



*Mental Health for All:
Supporting Students and
Financial Aid Staff*


Jess Graham, FAAC®, Assistant Director,
University of Iowa

IASFAA Spring 2026

1

Grounds Rules

- Share the message, not the messenger.
 - It is ok to share what you learned in this session! But please do not share names or other personal identifiers
- Listen to understand, not to respond.
- Ask questions! Approach the topic with curiosity.
- Attendees have the right to “pass” on activities/questions.
- **Any other ground rules to add to ensure a safe discussion?**




IASFAA SPRING 2026

2

Who is Jess?

- Assistant Director, Service Operations and Outreach (University of Iowa)
 - Supervisor to student employees!
 - Started in financial aid in 2019 as a work-study student
- Not a licensed mental health professional
 - Social Work B.A., Trauma-Informed Perspectives Certificate
 - Experience in Crisis Intervention
- Mental Health Advocate with lived experience :)




IASFAA SPRING 2026

3

Who is in the Room?



- Name
- Institution and State
- Years in Financial Aid
- Tell us about a memory of working with a student in distress(30-45 seconds)



4

Think, Pair, Share


- What were your strategies for helping the student become grounded?
- What would you have maybe done differently?
- What do you think went especially well?
- What skill(s) do you wish you would have been equipped with at that time?
- Were there resources that you offered to the student?
- Did you do anything to take care of yourself after this interaction?
 - If so, what?
 - If not, why not?

5

Working with Students in Distress

- Where is student mental health showing up in your work?
 - Appeals?
 - General advising appointments?
- When/why are you seeing students that are in distress?
 - Unable to pay rent?
 - Unable to register because of a bill balance?
 - Trying to manage a high bill balance?
 - Basic needs aren't being met?



6

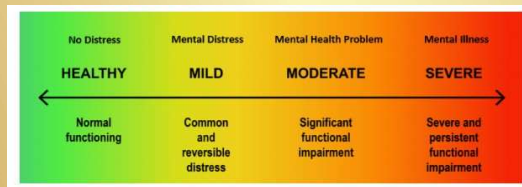
What Does It Mean To Be in Distress?

- Merriam-Webster definition:
 - (noun) – Pain or suffering affecting the body, a bodily part, or the mind
 - (verb) – To cause worry or be troubled
- **“An emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or unable to cope”.**
- Distress is often short and less intense
 - Mental illnesses are typically more persistent and pervasive
- May be a predictable response to life events (loss, trauma, stress), whereas mental illness may occur with or without such triggers and maybe out of proportion



7

What Does It Mean To Be in Distress?



Mental Health Continuum



8

What Does It Mean To Be in Distress?

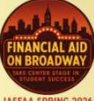
- How do you know when a student is in distress?
 - Signs/symptoms
 - Changes in physical appearance
 - Changes in mood
 - Change in behavior
 - Change in how thoughts are expressed
 - If you think it's odd, it is!



9

Basic Skills

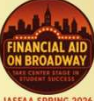
- **Unconditional Positive Regard**
- Active Listening
 - Be a parrot! Listen and reflect what you are hearing
 - "Is there anything I'm missing or misunderstanding?"
- Language matters
 - "Tell me more about that"
 - Clearly communicate – be simple, direct, and avoid jargon
 - Thank them for sharing with you!
- Boundary Setting
 - When to refer students to another resource
 - When to consult with another resource
- Environment



10

Know Your Resources



- **Campus resources for students at Iowa**
 - University Counseling Services
 - Student Care and Assistance
 - UI Student Wellness – Intro to Mindfulness
- What resources are on your campus?



11

Staff Mental Health and Well-Being


- **Burnout and Compassion Fatigue**
 - What is it?
 - When you hear the word burnout , what comes to mind?
 - What causes burn out and compassion fatigue?
 - How are they different?
 - The same?
 - How do you personally know when you're starting to feel burnt out?

12

Burnout vs. Compassion Fatigue

- **Burnout:**
 - Resulting from chronic workplace stress
 - Exhaustion (physical), mental distance/disconnection from one's job, and reduced professional efficacy
- **Compassion Fatigue:**
 - "Cost of caring" - common emotional experience for those in helping roles
 - Exhaustion (emotional), helplessness or overwhelmed when working with students
- Both can impact those that work in helping roles




https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases

IASFAA SPRING 2026

13

Know Your Resources


- **Resources for employees**
 - UI Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
 - Short-term counseling
 - Grief and mourning support group
 - UI Wellness
 - Managing Stress and Mindfulness
 - Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction
 - Campus trainings/workshops
 - Mental Health First Aid
 - Kognito
 - UI OSFA = big fans of Dr. Barry Schreier
- Any other resources you currently tap into?




IASFAA SPRING 2026

14

Self-Care



Putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others





IASFAA SPRING 2026

15

Self-Care


- Self-care is..
 - Ongoing, fluid process
 - Practiced intentionally and proactively rather than reactively
 - Eat lunch away from your desk
 - Plan to use your vacation time in advance
- Self-care at home
 - How do you restore your energy outside of work?
- Self-care in the office
 - How do you usually cope in the moment when you are at work?
 - Are there things you can do office wide to encourage or promote self-care in the workplace?
 - UI examples!

16

Food For Thought

- Reflection prompts:
 - What is one thing you do that restores your energy outside of work?
 - What's one boundary you could set this semester to preserve your own well-being?
 - What signals do you notice when you're starting to feel burn out?
 - When was the last time you noticed you "took work home with you" emotionally?
 - What's one situation with a student that has stuck with you longer than you expected? Why?
 - How do you usually cope in the moment when you feel overwhelmed at work?
 - What's one "non-negotiable" for your well-being you want to commit to this semester?
 - Do you have someone you can turn to for support in your office or on campus?



17

Resources


Canadian Medical Association. (2020, December 8). *Compassion fatigue: Signs, symptoms, and how to cope*. Physician Wellness Hub. <https://www.cma.ca/physician-wellness-hub/content/compassion-fatigue-signs-symptoms-and-how-cope>

Noor, A. M., et al. (2025). *Compassion fatigue in helping professions: A scoping review*. PMC. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11980338/>

Open Text BC. (n.d.). *The language of mental health*. In *Starting a conversation about mental health*. <https://opentextbc.ca/studentmentalhealth/chapter/the-language-of-mental-health/>

Wittenhagen, L. (2024). *The concept of distress — widely used but what does it mean?* Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15555240.2024.2356799>

World Health Organization. (2019, May 28). *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International classification of diseases*. <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>



18

Questions? Comments?



Connect with me!
Email: jessica-graham@uiowa.edu
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/jess-graham-ui2021/



IASFAA SPRING 2024
