

**Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna Dhún na nGall
Education and Training Board Donegal**

Coláiste Cranncha

Crana College



Critical Incident Policy & Management Plan

'Learning for Life'

School Vision

'We inspire every student to learn, to think, to care and to achieve'

Mission Statement

It is our mission to create a calm, caring and creative environment where all pupils are given the best opportunities to develop their potential to the full, to acquire knowledge and to adopt a positive attitude towards work, life and their community

Development and Communication of this Critical Incident

Management Policy:

- All Staff, the Students Council, the Parents' Association and the Board of Management were consulted in the formulation of this policy and their recommendations included in this document.
- It is proposed to review this C.I.M.P. every academic year.

Policy review: October 2013

Ratified by the Board of Management:

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1. Introduction

Crana College aims to provide opportunities for all pupils to develop their individual skills and talents within a supportive, safe and healthy environment where they feel valued individuals. It seeks to encourage pupils to develop the skills that will allow them to make informed choices about their own lives and to respect the decision of others.

In keeping with the School Mission Statement, the Board of Management is committed to the care of staff and students in our school.

This policy refers to the response taken by this school should a critical incident occur.

This Critical Incident Management Plan (CIMP)¹ should be read in conjunction with

- Responding to Critical Incidents, Guidelines for Schools, Department of Education, 2007.
- Responding to Critical Incidents, Resource Material for Schools, Department of Education, 2007.
- *Responding to Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016.

A critical incident may be defined as a single incident or sequence of incidents, which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the day to day running of the school.² Critical incidents may include:

2. Definition

For the purposes of this policy a critical incident is defined as any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the running of the school e.g.

- Death of a member of staff
- Death of a parent
- Student suicide
- School trip accident within the state
- School tour accident outside the state
- Major gang fight
- Assault on a staff member
- A traumatic event involving the school
- Serious accident or tragedy in the wider community

As each Critical Incident will require the school to respond in a manner appropriate to that particular incident at that time, this C.I.M.P. is intended to serve as a general outline of procedures to be followed in the event of a critical incident occurring. This list is by no means exhaustive.

It may be necessary to activate the critical incident plan following the death of a recent past student. This is particularly important if the deceased's circle of friends includes current students and/or there are siblings still in the school.

¹ *Responding To Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016, p 16.

² *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 15.

The strategies outlined in this document should be viewed alongside, and in conjunction with, the following practices and policies.

Health & Safety Statement
S.P.H.E. Curriculum

Pastoral Care Policy
Discipline Policy

Copies of this document should be available in

- Staff Room
- Secretary's office
- Principal's Office
- Deputy Principal's office
- Guidance Counsellor's office
- A copy should be taken on school trips
- A copy of this document should also be available in any staff pack distributed at the start of the academic year and should also be used in any induction process for new teacher.
- This document should be sanctioned by the B.O.M.

The suggestions and insights in this document need to be viewed alongside the particular and unique needs that are presented by every given critical incident. Some insights/suggestion may be applicable to some situations and not others. Indeed, two similar incidents may require different approaches.

3. Critical Incident Management Team

Student Support Team:

- The Principal
- The Deputy Principal
- Guidance Counsellor
- H.S.C.L. Officer
- SEN Co-ordinator
- JCSP Co-ordinator

Other Members:

- Year Head/s
- Representative of Board of Management – Chairperson
- Representative of Administrative Staff – School Secretary

This team will meet annually.

It will maintain an up-to-date list of contact numbers for:

- Staff
- Parents/guardians of students
- Emergency support services

Copies will be kept in the Administrative office and Principal's office. These lists will be updated when necessary by administrative staff.

The team will also establish a 'loop' system among staff so that information can be conveyed from one to another should a critical incident happen outside of school hours.

4. School Tours/ Trips

1. In the case of school tours/trips the Tour Leader will compile an information pack to include:
2. Name of the Tour Leader
3. A list of all participating teachers and pupils
4. A list of mobile phone numbers for all participating teachers and pupils
5. Passport details and (in the case of tours outside the country)
6. Photographs of participating pupils
7. Home contact numbers and mobiles of all staff & students involved
8. Relevant medical information on pupils and permission forms from parents in case of a medical emergency
9. Insurance details
10. Copy of itinerary
11. A copy of this file should be left with the Principal prior to departure.
12. School mobile phones will be made available to staff for outings, trips etc

5. Establishing Facts

Upon an incident occurring, immediate action should be taken including all or some of the following.

13. Establish contact (name) with necessary organisations, e.g. Gardaí, H.S.E. hospital, etc.
14. Establish the nature of incident.
15. Establish the name/s of the bereaved
16. Establish names and whereabouts of those injured
17. Establish extent of injuries
18. Establish names of those who are uninjured.
19. Determine location of victims.
20. Determine if there is any risk of further injury.
21. Determine if those on the trip are in more than one location.
22. Establish if emergency services have already been contacted.
23. Establish the names and whereabouts of witnesses including teachers.
24. Can teachers at the incident remove those unharmed from the scene?
25. Contact other members of the critical incident management team.
26. Meet team members and allocate any necessary jobs to be carried out.
27. Initiate transport arrangements if necessary.
28. Make individual contact with staff that may be directly involved or affected.
29. Visit incident site if necessary.
30. Visit hospital if necessary.
31. Arrange to deal with enquiries by phone.
32. Arrange transport if necessary if incident occurred on a school trip.
33. Arrange area or rooms to facilitate reunion of pupils and parents.
34. Special arrangements for those students whose parents are not available.
35. Establish how well the details of the incident are known.
36. Contact Parent's association.
37. Contact B.O.M.
38. Ensure telephone is manned.
39. Provide a script to those dealing with telephone queries.
40. When dealing with families check, is there already a deceased parent/s, or a deceased sibling. Are the parents separated? If separated, consider how to deal with both parents separately, if they are unable to be dealt with together.

41. Contact and visit family/ies checking first that they would welcome a visit. Ensure that at least one of the team that visits has a good relationship with the family. If there has been a difficult relationship between the family and the school, consider using a third party. This third party could accompany the school representatives or act as an alternative. Every effort should be made to avoid the latter.
42. Other students may be hearing news via social media. Consult with parents affected if they will give permission for the school to send a communication to other parents. This may limit the number of students who may hear the news via social media and allow other parents to tell their child face-to-face.
43. Discuss with the family what you have planned to take place in the school and consult with them what you would like to say for the good of the whole student body and what they want you to say.
44. Remember, if the family have to be met a number of times try and limit the number of times they have to 'tell their story'.
45. Determine how to deal with media if necessary.
46. If there are a number of students involved, is a family room in the school needed?

If incident occurred abroad,

47. Contact Department of Foreign Affairs
48. Contact relevant Embassy or Consulate office.

Provide list containing

49. Names and contact details of adults on trip.³
50. Try and contact teachers directly to get first-hand information on the ground.
51. Names and contact details of these adults' families.
52. Names of students on trip.
53. Names and contact details of parents of these students.
54. Determine if those on the trip are in more than one location.
55. Details of any pre-existing medical condition of adults on trips and medication required.
56. Details of any pre-existing medical condition of students on trips and medication required.⁴
57. Inform authorities if the school trip involved more than one school.
58. Contact travel agency used.

Depending on the scale of the incident, other issues may need to be addressed by the authorities.

59. Does the school need a liaison officer from the authorities working with or in the school?
60. Is there a Garda presence required at the school?
61. Is a Garda presence required at family homes?
62. Can authorities provide a spokesperson to deal with the media?
63. Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring family members of the deceased to the country?
64. Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring family members of the injured to the country? This may be a greater need than the provision immediate counselling.
65. Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring family members of the uninjured to the country? This may be a greater need than the provision immediate counselling.
66. Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring a school staff member to the country?
67. Do authorities need to make arrangements to meet those returning from the airport?
68. If there is underdeveloped health system in the country where the incident occurred, do authorities need to evacuate home or to the nearest other county?

³ *Responding To Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016, p18.

⁴ *Responding To Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016, p18.

69. Do authorities need to consider bringing medication/ equipment for the injured or mediation for those with previous medical conditions?
70. Do authorities need to contact Irish N.G.O.s on the ground for assistance?
71. Do authorities need to contact an organised Irish Diaspora organisation on the ground to provide assistance?
72. Do authorities need to contact an Irish Religious organisation on the ground to provide assistance?
73. If there are no Irish organisations on the ground, do authorities need to contact U.K. or another country's Embassy/Consulate/N.G.O. on the ground for assistance?
74. While the primary concern needs to focus on the deceased, injured and non-injured and their families, there is a body of students and parents at home who may be upset, particularly younger students or those very close to those affected. With this in mind, consult with authorities what can be, and who should, communicate to other parents and students in the school. Information can have the effect of reducing anxiety. This can also prevent false rumours.

6. Family & Suicide

When meeting with the family where a suicide has occurred additional issues arise.

The following may be addressed over a number of visits.

1. The family may be willing to allow it be stated by the school that the death was by suicide. Permission for this should be sought and not assumed.
2. Before the family is asked for permission to divulge the cause of death, school representatives may anticipate that the family may be reluctant to let people know the cause of death. It therefore might be useful, before they are actually asked and say no, to point out that students are already speculating about suicide amongst themselves⁵ and that it can help the school and others⁶ if it can be spoken about publicly. Outline the benefits of this and maybe outline the difficulties faced if the cause of death is not acknowledged. This is particularly important if the students are already talking about suicide.⁷ It might also be useful to point out to the family that there are a number of vulnerable students in the school you are very worried about and it can help the school and others⁸ if permission is given to allow the cause of death to be stated publicly and that it might help prevent others going through such an ordeal. Can the family keep this a secret forever? What will happen at the inquest?
3. When a suicide occurs one of the issues that teenagers can focus on is *why*? This can become obsessive and unhealthy. If the deceased had a history of mental issues and was in the health system, it might be useful to obtain permission from the family to divulge this to others as it would be healthy step in helping them let go of the *why*? Permission should not be sought and this issue should not be discussed with the family if family issues have contributed to the difficulties the deceased had.
4. The family may have found or been given a suicide note by the emergency services. Give the family an opportunity to discuss the contents with the school. This is particularly important if blame is apportioned to other students and/or teachers. Check with Gardaí if they have searched the deceased's phone/tablet etc. and discuss any findings. If the Gardaí have found a

⁵ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 9.

⁶ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 9.

⁷ *Suicide Postvention Toolkit, A Guide for Secondary Schools*, Headspace School Support, Australia, 2012, p 16.

⁸ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 9.

note and the contents of the note may cause a difficulty, consult with Gardaí the best course of action. It might also be necessary to check if e-mails, photographs, or messages have been posted on social networks by the deceased. This may require the help of family or friends.

7. Violent Assault/Death

1. A member of the school committee may have been involved in a violent incident.
2. Be sensitive to the fact that the alleged perpetrator may have relatives and friends within the school or may even be a student in the school. These relationships need to be monitored and advice should be taken from Gardaí and others who may have more knowledge/experience of the relationships involved.
3. It is the responsibility of parents to decide whether their child may be interviewed by Gardaí. Garda interviews of students should not generally take place on the school premises.
4. There may be an ongoing Garda investigation, a trial an inquest etc. Be conscious that this can prolong the trauma.⁹

8. Vulnerable Students

It is necessary to identify vulnerable students both the new vulnerable (as a result of the incident) and old vulnerable (as a result of previous history). This may involve consultation with other staff. New and old vulnerable students may include,

1. Siblings in the same school.
2. Cousins in the same school.
3. Other relatives who attend the school.
4. Those injured.
5. Eye witnesses.
6. Close friends in the deceased's school.
7. Close friends in other schools (contact that school).
8. Those who may have had contact with the deceased immediately prior to his/her death.
9. Those who may have had a difficult relationship or negative interactions with the deceased.
10. If the student was a senior student and acted as mentor/buddy to younger students, special attention needs to be given to these younger students and if necessary contact their parents.
11. Those who have suffered a previous bereavement, loss, or separation.
12. Other vulnerable students may not necessarily have been close friends with the deceased but may be particularly hard hit. These may include those who have had previous emotional issues and these events can cause additional stress. These types of students may not have even known the deceased. This type of student can be the 'quiet ones' who do not display any obvious signs of distress, or those who, because of their previous experiences, quite readily let others know of their issues.
13. Very young students may only be beginning to realise the permanency of death, and their idea of life after death is still vague. They may have concerns about how the deceased is feeling or thinking in the grave. They 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. They may think

⁹ *Responding To Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016, p 41.

it is normal to die young or normal to take your own life -this needs to be corrected. Similar issues may arise with students with learning difficulties.

14. Be careful to keep an eye out for contagion of grief. This is where a person becomes upset, not because they knew the deceased or have had a previous issue/s, but become upset simply because others are. This can be a particular concern with younger years.
15. If a death of a teacher has taken place, other vulnerable students may be those who had a particularly close relationship with that teacher or those who had a difficult relationship with that teacher including staff.
16. If a particular class/group had been giving a teacher a difficult time, this class/group may need particular attention in terms of group work to deal with such issues as guilt etc.

9. Staff Meeting

1. Hold a staff meeting which may include auxiliary staff.¹⁰
2. There may be a need for two separate staff meetings to aid supervision.¹¹
3. Information should be given to staff before students.
4. After delivering the news, give staff time to absorb the news and compose themselves.
5. If staff are absent, inform these by phone, not text. Similarly, if the news breaks outside school time, inform staff by using a phone call, not text. Do not leave a voice message giving details of the news, rather, leave a voicemail asking them to return the call as soon as they get the message.
6. Impress on staff the need for consistency in what the students hear from staff.
7. Explain the plan for the day.
8. Discuss vulnerable students and ask for input from staff.
9. Invite/encourage staff to attend students' assemblies.
10. Allow staff to share how they will address classes. If necessary, give staff suggestions as to how they might start their classes.
11. Advise staff to use their discretion as to when to restart teaching. Returning to the routine of teaching may actually act as a comfort to students. However, this should not be done without some form of acknowledgment of the loss – this can cause offence. After the acknowledgement, teachers can, if they wish, ask the students what they would like to do next, e.g. talk about how they feel, talk about the deceased, or talk amongst themselves or return to teaching. Experience shows that when students are given the choice (which itself helps them feel in control) they will opt for the comforting routine of teaching. Caution should be taken here. It may not be a good idea for students to attend 8/9 classes in one day that consist entirely of a discussion around events that have happened.
12. Particular attention should be paid to staff members who may be particularly upset, or had a recent bereavement, or who are simply finding the events difficult. It may be necessary to arrange supervision to support these teachers¹² or it may be necessary for a member of management helping to start that teacher's class with him/her present. Consideration should also be given to trainee teachers who may not have the necessary experience to address a class grouping.
13. Remind staff that if they are upset and anxious, students will become upset and anxious. If staff are calm and considered, the students are more likely to remain calm. Also, if they are comfortable, calmly share their feelings with the class.
14. It might be necessary to hold a staff meeting at the end of the day to review events.

¹⁰ *Responding To Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016, p23.

¹¹ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 22.

¹² *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 23.

10. Breaking News to Students

1. Teenagers need to have whatever information is available so that they can dispel mistruths or speculation; otherwise they may not begin the grieving process.
2. Remember that teenagers find it more helpful when adults are honest rather than 'pretending' to be more positive than they actually feel.¹³
3. Remember also that as a professional dealing with teenagers, you will have to confront your own reactions,¹⁴ your own shock, anger and sense of bewilderment. Get yourself grounded or it will be easy to get caught up in the teenagers' panic, pain and confusion.
4. Your calmness will influence their reactions. If the adults are anxious and upset, they will become so. If the adults are calm and in control it will promote calmness and stability.
5. When breaking the news to students whole school assemblies are not recommended¹⁵ and best practice is that the news should be shared in small groups¹⁶ such as year groups.
6. If the deceased was on a team or involved with a particular [formal] group within the school, do not treat this group separately when breaking the news.
7. It may be necessary to take aside some individuals and tell them in private. It may also be necessary to phone these students' parents to come and collect them from school.
8. Be conscious of the fact that teenagers, particularly those in the senior years, have friendships that cross other year groups. Therefore, if the student was in for example 5th year, speak to that year group first, then 6th years followed by 4th year. Then speak to the other year groups.
9. Even if the deceased was in 6th year, it is still necessary to speak to 1st years as they will hear the news anyway and it is best that they hear it in a controlled way from school management. This will ensure that all students have received the same information and accurate information.
10. It might also be useful if staff attend these assemblies so they will hear exactly what the students have been told ensuring continuity of message.
11. When speaking to different year groups, the language may have to be changed so that it is age appropriate.
12. Keep sentences short and avoid overly complicated medical terms.
13. It is instinctive to remind the students to 'look out for each other.' However, well-meaning this sentiment is, it can create problems. Some students may take this literally and feel, not only do they have to listen to the friends' difficulty, but also solve them. Indeed, in some cases students with difficulties may exploit this instruction. Therefore, it might be better to say to students 'watch out for each other, if someone is having difficulties point them in the right direction to those that can help, and don't try and solves their problems.'
14. If the cause of death is genuinely not known, let them know this.¹⁷ Use this fact to reinforce that if they hear any rumours about the cause of death, these rumours cannot be true as the medics and family do not even know. This is relevant when there may be a genuine sudden death.
15. Let them ask questions and if the answer is not known state this. Be conscious of the fact that asking of questions may simply be reassurance seeking rather than driven by the need for facts. When answering questions do not promise anything you cannot fulfil.
16. Give them details of the plan for the day. This provides necessary structure.
17. Give details of funeral arrangements or when the details will be known. Get back to them when the dates/times and other arrangements e.g. guard of honour, are known.

¹³ *Parenting Positively Helping Teenagers to Cope with Death*, Family Support Agency, Barnardos 2009, p 12.

¹⁴ *Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Death & Bereavement*, D. Adams & E. Deveau, (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995) p 168.

¹⁵ *Suicide Postvention Toolkit, A Guide for Secondary Schools*, Headspace School Support, Australia, 2012, p 14.

¹⁶ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 8.

¹⁷ *Parenting Positively Helping Teenagers to Cope with Death*, Family Support Agency, Barnardos 2009, p 6.

18. It may be necessary to cancel classes for certain year groups for a time during the day or for the rest of the day. This should not be done without having an alternative structured activity in place. This activity should be adult led, structured and if possible have a structure that is familiar to the students, e.g. a prayer service.
19. This formal activity can be followed by an informal activity such as food in the school canteen.
20. A quiet room should also be provided.
21. Arrange extra supervision in particular corridors/school yard/near toilets near the affected year group.
22. Staff should be on hand to allow individual students talk in private.
23. If, after the assembly, some students are particularly upset, it might be necessary to telephone parents to bring them home.
24. Consider if it is appropriate to resume class (for structure based reasons rather than academic reason even if teaching is not resumed).
25. Consider obtaining the help of clergy with the delivery of the above or help with constructing a script.
26. Consider holding private meetings with close friends of the deceased and positive leaders in the year group. Such a meeting or number of meetings can help the students feel listened to, and that they have some sense of input and control over what is happening. In addition, these meetings can also provide useful feedback to management that may help shape the next few days/weeks.
27. It may be necessary to consult with outside agencies. It needs to be remembered that students need to be with people they know and trust. If at all possible, it is better that teachers and other school staff provide support for the students. The external 'expert' should be primarily¹⁸ used to advise and support school staff.
28. Consider if students with special needs may need an altered method of delivery of the news.
29. If necessary, provide condolence books (one for each individual, if more than one) on school premises.

11. Breaking News to Students – In The Case of Suicide

1. If the death was suicide, and if the family have given permission to inform others that it was a suicide, it is recommended¹⁹ that attention is paid to the phrases used.

The following phrases should not be used

Commit* suicide

suicide victim

a successful suicide attempt

Instead use phrases like

A suicide

Die by suicide

Taking one's own life

*The word 'commit' has connotations associated with '*committing a sin*' or '*committing a crime*'.

2. In some cases, the wider student body may know that it was a suicide but are speculating about the method used. This can be very unhealthy if it is a topic of discussion, gossip, a distraction, a source of false rumour and a block to normal grieving. Some argue that details of the method of suicide^{20& 21} should not be provided while others²² state that it is okay to give the basic fact about

¹⁸ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 22.

¹⁹ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 9.

²⁰ *Suicide Postvention Toolkit, A Guide for Secondary Schools*, Headspace School Support, Australia, 2012, p 14.

²¹ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 31.

²² *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 24.

the method in a short a phrase as possible without giving graphic or excessive details²³ or talking about it at length.²⁴ However, extreme caution needs to be taken. This should not be done to satisfy curiosity, but rather to remove it as the main focus of conversation and to avoid it becoming an issue. Other factors that may determine the method of suicide being stated are the actual nature/method itself and the age of the affected year group/s. If it is to be spoken about perhaps it should only be done in smaller private groups or with the friends of the deceased only.

3. When a suicide occurs one of the issues that teenagers can focus on is *why?* This can become obsessive and unhealthy. If the deceased had a history of mental issues and was in the health system, and permission has been obtained from the family, it might be useful to others to hear this portion of the back story to the death. This might help to avoid speculation and help the students move on from the *why?* The back story should not be discussed if family circumstance contributed to the deceased's difficulties. If there is no back story, and the suicide was '*out of the blue*' extra difficulties may be faced by the friends of the deceased. However, remember that best practice is not to include speculation over motives as it is always very complex.²⁵ See debriefing in section 11.
4. If the family have not given permission for the cause of death to be disclosed, this can be included in what is said to the students by stating that the '*family have requested that the information not be shared*'²⁶ or '*only the family have the right to tell people that information*'.
5. It might be necessary to acknowledge to the students that there are rumours of suicide²⁷ but also to state that '*rumours can be hurtful to family and explain the damaging impact of misinformation and rumour*'.
6. It might be useful to use the terms '*tragic death*' or '*sudden death*'.²⁸
7. Throughout all interactions with students be careful not to give the deceased attention in death that they may have been looking for in life.²⁹ This can be done by shifting the conversation with teenagers from the topic of the deceased to *their reaction* to what has happened. This should result in students talking about themselves rather than the deceased.
8. The most significant factor contributing to suicide contagion appears to be the glamorizing or romanticising of suicide.³⁰ When the person who died by suicide was highly regarded or their death is 'celebrated' others involved can see the outcome of suicide as rewarding e.g. ends pain, gains recognition. Therefore avoid phrases such as the '*state of peace*' the deceased may have found through death³¹ and avoid glamorising their lives or indeed any aspect of the funeral or any memorial. It is common for people to remember the positive things about someone who has

²³ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 8.

²⁴ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 24.

²⁵ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 8.

²⁶ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 15.

²⁷ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 15.

²⁸ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 30.

²⁹ *Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Death & Bereavement*, D. Adams & E. Deveau, (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995) p 178.

³⁰ *Suicide Contagion*, Headspace School Support National Youth Mental Health foundation - Information Leaflet.

³¹ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 31.

recently died and focus less on the difficulties they may have been having prior to their death. While this may be well-meaning, it has the potential to encourage suicidal thoughts and behaviour in other vulnerable young people. Care needs to be taken not to give the impression that suicide has a positive outcome for the young person.³²

9. Suicide rates go up following an increase in the frequency of stories about suicide. Moreover, suicide rates go down following a decrease in frequency of stories about suicide.³³ Research shows that inappropriate media coverage can also contribute to suicide contagion. In Vienna there was a dramatic increase in subway suicides between 1984 and 1987. The figure dropped by 75% when the media stopped covering the story.³⁴ Therefore, if it is necessary, media guidelines for reporting suicide should be consulted³⁵.

12. Communicating with The Parent Body

Despite the fact that a number of parents may already be aware of the death of a student, there is still a need for the school to communicate formally to the whole parent body.

1. Consider if a general brief text needs to be sent out.
2. Remove parents of deceased from text system/e-mail/postal address file.
3. Consider if the details of what will happen in the school needs to be passed on to parents.
4. Consider if the details of what is said to the student body needs to be passed on to the parents.
5. Consider if the funeral details need to be communicated to the parents.
6. Consider if a more detailed letter needs to be sent to the parents, including the above and any additional information not suitable for a text.
7. Consider if the letter sent to the parents of the year group of the deceased needs to be different than the letter sent to other year groups and decide if each year group should receive a different letter addressing the needs of that particular year group?
8. Consider if parents need to be called into the school for a meeting.
9. If a meeting is to be held for, for example, 5th year, consider if an invitation should also be given to parents of students in 4th and 6th year. This might be necessary if the deceased's friendship circle overlap these years. It may happen that the parents from these other years may not actually turn up on mass – only those whose teenagers were close to the deceased. This might be suggested in the invitation. Consider if the invite should be for all year groups.

³² *Suicide Contagion*, Headspace School Support National Youth Mental Health foundation - Information Leaflet.

³³ *The Contagion Of Suicide Behaviour*, Columbia University & New York State Psychiatric Institute.

³⁴ *Suicide Among Young People- Is It Contagious?* The Suicide Research and Prevention Unit, University of Oslo 1997.

³⁵ *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide*, The Samaritans & Irish Association of Suicidology.

10. Consider if the parents' night can be addressed by management only or if an outside speaker needs to be call in e.g. from N.E.P.S., Samaritans.
11. If necessary, provide literature or hand-outs on death/ loss/ grieving.
12. At such a meeting, management should give an outline of the facts known and outline what the school has done. Outline the plan for further actions. Outline what has been said to the students. Outline supports that are available within the school. Allow for questions to be asked. Provide tea afterwards to allow them to mix.³⁶
13. Impress on parents that students may wish to gather together in houses. If this happens, parents should not provide alcohol³⁷ at such an emotional time.
14. Consider meeting the Parents' Association.

The following points are also worth making to parents at parents evening.

15. Parents may need to be reminded of the following. When individuals lose a close friend or loved one, it is normal to share their grief with others who knew the deceased equally well. In the past a teenager may have experienced the loss of an aunt, uncle, or grandparent. Because the parents knew that person equally well and are experiencing the same grief, it is normal for teenagers in such situations to share their grief with their parent/s. The situation where a teenager loses a friend can be different. When teenagers suffer the loss of a friend they may turn to their peers more than their parents, sharing thoughts and feelings with them because they are mourning the same loss.³⁸ Therefore, at a time like this some teenagers are more likely to want to spend more time with, and talk more to, their peers rather than their parents. In doing this, they are not trying to shut parents out, they are simply surrounding themselves with others who are going through the same experience and who knew the deceased as well as they did. They may also believe that their peers have a greater understanding than their parents who may not have known the deceased well. This is perfectly normal and teenagers need to be given the space to do this. See – *'Allowing Young People Grieve – A Guide For Parents'*.
16. For a young person the loss of a friend, and the subsequent feelings around grief and bereavement, can be very traumatic. Over the coming weeks the young person will experience numerous emotions including shock, guilt, anger and sadness. For parents, it can be difficult to know what to say or do. There is no simple straightforward way in which to respond to a young person who is grieving. It might be worth reminding parents of the following. However, if a parent's partner had lost a close friend, their natural instincts would automatically tell them what to say and do. They would empathise, listen, give them hugs, and give them space when they need it. For the young person it will be very similar but maybe with slightly different language.
17. When a teenager is experiencing pain it is a parents' natural instinct to want to fix things and make the pain go away. However, with grief, this is exactly what should not be done. The booklet *'Allowing Young People Grieve'* explains what the experts refer to as the need to *allow* teenagers grieve. It describes the range of emotions teenagers might experience and what they

³⁶ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 42.

³⁷ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 38.

³⁸ *Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Death & Bereavement*, D. Adams & E. Deveau, (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995) p 141.

are going through is healthy and normal and indeed necessary. It provides tips about how parents might respond to what the teenager says and does as a reaction to their loss. The booklet is not designed for teenagers to read themselves, but rather for parents to use over the coming weeks and months.

18. In the case of suicide other questions may need to be addressed for parents. It is very difficult for us to talk to young people about suicide when it has occurred. With this in mind the booklet '*Let's Talk About Suicide*', (pages 14 & 15) has some helpful tips about what language parents might use during a discussion. Parents should be reminded that what they say to their teenager should be determined by what is in their minds (as opposed to the parents) and they should take their lead from what the teenager is saying and what teenager is feeling.
19. The last few pages of this booklet also contains a list of useful contacts and organisations that can provide help.
20. The worries and anxieties of parents can be heightened if a suicide occurs and that suicide was 'out of the blue' in that the person in question showed no signs or symptoms of distress. This can leave parents feeling helpless as to what to do. In this case the following points may be worth highlighting. All suicides are tragic. In some cases, the individual concerned display signs of upset or distress beforehand, while in other cases, no signs are visible. When the latter occurs, it can cause parents to have heightened concerns. Parents will naturally be worried about what they should do, for and with, their own teenager. Because of this parents understandably try to reach out for a solution. With this in mind the following organisations, *Headstrong*, *National Suicide Foundation*, *Turn The Tide on Suicide*, and the *National Educational Psychological Services* state the same thing – that is the following. There is no hidden, new or magic solution other than utilising simple straight forward parenting skills. It is about – what every parent aims for - being the best parent they can be. This involves building resilience by nurturing their relationship with themselves (i.e. sense of self-worth) and the relationship with those that matter to them - primarily parents. With regard to both of these, the best thing that can be done is to talk and listen, and talk and listen over and over again – not just about practical issues – but feelings and emotions. It is just as important to do this with everyday matters as much as serious issues. David Colman's book *Parenting Is Child's Play* has sections dealing with effective communication, and understanding feelings. This is a useful resource along with *Parenting Positively*, *Teenage Well-Being* from The Family Support Agency and Barnardos. It is worth repeating what the professional organisations listed above say when a suicide occurs 'out of the blue', there is no magic solution, no hidden gem of an idea, it is about preventative action by being – what every parents strives to be - the best parent you can be. There are no night vision goggles to see what we cannot see but we can take preventive action through every interaction we have with teenagers so that they *feel* they are valued for who they are - warts and all.
21. A parents' information evening should also contain details of any debriefing session held with students. If the incident was a suicide the facilitator of the debriefing session held with the students should inform parents that the issue of suicide was dealt with stating impact of suicide and that it does not get rid of the pain but instead, multiplies it, passes it on to others, who have to live with it for the rest of their lives. Similarly, suicide can be likened to pulling the pin in a grenade, whereby, those left behind have to carry the crastinal in them for the rest of their lives. This helps put parents mind at ease in that somebody in the school has discussed how wrong suicide is.

22. When the death of a friend occurs, it is not uncommon for friends to want to have a memorial to the person who has died. However, research shows, that a non-family memorial in cases of suicide can have unintended consequences regarding other young vulnerable people. Parents should be asked that if their teenager mentions to them any such memorial they might encourage them to consult with the school before consulting with their peers. In addition, it is not uncommon for friends to want to get a tattoo to mark the person who has died. Similarly, parents might discourage this and let the school know.

23. Parents might also be reminded of the following. In a school the issue of mental health is not just addressed when something happens. This topic is addressed on a regular basis as a matter of course and is part of the normal curriculum and does not just happen when events occur. The S.P.H.E. curriculum and *Wellbeing* covers areas such as assertiveness, friendships, managing relationships, recognising and expressing feelings, self-confidence, body image, positive and negative influences, stress, moods, and decision making. These topics are covered in 1st year, and then repeated in 2nd year in greater depth and again in 3rd year at a more sophisticated level. In 4th year class the following issues are covered over a number of weeks. Our relationship with those that matter to us and our relationship with ourselves and how these two overlap. Identifying and understand our feelings such as anger, guilt, shame, anxiety, and jealousy as well as how our emotions drive us to do positive actions and how our emotions drive us to do negative actions. In addition, exercises around how we react to events in life (this is effectively cognitive behavioural therapy exercise) are covered. In 5th year religion class (using the Relationship & Sexuality curriculum) topics such as self-esteem, relationship with self, family, feeling and emotions, and the body are discussed. This is then repeated at a more adult level in 6th year. Also in 5th and 6th year speakers from outside agencies are used to talk about mental health issues. However, it must be remembered that what the school does can only ever be an *addition* to what parents can do, and can never be seen as a *replacement* for what can be done in the home.

24. It will be useful to alert parents to future triggers. As a teenager's emotions return to how they were before the death, there may be suddenly – out of the blue – a return of those emotions experienced at the height of the grief. This is perfectly normal. Future triggers are those things that remind the teenager that the person who has died, for example, songs, events, Halloween, Christmas, birthdays or even something as obscure as a smell.

13. Funeral

1. If it is acceptable with the family, the school should involve itself with the funeral arrangements and if necessary speak to the undertakers and/or the clergy or humanist leading the service. Meet students who are very close friends of the deceased to discuss funeral arrangements. This will allow them to feel that they are involved in the arrangements.
2. The H.S.E. recommends that teenagers are encouraged to go to the funeral to mark the life and death of the person who has died.³⁹ The later feelings of regret of not having gone may be difficult to deal with after the event. Encourage parents whose teenagers express an interest to let them go⁴⁰
3. Discuss with the family the schools and students' involvement in the funeral, e.g. a guard of honour, readings; bring up gifts, music, singing, etc.

³⁹ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 22.

⁴⁰ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 36.

4. People with different cultural backgrounds might have different customs and ways of dealing with death. Showing respect for this difference can help family members to cope with the death of a loved one.⁴¹ Therefore, sensitivity needs to be made towards different ethnic /religious/cultural beliefs⁴² amongst students and staff. For example, attendance at different religious services may not be acceptable to parents whose children are of different religious beliefs or of none. This may result in some students being excluded. If students of certain religious beliefs are to attend a service that they are unfamiliar with, it may be necessary to prepare them for the different practices. Consultation with parents may be necessary.⁴³
5. Contact Garda if traffic management is needed around the school or funeral.

Attendance at Funeral

- **Immediate Relative of student**-----Principal/D Principal, Year Head/Class Tutor, Representation from class group. Other students with note from parents.
- **Immediate Relative of Staff member**---- Principal/D Principal, staff at the discretion of management, Head Boy/Girl, leadership team members. Inform BOM, ETB.
- **Member of Staff** ----- Close the school (funeral/next day if weekend) and inform BOM, ETB and Parents' Association. Guard of Honour of Staff, Student Council, Head Boy and Head Girl.
- **Student in school**-----School stays open, major representation from student body, year group/class group, other students with a note from parents. Year Head/Class Tutor, management. Supports in place in school, transport arranged for students and BOM informed.
- **Board of Management member**---- Principal/D Principal, staff reps on BOM, Head Boy/Girl, leadership team members. Inform BOM, ETB.
- **Death during holidays of above**----Communication through web text and email to all staff/students. Guard of honour where possible.
- **Bereavement within location of school**----Inform staff and students of need for quiet and respect. Guard of Honour where possible.

14. Debriefing Session with Class/Year Groups

A debriefing session should be student led and the facilitator should go to where the students are – rather than where the facilitator is or thinks they should be. It may be necessary to debrief some or all class/year groups adjusting the language as appropriate.

A debriefing of students might explore some or all of the following⁴⁴

- Shock and numbness
- Guilt
- Anger
- Guilt at being angry
- Sadness
- Frightened
- Hopelessness
- Hurt (for those very close)
- Why? In the case of unexplained suicide

⁴¹ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 25.

⁴² *Responding To Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016, p18.

⁴³ *Responding To Critical Incidents*, NEPS Guidelines & Resource Materials For School, 2016, p26.

⁴⁴ Full text in *Allowing Young People Grieve – A Guide For Parents*.

The discussion should help label these feelings and help the students understand why they feel these feelings. The discussion may also include reference to

- How these feelings can come and go, how we may not feel all of them, how one feeling can last for a short period while others last for longer, and how we can jump back and forth between these feelings
- How these feelings may bring up previous losses in our lives and not just bereavements.
- What future events or circumstances may trigger these feelings.

In the case of suicide the discussion may also touch on

- The consequences of the action in that it does not get rid of the pain but rather multiplies it, and transfers it to others who have to live with it for the rest of their lives. When doing this it is useful to separate the act from the person.
- To end the session it might be useful to get the students to summarise what was done, i.e. label feelings and explain why we feel the way we do. Assuming the session has made them feel more at ease with themselves, this point can be used to highlight how useful and valuable it is to label and understand our feelings when times are difficult. This is a useful lesson for the future.
- In the case of an unexplained suicide, it is common for people to search relentlessly⁴⁵ for explanations and to find and answer to why. It would not be healthy to have a collective discussion about different whys. Instead, it might be useful to mention some of the following points.
 - Suicide is not simple and is often the result of a range of contributing factors.⁴⁶
 - One person may think of circumstances X and another circumstances Y and another circumstances Z. Circumstances X, Y, Z, may well be perfectly true but there is absolutely no way to know if it was circumstances X or circumstances Y or circumstances Z that resulted in the suicide.
 - There are 6 billion people on the planet and not one of them knows the answer to why.
 - In 200 years' time there will still be some unexplained suicides, and even then nobody will know why.

Providing permission and a safe place for young people to talk about their feelings, understand their reactions helps reduce distress. Talking to young people about suicide will not put the idea into their minds – if a suicide occurs amongst their friends or peers, young people will probably already be thinking about it. Moreover, appropriate discussions regarding mental health and suicide can help to reduce the risk of suicide contagion.⁴⁷

Be careful of what is termed 'competitive grief'.⁴⁸ This can manifest itself in statements such as '*they were my best friend – not yours*'. This can be destructive and efforts should be made to speak privately to these individuals and defuse the situation. This can be done by (i) acknowledging where

⁴⁵ *Suicide Prevention In Schools*, The Irish Association of Suicidology p 46.

⁴⁶ *Suicide Contagion*, Headspace School Support National Youth Mental Health foundation - Information Leaflet.

⁴⁷ *Suicide Contagion*, Headspace School Support National Youth Mental Health foundation - Information Leaflet.

⁴⁸ Maria Trozzi & Kathy Massimini, *Talking With Children About Loss*, (New York: Penguin Book, 1999) p 187.

they are emotional and (ii) encouraging them to allow others to grieve as they wish and in a non-judgmental way.

It may be necessary to follow up certain/vulnerable individuals soon after these sessions. This may involve one-to-one sessions or telephone call to parents and may need to take place a number of times.

A Few Suggestions For When Times Get Tough

When times get tough, we may be consumed by negative feelings. These negative feelings can prevent us from enjoying activities or people we normally enjoy. These negative feelings can hold us back in life. These negative feelings can prevent us from getting on with our lives.

What can we do?

What can be done is very simple but also very, very, difficult, i.e. process these feelings.

What is processing?

It involves labelling our feelings. Understanding them. Naming them. Analysing them. Breaking them down. Sorting them in our head. Dissecting them. Interpreting them. Examining them. Scrutinising them. Explaining them. Evaluating them. Sifting through them. Processing our feelings involves doing this over and over again, and if needs be over and over again.

When processing, avoid focusing on events and people. This distracts us from examining our feelings. Instead focus on the feelings and emotions that are brought about by these events or people.

Be careful about displaced feelings. Sometimes we can displace our feelings from the real source onto events or people. Check, are the events or people that bring on these feelings the real source? Are the events or people just triggers for these feelings? Ask yourself, is the real source of the feelings elsewhere?

It is often said '*it is good to talk*'. So, if needs be, get someone you trust to help you. However, is it the talking that is the good part? Or is it that, to talk, we have to order our thoughts, analyse them, dissect them, evaluate them, sift through them. In other words, talking encourages us and prompts us to process our feelings. Be careful who you choose to help. Make sure that their motives are in your interest not theirs. Make sure they don't just focus on events or people. Make sure they do not just offer solutions. Make sure they help you focus on your feelings. If you have heard people say '*talking does not help*', is it because they focused on events, or people, or solutions, rather than on the processing of the feelings?

Processing feelings can be painful, very painful. Let yourself experience this pain. This is positive as it is a form of processing them. Indeed, this processing may make us cry. Do you know why humans

cry? Humans cry because *we need to*. Crying is natural and normal. Crying is another form of processing.

Because this processing is hard, difficult, and painful and can take a long time people look for alternatives. They look for short cuts or indeed, alternatives to processing. These alternatives can be unhealthy. For example, we can bury our feelings by burying ourselves in our work or even avoid our work. Or we can bury our feelings by keeping fit to an obsessive degree or partying excessively. This will result in the feelings eating away at us inside or popping up elsewhere in our lives. Are you doing something like this? Try and catch yourself falling into the trap of using these alternatives. We can also make things worse by taking our feelings out on events or people around us. We can even try to destroy those relationships. Catch yourself doing this.

Also, if the pain is too much we can self-medicate by overdoing it with drink or by resorting to things like gambling or taking drugs. We can develop an unhealthy relationship with food. Catch yourself eating for emotional reasons rather than because you are hungry. We can even let our emotions become displaced to such a degree that we do not eat enough. If we are restricting our food intake, examine the complex emotions that are driving this. We can displace our emotions to such an extent that we might have thoughts of self-harm. If these things are happening, ask for help. Have the courage to get professional help. Reaching out for professional help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength and determination to manage the situation. Seeking out professional help is a statement to yourself that you do not want to continue like this. It is a statement to yourself that you are determined to work on this and get on with your life.

Remember this. When people want to lose weight there is a very simple and proven way to lose weight, i.e. a healthy diet and exercise. However, because this can take a long time and requires hard work people look for alternatives. They look for quick fixes, magic diets and short cuts. These never work long term. When we want to lose weight we should always go back to basics, a healthy diet and exercise. Similar, when dealing with and processing our feelings avoid the alternatives that never work. Go back to basics, i.e. processing.

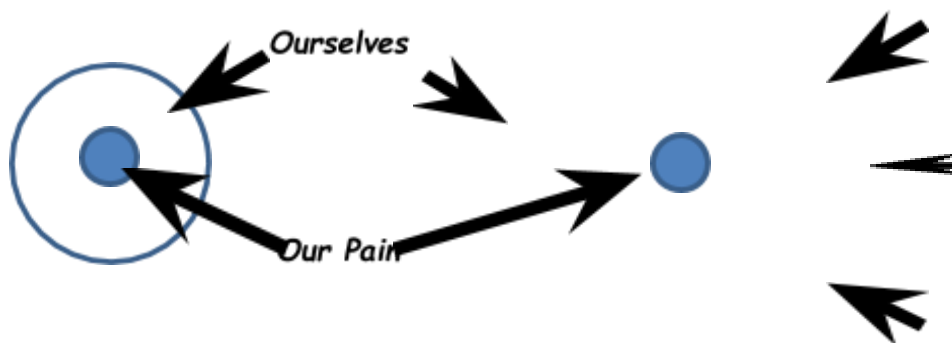
This processing of our feelings may not get rid of them. But the processing can make them more manageable. This processing can make them easier to carry. This process can make it easier to get on with our lives. This processing can help us prevent these feelings from holding us back. Remember, sometimes we cannot change events or people. All we can do is learn to manage the feelings.

The diagram on the left (below) shows the outer circle representing ourselves and the inner circle representing our pain. We instinctively want this inner pain to get smaller and go away. However, this may not happen. Instead, we should strive to enable ourselves to grow emotionally, and get stronger emotionally so that they have less of an impact on ourselves and our lives. We should strive to strengthen ourselves emotionally so that we can carry these feelings and manage these feelings so that they don't hold us back and that we can get on with our lives.



We grow emotionally

We get stronger emotionally



It is worth reminding ourselves what processing is. It involves labelling our feelings. Understanding them. Naming them. Analysing them. Breaking them down. Sorting them in our head. Dissecting them. Interpreting them. Examining them. Scrutinising them. Explaining them. Evaluating them. Sifting through them. Processing our feelings involves doing this over and over again, and if needs be over and over again.

Processing our feelings can take days, weeks, months or even years. We can go through bouts of processing - or dip in and out of this processing - when we feel able. Sometimes processing is hard to do. It is a skill that has to be learned. If you find it difficult, keep practicing this skill. If it's still difficult, practice the skill again and again. To help acquire this skill, why not do it when times are good, and when times are ordinary. This will help us when times are tough.

15. Debriefing Session with Staff

It may be necessary to facilitate a debriefing session for staff, including axillary staff and the critical incident team. The latter can be included with the general staff or can debrief separately. This may be best facilitated by an outsider organisation.

16. Memorial to the Deceased

In the aftermath of a death it is not unusual for students to create a spontaneous memorial by leaving flowers, cards, poems, pictures, stuffed animals, clothing or other items in a place closely associated with the student, such as a locker, classroom seat within the school, or somewhere off school premises, or where the student died.⁴⁹ This reflects a basic human desire to remember those we have lost.

However, in the case of suicide, the H.S.E. does not recommend permanent memorials like shrines, such as benches, statues and planting trees. Indeed, they also recommend that trees used in a suicide be cut down.⁵⁰ If this was on the school grounds consider re-landscaping, not with another tree, but maybe a hedge that would fill the void. It is often difficult for loved ones to understand why such memorials are not a good idea when people who die in other ways are often memorialised.

⁴⁹ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 36.

⁵⁰ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 33.

Indeed, it can be argued that all deaths should be treated in the same way and that suicide deaths should not be treated differently. Unfortunately however, we have to remember that constant reminders, glorification, or glamorisation of a suicide death might have the effect of making it seem attractive to others⁵¹ and that this is not the case with other deaths.

If a spontaneous memorial arises, immediately dismantling it can cause hurt, resentment and anger among students. Indeed, prohibiting any kind of memorial can be taken by students as being hurtful and provoke anger and it might also be incorrectly interpreted as stigmatising suicide.⁵² If a spontaneous memorial arises it is recommended that a time limit be set on such memorials - no more than 2 weeks.⁵³ The site should be monitored regularly, for example, cards and messages should be checked for negative comments or items or comments that romanticise suicide.⁵⁴ If possible, the site should be 'squared off' so that flowers and other items added later are added on top of previous items, rather than allowing the site to grow in width and length.

If the memorial is off school premises the school's ability to exert influence is limited. However after a reasonable period has passed and in consultation with the family, it might be a good idea to arrange a small event where the family (if they wish) and close friends of the deceased dismantle the memorial. It is particularly important that those who helped assemble the memorial are involved in the disassembly. Family and friends can also keep mementos from the site. When arranging this, it might be important to remind people, it is best to remember the deceased in life rather than where or how they died.

If there is time, and no memorial has appeared, it might be advantageous to anticipate that one might be spontaneously created on the school premises, e.g. near the deceased locker, at a desk, in the canteen etc. These should be avoided. Instead, if a school suspects this may happen, an alternative might be introduced that is under the school's control, such as a condolence book that can be signed in a private secluded part of the school. It is recommended that memorials should not be in a communal area such as canteen or entrance.⁵⁵

Students may wish to create and distribute t-shirts or bracelets or other images of the deceased or items that carry the deceased's name,⁵⁶ which may, in the schools view, contribute to suicide contagion. This needs to be handled sensitively. It might be good idea to be honest with these students and explain the schools' rationale to them by outlining the concern about other vulnerable students. Indeed, in some situations it might be useful to have this meeting very early on to avoid future disappointment or anger. This discussion can be strengthened if it can be stated that the '*family do not wish to have such a memorial*'. In addition, there is sometimes a trend among teenagers to have a very permanent reminder of the deceased by getting a tattoo. Parents should be alerted to this and encouraged to persuade their teenager to wait at least a year before getting a tattoo. The majority might not wish to do so after such a time period has passed.

Creative alternatives can be suggested to students such as organising an event with a beginning, middle, and end, rather than a permanent fixture.⁵⁷ If an event is organised it is recommended that it not be named after or to honour the deceased,⁵⁷ but instead, called for example, 'a mental health awareness initiative'. It might be preferable to organise such an event later in the school year. If the

⁵¹ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 32.

⁵² *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 37.

⁵³ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 14.

⁵⁴ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 36.

⁵⁵ *Suicide Postvention Toolkit, A Guide for Secondary Schools*, Headspace School Support, Australia, 2012, p 27.

⁵⁶ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 36.

⁵⁷ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 33.

students insist of doing something more tangible, alternative suggestions can be made that leave no permanent reminder such as releasing Helium balloons (near the sea if practicable) or place flowers in a moving river. Suggestions can also be made around a dedication in next year's year book or allowing the students create a scrapbook that they can bring home. In the case of a suicide, it is recommended that flags should not be flown at half-mast.⁵⁸

If the family request a memorial on school grounds you might have to explain, without naming other students, the difficulty this will pose regarding vulnerable students in your care. It might be necessary to say you have taken advice from the professionals in this area and that you are really worried about the possibility of suicide contagion and that you do not want to have this on your conscience. The school might have to consider precipitating this conversation in advance with the family before they bring up the subject. This might avoid them asking in the first place and putting the school in the difficult situation of saying no. Despite the fact that permanent memorials following a suicide are generally to be discouraged⁵⁹ the family may be determined to have a permanent memorial. If this is the case, it should be off school grounds.⁶⁰ It needs to be remembered that if the school agrees to a permanent memorial such as a tree, bench, plaque or scholarship the school should be prepared to do so for future deaths⁶¹ past deaths and indeed recent past students who pass away. If the school decides to erect a memorial, it should be small, discreet and placed in an out of the way position in the school that is not used for day to day activities. Also, a plaque with words only may be more appropriate rather than one with a picture/image of the deceased.

Finally, the H.S.E. advice schools to include a policy statement on memorials in their critical incident plan. It will help against being driven by intense emotions in a time of crisis.⁶²

17. Seeking Outside Help

Outside help can be sought from agencies such as

- N.E.P.S.
- The Samaritans
- Barnardos
- Headstrong
- H.S.E.
-

It may be necessary to seek help if

- There are multiple deaths
- The death takes place in the school
- The deceased is a very young student. Such a death can have extra difficulties.
- If the death is a suicide and totally out of the blue.
- If the death is a suicide and blame is apportioned to other students and/or teachers

While it may be necessary to consult with outside agencies, it needs to be remembered that students need to be with people they know and trust. If at all possible, it is better that teachers and

⁵⁸ *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 26.

⁵⁹ *Help When We Needed It Most, How to Prepare & Respond to Suicide in School*. The Samaritans, 2013, p 14.

⁶⁰ *Suicide Postvention Toolkit, A Guide for Secondary Schools*, Headspace School Support, Australia, 2012, p 28.

⁶¹ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 37.

⁶² *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 34.

other school staff provide support for the students. The external 'expert' should be primarily⁶³ used to advice and support school staff.

18. Social Media

Following the death of a friend, social media may help teenagers to share their grief. Indeed the family, including parents, may take comfort from what is said by the deceased's friends on social media.

However, it might be useful to remind the students that the family may be reading what is on social media, and therefore to be careful and sensitive about what they might write. It might be useful to remind immediate family members that they can ask Facebook to remove a loved one's account. This will completely remove the account from Facebook so that no one can view it. Facebook will not restore the account or provide information about its contents unless required by law. (If the request is made by a non-family member they will not process the request, but they will memorialise the account.)⁶⁴ If the family takes this course of action, ask them to let you know so that the students can be forewarned.

The school should remain vigilant to inappropriate comments or images that may be posted on social media and be prepared to act if necessary. This might be a topic for discussion at a meeting with close friends and positive leaders in the year group affected.

19. During School Holidays

If a death occurs during the State Exams, immediately contact the State Exams Commission and N.E.P.S. Discuss alternative arrangements and what supports they can provide.

If a death occurs during holiday time extra issues arise that may not occur if the school was open. The school should be opened. An invite should be sent out to the affected year group/s to invite them into school. A structured, familial and adult led activity should be provided. This provides comfort and familiarity and some degree of certainty for grieving teenagers. Such an event might be a prayer service. This might be followed by an informal gathering in the school where food can be provided.

The school should be open in the days to follow for students to access. Remember also to inform staff by telephone not text. If a voice message is to be left for staff who cannot be contacted, it should be '*ring me back when you get this message*'.

If the death occurs in the early part of a holiday period, e.g. June, it may be necessary to repeat some of the formal events that took place immediately after the death when the school reopens in September. This is necessary to cater for students who may not have been around when the death occurred and to mark and acknowledge what has happened when the school returns. If this is not done, offence can be taken by grieving teenagers who may think that the school has forgotten, don't care, or don't realise how upset they were.

⁶³ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 22.

⁶⁴ *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 36.

During school holidays it may not be possible/feasible or necessary to carry out some of the actions or events outlined in this document, for example a debriefing of students. However, when school reopens consideration may need to be given to carrying out some or all these actions - particularly a debriefing for students.

20. Returning To A Different Normal

At some point there will be a time when the right thing to do is to resume normal classes full time without interruption.

1. 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 few 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.⁶⁵
2. In some cases the resumption of normal classes may be enough for students to start moving on. However, other structured activities may be needed to restore a stronger feeling of normality returning. For example, a soccer blitz, a fundraiser. These activities may be necessary for younger years.
3. One very important issue that needs to be addressed is the 'empty seat'. In some classrooms it may be possible to rearrange the seating so that the empty seat is not noticeable. If the seating arrangement up to this point was casual, and the rearranging is not noticeable, it may not be necessary to mention it to students. However, if rearranging the seating is very noticeable, it might be necessary to forewarn the students that the changes have been made.⁶⁶ Some argue that it might be helpful to invite students to discuss what to do about the empty chair.⁶⁷ However, if after this discussion the students decide that the empty seat should be left as it is, it would be very difficult to go against their wishes. Therefore, sometimes it might be best not to consult with students in advance, but instead forewarn them in a sensitive way *why* it had to be done. However, there is one other option known as 'musical chairs'⁶⁸ that, if it works, can be an alternative to all of the above. This is where one designated teacher/Guidance Counsellor might do the following. Just before the first formal class re-commences this teacher/Guidance Counsellor might speak to one designated student privately who will be mature and emotionally able to carrying out what will be requested. On entering the class the designated teacher/Guidance Counsellor should stand beside the deceased's chair and then sit in the chair while asking permission from the class and while also saying that they have something they want

⁶⁵ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 23.

⁶⁶ *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011, p 37.

⁶⁷ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Guidelines for School*, Department of Education, 2007, p 30.

⁶⁸ Maria Trozzi & Kathy Massimini, *Talking With Children About Loss*, (New York: Penguin Book, 1999) p 192.

to share with the class. While sitting in the chair the teacher/Guidance Counsellor might say the following. *'We all want to share in the memories of the deceased [name]. We all want to feel [name] is still a part of us and still a part of our lives and will always be with us and around us. Part of this sharing and keeping memories alive might be for [name] chair to be shared amongst everybody. One of you could share in sitting in [name] seat in this class, another in the next class, and another in the next class, and keep the rotation going tomorrow. Would that be Okay? Who would like to start?'* This is where the designated student might step forward having been prepared beforehand.

4. If the death occurred in a room in the school, consider a total refurbishment of that room so it becomes unrecognisable from before. If it occurred on the school grounds consider re-landscaping.

5. The deceased student's locker is also an issue that needs to be addressed. If it is not fixed to a wall can it be easily removed? If it is attached to another student's locker, both should be removed and the other student allocated a new locker. If the locker cannot be removed, at the very least the deceased's name should be removed. If the locker cannot be removed is it possible to reallocate all the lockers in a new random sequence so that the deceased locker is indistinguishable from the rest? Students should not be asked to assist with the removal/rearrangement of lockers. An empty locker space can be particularly distressing symbol for close friends so it is appropriate to fore warn them in a sensitive way *why* this has happened.⁶⁹ If at all possible, a locker should not be removed leaving an empty space.
6. The contents of the locker should also be removed and returned to the deceased's family and the locker should not emptied when students are present.⁷⁰
7. The timing of addressing the locker issue can vary but if is likely to become a focal point/makeshift memorial; it should be removed as soon as possible.
8. Make sure the deceased's name is removed from all class rolls, and parents removed from text system, e-mailing list and postal list.
9. Be extra vigilant with vulnerable students for a number of months.
10. Be extra vigilant for absentees, particularly if these involve vulnerable students.
11. Some students may experience abnormal reactions. The following is a list of some symptoms that may present themselves. Those that have previous experiences of bereavement may be particularly affected. Those who have their own emotional issues or special needs may also need particular attention.

Anxiety	Yearning numbness
Isolation	Bedwetting
Nightmares	Thumb sucking
Over dependency	Social withdrawal
Tantrums	Mood swings
Loss of concentration	Forgetfulness
Insecurity	Misuse of drugs or alcohol
Refusal to discuss trauma	Uncontrollable crying
Change in orientation towards future	Physical symptoms
Impulsive behaviour	Failing memory
Guilt feelings prolonged	Change in eating habits
Self-defeating beliefs	Suicidal thoughts
Keeping of a diary or scrap book	Strained relationships
Suppressed anger	Feeling of vulnerability
Persistent avoidance of associated stimuli	Disengagement from enjoyable activities

⁶⁹ *Suici*

⁷⁰ *Suici*

12. Parents may also need to be informed of the symptoms to observe. Encourage parents to watch out for these feelings and inform the school. Some students may need referral to a professional counsellor. This should be done in consultation with the parents.

21. The Return Of Siblings

Sometimes grieving siblings can find it very difficult to return to school. They can be consumed by anxiety about how they will be treated. They may fear facing their friends, being crowded out, others being 'in their face', or they may fear breaking down in public and being singled out.

1. Visit the home and talk through the anxieties about returning
2. Give the sibling the option of a gradual/staggered return.
3. Ask the sibling how they would like to be treated.⁷¹
4. Let them know that they can leave class if they feel overwhelmed, and tell them there is an alternative room they can go to.
5. Speak to the sibling's year group/friends.
6. Discuss with them the need not to crowd the sibling out or not to be in their face.
7. Speak to them about not approaching the sibling on mass as a group.
8. Help the friends with suggestions about what they might say to the sibling.
9. The strongest worry the grieving sibling may have is the fear of breaking down in public when approached by others. The possibility of this happening can be heightened by what is said to the sibling or how they are greeted. For example, if the sibling is asked '*How are you?*' they may get very upset. This is a question that puts the sibling under pressure to respond emotionally and more than likely respond in the negative way. Of course they are not Okay! Therefore alternatives both students and teachers can use are '*welcome back*' or '*It's good to see you*'. These are statements and not questions and do not put the sibling under pressure to respond.
10. After a brief acknowledge with the sibling, encourage students to enter into normal conversation e.g. '*guess what happened in Maths class?*', '*Did you see that match last night?*'
11. With regard to teachers, one suggestion might be for the teacher to wait outside the classroom before class starts so that they can meet the sibling before they enter the classroom. Again they might steer away from questions that require the sibling to give an emotional response or engaging in a long conversation that might make them feel under pressure to respond. This can be particularly difficult if the sibling has to endure such interactions from 8 or 9 teachers in one day. Teachers might simply say '*it's good to see you*' – while placing a comforting hand on their arm/shoulder.
12. Teachers should not prompt or facilitate a long emotional conversation in a public area.
13. If it provides comfort, tell the sibling some or all of the above has been done.
14. Remember also that to ignore or not acknowledge the returning sibling can be very damaging.

⁷¹ *Responding To Critical Incidents, Resource Materials for Schools*, Department of Education, 2007, p 19.

15. As the academic year progresses, teachers may find themselves discussing topic in class that may touch on the experience the returning relative may have had. This can occurring in obvious situations where mental health might be discussed or less obviously, e.g. in German class a video may be shown that mentions suicide, death or a car accident. The returning students should be spoken to in advance and given the option of opting out of that class.
16. The above points are also worth remembering when teenagers return to school following the death of a parent.

22. Events In The Future

Future events can cause re-emergence of issues for grieving teenagers. Remember that for future events and Internet use, family may be looking.

These events may include,

- Month's Mind
- Birthdays & Christmas
- Prize giving & Graduation
- Extra – curricular events such as a play or a sporting event

It might be useful to re-read this document and plan ahead when such events are approaching and consult with family & close friends.

23. Evaluation

When time allows, the steps taken after the incident need to be assessed. The following questions may need to be asked. When reviewing this document, consult with all parties involved who may have an interest.

- Can the school lessen the possibility of recurrence?
- Do steps need to be deleted?
- Do steps need to be added?
- What worked?
- What did not work?
- What has been learned?
- Were there any circumstances that were unforeseen?
- Do the following policies need amendments?

Health & Safety Statement

Pastoral Care Policy

S.P.H.E. Curriculum

Discipline Policy

In addition, the Critical Incident Team should meet once a year to review the plan even if there has not been a critical incident.

- Have we kept in contact with the family/families concerned?
- Be sensitive to occasions such as anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas etc
- Review the support structures available
- Provide the appropriate support

- Review overall school response

24. Self-Reflection

Dealing with a critical incident can be one of the most challenging and distressing events any professional working with children has to deal with. When faced with difficult tasks, human nature tends to look for ways of avoiding having to do these tasks. Sometimes we justify not doing these tasks by saying *'there is no need'*, or *'it is not relevant in this case'*. Ask yourself are you dismissing the need for tasks to be done *because of the fear* of carrying them out? Are you doing this to avoid the emotional difficulty faced by engaging in these tasks? If this is the case, remember that a task should be done –despite it being difficult - simply because it is the right thing to do.

When faced with a critical incident, the normal human reaction is to put ourselves under pressure to make sure we do all that is needed, and do it well. This can sometimes manifest itself in panic and anxiety and rushing around at high speed. It might be useful to, instead of going up a gear - which is what we naturally tend to do - to go down a gear. Go slower, be more thoughtful, more purposeful, and, if need be, go slower again. This might allow your actions be driven by practical needs rather than your heightened emotional state. Remember, you can't get everything right and do everything yourself, share the responsibilities or seek outside assistance. Remember, you can't undo what has happened nor can you fix what has happened. You can only control or influence some – not all – of the consequence of what has happened. Everything you do will be for the best of intentions and will be done to have a positive outcome and remember, you cannot control how others will react to what is done.

Be mindful of follow up contact between the person dealing with a family and the family itself. Such contact should not develop into a dependent relationship where the person providing the assistance becomes a necessary part of the family's life. This is particularly important if it is a lone parent family.

Finally, after events have settled down, it may be necessary to have a gathering of those in the school directly involved with the incident and/or a gathering of the whole staff. This should not be a debriefing session to assess what worked and did not work. Instead, the aim of the gathering should be to allow those attending to 'declutter' their minds and provide a 'therapeutic outlet' for their emotions. This can be as simple as an informal social event such a meal out, or a more structured event facilitated by an outside expert. If the incident occurred during the school holidays, consider holding such a gathering as soon as possible, rather than wait for the next term to start. However, if the majority cannot attend due to holidays, it may be best to wait until the school term recommences so that all can attend. It may also be necessary for the school to facilitate counselling (using the Department of Education service) for teachers, if needed.

25. Health and Safety

First Aid

By way of protection of our staff and students, all staff will be made aware of the Health and Safety Document, Fire Evacuation Procedures, the location of defibrillators and the names of those trained in their use and in First Aid. These lists will also be posted near the defibrillators, on the Principal's notice board in the staff room and attached to this document.

Staff will be reminded of these procedures at the initial staff meeting annually and this information is included in the packs provided to new and substitute teachers.

Staff holding a current First Aid qualification

Rory O Neill (2018-2020), Michelle McDaid (2018-2020), Shane McArt (2019 – 2022), SNAs- All SNA's (2018-2020)

Location of Defibrillators

Outside Principal's Office

Persons Trained to use the defibrillators:

First Aid Team, Brendan Monagle (teacher), Elizabeth Maloney (Caretaker, Civil Defence).

Policy review: October 2013

Policy review: January 2014

Policy review: May 2017

Policy review: June 2019

Ratified by the Board of Management:

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