

Coláiste Éamon Rís

Critical Incident Management Policy

Introduction

While very few schools experience a major crisis, most schools at some time or other experience traumatic situations such as the sudden death of a student or teacher due to an accident or illness. The school wishes to respond in an organised and caring manner in the event of such an incident. All research in this area shows that the key to managing a critical incident is planning. We are confident that having such a plan in place we will be able to react quickly and effectively and maintain a sense of control in the school. It will also help to ensure that normality returns as soon as possible and that the effects on students and staff are limited. It will help us to respond in a positive manner to the short and long term needs of those affected by the incident.

We wish to acknowledge the information provided by NEPS (national educational psychological service) and a large portion of this policy is based on the advice and resource pack provided by NEPS entitled 'Responding to Critical Incidents'.

Aim

In our Mission Statement we state that the school community values, educates and prepares all its students for a responsible, meaningful and productive life.

This policy is devised to ensure that the school community will be able to deal positively, effectively and sympathetically in the event of a critical incident.

Definition

A Critical Incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the running of the school.

Creation of a coping supportive and caring ethos in the school

The school is proactive in putting systems in place which help to lessen the probability of the occurrence of an incident. This is done in the following ways:

1. Creating a physically and psychologically safe school by having in place a safety statement; an anti bullying policy; a substance use policy; fire drills and an evacuation plan. The school building is maintained to a very high standard and there is scheduled supervision provided for students before and after school and during the break times.
2. Promoting health and preventing infection. Integral to the success of any infection control programmes is the education of all staff members, who in turn should pass on the information to the students. Thus promotion of personal hygiene, of hygienic practices and the prevention of infection

becomes an integral part of the school curriculum. The school community should be current with immunisations. Parents are included in this team approach to infection control. A co-operative approach with ready dialogue between parents and the school ensures a healthy environment for all. Parents are encouraged to inform the school of any infectious illness in their children. In turn the school informs parents if there are any outbreaks of infection in the school.

This Critical Incident Management Policy is just one of many policies aimed at safeguarding and supporting the school community.

3. SPHE programmes are included in the curriculum to address issues such as grief and loss; communication skills; stress and anger management; conflict management; problem solving; help seeking; decision making and alcohol and drug prevention. This work is complemented by other subjects in the curriculum such as Religious education; English; Learning Support to mention a few.
4. By developing anti-bullying policies and peer support programmes such as the Meitheal programme so that students are protected and supported.
5. By staff being alert to the signs and symptoms of depression and informed in the area of suicide awareness and interventions for suicidal students.
6. By staff having access to resources on mental health issues.
7. The school has links with outside agencies which may be contacted in the event of an emergency or for onward referral of students.

Critical Incident Management team

The following staff members may agree to be part of the critical incident management team. They are Principal; Deputy Principal; the school Chaplain, the Guidance Counsellor.

Certain key roles need to be agreed to be assigned to each member, however, it is understood that these roles will to a certain extent be shared.

Team Leader: Mr. M. McMahon.

Staff Liaison: Mr. S. Ahearne.

Community and Parent Liaison: Mr. J. Hegarty

Student Liaison: Ms. M. Barnwell.

Administration: Ms. B. Stafford.

Critical Incident Plan

PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED IN THE EVENT OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

1. SHORT-TERM ACTIONS (1st Day)

A 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?

B Contact appropriate agencies

(See Appendix 3 for further details)

- Emergency services
- Medical services
- Health Board Psychology Departments/Community Care Services
- NEPS
- BOM
- DES

C Convene a meeting with Critical Incident Management Team

A list of possible topics to be covered follows.

- Agreeing a statement of the facts for staff, students, parents and the media. If possible there should be a written version of this.
- Delegating responsibilities to the Critical Incident Management Team.
- Appointing someone to handle phone enquiries and to deal with the media.
- Ensuring that a phone line remains open and available for enquiries.
- Organising the timetable/routine for the day. (Adhering to the normal school routine is important if this is possible).
- Organising a staff meeting, if appropriate.
- Organising the supervision of students during any staff meetings.
- Deciding whether an outside professional be invited to the staff meeting.

D Arrange supervision of students

E Hold staff meeting

All staff should be asked to attend, including ancillary 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.
- 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 NEPS advice and information pack).

F Organise timetable for the day

As far as possible the normal routine of the day will be maintained.

G Inform parents/guardians

(i) Children 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.

- Agree who should share information with parents and how this should be done.
- 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.
- Give telephone numbers for enquiries.

(ii) Children not directly involved:

The parents of other children in the school should be informed of the incident and that their child may be upset. Send a letter to parents stating the facts and brief details of the incident. It may not be appropriate at this point to disclose the names of those involved. (See NEPS advice and information for sample letter).

(iii) Inform students

Students will be informed in class groups. The students will be informed by the Principal or another member of the Critical Incident Management team or by their teacher. Advice might be sought from NEPS or other 'experts' on the best way to impart information.

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 distress.
- 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.

H Make contact with the bereaved family

I Dealing with the media

A written statement may be prepared to include:

- the facts about the incident
- what has been done already
- what is going to be done
- positive information or comments about the deceased person.

if asked to give a live interview the following points will be kept in mind:

- consider assigning the task to someone skilled or familiar with dealing with the media
- take some time to prepare
- remember that everything you say is on record and, therefore, keep it simple, factual and brief
- decline if you are not ready or think it inappropriate.

Consider setting aside a room for the media. This may help to control their access to staff and students. Brief staff and students and advise them on dealing with the media.

J 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.

2 MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS (24 – 72 Hours)

A Review the events of the first 24 hours

- Reconvene 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.

B Arrange support for individual students, groups of students, and parents, if necessary

- 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.
- 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. See Appendix 4 for sample letter for parental consent.

C Plan for the reintegration of students and staff (eg absentees, injured, siblings, close relatives etc.)

- Name key person(s) to liaise with above on their return to school.

D Plan visits to injured

- Name key person(s) to visit home/hospital.

E Liaise with the family regarding funeral arrangements/memorial service

- Designate staff member to liaise with family, to extend sympathy and clarify the family's wishes regarding the school's involvement in funeral/memorial service.
- Arrange a home visit by two staff representatives within 24 hours, if appropriate.
- Have regard for different religious traditions and faiths.

F Attendance and participation at funeral/memorial service

- Decide this in accordance with parents' wishes and school management decisions and in consultation with close school friends.

G School closure

- Request a decision on this from school management and Department of Education and Science.

3 LONGER TERM ACTIONS

A Monitor students for signs of continuing distress

A referral to the Health Board may be necessary. (See NEPS resource pack 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.

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

- 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?

C Formalise the Critical Incident Plan for the future

- Ensure ratification of the plan by the board of management if amendments are made.

D 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 pupils 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.

E Decide on appropriate ways to deal with anniversaries (be sensitive to special days and events)

- Anniversaries may trigger emotional responses in students/staff and they may need additional support at this time.
- Acknowledge the anniversary with the family and liaise on any proposed commemoration.
- Be sensitive to significant days like Birthdays, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day.

Review and Evaluation

- (a) Policy to be evaluated every year
- (b) Review of policy in three years time

Responsibility for both (a) and (b) with teacher with responsibility for dealing with the Principal

Appendix One

Summary Checklist for Principals

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

MAINTAIN THE NORMAL SCHOOL ROUTINE WHEN AT ALL POSSIBLE

10. Inform parents/guardians
11. Inform students
12. Make contact with the bereaved family
13. Organise support
14. Respond to the media.

Appendix Two

DEALING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF A SUICIDE OR SUSPECTED SUICIDE

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

- A 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 staff members.
- 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 ancillary 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.
- 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 child.
- 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.

* See NEPS advice and resource pack 4.2 for Reactions to Grief. See also Sample Letter to Parents.

Students

- Give the facts as they are known.
- 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 NEPS advice and information pack 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 to their family or their G.P.
- 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
- Pupils with a history of suicide attempts/self harm
- Pupils who experienced a recent loss, death of a friend or relative, family divorce or separation, break-up with a boyfriend/girlfriend
- Pupils who have been bereaved by a suicide in the past
- Pupils with a psychiatric history
- Pupils with a history of substance abuse
- Pupils with a history of sexual abuse
- Non-communicative pupils who have difficulty talking about their feelings
- Pupils experiencing serious family difficulties, including serious mental or physical illness
- Less able students.

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. In our school a number of teachers have undergone training in the area of suicide awareness. The names of these teachers are available from the Principal.

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.

Appendix Three

Emergency contact list

Wexford Garda Station **053 912 2333**

Ambulance **999/112**

Wexford Fire Station **999/112**

Wexford County Fire Service HQ **053-9176585, 9176586 9176699**

Wexford Health Centre **053-9147718**

Wexford Hospital **053-9153000**

Chairperson of the Board of Management (Gerry Forde) **087-8196096**

Inspectorate **01-8896553/8892002**

State Examination Commission **090-6442700**

DES – Communications Unit **01-8892341/2181**

NEPS Psychologist **053-91433000**

Clergy/Pastoral Care (Fr.Brian Whelan) **086 8306676**

ASTI **1850-418400/01-6040160**

Addiction:

Community Based Drugs Initiative (CBDI) **053-9121691/9123262**

Cornmarket Project (Addiction Counselling) **053-9144931**

Substance Misuse Team HSE **051-426600**

Drugs Outreach Service **087-9351765**

Bereavement:

Bereavement Care Service **053-9123086**

Helplines:

Childline **1800-666666** Samaritans **1850-609090**

Youth Service and Support:

FDYS Wexford **053-9123262** ISPCC **053-9123864** Barnardos **053-9481014**

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Due for review: