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Good Practices for Assisting Families and Next of kin in Cases of Disappearance of Persons. The Importance of the Psychology Professional Specialized in Disappearances

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ABSTRACT

Each year, an average of 23,000 missing persons reports are filed in Spain. Although most of them are resolved in the first few days, a significant number of people remain in the databases for years. The impact of a disappearance at all levels is not limited to the missing person's immediate environment but extends to different groups-professionals, community, and society-with a particular impact on family members and next of kin. Good practices in the assistance provided to the latter are crucial due to the associated benefits. The role of the psychology professional, specialized in disappearances, is essential in the areas of prevention, intervention, and postvention.

Buenas Prácticas en la Atención a Familiares y Allegados en Casos de Desaparición de Personas. La Importancia del Profesional de la Psicología Especializado en Desapariciones

RESUMEN

Cada año, se interponen una media de 23.000 denuncias por desaparición de personas en España. Aunque la mayor parte de ellas se resuelve en los primeros días, un número importante de personas permanece durante años en las bases de datos. El impacto que una desaparición supone a todos los niveles, no se limita al entorno más cercano de la persona, sino que se extiende a diversos estratos: profesionales, comunidad y sociedad, con especial calado en familiares y allegados. Unas buenas prácticas en la atención a estos últimos se hace imprescindible por sus beneficios asociados. El papel del profesional de la psicología, con especialización en materia de desapariciones, resulta esencial tanto en el ámbito de la prevención, como de la intervención y posvención.

Palabras clave

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The Problem of Missing Persons in Spain

An average of 23,000 missing persons reports are filed in Spain each year. Since records have been kept in the current Missing Persons and Human Remains System (Sistema de Personas Desaparecidas y Restos Humanos in Spanish), a dynamic system that is constantly updated, which began operating in 2010 and from which official statistics are extracted because it is the most specific for this purpose (López et al., 2022), a total of 270,093 reports have been filed. Of these, 6,192 remain active because they have not been resolved (López et al., 2023).

A disappearance has an impact in different areas (economic, legal, social, psychological, etc.) and at very different levels. It impacts from those in the closest environment of the missing person, or the person themselves if their absence has not been voluntary, to the intervention professionals, who despite their efforts are unable to resolve the situation favorably; the community to which the missing person belongs, which becomes aware of how unfair the world can be and the vulnerability of the human being; and society, which despite the material and human resources invested fails to provide answers to what happened (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018a, 2018b).

Disappearances are a problem common to all societies and cultures, regardless of the gender, age, or socioeconomic status of the person (Ministerio del Interior [Ministry of the Interior], 2017). Family members and next of kin who experience this problem, usually experience a multitude of upsetting emotions, going through wide-ranging uncertainty that makes them stumble from the hope of finding their loved one as soon as possible, through the fear of doing so in unfavorable conditions, to the wish that this situation, in which time seems to stand still, will come to an end, even if it means a fatal resolution for the missing person. Emotions and reactions follow one after the other in the absence of answers. Guilt, by action or omission, frustration, helplessness, and sadness, may occur frequently (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018a, 2018b). There may also be anger at the missing person, at themselves for not having known or for not having been able to avoid it, or at the hypothetical idea of acting differently once the absence has been confirmed; but this emotion may also be expressed towards a *higher power* for not interceding, or towards the intervention professionals, institutions, and authorities in charge of the investigation, if they consider that they are not receiving the correct treatment and the time and resources being dedicated to the issue are not adequate or sufficient (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018a; De Vicente & Santamaría, 2020).

Different studies show that the disappearance of people has its own idiosyncrasy based on uncertainty that significantly hinders the process of adaptation to the situation for family members and next of kin (De Vicente & Santamaría, 2020; García-Ledesma & Suárez, 2007). In this situation, over time, the following most frequent reactions can be observed: prolonged grief, depression, and post-traumatic stress in a different way to the experience of other losses (Barakovic et al., 2013, 2014; Huang & Habermas, 2019; Isuru et al., 2019; Pérez-Bambó, 2021; Powell et al., 2010). The coexistence of the physical absence of the missing person with the all-encompassing psychological presence of the missing person, in what has come to be called *ambiguous loss*, is a constant that generates complete physical and emotional exhaustion (Boss, 2001).

When a disappearance occurs, the data show that those around the victim will begin a tireless search for answers and solutions (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018a). Good practices in the care provided are of vital importance both for the benefit of family members and next of kin, as well as for those involved in the intervention and the ongoing investigation itself (Álvarez-Aparicio et al., 2023).

Although, (a) the *Comisión Especial para el estudio de la problemática de las personas desaparecidas sin causa aparente* [Special Commission for the study of the problem of missing persons without apparent cause], constituted in 2013 by agreement of the Plenary of the Spanish Senate, in its conclusions report clearly points out the need to address as a priority the problem of missing persons in a comprehensive manner, covering both technical and legislative aspects, as well as humanitarian ones; (b) different authors indicate the need for a theoretical framework on which to provide specialized psychological care also in the field of psychology (De Puelles, 2018; García-Ledesma & Suárez, 2007) and (c) at the international level, in police matters, work is being done to establish good practices for action in these cases (Vinuesa, 2023), the reality is that there is still much to be done.

Benefits of Good Practices in the Care of Families and Next of Kin of Missing Persons

In the approach to the phenomenon of missing persons in Spain, integrating the existing data on this situation in state territory and the knowledge provided by the scarce scientific literature produced both nationally and internationally; it has been established that it is a situation that can seriously compromise the welfare and mental health of the people affected, as well as that of the professionals involved in the resolution of these cases (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2015; Fernández & Cuervo, 2021; Pérez-Bambó, 2021).

Different authors have found that the disappearance of a loved one has a devastating impact on the close environment and presents certain particularities compared to other traumatic events, which makes personal and family maladjustment to the event more likely (De Vicente & Santamaría, 2020). The lack of certainty that hinders the process of adaptation and coping with the situation, and the absence of rituals that limits emotional validation and social support, make this situation particularly complex and painful (Boss, 2001; Comité Internacional de Cruz Roja [International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC, CICR in Spanish], 2014; De Castro, 2019; De Puelles, 2018).

Consequently, different investigations show that prolonged reactions of grief, depression, and post-traumatic stress are the most frequent in people who have suffered the disappearance of a loved one, presenting even greater alteration and presence of pathology than in cases of bereavement (Pérez-Bambó, 2021). A systematic review carried out by this author indicates the symptomatology associated with trauma (94%) as the most frequent in this problem (Pérez-Bambó, 2021, p. 18). In our country, De Vicente and Santamaría (2020), in a study with next of kin of missing persons using the Cuestionario del Impacto del Trauma [CIT in Spanish, Trauma Impact Questionnaire] conclude that: "of the 29 indicators of psychological distress and psychosocial impact, families with missing persons have very high scores in 26 of them, and they score much higher than the general population in 20 of them" (p. 2). Varona et al. (2015), state that, as in other unforeseen situations, in the immediate environment, the feeling of safety of self and family is broken in an unforeseen and uncontrolled way.

Families of missing persons often feel that the response and resources provided by the security forces and other institutions are insufficient for the effective search for their next of kin, and that the treatment they receive is not the most appropriate, which causes an aggravation of their suffering, stigmatization, and consequent secondary victimization (De Vicente & Santamaría, 2020; Fernández & Cuervo, 2021).

The benefits for families and next of kin of missing persons are mainly related to the adoption of measures aimed at alleviating the

effects of stress and preventing its complication and/or chronification, facilitating immediate and specialized care from the first moments, or promoting changes at the institutional and organizational level to avoid situations that generate secondary victimization, such as promoting specialized and updated training for professionals.

Regarding the professionals of the healthcare, safety, and emergencies, it is known that contact with human suffering is what generates the highest levels of anxiety and stress (Kroes et al., 1974). According to the literature, many of the activities that professionals assisting in cases of missing persons have to perform are among the situations that can cause the greatest psychological and emotional impact for a security and emergency expert (Fernández Millán, 2020; Mitchell & Bray, 1990; Parada, 2008).

To mitigate these effects, professionals develop a series of behaviors that help them in their day-to-day work, such as keeping busy and task-oriented, suppressing the emotions or feelings experienced, prolonging the feeling of unreality, or denying the impact it is having on them (Parada, 2008). These behaviors, although initially adaptive for professionals, may have their own counterbalance, negatively influencing their mental health and the professional intervention itself. They can generate fears and/or dysfunctional attitudes such as emotional distancing, dehumanization, paternalism, etc. and inappropriate behaviors such as excessive haste or early referral to other professionals, which negatively influence the investigation (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2015).

The benefits of implementing good practices can be seen in an improvement in the quality of the work performed and a marked reduction in the negative impact that these situations can have on the person involved, both personally and professionally. To this end, following what was raised in the *Comisión Especial para el estudio de la problemática de las personas desaparecidas sin causa aparente* [Special Commission for the study of the problem of missing persons without apparent cause] (2013), it is necessary, among other issues, to develop preventive measures, such as specialized training in the area, which promotes appropriate intervention strategies in the interaction with the environment of the missing person, in the emotional self-management of stress and associated variables involved in a case of this type (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2015); aspects that have been expressed in the *I Strategic Plan on Missing Persons* (Ministerio del Interior [Ministry of the Interior], 2022).

These measures also have an impact on the investigation itself, since the police interview is one of the fundamental tools in the investigation of disappearances. From the police perspective, all of the people with whom the missing person has had contact are an essential source of information that provides clues, data, or references that focus or direct other police actions. In many cases, moreover, this is the only information available, since there is no other type of evidence (Galán, 2018). Therefore, a proper conduct of the police interview is essential in order to obtain testimony from those who can provide information or have knowledge of the event (González, 2013).

According to Fernández and Cuervo (2021, p. 12), "the revictimizing factor with the greatest impact is the institutional helplessness to which the family group is exposed by the Statute of the Victim of Crime not recognizing the status of the next of kin as indirect victims, except in cases in which the disappearance is criminal in nature", which is consistent with the opinions of family and next of kin of missing persons, who demand humanized, individualized, and comprehensive care adapted to the singularities of the profile of each case of a disappearance (Fundación QSD

Global [QSD Global Foundation], 2015, 2018, 2019). It should be considered that, "although the priority of the families is the prompt finding of the loved one, several empirical studies support the positive effects of empathic attention to the victims in the reduction of the effects of secondary victimization" (Varona et al., 2015, as cited in Fernández & Cuervo, 2021, p. 13).

Good Psychological Practices in the Care of Family and Next of kin in Cases of Disappearance of Persons

Understanding a disappearance as a potentially traumatic situation that anchors the affected person in the past, taking away the positive aspects of the present and affecting his or her potential future (Maté & Maté, 2022), it can be noted that it is essential to implement good psychological practices in the care of family members and next of kin in these cases.

Following international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2024), a *good practice* can be defined as "a successful experience that has been tested and replicated in different contexts and can therefore be recommended as a model". Its evolution involves four steps: (1) *innovation, experience*, which may appear to have minimal results; (2) *promising practice*, after experiencing it several times in a given context; (3) *good practice*, when it has yielded positive results in various replications and contexts, and it is feasible for it to be shared widely so that others can adapt and adopt it; and (4) *policy, principle, standard*, in cases where the good practice evolves and can support a new policy or standard. As can be seen, the ultimate goal of a process of good practices is not only to publish and share them, but to generate change through their adoption, adaptation, and expansion.

Although the search for good practices in disappearances, using key words, does not yield specific results in the strict sense of the term in scientific indexed databases, experiences have been collected in different areas that may serve as a reference, as in the case of victims of: (a) gender violence; (b) crimes in judicial processes; (c) terrorism; (d) human trafficking, and (e) volunteer management, through the work of social entities (Fundación la Caixa, 2007).

When someone disappears, usually no means are spared to find him or her, taking into account the cultural and emotional aspects present. The assistance provided must be close and empathic (Martín & Muñoz, 2009). Providers of interventions must listen to the victim's complete message and devote their full attention to him or her (Nicolás et al., 2000, p. 155).

Professionals have the opportunity to positively influence the support process and the functional coping of what the person is experiencing, as a family member, next of kin or in other roles (Parada, 2008, p. 142). Likewise, the actions carried out must have a foundation of humanization, the deepening and delimiting of which is complex in today's world, and this can become a fundamental bioethical problem (Bermejo, 2014).

For all these reasons, it is considered appropriate to make a proposal for a protocol in areas of applicability of good practices, including all the instances involved in the puzzle that a disappearance involves.

Proposal of Areas of Application of Good Practices in Relation to Missing Persons, Family Members and Next of Kin

Applying good practices to disappearances and with the evidence found in various psychological areas, the following proposal is established in the development of this aspect (Table 1):

Table 1
Proposed Areas of Good Practice in Relation to Disappearances

A. Good practices with missing persons	B. Good practices with family members and next of kin in cases of disappearances
Missing persons who have not turned up Missing persons found dead Missing persons found alive	In view of advances in the investigation In the event of Communication of Bad News (CBN) In the event of long-term disappearances When death is confirmed or there is sufficient evidence of death For effective referral to resources
C. Good practices with intervention providers in cases of disappearances	D. Good practices within the operational and informative management of the disappearance
On self-care of security forces and other intervention providers For flexibility in the performance of their work On the coordinated work between professionals	In the management of the disappearance In the coordination between institutions and agencies In the relationship with the media
E. Good practices adapting actions to the type of disappearance	F. Other areas of good practice
Depending on the type of disappearance Depending on the cause of disappearance and/or added elements Depending on the age or characteristics of the missing person	Applicable to specific groups On the use of technology New good practices that may emerge in the future

Note: Prepared by the authors.

Good Practices for Missing Persons

People who Have not Been Found. Consideration will be given to what to do with their personal belongings: those that are useful for the investigation, those that can be given to the family, those found during the search, those requested from relatives and next of kin, etc.

Intrusion must be avoided when reconstructing the last movements of the missing person, and their personal data as well as that of their family and next of kin must be treated with care.

Although the basis for this recommendation was established with the repealed [Organic Law 15/1999 on the Protection of Personal Data](#), it is currently based on [Organic Law 3/2018 on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights](#). In disappearances, a "single spokesperson" must be assigned to collaborate with the media ([Muñoz, 2000](#); [Muñoz & Álvarez, 2000](#)) and with the family and/or next of kin ([Acinas, 2007](#)).

If the Person is Found Dead. One of the objectives is respect for the image of the missing person, without their uncontrolled exposure in the media ([Acinas, 2008](#)) and respect for their dignity, without misrepresenting what happened and the motivations behind it ([Consejo Audiovisual de Andalucía \[Audiovisual Council of Andalucía\], 2017](#)).

If the Person is Found Alive. Their rights must be safeguarded and their decision to return to their environment or to remain anonymous must be respected (informing the family of their condition and wishes, guaranteeing confidentiality).

In order to channel the potentially traumatic situation, psychological assistance should be provided at different times, for different scenarios and roles, for different populations and groups ([Martín & Muñoz, 2009](#); [Pacheco, 2012](#); [Robles & Medina, 2002](#)).

Good Practices With Family and Next of Kin of Missing Persons

This is where the greatest care must be taken, especially in the case of what are known as "long-term disappearances". What [Martínez-Tur et al. \(2001\)](#) call the "lack of direct connection with satisfaction and quality of service" (p. 155) may be evident when contact with the family of the missing person is too distant.

With Regards to Advances in the Investigation. It is necessary to evaluate what is transmitted, how, when, by whom, and for what purpose, etc. Family and next of kin must be kept informed, without affecting the course of the investigation and, if there are suspicions of criminality, care must be taken with the information so as not to

interfere with it, to avoid misunderstandings, as well as conflicts in the search and afterwards ([Lorente, 2008](#)).

When Communicating bad News - CBN. With issues that are not being efficacious, unsuccessful or unfruitful leads or lines of investigation, or the person is found dead, or alive but not wishing to have contact with the family, the information must be adequate, sufficient, and effective ([Acinas, 2007](#)). Facilitating good psychological communication for potential family conflicts reduces tensions and calms the situation ([Slaikeu, 2000, p. 257](#)).

In the Case of Long-Term Disappearances. The emotional discomfort of the families must be managed without them feeling harmed, and decisions must be properly explained, including if they mean that the resources dedicated to the investigation must be limited.

When the Death is Confirmed or There are Sufficient Indications. One must help to close processes at all levels (emotional, administrative, etc.), facilitating the relevant steps and promoting resilient and compassionate coping.

Effective Referral to Intervention Resources. Upon detection of needs or at the express request of family members to go to professionals (justice, healthcare, etc.).

Good Practices With the Professionals who Serve the Families

They must have trained personal skills and psychological competencies that enable dealing with families ([Álvarez-Aparicio et al., 2024](#)). [Alles \(2005, p. 99\)](#), indicates that the professional should identify him/herself adequately and, if it is necessary to point out any particularity due to the area or position of the professional, this should be stated.

On the Self-Care of Professionals. Professionals will sustain a high level of alertness and stress when receiving information from families, the missing person him/herself, and their superiors. There is a risk of them not resting as much as recommended in order to be able to resume the necessary tasks when new aspects emerge upon which efforts must be focused. The promotion of self-care is important in order not to wear oneself out psychologically and efforts should be made in small doses, to avoid burnout and compassion fatigue ([Acinas, 2012](#); [Álvarez-Aparicio, 2015](#); [Álvarez-Aparicio et al., 2024](#)).

On the Flexibility of Work Performance. It should be sought to reconcile availability, when needed, and rest, if it has been an intense workday and it is no longer necessary to continue in the short term. It is essential to provide general and specialized training on stress management ([Álvarez-Aparicio, 2015](#)).

On the Coordinated Work Between Professionals. Coordination is desirable between the security forces (state, regional, local), collaborating entities, and other professionals, for situations in which competences are shared. This maximizes the quality of the work carried out and minimizes the negative impact on the responder in the personal and professional sphere (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2015). An example is the protocol developed by the Centro Nacional de Desaparecidos [National Center for the Disappeared] (CNDES in Spanish) on the actions of the security forces in cases of disappearances (Cereceda Fernández-Oruña & Touris López, 2019).

Good Practices in the Operational and Information Management of the Disappearance.

In the Management of the Disappearance. It is necessary to apply the current legislation on Personal Data Protection (Organic Law 3/2018), confidentiality, institutional transparency (Law 19/2013 and Law 10/2019), and to seek a balance between the interests of all parties.

Coordination Between Institutions and Agencies. Coordination must be fluid, specific, and rapid between sections of the same institution, when multiple actions are required from an entity. Absence of this coordination can delay very important or crucial issues.

In the Relationship With the Media. Good practices are necessary to favor the resolution of the situation for the benefit of all, especially the most vulnerable. There may be mistakes to be corrected or lessons learned for future cases.

Good Practices in Actions Adapted to the Type of Disappearance

When a disappearance occurs, a supporting relationship is established with the affected persons that is different from other relationships, with specific objectives and appropriate limits. Okun (2001, p. 46), indicates that the difference is that a good supporting relationship contains ingredients such as: trust, empathy, authenticity, concern, respect, tolerance, acceptance, sincerity, and commitment to the relationship.

In Taking Action According to the Type of Disappearance (Voluntary, Involuntary, Forced). This must be in accordance with the moment of the disappearance and the needs that arise. The sectorization and relevant deployment of those providing the intervention is essential in the operational management of the disappearance (Álvarez-Leiva, 2005).

With Regards to the Cause of the Disappearance and/or Additional Elements. It is necessary to focus on the peculiarities of the disappearance: situations of completed suicide, crimes such as kidnapping, places that have armed conflicts, disappearances of citizens seized by human trafficking networks, accidents of various types with accessibility difficulties, etc.

Depending on the Age or Characteristics of the Missing Person. Flexibility and meticulousness are necessary in the attention in cases of minors, the elderly, disabled, or mentally ill (moderate, severe, or uncontrolled), concurrence of gender violence, if a foreign person is involved, if human trafficking is detected (in our country or in another country of origin of the missing person), situations of asylum-seeking or request for international protection.

Other Areas of Good Practice (Other Groups, Future Developments, etc.)

There are other aspects related to areas of application that affect the supporting relationship in delicate moments such as a

disappearance, and these must be taken into account: the personal values of the professional providing the intervention, bioethical aspects, problems, and difficulties that may arise in the relationship more or less unexpectedly, etc. (Okun, 2001, p. 339).

The Importance of the Professional Psychologist Specializing in Disappearances

Due to the complexity and characteristics of the problem of disappearances, they "require an approach that is also complex" (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018b, p. 23), from the perspective of human behavior and valuing not only the interaction between biological, environmental, and sociological processes, but also psychological ones (García-Barceló et al., 2019).

The psychology professional in the disappearance of a person should have a role focused on prevention, on the intervention itself during the process of the disappearance, and on postvention after its resolution (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2023, 2024). As has been seen, a disappearance is an abrupt and unforeseen situation that involves a great impact at different levels and, therefore, many people may be affected. This perspective reflects the need for a holistic, specialized, and efficient psychological intervention strategy that integrates and benefits all the people involved at each level (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018b).

Importance of the Psychology Professional Specializing in Disappearances: Area of Prevention

According to Law 17/2015, of July 9, of the National Civil Protection System, in emergency situations, such as initial disappearances, the psychology professional specialized in this field will have the function of "developing measures and actions aimed at preventing these situations from occurring or mitigating the possible adverse effects and risks derived". To this end, taking into account the contribution of the different actors involved in these situations, actions may be carried out aimed at the educational system, society as a whole, and other specific groups (Dirección General de Protección Civil [Directorate General of Civil Protection], 2023), such as intervention professionals and the media.

Tools such as those developed by the Grupo de Trabajo en Intervención Psicológica en Desapariciones (GIPD) [Working Group on Psychological Intervention in Disappearances] of the Madrid Psychological Association, aligned with this objective, will be essential in the early stages, because (a) they facilitate emotional management and decision making (Colegio Oficial de la Psicología de Madrid [COPM, Madrid Psychological Association], 2019) and (b) they enable knowledge adjusted to reality and greater sensitivity to this problem and possible underlying motivations, such as those related to suicidal behavior (COPM, 2023), which may be decisive for a favorable resolution.

Importance of the Psychology Professional Specialized in Disappearances: Area of Intervention

In this area, Álvarez-Aparicio (2023, 2024) emphasizes that the impact of disappearances must be contemplated in the different phases, taking into account each of the levels of affection specified above and understanding these events as "dynamic processes that will evolve over time as the circumstances that surround them and their subsequent investigation are modified, with the implications that may derive from this" (p. 39). Therefore, this author emphasizes the need for the psychology professional to be properly trained and specialized in dealing with this problem.

Along the same lines, De Puelles (2018) refers to three phases in the psychological approach to disappearances in which different psychological responses may occur, such as those described above: (a) the discovery of the disappearance, (b) the search for the loved one, and (c) finding them.

The discovery or becoming aware of the disappearance is characterized by a reaction of alarm and shock that may constitute a first traumatic experience. At this moment, the psychology professional will—in addition to facilitating the coping of the steps related to the reporting process—make a first intervention that promotes in people a good emotional management and a sense of control over the situation (De Puelles, 2018; Pérez-Santana, 2013).

Next, the search phase is characterized mainly by the discomfort generated by the absence of answers and a suffering that leads the individuals concerned to need closure of the situation. The main task at this time will be to help the relatives to manage this uncertainty and the emotional ambivalence it entails. It is not a matter of starting to create a process of mourning without certainties, but of learning to live with the situation so that their daily functioning and their interpersonal relationships are affected as little as possible (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018b). In turn, the passage of time leads to a disorganization in the family that may involve the questioning and reassignment of roles. Tensions and arguments may also arise in the family group, along with physical and emotional exhaustion and the need to progressively resume the corresponding routines (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2015; Pérez-Santana, 2013). The psychology professional is responsible for mediating between the different people to facilitate conflict resolution, decision making, and the reorganization of daily tasks.

Importance of the Psychology Professional Specialized in Disappearances: Area of Postvention

The finding of the loved one implies the closure of the emotional process associated with uncertainty and may initiate a grieving process and/or involve the need for readaptation of the family group (De Puelles, 2018). If the missing person is found dead, the initial psychological intervention will focus mainly on facilitating both communicating and coping with the bad news, promoting the adoption of adaptive strategies to manage the pain caused by the certainty of the loss. Subsequently, there are people who may need to attend structured therapy to help them in this process. In both cases, due to the peculiarities of the situation, it is essential for the psychologist to have specialized training in order to be able to adapt and personalize his or her intervention. On the other hand, the person may be found alive and it is important to bear in mind that, generally, the reorganization and differences in the family group will be greater, the longer the time elapsed since the disappearance (De Puelles, 2018).

It may happen that the search is prolonged in time and the missing person does not appear, increasing the uncertainty and the need for closure; in the face of an absence that may involve conflicts in the family structure and interpersonal relationships and be linked to reactions of anxiety and depression (Boss, 2001). In these cases, one should not intervene based on grief therapy, due to the fact that, as De Puelles states on this concept (2018, p. 156), based on the testimony of the founder of QSD Global and the feeling of some individuals who experience the disappearance of a loved one, "to accept the existence of a mourning, is to accept the definitive loss of the person sought". On the other hand, this same author points out that in certain circumstances "anticipatory grief can also be initiated, that is, a sense of definitive loss of the loved one based on risk/survival criteria, statistical data, or trust in the experience of experts" (p.166), thus delimiting when it may or may not be

advisable to speak of grief. The role of the psychology professional in this phase consists of facilitating the recognition of the absence in order to integrate it and cope adaptively, promoting moments of social interaction and bonding with the environment, the reorganization of roles and routines, and the performance of rituals that provide support in this absence so that the individuals can learn to live without the missing person.

Consequently, the objectives of the psychological intervention will be to facilitate the investigation of the event and each of the corresponding tasks related to it, in addition to promoting a good management of the psychological effects derived from the disappearance, which will allow individuals to integrate the event and adapt to the situation being able to continue with the search and with their daily routines at the same time (Álvarez-Aparicio, 2018b, 2024). Likewise, it is especially relevant during the whole process of the disappearance to prepare the family for all the legal procedures they will have to face.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the competent bodies in the field express the importance of both preventing the disappearance of persons and minimizing the suffering it causes in family members and next of kin (Ministerio del Interior [Ministry of the Interior], 2022), making emotional assistance for victims one of the main objectives at present (López et al., 2023). This assistance, as has been suggested throughout this article, should be provided by psychology professionals duly specialized in psychological intervention in disappearances, in order to provide quality and rigor to the therapeutic process, for the benefit of the families and other actors who may also request it.

Conclusions

The disappearance of a loved one, common to all societies and cultures, is perhaps one of the most painful and destabilizing experiences a person can suffer. Despite the concern and social alarm that these cases generate when they occur, due to their implications and consequences, even today in our country they have not been given the importance they require or the allocation of resources needed for a comprehensive approach, sensitive to each aspect and situation. This need was exposed in the *Comisión Especial para el estudio de la problemática de las personas desaparecidas sin causa aparente* [Special Commission for the study of the problem of missing persons without apparent cause], a decade ago.

Although the occurrence of an event of an abrupt, sudden, and unpredictable nature, such as a disappearance, can have a wide range of effects, the literature agrees that family members and next of kin are among those most affected by it. Consequently, and in view of the above, it is important to develop good practices in relation to the assistance provided, not only because of the benefits for those receiving it, but also for the professionals involved in the intervention and the investigation itself.

In this sense, although there are currently no experiences of good practices specific to missing persons, they can begin to be created based on those that have emerged for other groups. Experts indicate that having good practices guarantees the quality of the service provided and the satisfaction of all parties and agents involved, which is essential in relation to disappearances.

Implementing good practices involves consideration for the disappeared person, his or her memory, and the right to a positive and balanced memory of the disappeared person for his or her family and next of kin. Respect for any of the victims present at a disappearance, taking into account their needs and wishes, is considered essential.

It is essential to consider the contributions that can be made within psychological science for the care of victims and the creation

of good practices in this sector, from advice to the security forces, to the accompaniment of family members in the process (especially in disappearances of long duration or with great uncertainty associated), and to help the integration of the history and understanding of what happened (Reddeman, 2003).

It is essential to rely on the *expert knowledge* of both the security forces, trained in this type of situation and with demonstrable experience, and the families of the missing persons who know their loved ones and can give fundamental clues to resolve the disappearance as successfully as possible. Therefore, we must listen to them, and take them into account, when they wish to contribute.

Likewise, the preparation and specialization of the psychologist working in the field of disappearances is essential, both in accompanying family members and in collaborating with law enforcement agencies.

We can therefore conclude that the role of the psychology professional specialized in disappearances is relevant in the complex approach to this problem, in the field of prevention, intervention, and postvention. Increasingly, the relevant institutions in the field are claiming the need for these professionals in order to facilitate the investigation itself, as well as the adequate emotional management of the circumstances associated with it, not only for the families and next of kin of the missing persons, but also for the other actors involved in the event.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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