

# CampUS

The official newsletter of the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health's Higher Education Program



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Published by Hannah Dake

## Ending the Year on a High(er Education) Note

Happy December Iowa Higher Ed Colleagues! The 2nd edition of the monthly mental health and well-being newsletter, "CampUS" for all of us working on Iowa campuses, is here.

Each month we share current talk from the national campus mental health community. This month we offer a deconstruction of the ever-present "campus mental health crisis" under whose weight we all work as well as a practical skills video.

We also provide a platform to elevate the people behind the work in our Higher Edge Spotlight and introduce "Innovation Station." Please consider submitting examples of the work on your campus for us to feature. And lastly, we always want to offer you and your campus the services of the Higher Education Program in the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health.

Hope "CampUS" continues to prove useful! Please read and send to others on your campus! We will publish again in February, so best wishes on finishing the semester and for a break of replenishment and well-being!

*Barry A. Schreier, Monnee' Turner & Kun Wang*

# Deconstructing the Mental Health Crisis Narrative

## Mental Health for Higher Ed in Iowa Story

Campus mental health is dominated by the narrative of crisis, painting a dire picture of rampant and ever-increasing anxiety and depression among students. This unidimensional portrayal does not capture the entire spectrum of student experiences, especially student resilience and capacity to thrive in the face of ongoing threat, ambiguity, and adversity. It is time to deconstruct the singular “campus on fire” narrative and consider more complex and nuanced understandings of campus mental health.

Let’s define our focus. We hear of epidemic levels of anxiety and depression. What we know, however, is that student emotion falls across a continuum. The gauge below provides the various positions students can be emotionally:

**Stress =** Upset feelings in response to challenges that require attention and effort.

*“I am feeling overwhelmed because I have a big project due tomorrow.”*

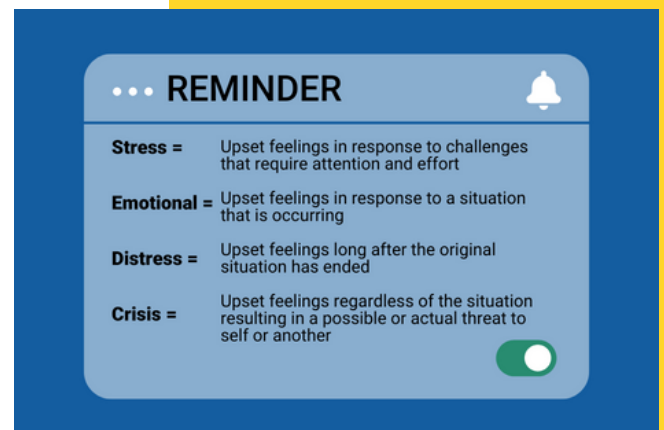
**Emotionality =** Upset feelings in response to a situation that is occurring.

*“I am really upset and sad because I just found out I got bad grades this semester.”*

**Distress (where anxiety and depression locate) =**

Upset feelings long after the original situation has ended.

**Crisis =** Upset feelings regardless of the situation that result in possible or actual threat to self or another.



*“I got bad reviews at work. I never do well. It’s not worth trying anymore. I have been so angry and disappointed with myself these past months.”*

*“I give up. I see no purpose or point. I don’t care anymore. This is the end.”*

## Mental Health for Higher Ed in Iowa Story Cont.

While some students live episodically or chronically managing symptoms of diagnosable anxiety and depression, the majority of our students in the majority of situations are managing stress and emotionality. Being upset about upsetting things is not a mental health crisis it is a reasonable response to unreasonable things.

It is crucial to acknowledge external factors that contribute to students' emotionality. The current moment is fraught with a global pandemic, political turbulence, wars, and bottomless digital age challenges. While these factors exacerbate emotionality, they do not necessarily translate into a surge of clinical mental health problems like depression and anxiety. One can feel stress about stressful things without having diagnosable anxiety. Likewise, one can feel sadness about sad things and not have diagnosable depression.

As Denison University President, Adam Weinberg stated, "We need to assure students that mental health challenges are not a personal failing but a reasonable response to a challenging historical moment" (Weinberg, 2022). The assumption that emotional responses to external stressors invariably are mental health crises does not support the complex interplay between students' individual grit and resilience and the impact of environmental factors beyond most students' control.



Adam Weinberg, Photo Credit: Denison University

Contrary to the crisis-centric view, research (Volstad et al., 2020) indicates that a significant portion of the student population adapts and copes with the transitions and stressors that are part and parcel of campus life. While it's undeniable that mental health issues exist and must be addressed, most students are successfully navigating these challenges.

The need for a balanced perspective on mental health that acknowledges both challenges and successes is vital. How we frame the current emotional temperature on campus impacts how our students frame this for themselves. The New York Times (Saxbe, 2023) noted that what can be considered "problems of living," or "normative worries" have been reframed for America's adolescents as "mental health crises." Saxbe quotes Dr. Lucy Foulkes, an Oxford University psychologist, who noted that framing the struggles of life as mental health crises has dictated how "people view themselves in ways that become self-fulfilling" and "encourages people to view everyday challenges as insurmountable."



## Mental Health for Higher Ed in Iowa Story Cont.

### Empowering Students to Flourish

The National College Health Assessment (NCHA) (2023) publishes data annually noting that students struggle with significant mental health and well-being challenges, including distress-level concerns. The NCHA also publishes data noting that the majority of the same students also see themselves as flourishing, reminding us that even when we struggle, we can also be doing well.

By shifting the prevalent campus narrative to recognize the whole range of student experiences, we better frame more supportive and realistic conversations about mental health.

This involves adjusting our approaches to include empowerment, skill-building, and refilling regularly tapped wells of resilience. By doing so, we prepare students to manage the present and ongoing challenges of being in the world while proportionally supporting the foundational assumption that life has struggles.

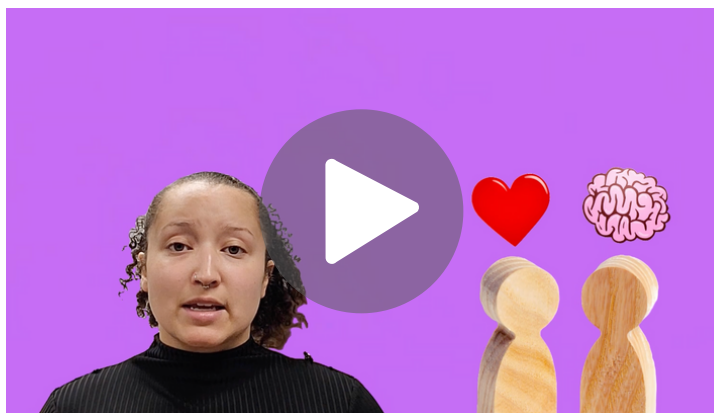
In deconstructing the campus mental health crisis narrative, we must stay mindful not to minimize student struggles and highlight their strengths and the positive steps many have taken towards their well-being. A balanced dialogue acknowledges inherent difficulties while celebrating growth and perseverance through adversity.

Our students are remarkable, let's remind them, expect this of them, and remember that bad things feel badly, and is okay. And when it does become distress, resources can provide support.



***How we frame the current emotional temperature on campus impacts how our students frame this for themselves.***

# Skills Video: Helping those who say “I don’t know.”



In this [video](#) just for faculty and staff, gain 4 actionable tips to better navigate those challenging moments when a student or colleague repeatedly responds to your help with "I don't know."

Take 2 minutes to watch, and leave feeling empowered to handle such situations and confidently support your students.

## Innovation Station

As part of “CampUS,” we will introduce a new section called the Innovation Station. Here we shine a spotlight on the incredible initiatives happening on our campuses dedicated to improving mental health and well-being.

The Innovation Station shares cutting-edge and inspiring stories demonstrating the innovative spirit of our campuses.

We invite you to join us in celebrating the noteworthy things we are doing to foster healthier campus environments. Please share your initiative, product, service, effort, or event on your campus that has made an impact on mental health and well-being.

 [Submit an Innovation Station Idea](#)



# The “Higher Edge” Spotlight: George Clark, Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC)

## 1. Please describe your role on campus.

My role on the DMACC campus is multifaceted—one-quarter of my time is spent teaching the first-year transitional course, “The College Experience.” This class helps traditional freshmen adapt and adjust to college life, understand the policies and procedures associated with DMACC, and the importance of mental and emotional well-being to academic success in higher education.

In addition to teaching four sections of The College Experience, grading related assignments, and providing students with respective office hours, the remainder of my time is earmarked for mental health counseling and facilitating ‘Counselor Workshops’ on loneliness and men’s mental health.



**George Clark, MA, LMHC**  
Counselor/SDV108 Faculty  
DMACC Student  
Development

## 2. How do you lead and interface with mental health and well-being across all areas of your campus?

First, we highlight the significance of emotional and mental health through our individual sections of The College Experience. We (\*six counselors at the DMACC Ankeny campus) often guest lecture in various classes, including but not limited to other first-year courses.

Second, I promote the essential role of mental health among various populations through serving on the Diversity Commission (DEI). Lastly, the counseling staff serve on DMACC’s Petition for Policy Waiver Committee which reviews student applications regarding academic difficulties associated with extenuating circumstances ranging from medical disabilities, personal hardship, military service, or the death of a loved one.



## The Higher Edge Spotlight: George Clark Cont.

### 3 Self-Care Strategies George Swears By

#### #1 Get Outside

Spend as much time in the outdoors and in nature as is possible. There is an abundance of research supporting the value of fresh air, vitamin D (from the sun!), and the soothing impact of natural sounds (e.g., birds, insects, wind, animals) on stress levels.

#### #2 Physical Exercise

Working out is our body's natural anti-depressant. I combine regular cardiovascular workouts with intermittent strength-training routines.

Now that I'm middle age, I recognize the correlation between muscular strength and my ability to successfully engage in outdoor activities I love like hiking, canoeing, and snowboarding.

#### #3 Fly Fishing

According to President Herbert Hoover: "To go fishing is the chance to wash one's soul with pure air, with the rush of the brook, or with the shimmer of sun on blue water." 'Nuff said.

### 3. Would you share a story where you were concerned about something or someone, and the steps you took that either helped and/or left you perhaps considering how you would do it differently next time?

When I was in grad school, I can remember being somewhat dismissive about Carl Rogers' belief that the therapeutic relationship (i.e., unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathy) in and of itself can give clients space for self-exploration, healing, and personal growth.

Approximately 10 years ago, one of my clients was engaging in self-harming behavior (cutting) to the extent that I was worried she might unintentionally take her life. Each week we processed her thoughts and behaviors—we considered alternatives as well as the importance of having a 'safety plan' with trustworthy individuals in whom she could confide.

Over the course of that semester, we traveled to the hospital on three occasions as she did not feel safe alone. We spent considerable time working through her childhood trauma and abuse.

I will always remember her expressing a huge sense of relief from simply disclosing this secret she'd carried for more than a decade. I think she was generally amazed that I didn't stand in judgment of her, that I created space for her to tell her story, and was vigilant about keeping her safe. Perhaps Walt Whitman said it best, "Be curious, not judgmental."

*"Be curious, not judgmental."*

-Walt Whitman

## The Higher Edge Spotlight: George Clark Cont.

### 4. Could you tell us about one high point and one low point in your work?

#### High Point:

The simple opportunity to be let into my clients' lives—the privilege to walk with individuals through their darkest times and help them come out the other side with renewed hope and insight.

#### Low Point:

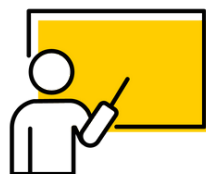
The recognition that despite my best efforts, some of my clients will remain 'stuck' and it ultimately has nothing to do with me (\*that's difficult to accept).

### 5. Is there something which you would like to normalize for others, where they may think they cannot share it or think it is only their struggle?

Being a counselor for 27 years has taught me an important lesson: Humility. It's okay to acknowledge you don't always have the answer(s) and to seek guidance and wisdom from colleagues. Isn't it ironic that we spend a considerable amount of time in consultation during grad school and then forgo the inherent value of consulting when we become "real" counselors.







# Bring a Workshop to Your Campus

## Working With Students in Distress Workshop

You are in your office thinking about an interaction with a student that leaves you troubled. Many things run through your mind: *Is this a big deal? Should I call someone about this? Can I help this student myself? Should I even get involved?*

For many students, personal matters have a profound effect on academic performance, and for that alone, such interactions are significant and a reason to be involved. These are complicated issues and getting involved can feel intimidating.

All one has to do is check the news to read about the “student mental health crisis.” Our students struggle with anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, thoughts of self-harm, physical illness, family problems, financial crises, and others. These can leave a student distressed and seeking your help.

The “Working with Students in Distress Workshop” is designed to help staff and faculty respond to students in distress. And, helping distressed students starts with understanding them. In this workshop, you’ll learn how to spot signs of distress, gain skills to handle difficult conversations with care and wisdom, and leave with the confidence to lend a hand when a student is struggling.



### Workshop Details



**A 60-90-minute, in-person workshop for staff & faculty**



**Requires AV for PowerPoint and video**



**Didactic and interactive with participants**



**Our team will come to you!**

For more information and to schedule your campus workshop, [submit an interest form](#):



**Submit a Workshop Interest Form**