Critical Incident Management

**What constitutes a “critical incident”?**
Any incident/situation, that potentially impacts or compromises the safety of the school, work setting, individuals, department, or community.
The incident may have occurred at or away from a school campus.

**What are the two types of critical incidents?**
- **Acute:** occurs suddenly, jarringly, unexpectedly (sudden death in a car crash, natural disaster-hurricane, flood, fire, etc.)
- **Chronic:** a daily problem that eventually spirals out of control (ongoing dispute, long-term illness, a concern that reaches a tipping point, etc.)

**Why do we need to provide leadership and a structured response to a critical incident?**
The most important goals toward healing are:
- to educate people about a critical incident so they can recognize and understand reactions (theirs and others)
- to help students, parents, and staff understand what they are going through
- to validate their experience
- to help people anticipate and plan for the coming days
- to discuss coping skills and resources for support
- to increase resiliency in children and adults alike

**What could happen if a critical incident is ignored?**
- rumors, inaccurate information, anger, secrecy
- stress related illnesses
- absenteeism
- burnout
Critical Incident Management

POINTS TO CONSIDER IN RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS

Proactive measures:

_____ Make certain that you have a campus phone tree (numbers of NISD Guidance & Counseling staff and your campus administrators) on your desk at home for use over weekends and holidays.

_____ Meet with your counseling staff to discuss roles, responsibilities, and procedures if a critical incident were to occur.

_____ Organize a bin of materials for use during a critical incident (folders with map of school, schedules, sign in sheets, markers, tissues, etc.).

In the immediate aftermath:

_____ If counselor is first to hear of the critical incident, counselor will
   • contact the principal to discuss the situation (note: principal will clarify roles and responsibilities)
   • contact Director of Guidance and Counseling
   • develop a critical incident management plan

_____ Head counselor confirms that campus administrators have called the NISD Executive Director of Communications to be sure the name/s of victim/s have been officially released.

_____ Principal decides if the phone tree is to be activated. May wish to consult with Director of Guidance and Counseling regarding decision as to how many “visiting” critical incident counselors to call upon (5, 10, 15, etc.).

_____ Director of Guidance & Counseling will contact the NISD Assistant Superintendent for Student, Family & Community Services.

_____ Director of Guidance & Counseling designates guidance department staff member to coordinate critical incident response (Coordinator of Elementary Guidance Services and/or Coordinator of Safe and Drug-Free Schools).

_____ Teachers potentially affected by the critical incident are called by administrator, counselor, or designee to prepare them prior to coming to school (if the incident occurs overnight or over a weekend or holiday).
Critical Incident Management
POINTS TO CONSIDER IN RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS

Before the start of the school day...

_____ Principal typically holds faculty meeting and also informs faculty in writing of all the pertinent details (if by email, use header: CONFIDENTIAL- Do Not Forward / Do Not Share With Students).

_____ In the case of the death of a student, check the emergency medical card to find out if other siblings in the family attend NISD schools. If so, inform principal or counselor at the neighboring school.

_____ Determine what clubs or extra-curricular activities the child may have been involved in and consider if a higher level of response/support to these teachers and grieving students if needed.

_____ Principal and counselor usually prepare a fact sheet for teachers and the visiting counselors who assist to inform them of the facts (can be the actual newspaper clipping).

_____ Principal & counselor usually prepare a letter to go home to parents (see “sample letters” under Resource tab in manual).

_____ Principal & counselor usually prepare a written statement for main office staff to read as they answer the phones (see “sample letters” under Resource tab in manual).

_____ Counselor copies sign in sheets. Students and critical incident counselors sign in/out.

_____ Counselor prepares folders with map of school, bell schedules, sign in sheets, hall passes etc.) for critical incident counselors who are coming to assist.

_____ Principal designates a central location to be used as the Crisis Response Center where students report for grief counseling (library, LGI Room, orchestra hall, etc.).

_____ VP or counselor secure a list of available classrooms that can be used.

_____ An area/room is designated for grieving staff (separate from students). It is recommended that you do not use the teachers’ lounge for this purpose.

_____ Counselors set-up a break/debrief room for counselors.

_____ Principal designates a central point where visiting counselors will report and get their name tags, campus maps, folders, room assignments, etc.

_____ Counselor or administrator briefs the front office staff that visiting counselors will be arriving and ensures they know to greet them discreetly and where to direct them.
Critical Incident Management
POINTS TO CONSIDER IN RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS

During the school day...
_____ If a student has died, have a counselor available to monitor in the area where the student had classes (example: 6th grade hallway).
_____ Check in with teachers to see how they are coping.
_____ Have other teachers or a substitute available for teachers who appear to be too upset to teach.
_____ Have a campus representative, along with two CI counselors, “follow” the deceased student(s) schedule to inform each class and share pertinent information.
_____ Keep debriefing groups to a small and manageable size. Schedule students into pre-determined debriefing rooms to avoid overloading any one location.
_____ Have markers, paper and crayons available so that students (either in classrooms or debriefing groups) can make a drawing or a sympathy card for the family – check all cards for appropriate content before forwarding to the family.
_____ Secondary Schools: have butcher paper/banner (in loving memory of…) for students visiting the Crisis Response Center (CRC) to sign. It is advisable to have the banner on a table in the CRC, not in a hallway or hanging on a wall.
_____ Have CI counselors transition into a debriefing group. This allows counselors who have been on duty for hours to gradually transition out of the CRC and take breaks.
_____ In every location, have tissues available for students.
_____ Have hall passes available. If students are congregating in hallways, counselors may need to walk them back to class.
_____ Counselor may call parents of students seen in debriefing sessions needing follow-up support to inform them of their child’s possible reactions over the coming days, etc.
_____ Have food available for the visiting counselors, and other helpers (breakfast bars, sandwiches, coffee, bottled water).
_____ At the end of the school day, distribute the letters to go home to the parents/guardians of those students most affected (include team members or classes most affected).
Critical Incident Management
POINTS TO CONSIDER IN RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS

After school...
_____ An administrator or counselor may need to ride the bus of the deceased student (contact the NISD Director of Transportation at 397-0940 to inform them of the situation).
_____ With principal approval, set up an area for remembrances (pictures, banner paper for written sentiments—be careful that this does not become a “shrine”).
_____ Check all cards and banners for appropriateness before sending these remembrances home to grieving family members.
_____ Empty the student’s locker and have teachers turn in all of students work to the principal (do not forget PE locker or other areas where student stores personal belongings).
_____ Guidance department will coordinate a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (see section in manual) for the staff at the end of the day. Principal will communicate to staff that the debriefing is voluntary and will take approximately 40 minutes.
_____ Have a lead debrief counselor meet with the counselors most affected or exposed to the critical incident.

The next day...
_____ Call or send thank you notes/ e-mails to those who helped your campus/community.
_____ Check in with those staff members who are most affected by the critical incident.
_____ Follow up with most affected students and send home referral resources for grief counseling.

In the coming days...
_____ Follow up with any plans made to support the community or families of the victims.
_____ Employ a “committee” approach if a memorial or remembrance is to be planned. Campus principal must approve.
POINTS TO CONSIDER IN HELPING YOUR CHILD
*Helping Parents Respond to Critical Incidents*

Look for behaviors in younger children that signal distress responses to recent events. These might include

- Return to behaviors of a younger age, such as thumb sucking, bed-wetting, fear of dark, etc.
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Changes in typical behavior (more passivity or aggression)

Look for behaviors in older children and adolescents that signal distress responses to recent events. In addition to some of the behaviors above, other indicators to note include

- Rebelliousness
- Loss of interest in routine activities
- Withdrawal from peer group
- Poor school performance
- Increased worry and depression

Limit and guide your child’s television viewing. Children have a limited perspective on events due to age and experience and may not understand how far or near the events are to them. This creates fear and anxiety.

Monitor any repeated TV viewing of tragic events. Children may not be able to communicate emotional responses to what they are seeing and feeling. It is important for parents to be with children if they are allowed to view televised events to allow for questions and the expression of feelings.

School counselors are available to assist you and your child should you need their support over the next few days.
Tips For Teachers
*Working with Students After a Traumatic Event *

♥ Provide safety & structure by continuing normal daily routines (school work; schedules, instruction)
♥ If the event is known, acknowledge that this is a difficult time (model compassion, resiliency and strength)
♥ Avoid over-explaining (keep your remarks simple; developmentally-appropriate, and respectful)- too much discussion derails instruction and instills fear
♥ Avoid “minimizing” or providing superficial reassurance.
♥ Avoid “catastrophizing” (reinforcing hysteria and panic) ~notice your own language, graphic details; facial expressions, etc
♥ Refrain from personal disclosures; or promoting your values / beliefs, war stories, religious teachings
♥ Keep adult conversations private and in a contained area (office, door closed, before and after school)
♥ Do act as a teacher- not as a counselor ~the counseling profession is highly regulated by law and ethical codes. You own liability when acting in a role you are not trained or hired to assume – DO NO HARM. Model healthy boundaries.
♥ Refer students to counselor as they begin to show signs of enduring distress so that they can tell their story once to a trained mental health professional. Help them contain their emotion until they see the counselor.
♥ Do remind students that you care about them and you are there to support them in their learning during this difficult time.
Traumatic Event Crisis Intervention Plan
Classroom Presentation Guide

The purpose of a classroom presentation activity is to provide information, minimize unwanted student responses, normalize grief and trauma reactions, and suggest appropriate behaviors. Five primary steps guide this process.

1. **Introduce discussion:** As some of you may already know __________ died. This is very difficult for all of us. When something like this happens, it is hard to know what to say or how to act. It is important, however that we spend some time talking about this incident and answer any questions that you may have.

2. **Clarify the facts:** This is what we know so far (share only basic facts) __________. That is all the information we have at this time. As we find out more information that you need to know, we will share it with you. (May want to emphasize the importance of not starting rumors about the incident)

3. **Normalize common reactions:** What did you think and feel when you first heard about this? What are you thinking and feeling now? I am not surprised that you feel this way or have these kinds of thoughts and feelings. Many people feel and think this way after a loss. These are all common reactions. If they are really bothering you, it helps to talk to someone about how you are thinking and feeling.
   
   a. How did you feel when you first heard the news?
   b. Where in your body do you feel this stress the most?
   c. Did anyone have trouble eating? Sleeping last night?

4. **Identify appropriate behavior:** When you have felt upset in the past, what kinds of things have you done to feel better? What have you seen other people do to help themselves? Here are a few suggestions:

   a. Drink lots of water- the body produces cortisol during times of stress which is a chemical that can make you feel sad. Water helps to flush it out of your body.
   b. Concentrate on what comforts you- maybe eating a special food or having something warm and soft like special blanket or sweater. Also getting lots of hugs and kisses from parents, grandparents,
sisters, brothers, and even pets! Who will you hug? What is your comfort food?

c. Exercise- getting up and moving can help. What kinds of exercise makes you feel happy?

d. Rest- sometimes watching T.V., listening to music or quietly reading a book can be a nice way to relax when you are stressed. What tips can you tell your classmates to help feel safe and cozy when going to bed tonight?

e. Give yourself permission to be happy and do all the things that make your feel better. Play at recess. It’s ok to laugh- smile- eat your lunch today…sadness comes in waves so sometimes you might not be thinking of the loss. It’s all part of the healing process.

f. Remembering the person who died- Share some good memories of ________. Tell me what they were like.

5. **Complete the heart activity**: My Many Colored Days” by Dr. Seuss

   a. Have an adult read the book
   b. Ask what feelings students associate with different colors. Tell them the colors one person thinks of might be different from someone else’s.
   c. Write feelings words on board and encourage them to assign their own colors.
   d. Pass out “My Many Colored Days” worksheet. Ask students to make a legend of colors and feeling words. Color in the parts of the heart to represent how much of that emotion is present in their heart today. Some colors may be small, others may dominate the heart.
   e. Ask students to share their colors and feelings as everyone is working.

6. **Conclude discussion**: Are there any questions before we end? If at any time during the next several days you want to talk to someone, please let a teacher know. If you need more time before your class resumes it’s regular schedule right now, please feel free to come with us and talk some more. Remember, we are all here because we care about you. Please let us know how we can help.

Adapted from the concept of “heartmapping” detailed in the book by Georgia Heard; “Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School”