. The paper reviews literature on Japan's mental health issues and presents evidence of successful, culturally appropriate destigmatization solutions. It also offers a new perspective on how Japan can shift its view on mental health through the implementation of culturally appropriate solutions that may lead to an increase in mental health awareness.

**Keywords:** *Mental health, stigma, depression, Japan, collectivism, social structure, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), hygiene*

**SUMMER 2025**

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## INTRODUCTION

Mental health remains a pervasive global concern, affecting about 1 in 8 people (World Health Organization, 2024). The dangers of psychological hardships are linked to various aspects of one's emotional, physical, and social wellbeing (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024a). Yet, the rise of mental health issues in Japan has taken a particularly extreme turn since 2022, based on information from Japan's National Police Agency statistics. Through the years 2018 to 2021, the number of suicides resulted in an average of 20,818 deaths per year. However, a rise in numbers was seen in 2022, with 28,335 suicides in one year. The following year's numbers were almost exactly the same. Motives for adult suicide included health issues, livelihood struggles, and personal relationship struggles, oftentimes with spouses or parents (National Police Agency, 2022). Globally, Japan ranked 19th out of 204 countries in 2021 for the highest suicide rates of all genders at a rate of 17.47 per 100,000 people (World Population Review, 2023). Besides suicides, the number of people suffering from depression has also increased. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported that depression rates have significantly risen from 7.9% in 2013 to 17.3% in just 7 years, highlighting the crisis of mental health in Japan (World Economic Forum, 2022).

The aim of this paper is to investigate Japan's mental health crisis and assess the extent to which the issue could be prevented if the stigma surrounding the problem were lifted through proposed solutions that promote mental health hygiene. Furthermore, the study aims to explore the potential for the crisis to be alleviated through destigmatization and mental health awareness solutions sensitive and suitable to Japan's culture. To this end, the cultural values of Japan and specific mental illnesses prevalent across the country and attributable to conformity and stigma will be discussed. This paper will then detail the reasons why particular destigmatization solutions have been successful in certain cultures, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in the United States, but have been unsuccessful in other cultures, such as Japan. The final section will recommend culturally appropriate solutions for Japan's mental health crisis.

## JAPANESE CULTURE

Japan is well known for cultural values and traditions that emphasize group harmony and conformity; however, the collectivist culture of Japan impacts an individual's mental health. According to the American Psychological Association (2018), collectivism is a social or cultural ideology that emphasizes the unity of a group rather than each person's individuality, cultivating a norm of suffering in silence instead of accepting help from others. The mindset is especially prevalent in Japan's education system, as external pressure is put on children to gain acceptance to a top university. Therefore, in order to prepare for university entrance tests, education focuses on drilling, testing, and other high-pressure methods of learning. The extreme pressure of the educational system leads to mental health issues in students (Ishiko et al., 2021). This pressure of Japan's collectivist culture may be one cause of mental health illnesses in the country. Next, the paper will look at culturally specific mental health issues in the country, common aggravations to these issues, and possible solutions.

**SUMMER 2025**

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### **CULTURALLY-SPECIFIC MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN JAPAN**

“Futoukou” [school refusal], “hikikomori” [social withdrawal], and “karoshi” [death from overwork] are all mental health phenomena that are culturally specific to Japan. When looking at each issue, an overlapping theme becomes apparent that relates to the cause and effect of collectivist culture and mental health issues: stigmatization.

“Futoukou” is defined by Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2022) as “children who don’t go to school for more than 30 days, for reasons unrelated to health or finances”. Instead, factors such as family circumstances and personal issues regarding friends or bullies account for the issue. The danger of children shutting themselves out from the rest of the world is closely related to a form of extreme social withdrawal known as “hikikomori”.

“Hikikomori” are individuals that have spent six months or more not taking part in society, often isolating themselves in their parents’ homes without going to work or school (Teo & Gaw, 2019). The number of these cases is rapidly increasing, as there were reported to be 613,000 middle-aged (40–64 years old) “hikikomori” and 541,000 “hikikomori” aged 15–39 years old in Japan during 2019 (Foreign Press Center Japan, 2019). Withdrawal from society and family is common in “hikikomori” as a sense of shame builds up in them. This shame can be traced back to the ingrained belief in Japan that people with mental health issues or disabilities should be isolated from the rest of society.

“Karoshi” first appeared as a Japanese term in the 1970s, the illness being “an occupational sudden death” (Ke, 2012). Many cases show that individuals who have experienced cardiovascular attacks can have their conditions aggravated by heavy workloads. In a society in which conforming to a rigorous work culture is presumed, a deviation from this norm is not accepted. In a workplace where everyone is expected to work hard, individuals feel ashamed asking for help (Asgari et al., 2016).

Millions of individuals have been negatively affected by the conditions mentioned above, which are strongly linked with external pressures and isolation from the outside world caused by stigmatization.

### **THE NATURE OF STIGMA**

Stigmatization implies that an individual is themselves responsible for the prejudice or discrimination that is leveled against them and is “primarily aimed at mental illness rather than at other health conditions” (Sheehan, 2016). The first widely distributed discussion of stigma was provided by Bruce Link and Jo Phelan, who defined it as requiring a “distinguished human difference”, culturally defined disapproval of that difference, and an attempt to “separate us from them” to generate unequal outcomes (as cited in Andersen et al., 2022). With the negative stigma surrounding mental health issues and treatments, those who feel stressed are unable to get diagnosed or seek help. In the past, Japan’s Psychiatric Society has taken actions to try to mitigate the stigma surrounding mental health, specifically the stigma surrounding schizophrenia. The society changed the official name of the disease from “seishin bunretsu byo” (split-personality disorder) to “togo shiccho sho” (dissociative disorder) to help diminish

**SUMMER 2025**

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the negative image of the illness as well as the inhumane treatment of individuals dealing with it (Sato, 2006). Although efforts have been made to improve the situation, the stigmatization of mental illnesses comes from the overall lack of knowledge society has of mental health issues.

Misconceptions fuel misunderstanding and mischaracterization, as seen in Japanese perceptions of schizophrenia, which many attribute to psychological factors. In a study by Ando et al. (2013). A majority of the public believed that the illness was based on psychological factors such as interpersonal relationships (65%), stress from personal relations (79%), and weakness or nervousness (73%), rather than biological factors. A lack of knowledge of treatments for depression was also shown, as 70-72% of the general public believed that suitable treatments for depression could be found by talking to loved ones, while 62-75% mentioned counselors, and fewer than 50% of respondents mentioned psychiatrists, doctors who are trained to diagnose, treat, and prevent such disorders, usually through medication (Pescosolido, 2013). This further shows that many Japanese people mischaracterize mental health issues as personal struggles rather than urgent biological conditions.

Because mental health issues are associated with personal weakness rather than biological conditions, depression and anxiety are seen as failures of willpower, leading to stigma and shame (Yani, 2024). Since open discussions on mental health issues are discouraged in collectivist cultures, many misunderstand its causes or treatments, making individuals reluctant to seek help. This dangerous pairing of stigmatization and collectivism is what is thought to be the main component of high suicide rates and depression rates, as the deep-rooted ideas of shame and inability to seek treatment lead an individual to suffer in silence with an illness whose severity they do not understand.

The danger of stigma, negatively affecting millions of Japanese citizens, is a problem that must be addressed. Observing how other countries successfully mitigate stigma is one way to find effective solutions. Yet, the question remains, what truly makes a country successful in mitigating mental health stigma, and can similar solutions be implemented in all countries?

### **SUCCESSFUL DESTIGMATIZATION IMPLEMENTATIONS ACROSS CULTURES**

According to 87% of Americans, having a mental health illness is not something to be ashamed of (American Psychological Association, 2022). In 2023, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) took significant actions to make youth mental health accessible through \$206 million in grant awards by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Established grant programs included a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant worth 13.7 million dollars to connect adolescents and families to behavioral health care, as well as an additional grant by HRSA for 55 million dollars to increase youth access to mental health services, particularly those provided in schools (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023). With access to therapists in most schools and workplaces, the ability to speak up about one's issues in the United States is the norm, as citizens have a positive view of seeking help to fix their problems. This positive and accepting view of mental health is one way other countries, such as the United States, are bringing awareness to the sensitive topic.

**SUMMER 2025**

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However, despite this open approach to mental health, the United States still faces significant challenges, with a suicide rate of 14.2 per 100,000 people in 2022. In contrast, Japan faces a more severe crisis with a higher suicide rate of 17.5 per 100,000 (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024b). Yet, through the examination of smoother integration of mental health services in the country, the reduction of suicide rates based on a country's culture can be seen.

The United States, similar to many Western countries, is an individualistic culture that prioritizes the individual over the collective group, meaning ideas like personal goals and independence are greatly highlighted (Humphrey & Bliuc, 2022). For this reason, people in the West tend to be more confident in their ability to support themselves and better themselves, which is why individuals have helped the self-improvement industry in the West continuously flourish (Lieberman, 2018).

Therapy largely focuses on individuals' relationships to themselves and the act of finding answers through individual reflection (Smith, 2022), which is why the practice is extremely successful in mitigating stigma. Through the cultural alignment of individualism in the practice, Americans are able to reflect on their issues without shame as they find self-reflection to be a valuable part of their lives.

Analyzing the United States' success in mitigating the stigma toward mental health, it is clear that the country's solutions closely relate to its individualistic society. Now this review will examine the impact of one of the United States' successful destigmatization methods and its effects when implemented in Japan to see if similar approaches can be applied to countries of contrasting cultures and produce the same results. The comparison will examine both countries' results in implementing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as a solution for destigmatization.

One effective form of psychotherapy that has been growing in the United States is CBT, which focuses on the idea of self-observation of an individual's thoughts and behaviors rather than the situation itself. The overall goal of the therapy is "to replace dysfunctional constructs with more flexible and adaptive cognitions" (Serafini et al., 2022). Through the therapy's focus on new thinking patterns and the evaluation of negative thoughts, individuals are able to find specific solutions that fit for them. The therapy's focus on self-reflection is closely related to beliefs ingrained in American culture, and because citizens in an individualistic society thrive on self-improvement, CBT is a popular and effective way for individuals to combine both self-reflection and professional help in a way that benefits the individual, accounting for the success of the therapy in the United States.

CBT's alignment with American societal beliefs has allowed it to achieve success in the United States. The paper will now examine whether this successful destigmatization method can be effectively integrated into other countries. Specifically, the paper will consider the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's (MHLW's) creation in 2010 of a CBT training enterprise focusing on anti-suicide measures.

The issues brought up in the discussion regarding CBT implementation in Japan focused on issues including a lack of trained therapists and stigma toward mental illness. When looking at the health

**SUMMER 2025**

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care system and CBT, it is shown that outpatient psychotherapy could be performed six times faster than CBT and was more profitable to hospitals than individual CBT, constraining the implementation on an economic and systematic level (Llewelyn & Shimoyama, 2012). Regarding the pressing issue of stigma, the culture of shame and resistance to psychiatry is what makes it difficult for individuals to participate in CBT in the first place. Another study also showed that, in 2011, victims affected by the intense Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami were supported through the practice of CBT, the practice giving them a chance to deal with their intense emotions. However, many individuals refused the practice as they resisted contributions from others and did not express their anxiety and depression after the traumatic event (Llewelyn & Shimoyama, 2012).

Based on the implementation of CBT across both the United States and Japan, it is shown that the solution of CBT itself is not what leads to the successful destigmatization of mental health, as the application of the therapy was unsuccessful in Japan. From this it can be seen that the success of CBT in destigmatization depends on its alignment with societal values. While effective in an individualistic society, CBT struggles in a collectivist one, where self-reflection-based therapy conflicts with cultural norms. This highlights the fact that mental health solutions must align with a country's ideals, as implementing Western approaches in Japan has proven ineffective. From this, the paper will now move on to successful methodologies in Japan, including holistic approaches, exercise, personal stress relief, cognitive reappraisal, and community outreach, which all fit into a collectivist culture. Implementing culturally responsive approaches is essential to alleviating the pressing issue of mental health problems and stigmatization in Japan.

### **CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SOLUTIONS FOR MITIGATING STIGMA IN JAPAN**

Now that the importance of finding destigmatization solutions within societal structures is accounted for, it can be understood that all solutions for mitigating stigma of mental health in Japan must be sensitive to a collectivist culture and help individuals feel comfortable about mental health awareness.

Shifting perceptions of mental health from association with danger to acceptance is the first step in promoting mental health awareness. Mental health can be seen on a spectrum. The spectrum of intervention for mental health problems focuses on phases such as prevention, early intervention, and treatment (Campbell & Robards, 2013). People often associate mental health with crisis; however, focusing on prevention or mental health hygiene can encourage well-being and self-care, which can help reduce stigma.

This is why a holistic approach to awareness is extremely valuable. A holistic approach to healing focuses on “all realms of existence, not just the physical body” (Jasubhai, 2019). In this way, mental, emotional, physical, and social attributes connect to one another to create a strong base for an individual's mental health. By focusing on factors that influence an individual's mental health, mental hygiene can be strengthened in more comfortable and socially acceptable ways, as the entire focus is not just on psychological health.

**SUMMER 2025**

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Physical activity can positively impact psychological health in ways such as “self-esteem, cognitive function, mood, depression, and quality of life” (Mahindru et al., 2023). One scientific reason behind this is that the human body produces opioids and endocannabinoids during physical activity, neurochemicals linked to pleasure and stress reduction. This evidence suggests that exercise can provide immediate relief for anxiety and stress, supporting the claim that physical activity can be a solution or potential coping mechanism for those with mental health issues and those who are working on their mental health hygiene (Mahindru et al., 2023).

In the context of Japan, this focus on physical health aligns well with recent trends in fitness and exercise, such as the rising popularity of convenience gyms over the past few years. Japanese citizens have always found ways to implement regular physical activity into their daily lives. However, in recent years, unique forms of exercise are being taken up, as convenience gyms have been a growing trend in the country. The 24-hour operating gyms work flexibly within Japanese people’s hectic schedules, shifting people’s perspectives to see the gyms as a tool to maintain one’s health through their adaptiveness. Some gyms even offer personal training services, creating a space where unique goals for individuals can be met. In relation to these services, the gyms introduce a new perspective on physical health and have led individuals to implement exercise in their daily lives through the personalized and enjoyable experience (Duan & Du, 2023).

By promoting the already established trend in convenience gyms, individuals will be able to implement forms of physical exercise and self-care into their daily lives conveniently without feeling shame in engaging in mental health practices, as mental well-being can be framed as an extension of physical health. Through this, strengthening mental hygiene for individuals can be accomplished in a culturally sensitive way. The normalization of practicing mental health care indirectly allows individuals to see mental health practices in a new light, recognizing that mental health does not have to be interlinked with crisis and stigma.

The individuals that could be positively impacted by this solution are individuals negatively impacted by stressful work environments, such as those affected by “karoshi”. The implementation of this strategy will help individuals incorporate time in their schedule to devote to physical and mental care, which the flexibility of convenience gyms allows. In order to promote the gyms to these individuals, it is important that convenience gyms continue to offer many forms of self-care, which will motivate individuals to come in and focus on their health goals. The immediate promotion regarding mental health should be avoided, as a holistic approach should be emphasized, and the main focus on the gyms being for mental health may be an uncomfortable way of advertising the idea. Convenience gyms should be promoted in the ways they are currently so that individuals are drawn by their flexibility and not pulled away by any extreme advertising of mental health care when individuals are not comfortable with the topic yet. In Japan, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) promotes physical activity in the “Health Japan 21 (the second term),” emphasizing how much the country values and promotes exercise (Nagasawa et al., 2023). In the future there could be possible enforcement through public bodies pushing the endorsement of the gyms’ basic promotion of physical activity through creating subsidized gym memberships as a government partnership with gyms to offer discounts for

individuals in the workforce that are most vulnerable to mental health issues. Another action that can be taken is the expansion of convenience gyms; although they are growing in number, any funding from the Japanese government could expand the number of gyms and renovate the gyms as well, making them more attractive to citizens. Through the implementation of these solutions, the view of mental health can be shifted, as individuals can focus on their mental health before they reach a certain breaking point.

In addition to the rising trend of convenience gyms in Japan, another form of stress relief popular in the country can help shift negative views of mental health hygiene in the same way physical and holistic approaches do. This trend, known as “oshikatsu”, is the general term for activities in which one is passionate about their “oshi”, or the person or character they support. The impact of this trend can be seen in the dedication of individuals who partake in it, with 40% of individuals' disposable time being spent on “oshikatsu” as well as 37% of individuals' disposable income being spent on related activities (Miyata, 2024). With the nationwide impact of “oshikatsu”, the effect on individuals' mental health must be taken into consideration. According to research summarized by the Nomura Research Institute's Future Creation Center, "oshikatsu" has been shown to increase happiness levels. The data suggests a strong correlation between having an oshi and higher happiness levels. Among people who rated their happiness as 8/10 or higher, the vast majority (over 75%) had at least one oshi, while only 20.9% had none. This indicates that having an oshi may contribute positively to overall happiness. With individuals seeking meaning outside of work, an increased number of people are turning to “oshikatsu” as a source of purpose and as a source of happiness (Miyata, 2024). Through the promotion of these activities and the continuous growth of “oshikatsu”, self-care does not need to be in practice during a crisis and can be comfortably incorporated into daily life. This idea consequently allows individuals to enjoy their hobbies while working on their mental health on a daily basis, and not before they exceed a certain stress level.

The final idea relating to individual stress relief and protection from extreme stress in personal or work settings is cognitive reappraisal. The strategy focuses on the regulation of emotions by individuals reinterpreting the meaning of their emotions to alter their emotional response. The practice takes place before an individual's feelings toward a certain situation are fully developed, as the focus is on emotional management. Through this strategy, emotional responses can be shaped (Wang & Yin, 2023). An example to illustrate this is when an individual is confronted by an angry boss. Instead of taking the negative actions of another in a personal manner, this person can engage in reappraisal by considering alternative interpretations of others' actions (O'Driscoll et al., 2014). The implementation of this practice can be promoted through a form of mindfulness training. Workplaces can use such training to teach employees about the power of change in perspective so that they can use these tactics to minimize negative emotions when dealing with work. Mindfulness strategies can also be implemented through school programs so that children can learn the importance of perspective shifting.

The use of these strategies could result in more individuals developing emotional resilience, contributing to the normalization of mental health awareness. This also aligns with movements like convenience gyms and “oshikatsu”, which promote mental well-being by normalizing mental health awareness and fostering a more positive outlook on stress management.

**SUMMER 2025**

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Through these growing trends, the practice of mental hygiene can be strengthened without individuals feeling a sense of shame, as mental health awareness is incorporated into existing practices such as exercise and self-care. Individuals can implement mental health care in their daily lives, shifting their view of mental health care to a hygiene-based practice and not one associated with crisis. The daily practices and strengthening of mental hygiene should be prioritized to prevent an individual's stress level from exceeding a certain limit. These practices could help a multitude of individuals, especially those under stress at work, as the solutions are time-flexible and easy to work on independently.

Another culturally appropriate solution that should be emphasized more in Japan is support groups. Unlike group therapy, which is often stigmatized for its professional or medical connection, support groups can help individuals connect with others without feeling judged. Many of the practices can be found in nonprofit advocacy organizations or community organizations. When looking at Japan's unique mental health struggles, such as "hikikomori", studies showed that through participating in support groups, individuals were able to put themselves back into society. The creation of a supportive community can help individuals dealing with mental health struggles to share their experience with others in a way that aligns with the collectivist culture. Although the practice is successful to some extent, the solution could be promoted even more through the encouragement of setting up online meetings in support groups. Individuals with mental health illnesses such as "hikikomori" might find it difficult to step out of their house to attend such meetings, but through an online support group, individuals would be able to connect with one another and communicate during times of need. The integration of this solution would allow Japanese citizens dealing with mental health issues to connect with others and not isolate themselves from the world.

The final way for Japan's society to shift its societal perspective on mental health is to educate individuals on mental health issues and their possible solutions. In the past, multiple programs regarding mental health literacy were introduced. An example of this is Japan's Health and Global Policy Institute's Child Health Project in 2020. The mental health program works to educate children on preventive actions for mental health. The program was positively viewed by 97% of elementary school students and all middle schoolers, as they responded that they would take a similar class again (Health and Global Policy Institute, 2022). Promoting comfortable conversations in the classroom to help students understand mental health challenges can be a key solution to mitigating stigma and also reducing cases of "futoukou". As children in Japan deal with difficult emotions, the chance to feel heard in the classroom as well as learn possible coping strategies will help them be more comfortable in the classroom and reduce their desire to isolate themselves from their school community. In other educational programs, some school curriculums have focused on prevention and recovery methods regarding mental health issues. The textbooks that students use allow them to understand certain experiences and treatment methods that individuals undergo. Students can see the perspectives of those dealing with mental health issues and become educated on mental health issues (Miura, 2021). Through the further promotion of mental health literacy in the classroom, students can learn about stress relief and other solutions for dealing with difficult situations and educate themselves on different mental health illnesses, which is an important way to mitigate the stigma of mental health.

**SUMMER 2025**

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## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Japan's stigma regarding mental health has been a major factor in the growing suicide and depression rates in the country. This paper's examination of the country's collectivist society has shown the cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding mental health. Individuals have not been sufficiently educated on such topics or sufficiently practiced mental hygiene themselves, resulting in a cycle of stigma. By examining successful destigmatization methods in the West, it was concluded that successful forms of destigmatization can only be created through solutions aligned with societal structures. In response to this, through the examination of holistic approaches, ongoing trends, individual practices, community outreach, and mental health literacy—all unique forms of mental health care—the conclusion that collectivist approaches must be applied to reduce mental health stigma in Japan was shown. The shift of mental health from the perspective of shame and crisis to one of normality through everyday practices was concluded to be the most realistic and effective way of mental health destigmatization. The findings from the paper hence suggest that the application of culturally appropriate forms of destigmatization in individuals' daily lives and further education in awareness can shift the negative view of mental health and lead to the mitigation of stigma.

## LIMITATIONS

Although this paper connects the success of collectivist approaches in terms of mental health through examining scientific effectiveness as well as success in Japan's society, there is a limitation to the information regarding whether the connection between mental health practice integrated in daily life and the long-term impacts of the solutions will reduce suicide rates. Furthermore, individuals with unique mental health illnesses should be examined carefully in further research regarding the mental health solutions mentioned throughout this review. Further data should be gathered after promoting the culturally appropriate solutions to see the effect on citizens' perspectives and understanding of mental health and the long-term effects and impacts on suicide rates.

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**SUMMER 2025**

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**SUMMER 2025**

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