



## **LORETO COLLEGE ST STEPHEN'S GREEN** **CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT POLICY**

Loreto College St. Stephen's Green aims to protect the well-being of its students and staff by providing a safe and nurturing environment at all times. This policy outlines the procedures to be taken in the event of a critical incident. For the purpose of this policy a critical incident is defined as "an incident or sequence of events that overwhelm the normal coping mechanism of the school" (*Responding to Critical Incidents-A Guideline for Schools: NEPS 2007*)

This could include:

- The death of a member of the school community
- A serious accident involving a member of the school community
- A traumatic event involving the school
- A serious accident or tragedy in the wider community

The aim of the policy is to help the school community to react quickly and efficiently and to ensure that appropriate support is offered to students and staff. In the event of a critical incident occurring, the Critical Incident Team is convened to plan and implement an appropriate response.

**The Critical Incident Team consists of:**

- Principal
  - Deputy Principal
  - Guidance Counsellor
  - Chaplaincy and RE team
  - Year Head (relevant)
  - Form Teacher (relevant)
  - Other volunteer teachers
- (See Appendix 1)

**Depending on the nature of the critical incident, the school may access professional support from agencies such as:**

- Department of Education Psychological Services
- National Suicide Bereavement Support Network
- Rainbows
- Priest
- Gardaí
- Counsellors

**Key administrative tasks in planning for a critical incident:**

Maintaining an up-to-date list of contact numbers for

- a) Staff
- b) Pupils, parents / guardians

c) Emergency support services

Compiling emergency information for school tours including:

- a) List of all pupils and teachers involved and group leader
- b) Copy of itinerary
- c) List of phone numbers / contact numbers of all involved including school mobile number
- d) Up-to-date medical information on pupils and permission forms from parents in case of a medical emergency
- e) Insurance details

**Procedures to be followed in the event of critical incidents:**

On notification of a critical incident the Principal will convene the Critical Incident Management Team to carry out the following:

- Ascertain the facts
- Contact appropriate agencies
- Organise for the supervision of pupils
- Inform Staff, BOM and Loreto Office
- Prepare a statement of the facts
- Identify high risk pupils
- Appoint someone to deal with phone calls
- Organise timetable for the day
- Inform parents and guardians
- Inform pupils
- Make contact with the bereaved family
- Organise support
- Respond to the media through a nominated spokesperson decided by the Board
- Contact school solicitors if required
- The team should draw up a short written statement of the facts for staff, pupils, parents and the media

**Media:**

A spokesperson will be designated to brief the media where necessary. All communication with the media should be simple, factual and brief. The school will at all times endeavour to protect the privacy of the family. The statement should include:

- The facts about the incident
- The school's response
- Support available for the pupils
- Positive information or comment about the deceased person (if applicable)
- Condolences extended to the family (if applicable)

**Administrative requirements:**

**Short Term Tasks (as applicable):**

- Organise supervision or substitution
- Make necessary phone calls
- Reserve rooms for meetings / counselling
- Record events, letters to parents, telephone calls made and received/text messages sent
- Deal with normal school business
- Organise practical requirements (snacks/ drinks/ tissues)
- Maintain the normal school routine where possible

**Medium Term Tasks (as applicable):**

- Prepare staff and pupils for attending the funeral
- Facilitate staff and pupils' responses e.g. book of condolence, school council's vote of sympathy, flowers
- Support distressed staff and pupils
- Ensure counselling service is available
- Deal with deceased person's possessions in keeping with parental wishes
- Invite the bereaved family to a school based mass or service
- Facilitate the return to school of siblings and close friends
- Monitor siblings and friends of the deceased carefully
- Update and amend school records and inform the DES

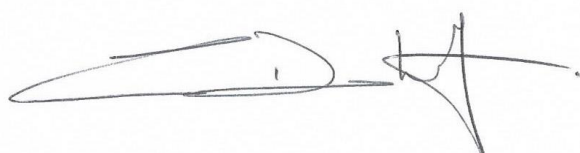
**Long Term Tasks (as applicable):**

- Keep in contact with the parents of the deceased
- Be sensitive to occasions such as anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas etc
- Organise a school service and memorial
- Help staff and pupils to acknowledge bereavement
- Provide appropriate support for the primary carers
- Review overall school response
- Review the support structures available

The Student Council, Parents' Association, Staff and Board of Management were consulted in the formulation of this policy and their recommendations included in this document. It was ratified by the Board of Management at its meeting of 13<sup>th</sup> February 2017. It will be reviewed yearly with a major review in 2021.

**Ratification date:** 13<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

**Due for review:** Annually with major review in 2021.



**Mr. Conor Doherty**

Chairperson, Board of Management  
Loreto College, St. Stephen's Green

**Appendix 1** Critical Incident Management Team

**Principal:** Jackie Dempsey

**Deputy Principal:** Des FitzGerald

**Guidance Counsellor:** Emer O'Keeffe

**Chaplaincy and RE team:** Caitríona FitzPatrick, Stephanie Curtis,  
Ailis Travers, Laura McTaggart, Maura McCaul

**Board of Management Liaison Person:** Conor Doherty (Chairperson)

**Volunteer Teachers:**

## **Appendix 2 Resource Document on coping with reactions to a critical incident**

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

### **Feelings and thoughts**

You may experience:

- **Shock** at what has happened. Things may feel unreal. Shock sometimes causes people to deny what has happened. This doesn't mean you don't care. You may feel like withdrawing, crying or becoming hysterical.
- **Fear** about the unpredictability of everything especially life, of a similar incident happening again, of breaking down or losing control, of being alone.
- **Guilt** – feeling responsible in some way for what has happened even though you are being told you could not be, for not being able to make things better or not being able to help others, for being alive or better off than others.
- **Shame** for not reacting as you thought you should, for needing support from others.
- **Anger** at someone or something, wanting to blame someone or something for what has happened, at the injustice of the event.
- **Confusion** about the event, about how you should react, about having mixed feelings about everything.
- **Pain** at the loss of the person, of associating this with other incidents, bereavements or losses that you may have experienced before.
- **Left out by people** not acknowledging your involvement in the incident or your relationship with the person who is injured or deceased.

### **Physical and behavioural reactions**

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

#### **Remember:**

- You need to look after yourself
- You are normal and are having normal reactions to an abnormal event
- There are people you can talk to: Form Tutors, Year Heads, Chaplains, etc.
- You may not experience any of the above feelings. There is little you can do to avoid these uncomfortable feelings and thoughts but there are things you can do to help you deal with them

#### **What can help?**

- **Talk** – Try to talk about what happened and how you feel. Don't bottle things up. Sharing your experience with others who have had similar experiences may help. Let someone know if you are not coping well. If it is difficult to talk, keep a journal of how you are feeling or draw your experiences or emotions.
- **Thinking over the incident** – You need to process the incident and allow it more into your mind over time. With time you may need to talk about it, write about it. You may find that you dream about it over and over again. All this eventually helps you to accept what has happened.
- **Attending memorials** – Going to the funeral or service.
- **Eating properly** – Try to eat a regular meal three times a day.
- **Exercise and relaxation** – Make sure you take some exercise and also find ways to relax and rest.

- Be careful not to use drink or other drugs to help you cope – They may numb the pain temporarily but will lead to other problems.

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

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

### **Appendix 3 Useful Contacts**

Barnardos	01-4530355
The Samaritans	1850 609090
Childline	1800 666666
Parentline	1890 927277
Aware	01-6766166 1890 303302
National Suicide Bereavement Support Network	024-95561
Rainbows	01-4734175
The Bereavement Counselling Service – Dublin	01-8391766
Bereavement Counselling Service	01-6767727
I.S.P .C.C.	01-6794944

<http://homepage.eircom.net/~nsbsn> Irish website for people bereaved by suicide, lists support groups.

## **Appendix 4 Resources**

### **RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS**

*INTO/Ulster Teacher Union (2000).*

When Tragedy Strikes: Guidelines for Effective Critical Incident Management in Schools.

*ASTI (1997).*

Guidelines for Schools on How to Respond to the Sudden Unexpected Death of a Student.

*City of Dublin VEC Psychological Services.*

Coping with a Major Crisis.

*City of Dublin VEC Psychological Service.*

When Something Terrible Happens...

*Pat Donnelly, Barnardos (2002).*

Someone to Talk To: A Handbook on Childhood Bereavement.

*Luke Monaghan (1999).*

Suicide Bereavement and Loss: Perspective and Responses.

*Siobhan Foster Ryan and Luke Monaghan (2001).*

Echoes of Suicide.

*The Irish Association of Suicidology, National Suicide Review Group (2002).*

Suicide Prevention in Schools: Best Practice Guidelines.

*William Yule and Anne Gold (1993).*

Wise Before the Event. Coping with Crises in Schools. Pub. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

*Available from Solas, Barnardos Christchurch Square, Dublin 8.*

Death – Helping Children Understand.

29

### **RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN**

G. Perkins and L. Morris (1991). Remembering Mum. Pub. A & C Black (Children under 7 years).

J.M. Kremetz (1991). How It Feels When a Parent Dies. London: Orion Children's Books (age 7 – 11).

S. Wallbank. My Father Died and My Mother Died. Cruse – Bereavement Care (11 years –).

Judith Bisignano (1991). Living with Death (A Workbook for 12 – 15 year olds). Pub. Good Apple, USA.

Noirin Hynes and Margarita Synott. Death and Dying: A Resource Pack. Available from the Marino Institute of Education.

### **RESOURCES FOR PARENTS**

Helen Fitzgerald (1992). The Grieving Child – A Parent's Guide. Pub. Simon and Schuster, New York.

Christy Kenneally. Sorry for Your Trouble – Helping the Bereaved (a tape).

Allison Wertheimer. A Special Scar: The Experience of People Bereaved by Suicide. Pub. Routledge, London 1991.

Sharry, John & Reid, Peter & Donohue, Eugene (2001). When Parents Separate: Helping Your Children Cope. Pub. Veritas Publications, Abbey Street, Dublin.

The National Educational Psychological Service Agency provides, on behalf of the Department of Education and Science, an educational psychological service to children in primary and post-primary schools. National Headquarters Frederick Court 24-27 North Frederick Street Dublin 1 Tel: 01 889 2700 Fax: 01 889 2755 Email: [neps@neps.gov.ie](mailto:neps@neps.gov.ie)



## **Appendix 5 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

(From the the National Educational Psychological Service Agency)

### **SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

#### **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/days off) contact members of the Critical Incident Team with a view to a meeting. Contact the Board of Management, Loreto Education Office and/or outside agencies e.g. NEPS/Health Board. If the public examinations are in progress, contact the State Examinations Commission Branch (SEC) (0902-74621) as soon as possible, in order to alert the Examination and Assessment Manager (EAM) for the school.

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

A. Call a meeting of the Critical Incidents Team, if the school has one. If not, call a meeting of the BOM and Senior Management.

#### **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 staff meeting 4. Preparation of what to say to students 5. Preparation of a letter to parents.

#### **Q. How do I handle all the phone calls?**

A. Staffing the telephone will be a stressful task. Assign one or two suitable people to take calls. Clear guidance should be given to those involved on what is appropriate to say. An agreed factual statement should be available to the telephone operators.

#### **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.

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

#### **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 completely acceptable. Be aware that some staff may be particularly vulnerable and watch out for them.

#### **Q. How do I handle the media?**

A. Delegate one suitable person to deal with the media. i.e. representative from the school or Loreto Education Office

Prepare a written 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 on the portrayal of suicide' (1999) 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 School by the media by providing a press room.
- The Communications office of the DES or the SEC can help, 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. 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. 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. Repression of grief because of the fear of 'losing face' in front of friends is an inappropriate coping strategy, as it can lead to difficulties later.

**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 Resource document 4.2.2 for Stages of Grief.

## **5.2 PARENTS**

**Q. This critical incident which occurred in the school 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. You will receive a letter from the Principal, which will deal with this. The information conveyed to you has been carefully gathered and is factual. The letter may also detail the school's plans to keep you informed in the immediate aftermath of this incident.

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

A. Yes but this will often depend on the particular situation. Some possibilities are:

- The school has already embarked on a response to the incident by activating its Critical Incident Team.
- Various outside agencies have been contacted so help will be available from.

**Q. How can I help my child?**

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

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

A. No we cannot be certain but 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. How long will the symptoms of 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.

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

A. If your child remains very distressed after six weeks or so, he/she may need additional support, but there is no fixed rule about the length of the grieving process. It is best to seek more help through your GP/Health Board.

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

A. During adolescence young people have very confused feelings about themselves and the world around them. Grief tends to heighten these feelings and increase the confusion. At this time too the individual may be orienting more towards his/her peers and away from family, so do not feel rejected if they look to friends for their support and comfort. Just be available and tell them so.

### 5.3 TEACHERS

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

A. Yes but please also consider that students need to be with people they know and trust, it has been found that their teachers are the best people to support them in school in times of distress. 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 feel free to opt out of it if they so desire. You would need to be in attendance at staff meetings where information is disseminated in relation to the incident, in order to stay in touch.

**Q. I have no qualifications to help out in this area. Don't you think 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. Experience shows that people grieve best with someone they know. Pupils need a safe environment in which to grieve and that security is often provided by the familiar face of the teacher in the first instance.

**Q. What should I do in the classroom that could be helpful?**

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

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

A. After bereavement a student may become withdrawn or aggressive, show anger, have mood swings or lack concentration. Try to handle all these changes with patience, do not seem surprised by them and do not get cross (See Appendix 4). If pupils come from a background where there is family breakdown, serious illness, alcohol or drug related difficulties, then you need to watch out for them.

**Q. What skills do I have that are important?**

A. Listening skills are probably the most important as people who have experienced loss or trauma generally feel that talking helps them to cope with their feelings. When it is clear that 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 critical incident. It is the person's way of coping with the event. It is not like depression, which is abnormal. People often need this kind of reassurance because of their confused state.

**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 laugh, some show no reaction. The important thing is that all these different ways are natural and normal and you should try to help the pupil understand this.

**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. There are notes on working in this way included in the pack. An advantage here is that students may feel safe and secure with their classroom teacher rather than being with an adult they do not know.

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

A. Discuss the issue with the Principal or guidance counsellor. They in turn may wish to discuss it with the NEPS psychologist and the parents. The outcome may be a referral through the GP to the appropriate service.

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

A. It is normal and you will get through this difficult time and we are here to help if you need support. Let us take care of each other. Talk to us if you or a friend needs help.

**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 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 ask 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 belongings, it might be useful to put together a folder of the student's work for the parents. This could be given to them at an appropriate time.

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

A. Talking about the death helps people to make sense of what has happened. People can cope with the truth. It is important to talk about how a person can get to the point where suicide seemed to be an option but to emphasise that it is not a good option. There is always help available if a person can take the step of reaching out for it.