Keys towards Psychosocial Accompaniment

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Forced Disappearance
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2. Forced Disappearance
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**Forced Disappearance**¹

## General objective

In recent years, forced disappearance of people in Mexico has become a widespread form of sociopolitical violence. The aim of this booklet is to assist in understanding its purpose, its historical and current expression in our country, as well as to become acquainted with the definition of what constitutes forced disappearance. We aim to identify the psychosocial impact and the coping mechanisms that need to be taken into account for the psychosocial accompaniment of victims.

## Specific objectives

- We will become familiar with:
  - The definition and purpose of forced disappearance of persons.
  - The background and current expression in Mexico.
  - Its psychosocial impact and coping mechanisms at personal, family, organizational and social levels.
  - Some pre-conceptions and key concepts for psychosocial accompaniment in cases of forced disappearance.

## What is forced disappearance?

The forced disappearance of persons is contemplated within the Human Rights legal framework. Some of the international legal instruments in this area are the Geneva Conventions, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Inter-American Convention on the Forced Disappearance of Persons, and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

The Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance,² states that this crime occurs in situations where:

> […] persons are arrested, detained or abducted against their will or otherwise deprived of their liberty by officials of different branches or levels of Government, or by organized groups or private individuals acting on behalf of, or with the support, direct or indirect, consent or acquiescence of the Government, followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned or a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty, which places such persons outside the protection of the law.

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¹ This booklet brings together the contents worked on during the Workshop on Psychosocial Accompaniment in Cases of Forced Disappearance of People, which took place on the 19th and 20th of September 2014 and was facilitated by Valeria Moscoso and Diana Lepe.

We highlight some elements of this definition that seem essential to the concept of forced disappearance:

1. It constitutes a deprivation of freedom against the will of the person.
2. It is the direct or indirect responsibility of the State, whether perpetrated by officials or by other people.
3. The victim is removed from the protection of the Law.

In the national legislation, the crime of enforced disappearance is mentioned in the Political Constitution, the Federal Penal Code, the General Victims, out of which the Specialized Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons was created. At present, a General Law on the matter is expected to be decreed and this has generated both criticism and expectation amongst family members and civil society.

Those of us who accompany relatives and close friends of people who have been victims of enforced disappearance, define it as: an involuntary and violent absence that is part of a strategy of power to instill fear and control the population. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the State, either by direct action, collusion, omission or acquiescence. The disappearance violates all human rights, it is a continuous crime, not subject to statutory limitation. It is a means of punishment, a permanent torture for relatives and a multiple offence (as it violates the rights of the person, their family, their community and society as a whole).

It is important to distinguish between what constitutes a forced disappearance from other forms of illegal denial of freedom. We believe that referring to enforced disappearance in any other terms, rather than a legal or social confusion, is a deliberate mechanism put in place by the State to hide its responsibility and generate impunity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forced Disappearance</th>
<th>Kidnapping</th>
<th>Abduction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A crime against humanity typified in the legal framework of Human Rights, in which the State has direct or indirect responsibility. It is an illegal deprivation of freedom for political purposes, mainly for the control of the entire population, or of some specific sector, through the use of terror.</td>
<td>A crime defined in the Federal Criminal Code, and committed by civilians. It constitutes an illegal deprivation of freedom that is carried out for economic purposes, to cause harm or to coerce the person or his family to comply to take a specific action.</td>
<td>This is not a legal term, but one used by the media. It refers to a kidnapping, usually short in duration, perpetrated by criminal groups. To state that a person was “picked up” or “abducted” exempts the State from probable responsibility, whilst stigmatizing the victim through possible association with illegal acts. Hence, the “motive” of their kidnapping.</td>
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3 General Bill against Forced Disappearance of Persons, which concerns Article 73 of the Constitution and was expected to be approved by the end of 2015; however, the concepts are still under debate: disappearance of people, involuntary disappearance, disappearance by individuals, forced disappearance and people not located.
4 Although the Federal Criminal Code also defines the crime of “forced disappearance of persons” (CPF, Tenth Title, Chapter III BIS), its commission is limited exclusively to its directive by public servants, leaving the responsibility of the State at other levels.
The responsibility of the State in relation to enforced disappearance lies in two main areas: 1. One in which the act of deprivation of freedom is carried out illegally (without an arrest warrant), or legally (with an order, but without the person being immediately presented before the Public Prosecutor’s Office); 2. The State’s concealment of information (of the legal investigation and of the person’s or the perpetrator’s whereabouts, etc.)

What is the purpose of forced disappearance?

Forced disappearance is used to control and instill terror in the population. It seeks to disband certain social sectors, especially those who oppose the regime or resist the interests of powerful groups, that often involve economic interests.

Forced disappearance has a specific capacity to break down structures. We will further review this in the section on psychosocial impact. Suffice to mention at present that it is designed to erase any material evidence or references of any kind that permit family members to demonstrate any responsibility of the State. This in turn limits legal and social resources to access the truth, attain justice and the live reappearance of the disappeared person.

Forced disappearance in Mexico

A) Background

Forced disappearance was used by Nazi Germany in their operation known as “night and fog”, which sought to erase traces of genocide and prevent the generation of martyrs. Later on, the French Army used it against Algerian revolutionaries and later they trained the Argentinian Army and the CIA in this and other counterinsurgency methods. In the twentieth century, during the seventies and eighties, forced disappearance was used in Latin America in civil wars and by military dictatorships, as part of the United States National Security Doctrine.

In Mexico, forced disappearance is considered to have begun in 1969 with the disappearance of Epifanio Avilés Rojas, a peasant from Guerrero, militant of the National Revolutionary Civic Association. The period known as the dirty war and the strategies of terror used against opponents of the regime by state security forces have been widely documented. The struggle for truth, for the live reappearance and remembrance has continued over the years by organizations such as the Eureka Committee, the Association of Relatives of the De-

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6 Figures about the total number of forced disappearances in Mexico during that period vary widely. For example, Alberto López refers to a total of 528 disappeared, while AFADEM gives a figure of approximately one thousand forced disappearances.
tained, Disappeared and Victims of Human Rights Abuses in Mexico, HI-JOS México and Born in the Tempest, among others.

The search for truth involved the unmasking of the Special Prosecutor’s Office for Social and Political Movements of the Past, established by then president Vicente Fox. The work of this office not only resulted in impunity for those responsible for State crimes, it also served to shelve the matters, shutting down any possibility to access truth, justice, and the complete reparation of damage for the victims.⁷

Politically motivated enforced disappearance continued to be used selectively in Mexico after the dirty war. However, over time the disappearances began to take on different characteristics.

For example, the disappearance of women since the early nineties in Ciudad Juárez and other parts of Chihuahua state (later it would occur in other areas). Once again, the victims’ families would initiate a tireless struggle for their presentation alive and for justice. Sometimes they did this individually and other times collectively, mainly in groups of mothers of the disappeared, such as “Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa” (“Bring our daughters back home”).

b) Forced disappearance today

At present, it has become a difficult task to clearly ascertain the forced disappearance of persons due to the alarming increase in human rights violations. The declaration of “War against drug trafficking”, made by Felipe Calderón in 2006, initiated a bloody humanitarian crisis that has claimed thousands of victims, and which continues to this date.

The National Registry of Data of Missing or Disappeared Persons⁸ – (Registro Nacional de Datos de Personas Extraviadas o Desaparecidas (RNPED)) – shows the official figure of 23,272 disappearances from January 2007 to October 2014, of which 9,384 occurred during the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto. Nonetheless, the data does not distinguish between disappearances perpetrated by State agents and those perpetrated by other groups. The data even includes both people considered under the “not found” category and the “disappeared”, which makes it difficult to have a clear picture of the magnitude and characteristics of disappearances in Mexico. In addition to the overall figures, it is important to portray the disappearance of persons by region. In this regard, the following chart shows the states of the Republic with the highest prevalence of disappearances in the same period (2007-2014) according to the abovementioned National Registry.⁹

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⁷ A paradigmatic case is that of the social fighter Rosendo Radilla Pacheco, whose case received a judgment against the Mexican State by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in November 2009. http://www.ordenjuridico.gob.mx/JurInt/STCIDHM4.pdf


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As can be observed in the chart, it is in the northern border area of the country where we find the greatest concentration of disappeared persons (11,544, practically 50%). It is difficult to ascertain reliable figures on the actual number of disappearances in Mexico, which the civil society estimates to exceed 30,000 people. This difficulty is due on the one hand, to deficiencies in the official databases and on the other, to the fact that hundreds of families do not report for fear of reprisals or distrust of the institutions. Added to this are the disappearances of Central American migrants in transit, which are not always considered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Disappearances</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tamaulipas</td>
<td>5,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalisco</td>
<td>2,139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estado de México</td>
<td>1,730</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coahuila</td>
<td>1,428</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinaloa</td>
<td>1,393</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baja California</td>
<td>1,157</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>1,145</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nuevo León</td>
<td>1,138</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guanajuato</td>
<td>1,088</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


9 Prepared by the author with data taken from the investigation of journalist Homero Campa: “El país de los desaparecidos. Research based on official data: with Peña Nieto a Mexican disappears every two hours”. Complete text available in Revista Proceso online: http://desaparecidos.proceso.com.mx/
New groups have joined the existing groups of family member organizations, and social movements have emerged that carry out the arduous job of denouncing, searching for persons alive and fighting for justice for the victims. Some of these are: Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity), Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos “Hasta encontrarlos” (Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared “Until we find them”), Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México (Fuundem)-(United Forces for Our Disappeared in Mexico), and in Coahuila (Fuundec), Familias Unidas en la búsqueda y localización de personas desaparecidas (Families United in the search and location of disappeared persons) (Coahuila). More recently, the group of Fathers and Mothers of the 43 disappeared Ayotzinapa students and the Iguala Families of the Disappeared Search Commission have emerged.

c) Victims and perpetrators

In relation to this bloody form of sociopolitical violence, it is pertinent to ask ourselves: **Who are the disappeared? Who are the perpetrators?**

Historically, forced disappearance has been used as a repressive mechanism against opponents of the regime: militants of left wing political parties, students, workers, teachers, peasants, social activists, rural and urban guerrillas. In other words, organized political players who, in accordance with their own ideologies, have directly confronted the state and economic power groups. However, it is not uncommon that direct relatives of such political players have also disappeared as part of a system of reprisal. Such is the case of relatives of Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez, guerrilla fighters from the state of Guerrero.

In these cases, the political motivation of the forced disappearance was clear. It served to demobilize these groups and as a warning for the rest of society. Likewise, it was easier to recognize the perpetrators, who belonged to legal corporations such as the military, police, intelligence agents, etc., or illegal groups, for instance paramilitary groups and death squads, who have operated in both rural and urban zones.

Nonetheless, at present the scenario has become more complex and both victims and perpetrators of enforced disappearance are diverse, making it difficult to identify a single pattern, and so the analysis must be done by region to try to understand who these players are today. We warn that it is not that forced disappearance against opponents has ceased, but that the spectrum has become broader, expanding into other sectors of the population who are not involved in political actions, but that due to the territorial characteristics become strategic to the interests of political and economic power groups.
We gather, thanks to the testimonies of victims, that in areas where networks of people smugglers and organ traffickers operate, it is mostly women and children who disappear. In regions with a high presence of drug cartels, young men are disappeared for reasons of recruitment, as hired killers or social cleansing. Migrants, on the other hand, are disappeared and pushed into forced labor, Tamaulipas being the state with the greatest risk. There are other areas of the country where professionals disappear to force them to collaborate with criminal groups. Finally, let us emphasize, disappeared persons are also registered from the ranks of the State's own security forces.

The above shows that organized crime is an important player in so far as the disappearance of persons is concerned. It should be noted, however, that this would not be the case if a state structure to facilitate its growth did not exist, and which is sustained through control of the population, territory and resources. There is even evidence of collusion between these criminal groups and State institutions themselves, leaving the population under permanent risk and guaranteeing impunity for the perpetrators.

Finally, two other players are also subject to enforced disappearance: journalists and human rights defenders. The activities they perform are uncomfortable both for the illegal economic interests of organized crime, and for the legal economic sector, primarily companies that seek to implement megaprojects in different areas of the country. Thus, enforced disappearance is increasingly common in situations such as the defense of water, forests, territory and education, among others. And let’s not forget the defense of the right to freedom of expression and information.
By reassessing the definition of forced disappearance, its purpose and the way it has been used in Mexico up to the present, we can contextualize the facts and understand them within a broader framework. Let us emphasize the importance of listening and understanding the uniqueness of each experience, where each family describes their own history of intense pain.

Here we present a couple of vignettes with words from the victims themselves:

For you, Negrito.
Hi, I hope that you will soon read these lines that I write here, lines of need, hope and love, of a desire to see you soon. From the day I was told that men dressed as soldiers identifying themselves as SEDENA had taken you, the world came crashing down, I didn’t know what to do, the only thing I thought at that moment was not to tell my mom, I thought it was something I could solve myself before worrying or upsetting her. I thought you had gotten into a fight or something, I never thought that you had been KIDNAPPE. I naively thought that that could never happen to us, because we are decent people, and have no money. (Written by the sister of young Jesus Omar Salaya, disappeared in Nuevo León, May 2010).

We were coming from Atoyac in a Flecha Roja bus, at that time it used to come through here, and at a checkpoint in a suburb called Cuauhtémoc they would stop the buses and ask all the people to get off the bus. Everyone got off and they searched the suitcases, searched everything. Then, when we were going to get back on the bus, they didn’t allow my dad to get on, my dad said “why can’t I get on?”, and they said “no, you’re arrested”, and my father said “and what do you accuse me of?”, and he said, “you compose corridos”, and my Dad said “well, but that’s not a crime”, and the military man said, “yes, but in the meantime you’re fucked” ... Yes, that’s how he disappeared, never ... we’ve spent our lives waiting for him, my mother died waiting for him and he never came back, and she used to say “Rosendo is going to come through that door”, and he never did ... So, what I did when I was older was to wear his shirts, and his pants, because my mom kept washing them [...] (Rosendo Radilla Martínez, son of social militant Rosendo Radilla Pacheco, disappeared in Guerrero, in August, 1974).

10 This and other testimonies of relatives of disappeared persons can be consulted at: http://nuestraaparenterendicion.com/index.php/canto-a-su-amor-desaparecido?start=21
11 Taken from the documentary by Luis Ramírez Román and Federico Mastrogiovanni, Ni vivos ni muertos.
### 6. Psychosocial impacts of forced disappearance

A forced disappearance can last for hours, days, months or years. If the person is released, he or she is no longer considered a disappeared person or a detained disappeared and becomes personally and socially recognized as a victim, as a survivor, as a former detainee disappeared. This way of naming themselves and being named responds to several factors.

Unfortunately, it can also be the case that the person is executed or that the conditions of detention cause their death, and what is then found is the body. Even though in both these cases the accompaniment must consider the psychosocial impact before and after the person's presentation, here we will only analyze the impact on family members when the person remains disappeared.

We mentioned before the significant capacity of enforced disappearance to destroy structures. Now we will expand on this, reviewing some of the impacts generated by this form of sociopolitical violence at these levels: personal, family, organizational, community and social.

#### a) Personal and family levels

Initially, the family of a person who has been disappeared faces significant emotional impact. The magnitude of this will depend, above all, on the information available regarding the actual event and whether there was knowledge of a previously existent risk. An example may be that the person has not arrived home and concern among their loved ones grows with the passage of time. In these situations, the uncertainty and anguish increase as the family's alternatives to find their relative are eliminated. In contrast, if the perpetrators break into the house and the person is forcibly removed in front of their family, the fear and anguish will skyrocket to very high levels. There are also instances in which the person - now disappeared - has received previous threats. In these cases, the family might have an idea about who the perpetrators are, their reasons and possible actions that need to be taken. All of this in turn will have an influence on the emotional impact.

In order for people to have a more or less calm life and carry out their daily activities, they need to have emotional, mental and physical stability, in a safe and to some extent predictable environment. Our psychic structure - the base of our emotions, feelings and thoughts - requires certain physical conditions and a social environment that guarantees our personal safety and integrity. If the social context becomes threatening, it will have a direct impact on the family and on the psychic structure of its members. Their physical and mental health will be compromised, and their daily lives disrupted.
Feelings of guilt are also common among relatives of disappeared persons. Some of the common thoughts are: “I should have prevented him/her from leaving home that day”, “I should have stayed with him/her”. Even though these self-reproaches increase their grief, they also express a desire to have been able to prevent the disappearance. Feelings of guilt are a way to diminish the feelings of abandonment and powerlessness generated by the power of the State, which otherwise would be insurmountable. Frequently, guilt is also promoted by the State and its institutions in order to elude their responsibility and even foster the destructive effects caused by guilt.

The disappearance itself causes not only physical or subjective impacts. The social context following the disappearance contributes to an increase or a permanence of the effects: the State’s lack of recognition of its responsibility in the events; the authorities’ concealment of information; obstacles or incompetence during search tasks; the “peloteo”\textsuperscript{14} where relatives are “shunted around” from office to office in circles of interagency blaming; the revictimization perpetrated by officials and the media, as well as social stigmatization of both the victim and their family. The situation becomes more complex when several members of the family are disappeared or there is risk of another person being attacked in some other way, which may include a new enforced disappearance.

### Every day, relatives of disappeared persons live in the anguish of “not knowing”.

Not knowing what happened, whether their family member is, whether they are dead or alive. The likelihood of death alternates with the possibility of survival, and this swaying from one to the other brings enormous physical, psychological and emotional depletion. The lack of sleep and food, and the permanent anxiety and alertness that are usually present are translated into physical and psychological ailments, which can lead to clinical symptoms.

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The effect on family dynamics is an additional layer to the individual impact. **The search and legal complaint procedures require time, money and commitment from relatives.** They have to face new challenges, such as learning to appear in front of the media or talking with authorities. These activities mean that some members have to spend more time away from home, while others assume domestic tasks and financial responsibilities. Family roles are modified and even though the need to do so is recognized, it is still a difficult process that produces tensions, extra burdens and relational changes within and outside the family.

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\textsuperscript{14} That is, the declaration of non-jurisdiction and referral to another institution.
Family communication is also altered. Each person experiences the absence in a unique way and carries his or her own physical and emotional affliction. Efforts to control feelings and thoughts in order to appear strong and “not increase” the grief of others, may result in the individual’s experience of suffering being silenced and kept private, which may generate feelings of loneliness and isolation. A common concern is the management of information with sick family members and children. In terms of the outside world, silence can also become an alternative for different reasons: fear of putting the disappeared family member at risk, distrust or feelings of incomprehension, or because re-telling the facts reopens the wound, a wound that does not heal.

b) Organizational, community and social levels

The psychosocial impact at these three levels will depend, above all, on the closeness with the person who has been disappeared and on the perception of themselves also being at risk. What we mean by this is that the impact will not manifest itself in the same way in groups close to the disappeared person as in the community where they lived, or in the larger society. Although fear spans across all three levels, there are specifics that need to be pointed out. We refer to the organizational level because people who are disappeared for political reasons usually belong to a group whose objectives and activities are opposed to the interests of the State or of other power groups. Let us remember that this implies state responsibility even if the disappearances have not been perpetrated by public officials.¹⁵

Generally, we can say that the members of these groups experience similar effects to those of family members, including fear, anger, anguish, powerlessness, sadness, uncertainty, guilt, somatization, etc. Terrifying fantasies about the possible death or torture of the disappeared comrade are also present, along with feelings about the likelihood of themselves being in the place of their comrades. There are times when the intensity of the fear and the perception of danger are grounds to abandon an organization, to relocate to safer areas, or even, choose exile.

¹⁵ See above the section on “Victims and perpetrators”.

Photography: Valeria Moscoso
Similarly, at this level, feelings of guilt can be observed about any possible minimization of impending “signs of danger”, a lack of security measures or the organizing of an activity that could have led to a disappearance. This is also known as “survivor’s guilt”.

At the community level, the extent of the fear depends on the characteristics of the sociopolitical violence in the area and how enforced disappearance is being used. This fear can generate indifference on the one hand or on the other it can make people point out or blame individuals or families. A tendency to keep distant from others might then be used as a preventive measure, on the assumption that it reduces the risk of being in a similar situation. This in turn translates into the segregation of victims, the social silencing of the damage done, mutual distrust and the eventual rupture of social ties.

Silence may also be due to the difficulties experienced by community members when discussing the issue with relatives. The “not knowing what to say”, or how to say it, or fear of opening their wound. As a result, the community slowly becomes a silent witness of the horror.

At a social level, an analysis of forced disappearance from a psychosocial perspective takes on a different logic, particularly due to the effective use of this strategy of sociopolitical violence aiming to achieve social control. This is the social impact at the core of forced disappearance.

The immaterial nature of the disappearance, the eradication or lack of evidence, coupled with an apparatus set in motion by the State to silence and criminalize, turns the social recognition of enforced disappearance into a permanent dispute for truth. Above all, for those who struggle to eradicate enforced disappearance, it is imperative that this issue does not become a historic and symbolic social vacuum, an absence in the social imaginary and collective memory, something that is widely ignored or continues to be associated only with totalitarian regimes, military dictatorships or “levantones” (abductions).

The objective of social control is successfully achieved when the social response to these events is indifference, the “not wanting to know” of the other’s pain, and even justification of the violence. In this way, as social subjects, people manage to withdraw from a threatening environment where the law ceases to be a symbolic and juridical support, where the social structure no longer guarantees citizen relationships and the sense of security is diminished, where our very worldview is questioned. It is preferable to think that the victims “must have done something” and that the perpetrators are sociopaths or delinquents, and not that the violence is part of a State policy, because otherwise we would have to confront the sensation that we are stranded alone to face power.

Coping mechanisms in cases of forced disappearance

Since we have already outlined the psychosocial impact of enforced disappearance, it is equally important to identify the mechanisms that people develop to handle this painful experience. Let us now review the coping mechanisms at the same levels: personal, family, organizational, community and social.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\) We’d like to stress out that this typology is descriptive, that there are intersections between levels, and that these mechanisms are implemented at the same time as the impacts are experienced.
a) Personal and family levels

Coping mechanisms are always unique and depend on diverse elements that include the identity, age and gender of the person, their beliefs and convictions, the ways they usually face adversity, previous traumatic experiences from which they have learnt or that, on the contrary, have left them vulnerable in certain areas; also, their links with other people and groups, the social and cultural context, etcetera. In a way, each one of us condenses in our body and subjectivity our own life history, starting from the most singular and intimate, to the social and political.

Without losing sight of the above, we will mention some coping mechanisms that relatives develop. We are referring here to those who have opted for the path of public or legal complaint but we should not forget that there are families who choose to remain silent and do not denounce for fear, mistrust or other reasons that often remain hidden. Their stories will remain unreported.

Some relatives describe the first moments as “walking in the dark”. Confusion, uncertainty and anguish increase as they take their first actions to face what happened, such as dialing the person’s mobile number, enquiring about them with other people, attending places they frequented. When these options are exhausted, a long and distressing pilgrimage begins to public institutions including hospitals, public prosecutor’s agencies, military barracks, immigration and police stations, and even prisons and forensic services. These steps constitute the first contact relatives make with these institutions.

When relatives associate the disappearance with their loved one’s political activities, they usually go directly to their organization or to human rights centers. Also, in those cases, public denunciation begins almost immediately. Even if the disappeared person and their relatives have not had any previous political activity, all kinds of resources can be put in place in order to face the situation. This in turn strengthens the relatives, and the search becomes more professional.

Some of the resources they may use include: knowledge of their rights, clear documentation of the facts, dialogue with and pressure on authorities, reports to the media, resorting to national and international human rights organizations, performing their own investigations and searches, carrying photographs of their disappeared relative, demanding exhumations and forensic studies, etc. The learning curve is steep and the journey is often shared with other families.

It is a challenge to establish new family stability. It is often difficult to visualize the management of one’s own emotions, the care of physical needs and living conditions, which are all important coping mechanisms, and which help restore the family structure. They also constitute material and symbolic support for the physical and mental well-being of family members.
b) Organizational, community and social levels

Despite the spread of fear throughout the social fabric by forced disappearance, it is possible to find support and solidarity at organizational, community and social levels.

Organizationally there are two layers. On the one hand, there are the actions carried out by the organization in which the disappeared person participated such as: remaining close, strengthening communication and security measures, joining in search tasks, accompanying the family members, carrying out political denunciation, working for the defense of human rights and generating alliances with other players. Secondly, the actions set in motion by relatives serve to create political organization. Suffice to mention that since the 1970s groups of mothers and children of the disappeared and disappeared ex-detainees have developed in several countries. Identifying oneself with the other, with their pain and experience, creates a social bond. Consequently, the group initiates coordinated actions for truth, justice, memory and reparation of damage. It is not easy to sustain these efforts over time and on many occasions, political contexts cause them to grow or weaken. This connection between families has been crucial in the struggle against enforced disappearance.

There are also ways to face enforced disappearance at community and social levels. Perhaps one of the main ones is to overcome fear and indifference and allow ourselves to be moved by these stories of intense suffering. Some people approach relatives and organizations to join their actions or participate from their own spaces and areas of expertise, searching and disseminating information, organizing political and cultural activities, attending public events and demonstrations, raising funds to support the struggle, offering specialized services, doing research, and so on.

These actions are important and valuable in themselves, they contribute towards the social acknowledgement of forced disappearance, and help debilitate the social control exercised by the State. These collective actions raise awareness about mechanisms of power, lead to the creation of resistance alternatives, influence public opinion and the social imaginary, and ultimately, strengthen human rights struggles.

8. Pre-conceptions held by companions

As companions of relatives of disappeared persons we constantly continue to develop knowledge, tools and ways of working. Occasionally, when we begin the accompaniment in events of forced disappearance, we tend to think that our work is insufficient in the face of the magnitude of the event. This may also be due to underlying ideas that generate anxiety and prevent us from clearly picturing the characteristics of the specific context in which we operate.

17 See above, “Background” section.
Some of these pre-conceived ideas can be:

**To think that the person will feel misunderstood.**

The person knows that their pain is theirs and sometimes they do not find the words to name it. Yet the mere possibility of being heard represents a significant source of support which might not be usually available, and provides a space of listening and respect.

**To think that the person will not share their emotions.**

This can be partly true. For victims, silence and emotional encapsulation are both very common coping mechanisms. Not only as a means to prevent feeling overwhelmed, but also as a useful strategy to maintain the strength they require for their struggle. Offering a space for the person to express their emotions and knowing how to respect their rhythm is very important.

**To think that the person can be overwhelmed by their emotions.**

Amongst companions this is a very common concern. However, this rarely happens. To be open to all emotions and allow catharsis is precisely part of the psychosocial accompaniment. And even in this case, the person usually maintains a certain control, and when they do not feel ready to express emotions they prefer not to broach the subject.

**To think that our function is to help the person through their mourning process.**

We have seen that as long as relatives do not have access to the truth, and lack the certitude of either their relative’s survival or death, mourning cannot take place. However, our work helps the person find their own answers and supports along the way in order to make sense of their life and struggle. Furthermore, to understand that in the face of such terrible events, their pain and anguish are normal emotions.

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**Dos and Don’ts for accompaniment in cases of forced disappearance**

The accompaniment is as unique as we are as people. Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting on some key points that can help us prepare and guide our action, always without losing sight of the fact that the victims are the ones who will point the way forward.

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18 For the common points to the different modalities of sociopolitical violence, refer to the Main Booklet of this same series.
### Don’ts

1. Disconnect the psychosocial accompaniment from the scenario of disappearance.
2. Assume that all relatives of disappeared persons can be accompanied in the same manner.
3. Assume that the same accompaniment techniques will be helpful for all family members.
4. Use techniques in vogue or of which we have no in-depth knowledge.
5. Generate false expectations or ambiguous situations.
6. Assume that the companion can support in any situation of disappearance.

### Dos

1. **Allow sufficient time to analyze the context of the disappearance**, including characteristics of violence in the region, the possible perpetrators and their motives, as well as the family’s resources and security conditions.
2. **Consider the uniqueness of the experience.** Even in disappearances that have occurred in the same region, each family approaches the event in a different way. For example, there will be those who consider it a crime and will not find meaning in a public denunciation, and others for whom it is a political act and opt for political denunciation.
3. **Keep in mind the uniqueness of the person and their place in the family.** Remember that not all family members experience the absence or assume public activities in the same way. Listen and think together about different and common ground, as well as appropriate strategies to accompany the family.
4. **Be careful about the accompaniment techniques we use,** making sure they are relevant to relatives of disappeared persons, that respect times and spaces, that are non-intrusive or avoid creating situations we will not be able to handle. It is better to use simple tools rather than “magic formulas” or “attractive techniques” that can, instead of helping, harm or generate confusion.
5. **Be careful about the accompaniment techniques we use,** making sure they are relevant to relatives of disappeared persons, that respect times and spaces, that are non-intrusive or avoid creating situations we will not be able to handle. It is better to use simple tools rather than “magic formulas” or “attractive techniques” that can, instead of helping, harm or generate confusion.
6. **Be ethical and always keep in mind our own professional and personal limitations.** The issue of disappearance can disturb us and it is necessary to be sure that we know the situation well before starting an accompaniment.
**Dos**

**Be mindful of our role as companions.** Despite the indignation or other feelings that may be stirred in us by the disappearance, the experiences and situations belong to the relatives of the disappeared person. Boundaries are important as they favor the accompaniment and generate certainty and respect.

**Be respectful of decisions made by family members.** Decisions about the search and complaints are their choice. More to the point, from the beginning, be clear as to whether we will provide accompaniment even if they decide not to engage in these procedures.

**Make of accompaniment a respectful path.** Personal and family responses are neither good nor bad; they are the ones that have developed. Avoid making judgments about the impact, the ways of remembering and coping. This will favor an atmosphere of trust and allow the relatives space when making their decisions.

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**“El Morralito” (Tool bag)**

Forced disappearance always generates questions and enigmas that can only be answered through each family’s unique history, as well as how they are politically and socially handled. Even so, in “El Morralito” we present some questions that have arisen in our experience as companions. We share them here with the hope that they’ll contribute to collective reflection:

How to contribute at a broader level to strategies of struggle that consider and include new scenarios and new victims and perpetrators of enforced disappearance? How to demonstrate the responsibility of the State in the complexity of the current context? How can we, from our professional and political position, contribute to the analysis of disappearance and enforced disappearance in our country? What challenges are we facing in these contexts? How can we ensure that our focus and work are responding to the needs of victims of disappearance? How to build differentiated accompaniment strategies suited to the specific facts of forced disappearance, and the coping mechanisms that families decide upon?
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