



**University of Idaho**

College of Education,  
Health and Human Sciences

# **LOOKING INWARD: ACADEMIC ADVISORS' MENTAL HEALTH**

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# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

U of I Moscow is located on the homelands of the Nez Perce, Palouse, and Coeur d'Alene tribes. We extend gratitude to the Indigenous people who call this place home, since time immemorial. U of I recognizes that it is our academic responsibility to build relationships with Indigenous people to ensure the integrity of tribal voices.

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## Looking Inward: Academic Advisors' Mental Health

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We examined academic advisors' clinically significant symptoms of major depressive disorder (MDD) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), including whether there are statistically significant relationships between advisors' demographic characteristics, work-related variables, institutional variables, burnout, resilience, and risk of clinically significant MDD/GAD symptoms. We analyzed survey data of academic advisors collected from February to March 2023 ( $n = 777$ ) and found that 16.9% of advisors met the criteria for MDD while 29.6% met the criteria for GAD, rates higher than national averages. While there were some demographic differences, advisors who experienced higher rates of burnout had increased odds of experiencing MDD and GAD symptoms. In addition, advisors' resilience was associated with decreased odds of experiencing MDD and GAD symptoms.

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**KEY WORDS:** academic advisors, mental health, COVID-19 pandemic, burnout, resilience

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, college and university leaders adjusted operations to curb transmission of the virus in March 2020 (Cameron et al., 2021). While most colleges and universities have since resumed pre-pandemic levels of operations, the disruptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic left a lasting impact on higher education. The rapid changes which the pandemic unfolded, the swift changes in college and university operations, the uncertainty surrounding the virus's threat, and the significant loss of life coalesced into collective traumatic events akin to natural disasters (Copeland et al., 2021). Those collective traumatic events had deleterious effects on individuals' mental health (Magnavita et al., 2021); however, in the context of higher education, researchers

have predominantly focused on the mental health of college students during the pandemic while overlooking employees' mental health, leaving a substantial gap in the literature (Copeland et al., 2021; Soria & Horgos, 2021; Soria, Horgos et al., 2021; Soria, Kelling et al., 2022).

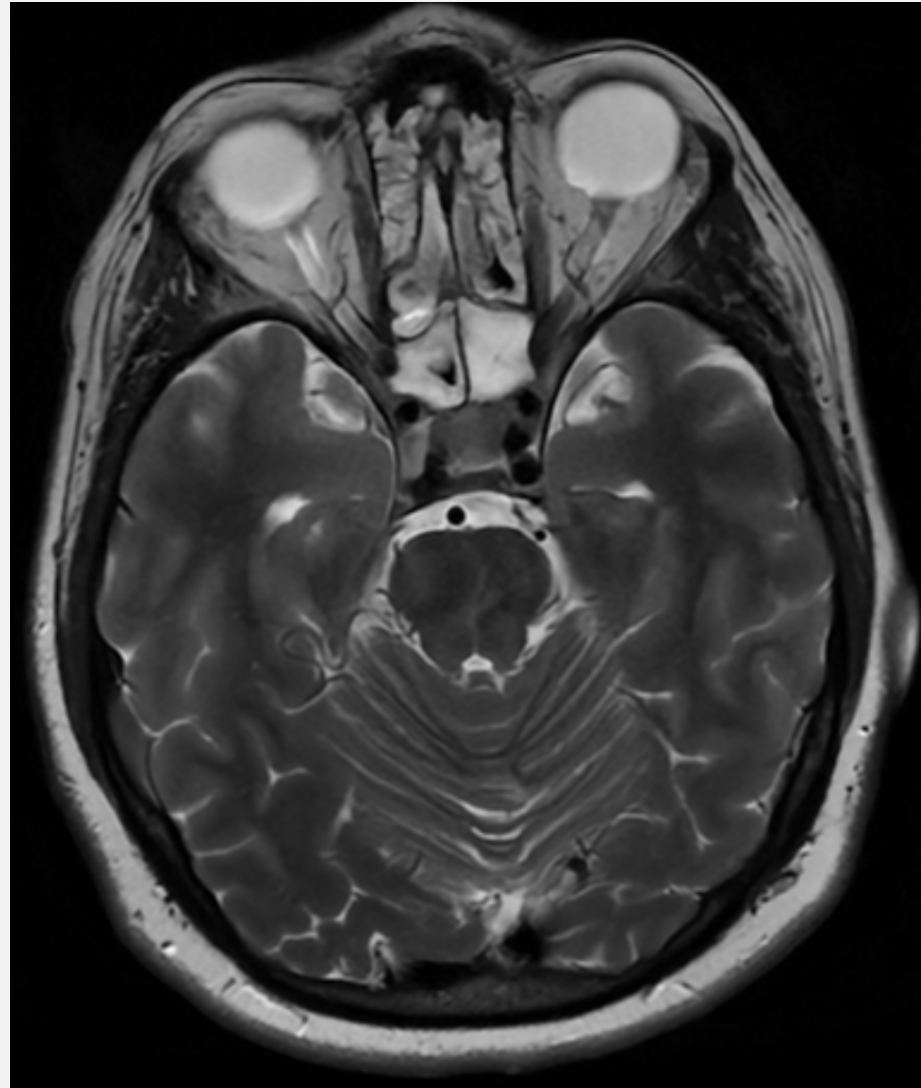
The COVID-19 policies added new stressors and burdens for academic advisors, such as navigating the uncertainties of the pandemic, addressing significant and pressing concerns from struggling students, managing increasing workloads, pivoting to new methods of communication, and balancing responsibilities while working from home and caring for others (Survase & Johnson, 2023; Turner & Farr, 2020). Such stressors contributed to advisors' burnout, a psychological syndrome that manifests after prolonged exposure to workplace stress (Maslach et al., 2001; Soria et al., 2023), and compromised advisors' resilience (i.e., their ability to bounce back after adversity; Soria, Boetcher et al., 2022). Elevated burnout and reduced resilience can increase depression or anxiety among academic advisors, thus diminishing their ability to effectively support students (Chiu et al., 2019; Sheerin et al., 2018). Academic advisors are indispensable in fostering college students' success (Drake, 2011; Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2013; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Museus, 2021; Tinto, 2006); consequently, it is imperative to prioritize academic advisors' mental health.

Improving mental health means first understanding the rates at which academic advisors experience major depressive disorder (MDD) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). The purpose of this study is to examine the frequency with which academic advisors experience MDD and GAD and whether additional variables may be associated with MDD or GAD symptoms. We sought to answer the following questions: What is the frequency with which academic advisors experience clinically significant rates of MDD

Thank you to the U of I students on the research team, the advisors who participated in the study, and the reviewers and editors of the *NACADA Journal*!

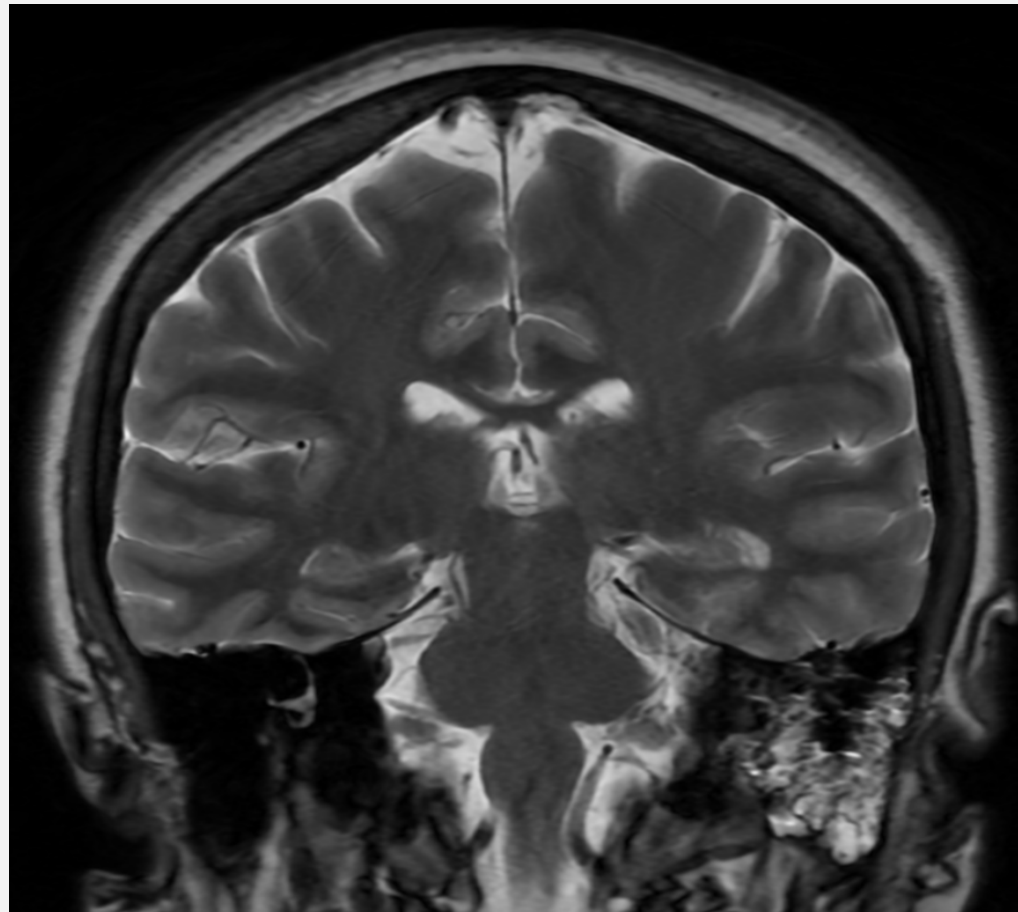


# COVID-19 PANDEMIC & HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS





# COVID-19 PANDEMIC & ACADEMIC ADVISORS



# COLLEGE EMPLOYEES' MENTAL HEALTH



Major depressive disorder (MDD)

- Mood disorder characterized by persistent depressed mood or hopelessness

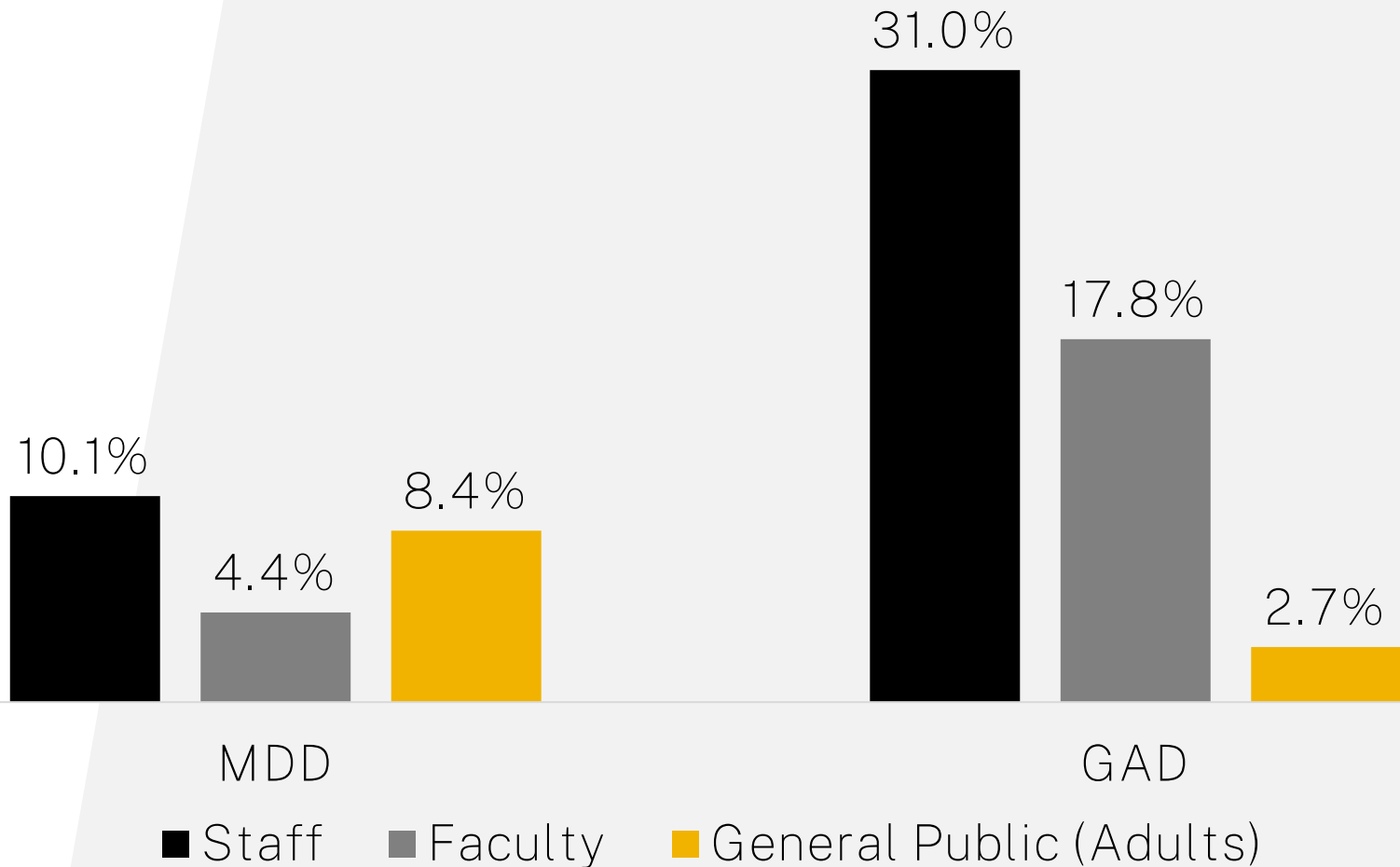


Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

- Anxiety disorder characterized by excessive and uncontrollable anxiety and worry



# MENTAL HEALTH AMONG EMPLOYEE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION & THE U.S.



(Mazurek Melnyk et al., 2021; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023a, 2023b)

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the frequency with which academic advisors experience clinically significant rates of MDD and GAD?
- Are academic advisors' demographic characteristics, work-related variables, institutional variables, burnout, and resilience associated with clinically significant MDD symptoms and GAD?

# METHODS: PROCEDURES

We\* surveyed 8,122 academic advisors at 1,300 2-year and 4-year institutions about their burnout, work-related experiences, advising-related variables (e.g., caseload), mental health, belonging, support, and turnover intentions

- 2,566 responded
- We arranged the items in different modules to reduce survey fatigue (~800 responded per module)
- We are disseminating the results through peer-reviewed publications and presentations

\*Thank you to U of I doctorate students: Elise Kokenge, Erin Standley, Jake Connley, Cassandra Heath, Aaron Agramon, Shannon Wilson, & Stacey Vakanski

# METHODS: SAMPLE

777 of the original respondents were randomly sampled to respond to items about mental health, burnout, and resilience

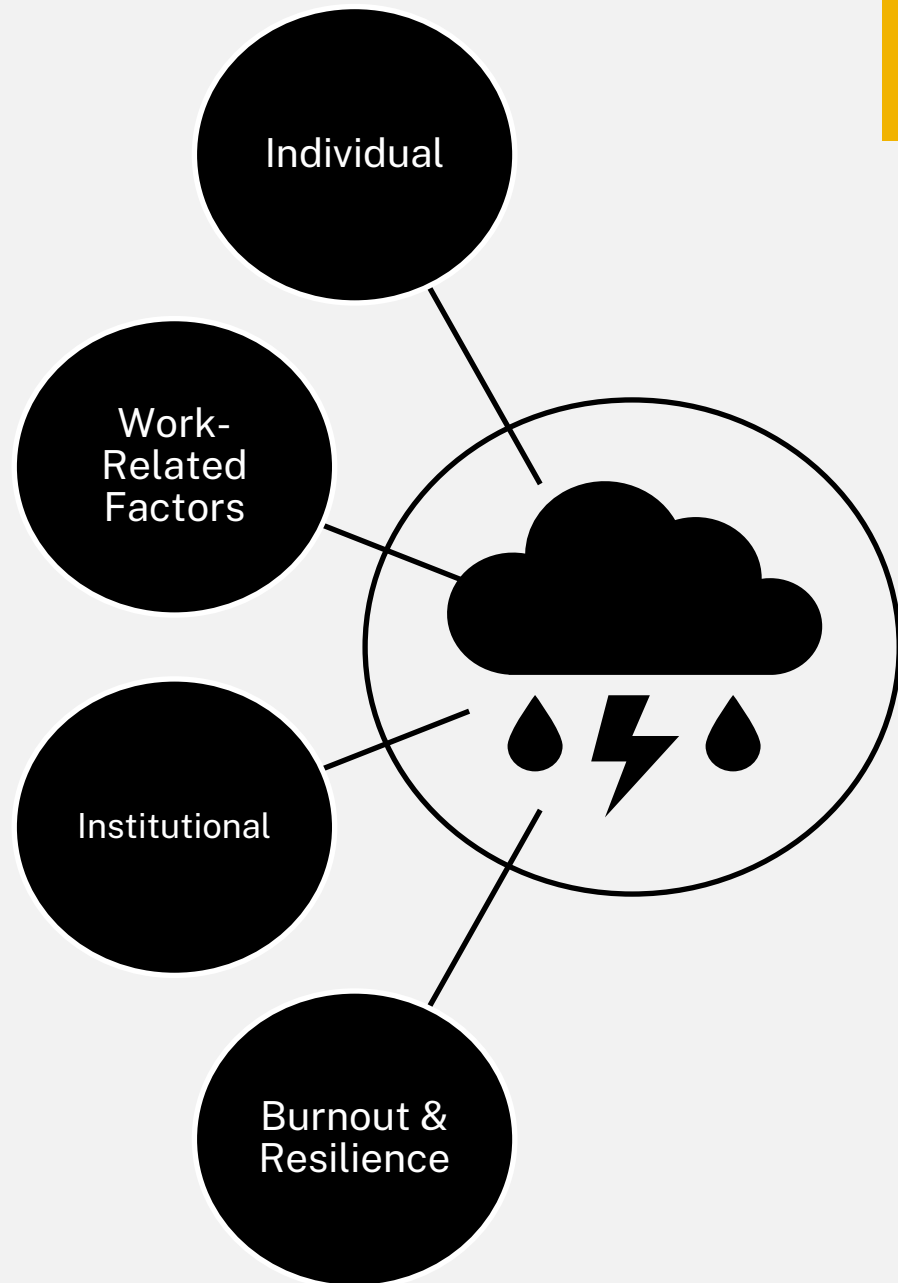
- 83.9% employed at public institutions
- 90.0% employed at 4-year institutions
- 75.9% cisgender women
- 77.5% White
- 92.7% do not have a disability
- 40.08 average age
- 74.3% master's degree
- 92.9% primarily advise undergraduates

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fink (2014) examined the role of individual, interpersonal, and institutional variables in college students' mental health—we extended the model by adding additional environmental and institutional variables.

Glover et al. (2020) proposed that inequitable COVID-19 policies generate(d) interactive and multiplicative harms upon individuals who were already marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised prior to the pandemic.

# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



# INDEPENDENT VARIABLES



Demographics: gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, education

Institutional: type, number of students enrolled, highest degree offered, locale

Advising-related: caseload (mean = 383.24), type of students advised, length of time employed (5+ years = 60.2%), satisfaction with salary (mean = 2.57, 1 = very unsatisfied to 5 = very satisfied)

# INDEPENDENT VARIABLES



Burnout: abbreviated Maslach's Burnout Inventory (Gabbe et al., 2002)

- Emotional exhaustion (e.g., I feel fatigued from I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job)
- Depersonalization or cynicism (e.g., I've become more callous toward people since I took this job)
- Personal accomplishment (e.g., I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work)

Resilience: abbreviated measure of resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003)

- e.g., I can deal with whatever comes my way

# DEPENDENT VARIABLES

PHQ-2 to measure MDD symptoms (16.9%)

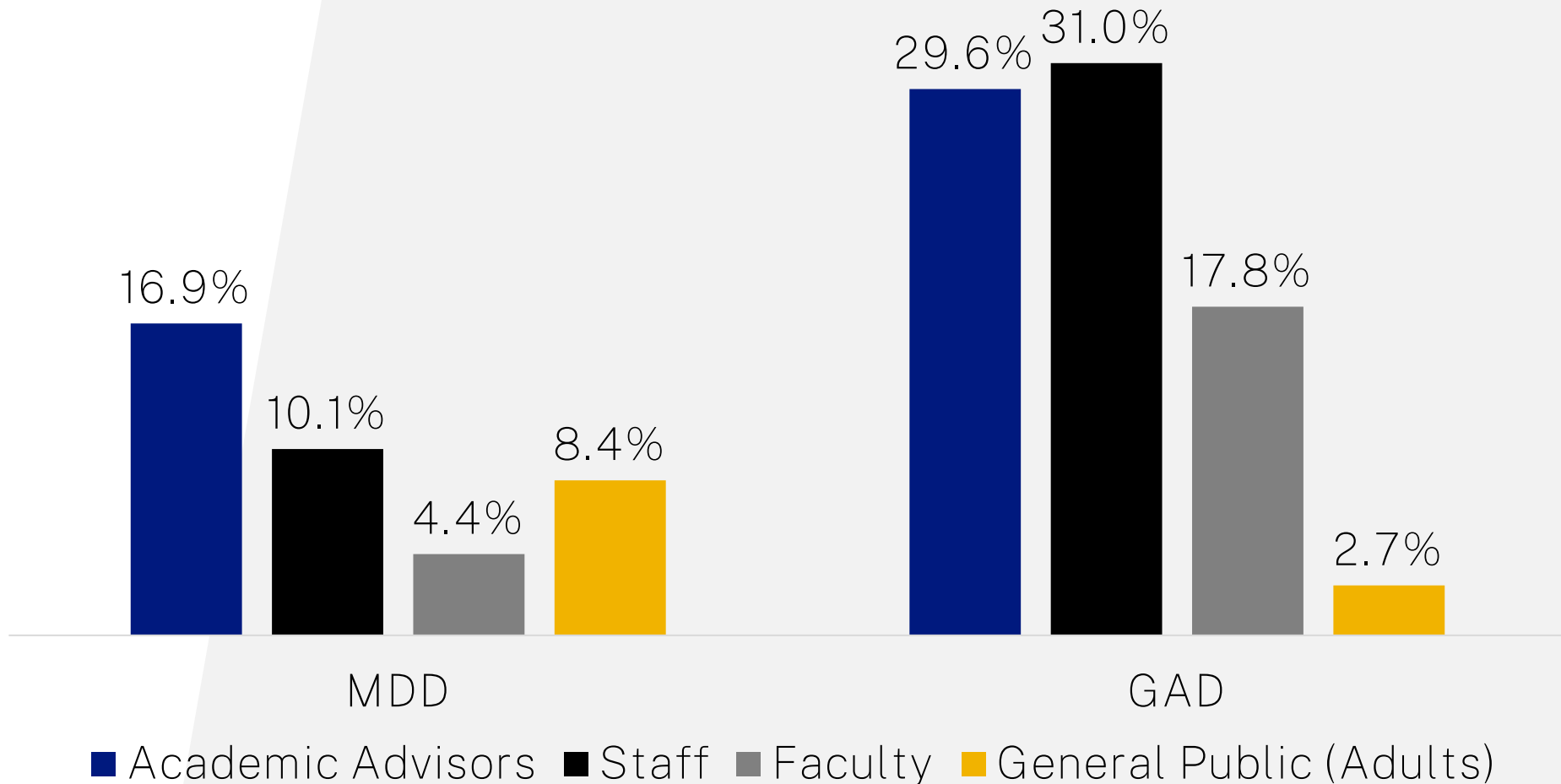
- e.g., how often during the past two weeks have you been bothered by the following problems?  
Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless

GAD-2 to measure GAD symptoms (29.6%)

- e.g., how often during the past two weeks have you been bothered by the following problems?  
Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge

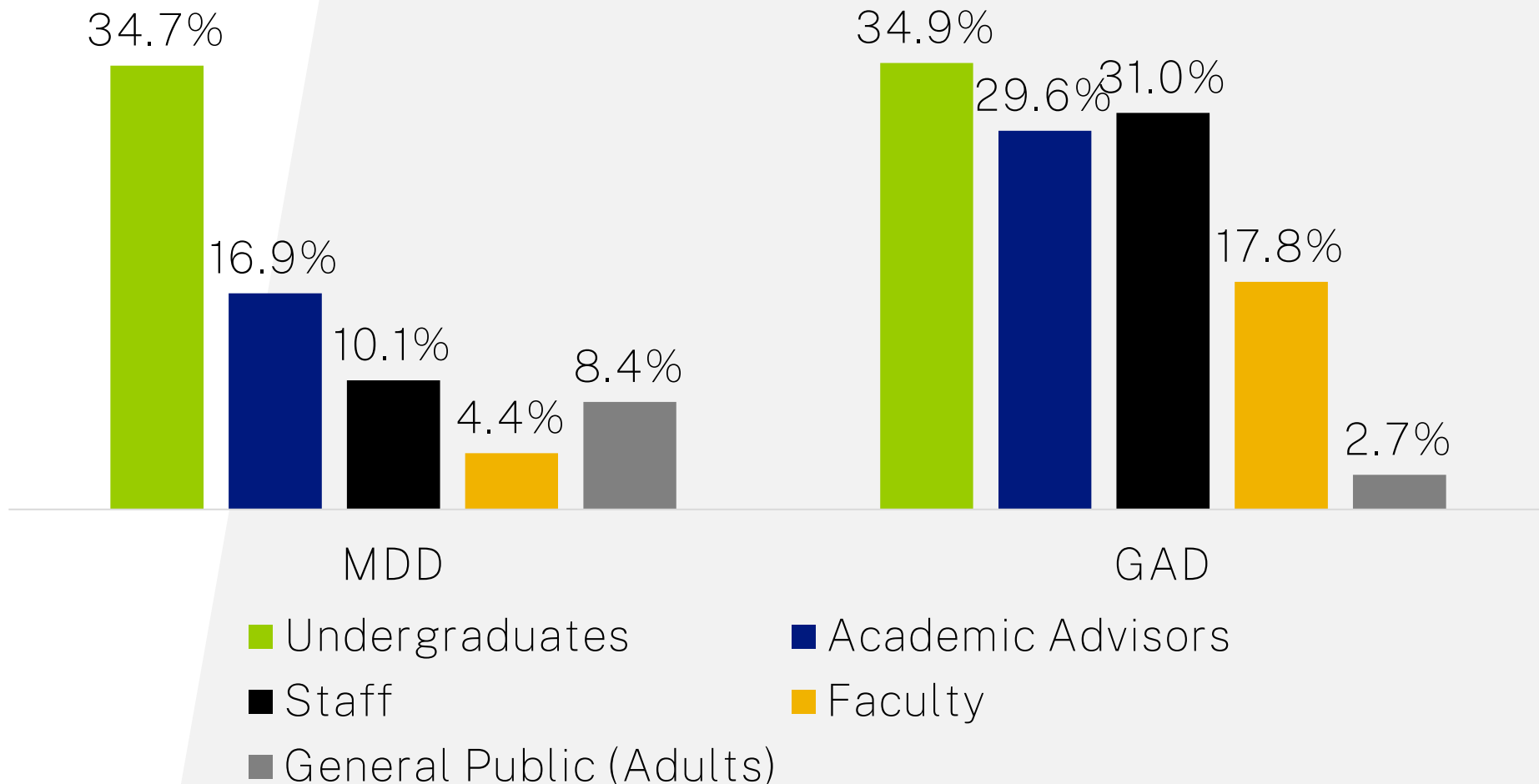


# MENTAL HEALTH AMONG EMPLOYEE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION & THE U.S.





# MENTAL HEALTH AMONG EMPLOYEE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION & THE U.S.



## RESULTS: MDD

Most demographic and institutional variables were not significantly associated with advisors' odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms

Compared to all other advisors,

- **Black or African American advisors** had significantly higher odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms
- **Advisors with doctorate degrees** had significantly lower odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms

## **RESULTS: MDD**

Most **work-related variables** were not significantly associated with advisors' odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms

**Salary satisfaction** was associated with significantly lower odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms

## **RESULTS: MDD**

**Burnout and resilience** were significantly associated with advisors' odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms

**Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization** were associated with significantly higher odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms

**Personal accomplishment and resilience** were associated with significantly lower odds of experiencing clinically significant MDD symptoms

## **RESULTS: GAD**

Most demographic and institutional variables were not significantly associated with advisors' odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms

Compared to all other advisors,

- **Genderqueer, nonbinary or transgender advisors and advisors who had a gender identity not listed on the survey** had significantly higher odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms

## RESULTS: GAD

Compared to all other advisors,

- **Heterosexual or straight advisors** had significantly lower odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms
- **White advisors and advisors who worked at public institutions** had significantly higher odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms

**Age** was also significantly associated with lower odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms

## **RESULTS: GAD**

**Burnout and resilience** were significantly associated with advisors' odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms

**Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization** were associated with significantly higher odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms

**Personal accomplishment and resilience** were associated with significantly lower odds of experiencing clinically significant GAD symptoms

# DISCUSSION

Some employees—Black or African American advisors, White advisors, younger advisors, advisors at public institutions, and genderqueer, nonbinary, transgender advisors—may be more likely to experience MDD or GAD compared to their colleagues.

Congruent with our conceptual framework and prior research, demographic variables are important to examine in mental health models because some individuals may have had disproportionately negative experiences during the pandemic that affected their mental health (Fink, 2014; Glover et al., 2020).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Reduce emotional exhaustion and cynicism

- Use trauma-informed approaches in the workplace
- Build community and support
- Share power and promote advisors' autonomy

Increase personal accomplishment and resilience

- Dedicate time and space for advisors to engage in advisor support groups and professional development
- Control (personal resources to respond to adversity), coherence (making sense of experiences), and connectedness (social bonds to help with coping during adversity; Friis-Healy et al., 2022)

# **FINALLY**



You matter.

You inspire others.

You are important.

You make a difference.



# THANK YOU!

Any questions?

Please contact me anytime:

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