



RESPONDING TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT

A detailed guide



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This document is intended to support a GAA unit in dealing with a critical incident. It is to be utilised as a reference guide and ideally will be augmented by a Club or County Critical Incident Response Plan (although it is recognised that not all units will have one of these in place before a critical incident occurs.)

A critical incident – something that overwhelms our natural ability to respond – may visit your club at any time. Having a plan in place can help your club respond to the best of its ability while ensuring that those managing the response and those impacted by the incident are supported appropriately.

No two critical incidents are identical. Considerations including whether it took place on GAA grounds or happened during official club activity will determine the degree of involvement of your club/county in managing the response.

Your club may be one of several entities playing a part in responding to a critical incident, as the diagram below indicates. It also highlights the importance of having the individuals and family/families most directly impacted at the centre of all plans/decisions.

Some potential entities involved a community-based response to a critical incident.



If your club has been impacted by a critical incident here are some things to consider as part of your response:

FIRST STEPS

- Call a meeting of club executive or sub-group handling the response (Please note: a volunteer should not feel obliged to be part of the response team, especially if closely impacted by the incident themselves).
- Contact your County Health & Wellbeing Committee, or your county chairperson/secretary for support. (If necessary, the county structure will notify Croke Park/national level of your association for additional guidance/support).
- Nominate one person to liaise directly with the impacted family or families (preferably someone in the club known to them).
- Keep a basic log of events including timelines, details of the incident, and actions taken (see sample template: <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/community-personal-development/cirp-training>). This could be important should any subsequent inquiry take place which could range from an internal club review to a formal/coroner's inquiry, depending on the nature of the incident.

TEAM GATHERING

- If a squad or squads have been impacted by a sudden death or death by suspected suicide, many clubs find it beneficial to bring the group together in the clubhouse in the 24-48 hours after the incident.
- This offers the squad, mentors, and executive an opportunity to connect, reflect on what has happened, agree next steps, support each other and identify any additional support available.
- If the situation involves a loss of life such a gathering also helps people share in their grief and fill some of the vacuum before the funeral. The use of a clubhouse offers a safe and familiar setting, away from alcohol, where emotions can be expressed without judgement.
- It is normal for people impacted by a critical incident to experience a broad range of emotional reactions (see information sheet on Normal Responses to Abnormal Incidents here: <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/community-personal-development/cirp-training>). Should anyone struggle to come to terms with the trauma they may have experienced, their GP should be their first port of call.

WHAT SUPPORTS ARE RECOMMENDED?

- In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, the emotional and psychological support provided by those closest to us is the most effective i.e. one's family, club, community, coaches, friends, and peers. Providing professional counselling is not recommended in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident but may be appropriate at a later stage to support the recovery for anyone struggling to readjust.
- If you receive requests to provide professional counselling support for any club member(s) we suggest you connect with your County Health & Wellbeing Committee or the Community & Health department in Croke Park to assist you in determining appropriate next steps (via community.health@gaa.ie).



- A club can also signpost individuals to their GP, the medical professional best placed to identify suitable additional supports, which may include counselling.
- Each community/county will have agencies/community groups that may be called upon for support during or after critical incidents. Liaise with local agencies or services if required.

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE

Some people are more vulnerable than others. Watch out for those who are demonstrating difficulty moving on in the weeks following the critical incident. Signs may include:

- withdrawal
- loss of interest in sport/college/work
- expressing a sense of hopelessness

If you are concerned about anyone, please check in with them. Ask how they are feeling and if they would like some professional support. If they would, link them with their GP (speak first with their parent/guardian if they are a juvenile).

MEDIA MANAGEMENT

- To ensure consistency of message only one club representative should deal with media enquiries (e.g. club chair/secretary/PRO).
- While clubs are under no obligation to speak to the media, co-operation can make the difference between accurate and inaccurate reporting.
- Media should not be permitted on club property without the prior approval of the executive. This applies to television, radio, print media and photographers.
- A club can issue a statement on its website/social media and then direct all media inquiries to it (saving the need to engage repeatedly with media enquiries).
- If a club would rather not deal with any media enquiries (as has been the case in some very high-profile incidents) this responsibility can be passed on to county level, or National Level Association .

SOCIAL MEDIA ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Ensure that the family's wishes are respected at all times. In cases of loss of life, clubs should refrain from posting details on social media until an official death notice has been released (e.g. on RIP.ie). This helps ensure that all relatives (those living abroad etc.) are informed first.
- Once a death notice is released, clubs may share this along with their condolences across their social media channels.
- While clubs may share a photo of the deceased in conjunction with the above notification, it is not recommended to change club social media Profile Photos and Cover Photos to that of the deceased (as you then need to make the difficult decision when to remove that photo and if a precedent is set will this have to be done for all club members who die subsequently?)

- Care needs to be taken when reporting on suspected suicide as research shows that certain types of media depictions, such as explicitly describing a method, sensational and excessive reporting, can lead to imitational suicidal behaviour among vulnerable people.
- If the death is a suspected suicide, the club may share details of the general supports that are available to club and community members (e.g. Samaritan's helpline 116-123) without commenting/speculating on the cause of the death.

NORMAL CLUB ROUTINE

- It is advised that clubs and counties maintain as many scheduled activities as practical in the aftermath of any critical incident, including a sudden death/suspected suicide.
- Should postponements be unavoidable it is recommended that normal routine is restored as soon as possible, including training and match schedules. Regular and open communication about returning to training/matches should be maintained with those most closely impacted – including bereaved families.
- While motivation and morale may be understandably low among those most closely impacted, training and matches provide a reassuring structure and routine as well as access to trusted support networks during uncertain times.
- Before returning to formal training or competitive matches an informal kick or puck-about can provide an opportunity to release some of the physical and emotional tension and stress brought on by a critical incident, while easing players back onto the field of play.
- Naturally, individuals should be allowed to return at their own pace.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

GUARDS OF HONOUR

- A guard of honour may be requested by a family or may form part of the club's plans surrounding a funeral. If juveniles are to participate, they should be supported by adults, with a parent/guardian standing with them or members of an adult team alternately placed between them.
- Participating in any guard of honour should always be optional and at the discretion of an individual or parent/guardian.

VIGILS

A public vigil can offer the wider community an opportunity to show support and solidarity with a club /family that has been bereaved through a critical incident. However, they can also bring some challenges. Please consider the following before deciding to hold/ announce one publicly:

- The burden of managing a vigil can prove stressful for club officers and volunteers during an already emotional and exhausting time
- They can attract significant media attention, some of which may be intrusive/unwanted
- Vigils can be highly emotional experiences for some people
- Will it set a precedent in the club – will vigils be held following all subsequent tragic death?

MEMORIALS

While memorials are a common way of paying respect to a lost loved one, they also bring with them some considerations:

- If a physical memorial (photo with candles, etc.) is placed on club grounds when is an appropriate time for its removal? Will the family be consulted on this?
- The retiring of a jersey may be appropriate for the first match back were a player to have lost his/her life, however, anything beyond that timeframe can bring challenges.

The wishes of the bereaved family should always be taken into consideration. We should also be mindful of different religious faiths and accepted practices.

See here for more advice on memorials/vigils:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/advice-communities-groups-and-schools-public-memorials-following-sudden-death>

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Finally, be mindful of your own wellbeing – managing a critical incident (particularly one relating to suicide) is not easy or part of your volunteer role description. Also, it is challenging in difficult times to be the one that people in the community and club are turning to for guidance and direction. This is particularly true as club officers and mentors are likely to also be personally impacted by any incident that visits a club.

It takes energy to support and guide the club during a critical incident so it is important that you:

- Take time for yourself
- Acknowledge your feelings
- Be gentle with yourself
- Allow yourself to grieve
- Accept that you won't have all the answers and know that it's ok to communicate that
- Take advantage of the supports available

For further information on the GAA's Critical Incident Resources, please see: <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/community-personal-development/cirp-training>



WHERE WE ALL BELONG