

The cover features a large teal triangle pointing downwards, set against a background of green and orange geometric shapes. The top-left and bottom-left corners are decorated with a pattern of green circles of varying sizes on an orange background.

SAMARITANS

Critical Incident Planning

How to prepare and respond to a
suspected suicide in schools, colleges
and other youth settings in the UK.

UK

This guidance forms part of Samaritans Step by Step service, which offers specially trained volunteers who can assist schools, colleges and other youth settings with their response to a suspected suicide. Step by Step has a dedicated email and phone number, see below.

We aim to respond to you within 24 hours.

To request support:

Email

stepbystep@samaritans.org

Call

0808 168 2528

Calls are free from landlines and some mobile providers.

Further information:

Visit

[samaritans.org/stepbystep](https://www.samaritans.org/stepbystep)

Contents

Why have a Critical Incident Plan?	4
Forming a postvention team	5
Breaking the news	6
Support for students and staff	7
Liaison with the family	8
Other considerations	9
Further sources of support	11

Why have a Critical Incident Plan?

The death of a student or member of staff through illness or accident is always a tragedy. A death from suicide, however, presents many additional problems and considerations, and raises the risk of potentially being the trigger for another suicide.

Responding to a suicide or attempted suicide is one of the most traumatic events that a school may have to manage. The key to coping promptly, proactively and proportionately to such an incident is for a leadership group to have discussed the possibility in advance. A plan can then be ready and staff can be trained so that the response can be put into action immediately in order to:

- Maintain the structure and routine of the school and enable normal working to resume as soon as possible.
- Facilitate the expression of loss and grief.
- Reduce the risk of imitative suicide.
- Maintain the Duty of Care and ensure that all who need support have access to it.

Discussion and planning in advance by an appropriate and experienced group of staff makes it easier for an effective response at a time when emotions are high and when staff themselves are processing their own reactions to what has happened. The Critical Incident Plan should be a clearly defined and documented response by the school to such a situation.

There is no 'one size fits all' blueprint. The Plan for each institution needs to be devised by the school to fit its own context. It also needs to acknowledge the need for flexibility as the circumstances surrounding every incident will be slightly different.

The following pages suggest elements to be considered when a Critical Incident Plan is being discussed. The content is based on experience and research. Some aspects of what these pages contain should ideally be written into a Critical Incident Plan, while other parts are there to be considered and discussed.

Samaritans sincerely hope that the Plan will never have to be put into action.

Please note that the word 'school' is used throughout for consistency. It is understood that each time it is used it also covers 'college' and 'academy', etc.

Forming a postvention team

The Postvention Team (PVT) is a group of staff who can be brought together immediately following the news of a student or member of staff death by suspected suicide.

The first step in forming the Team is to appoint a Chair. This will normally be a senior member of staff. The pre-nominated Chair will take the initiative as soon as an incident is reported. It is best if there is also a second person who is prepared for the role in case the Chair is unavailable.

The Postvention Team usually consists of around six to eight people and may include the Headteacher, another representative or two from the SLT, the Safeguarding Lead, the School Counsellor, etc. The Chair should have the authority to co-opt others on to the PVT – for example the Head of Year and/or Form Tutor of the deceased.

Someone from Admin should also be present to minute the meetings of the PVT. It is important to have a written record of decisions made and actions taken. This may be invaluable if the school's response is criticised and also if the coroner later asks for a report.

The PVT will meet promptly to confirm known facts and to establish 'a single

source of truth' in order to give a consistent message. This will help to reduce the chances of speculation and rumour. Roles will be allocated – Care for Staff Lead; Care for Students Lead; Family Liaison Lead; Communications Lead, plus any others as decided by the Team.

In some schools, in our experience, a senior member of staff has tried to take on several or all of the above roles. Our strong advice is that this is too much for just one person to carry out on their own.

The Chair continues to co-ordinate the school's response for as long as is necessary and convenes further meetings of the PVT when appropriate. All 'Leads' need to report back regularly to the Chair so that she/he has a full knowledge of every aspect of the follow-up. It is essential that key people communicate clearly and that the Chair keeps the whole staff informed. Please also think about support for each other.

Breaking the news

Depending on when and where the incident took place, social media and the community grapevine may already have spread the news in some quarters. However, it is important that the Head and/or SLT should speak about it to all students.

Firstly, the staff need to be informed. Dependent on when the incident happened this may be done by phone, group e-mail or text – or a combination of the three. For those nearest to the deceased, a phone conversation is much more sensitive. Otherwise, a before-school staff briefing may be the best opportunity. Unfortunately, this gives minimal time for staff to come to terms with what has happened. All staff need to know – not just the teachers - support, caretaking, supply and peripatetic staff etc, too.

Good practice suggests that it is better to break the news to young people in small groups such as tutor groups – in their own classroom. Consider writing a script for teachers to read to their group so that the message is consistent. The language used for Year 7 will differ in some respects from that used with the sixth form. Students may ask questions which have to be answered honestly and carefully, but without disclosing details such as the method used or whether a note was left.

Until the inquest, phrases like 'sudden unexplained death' can be useful.

Remember – it is only a coroner who can officially give a verdict of suicide.

If the school has already made contact with the parents of the deceased, it is important to consider reasonable wishes and requests about what is said – and not said.

As soon as possible, inform the;

- Chair of Governors/Trustees
- Local Education Authority (if relevant)
- Contact Step by Step for support, guidance and advice. (0808 168 2528)

Prepare a statement for teaching, support and office staff to use in response to enquiries. This could be placed on the school website too. A letter/e-mail to all parents and carers may be helpful as they should know what has happened and may ask for guidance about how to handle conversations with their child(ren). Everyone should avoid being drawn in to conversations with local or national media who may be seeking news-making quotes.

Support for students and staff

After a death and when having that first conversation with students, include something about normal emotions and responses to such news. Allow them to reflect, comment openly and discuss their feelings, but try to control the extent to which anyone may initiate or spread small-scale hysteria. Encourage support and care for each other and give information about the school's provision of support for individuals.

The above paragraph is particularly relevant for the tutor group – and even the year group – of which the student or member of staff was a part of.

Who will be the priorities for support? Try to identify and carefully support any particularly vulnerable students who may be considered a potential 'contagion' suicide risk. Research shows that those who are psychologically close, geographically close or have social proximity are at the greatest risk.

Many schools, in the first few days, will provide a supervised quiet room where students can go if they are struggling to cope. This may be especially appreciated by close friends.

Schools often look to buy in additional counselling support for a few days if it is difficult to free staff from their timetabled commitments.

In the instance of attempted suicide which peers know about (sometimes the family and school keep it confidential), the tutor group and even the year group may welcome some advice on how to react when the student is reintegrated. Similarly, this kind of advice may apply to a tutor/year group in which there is a sibling of the deceased.

Any number of staff (teaching or non-teaching) may be deeply affected by the loss and may need practical or emotional support. Much of what is written above can apply to staff as well as students.

Members of staff are usually exceptionally good at supporting each other, but sometimes may appreciate a confidential support session, perhaps because the incident has revived memories of a past bereavement involving a family member or friend.

If the school has involved the Step by Step Service, our Advisor will offer to liaise with the nearest Samaritans branch about sending in experienced trained listeners to hold 1 to 1 confidential meetings for offloading and debriefing. (Staff only – for various reasons related to safeguarding we do not work with students).

It can be helpful to remind staff of other external sources of wellbeing support – including that Samaritans can be contacted at any time on 116 123. This may be particularly useful in evenings and at weekends.

Liaison with the family

It is extremely important to ensure that liaison with the family of the deceased is prompt, sensitive and supportive. The need for this cannot be stressed too strongly.

The member of staff who is nominated to fulfil this role should remain consistent throughout the period during which close communication and support are maintained. It may be that the decision of the PVT is to allocate two people to share this role. If so, it is usually one senior member of staff and one who knew the student well.

This communication needs to be a two-way process – so the family need to know how the Liaison Lead can best be contacted. Some Liaison Leads are happy to give the family their mobile number, but this may not be appropriate in every case.

It is recommended that the family are contacted as early as possible. Every effort should be made to be guided by the family's wishes unless impractical or unreasonable requests are made. Both practical and emotional support need to be offered.

A personal letter of condolence from the headteacher and one from the chair of governors are usually much appreciated.

In these circumstances, most families are very appreciative of support and of close contact with the school. However, others can be very challenging, especially if they are looking for someone to blame for their loss. The Liaison Lead needs to be prepared for some difficult conversations. It is also possible that the deceased is from a split family, in which case two separate strands of conversation need to be opened and maintained.

In some cases, cultural and religious beliefs need to be understood and acknowledged.

Liaison is best maintained for as long as the family find it helpful – and certainly up to the date of the funeral.

Other considerations

In the event of the death being on the school premises, the following procedures need to be followed immediately. This circumstance is more likely to occur where there are boarders, but is not totally unheard of in other schools.

- 1 Secure the location.
- 2 Phone the emergency services.
- 3 Confirm an identity.
- 4 Ensure co-operation and compliance with instructions/advice from police and paramedics.
- 5 The police will inform the next of kin.
- 6 Ensure that there is no contact made with the family until police confirm that they have formally done so.
- 7 Times and details of what has happened should be recorded accurately.
- 8 Move on to convening a meeting of the PVT as soon as possible.
- 9 N.B. If the deceased is a boarding school overseas student the relevant embassy should be informed.

Not all of the following need to be written into a CIP, but it may be helpful if they are discussed and considered. Step by Step Advisors can give advice, guidance and support on any or all of them;

- If the media, including local press, show interest, our Samaritans Media Advice Team will be pleased to help. They can be contacted on mediaadvice@samaritans.org
- What arrangement will be made for the return of the student's possessions?
- How will the school manage the issues of the empty chair, the empty cloakroom peg, the empty locker, etc?
- Promptly remove the name from any e-mail (students or parents) contact lists. It can be hurtful for a parent to receive a message about an overdue library book or arrears with dinner money, etc.
- Memorials can be a contentious issue. Careful and prompt consideration about 'what, where and how' is appropriate. This can involve tricky decisions, but it is important to get it right. Our Step by Step Service has produced a booklet and can give guidance on this.

- Staff attendance and representation at the funeral. We also suggest that if students wish to attend the funeral, parents should be asked to accompany them.
- It may be necessary for the school to contribute to the inquest, either in person or through a written report.
- Social Media – the school may need to consider responding via direct messages or public posts to correct any seriously incorrect or hurtful messages which have been posted.

Finally – please don't forget that our Step by Step service will respond promptly to all requests for help, support, advice and guidance.

Contact us on 0808 1682528 or at stepbystep@samaritans.org

Further sources of support

Aware NI (Northern Ireland)

Aware is the depression charity for Northern Ireland, with programmes aimed at young people to maintain good mental health and build resilience.

www.aware-ni.org

Breathing Space (Scotland)

Breathing Space is a free, confidential phone and web based service for people in Scotland

experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

www.breathingspace.scot

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Through the BACP you can find information about counsellors in your area.

www.bacp.co.uk

ChildLine

Provides support services for children and young people. Phone the free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK about any problem. Tel: 0800 1111

www.childline.org.uk

Choose Life

The National Strategy and Action Plan to prevent suicide in Scotland.

www.chooselife.net

Cruse Bereavement Support

Promotes the wellbeing of bereaved people and enables anyone bereaved by death to understand their grief and cope with their loss. The organisation provides support and offers information, advice, education and training services.

www.cruse.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Scotland

Cruse Scotland is the nation's expert in bereavement counselling, listening services, information, advice and training.

www.crusescotland.org.uk

Facing the Future

Support groups for people who have been bereaved by suicide developed and delivered by Samaritans.

www.facingthefuturegroups.org

Lifeline (Northern Ireland)

Lifeline is the Northern Ireland crisis response helpline service for people who are experiencing distress or despair.

Tel: 0808 808 8000

www.lifelinehelpline.info

NAPEP UK: Local Authorities Educational Psychology Services Crisis Response Team Network

A support network for peers involved in Local Authority Educational Psychology Services that offer support to school communities following a traumatic incident. The network shares information, discusses best practice and provides the opportunity to respond to large scale cross border incidents in a co-ordinated way.

www.napep.info

Samaritans

Can provide support day or night, 365 days a year to anyone, regardless of background or religion. Whatever you're facing, we're here to listen.

Tel: 116 123 (this number is free to call)

Email: jo@samaritans.org

www.samaritans.org

Please note these are the main Samaritans contact details and not for the Step by Step or Schools service.

SAMARITANS

Contact Step by Step

Email

stepbystep@samaritans.org

Call

0808 168 2528

Calls are free from landlines
and some mobile providers.

Visit

samaritans.org/stepbystep

Samaritans Registered Office
The Upper Mill, Kingston Road,
Ewell KT17 2AF
T 020 8394 8300

A registered charity