

# RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS

NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools

# RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS

## NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools

The Guidelines are available on the  
Department of Education and Skills website:

[www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)





# FOREWORD

---

In 2003 the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) produced a resource pack to help schools in responding to unexpected and traumatic events. A second edition was produced in 2007. I am delighted with this opportunity to welcome this 2016 revision of *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools*. I would like to emphasise the importance for school staff of the advice and information contained in this publication. It is based on research in the area of critical incidents and is further enriched by the experience of NEPS psychologists and schools.

The kinds of critical incidents experienced by schools includes suicide or suspected suicide, death due to violence, accidental death including road traffic accidents and drowning, and death through illness.

The key to managing critical incidents is forward planning. *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools* outlines how schools can plan for crises and also considers preventative approaches that schools should adopt in creating a safe and supportive environment.

In times of tragedy, young people need support from the adults who know them best. Their teachers have invaluable experience, competence and skills in dealing with children and young people and, in partnership with parents, are the best people to provide this support. The publication provides practical step-by-step guidelines for teachers and principals on how to respond when a tragedy occurs. It offers support to schools at a potentially challenging time.

I would like to express my appreciation to NEPS on the publication of these revised Guidelines. I know that schools will benefit greatly from this highly accessible advice and information. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the other agencies who have worked jointly with NEPS psychologists in responding to incidents.

Finally, I wish to extend my sympathy to the many schools that have experienced tragic events over the years and to acknowledge the strength and courage displayed by students and school staff during these difficult times.

**Richard Bruton, T.D.**

Minister for Education and Skills



# CONTENTS

---

6 Acknowledgements

---

7 Acronyms

---

8 Introduction

---

## 12 Section 1 THE ROLE OF NEPS IN CRITICAL INCIDENTS

---

12 1.1 Description of the role of NEPS

13 1.2 NEPS as a school service

13 1.3 Interagency liaison

## 14 Section 2 PREVENTION

---

## 16 Section 3 PREPARATION AND PLANNING

---

16 3.1 Creating a plan

16 3.2 Defining a critical incident

16 3.3 The role of the NEPS psychologist in critical incident planning

17 3.4 Setting up a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)

17 3.5 Key administrative tasks

18 3.6 Communication of the plan

19 3.7 Checklist for reviewing the policy and plan

## 20 Section 4 ACTION PLAN FOR PRINCIPAL / TEAM LEADER: SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

---

20 4.1 Initial assessment of the incident

21 4.2 Initial action plan

22 4.3 Agenda for meeting with Critical Incident Management Team/Key Staff

24 4.4 Meeting with a staff group

24 4.4.1 Sample script for principal

26 4.5 Cultural sensitivity and awareness

26 4.6 Students with learning difficulties

27 4.7 End of day session with teachers

27 4.8 Contact with the affected family/families

28 4.9 Summary checklist for principals: Day 1

## **29** Section 5 ACTION PLAN FOR PRINCIPALS: MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

---

- 29 5.1 Meeting with the CIMT and other agencies
- 29 5.2 Meeting with whole staff

## **30** Section 6 ACTION PLAN FOR PRINCIPALS: FOLLOW UP

---

## **32** Section 7 SUICIDE/SUSPECTED SUICIDE

---

- 32 7.1 Suicide prevention - what schools need to do
- 34 7.2 Criteria for judging the suitability of external programmes
- 35 7.3 Warning signs
- 37 7.4 Flow Chart: Responding to concerns
- 38 7.5 Issues that may arise when a student dies by suicide/suspected suicide
- 39 7.6 Suicide contagion

## **40** Section 8 ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS AND VIOLENT DEATHS: SOME ISSUES

---

- 40 8.1 Road traffic accidents
- 41 8.2 Violent death
- 41 8.3 Witnessing an event
- 42 8.4 Breaking the news
- 42 8.5 Parent meetings
- 43 8.6 Drop-in centres

## **44** Section 9 DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

---

- 44 9.1 Guidelines for the school
- 46 9.2 Do's and don'ts in dealing with the media
- 47 9.3 Frequently Asked Questions in dealing with the media - Principals

## **48** Section 10 CRITICAL INCIDENTS DURING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS

---

- 48 10.1 Frequently Asked Questions during exam time

## **51** Section 11 RESOURCES: RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS

---

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

Much of the information in *Responding to Critical Incident: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools* is based on the direct experience of psychologists in NEPS who have provided support to schools in the aftermath of critical incidents.

This difficult work is undertaken jointly with school staff who display exceptional coping skills when the unimaginable happens. Most schools now have a critical incident management plan and team. This helps them to cope when an incident happens. NEPS colleagues have provided feedback on their experience in schools and this has informed changes to the previous publications as well as the development of new materials. Suggestions from colleagues in school management bodies, unions and parent groups have also been incorporated. Thanks to all for their contribution.

The practical experience of working with schools and other agencies over the years has resulted in the accumulation of a significant body of expertise within NEPS. The commitment of NEPS staff and school staff members to working together in difficult circumstances is outstanding. Thanks to all members of the school community for this work.

A number of complex incidents requiring more effective interagency liaison has helped to develop NEPS practices and has provided pointers to areas needing further development. We would like to acknowledge the value of working jointly with our colleagues in other agencies. Thanks to those agencies with whom NEPS has worked and who have offered feedback on particular events as well as on this new publication.

# ACRONYMS

---

ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CIMP	Critical Incident Management Plan
CIMT	Critical Incident Management Team
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DOH	Department of Health
EAM	Examination and Assessment Manager
EAS	Employee Assistance Service
ETB	Education and Training Board
HEA	Health Education Agency
HSE	Health Service Executive
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals Network
LHO	Local Health Office
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NOSP	National Office for Suicide Prevention
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
RTA	Road traffic accident
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
TUI	Teachers Union of Ireland
WHO	World Health Organisation



# INTRODUCTION

---

The aim of these guidelines is to outline the role of the school

in promoting mental health  
and in creating effective  
care systems

in being proactive in  
preparing for critical  
incidents

in responding to  
critical incidents

The guidelines are divided into the following sections covering the broad areas of prevention, planning and intervention

- A general description of the role of NEPS
- Prevention
- Preparation and planning
- Issues around suicide, road traffic accidents and violent death
- Dealing with the media
- Critical incidents during certificate exams

Resource Materials in the form of Handouts are contained in the Section 11 of this document which can be photocopied as needed. These Handouts will be referred to throughout this publication as R1, R2, and R3 etc.

## PREVENTION

This section briefly describes elements of schools' policies and practices that promote mental health and wellbeing. It highlights the need for staff training and awareness as well as procedures for responding to vulnerable students. Further information on how schools can support students with mental health difficulties is included in Section 7, which focuses on suicide. Comprehensive advice for schools on mental health promotion is available in the publications *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools (2013)* and *Well-Being in Primary Schools (2015)*.

## PREPARATION AND PLANNING

This section gives detailed information on how to prepare for critical incidents. It covers:

- What is a critical incident?
- The establishment of a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)
- Key administrative tasks
- A checklist for reviewing policy and plans.

Advice on the development of a critical incident policy and a planning template can be found in Section 11, R19 and R20.

## INTERVENTION

The next three sections set out a recommended action plan for schools. It offers a step by step guide through the various stages of the response:

- Short term actions – Day 1
- Medium term actions – Days 2/3
- Follow-up actions.

Information and advice is also given in dealing with particular types of incidents and issues that may arise.

Guidelines on some of the issues arising in relation to death by suicide/ suspected suicide, road traffic accidents and violent deaths are addressed in sections 7 and 8.

The media section contains guidelines on how schools can best deal with media interest. Advice on use of social media during a critical incident is included in Section 11, R22

NEPS' role during certification examinations is addressed in Section 10.



Sections 1 - 10

# **GUIDELINES**

## **RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS**

# SECTION 1

## THE ROLE OF NEPS IN CRITICAL INCIDENTS

### What is a critical incident?

In a school context, NEPS suggests the following definition:

A critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school.

### 1.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE (NEPS)

Since the establishment of the Schools Psychological Service in 1965, psychologists have been involved in helping school communities respond to critical incidents. This continued to be a core element of the work following the establishment of NEPS in 1999. This work continues to be a key area of service as NEPS experiences an increase in the number of requests from schools for intervention in the aftermath of critical incidents.

As well as working specifically in the area of school policy and planning for critical incidents, NEPS also has an important role in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing in schools and in prevention and early intervention. This role is complementary to that of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), and includes supporting schools in the development of early intervention for students showing signs of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

When a tragic event happens, NEPS response generally involves:

#### PLANNING

Helping school management to assess the significance and impact of the event, to draw up a plan, to mobilise the schools resources and to access other support systems.

#### INFORMATION & ADVICE

Providing information and advice to management and staff as they come to terms with the situation.

#### SUPPORT

Being available for consultation to school staff as they support the students. This may involve support meetings at the beginning and end of the school day.

#### SCREENING

Working with teachers to identify students who are most in need of support, and developing procedures for reviewing their needs and supporting onward referral, if necessary.

The primary role of NEPS is to advise and support the teachers and other adults who work daily with students and who know them well. Best practice indicates that students need to be with people they know and trust. It is, therefore more beneficial if school staff provide support for students as they will be around in the longer term and will be in a better position to monitor their students over the days and weeks following an incident.

NEPS does not provide counselling, but rather immediate, short term support, information and advice to staff.

On rare occasions and in the event of a major critical incident, school management may decide to host a parent meeting in order to support parents and to disseminate information. The psychologist may attend this meeting to outline the role of NEPS, answer questions on the psychological impact of the event and offer advice on how parents can best support their children (see Section 8.5).

In a very limited number of cases a decision may be made by NEPS and external agencies, in consultation with the school, to provide a drop-in service for parents. NEPS psychologists may be available at such a drop-in facility as part of an interagency response (see Section 8.6).

## **1.2 NEPS AS A SCHOOL SERVICE**

NEPS is a school support service and is in a unique position as it delivers almost all of its services in the school setting. The assigned school psychologist will usually be involved in supporting the school response to the incident and will generally be known to the school staff. At times of tragedy a person who is familiar with the school, the staff and the students is well placed to offer support in the school. Prior knowledge of the normal running of the school can be invaluable at a time when all normality seems to disappear. This familiarity offers comfort to the principal and other school staff. Even where the assigned school psychologist is not involved, NEPS' experience in dealing with incidents in school settings, and their relationships with local support agencies is very useful.

NEPS psychologists will take their lead from the principal of the school and will be available to give advice on how to proceed. As most schools will not have much experience of such events, school management appreciate clear advice as they come to terms with the immediate shock.

## **1.3 INTERAGENCY LIAISON**

Where a number of external agencies are involved in the response, experience has shown that a co-ordinating role is necessary. Schools can be overwhelmed by the many offers of help from individuals and agencies, especially when a major incident occurs. NEPS can support the school in coordinating offers and advising on how best to avail of and manage the various resources available. Procedures for recording meetings with students and for onward referral need to be clear and agreed by the Critical Incident Management Team.

# SECTION 2

## PREVENTION

Schools can attend to prevention by having systems in place which help to promote emotional health and wellbeing and which build resilience in both staff and students, thus preparing them to cope with a range of life events.

Mental health promotion is a vital element of this work. Mental health has been defined in the following ways:

*“A state of emotional and social wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can manage the normal stresses of life, can work effectively, and is able to play a role in his or her community”* (WHO, 1999).

*“The emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness”* (HEA, 1997).

One of the key means available to schools in their work of supporting healthy development for all students is Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).

### **Social, Personal and Health Education**

SPHE is a key element of a school’s prevention work. It is a required element of the curriculum at Primary School level and of the Junior Cycle programme for all Post Primary schools. At Senior Cycle, schools are encouraged to deliver an SPHE programme. A draft curricular framework for SPHE at Senior Cycle is available on the NCCA website. The NCCA are currently developing Draft Guidelines on Wellbeing in Junior Cycle.

Many schools use Transition Year as an opportunity to do more in-depth work on such areas as personal development and mental health.

SPHE supports the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual development, and wellbeing of all members of the school community. When well implemented, it has a significant role to play in the creation of healthy, nurturing and safe environments. It is a ‘universal’ intervention, targeting all pupils, and thus enhancing the health of the whole school population. It should be integrated with the academic, social, emotional, recreational and artistic life of the school. It is critical to a whole school strategy that encourages students to develop their values and attitudes and helps provide the life skills they need to live healthy lives in the wider community.

Teachers, parents and agencies in the wider community should all be encouraged to participate in and contribute to this process. Inputs by Health Service Executive services and other community groups need to be carefully integrated into the work of the SPHE team so as to support the overall work of the school in health promotion.

Guidance for schools for judging the suitability of external programmes is provided in Section 7.2. Some of the elements which contribute to creating a healthy and safe school include:

- The creation of a **psychologically safe environment**, including good SPHE provision, effective pastoral care systems, procedures for identifying vulnerable students and use of school resources such as guidance and counselling to respond to the needs of such vulnerable students. Young people face many challenges in their lives. Not being accepted for who they are and what they are can often cause difficulties. Children who feel different because of their sexuality, their ethnicity, their interests, their talents, their family, the way they look, etc., may experience difficulties in the school environment. Safe and inclusive schools are alert to potential problems and have clear policies and procedures in place for dealing with such issues, including an anti-bullying policy
- **The integration of SPHE programmes** in the curriculum in a broad based way, addressing issues such as grief and loss; communication skills; stress and anger management; resilience; conflict management; problem solving; help-seeking; bullying; decision making and the use and misuse of alcohol and drugs
- **The incorporation of mental health issues into the regular SPHE provision.** Programmes offered by external agencies in the promotion of positive mental health are integrated into an overall SPHE and student support plan for the school. Note: Please refer to Section 7 for additional advice on mental health and suicide
- The creation of a **physically safe environment**, evacuation plan formulated, regular fire-drills occur, fire exits and extinguishers are regularly checked
- The provision of **staff training and resources** on issues affecting young people, (see Section 11)
- **The creation of systems and procedures for the identification of students at risk**, and for referral to school personnel for screening and support
- The **development of links with external agencies**, together with clear procedures for appropriate onward referral, for those with more serious difficulties
- Staff are familiar with the **Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures** and how to proceed with concerns or disclosures
- **The provision of support** for school staff members and clear information on how to access the Employee Assistance Service (**Free phone 1800 411057**).

Attention to these areas will contribute to the creation of a safe school, will de-stigmatise mental health problems and will foster the development of young people who are healthy in mind, body and spirit. Students, teachers and parents will be encouraged and enabled to talk openly about their problems and seek help when necessary.

*The Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion & Suicide Prevention (2013), Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools (2014) and Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (2015)* provide additional resources for schools on mental health promotion.



# SECTION 3

## PREPARATION AND PLANNING

### 3.1 CREATING A PLAN

Situations such as the sudden death of a student or teacher can have a traumatic effect on a school. The first three weeks following an incident is a time of vulnerability for staff and students and may call on all its resources to deal with the event.

The key to managing a critical incident is planning. NEPS psychologists report that schools which have developed a **Critical Incident Management Plan (CIMP)** are able to cope more effectively in the aftermath of an incident. Having a plan enables staff to react quickly and effectively and to maintain a sense of control. It may also ensure that normality returns as soon as possible and that the effects on students and staff are limited.

Research suggests that an effective response by the school during the first 48 hours is crucial. It is therefore important for all schools to prepare a Critical Incident Management Plan. Templates for a critical incident policy and for a CIMP are provided in Section 11, R19 and R20. Schools should develop these with regard to its own particular circumstances and needs. Involving parents and students in the development of the Critical Incident Management Plan is advised.

### 3.2 DEFINING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

In a school context, NEPS suggests the following definition:

A critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school.

### 3.3 THE ROLE OF THE NEPS PSYCHOLOGIST IN CRITICAL INCIDENT PLANNING

The school psychologist may support schools in planning in a number of ways

- by making a **presentation** to a school or a cluster of schools on the development of a CIMP and/or on how to respond to a critical incident
- by encouraging schools to establish a **Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)**
- by attending one of the early meetings of the **CIMT**
- by offering to attend a **follow-up meeting** with the team to discuss the draft policy/ plan and to offer feedback before it is finalised.

### 3.4 SETTING UP A CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM (CIMT)

At the time of a crisis there are a large number of tasks to be carried out. By identifying key roles in advance of an incident there is a clear statement of **who will do what, when and how**. A good plan also ensures that no individual is overburdened and that important elements in the response are not forgotten. Generally the principal will play a key role. Staff members such as the guidance counsellor, chaplain, home school liaison co-ordinator and members of the SEN or student support teams all have an important contribution to make when an incident occurs because of their particular training and expertise. Their role should therefore, be carefully considered.

Students, where appropriate, should be involved in the preparation of the plans so that they will know what to expect if a tragic incident happens. The following points may help in ensuring that an effective team is established:

- members should be suited to the role. They should have an interest in this type of work and some particular skills (e.g. good interpersonal skills, organisational skills, a calm approach). It is suggested that someone who is recently bereaved may not be a suitable candidate for the team
- each member should be willing to contribute a number of hours to the work
- responsibilities attached to the various roles should be clearly outlined
- the size of a team should be appropriate to the size of the school
- the team should meet annually to update and review the plan
- the members should usually remain on the team for at least one full school year.

Some possible roles are:

TEAM LEADER  
GARDA CONTACT  
STAFF CONTACT  
STUDENT CONTACT  
PARENT CONTACT  
COMMUNITY/AGENCY CONTACT  
MEDIA CONTACT ADMINISTRATOR

A detailed outline of these roles can be found in the template for the critical incident plan (see Section 11, R19). Student leaders/representatives may have a role to play.

### 3.5 KEY ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS

Certain administrative tasks need to be carried out in advance. Contact details should be regularly updated so that communication is speedy and effective in the event of a critical incident. This role is often carried out by the school secretary. In the event of an incident, the normal school business will also have to be dealt with in addition to all of these tasks.

Maintain an up-to-date list of contact telephone numbers. Numbers should be available for:

STUDENTS  
PARENTS / GUARDIANS  
STAFF MEMBERS  
EMERGENCY CONTACT LIST (see Section 11, R21).  
This should be displayed in the staff room, the school office and the principal's office.

Agreement should be reached about where lists will be kept. All lists should be dated and responsibility for updating at agreed intervals should be clearly assigned. A copy of the layout of the school building should be displayed in key places, with exits highlighted - this is already required under Health and Safety regulations.

Information compiled in case of emergency during school trips should include:

- A list of all the students/staff involved and the teacher in charge
- A list of mobile phone numbers for the teacher in charge and other accompanying staff members
- Up to date medical information on students with allergies, epilepsy etc.

#### Preparing templates

- Prepare templates for letters to parents and templates for press releases. These should be 'ready-to-go' and on the school computer system so that they can be adapted quickly when an incident occurs.

#### Emergency packs

- A small number of key documents for members of the CIMT, should be readily accessible in the event of an emergency e.g. emergency contact lists, checklist for first 24 hours, layout of school buildings.

#### Administration in the course of an incident

- Identify a dedicated telephone line, which will be kept free for important outgoing and incoming calls
- Identify rooms which may be used for various purposes - individual and group support sessions; meeting parents; a quiet room; a waiting room etc.
- Designate a point where a log of events and telephone calls made and received will be kept
- All offers of help should be logged – the name of the agency, what they are offering, a contact name and number. These agencies may be contacted later if appropriate
- Agree arrangements for dealing with normal school business.

### 3.6 COMMUNICATION OF THE PLAN

All staff and students should be consulted during the planning stage

- If there are a significant number of students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, some consultation with parents about their beliefs and rituals is advisable so that the school is aware of issues that may arise, (see Section 4.5)

- Once prepared, all staff should be made aware of the school's critical incident policies and procedures
- The CIMP should be instantly accessible to the personnel who will have the key roles in putting the plan into action
- School management may also decide to give a copy of the final plan to each staff member. Alternatively, they may have copies readily available in the school office and on the computer system
- Students and parents should be informed
- All new and temporary staff should also be informed of the details of the plan.

### 3.7 CHECKLIST FOR REVIEWING THE POLICY AND PLAN

Has serious consideration been given to the school's approach to prevention?
Has the school defined a critical incident and given examples?
Have key roles been clearly identified and the assigned tasks outlined?
Have staff members been nominated to each of the assigned roles/tasks?
Are the personnel suitable?
Has each member of the team compiled their emergency pack (photocopies of relevant handouts)?
Has contact been made with external agencies?
Is the Emergency Contact List (Section 11, R21) appropriate and complete?
Are letters and press releases readily available on school headed paper, for adaptation to suit the particular circumstances?
Are telephone numbers on contact lists up-to-date?
Have all the staff been consulted about the plan/policy?
Has a date been set for a review of the plan?
Who will be given copies of the plan?
Where will copies of the plan be kept?
Have parents been consulted about the plan?
Have the students been consulted about the plan?

# SECTION 4

## ACTION PLAN FOR PRINCIPAL/TEAM LEADER: SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

Day 1

This section of the guidelines outlines short term action plans for schools. Medium term and follow-up actions are addressed in Sections 5 and 6.

### 4.1 INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INCIDENT

With the increase in the number of critical incidents, there is a need to clarify the type of response a NEPS psychologist might be expected to offer in different types of situations. To assist in this, a classification of response levels is proposed, which is linked to a number of factors impacting on the situation. This classification in no way diminishes the seriousness of any particular event. It is intended to help schools and psychologists assess what level of intervention is needed, including the additional supports a psychologist may need to request from colleagues and other agencies.

#### STEP 1

What type of response is needed?

- **Response Level 1:** the death of a student or staff member who was terminally ill; the death of parent/sibling; a fire in school not resulting in serious injury; serious damage to school property.
- **Response Level 2:** the sudden death of a student or staff member.
- **Response Level 3:** an accident/event involving a number of students; a violent death; an incident with a high media profile or involving a number of schools.

#### STEP 2

Should a psychologist be involved?

- Consider the nature of the event and how your school is coping. What support do you need from NEPS and/or other agencies?

#### STEP 3

How do I assess the needs of the school?

- Is there a feeling of being overwhelmed by this event?
- Has there been a previous incident? How recent? What kind of incident? If more than one, how many? (If the school has experienced a recent incident or a number of incidents staff may be exhausted or distressed. On the other hand, they may feel more experienced and better able to deal with the situation).
- Is there a critical incident plan/team in place?
- Is there a good pastoral care system in the school?
- Is there significant media interest in the incident?
- Are other agencies already involved?

## STEP 4

### What action do I take?

- For an incident requiring a Level 1 response it may be sufficient to talk to the psychologist on the phone. Locate your Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools (2016). The psychologist will refer to these and talk you through relevant sections. A copy of these has been made available to all schools. It is also available on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) by following the links to NEPS.
- In the case of an incident requiring a Level 2 & Level 3 response, make contact with NEPS. Depending on the incident at least one psychologist will visit the school.

Exchange mobile numbers with the psychologist so that immediate contact will be possible at all times.

A checklist is provided at the end of this section. The procedures to be followed will depend on the particular incident that has occurred and the particular arrangements in place in your school.

## 4.2 INITIAL ACTION PLAN

- Gather accurate information: It is important to obtain accurate information about the incident; otherwise rumours may take over and add to the distress of those involved.
- Establish the facts: What has happened? When it happened? How it happened? The number and names of students and staff involved; are there other schools involved? the extent of the injuries; and the location of those injured.
- Contact appropriate agencies (see school's Emergency Contact List: Section 11, R21)

EMERGENCY SERVICES  
MEDICAL SERVICES  
BOARD OF MANAGEMENT  
NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE  
HEALTH SERVICE EXECUTIVE  
TEACHER UNIONS  
STATE EXAMINATIONS COMMISSION  
PARISH PRIEST/CLERGY

- Convene a meeting with key staff/Critical Incident Management Team. Depending on the incident it is advisable to arrange an evening or early morning meeting to ensure that the team is well prepared and has a plan in place for the school day ahead.

## 4.3 AGENDA FOR MEETING WITH CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM / KEY STAFF

Share full details of the event

Agree on the facts. These will need to be relayed in a clear, appropriate and consistent manner by all staff to the students

Discuss what agencies have been contacted and whether there are additional ones that should be informed (check Emergency Contact List Section 11, R21)

Managing communication needs careful attention. Use of social media is a good medium for facilitating factual and appropriate communication

When a number of external agencies are involved in a response, co-ordination will be needed and procedures will need to be agreed. An agency such as NEPS may take on this role

Plan procedures for the day

Discuss issues relating to school routine, including school closure. Remember it is important to maintain a normal routine when at all possible. It is recommended that the school timetable runs as normal. This will provide a sense of safety and structure which is comforting for many students. Teachers should give students the opportunity to talk about what has happened and temporarily shelve all academic activities if necessary. See Section 11, R5 for further information

You may wish to consult students about what to do if there is an event scheduled such as a trip, concert, match, etc. This should reduce the likelihood of students being angry later on as a result of any school action or in-action

Discuss how to break the news to relatives and close friends and who should do this (remember that they must always be told separately)

Discuss how to break the news to the rest of the students. It is often best to do this with class groups, rather than large assemblies (See Section 11, R5)

Discuss how to identify vulnerable students (see page 25)

If there are students of various nationalities and religions in the school, this needs to be taken into consideration in organising prayer services, attendance at the funeral etc.

Parents of different religious or national groups may need to be consulted

Plan a whole staff briefing (including ancillary staff). This may need to be done in two groups depending on the arrangements for the supervision of students

Agree the text of a letter to be sent to parents, (See Section 11, R2 and R3)

Discuss how to deal with the media. Prepare a media statement and place it on the school's website, if appropriate (see Section 9 and Section 11, R4). This can be emailed to media representatives who make contact with the school. It may also be used if an interview is requested

Delegate responsibilities to the appropriate critical incident team member or key personnel

Discuss which room(s) will be available to external agencies

Decide whether a quiet room should be made available for students. This is a place that students can go if they are having difficulty remaining composed in the classroom. It should have tissues, a few stuffed toys, cushions, drawing and writing materials and information leaflets from the Resource Materials section appropriate to the age of the students. It is generally recommended that this is available for the week following the incident and that its use is then reviewed. Students should sign out of their regular class and sign into the quiet room for a certain time. The room should be supervised to ensure student safety. A very distressed student may need individual support. This might be offered by the guidance counsellor, chaplain or other staff member. A similar room could be set up for staff

A record should be kept of all students seen by school staff and agencies external to the schools, (see Section 11, R1). One person should be appointed to collate the lists regularly

Agree the next meeting time for the Critical Management Team/key staff

Agree a time for a follow up staff meeting at the end of the day. This gives an opportunity for the principal to update staff on any developments. It also allows time for preparation for the following day. Lastly, it gives staff a chance to share their experience and to wind down after the day.

**NOTE** In the case of a major incident, meetings may be held in a location away from the school involving key personnel from schools and other agencies. Care should be taken that staff with appropriate experience and authority remain in place in the school to facilitate an effective response. The principal might consider delegating someone to go to such meetings as, if they decide to go themselves, they may not be available for critical decisions in their own school.



## 4.4 MEETING WITH A STAFF GROUP

The purpose of this meeting is to relay facts to staff and to plan the schedule for the day. It is generally the principal who leads this meeting. On occasion, this duty may be delegated to another member of the team. It is crucial that the teachers have accurate facts and are kept updated. This will help to dispel rumours which may begin to circulate. It may be useful for NEPS to give a brief input.

**REMINDER:** The staff may need to be seen in two separate groups in order to facilitate supervision of students.

### 4.4.1 SAMPLE SCRIPT FOR PRINCIPAL

// *You may have already heard that two of our students were involved in a car accident last night (give details of where). (Name of students) who were driving together, both died as a result of their injuries. As more information becomes available, including funeral arrangements, I will speak to you again. This is a terrible tragedy for the school and community and our thoughts are with the families.*

*It is important to make every effort to maintain regular classroom routines in accordance with the timetable. However, for many of the students this will be difficult. I understand that this may be a very difficult time for you also and we need to be here for each other. The psychologist is now going to talk to you about how we can support each other and the students in the coming days and weeks. Thank you. //*

#### REMEMBER

Students need to be with people they know and trust so, if at all possible, it is better that teachers and other school staff provide support for the students. The external "expert" should be primarily used to advise and support school staff.

(The following is optional)

I can see that a number of people are very upset and would like to give you a few moments to say a few words or to ask questions if you would like.

**Why routine is so important:**

Routine is very important at a time of tragedy. It provides a sense of security, especially for younger students. It helps students to see that, despite these awful events, the world remains largely unchanged and that life goes on. They will learn this over the next hours, days, weeks. They learn this through seeing you cope with this event and seeing that the routine of life is continuing. It is important to maintain the normal routine as much as possible. So, after this meeting, it would be best if you could go to your classes and be with the students.

**It is ok to be upset:**

Remember this is an upsetting time for you as well as the students and it is ok that the students know and see that you are upset. In fact it may be reassuring for them.

**How to share the facts with students:**

It is important that close friends of the deceased are told first and separately. Some of you may feel uncomfortable about relaying this information to the students. It is important to remember that the students know you and trust you and that it is better if they hear this tragic news from someone they know and that this happens in a safe and familiar environment. Remember also that you are here for the longer term. You will be the ones to whom the students will look for guidance and support in the next hours, days, weeks and months.

**It is important to stick to known facts and to be alert to rumour. Rumours can proliferate at these times and be very upsetting for students.**

**For teachers who feel unable to meet with classes:**

If a teacher is particularly upset or feels unable to cope, (which could be for any number of reasons), make sure that s/he is offered support and that their class is covered. If any of you feel unable to address the students please stay behind at the end of the meeting. We will help you prepare what to say or it may be possible to make alternative arrangements.

**Provide literature:**

I am going to distribute some handouts that you may find useful over the next few days.

**These are all available in the Resource Materials section of this publication.**

Select as appropriate from:

- R5 A classroom session following a critical incident
- R6 Children's understanding and reaction to death according to age
- R7 Stages of grief
- R8 How to cope when something terrible happens
- R9 Reactions to a critical incident
- R10 Grief after suicide (use only when it is clear that the death was due to suicide and where parents have acknowledged this. This must be handled with the greatest care to avoid potential difficulties)
- R17 Frequently Asked Questions - Teachers
- R23 Teachers helping students in a crisis or emergency

**Go through these briefly and allow for questions.**

**Identifying vulnerable students:**

A lot of the students will be very upset and will want and need to talk about what has happened. For the majority of students this can be done in the classroom or group setting. It is helpful for students to hear others talking about how they are feeling. This normalises their reaction. If a student or group of students are particularly distressed it is advised to have them talk to someone they know who will be available over the next days and weeks. If you are particularly concerned about a pupil, please talk to me about this. This will be for only a small number of students. Remember at times of loss students will be comforted best by people they know and trust, rather than by a stranger.

**Students who need to be closely monitored as they may be more vulnerable than others are:**

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

## Quiet room

It can be useful to have a designated room available for students for a period, perhaps a week, following a tragedy. It offers people a quiet space to be if feeling overwhelmed.

**NOTE** Staff should be clearly informed about procedures for the running and monitoring of the quiet room.

## Advise of the availability of other literature and leave copies in the staff room

I am going to leave additional information here, which you may wish to read.

R7 Stages of grief

R9 Reactions to a critical incident

R23 Teachers helping students in a crisis or emergency

## Support for each other and vulnerable staff members

Some of you may be particularly vulnerable due to a recent loss or previous experience of (suicide or road traffic accident etc.) or you may have known the student well. It is important that you talk to each other and support each other during this difficult time. If you are aware that a colleague may need support arrange to meet them after school or give them a call.

## Restate the schedule for the day

I think that it would be useful to meet for about 30 minutes at the end of the day. This will give us an opportunity to update on how things have developed during the day. It will also allow us to plan for tomorrow and will provide an opportunity to talk things through with others after a difficult day.

## 4.5 CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND AWARENESS

The school's response should be sensitive to different religious beliefs and different traditions amongst students and staff. For example, attendance at a Christian service may not be acceptable to parents whose children are of other religious beliefs, or of none. This may result in some students being excluded. It is also important to be mindful of different cultures, and of differing religious beliefs and rituals that exist around death. If students are to attend a funeral rite of a religion or denomination other than their own, it may be helpful to prepare them by exploring the rituals and beliefs particular to that religion. The school could ask the parents' advice in relation to these matters.

## 4.6 STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Students with general learning difficulties will be at a different developmental level to their peers. Their understanding of death will be in accordance with their developmental age (see Section 1.1, R6). They should be told the news separately so that the information can be given according to their level of understanding. The information should be given in short simple sentences. They may repeatedly ask the same questions and therefore teachers should be ready to go over the information a number of times. This will require patience and sensitivity.

### Clear information should be given on the following topics:

- What happens when a person dies
- What a funeral is and what usually happens on the day of the funeral
- How they and other people might feel when someone dies
- How different people show their feelings in different ways.

It is important that students are reintegrated with their peers as soon as possible.

The use of nonverbal approaches, such as picture books or artwork, may be helpful. Pictures may help them to explore their feelings and provide them with an opportunity to talk and to ask questions.

## 4.7 END OF DAY SESSION WITH TEACHERS

Sample script for principal

*// Thank you all for staying. I know that it has been a difficult day and you may all be 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 all doing ok. //*

Provide update on the latest facts as known and outline the schedule for tomorrow.

Is anyone concerned about anything or anyone? (**Remind them about compiling a list of students about whom they have particular concerns**).

If you are feeling very distressed and would like to talk in confidence to someone, you can access support through the **Employee Assistance Service (EAS)**. The Department of Education and Skills has contracted an agency to provide this service for teachers. It is staffed by a network of trained counsellors and therapists. A number of sessions may be availed of and it is confidential.

You make the contact yourself. **The freephone number for the EAS is 1800 411057.**

If the psychologist is offering an end-of-day support meeting, let staff know where it will take place and at what time.

*// Thank you all for your great work and support today. //*

## 4.8 CONTACT WITH AFFECTED FAMILY OR FAMILIES

- Arrange a home visit by two staff representatives within 24 hours, if appropriate
- Plan visits to those who are injured - name key person(s) to visit home/hospital
- Liaise with the family regarding funeral arrangements/memorial service
- Designate a suitable staff member to liaise with the family, to extend sympathy and to clarify the family's wishes regarding the school's involvement in the funeral/memorial service
- Decide on the school's role in the funeral service following consultation with parents, school management and close school friends
- Have regard for different religious traditions and faiths.

## 4.9 SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR PRINCIPALS: DAY 1

1	Gather the facts - what has happened, when, how, where, and who is injured or dead
2	Consult Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools (available on the DES website <a href="http://www.education.ie">www.education.ie</a> )
3	Is it an incident requiring a NEPS Response at Level 1, 2 or 3?
4	Who do I need to call (see Emergency Contact List - R21)?
5	Meet with the other Critical Incident Management Team
6	Meet with other agencies, if involved, to agree roles and procedures
7	Have administration staff photocopy appropriate literature
8	Arrange for the supervision of students
9	Agree content of communication for school social media site, if appropriate
10	Address the staff meeting
11	Identify vulnerable students
12	Draft a media statement (R4)
13	Prepare for a media interview, (see Section 9)
14	Draft a letter to parents (R2, R3)
15	Meet with the CIMT to review the day and arrange an early morning meeting for the following day
16	Meet with the staff group
17	Make contact with the affected family/families.

**MAINTAIN THE NORMAL ROUTINE IF AT ALL POSSIBLE**

# SECTION 5

## ACTION PLAN FOR PRINCIPALS: MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

Day 2 and following days

It is sometimes the case that the first day following an incident is quite calm as people may be in shock. Day 2 may be a day when more support is needed as the news begins to sink in. It is advisable that the CIMT continues to meet each day until the school returns to normal functioning.

### 5.1 MEETING WITH THE CIMT AND OTHER AGENCIES

The principal or critical incident team leader normally conducts the meeting.

#### SUGGESTED AGENDA

- Review what has been done to date
- Make a decision about school closure
- List tasks for the day and assign roles - media: liaison with other agencies: contact with bereaved family: attendance and participation in the funeral service
- List items to be addressed by the principal at the staff meeting
- Review the schedule for the day
- Go through the list of students and staff who may be vulnerable and review how they are doing
- Develop a plan for monitoring students over the next few weeks, especially those identified as vulnerable.

### 5.2 MEETING WITH WHOLE STAFF

- The principal outlines the schedule for the day and updates staff on any information from the family, funeral arrangements etc.
- A representative from another agency may address the staff, if appropriate.

#### Sample script for a principal

// Yesterday was a difficult day for you, as well as for many of your students. You did really well in keeping the routine going as much as possible despite everything. Yesterday there was a sense of numbness and quietness in the school. Today people may begin to feel the reality and pain of the loss. It may be a difficult day for everyone but I'd like to just remind you again to give students and yourselves an opportunity to talk about (name of the deceased) and about what has happened. //

Update on any new information and outline schedule for the day.

Give an opportunity for questions.

# SECTION 6

## ACTION PLAN FOR PRINCIPALS: FOLLOW-UP

Follow-up is the work carried out in the weeks, months and years following a critical incident. The goal of follow-up is to help the school community cope with the impact of the event in the longer term and to monitor those individuals with ongoing difficulties. The school may also decide to review the critical incident policy and plan memorials.

- Meet with appropriate staff to review the list of affected staff and students. Identify who will be responsible for follow-up
- Discuss referral procedures and when an onward referral may be indicated

### WHEN IS IT NECESSARY TO REFER A STUDENT ON?

Following a critical incident it is expected that there will be “normal” distress among a number of students, especially close friends or relatives. Within approximately 6 weeks most students will have returned to normal functioning. However, if students continue to show significant signs of distress a number of weeks after the incident, they may need to be referred on.

A student who has expressed suicidal intent should be further screened. Information on warning signs and a guide to steps the school should take is contained in Section 7. If it is a serious threat parents must be informed and the student referred on immediately to their GP or Child and Adolescent Services. Arrangements previously made with the relevant services for onward referral should now come into play.

- Prepare for the return of bereaved student(s) (see Section 11, R11)
- Discuss what the school will do in memory of the student(s). A representative from the school should liaise with the family/ies of the deceased regarding the memorial. Remember that whatever policy or precedent the school sets at this time may need to apply to all future deaths
- Discuss what to do with respect to events that the deceased student would have been part of e.g. the Debs, award ceremonies and exam results, if applicable
- Discuss the management of exam results and the return of practical work submitted to the SEC. Notify the SEC of the need to attend to the issuing of results of the deceased
- Return personal belongings to the family or families. Bereaved parents often find it helpful to visit the school at a later date. This offers the school an opportunity to return the student’s personal belongings and/or school work to the family. It may be an idea to put them in a ‘memory folder’ or ‘memory box’
- Mark the school’s calendar in advance with the anniversary date. Anniversaries may trigger emotional responses in students or staff and they may need additional support at this time. The school may decide to acknowledge the anniversary and should link with the family on any proposed commemoration

- Be sensitive to significant days like birthdays, Christmas, Mother's Day and Father's Day
- Where the school does not have a Critical Incident Management Plan in place this is a good time to begin working on developing one
- Evaluate the school's response to the 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?
- The school may also decide to review the whole school approach to promoting health and wellbeing and student support. *The Well-being Guidelines (2013),(2015)* and *Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools (2014)* will be useful references.



# SECTION 7

## SUICIDE/SUSPECTED SUICIDE

More people die by suicide in Ireland each year than in road traffic accidents. Currently, youth suicide rates in Ireland are the fourth highest in the European Union (WHO, 2013).

### Note on use of the term 'suicide'

NEPS strongly recommends to schools that great care should be taken in the use of the term 'suicide'. It should not be used until it has been established with a good degree of certainty that the death was as a result of suicide. Families may be very sensitive about the use of the term. A staff member should contact the family to establish the exact facts and the family's wishes about how the death should be described. The phrases 'tragic death' or 'sudden death' may be used instead.

When a death by suicide occurs in our schools it is usually in post-primary schools, but there have also been a small number of suicides/attempted suicides in primary schools. 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. A wide range of reactions is experienced and close friends and relations may be especially upset. For some, it may bring back memories of other loss experiences. For a small number, especially those who may already be experiencing difficulties, it may raise the awareness of suicide as an option. There may also be a number of students who may not be impacted by the event.

### 7.1 SUICIDE PREVENTION - WHAT SCHOOLS NEED TO DO

Concerns about youth suicide have led to increasing demands for schools to assume a role and responsibility in the prevention and management of suicidal behaviour among students. While schools are key settings for reaching young people at a formative stage of development, careful consideration needs to be given as to the most appropriate approach to suicide prevention in the school setting.

Programmes focused directly on raising student awareness of suicide may appear desirable, especially in the aftermath of a suicide when there is a heightened awareness of the need to do something, but they are controversial. It is thought that they may carry the risk of increasing suicidal behaviour among young people through normalising it as a legitimate response to adolescent stress. Suicide awareness programmes aimed at school staffs are more appropriate. The approach preferred by NEPS is the promotion of school policies and programmes that promote mental health and wellbeing; the development of school care systems that assist in the early identification of students at risk; the provision of targeted interventions for this group of students; work at interagency level to support the promotion of mental health and to facilitate access to services that are responsive to the needs of young people.

This advice is based on research findings and a concern that programmes, which might have unintended negative outcomes, should not be implemented unless there is a strong evidence base for their effectiveness.

The effectiveness of school programmes for mental health was presented to the Expert Advisory Group of the National Office for Suicide Prevention in September 2006, by Professor Margaret Barry of NUIG. This review of the research concluded that "schools are a key setting for mental health promotion. Mental health promotion in schools, when implemented effectively, can produce long-term benefits for young people, including emotional and social functioning and improved academic performance. Traditional topic based health education approaches are of limited value (knowledge only programmes have minimal effects on behaviour). Programmes adopting a whole school approach are more successful and the most promising."

The *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention (2013)* and *Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (2015)* give a comprehensive overview of best practice with regard to mental health promotion and suicide prevention. Copies have been sent to all schools. They are also available on the DES website [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

NEPS psychologists encourage schools to develop good practice on mental health promotion that is in line with these Well-Being Guidelines. Needs will vary from school to school and from area to area, but work may include a focus on:

- Implementation of school based primary prevention programmes for all students, including mental health programmes, within the context of the school's SPHE provision. The focus should be on building resilience and coping skills; problem solving; decision making and help seeking skills
- Development of care structures and systems aimed at recognising those young people experiencing emotional distress (see *Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools (2014)* available on the DES website)
- Awareness building amongst school staff and parents of the difficulties faced by some young people who have multiple problems of personal adjustment and life stress. Support for school staff and parents by developing awareness about the signs and symptoms of distress, anxiety, depression, substance misuse and suicidal behaviour. This may be done in liaison with other agencies
- Implementation of targeted interventions for pupils who need help to overcome difficulties and manage their distress. Include programmes and interventions that reduce risk in youth - alcohol and substance abuse, delinquency, violent behaviour etc.
- Increasing staff awareness of suicide and how to intervene with suicidal students. Building on the skills of guidance counsellors by increasing their ability to recognise suicide risk, to make an initial assessment of the level of risk, and to develop and implement appropriate management plans. Staff with designated care roles such as the guidance counsellor, chaplains and year heads may consider attending HSE provided ASIST and Safetalk training (see Section 11, R 24)
- Helping the school to develop mechanisms for the referral of distressed or at risk students, initially to the guidance counsellor, and where necessary to the local health services or GP
- The development of procedures for ensuring the coordinated, supportive return of students to school after hospitalisation for suicidal behaviour. Such procedures should provide the necessary information and guidance to school personnel before the adolescent returns to school (only with parental permission and on a need-to-know basis)
- Helping schools to build school/interagency/community systems - through inter-school liaison, and encouraging community agencies to support SPHE in schools.

## SUICIDE PREVENTION SUMMARY

- Primary prevention, including mental health programmes for all
- Care structures and systems
- Awareness building for all school staff
- Information for parents
- Targeted programmes for more distressed students
- Training of guidance counsellors and other key staff in suicide awareness and intervention skills
- Referral procedures and linking mechanisms with agencies
- School/community/agency systems and involvement.

## 7.2 CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THE SUITABILITY OF EXTERNAL PROGRAMMES

Schools have an increasing concern with how to prevent suicide and may consider offering certain programmes, provided by external agencies, in the school setting. Individual speakers may also be available to do inputs. It is important that certain criteria are used to inform decision makers as to whether or not a particular programme or presentation should be made in their school. Some programmes that aim to reduce suicidal behaviour among young people may have positive outcomes for some students but unintended negative consequences for others. Safety for students is paramount, which suggests that great care should be taken in deciding whether a particular programme might be offered in a school.

DES, Circular 0022/2010 (primary) and 0023/2010 (post primary) outline best practice for schools considering using external programmes or programmes delivered by outside agencies to enhance or supplement the SPHE/RSE programmes. Appendix 3b in Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention provides additional advice.

Criteria for choosing and assessing external providers are listed below with regard to safety issues, then with regard to the programme itself and finally with regard to the providers.

### SAFETY CRITERIA

- The programme does not directly or indirectly raise awareness about suicide
- The programme does not place an unreasonable onus on young people to take an unduly high degree of responsibility for the wellbeing of their peers
- Programme providers have good, established and ongoing relationships with key people in the school and in the community, including NEPS, the PDST support staff, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). They show a clear understanding of the support services available in the event of a suicide attempt or death occurring within schools
- Parents/guardians are informed that the programme is being provided.

### PROGRAMME CRITERIA

- The implementation of the programme or input will support integrated, whole school, consistent implementation of the SPHE curriculum and a whole school approach to wellbeing and mental health promotion

- The programme content is appropriate for the age, gender and cultural background of students
- The intervention programme and programme outcomes have been independently evaluated and the benefits substantiated by research.

## PROVIDERS' CRITERIA

Programme providers ensure that:

- They provide comprehensive information about their organisation, programme content and programme methodology
- They are able to document and demonstrate to schools that they have sufficient educational training and qualifications to demonstrate an understanding of SPHE and the general organisation and structure of schools, as well as in the delivery of the input and the facilitation and management of groups
- They are able to demonstrate to schools that the programme is sustainable in the long run, including the likelihood that the school will be able to ultimately incorporate the programme within the school's programmes and care systems
- The agency/individuals delivering the programme have a written child protection policy and clearance from An Garda Síochána to work with children.

## 7.3 WARNING SIGNS

Below is a list of factors which indicate that a person is troubled or distressed. The list is not exhaustive, and there may be other signs which those familiar with a student may notice. There may be an increased likelihood of suicide or suicidal behaviour if a number of these signs are present, (see Section 11, R14, R15).

An unexpected reduction in academic performance
A change in mood and marked emotional instability, either more withdrawn, low energy or more boisterous, talkative, outgoing
Withdrawal from relationships, separation from friends or break-up of a relationship, getting into trouble at school, discipline problems, suspension or expulsion, trouble with the law
Loss of interest in usual pursuits, study, relationships
Ideas and themes of depression, death or suicide
Hopelessness and helplessness
Giving away prized possessions
Stressful life events, including significant grief
Bullying or victimisation

*(Continued overleaf)*

A history of mental illness

Alcohol/drug misuse

A history of suicidal behaviour or deliberate self-harm

A family history of suicide/attempted suicide

Expression of suicidal ideas on social media.

Where a number of these signs exist, or when information about a student's expression of suicidal ideas is brought to staff attention, a plan needs to be put in place to explore what is going on and to offer help.

## STEPS TO TAKE WHEN CONCERNS ARISE

School staff may hear of suicidal behaviour or become aware of young people who are emotionally distressed and could be at risk in a number of ways:

- Students may learn of a fellow student's intentions to harm him/herself and report this to a teacher
- A note may be found or a posting on a social media site in which a desire for death or for an end to problems or to an 'impossible' situation is expressed. This might also be found on internet sites used by young people (see Section 11, R22)
- There may be changes in the young person's behaviour which are uncharacteristic and cause concern
- A student may begin to show an interest in issues of death or suicide, (see Checklist Section 11, R14)
- The young person may share his/her thoughts about suicide with the staff member, directly or indirectly.

### REMEMBER

Concerns about suicidal behaviour should never be dismissed on the grounds that the student is merely seeking attention and will not make a suicide attempt.

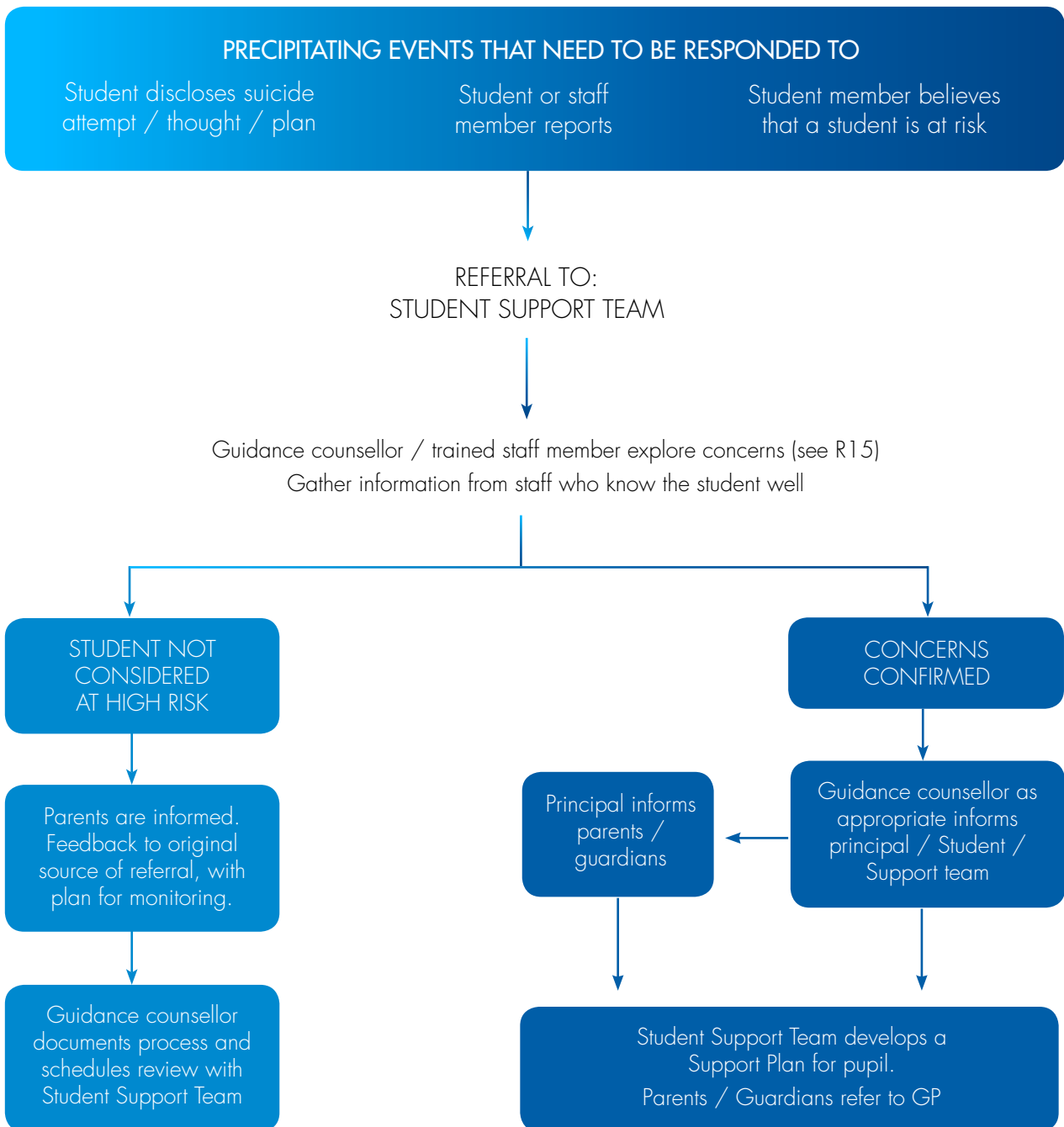
Schools need to have in place a clear procedure for the care of students about whom such concerns arise.

#### Suggested procedure:

- Concern is reported to guidance counsellor or designated staff member
- A meeting takes place with the reporting staff member or student
- A meeting takes place with the student, (see Section 11, R13, R14 and R15)
- A judgement is made of the seriousness of the situation
- Parents are informed of concerns, feedback is given to the original source of the referral, and a plan is drawn up for monitoring the student. Check with the student after an agreed period as there may be some underlying issues which need to be addressed

- Where a concern is confirmed, the guidance counsellor reports to the principal, and may consult with NEPS or with local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- The principal informs parents or caregivers immediately
- A management plan appropriate to the level of risk is put in place, including onward referral to the family GP.

## 7.4 FLOW CHART: RESPONDING TO CONCERNS



## 7.5 ISSUES THAT MAY ARISE WHEN A STUDENT DIES BY SUICIDE/SUSPECTED SUICIDE

### FAMILY

- Sympathise with them and acknowledge their grief and loss
- Organise a home visit by two staff members (checking first that the family would welcome such a visit)
- Consult with the family regarding the appropriate support from the school e.g. at the funeral service.

### STUDENTS

- Give the facts as agreed with the bereaved family
- Inform close friends and relatives separately
- Create safe and supportive spaces for the students where they can share their reactions and feelings
- Advise them on their possible reactions over the next few days, (see Section 11, R9)
- Avoid glorifying the victim and sensationalising the suicide. Carry out the same rituals or memorial services as you would for other student deaths, such as those due to road traffic accidents
- Advise the students of the support that is available to them. Tell them that talking is positive and helpful
- Take any talk of suicide seriously. Follow school protocols for dealing with this. Provide support, inform parents immediately and discuss onward referral options
- Students may wish to 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 access further help, if they, or their friends, should need it
- Give handout R10 - Grief after Suicide or Suspected Suicide.

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.

### REMEMBER

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.

A booklet 'You Are Not Alone', published by NOSP provides guidelines on managing the immediate aftermath of a death by suicide, both from an emotional and a practical point of view. In addition a publication entitled "Suicide Prevention in the Community - a Practical Guide" (HSE, 2012) provides comprehensive information on dealing with suicide. Both publications are available on [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)

### NOTE ON CARE OF STUDENTS FOLLOWING A FUNERAL:

It is important following the funeral of a student who has died by suicide that students and parents are encouraged to come back to the school for support. Schools often provide tea and coffee. This may be a particularly vulnerable time for students, especially if it is on a Friday. Parents may be working or there may be no one at home. Groups of students may congregate and consume alcohol which is not advisable. Encouraging them to come back to the school until the usual finishing time can help to prevent this.

Parents might also be advised to be particularly alert to their children's whereabouts over the following days. They might encourage their children to gather in each other's homes, rather than in the pub or street. The safety of all children is very important at this time.

## 7.6 SUICIDE CONTAGION

Significant care is needed in considering the response to a suicide in a school and each circumstance will be unique. For suicide postvention to be effective, individuals must be aware that emotional support is available and encouraged to take advantage of such assistance. School personnel should be aware in the weeks and months following a suicide that there is heightened risk for all students and in particular vulnerable students, (see Section 11, R13, 14, 15 and page 25 for guidance). The attendance patterns of students should be closely monitored at this time, and any absences followed up with parents.

Suicide contagion or copycat suicides occur when suicidal behavior is imitated. Guilt, identification and modelling are thought to play a role in contagion. Although rare, suicide contagion can result in a cluster of suicides. Suicide clusters emerge when a number of apparent suicides, which may appear to be unrelated, occur in a particular area over a particular time period. However, defining any set of events as a cluster is difficult. Suicide clusters have occurred in schools across the world.

Underestimating the impact of a suicide can result in failure to provide needed coping assistance. Conversely, overestimating impact, and providing unnecessary postvention may serve to sensationalise the death. It may also be that reporting of suicides creates a perception the suicide is one of a range of problem-solving strategies available.

Insufficient evidence has been found to recommend universal (non-targeted) school based suicide prevention programmes or programmes applied to high-risk groups. For information see [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)



# SECTION 8

## ROAD TRAFFICS ACCIDENTS AND VIOLENT DEATHS: SOME ISSUES

It is not possible to address every type of incident that will happen but experience has given some indications of issues that might arise in the case of road traffic accidents and violent deaths. The general advice contained in these guidelines will be applicable but some particular issues arise in these two instances which are addressed in this section.

### 8.1 ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

#### Co-ordination with other agencies

In the case of a major accident, meetings may be held involving key personnel from schools and other agencies. These meetings may take place away from the school. If the principal attends such a meeting, he/she should ensure that a staff member with appropriate experience and authority remains in the school. He/she should assign someone the task of making critical decisions and co-ordinating the response. It may be appropriate that the principal delegates someone to go to such off-site meetings rather than themselves.

#### Communication

When a number of students, or students from different schools are involved, additional communication systems need to be put in place in order to co-ordinate actions. Co-ordination of funeral arrangements, attendance at funerals, and arrangements for transport of students or representatives to funerals need to be made. Appropriate and respectful use of social media will also help (see Section 11, R22).

#### Managing information

If students are badly injured or on critical lists, this contributes to an ongoing sense of crisis. In such circumstances, the management of information becomes especially important. News about the condition and progress of people who are ill will need to be checked for accuracy so that unwarranted distress is not engendered. In particular, news of a further death must be fully checked with the most reliable source available before any announcements are made. If someone is on life-support, news that it is going to be switched off at a certain time should not be given. Such information can be incorrect.

It is very important that the family be given time to inform their own relatives of new information. Family members should not hear news through a network of rumour or gossip. It may not always be possible to control the spread of news, but inaccurate or untimely information should not be given out by the school or by NEPS.

#### Paying respects

Victims may be badly injured and students may be afraid to go to the house to pay their respects. They may hear that the person looks terrible. This is often not the case as, where injuries do result in serious disfigurement, the remains are laid out in such a way as to minimize distress. It may be useful to have a representative from the school visit the home. They will be able to feed back accurate information to colleagues and students and advise accordingly. Pupils who pay their respects have often reported back that the deceased looked peaceful or that the rumours were incorrect. This may be a comfort to others, may help to allay anxieties and may enable some students to go themselves if they feel the need to do this.

Some students may need support before, during or after viewing the remains. This may be their first experience of death and the presence of a supportive adult may be very important.

## Funeral arrangements

If such a large scale incident happens during the State Examinations, church services might be arranged to facilitate those doing the exams, e.g. by having services in the evening, if the family is in agreement.

## 8.2 VIOLENT DEATH

The sudden death of a student or teacher is a tragic event and when the person has died as a result of violence it is even more traumatic. A violent death brings up concerns about personal safety. The perpetrator may be a member of the same community or come from the same family as the victim. If the death occurred as a result of family violence, children may worry that the same thing could happen in their own family. Parents may wonder what to say in response to these worries.

Some issues that may arise:

- The idea that “it could never happen to us” or “it could never happen here” is shattered. Staff, parents and students may be afraid that it could happen again or that it could happen to them. It is important to reassure them that these events do not happen often
- Be sensitive to the fact that the alleged perpetrator may have relatives and friends within the school community. It may be necessary to take steps to diffuse tensions between students
- Some pupils may worry that they could have prevented what happened. It is important to stress that no one has control over another person’s actions
- It is important to give the facts in a way that is appropriate to the age of the child. Do not give graphic details and discourage the circulation of speculation about such details
- Advice should be offered to staff, parents and students about dealing with the media. It is better to leave this to a designated person, who has prepared for this element of the work
- There will be an ongoing Garda investigation, a trial, an inquest etc. This can prolong the trauma
- A member of the critical incident team should be identified as the Garda Liaison person
- It is the responsibility of parents to decide whether their children may be interviewed by Gardaí. Garda interviews of students should not generally take place on the school premises
- Although this is an intense event it is important to remind the school that any memorial should be the same as for other students who have died. It is important for the school to be mindful of not glamourising the event or the deceased person.

## 8.3 WITNESSING AN EVENT

There may be some students/staff who were involved in an incident but were uninjured, or who witnessed an accident or a violent incident. Reactions to this may be immediate or happen sometime after the event.

Flashbacks and intrusive thoughts of the event, heightened body arousal causing the person to be jumpy and anxious, and a range of feelings from numbness to hysteria may occur. All of these are normal reactions to trauma. It may help them to talk through the events:

- WHAT THEY SAW?
- WHAT THEY HEARD?
- HOW THEY FELT?
- WHAT THEY THOUGHT?
- WHAT THEY DID?

Difficulties arise if these reactions are extreme or persist over a period of time. Onward referral should be made where needed (see note on onward referral in Section 6).

## 8.4 BREAKING THE NEWS

The same principles that govern the breaking of news generally should apply here, (see R5). However, where the death has been violent there are some additional factors that need to be remembered. The death may be a murder or manslaughter but this will not be determined until after the court case so staff should be careful about the use of language. It is important to give students accurate information about what has happened in an age appropriate manner. If we don't give students accurate information, rumours will start and the details of these are often more extreme than the reality. Accurate information does not require that graphic details are included. Such information may play on the fears of children and young people and is not helpful. Tell students that an investigation of what exactly happened is the responsibility of the Gardaí and that the facts will emerge in due course.

### Sample script for a principal

*// Some students from our school have been involved in a road traffic accident. Some deaths have occurred and some are injured. Those who have died are..... The injured are.....They are being treated in..... There are.....who are very seriously injured, and others are ok, but are being checked out by medical staff. We are getting information on an ongoing basis and will let you know if there is anything important you need to know. Please be careful to stick to the facts and not to engage in spreading rumours about injuries or further deaths. This could be very distressing for others, especially if not accurate. //*

OR

*// Sean was killed on Saturday night. It seems that he was walking home with two of his friends around midnight when he was attacked. Someone living on the street called the Gardaí. Sean was brought to hospital, where he died at 3 a.m. The Gardaí are investigating the details of what happened. The full facts will not be known for some time and there is no point in putting stories about which may not be true and which can be hurtful and upsetting, or may even give rise to further problems. We will let you know of any facts that we have as the situation becomes clear. //*

## 8.5 PARENT MEETINGS

It is sad to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to let them know that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it. Parents may seek assistance in knowing what to say to their children at this time. It is sometimes useful to hold a parent information meeting. This will allow parents to get information about how they can help their children through this difficult time. Meetings may be held during the day or in the evening or both. It may be useful to ask other agencies to be involved so that parents are informed about available services, how they work, and how to access support for their children.

## Large group meetings for parents: what to say

The principal:

- Outlines the plan for the meeting and introduces the speaker/s
- Gives an outline of the facts as known
- Outlines what the school has done to date and the plan for the next few days, weeks etc.
- Outlines the in-school support systems available to students and how parents can request help e.g. from the guidance counsellor, chaplain, other available staff
- Offers advice to parents about dealing with the media, if appropriate. In general, the advice should be not to allow their children to be interviewed. Children do not have experience of dealing with the media and may regret what they say later
- Give guidance to parents on their children's use of social media at this time
- Inform parents that tea and coffee will be available at the end of the meeting, and that speakers and some school staff will be available to answer any questions.

## 8.6 DROP-IN CENTRES

If there is a sense that parents and young people in the wider community are especially distressed or in need of more support than can be offered in the large group meeting, external agencies may decide to set up a drop-in center on one or two evenings. This allows members of the community, who may be traumatised by an event, to access services in a user-friendly way. It also gives working parents a chance to get advice and support. Pupils may come from a dispersed area and an 'out-center' in a town or village may make services easier to access.

Both statutory and voluntary agencies might be involved, e.g. adult services, childrens' services, adolescent counselling services and voluntary bereavement/support services, as well as school based services like NEPS. The involvement of a number of support services facilitates follow-up by the most appropriate agency. Support offered in this way can provide reassurance and information about normal reactions to trauma. If there are serious concerns or if parents or students are in need of additional help, they can be offered appropriate advice. Early appointments may be facilitated as a result of prior arrangements between the agencies.

If agreed, an announcement about the availability of such a drop-in service might be made at church services locally, as well as through the normal school channels.

# SECTION 9

## DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Some events draw a great deal of media attention. Media interest can add to the complexity of the situation and it is therefore very important to agree a procedure for dealing with the media at an early stage in the intervention.

### 9.1 GUIDELINES FOR THE SCHOOL

The principal should either elect to be the media spokesperson or delegate the task to another staff member. If the school has a CIMP, this person will have previously been identified.

The primary concern at this time is to look after the school community and to protect the privacy of the people most affected. Provision of interviews or material for the media should not distract the school from these tasks. It is important to remember that the media can assist in dispelling rumour, providing information and giving the message to parents and children that the school is coping well with events. On the other hand, it can also add to the pain by sensationalising the story.

A press statement should be prepared. It should be brief and carefully considered. It is especially important that information reported is accurate. Sweeping statements or generalisations should be avoided. The privacy of the persons/family concerned should be respected. It can be read out, or given out to the media by fax, email or telephone.

Interviews may also be requested, especially if it is a high profile incident. If school personnel do not wish to be interviewed they should make this decision and request the media to respect this choice.

Schools may reduce pressure from the press by agreeing to give interviews and by doing so at designated times and in a specific "press" room. This will help to avoid having to deal with a constant stream of requests, a distraction from the school's role of supporting students.

Some schools may have access to a manager, trustee or Board of Management member with experience or training in this field and should use this resource if available. Advice may also be available from such bodies as the teacher unions, management bodies, the State Examination Commission (if the incident is during exam time) and, in the case of major incidents, the Press Office of the Department of Education and Science.

Preparation is very important as this is not part of the normal work of principals. Statements should be written out but, ideally, not read to the camera. Some questions might be agreed in advance so that responses can be prepared and, if there is time, even rehearsed. At a time of distress, it may be difficult to find the right words so it is generally better to err on the side of brevity and caution.

Parents should be advised not to allow their children to be interviewed as they do not have the maturity or judgement needed to handle it. It can sometimes lead to regret at a later stage or may increase distress for various parties.

## Checklist

- Delegate a media spokesperson (as outlined in the CIMP)
- The principal should advise students, parents and staff that only the nominated spokesperson will deal with the media
- Allow limited and controlled access to the media by providing a press room and by making statements only at specified times
- Prepare a media statement, (see Section 11, R4)
- Interviews should be short, factual and to the point.

## REMEMBER

The publication "*Media Guidelines for the Reporting of Suicide and Self-Harm*" (Irish Association of Suicidology & the Samaritans, 2007) offers a specific guide to reporting suicide in the media. The guidelines suggest that the media can help prevent copy-cat suicides by:

- not mentioning specific details of the suicide e.g. location and method used;
- not using colourful phrases to romanticise it;
- not citing causes of suicide and thereby indirectly suggesting suicide as an option.

These guidelines should be adhered to by the school in any communication with the media.

## 9.2 DO'S AND DON'TS IN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

DO write a press statement (R4)

DO consider contacting the INTO, TUI, ASTI, NAPD, IPPN or other relevant body for advice and guidance

DO use careful and sensitive language

DO keep it short

DO regard everything as recorded and quotable (generally the media will)

DO ask whether there will be the possibility of editing the interview

DO ask in advance for a outline of the questions that you will be asked

DO avoid sweeping statements and generalisations

DO avoid being drawn into speculation

DON'T go into personal details of those involved

DON'T read the statement to the camera

DON'T engage in rambling discussions afterwards

DON'T use "No Comment"

DON'T respond to "quotes" from others

DON'T answer questions you don't know the answer to

DON'T make "off-the-record" comments

## 9.3 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS IN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA - PRINCIPALS

### Q. I (the principal) am being asked for an interview. How do I respond?

A. If you do not feel comfortable being interviewed it is acceptable to refuse. If you are willing to be interviewed, you should rehearse what to say. Writing a media statement may be helpful. The language used should be careful and sensitive. It should state the facts about what has happened, and refer to the upset/distress/sorrow in the school. It should express the school's sympathy to the bereaved family. An outline of the supports that have been put in place for the students, staff and parents should be given. Ideally, this statement should not be read to the camera.

### Q. What about the actual interview?

A. Interviews should be kept short; avoid making sweeping statements and generalisations; avoid being drawn into rambling discussions afterwards or into speculation; don't use "no comment" as it can sound unhelpful and defensive. Don't respond to "quotes" from others. If asked a question you don't know the answer to, it is important that you say so. Make no 'off-the-record' comments and remember that everything is quotable. An unguarded remark may be broadcast many times and may cause distress. Ask the media for an outline of the questions that you will be asked and whether there will be the possibility of editing the interview. Media personnel can be very helpful about this if the underlying concern is clear.

### Q. How do I respond if the media are seeking to interview students?

A. It is important that only one person from the school is nominated as the media spokesperson. In general the principal takes this role. The principal should advise school staff and students either in assembly or over the intercom system that there is one media spokesperson and only that person will liaise with the media. It will therefore not be necessary for any students or staff to give interviews. The principal should mention in this announcement that students are not used to dealing with the press, radio or television and if interviewed may say something that they don't really intend to. This may cause unintentional hurt and they may regret something they said later.

### Q. How do I respond if the press ask me or students for pictures of the deceased/ injured?

A. The press may ask for pictures of the injured or deceased for publication. The provision of pictures is the sole decision of the bereaved/affected family. It is important to advise staff and students to respect this.

### Q. TV stations, radio programmes and newspapers are calling the school requesting interviews. How do I advise handle this?

A. Draft a media statement, (see Section 11, R4). Advise the secretary that when calls are received from the media, their email address or fax number should be taken and a copy of the media statement should be sent to them. Advise them of the venue and timing of any media briefing if this has been arranged.



# SECTION 10

## CRITICAL INCIDENTS DURING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS

The examination period is a time when the staffing arrangements and the organisational arrangements in schools are different from those in place during the rest of the year. If a critical incident happens at this time, complexity is increased because of the extra pressures that exist and the need to enable as many students as possible to proceed with their exams.

### 10.1 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS DURING EXAM TIME

#### Q. Who needs to know about the incident?

A. If the public examinations are in progress contact the State Examinations Commission (0906- 442700) as soon as possible, so that they can alert the Examination and Assessment Manager (EAM) for the school. Alternatively, you can contact the EAM in your area directly. Contact the NEPS psychologist who will, if necessary, visit the school.

#### Q. What steps do I take if an incident occurs?

A. You should identify those individuals who may need support or advice. You may want to discuss this with the guidance counsellor or other key staff who are available. These may include:

- Relatives of the deceased
- Friends of the deceased
- Siblings
- Teaching and other staff

The main sources of help in the community should be identified and contacted as necessary.

#### Q. What is the psychologist's role?

A. The role remains that of supporting the school staff who support the students. However, because many staff will not be around and because of the importance of the Leaving Certificate to students, the psychologist may have some face to face involvement with students. If at all possible, students should be encouraged to complete their exams. If a student needs to leave the exam hall due to distress, the psychologist may if present be able to help them settle down so that they can return. It is vital that they are accompanied at all times, in order to preserve the integrity of the examination.

#### Q. Will account be taken of the situation in marking the papers?

A. The general principle is that marks can only be given for what is presented on the paper so the impression should never be given that adjustments are made. This is necessary to preserve the integrity of the exams. NEPS' role is in relation to supporting the staff and students. Matters pertaining to marking etc. are for the State Exams Commission (SEC). If there is a critical incident during the exams the EAM assigned to the county for the period of the exams usually visits the school. Queries regarding the exams should be referred to the EAM.

#### Q. Can a re-sit be organised if students don't complete the exam?

A. No

**Q. Can extra time be given to the students?**

**A.** If the EAM agrees to it, a student who comes out during the exam and goes back in can be allowed the time lost to be made up at the end of the exam. The school authorities must vouch that the candidate was accompanied by an appropriate person and accounted for at all times while absent from the exam. The student can be encouraged to refocus and techniques may be given to help to reduce their anxiety and distress. No help may be given about the content of the paper. The integrity of the exam must never be breached.

**Q. Can the supervisor/invigilator help the student to settle down in the exam?**

**A.** The supervisor can go down quietly to a student who appears to be agitated or who is not writing – perhaps in a daze, and can help them to focus. They might, for example, suggest starting with Section A or B or encourage them to read the questions and decide which one to start with. If the student isn't responding, the supervisor might suggest that the student be given a separate center. If someone is crying, it is important to encourage them out of the exam center as this may disturb or upset other students. It may be necessary to arrange for a separate center to be set up in such circumstances.

**Q. Can I authorise extra time and/or the setting up of a separate center?**

**A.** No. It is within the EAM's remit to provide certain facilities for students who are distressed.

**Q. What should I do in relation to the media?**

**A.** Contact the State Examination Commission for advice.



Section 11

# **RESOURCES**

**RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS**

# CONTENTS

---

51	<b>Section 11</b>	RESOURCES: RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS
53	R1	STUDENT CONTACT RECORD
54	R2	SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS - SUDDEN DEATH/ACCIDENT
55	R3	SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS - VIOLENT DEATH
56	R4	SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE MEDIA
57	R5	A CLASSROOM SESSION FOLLOWING NEWS OF A CRITICAL INCIDENT
60	R6	CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND REACTION TO DEATH ACCORDING TO AGE
62	R7	STAGES OF GRIEF
63	R8	HOW TO COPE WHEN SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENS
64	R9	REACTIONS TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT
65	R10	GRIEF AFTER SUICIDE OR SUSPECTED SUICIDE
66	R11	REINTEGRATION OF THE BEREAVED CHILD IN SCHOOL
67	R12	WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD THROUGH THIS DIFFICULT TIME
68	R13	A GENERAL INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS, CHAPLAINS, OTHER DESIGNATED STAFF
69	R14	CHECKLIST - STUDENTS AT RISK
70	R15	EXPLORING SUICIDE RISK
73	R16	FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS - PRINCIPALS
76	R17	FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS - TEACHERS
78	R18	FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS - PARENTS
79	R19	CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY & PLAN - FRAMEWORK
86	R20	CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEMPLATE FOR SCHOOL PLAN
88	R21	EMERGENCY CONTACT LIST
89	R22	GUIDANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND CRITICAL INCIDENTS
92	R23	TEACHERS HELPING STUDENTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS OR EMERGENCY
95	R24	USEFUL WEBSITES AND HELPLINES FOR ACCESSING RESOURCES

# R1

## STUDENT CONTACT RECORD

This form can be used by school staff to record the details of students supported following a critical incident. This information should be collated centrally.

Name of staff member:

DATE	STUDENT'S NAME	CLASS / YEAR	OUTCOME (include need for follow-up)

## SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS - SUDDEN DEATH/ACCIDENT

This letter can be used as a template for schools when they are informing parents of a tragedy, offering some advice and outlining what the schools response involves (brief details of the incident and, in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost). Where text/social media are used for communicating with parents this content will help with drafting.

(School Contact Details)

(School Crest)

Dear Parent/Guardian

The school has experienced *(the sudden death, accidental injury, etc.)* of *Name of student(s)*. We are deeply saddened by the deaths/events.  
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 s/he may like to discuss with you. It is important to give factual information that is age appropriate.

You can help your child by taking time to listen and by encouraging him/her to express feelings. All children are different and will express their feelings in different ways. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty concentrating or 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 reaction. Over the course of the coming days, 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.

### *(Optional)*

An information night for parents is planned for *(date, time and place)*. At that time, further information about how to help children in grief will be given.

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

Young people frequently turn to social media to see what others are saying, or to find out more. At these times it is important that you monitor their use and engage with them about what they read. We urge you to emphasise and reinforce the need to be extremely sensitive and careful about what they post.

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

Principal's signature

# R3

## SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS - VIOLENT DEATH

This letter can be used as a template for schools when they are informing parents of a violent death, offering some advice and outlining what the schools response involves. (Give accurate information about the incident, but avoid using the word murder as this will not be established until the court case is completed).

Dear Parent/ Guardian

I need to inform you about a very sad event that has happened.

A child/young person from the neighbourhood, the sister/ brother of **(name of student)**, a student here at school, was killed as a result of **(a violent attack, violent incident in the street etc.)** earlier this week. We are all profoundly saddened by his death.

We have shared this information and had discussions with all of our students so that they know what has happened. School staff members have been available for students on an on-going basis today. Other support personnel **(including psychologists etc., according to actual arrangements)** are available to advise staff in their support of students.

The death of any young person is tragic, but a violent death is even more difficult. It is hard to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to accept that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it.

This death may cause a variety of reactions in your child. Some children/young people may be afraid for their own life and for the lives of those they love. Take time to listen to their fears and reassure them that what has happened is rare.

We have enclosed some additional information that may be useful during this time.

The media are in the vicinity of the school and may approach you or your children. You need not respond to their questions if you are approached. We will not allow the media to interview your child at school and our general advice is that you should not let your children be interviewed. They are not mature enough to judge what to say and may say something they will regret later.

In these times, young people tend to turn to social media to see what others are saying, or to find out more. While social media can be of great consolation, we would urge you to reinforce the need to be extremely sensitive about what your son/daughter might post to others.

Our thoughts are with **(family name)** and with each of you.

Sincerely

Principal's name



## SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE MEDIA

This can be used as a template by schools to be emailed, posted on the school social media site 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 **(Name)** 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 Management 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 to support them and to offer them advice and guidance.**

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

Thank you.

## A CLASSROOM SESSION FOLLOWING NEWS OF A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Normally, the class teacher, class tutor or other teacher who knows the students should be the person to inform them of the events and lead the classroom session. Students generally feel safe and secure with someone they know. If the teacher feels uncomfortable with this role another staff member may share the task. Teachers should have the opportunity to opt out of this work if they feel unable to handle it and other arrangements should be made for that class group.

The aim of the session is to break the news 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 Giving 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 Advising about social media usage
- STEP 6 Empowerment
- STEP 7 Closure
- STEP 8 Free Time
- STEP 9 Recovery

### STEP 1

#### Giving 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 of the day

#### Sample Script

*I have something very sad I want to share with you. **The factual information agreed upon by the staff e.g. (name of student)**, who attends our school and was missing, has been found. You will probably be aware, through social media, that 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. A number of materials that can be used are suggested in Section 11, R24. 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 children 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 R9). 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 know. In addition to conversations they may have with friends on social media they may need to talk to someone in person about how they are feeling. Depending on the incident and the age of the students distribute handouts **R7, R8, R9, R10**.

## STEP 4

### Worries (for younger children)

#### Sample script

*You may be worried about **(name of the deceased)** - that they might be sad or lonely or hungry or cold. When someone dies they don't feel cold or hungry or feelings like that anymore.*

*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 was very sick and the chances of this happening to someone else you know are low.

## STEP 5

### Advising about Social Media Usage

Discussions may begin with an outline of the various social media currently being used by members of the group. The value of these as a way of keeping in contact with and supporting friends should be acknowledged. Students may be asked for experiences of ways in which such communication has helped them as well as examples of ways in which it has gone wrong. Media involving live communication such as Skype or Viber are generally more conducive to support and less open to misunderstanding than text-based means. Students will be encouraged to consider how much social media usage is too much, particularly late into the night. More guidance on social media use is contained in **R22**.

## STEP 6 Empowerment

Help the students to identify strategies that they might use to help manage their reaction, for example, talking to family and friends, getting enough sleep, taking plenty of exercise and appropriate use of social media - 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 7 Closure

End the session by focusing 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.

## STEP 8 Free Time

After the discussion the teacher may want to allow the student's some play time in the playground or free time in the classroom or an agreed area, depending on the age.

## STEP 9 Recovery

It may be useful to continue to do these activities at intervals during the days following and to intersperse them throughout the curriculum in the coming days.

Normal routines should generally be returned to as soon as possible.

- Students should be encouraged to resume sports and other extra-curricular activities
- 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 crisis and lessons learnt from their experiences. There will also be opportunities for structured discussion within the school's social, personal, and health education programmes. Social Personal & Health Education (SPHE) curriculum time is an ideal context in which to offer support.

## CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND REACTION TO DEATH ACCORDING TO AGE

(This may be used with various groups and individuals)

Children's understanding and reaction to death will depend on their age and their developmental stage. The following are guides only as children will differ in their reactions and grasp of events for a range of reasons other than age alone.

### AGES 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 from a loved one
- May feel responsible for the death in some way
- May become apathetic and depressed
- May regress to an earlier stage of development e.g. thumb sucking, bedwetting, tantrums or may become clingy
- 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 wellbeing of other family members.

### AGES 5 – 9 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 what he/she is 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
- The reaction of their peers is important, they 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 i.e. physical complaints like tummy aches
- 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 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
- Children's use of social media should be monitored and supported by parents.

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.

## STAGES OF GRIEF

(This may be used with various groups and individuals)

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

- 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 acceptable to cry
- It is acceptable 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 perhaps with alcohol and drugs, this complicates matters rather than bringing relief
- 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 cycle 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
- Use of social media can help but do not rely on it as your only source of support
- Useful websites: [www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie); [www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie); [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)

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

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

### BEHAVIOURAL

- Nightmares
- Social withdrawal
- Over reliance on use of social media
- Irritability
- Loss of concentration/forgetfulness
- Physical/Verbal aggression
- Missue of drugs, including alcohol

### 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

## GRIEF AFTER SUICIDE OR SUSPECTED 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 normal
- 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 ok 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 and compassionate 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 trying to kill 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](http://www.spunout.ie); [www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie); [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)

## REINTEGRATION OF THE BEREAVED CHILD IN SCHOOL

Some suggestions are offered here which may help prepare the school and the bereaved child 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 s/he 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 bereavement 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 the first class of the day 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
- Allow them access to a 'quiet room' where he/she can go to be alone. You might suggest: "We can set up a signal for you to use if you need to leave the class at any time". (Ensure supervision)
- Link the student in with the guidance counsellor 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.

## WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD THROUGH THIS DIFFICULT TIME

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, taking 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
- As well as advising your child about appropriate use of social media, monitor their use, particularly during this vulnerable time. Useful website: [www.webwise.ie](http://www.webwise.ie)

# R13

## A GENERAL INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS, CHAPLAINS, OTHER DESIGNATED STAFF

This can be used to help explore a student’s reaction to a critical incident and how it is impacting on them. It can help the student to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions in a safe environment with a caring adult.

STUDENT’S NAME                      BIRTH DATE                      AGE                      SEX M/F                      CLASS / YEAR

*We are concerned about how things are going for you. Our talk today will help us to discuss what’s going well and what’s not going so well. If you want me to keep what we talk about between me and you, I will do that – except for those things that I need to discuss with others in order to help you. For example, if you or someone else is at risk in any way, I could not keep that confidential. My job is to help and I will need to do something about it.*

*In answering, please provide as much detail as you can. At times, I will ask you to tell me a bit more about your thoughts and feelings.*

- Where were you when the event occurred?
- What did you see or what did you hear about what happened?
- How are you feeling now?
- How well do you know those who were hurt or killed?
- Has anything like this happened to you or any of your family before?
- How will your life be different now?
- How do you think this will affect your family in the days to come?
- What bothers you the most about what happened?
- Do you think anyone could have done something to prevent it?                      Yes                      No                      Who?
- What could you/they have done?
- Thinking back on what happened;

	Not at all	A little	More than a little	Very much
How angry do you feel about it?	1	2	3	4
How sad do you feel about it?	1	2	3	4
How guilty do you feel about it?	1	2	3	4
How scared do you feel?	1	2	3	4

- What changes have there been in your life or routine because of what happened?
- What do you usually do when you need help with a personal problem?
- Which friends and who at home can you talk to about this?
- Do you use social media to keep in touch with friends?
- What are you going to do when you leave school today? If you are uncertain, let’s talk about what you should do.

# R14

## CHECKLIST - STUDENTS AT RISK

This checklist may be used as an aid by school staff who are concerned about a student. It should be remembered that the checking of a number of items for any one student may point to other problems. Indication of a number of these factors in any one student should always be followed up.

Unexpected reduction of academic performance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talking about suicide	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ideas and themes of depression, death and suicide in their work	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making statements about hopelessness, helplessness or worthlessness	<input type="checkbox"/>
Change in mood and marked emotionally instability	<input type="checkbox"/>
Significant grief or stress	<input type="checkbox"/>
Withdrawal from relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>
Break up of an important relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discipline problems, being in trouble in school	<input type="checkbox"/>
Withdrawal from extra-curricular activities	<input type="checkbox"/>
Giving personal belongings away	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loss of interest in things one cares about	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neglect of physical appearance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical symptoms with emotional cause	<input type="checkbox"/>
High risk behaviours	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alcohol or drug abuse	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bullying or victimization	<input type="checkbox"/>
History of suicidal behaviour e.g. cutting or overdose risk behaviours	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family history of suicide/attempted suicide	<input type="checkbox"/>
Over use or reliance on social media	<input type="checkbox"/>

# R15

## EXPLORING SUICIDE RISK AND GUIDANCE IF STUDENT EXPRESSES SUICIDE IDEATION

A student may express ideas or exhibit behaviours suggestive of suicide ideation while in schools or information may be reported by another student or parent. The school has a responsibility to make an assessment and take action. The term 'risk assessment' is used in quite a specific sense and such an assessment needs to be carried out by a trained professional. This note is intended to help those professionals (designated school staff, such as guidance counsellors or chaplains) most immediately available to the student, to make a judgement as to whether a student is at risk. Where there is a serious concern about a student, then a referral should be made immediately. It is not easy to gauge the seriousness of such behaviour. The school is not responsible for deciding on the seriousness of the risk. Generally, all threats or reported threats should be taken seriously even if it may appear to be 'attention-seeking'.

### WHAT SHOULD A TEACHER DO?

Listen. If a student seeks out a teacher to discuss their concerns about suicide, they have an idea that the teacher may be a help to them. Indicate concern and a willingness to help. There may not be time to discuss it properly when the student first approaches. Arrange a time to talk and prepare for the meeting.

**Review available information:** Review any significant changes observed in the student over recent weeks. The list of warning signs in R14 should be used to guide a review discussion with concerned staff.

Don't be afraid to use the word "suicide". Getting the word out in the open may help the student feel that his/her cry for help has been heard.

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 confirm 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 personal/family difficulties e.g. relationship breakdown, loss of friendship, problems with the law, parental separation, recent bereavement, serious illness etc. **"How have things been going for you recently; has anything significant happened in your life recently?"**

#### 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. **"How have things been going for you? Have you been ill? Has anything significant happened to you recently?"**

## Plan

Does the student have a plan? If 'yes', ask **"How do you intend to do it?"** Does he/she have a particular day in mind? "When are you thinking of doing it?" Has he/she written suicide notes? The more concrete the plan the more serious the threat.

## Means

Does the student have the means and a place to do it. Ask **"How do you intend to do it?"** Are the means available lethal? Have they access to a rope or pills? **"Where would you do it?"** 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 out and their siblings also?

## ONWARD REFERRAL

The greater the number of "Yes" answers, the higher the risk and the greater the need for immediate onward referral. Parents should be informed and asked to bring the student to their GP or to another service and report what the student has said. Advise about use of Accident and Emergency Services if parents have concerns about accessing a GP out of hours.

Do not send the student home alone if there are concerns. Release the student to the parents if concerns for safety exist. Explain to the student that you have to take action and let them know what action you are taking. If a student is under 18 years teachers are obliged to inform the parents even without the student's consent.

Record the information and the actions taken. Share this with the relevant person in management. Share information as considered necessary with other staff members (e.g. student support team, class/subject teacher) taking into consideration the student's right to confidentiality.

## RETURN TO SCHOOL

A plan for reintegration of the student will be the responsibility of a designated person from the student support team. Consider the timing of the student's return if there has been an absence from school. Discuss the return with the parents and student. **Should the student be under medical supervision? Can the parents provide advice for the school from the medical team who assessed the student? How would the student like to have the absence explained?**

Share information about the return as considered necessary (for example with management, student support team, class/subject teacher as appropriate) and with other staff members, remembering confidentiality. Monitoring in the first few days will be an important part of the plan. Have a staff member available to meet them on arrival. Ensure that all teachers know that the student has been through a difficult time. Let the student know which staff member is available if support is needed. Keep routine as normal as possible. Ensure that there is a current family/guardian contact number available should difficulty arise.

Monitor the behaviour of friends and other students who may be providing support to the student to ensure that they are not taking on too much responsibility for the wellbeing of the student. Where a previous suicide has occurred in a school be aware of the possibility of copycat or suicide contagion which occurs when suicidal behaviour is imitated (see 7.6 in the Guidelines).



## PREVENTATIVE AND PREPARATORY GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

School systems are not only responsible for the academic needs of students but also for their emotional, social, and physical wellbeing. A preventative whole school approach to supporting mental health schools should ensure implementation of the *Well-Being Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention* (2013/2015), available on the DES website. This includes ensuring that the SPHE curriculum is consistently delivered in the school. SPHE provides a framework for educating young people about their health and wellbeing in a planned and structured way. It is advised to ensure that mental health awareness is included in curriculum delivery at all levels in the school.

If the school does not have a Student Support/Care Team in place consider setting one up. The document *Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools* (2014) is a useful resource and available on the DES website. It will provide a system for tracking and monitoring the students who have difficulties. Having such a system reduces anxiety for staff who have the concern as it shares the burden.

Schools are advised to have some members of staff trained in ASIST professional development provided by HSE. Information is available on [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (PRINCIPALS)

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

### **Q. What do I do first on hearing news of the incident/death?**

**A.** If the source of the news is the affected family, express condolences and get as many facts as possible sensitively. If it is from another source, check for veracity; obtain the facts; the numbers injured etc. Ascertain who is to contact the next of kin. The Gardaí may have already undertaken this role.

### **Q. Whom do I contact for help?**

**A.** If the school is closed (weekends/holidays) contact members of the Critical Incident Management Team with a view to setting up a meeting. Contact the Board of Management and/or outside agencies e.g. NEPS/Health Service Executive. If the State Examinations are in progress, contact the State Examinations Commission (SEC) (0906 442700) as soon as possible, in order to alert the Examination and Assessment Manager (EAM) for the school.

### **Q. What should I do on the first morning back at school?**

**A.** Call a meeting of the Critical Incident Management Team. If the team is not available call a meeting of the BOM and Senior Management. Set up a team for the duration of the crisis.

### **Q. What should be on the agenda for this meeting?**

- A.**
1. A statement of the facts as known
  2. Delegation of responsibilities
  3. Preparation of what to say at a staff meeting
  4. Preparation of what to say to students
  5. Initial schedule for the day
  6. Preparation of a letter to parents/guardians
  7. Discussion of support services/agencies whose support may be needed and agreement about who will contact them
  8. Preparation of a media statement, if appropriate.

### **Q. How do I manage communication?**

**A.** Schools will need to manage telephone and email contacts, as this can be stressful. Assign one or two suitable people to this task. Provide clear guidance on what to say or write. An agreed factual statement should be available. This can be placed on the schools' social media site.

### **Q. How do I keep staff up to date?**

**A.** The staff room is a very important room for teachers on this day. Informal briefings can take place during the breaks, as well as more formal meetings at the beginning and end of each day.

**Q. How do I dovetail the school's part in the funeral/religious ceremonies with the wishes of the parents/guardians?**

**A.** The school chaplain or local clergy/parish priest may be the main link person here. Ensure that the parents' wishes are respected and that participation of any students or friends is agreed with them. Ensure that beliefs about death or particular customs about funerals of different religious or ethnic groups are understood and respected.

**Q. How do I handle staff members who want to opt out?**

**A.** All staff would be expected to attend meetings held to disseminate information. However, it should be made clear to staff at these meetings that opting out of support type work is possible if they feel quite unable to cope. Be aware that some staff may be particularly vulnerable and watch out for them.

**Q. How do I handle the media? (See Section 9 – Dealing with the media)**

**A.** Delegate one suitable person to deal with the media.  
Prepare a media statement.

- State that it is a difficult time for the school community
- Emphasis should be on what is being done to support staff and students
- The 'Media Guidelines for the Portrayal of Suicide' suggest that the media can help prevent copy-cat suicides by not mentioning specific details of the suicide e.g. location and method used; not using colourful phrases to romanticise it; not citing causes of suicide and thereby indirectly suggesting suicide as an option. These guidelines should be adhered to by the school in any communication with the media
- Allow limited and controlled access to the media by providing a press room
- The SEC can help if the incident is during exam time. Teacher unions, trustees of schools and management bodies may also have press officers who are able to advise, if appropriate.

**Q. What/when should I tell staff/students about the incident?**

**A.** Give the facts, as you know them. This is the best way to counter rumour and fantasy. It should be done as soon as possible to prevent staff and students hearing from other, sometimes inappropriate, sources.

**Q. What if I feel upset myself and find it difficult to talk?**

**A.** It is very important to let children know that it is natural and acceptable to be upset and to cry. It is better to share feelings with them than to hide them, so don't worry if you get upset. It may help to create a safe and open atmosphere for grief. You should also seek and accept support for yourself while dealing with this difficult event.

**Q. What if some students do not appear to grieve?**

**A.** 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. Don't assume that because overt signs are absent, the person is not grieving. Each individual has his/her own personal way of grieving. It is important that these different individual ways are respected and seen as normal.

**Q. How long does it take to come to terms with bereavement?**

**A.** There is no definite answer to this. Each individual progresses at his/her own pace and there are enormous variations, (see R7).

**Q. How soon should brothers and sisters or friends who are closely involved be encouraged to return to school?**

**A.** They should usually return fairly quickly. They need the support of their peer group and the routine of school will offer them some sense of normality. Their presence at school will offer others an opportunity to express their grief. The sooner they return the easier it is for them to reintegrate. This advice should, however, be tempered by any particularly unusual circumstances and decisions will ultimately be made by parents/guardians.

**Q. Where a lot of well-intentioned friends are calling to the house and perhaps staying out late at night, what should I advise a grieving family to do?**

**A.** Encourage them to set clear limits, when friends can call and when they should leave. Often the bereaved adults need to be reminded that setting clear limits is good. Friends may stay too long because they do not know when or how to leave the house. School can help by suggesting time limits to the friends. This is especially important at exam time when rest is essential.

**Q. What can I do about phone texting or social media use, especially if unreliable (or inappropriate) messages are being passed about?**

**A.** A critical incident highlights the need for a well-established school policy on this issue (see **R22**). Students should be advised that they are being given reliable and up-to date information by the school. They should be encouraged to report to a teacher all social media communication received which are at variance with the facts as known, or which are a cause of worry or concern - especially about friends.

**Q. How long do we leave the memory area in the classroom/corridor**

**A.** Sometimes out of respect for the deceased a space/table is set up with a picture, candles flowers, messages, cards, etc. This can offer a focal point in the initial days of grieving. The items can be brought to the funeral service as part of the offertory procession.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (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 are 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 should 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. 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?**

**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 **R6**, **R7** and **R9**). 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' 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 **R5**. An advantage here is that students may feel safer and more secure with their regular classroom teacher.

**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 to the appropriate service.

**Q. What is the overall message in helping bereaved children?**

**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. If you need help, or a friend is in difficulty, it is best talk to us rather than relying totally on social media."*

**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.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (PARENTS)

The following is a summary of questions frequently asked by parents 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 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. Information on social media is not reliable and always needs to be checked.

**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. 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. Advise on and monitor safe use of social media.

**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/HSE Services.

**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.

## CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY & PLAN - FRAMEWORK

The key to managing a critical incident is planning. Schools are strongly advised to develop a policy in relation to critical incident response. NEPS also encourages schools to develop a Critical Incident Management Plan, outlining who will do what in the event of a tragedy.

The templates outlined below are designed as an aid to schools in drawing up a policy and plan. Each school will need to look at its own particular context and circumstances and draw up its own unique policy and plan.

### CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY

#### Initiate and establish structures

Establish a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) which will take responsibility for developing a policy and putting a Critical Incident Management Plan (CIMP) in place.

*(Name of school)* aims to protect the wellbeing of its students and staff by providing a safe and nurturing environment at all times. (Make reference to the school's mission statement). The Board of Management, through *(name of principal)*, has drawn up a critical incident management plan as one element of the school's policies and plans.

*Our aim is to establish a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) to steer the development and implementation of the Critical Incident Management Plan.*

#### Review and Research

The CIMT should consult resource documents available to schools on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) and [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie), these include:

- Responding to Critical Incidents Guidelines and Resources for Schools (NEPS 2016)
- Suicide Prevention in Schools: Best Practice Guidelines (IAS, National Suicide Review Group (2002)
- Suicide Prevention in the Community - A Practical Guide (HSE 2011)
- Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention (DES, DOH, HSE 2013)
- Well-Being in Primary Schools - Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (DES, DOH, HSE 2015)

Other useful documents may be found on websites listed on pages 95 and 96.

#### Define what you mean by the term 'critical incident'

The staff and management of (name of school) recognise a critical incident to be "an incident or sequence of events that overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school". Critical incidents may involve one or more students or staff members, or members of our local community. Make a list for your plan using examples as follows:



- The death of a member of the school community through accident, violence, suicide or suspected suicide or other unexpected death
- An intrusion into the school
- An accident involving members of the school community
- A major accident/tragedy in the wider community
- Serious damage to the school building through fire, flood, vandalism, etc.
- A major accident/tragedy in the wider community.

### **Aim**

The aim of the CIMP is to help school management and staff to react quickly and effectively in the event of an incident, to enable us to maintain a sense of control and to ensure that appropriate support is offered to students and staff. Having a good plan should also help ensure that the impact on students and staff will be limited. It should enable us to effect a return to normality as soon as possible.

### **Creation of a coping supportive and caring ethos in the school**

We have put systems in place to help to build resilience in both staff and students, thus preparing them to cope with a range of life events. These include measures to address both the physical and psychological safety of the school community.

### **Physical safety**

Include some specific examples of what the school is doing at this point. You might also refer to your Health & Safety policy

- Evacuation plan formulated
- Regular fire drills occur
- Fire exits and extinguishers are regularly checked
- Pre-opening supervision in the school yard (possibly include details)
- Front gate locked during school hours
- School doors locked during class time
- Rules of the playground – include details.

### **Psychological safety**

The management and staff of (name of school) aim to use available programmes and resources to address the personal and social development of students, to enhance a sense of safety and security in the school and to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion.

Include specific examples as appropriate.  
Some suggestions follow:

- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is integrated into the work of the school. Issues such as grief and loss; communication skills; stress and anger management; resilience; conflict management; problem solving; help-seeking; bullying; decision making and prevention of alcohol and drug misuse are addressed in the SPHE curriculum. Promotion of mental health is an integral part of this provision.
- Staff have access to training for their role in SPHE
- Staff are familiar with the Child Protection Procedures and the name of the Designated Liaison Person

- Books and resources on difficulties affecting the primary/post primary school student are available
- Information is provided on mental health in general and such specific areas as signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Staff are informed in the area of suicide awareness and some have attended specialist training such as ASIST provided by the HSE
- The school has developed links with a range of external agencies – list these agencies
- Inputs to students by external providers are carefully considered in the light of criteria about student safety, the appropriateness of the content, and the expertise of the providers. See DES Circulars 0022/2010 (Primary) or 0023/2010 (Post-Primary)
- The school has a clear anti-bullying policy and deals with incidents of bullying in accordance with this policy
- There is a care system in place in the school using the “Continuum of Support” approach which is outlined in the NEPS documents published on 2007 for primary schools and 2010 for post primary schools. See also Student Support Teams in Post Primary Schools (2014). These documents are available on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)
- Students who are identified as being at risk are referred to the designated staff member (e.g. guidance counsellor or support teacher), concerns are explored and the appropriate level of assistance and support is provided. Parents/guardians are informed, and where appropriate, a referral is made to an appropriate agency (a summary of this support is set out in **R 23**)
- Staff are informed about how to access support for themselves.

### **Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)**

A CIMT has been established in line with best practice. The members of the team were selected on a voluntary basis and will retain their roles for at least one school year. The members of the team will meet annually to review and update the policy and plan. Each member of the team has a dedicated critical incident folder. This contains a copy of the policy and plan and materials particular to their role, to be used in the event of an incident.

### **Preparation of CIMP**

**Roles:** Schools need to make arrangements for assigning roles, taking account of such practical issues as school size and the number of staff available. Many schools will double up of roles. Schools might wish to consider including one or more members of the BOM on the team as well as members of the school’s student support / care team.

The key roles which need to be covered are as follows:

- TEAM LEADER
- GARDA LIAISON
- STAFF LIAISON
- STUDENT LIAISON
- PARENT / GUARDIAN LIAISON
- COMMUNITY LIAISON
- MEDIA LIAISON
- ADMINISTRATOR

Outlined below are some points on the key responsibilities of each role. A note on helpful qualities for each role can be found in the text box. However, each school will have to adapt these suggestions to their own circumstances and needs.

## TEAM LEADER

A person who carries authority and can make decisions during a crisis (e.g. school closure, attendance at memorial services, etc.)

- Alerts the team members to the crisis and convenes a meeting
- Coordinates the tasks of the team
- Liaises with the Board of Management; DES; NEPS; SEC; ETB
- Liaises with the bereaved family.

It is important to consider who will take the lead in the absence of the team leader.

## GARDA LIAISON

(This may be seen as part of the team leader's role)

- Liaises with the Gardaí
- Ensures that information about deaths or other developments is checked out for accuracy before being shared.

## STAFF LIAISON

A staff member known and trusted by the staff

- Leads briefing meetings for staff on the facts as known, gives staff members an opportunity to express their feelings and ask questions, outlines the routine for the day
- Advises staff on the procedures for identification of vulnerable students
- Provides materials for staff (from their critical incident folder)
- Keeps staff updated as the day progresses
- Is alert to vulnerable staff members and makes contact with them individually
- Advises them of the availability of the EAS and gives them the contact number.

## STUDENT LIAISON

A trusted and familiar figure to the students. A bigger school may need a number of such people

- At post-primary level, may co-ordinate information from tutors and year heads about students they are concerned about
- Alerts other staff to vulnerable students (appropriately)
- Provides materials for students (from their critical incident folder)
- Maintains student contact records (R1)
- Looks after setting up and supervision of 'quiet' room where agreed.

## COMMUNITY/AGENCY LIAISON

Someone with good contacts with agencies and relevant individuals in the community

- Maintains up to date lists of contact numbers of
  - Key parents, such as members of the Parents Council
  - Emergency support services and other external contacts and resources
- Liaises with agencies in the community for support and onward referral
- Is alert to the need to check credentials of individuals offering support
- Coordinates the involvement of these agencies
- Reminds agency staff to wear name badges
- Updates team members on the involvement of external agencies.

## PARENT/GUARDIAN LIAISON

Someone known to parents. This person should be comfortable speaking before a large group and have skills to manage emotional reactions of individual or groups of parents

- Visits the bereaved family with the team leader
- Arranges meetings, if held
- May facilitate such meetings, and manage 'questions and answers' sessions
- Manages the 'consent' issues in accordance with agreed school policy
- Ensures that sample letters are prepared and available on the school's IT system ready for adaptation
- Sets up room for meetings with parents
- Maintains a record of parents seen
- Meets with individual parents
- Provides appropriate materials for parents (from their critical incident folder).

## MEDIA LIAISON

Someone with good interpersonal skills who would be comfortable talking to the media by phone or in person. A person who is able to set limits without being offensive

- In advance of an incident, will consider issues that may arise and how they might be responded to (e.g. students being interviewed, photographers on the premises, etc.)
- In the event of an incident, will liaise where necessary with the SEC, relevant teacher unions etc.
- Will draw up a press statement, give media briefings and interviews (as agreed by school management).

## ADMINISTRATOR

- Maintenance of up to date telephone numbers of
  - Parents/guardians
  - Teachers
  - Emergency services
- Takes telephone calls and notes those that need a response
- Ensures that templates are available on the schools IT system and ready for adaptation
- Prepares and sends out letters, emails and texts
- Photocopies materials as needed
- Maintains records.

### Record keeping

In the event of an incident each member of the team will keep records of phone calls made and received, letters emails and texts sent and received, meetings held, persons met, interventions used, material used etc. The school secretary (**name**) will have a key role in receiving and logging telephone calls, sending letters, photocopying materials etc.

### Confidentiality and good name considerations

The management and staff of name of school have a responsibility to protect the privacy and good name of the people involved in any incident and will be sensitive to the consequences of any public statements. The members of the school staff will bear this in mind, and will seek to ensure that students do so also. For instance, the term 'suicide' will not be used unless there is confirmed information that death was due to suicide, and that the family involved consents to its use. The phrases 'tragic death' or 'sudden death' may be used instead. Similarly, the word 'murder' should not be used until it is legally established that a murder was committed. The term 'violent death' may be used instead.

### Critical incident rooms

In the event of a critical incident,

**name room** - will be the main room used to meet the staff

**name room(s)** - for meetings with students

**name room** - for parents

**name room** - for media

**name room** - for individual sessions with students

**name room** - for other visitors

### Consultation and communication regarding the plan

All staff were consulted and their views canvassed in the preparation of this policy and plan. Students and parent/guardian representatives were also consulted and asked for their comments.

Our school's final policy and plan in relation to responding to critical incidents has been presented to all staff.

Each member of the critical incident team has a personal copy of the plan.

All new and temporary staff will be informed of the details of the plan by (Name of team member)

The plan will be updated annually (**name month .....**)

# R20

## CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEMPLATE FOR SCHOOL PLAN

### CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM

Role	Name and Email adress	Telephone number
Team Leader		
Garda Liaison		
Staff Liaison		
Student Liaison		
Parent Liaison		
Community Liaison		
Media Liaison		
Administrator		

### SHORT TERM ACTIONS – DAY 1

Task	Name
Gather accurate information	
Who, what, when, where?	
Convene a CIMT meeting - specify time and place clearly	
Contact external agencies	
Arrange supervision for students	
Hold staff meeting	
Agree schedule for the day	All staff
Inform students - (close friends and students with learning difficulties may need to be told separately)	
Compile a list of vulnerable students	
Contact/visit the bereaved family	

*(continued opposite)*

Prepare and agree media statement and deal with the media	
Inform parents/guardians	
Hold end of day staff briefing	

### MEDIUM TERM ACTIONS - (DAY 2 AND FOLLOWING DAYS)

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

### FOLLOW-UP BEYOND 72 HOURS

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



# R21

## EMERGENCY CONTACT LIST

(To be displayed in staff-room, school office and Principal's office etc.)

AGENCY	CONTACT NUMBERS
GARDA	
HOSPITAL	
FIRE BRIGADE	
LOCAL GPs	
HSE/Primary Care Team / Primary Care Centre / CAMHS / Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention	
SCHOOL INSPECTOR	
NEPS PSYCHOLOGIST	
DES/ETB	
INTO / ASTI / TUI	
PARISH PRIEST / CLERGY	
STATE EXAMS COMMISSION	
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SERVICE	1800 411 057

## GUIDANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Social media is now part of everyday communication and information sharing. Most students are avid and competent users. Social media messages speed up the rate at which information is shared. This can have a significant influence on the behaviour of young people during a critical incident. Some social media communication may occur without the knowledge of school staff that leads to distress among students or their parents/guardians.

The following information may help schools to consider issues related to social media use when dealing with a critical incident.

- It is essential that schools take account of the need to have competency in the use of social media among management and staff. If the members of the CIMT have particular concerns or fears about social media, they should consult those familiar with its use. Senior-students e.g. sixth-year members of the student council could also be asked for help. Normalising social media use by the students during a critical incident is very important.
- Schools should include social media literacy in the school curriculum. It is essential that school management, staff and students understand the role of social media, and its positive and negative aspects. A positive disposition to social media by the school may encourage thoughtful use by students during a critical incident.
- Agreement on appropriate use of social media during a critical incident should be included in the school's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). All school staff should follow agreed online professional protocols as prescribed by the New Code of Professional Conduct by Teachers i.e. "Teachers should ensure that any communication with pupils/students, colleagues, parents/guardians, school management and others is appropriate, including communication via electronic media, such as email, texting and social media etc." (The Teacher Council, 2012). The CIMT may also remind staff, students and other relevant community members about their AUP during times of crises.
- When dealing with a critical incident it is advised that schools act quickly and with caution. A message could be placed on the school website and on any other school social media account along the following lines:  
  
*'You may be aware of a recent event within the school community. We ask you to respect the family's privacy and sensitivities by considering if you should post any comments, especially on social media. We will inform you through the normal channels of any relevant developments.'*
- School can use social media to provide up to date information for all concerned throughout the various stages of the incident. Positive messages and appropriate advice for young people and their parents/guardians can be provided. One important message would be to remind parents/guardians to discuss social media use with their children and monitor use more actively following a crisis.

- It is important that CIMT members are familiar with safe messaging guidelines and the document **Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide and Self-harm**. Safe messaging guidelines should be followed when sending messages to staff, students, community or the media following a death by suicide. Media personnel if making contact with the school during a critical incident should be provided with the guidelines. Should the need arise during a crisis, schools can contact the Department of Education and Skills Press Office for advice and support or in the case of Education and Training Board schools the Board head office.
- Young people often post Rest-In-Peace (RIP) messages on social media sites when tragedies occur. These posts can be heartfelt and emotional particularly in cases of death by suicide. Messages such as “I miss you and will see you soon” or “I will follow in your path” should cause concern and be followed up with the individual concerned. The death by suicide of an individual may influence others. Young people are especially prone to contagion. Those who are emotionally vulnerable may act on suicidal impulses.
- Activity on social networking sites during a critical incident can be a source of potentially important information, such as suicide pacts, identification of vulnerable groups or individual young people who may be at increased risk of suicide. Given privacy restrictions to people’s personal web pages, distressing information may be posted without the knowledge of parents or school management. It is likely that users will block access so activity of this nature will not be accessible to everyone.
- Monitoring sites raises issues of privacy and surveillance. Schools are not advised to engage in monitoring. However, should schools become aware of inappropriate posts by students, they could inform the parents/guardians and encourage them to request that it is deleted. The easiest way to have a post removed is for the person who originally posted it to delete it from their account or request its removal. Service providers will not usually remove posts unless content is contrary to their AUP.

The following advice for journalists is provided in the Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide and Self-harm.

*The internet has created additional opportunities and challenges for journalists due to the speed and ease of accessing and publishing information. Points of view can now be presented more quickly and easily but sometimes without review or factual basis. It can be difficult for some readers to understand the distinction between what is fact and what is opinion. If you are posting your story on a news website or blog please consider the following points:*

## General tips

- Avoid linking to or mentioning the names of websites that encourage or glamorise suicide. Helpful websites offering support are listed at [www.ias.ie](http://www.ias.ie) and [www.samaritans.org/ireland/links](http://www.samaritans.org/ireland/links).
- Try to exercise care and judgment in the creation of news stories that will appear online, as they can often be surrounded by adverts and commentary which are outside the control of the author. Additional features on the page can create a negative context, allowing, for example, adverts promoting depression aids to appear alongside articles on mental health.
- Add hyperlinks to sources of support to ensure that people in distress can access useful resources quickly. Consider promoting [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) within the UK and Ireland, or our worldwide equivalent, [www.befrienders.org](http://www.befrienders.org), beyond these regions.
- [webwise.ie](http://www.webwise.ie) is an internet safety initiative funded by the DES, focused on raising awareness of online safety issues and good practice among students, their parents/guardians and teachers. [www.webwise.ie](http://www.webwise.ie)

## Reader feedback

- The ability to comment on articles or blog posts gives readers the opportunity to glamorise suicide or present controversial opinions about suicidal tendencies and mental health. The relative anonymity of these comments can encourage debates that are inappropriate for a news website, and potentially damaging to other readers.
- Responsible websites ensure that the terms and conditions each commentator agrees to when contributing online are explicit in what constitutes inappropriate material, and how it will be dealt with. In addition, site owners and moderators should understand the implications of allowing these comments to be published on their website.
- Wherever possible, attempt to educate your audience to understand how to use the feedback section with full consideration for everyone's health, safety and wellbeing, and the right of the publisher to remove inappropriate content.
- Consider making it clear to users that feedback services are moderated, whether manually or electronically.

## TEACHERS HELPING STUDENTS IN TIME OF CRISIS OR EMERGENCY

### 1.LISTEN 2.PROTECT 3.CONNECT 4.MODEL & 5.TEACH

THINK ABOUT your students' "DIRECT EXPERIENCE" with the event i.e. FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE of the event (physically experiencing or directly seeing it as it happens).

After the event, changes can happen in students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Your students may worry about family members, classmates, friends, or pets they care about, and may worry that it will happen again. Common reactions to crises and emergencies include trouble sleeping, problems at school and with friends, trouble concentrating and listening, and not finishing work. Your students may become more irritable, sad, angry, or worried as they think about what has happened, and as they experience recovery efforts after the event.

When students share their experiences, thoughts and feelings about the event, LISTEN for RISK FACTORS for adverse reactions.

Risk factors that may indicate a need for counselling referral for students include:

- loss of a family member, schoolmate, or friend
- observing serious injury or the death of another person
- family members or friends missing after the event, past traumatic experiences or losses
- getting hurt or becoming sick due to the event
- home loss, family moves, changes in neighbourhoods/schools, and/or loss of belongings.

If a student has had any of these experiences, you may wish to consider referring her or him to the HSE services. Your NEPS psychologist will be available to provide support and advice. Now that you know what can affect your students after a disaster, school crisis, or emergency, you're ready to **Listen, Protect, Connect, and Model & Teach**

### 1.LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT, MODEL & TEACH

The first step after an event is to listen and pay attention to what they say and how they act. Your students may also show their feelings in non-verbal ways, like increased behavioural problems or increased withdrawal. Let your students know you are willing to listen and talk about the event, or to make referrals to talk to an appropriate professional, if they prefer it. Use the following questions to talk with your students. You can listen for clues that indicate when students are having a hard time. Write down a few examples that may be helpful to note:

- What might be preventing a student from coming to or staying in school?
- What might be preventing a student from paying attention or doing homework?
- What might be preventing a student from returning to other school based activities?

Listen, observe, and note any changes in:

- Behaviour and/or mood
- School performance
- Interactions with schoolmates and teachers
- Participation in school-based activities
- Behaviours at home that parents/guardians discuss with you.

## LISTEN **2. PROTECT, CONNECT, MODEL & TEACH**

You can help make your students feel better by doing some or all of the following:

- Answer questions simply and honestly, clearing up any confusion students may have about what happened
- Let your students know that they are not alone in their reactions
- Provide opportunities for your students to talk, draw, and play, but don't force it
- Talk to your students about what is being done by the school and community to keep everyone safe from harm
- Watch for anything in the environment that could re-traumatize your students
- Keep your eyes and ears open for bullying behaviours
- Maintain daily routines, activities and structure with clear expectations and consistent rules
- Make adjustments to assignments to be sensitive to students' current level of functioning
- Limit access to live television and the Internet that show disturbing scenes of the event
- Remember, what is not upsetting to adults may upset and confuse students, and vice versa
- Encourage students to "take a break" from the crisis focus with activities unrelated to the event
- Find ways for your students to feel helpful to your classroom, the school, and the community
- List other things you do that help your students feel better. Sharing this list with other teachers may increase ideas to help your students.

## LISTEN, PROTECT **3.CONNECT, MODEL & TEACH**

Reaching out to people in your school and community will help your students after a school crisis or emergency. These connections will build strength for everyone. Consider ways to make some or all of the following connections:

- "Check in" with students on a regular basis
- Find resources that can be supportive to your students and staff
- Restore interactive school activities, including sports, club meetings, student projects, and student councils, coaches, etc.)
- Encourage student activities with friends, including class projects and extracurricular activities

- Empathise with your students by allowing a little more time for them to learn new materials
- Build on your students' strengths by encouraging them to find ways to help them use what they have learned in the past to help them deal with the event
- Remind your students that major disasters, crises, and emergencies are rare
- Discuss feeling safe and times they have felt safe
- List programs and activities that connect you and your students with the community
- Share your list with other teachers to create a larger list of activities and resources.

## LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT **4.MODEL** & TEACH

As you help your students after a disaster, crisis, or emergency, your efforts may be more successful – and you may be less stressed – if you keep in mind:

- It is good to be aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions, these can be seen and may affect your students
- How you cope and behave after an event will influence how your students cope and behave. Your students will be watching you for both verbal and non-verbal cues
- Monitor conversations that students may hear
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation, but demonstrate how people can come together to cope after such an event.

## LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT, MODEL & **5.TEACH**

Talk to your students about expected reactions after a crisis (emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and physiological). There are “normal” reactions to abnormal events.

- Different people may have very different reactions, even within the same family
- After the event, people may also have different amounts of time they need to cope and adjust
- Encourage your students to identify and use positive coping strategies to help them after the event
- Help your students problem-solve to get through each day successfully
- Help your students set small “doable” goals and share in these achievements as “wins” for the students and your classroom
- Remind students that with time and assistance, things generally get better. If they don't, they should let a parent or teacher know
- Over time, you, your students, their families, your classroom, can EXPECT RECOVERY.

*Adapted by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for Irish schools from Psychological First Aid materials developed by the American Red Cross (2014 and FEMA, see [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)). We acknowledge with thanks.*

## USEFUL WEBSITES AND HELPLINES FOR ACCESSING RESOURCES

NEPS has identified the following websites which schools may find helpful. However, all materials should be reviewed by school management to ensure that they conform to school ethos and policy before they are used.

### TRAINING - [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)

**ASIST Training:** ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) is a two-day interactive workshop in suicide first-aid. It is suitable for all kinds of caregivers - health workers, teachers, community workers, Gardaí, youth workers, volunteers, people responding to family, friends and co-workers. It is free of charge. If you'd like to make a difference in your community, you may wish to access ASIST training and learn how to help. Information can be obtained on the website of the National Office for Suicide Prevention.

**SafeTALK:** SafeTALK 'suicide alertness for everyone' is a half day training programme that prepares participants to identify persons with thoughts of suicide and connect them to suicide first aid resources. These specific skills are called suicide alertness and are taught with the expectation that the person learning them will use them to help reduce suicide risk in their communities. Participants learn how to provide practical help to persons with thoughts of suicide in only a few hours. Following a SafeTALK workshop you will be more willing and able to perform an important helping role for persons with thoughts of suicide.

### WEBSITES

**Barnardos** provide resources and advice on [www.barnardos.ie/resources](http://www.barnardos.ie/resources), [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp)

The **Childhood Bereavement Network** (CBN) is a multi-professional federation of organisations and individuals working with bereaved children and young people. [www.irishchildhoodbereavementnetwork.ie](http://www.irishchildhoodbereavementnetwork.ie)

**Cruse Bereavement Care** exists to promote the wellbeing of bereaved people and to enable anyone bereaved by death to understand their grief and cope with their loss. [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

The **Professional Development for Teachers** (PDST) **Health and Wellbeing Team** provide support for teachers at primary and post-primary level in physical education (PE), social personal and health education (SPHE) which includes anti-bullying, child protection, mental health and wellbeing, relationships and sexuality education (RSE) and other SPHE related areas. Supports offered to schools include in-service for principals, co-ordinators, teachers of SPHE, whole staff groups; programme planning; school policy development; schools visits. [www.pdst.ie](http://www.pdst.ie).

The former SPHE Support Service has been integrated into the Health and Wellbeing team of the PDST. Visit [www.sphe.ie](http://www.sphe.ie) for further information and to book post-primary SPHE courses.

The **National Office for Suicide Prevention** (NOSP) was established to oversee the implementation of 'Reach Out' the National Strategy for Action on Suicide Prevention, and to co-ordinate suicide prevention efforts around the country. The NOSP works closely with the HSE **Suicide Prevention Officers**. Up-to-date contact details for suicide prevention officers can be found on the NOSP website [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)



The **Irish Association for Suicidology** (IAS) sets out to be a forum for all individuals and voluntary groups involved in any aspect of suicidology for the exchange of knowledge gained from differing perspectives and experiences [www.ias.ie](http://www.ias.ie)

**Irish Hospice Foundation** - [www.hospicefoundation.ie](http://www.hospicefoundation.ie)

**Lifelines** supports all people who are affected in anyway by self-injury within the United Kingdom and beyond. It supports people who self-injure, and their family and friends. [www.selfharm.org](http://www.selfharm.org)

**Winstonswish Foundation**, help for grieving children and their families. [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Resources and support for those dealing with suicide, depression or emotional distress, particularly teenagers and young adults. [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

A national charity committed to improving the mental health of all children and young people. [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

An Irish website covering all aspects of health, lifestyle, culture and craic. It's an online youth information centre, a magazine, a health clinic, a contact directory, a youth media forum a take action initiative, a community building place and lots more. [www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

A site that focuses on issues relating to youth in Ireland today. [www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie)

An Australian site that helps young people through tough times. [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)

**Mental Health Ireland** aims to promote positive mental health and to actively support persons with a mental illness, their families and carers by identifying their needs and advocating their rights. The pro teen matters web magazine, which is created by young people for young people, has information about physical and mental health, frequently asked questions, competitions, jokes and stories. [www.mentalhelathireland.ie](http://www.mentalhelathireland.ie)

Non-judgemental information and support. [www.gayswitchboard.ie](http://www.gayswitchboard.ie)

## HELPLINES

Remind students that if they need someone to talk to, at any time of the day or night, they can ring either:

Childline: 1800 666 666 (free calls)

The Samaritans: 1850 60 90 90 (Local call cost)



These Guidelines are available on the Department of Education and Skills website:

[www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)