

RESPONDING TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT

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RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS

INTRODUCTION

Our Lady's recognises a critical incident to be an incident or sequence of events that significantly affects or disrupts the normal running of the school. Dealing with death, loss and trauma is inevitable in the school community. It is recognised that responding to tragedies can never be fully prepared for as each situation is unique. The school has taken all reasonable steps to prepare a response but it is important to state that the school cannot, nor should be expected to, take full responsibility for responding to a crisis. We accept that the school recognises its role and will work in partnership with others in supporting all concerned.

RATIONAL FOR THE POLICY

Our Lady's has taken a number of measures to create a coping, supportive and caring ethos in the school. The school has also formulated a number of policies and procedures to be followed with a view to ensuring the physical and psychological safety of both staff and students during the normal course of the school day and in the event of a critical incident. Such policies include: Health and Safety Policy, Pastoral Care Policy, Anti-Bullying Policy, Cairdeas, Code of Behaviour, Whole School Guidance Policy, Substance Use Policy and Wellbeing programme.

The aim of the Crisis Response Policy is to provide a plan which will help staff and management to react appropriately and effectively and to maintain control of the situation. The plan will also help the school to return to normality as soon as possible and limit the affects of the incident on staff and students.

Crisis Response

While the school acknowledges the wide range of incidents which could provoke a crisis this policy was drafted for the purposes of responding to death or serious injury. All members of the school community have a role to play in responding to a crisis and specific roles are assigned to members of the Pastoral Care Team.

THE PRINCIPAL: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Principal will act as Team Leader and in his absence the Deputy Principal.
The Deputy Principal will work in cooperation with the Principal

The Principal

- Establishes the facts. It is crucial that the school has the correct information regarding the crises.
- Alerts the team members to the crisis and convenes a meeting of the team
- Coordinates/delegates tasks of the other team members
- Liaises with the Board of Management, the Department of Education and Skills, the National Educational Psychological Service, the Health Service Executive, CAMS, TUSLA and other agencies as required.
- Liaises with the family
- Prepare a press release and liaises with the media
- Keeps staff updated on information/developments and progress
- Offers advice to staff
- Make necessary arrangements for the school
- Constantly monitors and reviews progress

THE PASTORAL CARE TEAM: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Pastoral Care team consists of teachers, class tutors, Yearhead, The Guidance Counsellor (Ms Therese Boland), Ms Campion, Ms. Kinane, Ms Johnston, Ms Cooney, Ms Flannery, Mr Carroll and Ms Hewson (secretary). Other members of staff are co-opted onto the team as required.

The Pastoral Care Team

- Meets with the Principal/Deputy Principal. Agree on a common statement with regard to the crisis giving the facts as they are known.
- Assign tasks to team members
- Inform students (avoid whole school announcements). Students will be informed at class groups/assemblies in suitable areas of the school. Tutors and Yearheads may be requested to attend the assemblies with their class groups. Yeargroup affected will be met in tutor classes.
- The class or group most affected should be the first to be told. Other classes will be informed in their designated groups.
- Not every class is going to be traumatised, some students may not even know the deceased but it is important to acknowledge the loss for the whole school community.
- Identifies particular students who may need to be told of the event individually, e.g. close friends and relatives, class mates
- Contacts the local clergy
- Provides support for vulnerable students
- Maintains a register of students most affected by the event
- Inform Parents/Guardians of Students who have availed of support following the event.
- Prepare a list of students who may have experienced similar trauma in their lives
- Prepares a quiet space for students
- Organises spiritual support/prayers
- Keeps the Principal/Deputy Principal informed of progress/developments
- Find out details of funeral in the case of a death (communicates this to staff)
- Makes staff aware of students who are particularly vulnerable and what supports will be available to them.
- Organises book of condolences/flowers/mass cards/guard of honour as required.
- Attend at school (if possible) in the event of a death occurring at weekends or during holiday times.
- Is also available to respond to incidents affecting staff

TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Principal will keep staff informed through verbal communication in the staffroom, e-mail, text messages and written notices on the noticeboard.

Teachers/school staff are requested to:

- Check mobile phone and e-mail for group messages. (Report to the staffroom and consult the noticeboard for further details).
- Consult supervision roster on Vsware. Teachers are requested to supervise classes as required (even if the teacher is free at a particular class time).
- Help identify vulnerable students and report names to Ms. Cooney.
- Students who are not coping are referred to Ms Flannery/Guidance Counsellor on an individual basis. A record of students attending will be maintained. Students going to the assigned space should have a note in their journal signed by a teacher.
- Advise students whether or not scheduled events (matches, trips etc) are taking place or not.
- The school secretary will liaise with teachers who are absent from school.

- Keep the Principal/Deputy Principal informed of any new information or relevant developments.
- Do not allow a student to leave the classroom alone in a distressed state.
- Explain to students that they must be supervised at all times.
- Remind students that information received by text or e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and other social media can be at variance with the facts as known. Students are advised to report to a teacher any texts or e-mails which are a cause of worry or concern especially about friends.
- Let students know that support is available (CIRT – Pastoral Care Team members)
- Attend de-briefing session at the end of the day if possible.
- Co-operate with all arrangements put in place in response to the incident.
- Teachers who are finding it difficult to cope should inform the Principal/Deputy Principal as soon as possible so that alternative arrangements can be made. Teachers are asked to support each other at difficult times and to pay particular attention to a teacher who may be vulnerable due to a recent loss or previous experience (e.g. suicide or road traffic accident). Members of the CRIT Team will be available to support colleagues as required.

Not every class is going to be traumatised, some students may not even know the deceased but it is important to acknowledge the loss for the whole school community. In some cases classes can proceed as normal.

REMEMBER IT IS IMPORTANT TO MAINTAIN A NORMAL ROUTINE WHEN AT ALL POSSIBLE.
(Responding to Critical Incidents, Guidelines for Schools, p. 21)

Reaction to Trauma

There is no blueprint to use in understanding the reactions of different people to a crisis. What is helpful is to be prepared for the great variation in expression that will occur surrounding a trauma.

- Re-experiencing the trauma where the person re-lives the experience.
- Avoiding the experience where the person's response is to avoid feeling or thinking about the trauma.
- Heightened anxiety for example concentration difficulties, sleep disturbance, fear, depression, irritability, unresolved grief or panic.
- The most common reaction is shock
- Expect tears and outbursts
- Many students will be able to continue to go class
- Some students may need to go home (only if a parent/guardian is able to collect them)

CRISIS RESPONSE – STEP BY STEP

1. The principal having confirmed that a critical incident has occurred makes contact with the family.
2. The Deputy Principal will prepare a supervision roster and place on the noticeboard. Teachers are requested to supervise classes as required (even if the teacher is free at a particular class time). The roster may include breaktime/lunchtime/before and after school.
3. Schedule Crisis Team Meeting to plan strategy and distribute key tasks.
4. Prepare a statement for teachers to include advice on social media. (Reports on social media may not always be accurate. Students should refrain from commenting on social media).
5. Assign tutor groups/yeargroups to designated assembly points (Social Area, classrooms and Canteen)
6. Prepare social space & other quiet spaces as required.
7. Prepare written and oral statements for all communication with the school.
8. Communicate with staff as appropriate regarding relevant information

9. The Principal/Deputy Principal will keep staff informed through verbal communication in the staffroom, e-mail, text message and written notices on the noticeboard.
10. Teachers are requested to help identify vulnerable students and report names to Ms. Cooney. Please confirm all referrals by e-mail.
11. Students who are not coping are referred to Ms Flannery/Counsellor on an individual basis. A record of students attending will be maintained (Student Contact Record).
12. Students going to the assigned quiet space should have a note in their journal signed by a teacher.
13. Advise students whether or not scheduled events (matches, trips etc) are taking place or not.
14. Send correspondence to parents/guardians especially in the event of school closure. (Enclose information sheet)
15. Organise de-briefing session at the end of the day if possible.
16. Organise regular CIRT meetings for a number of days. Involve other staff as required.
17. Yearhead Office will be used for personnel from external agencies and the Reception Room will be kept free for parents/siblings and other visitors to the school.

Training

All members of the Critical Incident response Team will be given the opportunity to complete two hour NEPS training course

POLICY MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Effective policy requires constant monitoring and evaluation to ensure successful implementation and to review what adjustments may be necessary from time to time.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the above policy will be of support in the event of a tragedy occurring in our school community. It is important to note, however that the guidelines cannot replace the most vital quality needed in dealing with such personal issues as suicide, bereavement and loss – the sensitivity, care and compassion we offer to one another and our students on a daily basis.

Ratified by the BOM 27 May 2008

Reviewed 18 November 2013

Reviewed 12th January 2018

Reviewed 6th October 2022

CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEMPLATE

Critical Incident Response Team

Name	Role	
Principal	Team Leader/Media Liaison	Mr Fogarty
Deputy Principal	Liaise with NEPS and other agencies	Ms Butler
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide student support & prepare Prayer Room/Quiet Space• Prepare list of vulnerable students• Provide support for students	Ms. Johnston Ms Kinane Mr Carroll Ms Cooney Ms Galvin
Guidance Counsellor	Provide support for students	Ms Flannery Ms Boland Ms Griffin
Secretary	Organise book of condolences, flowers, mass cards, guard of honour	Ms Hewson

Rules for operation of the Quiet Space

- Teachers should be informed that a quiet space has been established for students who are affected and unable to remain in class.
- Only students assigned by a teacher or member of the CIRT team should proceed to the quiet space
- Students should present a note in their journal when they arrive to the room.
- A record of all students presenting should be maintained (see pg. 22)
- Students leaving to use the bathroom need to be accompanied by a teacher
- Water and light refreshments will be provided by the CIRT team

Short term actions – Day 1

Task	Name
Gather accurate information	Principal
Who, what, when, where?	
Convene a CIMT meeting – specify time and place clearly	Principal
Contact external agencies	Deputy Principal
Arrange supervision for students	Principal/Deputy Principal
Hold staff briefing session	All Staff
Agree schedule for the day	Crisis Response Team
Inform students – (close friends and students with learning difficulties may need to be told separately)	Crisis Response Team
Compile a list of vulnerable students	Ms. Cooney
Contact/visit the bereaved family	Principal/Deputy Principal
Prepare and agree media statement and deal with media	Principal
Inform parents	Principal/Deputy Principal
Hold end of day staff briefing	Principal/Deputy Principal

Medium term actions – (Day 2 and following days)

Convene a CIMT meeting to review the events of day 1	Principal
Meet external agencies	Deputy Principal
Meet whole staff	Principal/Deputy Principal
Arrange support for students, staff, parents	Principal/Deputy Principal
Visit the injured	Principal/Deputy Principal/Yearhead/Class Tutor
Liaise with bereaved family regarding funeral arrangements	Principal/Deputy Principal
Agree on attendance and participation at funeral service	Crisis Response Team
Make decisions about school closure	Principal/BOM

Follow-up – beyond 72 hours

Monitor students for signs of continuing distress	Class teachers
Liase with agencies regarding referrals	Crisis Response Team
Plan for return of bereaved student(s)	Crisis Response Team
Plan for giving ‘memory box’ to bereaved family	Crisis Response Team
Decide on memorials and anniversaries	BOM/Staff, parents and students
Review response to incident and amend plan	Crisis Response Team/BOM

EMERGENCY CONTACT LIST

AGENCY	CONTACT NUMBERS
ASTI	(01) 6719144
Bus Drivers	Gerry Ryan (0504) 24426 (087) 2520320 Noel Hayes (085) 7672440 Ned Callanan (087) – 2538111 Tom Murphy (086) 1522464 Brendan Kenny (087) 6772982 Aidan Johnston (086) 3148197 Damian Johnston (087) 8191818 Joe Fitzpatrick (0505) 21922 (086) 2435793 Bus Éireann (061) 217445
DES	Athlone (09064) 83600 Press Office (01) 8896400
CARE CALL	1800 411 057
FIRE BRIGADE	Templemore (0504) 31204 999 or 112
GARDA	Templemore (0504) 32630 999 or 112
HOSPITAL	Nenagh (067) 31491 Limerick (061) 301111
HSE/Community Care Team/Child and Family Centre/CAMHS	Thurles (0504) 23211 90 O Connell's Street Limerick (061) 483388
Limerick CIE	(061) 418855 (061) 217445
LOCAL GPs	Dr. de Largy 0504 51974 Templemore Health Centre 0504 – 31561 Dr. Ailish Kenny 0504- 53122 Dr. Paul Booth (Roscrea) 0505-23555
NEPS PSYCHOLOGIST	(01) 8892700 Limerick office (061) 430004
PARISH PRIEST/CLERGY 0504 35772 – 086-2420611	Fr Dominic Meehan (085) 1111320 Rev. Ian Coulter
SCHOOL INSPECTOR	Limerick Office (061) 430000
STATE EXAMS COMMISSION	(09064) 42700
Tipp FM <i>Newsroom</i>	(052) 25456
Allianz	(01) 6133063
Pieta House, Roscrea	(0505) 22568

NOTE FOR CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM

Dear Teacher,

The following student(s) appears very upset as a result of the recent incident.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

I have given permission to her/him/them to attend the Quiet Space

I understand that this student/these students may be sent back to class if insufficient space is available. In the event that this is the case the student(s) will be given an appointment time with one of the CIRT members as soon as possible.

Time: _____

Date: _____

Signed: _____

A CLASSROOM SESSION FOLLOWING NEWS OF A CRITICAL INCIDENT

HANDOUT FOR TEACHERS: (*Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools*)

The aim of the session is to give the students an opportunity to discuss what has happened and to express their thoughts and feelings in a secure environment. The teacher needs to listen and be empathic. The session needs to be tailored to the age and developmental level of the class group.

The outline of the session is as follows:

- Step 1: Reiterating the facts and dispelling rumours**
- Step 2: Sharing stories and allowing and encouraging the sharing of thoughts and the expression of feelings**
- Step 3: Normalising the reactions**
- Step 4: Worries (for younger children)**
- Step 5: Empowerment**
- Step 6: Closure**

Step 1: Recapping on the facts and dispelling rumours.

Tell the students in a calm, low key and factual voice

- What has happened?
- Who was involved?
- When it happened?
- The plan for the day?

Sample Script

The factual information agreed upon by the staff e.g. (Name of student), who attends our school and was missing, has been found. He is dead. Yesterday, the Gardaí found his body. They are investigating what has happened and will let us know as soon as they find out more information. I am feeling very sad about what's happened. Let's spend some time together now helping each other to talk about how we feel about what has happened.

Step 2: Sharing stories

Take some time for discussion. Students may wish to tell their story of the event. As a result they will feel less alone because of their common shared experiences. Assisting them to 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 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.

Sample script

To help us today, we are going to make a memory box for (name of deceased). You can draw a picture of a time you remember with (name of the deceased) or write a poem or a letter to him. If you like we can put these in a nice box and give it to (name of deceased) family sometime soon. This will help them to see how important (name of deceased) was.

Step 3: Normalising the reactions

Tell the students that they will all react differently to what has happened and that there is no right or wrong way. List some possible feelings and reactions, (see Reactions to a Critical Incident). Explain that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Let the students know that the reactions or symptoms will go away in time. Tell them that if the

symptoms haven't gone after a few weeks, they should let you or their parents/guardians know. They may need to talk to someone about how they are feeling. Depending on the incident and the age of the students distribute handouts (Stages of Grief, How to Cope When Something Terrible Happens and/or Grief after Suicide).

Understanding and Reaction to Death according to age

Adolescents

- Fully understand the finality, universality and inevitability of death. Their experience of death is similar to adults.
- May have a range of feelings: guilt, regret, anger, loneliness etc.
- Death adds to the already confused array of emotions experienced by adolescents.
- 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.
- Don't feel left out if they seem to value their friends more than their parents

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

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

Step 4: Worries (especially for younger children)

Sample script

You may be worried that the same thing could happen to you or someone in your family. What happened to (name of deceased) doesn't happen very often.

If the classmate has been ill, you could say "He/she was very sick and the chances of this happening to someone else you know are low".

Step 5: Empowerment

Help the students to identify strategies that they might use to help manage their reactions. For example, talking to family and friends, getting enough sleep, exercise may all help. If appropriate, students can share strategies that worked for them in other stressful situations or brainstorm ideas as to what might help. Overall, it is important to help the students regain a sense of control.

Step 6: Closure

End the session by focussing on the future. Depending on the nature of the incident, help the class/group decide what they would like to do about various issues, e.g., what to do about the person's empty chair, about writing cards or letters. Reiterate the message that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances.

NORMAL ROUTINES SHOULD GENERALLY BE RETURNED TO AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

- Students should be encouraged to resume sports and other extra-curricular activities
- Help students to identify or establish some supports; help them to identify who they go to for different kinds of help
- 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 also be opportunities for structured discussion within the school's social, personal, and health education programmes.

STAGES OF GRIEF

(Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools)

Grief is a normal, healthy and predictable response to loss. Although there are distinct phases in the grieving process, people 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

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 person who is gone
- 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

Normalisation of life

- 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.

HOW TO COPE WHEN SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENS

(Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools)

- Reach out — people do care
- Talk to your friends, family and teachers - talking is the most healing medicine
- Remember you are normal and having normal reactions — don't label yourself as crazy or mad
- It is ok to cry
- It is ok to smile
- If your feelings and reactions seem different from those of your friends, remember everyone reacts differently
- When the stress level is high there is a temptation to try to numb the feelings with alcohol and drugs. This complicates the problems, rather than relieving them
- Some people find that writing or drawing is helpful. What about writing a note or letter to the family of the person who died or the person themselves?
- Spend time with people who have a positive influence on you
- Make as many daily decisions as possible. This will give you a feeling of control over your life, e.g. if someone asks you what you want to eat — answer them, even if you're not sure.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal — don't try to fight them — they'll decrease over time and become less painful
- Make a special effort to take care of yourself during this time. Try to get some extra sleep, eat nutritious foods and get some exercise, even if it is just a walk
- Sticking to your “normal” routine helps. Structure your time — keep busy
- Take time out— go for a walk or kick a football
- Provide some balance to the negative things that have gone on by doing something special or fun for yourself. Think about something that makes you feel good. Then make it happen — like going to the cinema, listening to music, calling a friend, etc. Laughter is good medicine. Watch a funny movie or play a silly game with younger children to lighten your spirits
- Useful websites: www.spunout.ie; www.youth.ie; www.reach.com.au
Childline 1800 666 666 (free calls)
Samaritans 1850 60 90 90 (local call cost)

Above all, realise that what you are experiencing is normal following a traumatic event. Be understanding of yourself and others.

REACTIONS TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Handout for Students

Following the recent sad event, you may now be experiencing some strong emotional or physical reactions. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel but here is a list of difficulties that people sometimes experience following such an event.

FEELINGS

Fear
Guilt
Shame
Regret
Anger
Tearfulness
Loneliness
Anxiety
Mood swings
Shock
Yearning
Numbness
Confusion
Isolation
Insecurity

BEHAVIOURAL

Nightmares
Social withdrawal
Irritability
Loss of concentration
Forgetfulness
Physical/Verbal aggression
Misuse of drugs

PHYSICAL

Tiredness
Sleeplessness
Headaches
Stomach Problems
Bowel/Bladder problems
Loss or increase in appetite

THOUGHTS

Disbelief
Denial
Sense of unreality
Preoccupation with images of the event/person

ONLY IF A TRAGEDY IS CONFIRMED AS A SUICIDE BY THE FAMILY, CAN IT BE RELAYED AS SUCH TO STUDENTS

GRIEF AFTER SUICIDE

Remember there is no right or wrong way to react when someone you know dies. People will have many different reactions to what has happened.

- Know that you can survive, even if you feel you can't.
- You may feel overwhelmed and frightened by your feelings. This is normal. You're not going crazy; you are grieving.
- You may not feel a strong reaction to what has happened. This is okay.
- You may experience feelings of guilt, confusion, forgetfulness and anger. Again these feelings are all normal.
- You may feel angry at the person who has died, at yourself, at God, at everyone and everything. It is okay to express it.
- You may feel guilty about what you did or did not do. Suicide is the act of an individual, for which we cannot take responsibility.
- You may never have an answer as to "why" but it is ok to keep asking "why" until you no longer need to ask or you are satisfied with partial answers.
- Sometimes people make decisions over which we have no control. It was not your choice
- Feeling low is temporary, suicide is permanent. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. If you are feeling low or having a difficult time, ask for help.
- Allow yourself to cry, this will help you to heal.
- Healing takes time. Allow yourself the time you need to grieve.
- Every person grieves differently and at a different pace.
- Delay making any big decisions if possible.
- This is the hardest thing you will ever do. Be patient with yourself.
- Spend time with people who are willing to listen when you need to talk and who also understand your need to be silent.
- Seek professional help if you feel overwhelmed.
- If you are thinking of harming yourself, you must talk to a trusted adult.
- Avoid people who try to tell you what to feel and how to feel it and, in particular, those who think you should "be over it by now."
- Ask in school about a support group for survivors that provides a safe place for you to express your feelings, or simply a place to go to be with other survivors who are experiencing some of the same things you're going through.
- Allow yourself to laugh with others and at yourself. This is healing.
- Useful websites: www.spunout.ie; www.youth.ie; www.reachout.com.au

REINTEGRATION OF THE BEREAVED STUDENT IN SCHOOL

(Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools)

Some suggestions are offered here which may help prepare the school and the bereaved student for their return to school. They will help to ensure that the individual, the other students and the staff feel more comfortable and at ease.

- Visit the bereaved student at home to see what he/she would like to happen when they return to school.
- Talk to the student's class about how people are affected by grief and encourage them to share their own feelings. Ask about how they have coped with bereavements in their own lives and what has helped.
- Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to come back to school. Ask how they would like to be treated if they were returning to school after a death. This might be done in pairs or small groups, thus encouraging all to be involved. It will also ensure that a range of preferences are expressed, reinforcing the fact that different people will have different preferences as to how they are treated. Some people may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone. In general bereaved students say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being 'over-nice' to them. However it is a delicate balance as they don't want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all.
- It may help if, in advance of the student's return to school, classmates have sent cards or notes or drawn pictures for the bereaved classmate. This will let her/him know that they are in their thoughts.
- When they return, acknowledge their loss "I'm sorry that (name of deceased) died. I know that you are sad. It is ok to cry". (In Post-Primary schools, check that this is done in Tutor Class and not in every class. Teachers can express their own sympathies separately once the general re-entry to class has been managed).
- When the student returns, they may have difficulty concentrating or joining in class activities. Be understanding.
- Link the student in with the guidance counsellor or other counsellors for support if needed.
- Listen when they want to talk: "If you need to talk at any time, I am here to listen"
- Carry on normal routines and normal approaches to discipline.
- They may have difficulty completing homework and assignments: "If you are having difficulty doing your homework it is ok to do as much as you can for a while".
- Allow them as much time as they need to grieve.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

The following is a summary of questions often asked by teachers in the aftermath of a critical incident.

Q. I would like to opt out of support type work for personal reasons. Is this OK?

A. It has been found that their teachers are the best people to support students in school in times of distress because they need to be with people they know and trust. Accordingly, all teachers and other school staff members are encouraged to help the students at these times. However, nobody should be obliged to do this work and people should be able to opt out of it if they feel they need to. This may be for a number of reasons, including recent personal bereavement, experience of a loss similar to that occurring in the particular incident or other circumstances. However, in order to stay in touch, they would need to be in attendance at staff meetings where information is disseminated in relation to the incident.

Q. I have no qualifications to help out in this area. Shouldn't the job be left to the experts?

A. You probably have more skills here than you realise. Your experience, competence and skills as a teacher and as an expert in dealing with children and young people are invaluable. Most importantly, the students know you. Students need a safe environment in which to come to terms with what has happened. This security is often enhanced by being able to discuss the events with a familiar teacher in the first instance.

Q. What should I do in the classroom to be helpful?

A. You should acknowledge the situation and clarify the facts, as they are known. Honesty is essential. Encourage questions so that the students have a clear understanding. You should try to establish normal routines as soon as possible — but balance this with allowing students opportunities to discuss the incident and to express their thoughts and feelings. Encourage them to resume extra-curricular activities and help them to identify where they can go to for support. Encourage them to be supportive of one another.

Q. What are the signs of grief that I may notice in students seen?

A. After bereavement students may have a wide range of different reactions — some may become quiet and withdrawn, while others may seem to be aggressive, irritable or angry. They may have mood swings or lack concentration. Try to handle all these 'normal' reactions with patience, do not seem surprised by them and do not get cross (see attached resources). If students come from a background where there is family breakdown, serious illness, alcohol or drug related or other difficulties, then you need to take extra note of any behavioural changes.

Q. What if I think that some students are not grieving normally?

A. There is no such thing as a 'correct' way to grieve. Some people cry, some may laugh or become giddy, some show no reaction. The important thing is that all these different ways are natural and normal and you should try to help the student understand this.

Q. What skills do I have that are important?

A. Listening skills are probably the most important. People who have experienced loss or trauma generally feel that talking helps them to cope with their feelings. When you sense a student wants to talk, try to make the time. Be reassuring and patient while gently encouraging them to talk about the loss. Reassure the student that you are there to help.

Q. Is there any one important thing I should say?

- A. Yes — emphasise that grieving is a normal healthy process following a traumatic incident. It is the person's way of coping with the event. It is also normal for people to react in different ways — there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to grieve.

Q. Is it a good idea to organise a classroom session following a critical incident?

- A. Some schools do and they have found this to be very effective. You will find notes on leading a class session after news of an incident in the resources provided. An advantage here is that students may feel safer and more secure with their regular classroom teacher rather than being with an adult they do not know.

Q. What should I do if I feel that a student needs more professional support?

- A. Discuss the issue with the Principal or guidance counsellor. They, in turn, may wish to discuss it with the NEPS psychologist or other support services and with the student's parents. The outcome may be a referral through the GP to the appropriate service.

Q. What is the overall message in helping bereaved students?

- A. "You will get through this difficult time and we are here to help if you need support. Take care of yourself and look out for each other. Talk to us if you need help or if you think a friend is in difficulty".

Q. When should I get back to a normal teaching routine with a class?

- A. It is important to give students sufficient time and space to share their feelings and to come to terms with what has happened. However, it is also important to move towards a normal routine as soon as possible. Getting on with the regular and familiar pattern of school life helps reduce stress. Avoid introducing new material in the immediate aftermath of an incident or bereavement, as grief and shock can interfere with concentration and motivation. It is often a good idea to consult the students themselves about returning to the normal routine.

Q. What do I do about the empty chair/a student's belongings etc?

- A. A helpful strategy might be to involve students in a discussion about what to do about the chair. This might also present an opportunity to move to a new phase in the process. With regard to the student's belongings, it might be useful to put together a folder or a 'memory box' of the student's work for the parents. This can be given to them at an appropriate time.

Q. Is there a danger that by talking about suicide you make it appear to be an option for others?

- A. Talking about the death helps people to make sense of what has happened. People can cope with the truth, but suicide must never be represented as a valid option. There should be no criticism of the person who has died. Separate the person from the behaviour. It is important to talk about how a person can get to the point where suicide may seem to be the only option but emphasise that it is not a good option. Feeling low is usually a temporary thing, whereas suicide is permanent. With suicide the intention may have been to change life circumstances rather than end life. There is always help available if a person can take the step of reaching out for it. Encourage students to seek help if they need it.

TO ALL STAFF MEMBERS

**PLEASE REPORT TO THE
STAFFROOM PRIOR TO GOING TO
CLASS. CONSULT THE
NOTICEBOARD FOR FURTHER
INFORMATION.**

Signed: _____
Principal

Time: _____ **Date:** _____

SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE MEDIA

This can be used as a template by schools to be emailed, faxed or given to the media. It may help to decrease the number of media calls and callers to the school.

In some instances it is not appropriate to provide names or information that might identify individuals.

This announcement will need to be changed based upon confidentiality issues, the wishes of the victim's family and the nature of the incident.

My name is *(Name)* and I am the Principal of *Our Lady's Secondary School*. We learned this morning of the death of *(one of our students or Name of student)*. This is a terrible tragedy for _____ family(*ies*), our school and our community. We are deeply saddened by these events. Our sympathy and thoughts are with *(Name)* family and friends.

Name of student/students was a *(5th year boy)* and will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

We have been in contact with his/her parents and they have requested that we all understand their need for privacy at this difficult time.

Offers of support have been pouring in and are greatly appreciated. Our school has implemented our Critical Incident Response Plan.

Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and *(insert other information if relevant)* have been with us all day supporting and advising teachers in their efforts to assist our students at this time.

The teachers have been helping students to deal with the tragic event.

The school has been open to parents/guardians, to support them and to offer them advice and guidance.

We would ask you to respect our privacy at this time.

Thank you.

DEBRIEFING SESSION FOR STAFF

Thank you all for staying on this evening. I know that it has been a difficult day and you are all tired. I thought it was important for us just to take a bit of time to check in with each other and to make sure that we are doing okay.

Provide update on the latest facts and outline the schedule for the following day.

Is any concerned about anything or anyone – if so please inform a member of the CIRT before you leave this evening if possible.

If you are feeling distressed and would like to talk in confidence to someone, you can access support through the Employee Assistance Service (EAS) 1800 411 057. A number of sessions are available free of charge. The service is staffed by a network of trained counsellors and therapists.

Thank you for your great work and support today.

Re: seeking parental consent for a child to be seen in a group or individually by a NEPS psychologist.

Dear parent(s)/guardian(s),

You may already know that our teachers and staff have been providing support to our students following (specific reference to the incident).

Additional support is also being provided to our school by psychologist/s from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

The psychologist will be available, where necessary, to meet with individuals or with groups of students to help them during this difficult time.

The aim of such sessions will be to:

- a) Provide information about dealing with grief and loss in a healthy way
- b) Allow students the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment
- c) Allow students time to comfort and support each other, under the guidance of experienced staff from
- d) Help students resume their normal routines as soon as possible.

If you would like for your son/daughter to participate in such a session and any follow-up meetings that might be scheduled, please give your consent by signing below.

You should return it to the school immediately.

If you have any questions, please contact **(Name and phone number of contact person)**.

I give my consent for _____ to participate in a Group/Individual Session
Student Name

Parent or Legal Guardian

Date

Yours sincerely,

Principal

Re: Sudden death/accident

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

The school has experienced (the sudden death, accidental injury, etc.) of Name of student(s). We are deeply saddened by the deaths/events.

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

Our thoughts are with *(family name)*.

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 and questions that he/she may like to discuss with you. It is important to give factual information that is appropriate to their age.

You can help your child by taking time to listen and by encouraging them to express their feelings. All children are different and will express their feelings in different ways. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty concentrating or to be fearful, anxious, or irritable. They may become withdrawn, cry, complain of physical aches and pains, have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares. Some may not want to eat. These are generally short term reactions. Over the course of the days to come, please keep an eye on your child and allow him/her to express their feelings without criticism.

Although classes will continue as usual, I anticipate that the next few days will be difficult for everyone.

We have enclosed some information which you may find useful in helping your child through this difficult time.

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

Yours sincerely,

Principal

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Resource for Parents/Guardians

(Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools)

The following is a summary of questions frequently asked by parents/guardians after a critical incident.

Q. This incident has upset my daughter/son. As there are many rumours circulating, I would like to know what really happened. How can I find that information?

A. The school will inform students and parents/guardians of the core details of the incident insofar as they are known. It sometimes takes some time for the true facts to emerge. In the meantime, it is important to stick to the facts as known. Discourage rumour or gossip as it is often incorrect and can be distressing for the families and friends of those involved.

Q. Will help be available to the students in the school?

A. This will depend on the particular situation. The school will usually put a plan in place for supporting students. This support may include classroom discussion, small group discussion or individual support for students who need it. This support may be offered by school staff themselves, or by staff of other agencies. If there is particular concern about your son or daughter, you will be informed.

Q. How can I help my child?

A. You are the natural support for your child. He/she may want to discuss their feelings and thoughts with you. You can help by listening carefully. You should tell them it is ok to feel the way they do, that people react in many different ways and that they should talk rather than bottle things up.

Q. How long will the grief last?

A. There is no quick answer to this. It varies from individual to individual and according to circumstances. It will also be affected by the closeness of the child to the event or to person who died. Memories of other bereavements may also be brought up by the incident. Be patient and understanding. It can take time.

Q. Since the incident occurred my child has difficulty in sleeping, complains of headaches etc. Can I be sure these are related to the incident?

A. Grief can affect one physically as well as emotionally and these and other symptoms may be part of a grief reaction. If they persist, consult a doctor for a check up.

Q. If my child remains very upset what should I do?

A. If your child remains distressed after a period of six weeks or so, he/she may need additional support, but there is no fixed rule about the length of the grieving process. If you are very concerned at any point, it is best to seek more help through your GP/Child and Family Centre/CAMHS.

Q. In what ways are adolescents different from other children?

A. During adolescence there are a lot of changes going on for young people and some may feel confused about themselves and the world around them. Grief tends to heighten these feelings and increase the confusion. At this time, too, the individual may look more to friends than to family for support and comfort. Don't feel rejected by this. Just be available to listen when they need to talk and make sure they know you are there for them when they need you.

WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD THROUGH THIS DIFFICULT TIME

(Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools)

Children do not need to be taught how to grieve. They will do it naturally and in healthy ways if we allow them and if we provide a safe atmosphere, permission and example to do so.

- Listen carefully. Let them tell their story. Tell them that the reactions they are having are normal.
- Pay extra attention, spend extra time with them, be more nurturing and comforting.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse". People are not consoled by such statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help them.
- Do not be surprised by changes in behaviour or personality. They will return to their usual selves in time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally. Help them to understand the relationship between anger and trauma. Help them find safe ways to express their feelings e.g. by drawing, exercise, or talking.
- Help them to understand that defiance, aggression and risk behaviour is a way to avoid feeling the pain, hurt and or fear they are feeling.
- When going out, let them know where you are going and when you will be back.
- If you are out for a long time telephone and reassure them.
- Tolerate regressive behaviour such as nail biting, thumb sucking, or the need for a night light.
- Share your own experience of being frightened of something and getting through it.
- If they are feeling guilt or shame, emphasise that they did not choose for this to happen and that they are not to blame. Even if they were angry with the person who died, or had been mean to them, this did not make it happen.
- Work with the school support services and other available services.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRAYER SERVICES

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader

We have gathered here today to remember _____. His/her life brought joy and love to us all and his/her goodness and gentleness live on in our hearts and in our memories. As we gather together to celebrate this treasured memory we begin by asking God to take care of _____ and to welcome him/her into His kingdom.

In this moment of sorrow the Lord is in our midst and consoles us with his words:

“Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall be comforted”.

Reading Matthew 11: 28 – 30

Jesus says “Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

This is the word of the Lord.

Psalm:

Response: In you O God I put my trust

You give us Life that we may praise you.

Response

You give us Hope that we may trust you.

Response

You give us Love that we may know you.

Response

You give us Faith that we may come to you.

Response

You give us light that we may find you.

Response

You give us Food that we may need you.

Response

You give us Healing that we may desire you.

Response

You give us Jesus that we may see you.

Response

You give us Death that we may touch your face.

Response

You give us Heaven that we may live with you forever.

Response

The Gospel

A reading from the Gospel according to St. John (14: 1-6)

Do not let your hearts be troubled

Trust in God still and trust in me.

There are many rooms in my father’s house;

if there were not, I should have told you.

I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with me;

so that where I am you may be too.

You know the way to the place where I am going.

Thomas said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going so how can we know the way?”

Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

No one can come to the Father except through me.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Prayers

May the Lord support us all day long

Till the shadows lengthen and the evening comes
And the busy world is hushed
And the fever of life is over and our work is done.
Then in His mercy may He give us a safe lodging and a holy rest
And peace at last. (Cardinal Newman)

Prayer for the deceased

Lord, we mourn the loss of _____
Whose life has passed so quickly.
And we entrust him/her to your mercy.
Welcome him/her into your heavenly home
And grant him/her the happiness of everlasting youth.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayer for the mourners

Father of mercies and God of all consolation,
Comfort us in our loss and sorrow.
Give us refuge and strength,
Lift us from the depths of grief.
Your Son Jesus Christ,
By dying has destroyed our death,
And by rising, restored our life.
May our faith be a light to us in this time of darkness.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayers of the Faithful

Let us pray now to God, the source of life; we pray for our friend who has died and also for those who mourn him/her; for ourselves and for all God's people.

Give eternal rest to _____, and may the light of Jesus Christ shine upon him/her. Lord hear us.

Grant to those who mourn him/her the comfort of knowing that he/she is with God, and let them always be thankful for the good of his/her life. Lord hear us.

We pray for all we know who have died, for family and friends; we pray especially for those who have died unmourned and unloved. Lord hear us.

Grant to us, Lord God, a strong confidence
That you are Lord of the living,
And that nothing you have made is forgotten
In your sight and in your love.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflection

We can look on death in many ways:

A cloud that is dark,

A moment of intense aloneness

A stinging fear

An experience we resist and don't wish to talk of.

We cannot avoid it nor escape it.

Our experience this day reminds us that death is a moment we all will face.

Can we see in it the outstretched hand of God,

The light beyond the cloud that is dark;

Or the companionship of Christ Jesus in this fearful moment of aloneness?

As loved ones who have died in the peace of Christ beckoned us into life

They beckon us too, from beyond this earthly life

To share in the light and love of Jesus

Whose death was the beginning of the risen life on Easter morning.

Beannacht

On the day when the weight deadens on your shoulders and you stumble.

May the clay dance to balance you.

And when your eyes freeze behind the grey window

And the ghost of loss gets in to you,

May a flock of colours, indigo, red, green and azure blue

Come to awaken in you a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays in the currach of thought

And a stain of ocean blackens beneath you,

May there come across the waters

A path of yellow moonlight

To bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,

May the clarity of light be yours,

May the fluency of the ocean be yours,

May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow wind

Work these words of love around you,

An invisible cloak to mind your life.

Eternal rest grant to him/her, O Lord

And let perpetual light shine upon him/her.

May he/she Rest in Peace and may his/her soul and the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen

May the love of God and the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ

Bless and console us

And gently wipe every tear from our eyes:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer for the ill

Lord, she who you love is ill.

You well know her pain, her suffering and her fear,

Give her again the joy of good health,

But more so, give her now the assurance that you are close:

Let her know the presence of your love.

Give peace of heart and confidence to all of us who care for her;

May we glimpse in her sufferings and pain the gifts of courage you have given her.

Help us to be hopeful that her serious illness will pass.

Strengthen her body, mind and spirit, to be fully with us again.

Lord, Father of Mercies and God of all consolation.

Lay your healing hands on _____ and comfort her/him in her/his time of need.

Grant to her/him inward happiness and the serenity which comes from living close to You.

Daily renew her/his strength, and let the eternal spirit dwell in her/his body and her/his mind filling her with grace and courage.

May her/his faith be a light to her/him at this time.

Amen

Critical Incident Response Team

Paul Fogarty

Martina Butler

Anne Marie Johnston

Geraldine Griffin

Aoife Campion

Therese Boland

Alice Cooney

Caroline Kinane

Nicola Hewson

Denise Flannery

Brian Carroll

Norma Galvin

