

TOOL 7 Critical incident management plan

A critical incident is broadly defined as any situation faced by a school community causing its members to experience unusually strong reactions, which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the time the situation arises or later. The necessity of responding promptly and appropriately in such situations is important in protecting the mental health of students, staff and families.

Examples of critical incidents that could affect the mental health of school community members include:

- the accidental death or serious injury or terminal illness of a student or staff member
- the destruction of part, or the whole of the school
- major vandalism
- the murder of a student or staff member
- a group of students lost or injured on an excursion
- students and /or staff members being taken hostage
- student or staff suicide (see *Educating for Life*)
- extremely damaging media attention
- a sexual assault
- a natural or other major disaster in the community
- enforced school closure.

Main components of a critical incident management plan

Establish a critical incident management (CIM) team

Members should include those with expertise, such as the school counsellor, first aid officer, and a member of the school executive, as well as others who have personal qualities appropriate to crisis management. Members of the team can also be drawn from the wider school community. The principal does not have to be a member, but the team leader should liaise closely with the principal.

The functions of the team are:

- coordination and communication
- overseeing the implementation of the critical incident management plan
- support and debriefing of students (where appropriate)
- support and debriefing of staff (where appropriate)
- ongoing review and familiarisation of new staff with the critical incident management plan.

Develop a CIM plan

In developing a CIM plan, the team should review any of the school systemic education system requirements. This plan should have four main parts.

1. Immediate action

Each member of the team should have responsibility for a key action. Some actions, such as evacuation procedures, should be practiced regularly.

- Initial contact person gathers factual information.
- Contact emergency services – dial 000.
- Ensure safety and welfare of staff and students.
- Contact first aid officer.
- Administer first aid until ambulance arrives.
- Once police or other emergency services have arrived at the school, they will determine if other resources such as the State Emergency Services are required.
- Contact education system officer responsible for critical incidents.
- Telephone critical incident team leader:
 - give facts of the situation
 - receive advice on availability of counselling
 - maintain duty of care of students
 - manage the media.
- Consider how to provide advice to parents and families.
- Contact parents or families of affected persons.
- Fax copy of Incident Report form to the relevant system personnel.

2. Additional action

Not all critical incidents will require professional counselling of students and staff, follow-up, and monitoring of outcomes. However, where the incident has been serious, such as the death by suicide or other causes of a student or staff member, care needs to be exercised.

- Convene brief meeting of the CIM team with school executive to discuss intervention plan and obtain executive support.
- Convene full staff meeting of teaching and administrative staff to:
 - present information
 - allow staff response
 - discuss action plan
 - decide on how students will be informed or given additional information.
- Phone the cluster director or other schools for assistance.
- Set up a recovery room in the school, with necessary support personnel.
- Inform students of the facts of the incident, school actions, and counselling services. Allow student discussion or response.
- Identify students and staff at risk: contact their families.
- Arrange counselling for students and staff at risk.

- Inform parents by letter:
 - the facts of the critical incident
 - possible reactions of students
 - the school's response plan
 - sources of help for families
 - encourage two-way communication between parents and the school.
- Restore the school to regular routine as soon as practicable.
- Make use of the cluster staff.
- Obtain updated factual information.
- Continue to inform staff, students and parents.
- Continue to monitor wellbeing of students and staff.

3. Follow-up

Within three days, within the first month, or at the time of the first anniversary, some staff and students may need additional support. Ongoing monitoring may be required of their wellbeing. Each year the critical incident management plan needs to be reviewed, updated and new staff need to become familiar with its contents.

4. Whole school education

The plan needs to involve a wider network of teachers and trained support personnel. Loss and grief needs to be a topic in the school curriculum, in Personal Development, Health Education, or Religious Education classes. It can also be used as a theme in a cross curricula approach, but taught by teachers with professional preparation in teaching about loss and grief.

Suicide postvention as a component of the CIM plan

Suicide postvention should be addressed within the critical incident management plan. The section on death by suicide should address specific issues such as:

- discussing the suicide with pupils
- prevention of suicide contagion
- identification of students and staff at risk
- discussion of suicide with the media
- informing and working with parents
- school involvement in memorial services or activities.

The plan must be made known and accessible to all staff. Should a death occur, it can then be implemented immediately. Schools that respond 'on the run' are much less effective in their response and may initiate activities that can have either short-term or long-term negative consequences. For assistance in reviewing or developing the suicide component of a critical incident management plan, see *Educating for Life*.