

De La Salle College Churchtown



Critical Incident Policy

Academic Year

2018/2019

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Section 1 – Introduction

School

De La Salle College Churchtown is a Catholic, voluntary, post primary school for boys founded by the De La Salle Brothers and now under the trusteeship of the Le Cheile Trust.

Mission Statement

‘The Lasallian School of today must ensure a good academic level, good discipline, good atmosphere for life and work and a good reputation.’

The college seeks to foster the spiritual, moral, intellectual, social, cultural and physical education of all its pupils in a safe, secure and caring environment and in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

De La Salle is proud to welcome all students to the best of its ability. All school policies, practices and the general atmosphere of the school, allied to the excellent relations among the students, and between the students and the teachers and staff, combined to encourage the participation, integration and attainment of all the students.

The college motto ‘Recta Sapere’ means ‘Correct Judgement’ which we interpret as ‘The wisdom to know what is right and the courage to do it’.

Within this context, De La Salle Churchtown acknowledges the need to have a school policy in place in the event of a crisis/critical incident occurring usually without warning, and at any time of the day or night.

However it is important to note that this policy is more **advisory** than prescriptive given that each crisis/critical incident will demand a different set of responses.

DEFINING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

The life of any school is affected by many and various traumas such as

- Bereavement
- Suicide of a student, teacher, parent
- Attempted Suicide of a student, teacher, parent
- Death of a staff member or student
- Serious illness of a close relative of student/staff
- School fire, explosion or other emergency
- Serious violence or threat of same in the school/school community

- The disappearance of a member of the school community
- Intrusion into the school
- An accident on a school trip.

De La Salle College Churchtown is committed to addressing the issues of death, loss and tragedy in a comprehensive manner and this policy document will attempt to outline structures and strategies which the school has in place in anticipation of such events within the school community

CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM

The purpose of a **Critical Incident Management Team** is to deal with any significant trauma that may occur in the life of the school.

- Leadership :Principal (Deputy Principal in absence of Principal & most senior member of staff in the absence of the Deputy Principal)
- Deputy Principal
- Coordinator
- Relevant Year Head/ Facilitator
- Guidance Counsellor
- The Staff Representative if appropriate
- School Secretary (and Caretaker if necessary)
- Representative of the Board of Management
- Family Liaison
- Chaplain/Head of R.E.
- Communication
- Garda Liaison/ Community Officer/Fire Brigade Representative

Section 2 – Short Term Actions (1st Day)

Hearing the News

Once a critical incident comes to the attention of a member of the school community, s/he should, where possible and practical, inform the senior management of the school forthwith. However, where it is apparent that an emergency situation exists, it may be necessary to call one or other of the emergency services in the first instance.

1. Gather the facts – Who? What? When? and Where?
2. Contact appropriate agencies
3. Convene the Critical Incident Management Team
4. Organise for the supervision of students
5. Inform staff
6. Agree on a statement of the facts
7. Identify high risk students
8. Appoint someone to deal with phone enquiries
9. Organise timetable for the day
10. Inform parents/guardians
11. Inform students
12. Make contact with the bereaved family
13. Organise support
14. Respond to the media.
15. Funeral services

The procedures to be followed will depend on the particular incident that has occurred and the particular arrangements in place in a school.

Gather accurate information

It is important to obtain accurate information about the incident, otherwise rumours will take over and add to the distress of those involved.

- ✓ What happened, where and when?
- ✓ What is the extent of the injuries?
- ✓ What is the location of those injured and not injured?
- ✓ How many are involved and what are their names?
- ✓ Is there a risk of further injury?
- ✓ What agencies have been contacted already?

Contact appropriate agencies

(See Appendix 1 & 2 for further details)

- ✓ Emergency services
- ✓ Medical services
- ✓ HSE, TUSLA, Psychology Departments/Community Care Services
- ✓ NEPS
- ✓ BOM
- ✓ DES/Schools Inspector.

Convene a meeting with key staff/Critical Incident Management Team

A list of possible topics to be covered follows: Once the facts of the crisis have been established, a meeting of the available Critical Incident Management Team should be called forthwith. The team will need to agree an immediate plan of action which may/will involve:

- Assigning responsibilities to the Team members
- Agreeing a statement of the facts for staff, students, parents and media. If possible there should be a written version of this
- Informing staff and students (where possible all staff should have been informed in the first instance)
- Contacting parents
- Visiting families most immediately affected by the crisis
- Organising a timetable for the day and adhering to the normal routine in so far as is possible
- Organising a staff meeting, if appropriate
- Organising the supervision of students during any staff meetings
- Deciding on whether an outside professional will be invited to the staff meeting
- Liaising with relevant support groups. Counsellors, Health Boards, NEPS, DES, etc.
- Organising a school assembly/prayer service/Mass.

Arrange supervision of students

Hold staff meeting

All staff should be asked to attend, including auxiliary staff. The areas which might be covered are listed below.

- ✓ An account of the facts as known.
- ✓ An opportunity for staff to express their views and their feelings.
- ✓ Discussion with the staff about how the facts will be shared with the students. (There should be an agreed approach to this if possible).
- ✓ An outline of the routine for the day is proposed by the CIMT
- ✓ Information for staff about which outside agencies have been contacted, or are involved and the supports that will be put in place for both students and staff.
- ✓ A procedure for identifying vulnerable students.
- ✓ Distribution of relevant handout material (see Resource Documents in Appendix 4).

Organise timetable for the day

AS FAR AS POSSIBLE MAINTAIN NORMAL ROUTINES.

Inform parents/guardians

Students directly involved:

Parents/guardians should be contacted as soon as possible, and this first contact will need to be handled with great sensitivity. The steps involved are set out below:

- ✓ A designated person to share information with parents and how this should be done should be agreed upon. Give telephone numbers for enquiries
- ✓ Make a list of parents/guardians who have been contacted and those who still need to be told to avoid duplication of messages.
- ✓ Give parents/guardians relevant and factual information.
- ✓ Set a room aside for distressed students to meet their parents/guardians.
- ✓ Provide support to parents who are on their own when they arrive at the school.

Children not directly involved:

The parents of other students in the school should be informed of the incident and that their son may be upset.

Send a letter to parents stating the facts and brief details of the incident. A written account of the event, how the school proposes to deal with it, and how parents can assist their son/family members in recovering from a trauma should be forwarded as soon as possible. It may not be appropriate at this point to disclose the names of those involved. (See Appendix 3 for sample letter).

Inform students

- ✓ Careful preparation is important when meeting students to inform them of a critical incident.
- ✓ Consideration should be given to the age of the students and the optimum group size. It is best to do it in class groups or sub-groups. The suitability of the 'messenger' should also be considered, remembering that it is generally thought that support is best given by the adults known to the student.
- ✓ Any outside 'expert' might help by assisting the people undertaking this task to prepare for it and by providing ongoing advice and support as they manage it.
- ✓ The nature of the event will clearly have an influence on how students are informed.
- ✓ A room set aside for distressed students, water/ tea/coffee etc to be made available if needed.

The key points/actions in the process are listed below:

- ✓ Give facts and avoid speculation. This will help to dispel rumours which can cause unnecessary stress.
- ✓ Allow pupils to ask questions, tell their story and express feelings.
- ✓ Help students realise that overwhelming emotions are natural and normal following a critical incident. (See Appendix 4 - Resource Documents 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 on reactions to grief and critical incidents.)

Make contact with the bereaved family

Dealing with the media

- ✓ A designated person to act as spokesperson, (clarity regarding “on the record” and “off the record” comments should be established).
- ✓ Permission from the family should be sought.
- ✓ Family to be informed about any press release and the contents to be made known to them.
- ✓ Personal details of students/staff members involved (phone numbers, addresses etc.) should not be divulged.
- ✓ Staff and students to be briefed on dealing with the media.
- ✓ Consider setting aside a room for the media. This may help to control their access to staff and students.

Prepare a written statement to include:

1. the facts about the incident
2. what has been done already
3. what is going to be done
4. positive information or comments about the deceased person.
5. some points to remember if you are asked to give a live interview:
 - a. consider assigning the task to someone skilled or familiar with dealing with the media
 - b. take some time to prepare
 - c. remember that everything you say is on record and, therefore, keep it simple, factual and brief
 - d. decline if you are not ready or think it inappropriate.

Organise the reunion of students with their parents, if necessary

- ✓ Inform students that their parents/guardians will be collecting them as soon as possible.
- ✓ Facilitate distressed students and their parents by providing a private room where they can meet following an incident. This could be a very emotional time.
- ✓ Where appropriate offer help with transport, especially for younger children.

Funeral Services

- ✓ Decide what representation is appropriate and if possible consult the family concerned prior to making any arrangements
- ✓ Brief students ahead of the funeral service as it may be the first time many are exposed to grief
- ✓ Consider a common expression of sympathy from students and or staff
- ✓ Check with funeral directors re the arrangements for floral tributes
- ✓ Representative from the school should visit the home of the bereaved – visiting the bereaved may be distressing and support should be provided
- ✓ Request a decision on school closure from school management and school inspector.

Section 3 – Medium Term Actions (24 – 72 Hours)

1. Review the events of the first 24 hours

- ✓ Reconvene key staff/Critical Incident Management Team.
- ✓ Briefly check out how each person on this team is coping.
- ✓ Decide arrangements for support meetings for parents/students/staff.
- ✓ Decide on mechanism for feedback from teachers on vulnerable students.
- ✓ Have review staff meeting with all staff if necessary. Ensure all staff are kept up to date on any developments.
- ✓ Be sensitive as to how all staff are coping on a personal and professional level.
- ✓ Establish contact with absent staff and pupils.
- ✓ Update media, if necessary.
- ✓ School Closure: decision from the Chairperson of the BOM

2. Arrange support for individual students, groups of students, and parents

- ✓ Provide a suitable room.
- ✓ Hold support/information meeting for parents/students in order to clarify what has happened.
- ✓ Offer advice and reassurance. Inform them about support services and provide relevant handouts. (See Resource Documents in Appendix 4).
- ✓ Give any teacher who feels uncomfortable with involvement in support meetings the choice of opting out.
- ✓ Arrange, in consultation with outside agencies, individual or group debriefings or support meetings with parental permission.

3. Plan for the reintegration of students and staff

- ✓ Name key person(s) to liaise with above on their return to school.
- ✓ Plan visits to injured
- ✓ Name key person(s) to visit home/hospital.

4. Liaise with the family regarding funeral arrangements/memorial service if not already done in the short term

Section 4 – Longer Term Actions

Monitor students for signs of continuing distress

A referral to the Health Board may be necessary. (See Appendix 4 - Resource Document 4.5 for *Normal Reactions to a Critical Incident*).

For example, if over a prolonged period of time, a student continues to display the following, he/she may need assistance from the Health Board:

- ✓ uncharacteristic behaviour
- ✓ deterioration in academic performance
- ✓ physical symptoms – eg weight loss/gain; lack of attention to appearance; tiredness; restlessness
- ✓ inappropriate emotional reactions
- ✓ increased absenteeism.

Evaluate response to incident and amend the Critical Incident Management Plan appropriately

This policy will be reviewed after an incident if there should be one or every 4 years in the absence of an incident

The following will be considered:

- ✓ What went well?
- ✓ Where were the gaps?
- ✓ What was most/least helpful?
- ✓ Have all necessary onward referrals to support services been made?
- ✓ Is there any unfinished business?

Formalise the Critical Incident Plan for the future

Consult with your NEPS psychologist and/or your local HSE Critical Incidents Team about this.

Inform new staff/new school pupils affected by Critical Incidents where appropriate

- ✓ Ensure that new staff are aware of the school policy and procedures in this area.
- ✓ Ensure they are aware of which students were affected in any recent incident and in what way.
- ✓ When individual pupils or a class of pupils affected by an incident are transferring to a new school, it would be useful to brief the Principal of the new school.

Decide on appropriate ways to deal with memorials/ anniversaries

- ✓ Anniversaries may trigger emotional responses in students/staff and they may need additional support at this time.
- ✓ Be sensitive to special days and events like Birthdays, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day.

Section 5 – Dealing with the aftermath of a suicide or a suspected suicide

The term “suicide” should not be used until it has been established without doubt that the victim’s death was indeed as a result of suicide. The phrases “tragic death” or “sudden death “ should be used in the interim.

When somebody dies through suicide, those who know the person experience a deep sense of shock and sometimes, trauma. It is important that the school community has guidelines in place which will help with coping in such difficult circumstances.

Introduction

- ✓ When a person dies through suicide, those who know the person experience a deep sense of shock.
- ✓ The unexpectedness of the death and the taboo associated with suicide can leave a school community feeling unsure of how to proceed.
- ✓ Again, the key to this is planning.
- ✓ The term ‘suicide’ should not be used until it has been “established categorically that the student’s or teacher’s death was as a result of suicide” (ASTI Guidelines 1997). The phrases ‘tragic death’ or ‘sudden death’ may be used instead.

The following is a guide to how a school can support the bereaved family, school staff and students.

Family

- ✓ An appointed staff member should contact the family to establish the exact facts and the family’s wishes about how the death should be described.
- ✓ Acknowledge their grief and loss.
- ✓ Organise a home visit by two designated staff members (Principal, Year Head etc.)
- ✓ Consult with the family regarding the appropriate support from the school e.g. at the funeral service.

Staff

- ✓ Convene a staff meeting to brief staff on the above details. It may be necessary to do this in two shifts therefore ensuring staff are available for support to students and for cover at all times. Remember to include auxiliary staff.
- ✓ Students need to be with people they know and trust. If possible, it is better if the teachers provide support for the students. The external “expert” visitor should therefore be primarily used to brief the teachers.
- ✓ Help teachers to prepare for breaking the news to students. Close friends and relatives of the deceased in the school need to be told first. This needs to be done in a private location.
- ✓ Outline the possible reactions.
- ✓ Give them information from the schools pack on dealing with the students in the classroom and on reactions to grief.
- ✓ Revisit the Resource Document, provided by NEPS, re potential suicide indicators of high risk students

- ✓ Identify high-risk students and what supports are available.
- ✓ Remind them of the school's critical incident plan.
- ✓ Decide on the strategy to deal with queries from parents/guardians. Prepare a letter setting out the facts, how the school is dealing with the events and how parents or guardians can support their son.
- ✓ Ensure that a quiet place can be made available for students/staff.
- ✓ Hold further staff briefings during the day to update information, to offer support and to further identify high-risk students.

Students

- ✓ Give the facts as they are appropriate.
- ✓ Create a safe and supportive space for the students where they can share their reactions and feelings.
- ✓ Advise them on their possible reactions over the next few days (see Appendix 4 - Resource document 4.5).
- ✓ Avoid glorifying the victim and sensationalising the suicide.
- ✓ Advise the students of the support that is available to them.
- ✓ Take any talk of suicide seriously and provide support or refer on immediately.
- ✓ Students may wish to confide in and seek support from each other rather than adults. Facilitate this if appropriate and if it is possible. However, information should be provided about how to get further help if they, or their friends, should need it.

Indicators of high risk students

- ✓ Close friends and relatives of the deceased
- ✓ Students with a history of suicide attempts/self harm
- ✓ Students who experienced a recent loss, death of a friend or relative, family divorce or separation, break-up with a boyfriend/girlfriend
- ✓ Students who have been bereaved by a suicide in the past
- ✓ Students with a psychiatric history
- ✓ Students with a history of substance abuse
- ✓ Students with a history of sexual abuse
- ✓ Non-communicative Students who have difficulty talking about their feelings
- ✓ Students experiencing serious family difficulties, including serious mental or physical illness

Schools should be vigilant around the time of the inquest and the anniversary of the student's death.

Assessing for suicide potential

- ✓ This is a brief note indicating how to go about making an immediate assessment as to whether a student is at risk.
- ✓ Where there is a serious question mark or concern about a student, then referral should be made to a person trained in risk assessment.
- ✓ Have a sensitive but direct and open discussion with the student.
- ✓ If a student has been reported to be talking about suicide, they should be asked openly "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" This will offer the student the opportunity to talk about their feelings and their thoughts. If they affirm that they

have been thinking about it, then this should be explored by raising the following issues with the student.

- ✓ Previous attempt: Has the student attempted suicide before? You might ask “Have you ever tried to harm yourself before?” If the answer to this is “Yes”, then the risk increases.
- ✓ Personal/family history: The level of risk increases with the number and seriousness of family difficulties e.g. parental separation, recent bereavement, serious illness etc.
- ✓ Physical/emotional history: A student who has experienced major personal difficulties, whether as a result of physical (recent hospitalisation, chronic illness) or significant emotional difficulties (depression, loneliness, guilt, anger etc.) is more at risk.
- ✓ Plan: Does the student have a plan, for example, has written suicide notes, has a particular day in mind to carry out the act, has a gun, or pills to take? The more concrete the plan the more serious the threat.
- ✓ Means: Does the student have the means and place to do it. Are the means available lethal?
- ✓ Will the student be in a place where they can be rescued? For example, do they intend to carry out the action when both parents are at work and their siblings are at school.

The greater the number of “Yes” answers, the higher the risk and the greater the need for immediate onward referral of the student.

Parents should be informed at once and asked to bring the student to their GP or to another service. (If a student is under 18 years teachers are obliged to inform the parents even without the student’s consent).

Section 6 Roles and responsibilities of CMIT.

CHAIRPERSON

The School Principal (or someone acting on his/her behalf) is the chairperson of the CIM team.

Responsibilities

1. Determine whether it is necessary to activate the CIM plan
2. Designate the person who will investigate all the details
3. Nominate the coordinator
4. Contact the CIM team, outside school if necessary
5. Convene and chair the CIM team
6. Activate the CIM plan
7. Contact and inform the BOM
8. Brief the staff
9. Liaise with the Media

Tasks

1. Have/keep telephone numbers of the CIM team to hand.
2. Brief staff on the need to know basis at the earliest opportunity and keep them informed of developments as appropriate.
3. Indicate to staff what, if any, information is to be shared with the students.
4. Ensure that the Principal deals with all news media enquiries.
5. If appropriate, prepare a statement for the news media, expressing the school's feelings and explaining the school's response plans.
6. Agree a specific time for press briefings if situation is 'on-going'.
7. Nominate a specific location for media briefings.
8. Ensure that the school runs as normally as possible, if appropriate.

COORDINATOR

The coordinator, nominated by the Principal, is responsible for the implementation of the CIM plan and for ensuring appropriate support throughout the critical incident.

Responsibilities

1. Responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the decisions of the CIM team.
2. Ensuring that each person/group understands and is fully briefed on his/her role within the response.
3. Responsibility for the updating procedures where appropriate and for keeping staff informed of such changes.

Tasks

1. Ascertain the facts of the situation.
2. Meet with the CIM team.
3. Ensure that each member of the CIM team understands fully their role and has the necessary information and support to carry it out.
4. Regular meetings, in the aftermath of the critical incident and in the days that follow, with updated briefings as appropriate.
5. Attendance at in-service and/or other training relevant to a critical incident and to the school's response.
6. Evaluation of the communication process afterwards.

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL

The Deputy Principal is responsible for administration.

Responsibilities:

1. Member of the CIM team.
2. Keep the school running as normally as possible.
3. Make rooms available for: Counselling, Chaplain/Reflection, Parents/Public to meet, Other.
4. Frees up teachers who are: helping out with students, Helping the coordinator and facilitator, affected by the situation.
5. Knows what is happening.
6. Knows where it is happening.

Tasks:

1. Continue with school administration but in unusual circumstances.
2. Links with the CIM coordinator.
3. Is part of the CIM team.

FACILITATOR/YEAR HEAD

The Facilitator is usually the Year Head of the relevant student group affected by the Critical Incident.

Responsibilities:

1. To work closely with the tutors in order to identify specific needs within the school.
2. The facilitator works closely with the Deputy Principal to relay information regarding: extra classrooms which may be needed, changes in classrooms, changes required re staff.
3. The facilitator is responsible for overseeing the delivery of the response to the students.

Tasks

1. The facilitator meets as a member of the CIM team.
2. The facilitator meets with the relevant tutor and teachers throughout the day. The information obtained at these meetings will be disseminated at the CIM team meetings or to key personnel throughout the day.
3. The facilitator maintains his/her role as facilitator throughout the critical incident and during the aftercare period.

COUNSELLING

The guidance counsellor/ counselling staff.

Responsibilities

1. To support teachers in their implementation of the response in the classroom.
2. To provide counselling/emotional support to students and staff affected by the incident.
3. To ensure follow up and evaluation towards best practice in critical incident response.

Tasks:

1. Offer support to teacher and be present if necessary when story is being verified.
2. Feedback to CIM team.
3. Support the teacher and Year Head in the classroom by:

Providing resource materials and guidelines on talking and listening to students.

- Checking that teachers are comfortable with their roles and identifying alternatives where necessary.
 - Helping teachers identify the needs of particular groups of students in relation to one-to-one or group support.
4. Provide space and time for one-to-one and/or group consultation with students.
 5. Provide space and time for one-to-one support for staff members affected by the incident.
 6. Access and facilitate support from outside agencies where necessary.
 7. Develop a resource pack for use in a Critical Incident.

CHAPLAIN/SPIRITUAL ROLE/R.E. DEPT.

Responsibilities

1. Liaise with local parish in the case of a death
2. Provide opportunity for prayer in the school (working with R.E.team)

Tasks:

1. Contact local parish re funeral arrangements.
2. Liaise with parish and home with regard to school involvement in liturgy.
3. Organise students/staff to be involved in funeral if invited to do so.
4. Work with RE team to provide prayer for the affected group as soon as possible.
5. Establish 'quiet' or prayer space in the school.
6. Be available to staff if required.

COMMUNICATION

Person/s Nominated by Principal.

Responsibilities:

To ensure that information is disseminated to all members of the school community in the event of a critical incident.

Tasks:

1. To liaise with the office staff re accessing up-to-date records of telephone numbers (school term and holiday), mobile phone numbers, home addresses and e-mail addresses of all CIM team members.
2. To liaise with office staff re accessing all contact details of all staff members.
3. To liaise with Principal regarding communications to staff, students, public.
4. To organize a ‘communication-to-all-staff’ system when dissemination of information is required outside school time.
5. To organize a ‘Bulletin Board’ in the staffroom during the critical incident and to update where necessary.

*This policy was ratified and adopted by the Board of Management*_____

Signed:

Chairperson of Board of Management

Principal

Date: _____

Date: _____

Date of next review:

Section 7– Appendices

Appendix 1 – Emergency Contact List

Local Garda Station

Ambulance St. Vincents Hospital Emergency 01-2214358

Fire Brigade

Hospital St Vincent’s Emergency 01-2214358

St Vincent’s General 01-2214000

Local GPs

HSE/Child and Family Centre

Information 1850 24 1850

Head Office Naas 045-880400

Principal/Chairperson of the Board of Management

School Inspector 01-8896553

State Examination Commission 090-6442700

DES – Dublin 01-8734700

NEPS Head Office 01-8892700

ASTI 01-6040160

Clergy/Pastoral Care

Local counselling services

Barnardos Bereavement Counselling for Children

Hyde Square
654 South Circular Road
Dublin 8..
Tel: (01) 473 2110
Open Mon - Fri 10am - 12 noon
Fax: (01) 453 0300
[Email: bereavement@barnardos.ie](mailto:bereavement@barnardos.ie)

Samaritans

112 Marlborough St,
Dublin 1
Phone : 1850 60 90 90
open 24hrs, 365 days
[Email: jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
replies within 24 hrs

AWARE

72 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin 2.
tel. 01 661 7211
fax. 01 661 7217
[e. info@aware.ie](mailto:info@aware.ie)

Console, living with Suicide. 1800 201890

www.console.ie

Childline 1800 666666

Childline Text Talk 50101

Parentline 1890 972722/ 018733500

Rainbows Ireland (National Office)

Loreto Centre
Crumlin Road
Dublin 12
Ireland
Phone 353 1 4734175
Fax 353 1 4734177

Appendix 2 – Sample letter to parents in the event of a tragedy

Dear Parents,

The school has experienced (*the sudden death, accidental injury*) of one of our students. We are deeply saddened by the death/events.

(Brief details of the incident, and in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost)

We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy.
(Elaborate)

It is possible that your child may have some feelings that he may like to discuss with you.

You can help your child by taking time to listen and encouraging them to express their feelings.

It is important to give them truthful information that is appropriate to their age.

If you would like advice or assistance you may contact the following people at the school. *(Details)*

Yours faithfully,

Elizabeth O'Connell
Principal

Appendix 3 – Resource Documents for use by schools

How teachers can support students in school following a critical incident

(Adapted from Critical Incidents: Managing Loss and Trauma in Schools: A Wiltshire Psychological Service and School Improvement and Support Information Booklet.)

General considerations

- ✓ Students should be given opportunities to discuss the incident and express their thoughts or feelings in a secure environment. The teacher needs to be aware of the importance of handling the discussion in a confident but sensitive manner. However, normal routines should be returned to as soon as possible.
- ✓ Students should be encouraged to resume sports and other extra-curricular activities.
- ✓ Help students re-establish support systems, identify with them who they go to for different kinds of support.
- ✓ It is appropriate that the class curriculum is adjusted or adapted. For example, teachers should avoid presenting new learning material for a while following an incident as concentration may be impaired.
- ✓ Use opportunities which arise within ordinary class work, where coping and support can be reinforced.
- ✓ Students could be encouraged to discuss how to avoid future crises and lessons learnt from their experiences. There will be opportunities within the school's personal, social and health education programmes for structured discussion.

Meeting with individual students

- ✓ Take your cue from the student. When they feel like talking, try to find the time to listen.
- ✓ If the time they choose is not appropriate, explain that you would like to talk with them and name an alternative time and place.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to mention the incident or the deceased person's name. It is important to acknowledge what has happened for the student.
- ✓ It is alright to ask the student what he/she needs, what helps or what doesn't help.
- ✓ Let the students know that it is normal to laugh and cry. Reassure them it is okay to lighten the mood by remembering old times and stories.
- ✓ Believe what the students say. Feelings must be acknowledged, believed and discussed. Try not to make comments such as "you don't really mean that" or "it will be okay s

A classroom session following a critical incident

(Adapted from Critical Incidents: Managing Loss and Trauma in Schools: A Wiltshire Psychological Service and School Improvement and Support Information Booklet.)

A classroom session is an important intervention following a critical incident that affects large numbers of students. Sessions containing up to 30 students can be effective. It is recommended that the classroom teacher take an active role, if possible. Students may feel safe and secure with their classroom teacher rather than being with an adult they do not know. Teachers may be able to lead these sessions and the NEPS psychologist can act as a co-facilitator. If the teacher feels uncomfortable with this role the psychologist may take more of an active role. Teachers should have the opportunity to opt out of this work if they wish. A class session needs to be tailored to the developmental level of the class. The time required will vary depending on the class experience and age.

The process involves:

- ✓ providing facts and dispelling rumours
- ✓ sharing stories
- ✓ sharing thoughts and feelings
- ✓ normalisation of thoughts and feelings
- ✓ empowerment
- ✓ closure.

Providing facts and dispelling rumours

State the facts clearly. Talk in concrete rather than abstract terms. Dispelling rumours helps students understand the reality of the events. Helping students hear the facts is an important prerequisite for coming to terms with what has happened.

Sharing stories

Students are asked to tell their story of the event. As a result they will feel less alone because of their common shared experiences. Helping them verbalise their experiences helps their recovery.

For those students who find it difficult to verbalise their experiences or for students with learning difficulties it may also be helpful to allow them to express their feelings and recount their experiences in other ways. Writing stories or using art can be particularly helpful, especially for younger students. Give the students a choice as to how they want to represent their experiences.

Have a box of tissues at hand.

Sharing thoughts and feelings

Help the students identify what they thought and felt at the time of the incident, or when they first heard of the incident. It may be helpful to share your own feelings, thoughts and fears that you experienced during the crisis or just after hearing the news.

Normalisation of thoughts and feelings

Explain that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Let the students know that in time, for most people, the reactions or symptoms will go away. Inform the class that if the symptoms don't go away they need to seek help. Distribute handouts on reactions to grief to the students, if appropriate.

Empowerment

Help the students identify strategies that they can use to help manage symptoms. For example, talking to family and friends, getting enough sleep, exercise etc. If appropriate, students can brainstorm ideas that might help prevent a similar situation happening again. Overall, it is important to help the students regain a sense of control.

Closure

End the session by focussing on the future. Depending on the nature of the incident, help the class/group decide what would bring about a sense of closure, for example, organising a memorial, writing cards or letters. Reiterate the message that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Tell students what further supports will be put in place if needed.

Grief

(Adapted from "Grief in Children: Someone to talk to". Barnardos p. 64 – 65.)

It is acknowledged that while there are distinct stages/phases in the grieving process different people may go through these stages in different sequences and at different paces. Generally the grieving process in adults is thought to take about two years while with children and adolescents it may be over a more extended time-frame with different issues arising as they go through developmental milestones.

Denial, numbness, shock (up to 6 weeks)

- ✓ Death of the person may be denied
- ✓ Emerging feelings may be suppressed
- ✓ Refusal to talk about the death
- ✓ Bereaved keeps very busy to avoid thinking about the death
- ✓ Bereaved may show signs of confusion and forget everyday routines
- ✓ Children in shock may display either silent withdrawal or outbursts of crying/screaming.

Acute grief/searching and longing for deceased (6 weeks to 4 months)

- ✓ Acute sadness – crying
- ✓ Physical pangs of pain including loss of appetite and disturbed sleep
- ✓ Emotional pain accompanied by dejection, hopelessness, lack of concentration
- ✓ Fears of life after death, nightmares, ghosts
- ✓ Disorganisation
- ✓ Strong guilt feelings and questioning of self and others, particularly in the case of a sudden death
- ✓ Feelings of anger at the departed for leaving them
- ✓ Bereaved may reject offers to comfort them.

Adaptation to life without the deceased (6 months to 18 months)

- ✓ People begin to adjust to their lives without the lost person
- ✓ Sense of isolation
- ✓ Fearful of forgetting the deceased
- ✓ Less crying and irritability
- ✓ Exacerbation of existing personality problems. Children with low self-esteem may be at a greater risk of emotional behavioural difficulties.

Re-organisation

- ✓ Getting on with life
- ✓ Returned sense of humour and play
- ✓ Able to participate emotionally in new relationships
- ✓ Changed relationship with the deceased – able to think of the deceased without pain
- ✓ Reduction in physical/emotional symptoms
- ✓ Less guilt.

Children's understanding and reaction to grief according to age

(Adapted from "Children's understanding of death" Barnardos. p. 28 – 32.)

The following are guides only – children will differ in their reactions and grasp of events for a range of reasons other than age alone.

Infants (0 – 2 years)

- ✓ Infants do not understand the meaning of death
- ✓ They may display anxiety when separated from a loved one
- ✓ They may appear upset, subdued and uninterested in their surroundings.

Ages 2 – 5 years

- ✓ No understanding of the permanency of death
- ✓ May search for the missing person
- ✓ May feel responsible for the death in some way
- ✓ May become apathetic and depressed
- ✓ May regress to an earlier stage of development e.g. thumbsucking, bedwetting, tantrums or may become clingy etc.
- ✓ May develop fears of going to sleep
- ✓ May worry that other loved ones may die.

How you can help

- ✓ Continuity of normal routine e.g. mealtimes and bedtime
- ✓ Offer physical comfort
- ✓ Explain the death in clear simple language, using words like "dead" and "died".
- ✓ Do not use terms like "gone to sleep" or "passed away"
- ✓ You may need to repeat the same information again and again
- ✓ Permit them to ask questions and be consistent in your answers
- ✓ Reassure them that they had nothing to do with the death and of the well-being of other family members.

Ages 5 – 7 years

- ✓ Beginning to realise the permanency of death, but their idea of life after death is still vague
- ✓ May have concerns about how the deceased is feeling or thinking in the grave
- ✓ May have a lot of questions about aspects of the death e.g. how the person died, what they looked like, the funeral, heaven, coffins etc.
- ✓ The reaction of their peers is important, may feel ‘different’ to them
- ✓ Their peers may be awkward about the death and avoid contact
- ✓ They may become the target of bullying.

How you can help

- ✓ Encourage the child to talk and cry about the deceased if they wish to, otherwise
- ✓ respect their silence
- ✓ Answer questions and provide as much factual information about the death as possible
- ✓ Reassure them that thinking and feeling ceases after death
- ✓ Be vigilant in relation to bullying.

Ages 9 – 12 Years

- ✓ Understand the finality and universality of death
- ✓ Awareness of their own mortality and may worry about their own death
- ✓ May display psychosomatic symptoms
- ✓ May wish to stay at home close to parents
- ✓ May display anger.

How you can help

- ✓ Dispel fears about their own health or the health of other loved ones by offering
- ✓ reassurance
- ✓ Encourage them to go to school
- ✓ Allow them to express their anger, offering appropriate ways to do so.

Adolescents

- ✓ Fully understand the finality, universality and inevitability of death. Their experience of death is similar to adults
- ✓ May feel a range of feelings: guilt, regret, anger, loneliness etc.
- ✓ Death adds to the already confused array of emotions
- ✓ May appear to not care about the death
- ✓ May seek support outside of the family.

How you can help

- ✓ Offer them time to listen
- ✓ Allow them to express their grief in their own way
- ✓ Be prepared for mood swings.

Note: If parents are grieving themselves, they may be emotionally unable to support their other children. In this instance, another supportive adult in the child’s life, e.g. other family members, friends, neighbours may need to offer emotional support.

It should be remembered that for children with special educational needs, their understanding of what has happened will be in line with their developmental age.

The range of 'normal' reactions to a Critical Incident

(Adapted from Somerset Educational Service pack.)

Each individual has his/her own way of dealing with feelings, loss and tragedy. There is no right or wrong way to react and any or all of the following can be experienced.

Feelings Behaviour

Fear Bedwetting
Guilt Nightmares
Shame Thumb sucking
Anger Over dependency
Regret Social withdrawal
Loneliness Tantrums
Anxiety Mood swings
Shock Loss of concentration
Yearning Forgetfulness
Numbness Irritability
Confusion Tearfulness
Isolation Insecure feelings
Separation anxiety
School refusal
Physical/Verbal aggression
Misuse of drugs, including alcohol

Physical Thoughts

Tiredness Disbelief
Sleeplessness Denial
Headaches Sense of unreality
Gastrointestinal Problems Preoccupation with images of the event/person
Bowel/Bladder problems
Loss or increase in appetite

Guidelines for input with pupils on coping with their reactions to a Critical Incident

This might also be used as a handout for pupils and parents as appropriate.

Coping with a critical incident can be difficult and stressful. It can affect the way we feel, think and behave. The following information will help you understand some of the feelings and reactions you may experience within hours, days or weeks after an event. There are also some suggestions on what may help you during this time.

Feelings and thoughts

You may experience:

Shock at what has happened. Things may feel unreal. Shock sometimes causes people to deny what has happened. This doesn't mean you don't care. You may feel like withdrawing, crying or becoming hysterical.

Fear about the unpredictability of everything especially life, of a similar incident happening again, of breaking down or losing control, of being alone.

Guilt – feeling responsible in some way for what has happened even though you are being told you could not be, for not being able to make things better or not being able to help others, for being alive or better off than others.

Shame for not reacting as you thought you should, for needing support from others.

Anger at someone or something, wanting to blame someone or something for what has happened, at the injustice of the event.

Confusion about the event, about how you should react, about having mixed feelings about everything.

Pain at the loss of the person, of associating this with other incidents, bereavements or losses that you may have experienced before.

Left out by people not acknowledging your involvement in the incident or your relationship with the person who is injured or deceased.

Physical and behavioural reactions

It is quite normal to experience, tiredness, sleeplessness, nightmares, headaches, loss or increase of appetite, bowel/bladder problems, loss of concentration, irritability. Sometimes people feel generally unwell.

Remember:

- ✓ You need to look after yourself
- ✓ You are normal and are having normal reactions to an abnormal event
- ✓ There are people you can talk to
- ✓ You may not experience any of the above feelings.
- ✓ There is little you can do to avoid these uncomfortable feelings and thoughts but there are things you can do to help you recover.

What can help?

- ✓ Talk – Try to talk about what happened and how you feel. Don't bottle things up. Sharing your experience with others who have had similar experiences may help. Let someone know if you are not coping well. If it is difficult to talk, keep a journal of how you are feeling or draw your experiences or emotions.

- ✓ Thinking over the incident – You need to process the incident and allow it more into your mind over time. With time you may need to talk about it, write about it. You may find that you dream about it over and over again. All this eventually helps you to accept what has happened.
- ✓ Attending memorials – Going to the funeral or service.
- ✓ Eating properly – Try to eat a regular meal three times a day.
- ✓ Exercise and relaxation – Make sure you take some exercise and also find ways to relax and rest.
- ✓ Be careful not to use drink or other drugs to help you cope – They may numb the pain temporarily but will lead to other problems.

Seek help if, four to six weeks after the event:

- ✓ you cannot cope with or feel overwhelmed by your feelings
- ✓ you (continue to) have nightmares
- ✓ you experience sleeplessness
- ✓ intrusive thoughts about the event persist
- ✓ you begin to have problems in school
- ✓ you have been using excessive drinking, smoking or other drugs to help you cope since the event.

Guidelines for meeting with parents

When a critical incident occurs, many parents are very anxious about how their child will react and what they can do to help. It is often useful for the school to arrange a meeting after school to allay parents' fears. It also reduces the number of individual calls and visits to the school from concerned parents. It is recommended that the Principal heads the meeting and the psychologist attends to talk about the psychological impact of trauma. The following are recommended areas to be covered at the meeting:

- ✓ Acknowledge what has happened, offer condolences and give space for sharing of feelings and emotions if appropriate.
- ✓ Outline what has been done to date and a plan for the next days and weeks.
- ✓ (How the students are reacting in general. What help has been provided and by whom and what help will be provided in the future).
- ✓ Outline what are the normal reactions to a critical incident and provide handout.
- ✓ Go through Children's Understanding of Grief and provide handout.
- ✓ Suggest ways in which they can help their child (Give Frequently Asked Questions by parents).
- ✓ Give time for people to vent their concerns and provide answers, if possible.
- ✓ Advise that you will all be available at the end of the meeting for 15 minutes if anyone has any further concerns or questions.