

Graduate Student Mental Health Focus of Psychosocial Wellness

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Outline

- Clinical impressions
- Defining psychological well-being
- Preliminary findings from the Mental Health and Counselling Benchmark Study
- Responding to distress

Clinical impressions

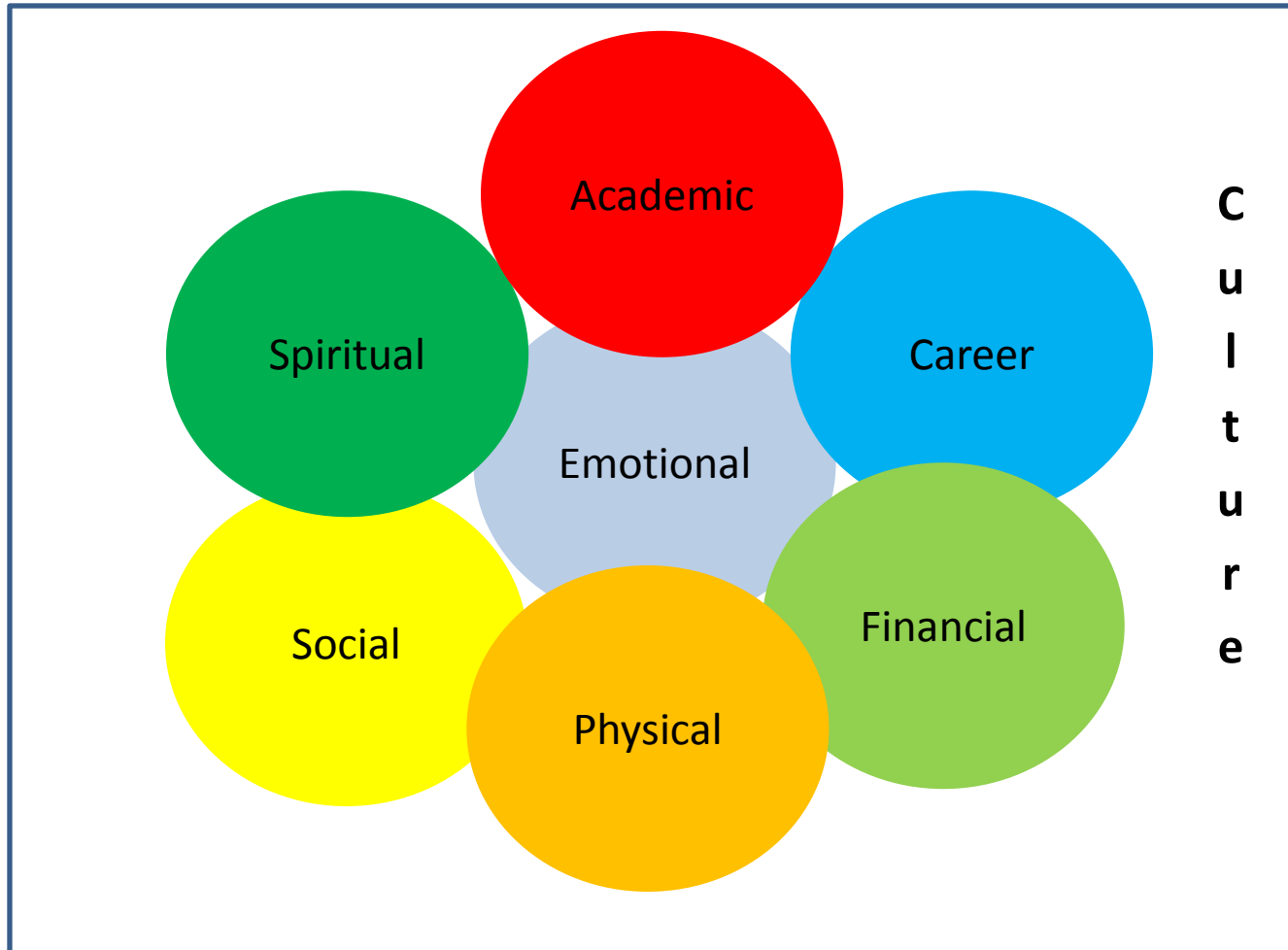
- Is there an increase in the severity & complexity of psychological issues?
- McGill clinical impressions
 - More seeking services (30% increase over 5 years)
 - Problems more complex and severe
- American research indicates...
 - Increase of level of severity of psychological concerns
 - Increase in demand for Counseling Services (MIT 50%; Columbia 40% increase in 10 years)

Our working definition of psychological well-being:

- *“The capacities of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face.*
- *It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual wellbeing that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity”*

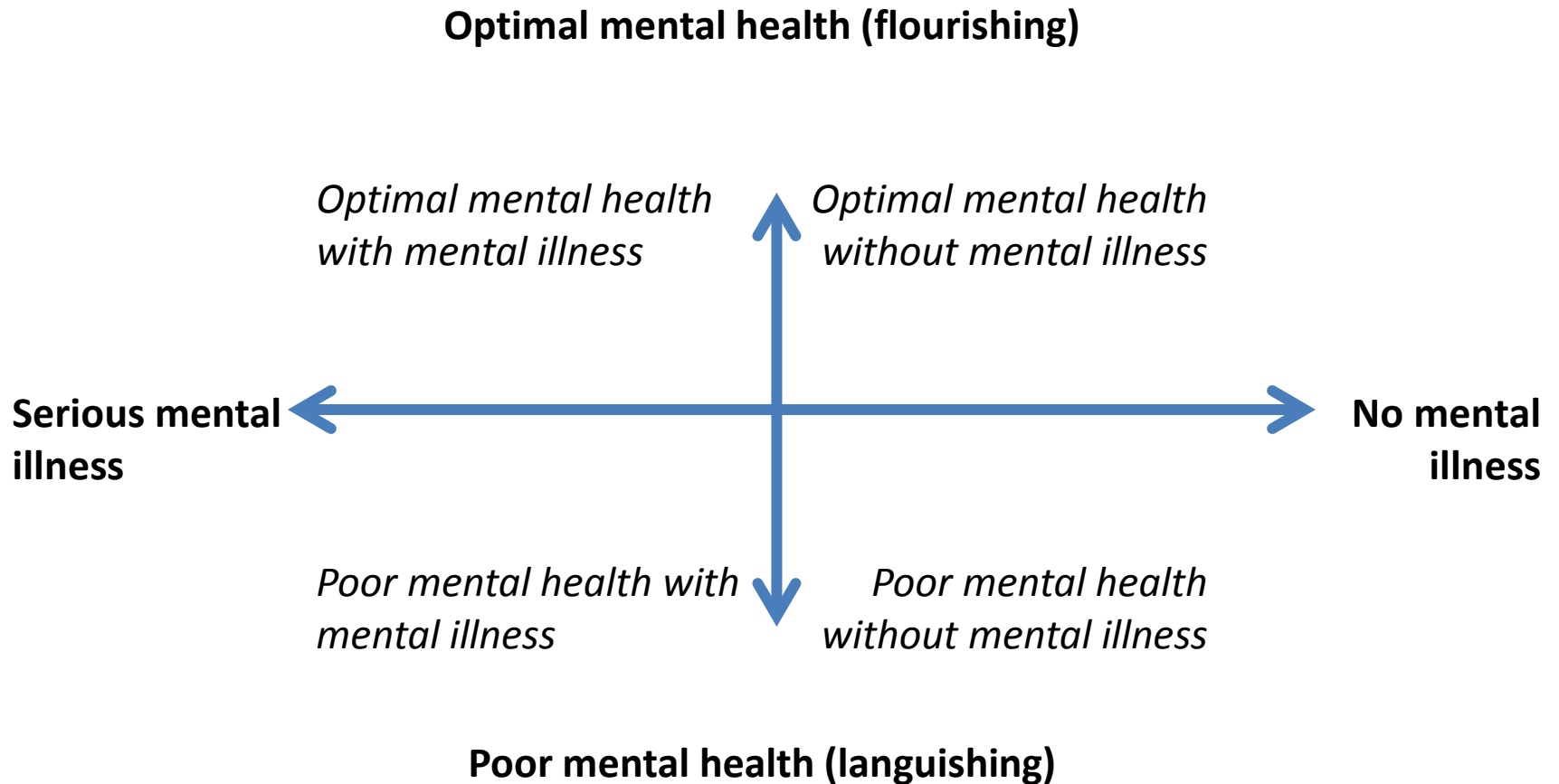
(Public Health Agency of Canada)

Ecological model of well-being



Adapted from Laverick (2004)

Dual continuum model of mental health & illness



Keyes (2002)

How do we better support graduate student success and well-being at McGill?

- What's out there?
- McGill Counselling Service was looking for a way to better understand the psychological experiences of our student body

Mental Health and Counselling Benchmark Study

- Gives us information about the general student body's psychological well-being (not just the students seen by our services)
- Psychometrically reliable assessment tool intended to meet clinical, research and administrative needs of psychological service centres
- Comprehensive survey with 62 core questions (8 subscales)
- Additional questions about trauma, suicide, social support, and student engagement indices

Mental Health and Counselling Benchmark Study

Subscales

Depression

Generalized Anxiety

Social Anxiety

Academic Distress

Eating Concerns

Family Distress

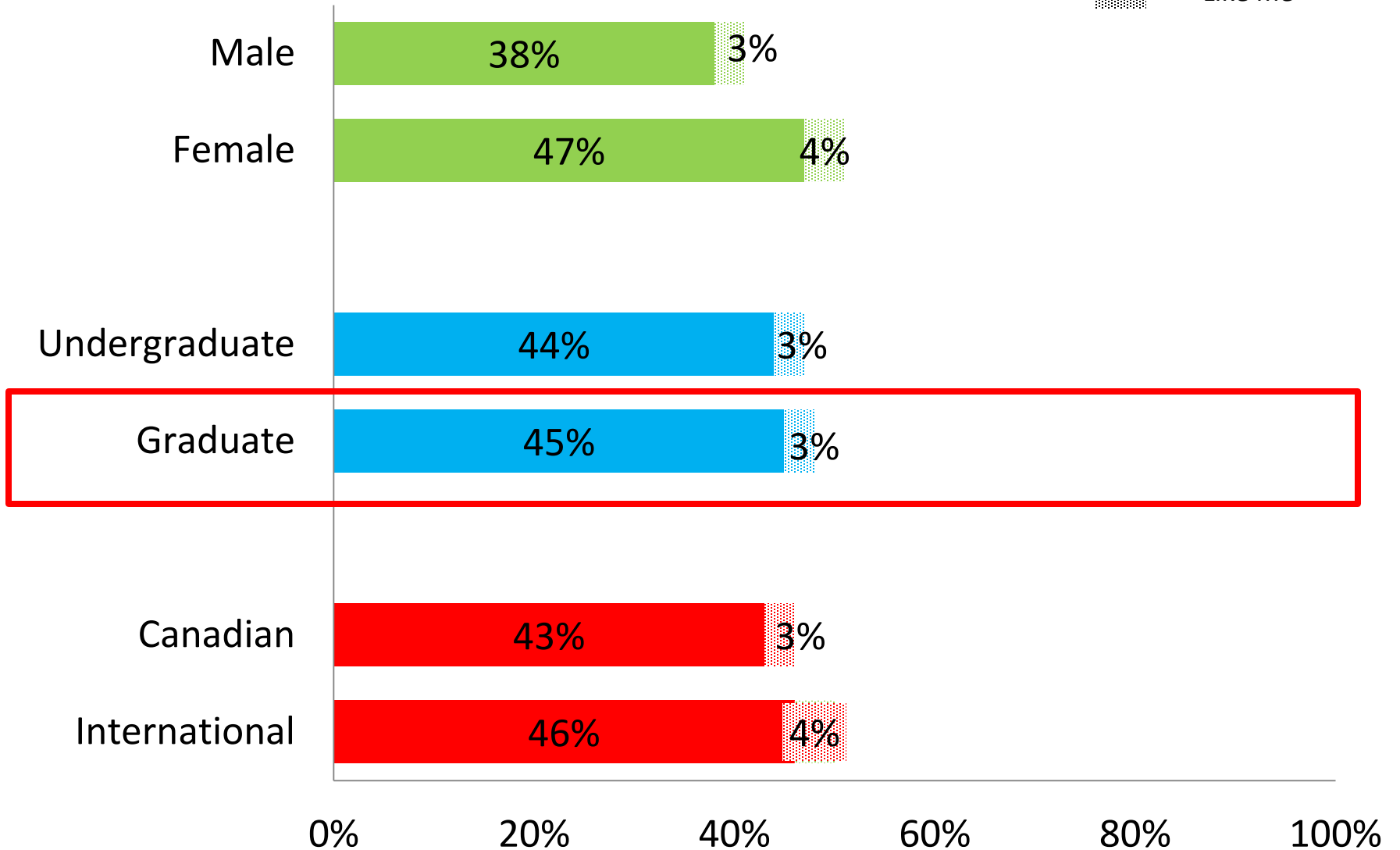
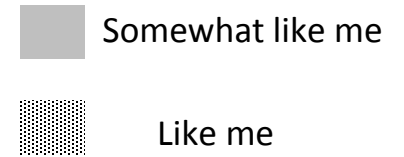
Substance / Alcohol Use

Hostility

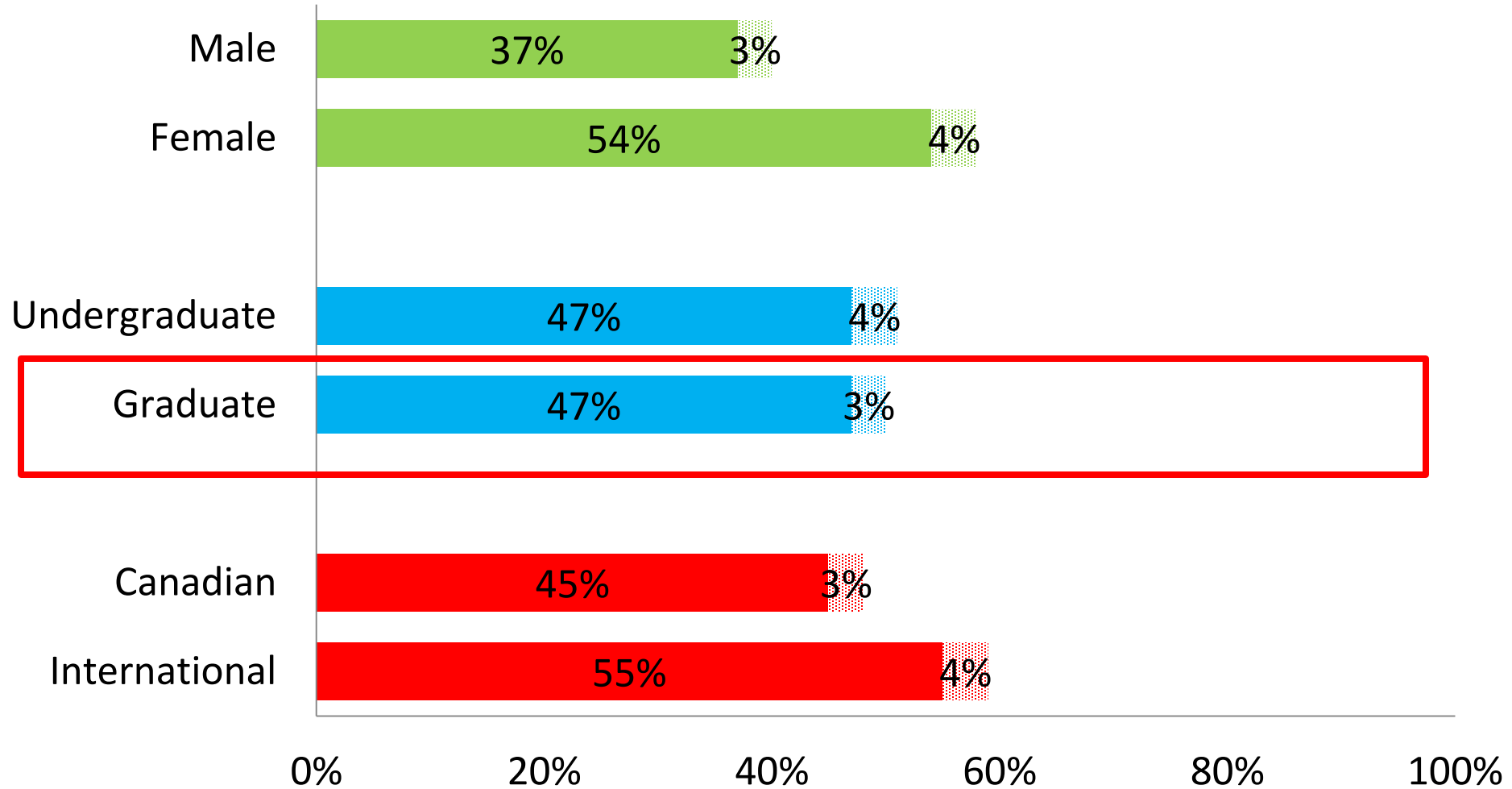
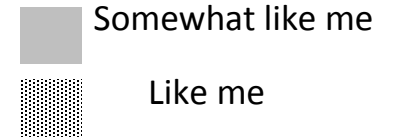
Demographics

	Overall	Graduate
%Level of Study	75% (UG)	25%
% Full-time	95%	93%
% Female	57%	53%
% 25 or younger	80%	35%
% Aboriginal	1.1%	1%
% International	23%	25%
% First-generation university	13%	17%
% Ethnic Minority	29%	32%
% LGBT	21%	21%

Depression

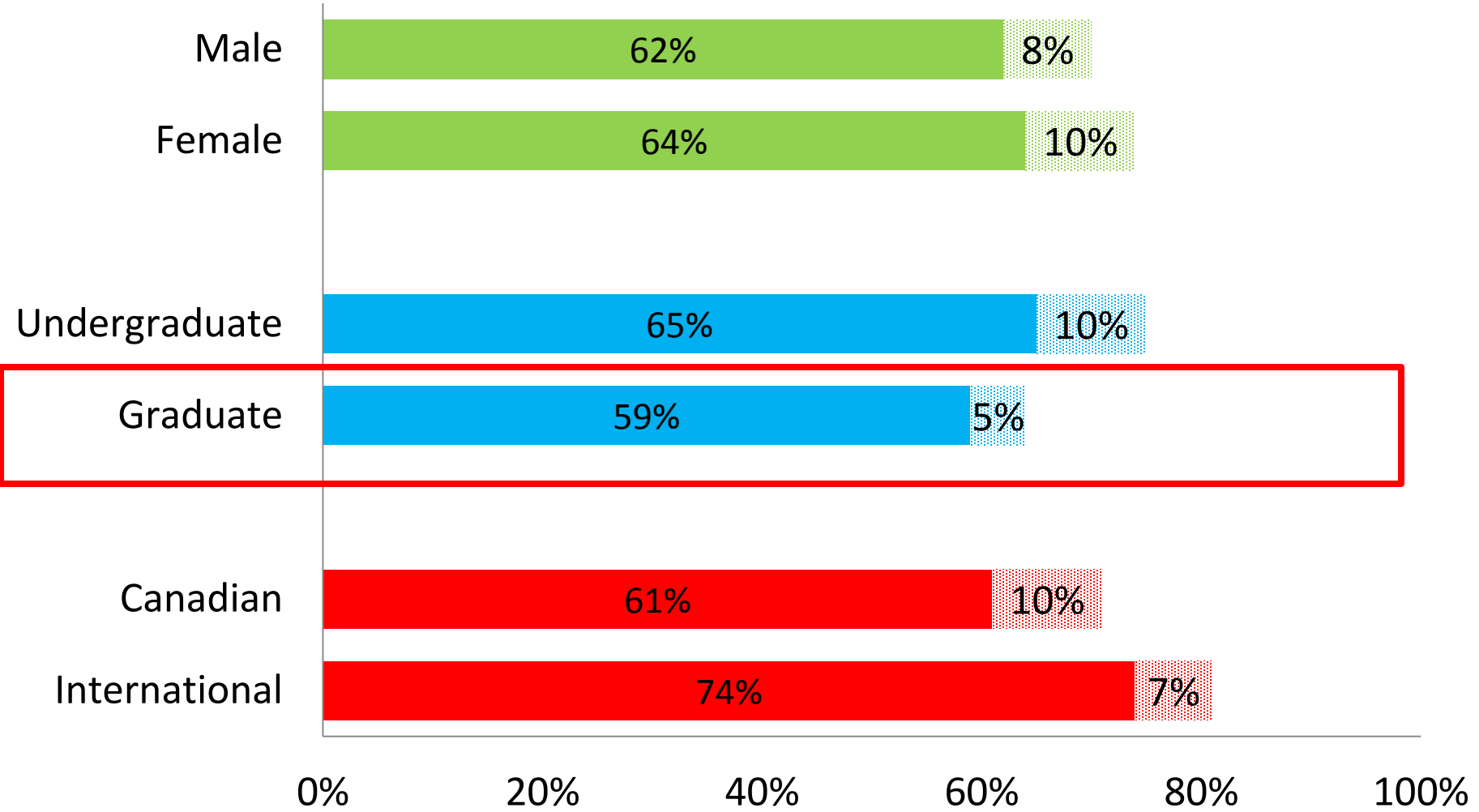


General Anxiety

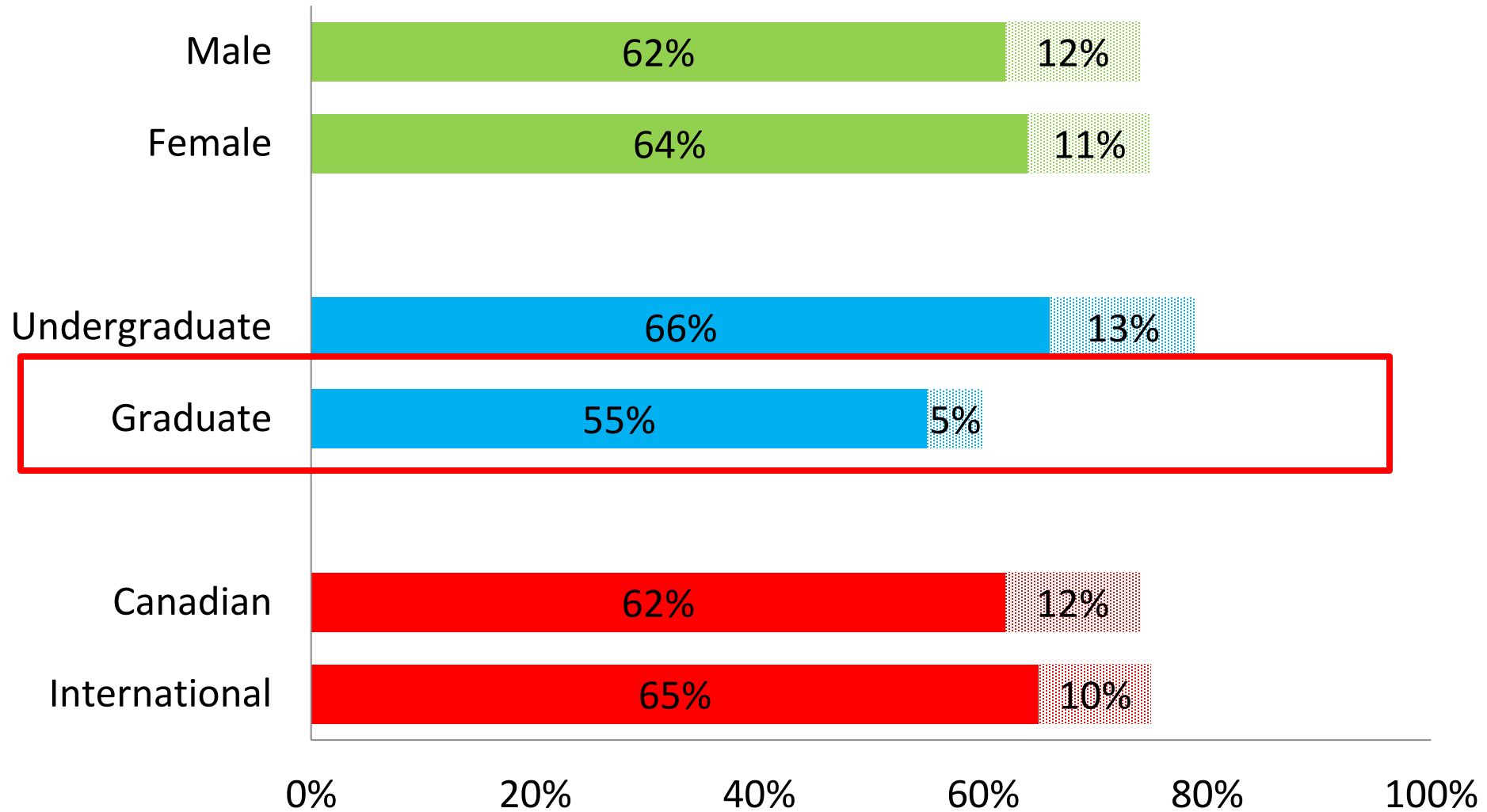
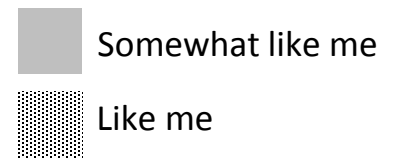


Social Anxiety

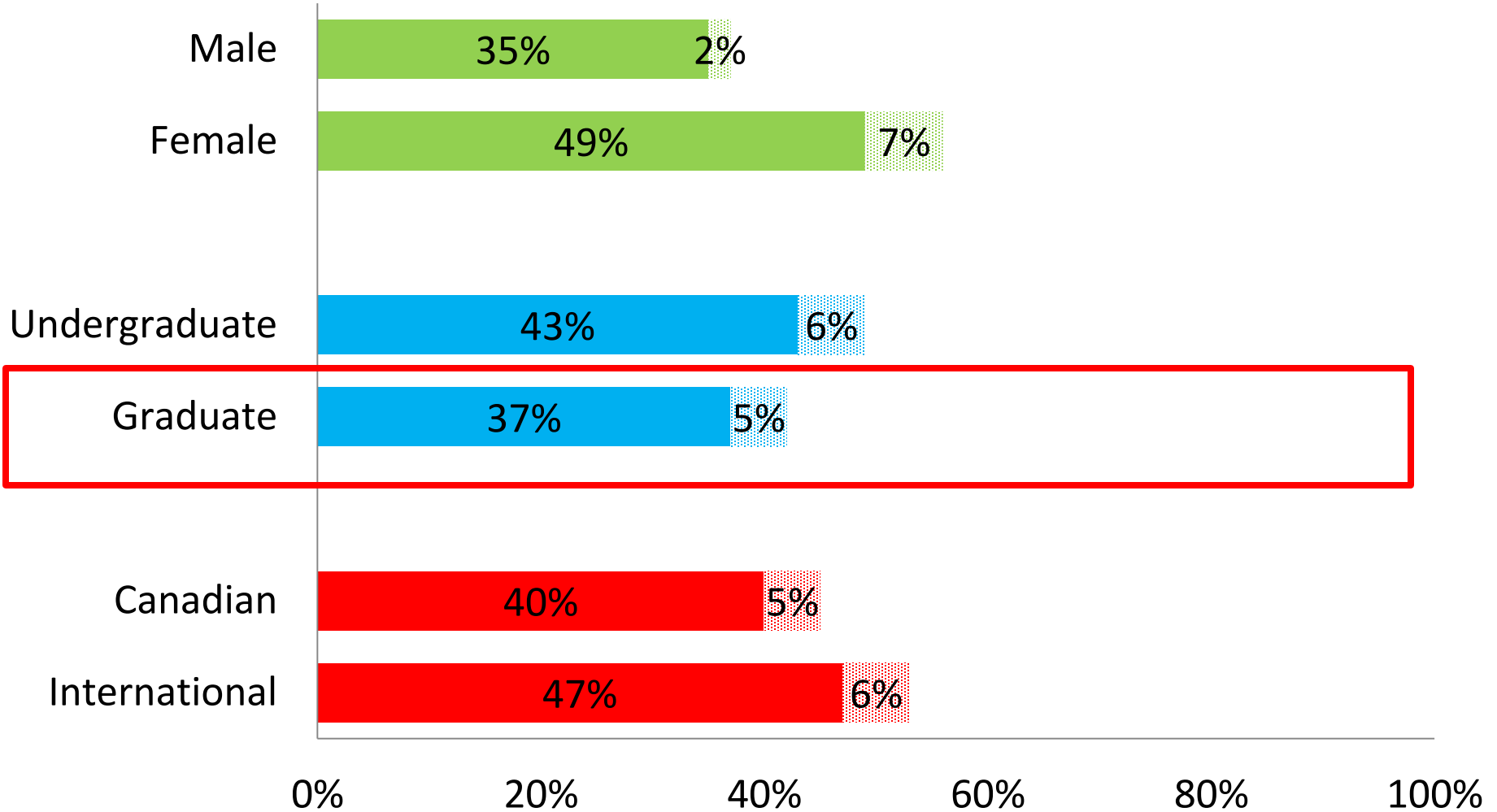
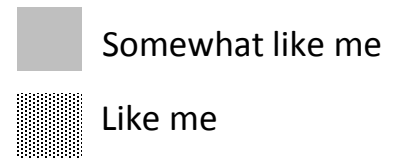
Somewhat like me
Like me



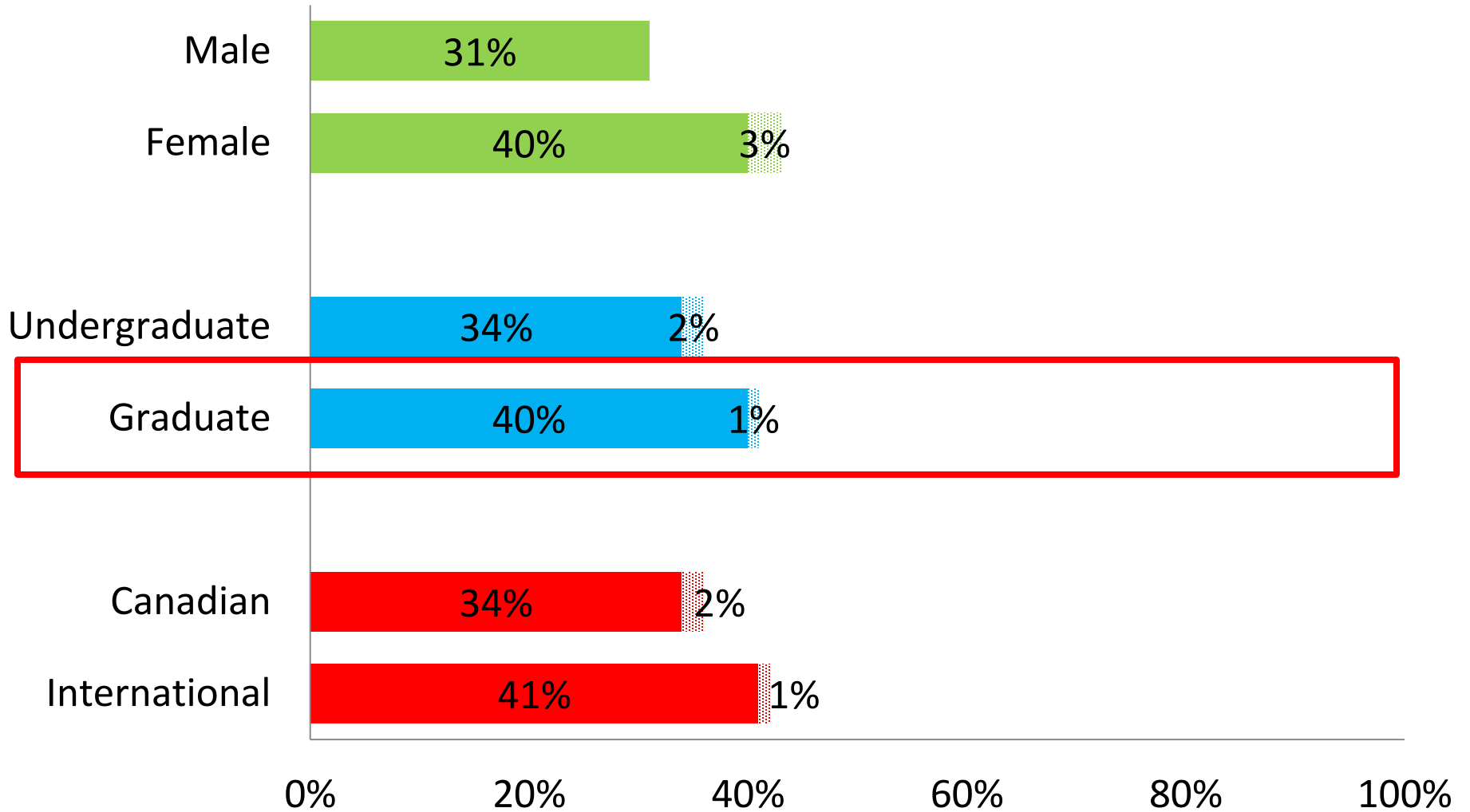
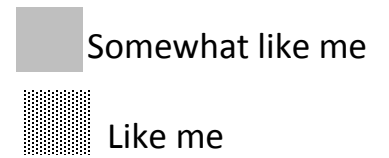
Academic Distress



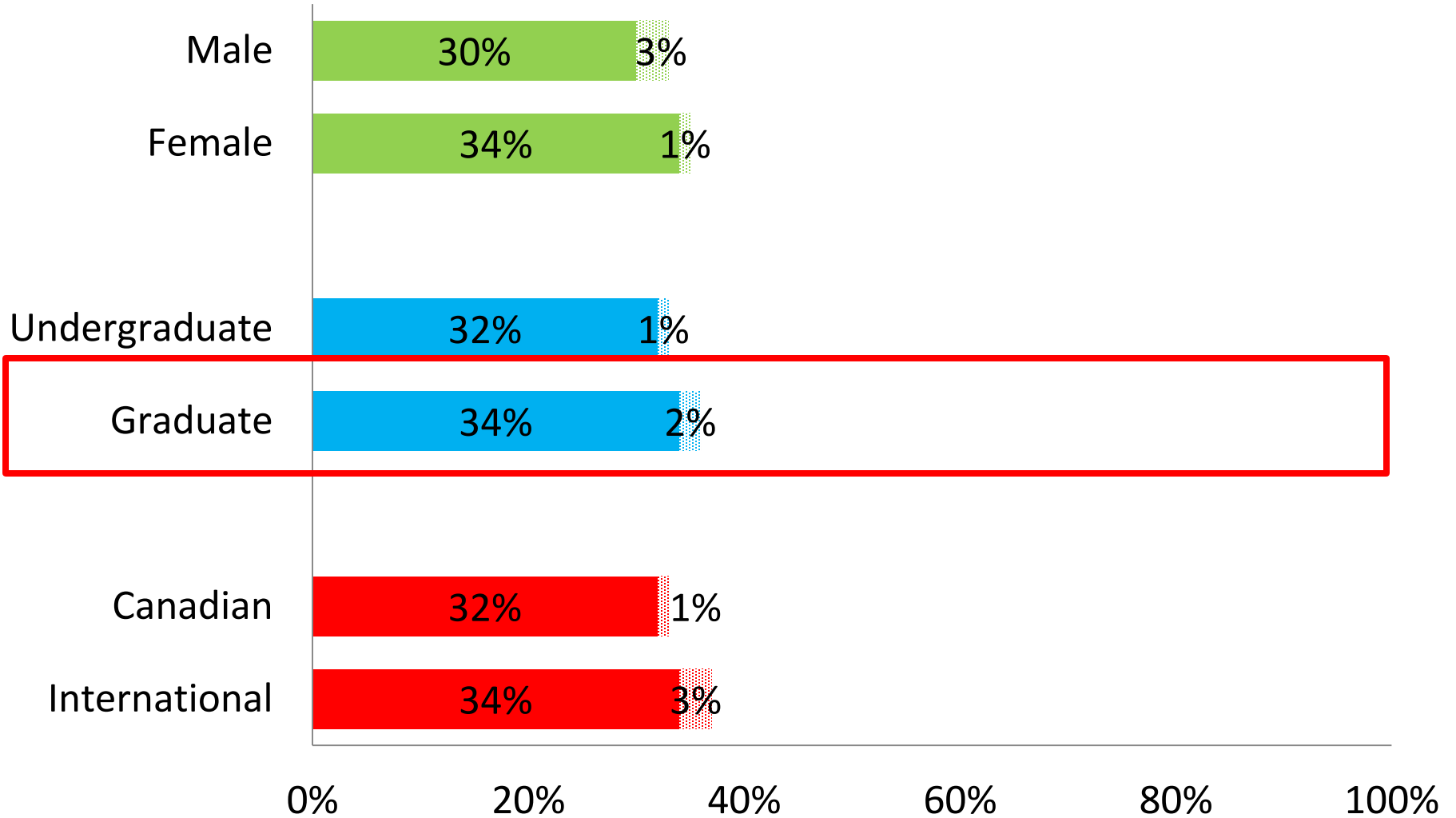
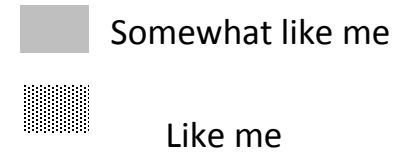
Eating Concerns



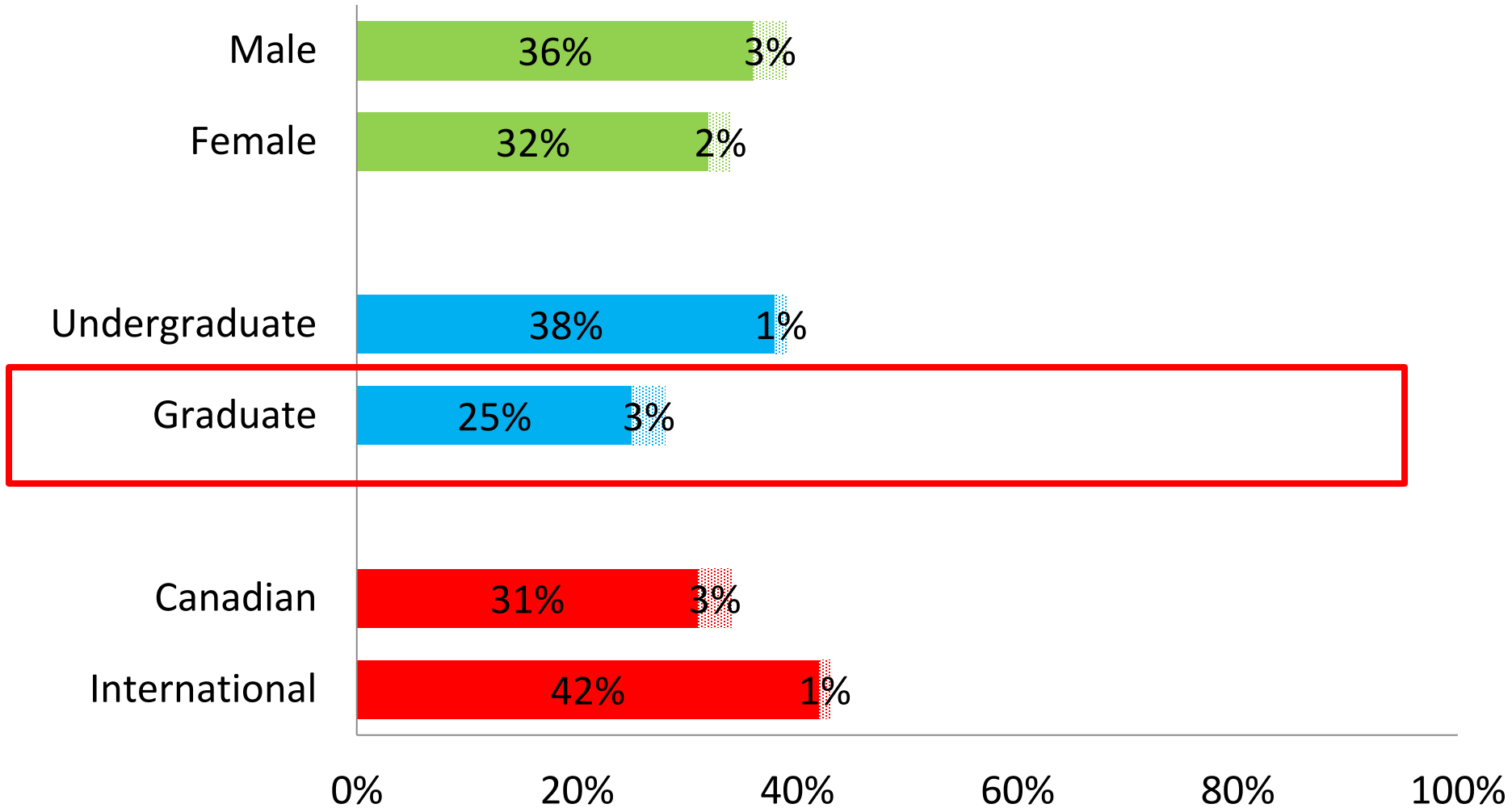
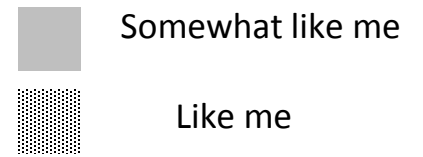
Family Distress



Hostility



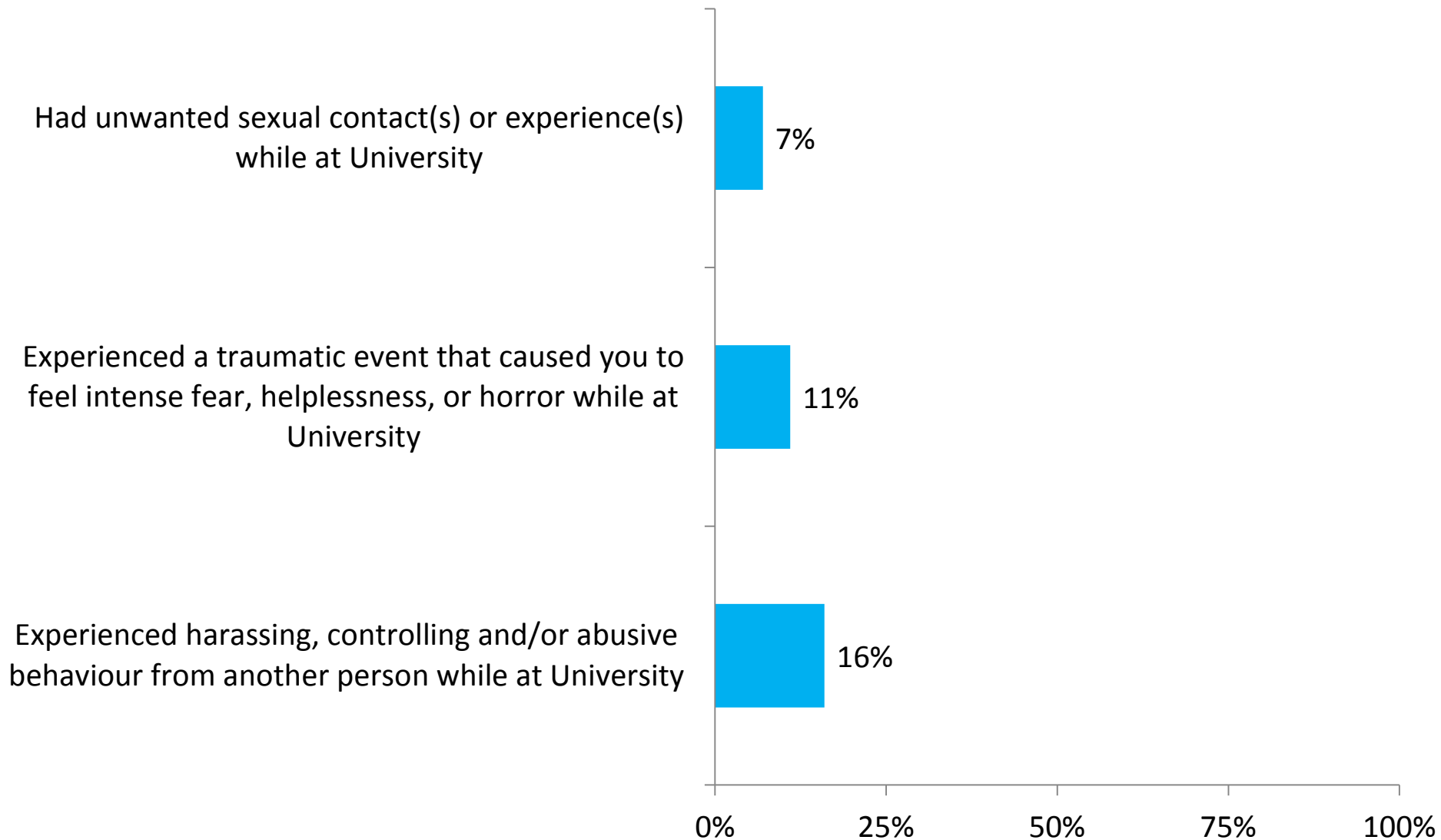
Substance Use



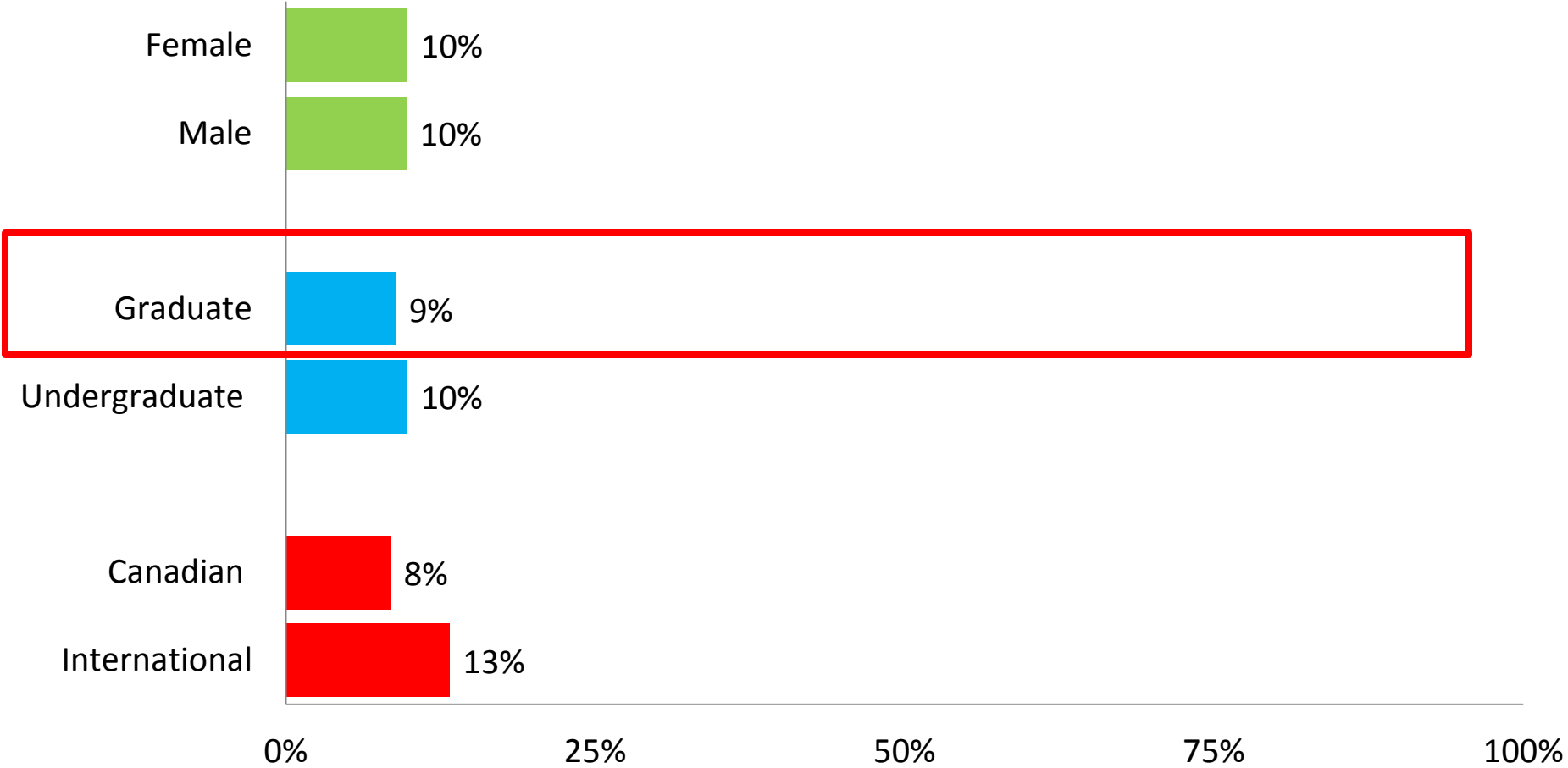
Percentage of respondents who accessed resources

	On-campus	Off-campus	Currently taking prescribed medication for a mental health concern	Registered with the office for disability services
Female	9%	5%	7%	2%
Male	6%	3%	6%	2%
Graduate	6%	5%	7%	<1%
Undergraduate	8%	4%	6%	3%
Canadian	8%	4%	6%	3%
International	5%	3%	4%	1%

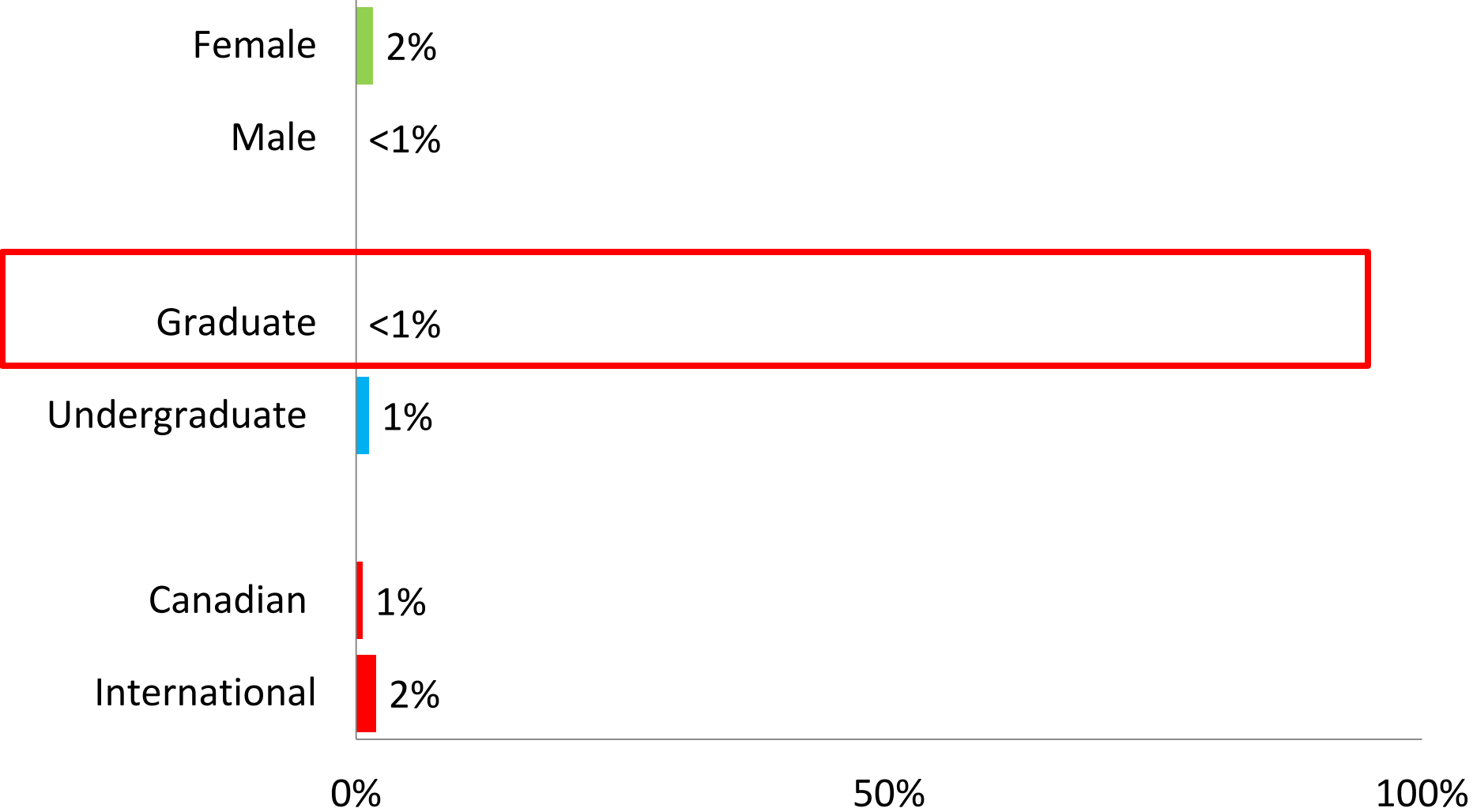
Traumatic experiences



Seriously considered attempting suicide while at University

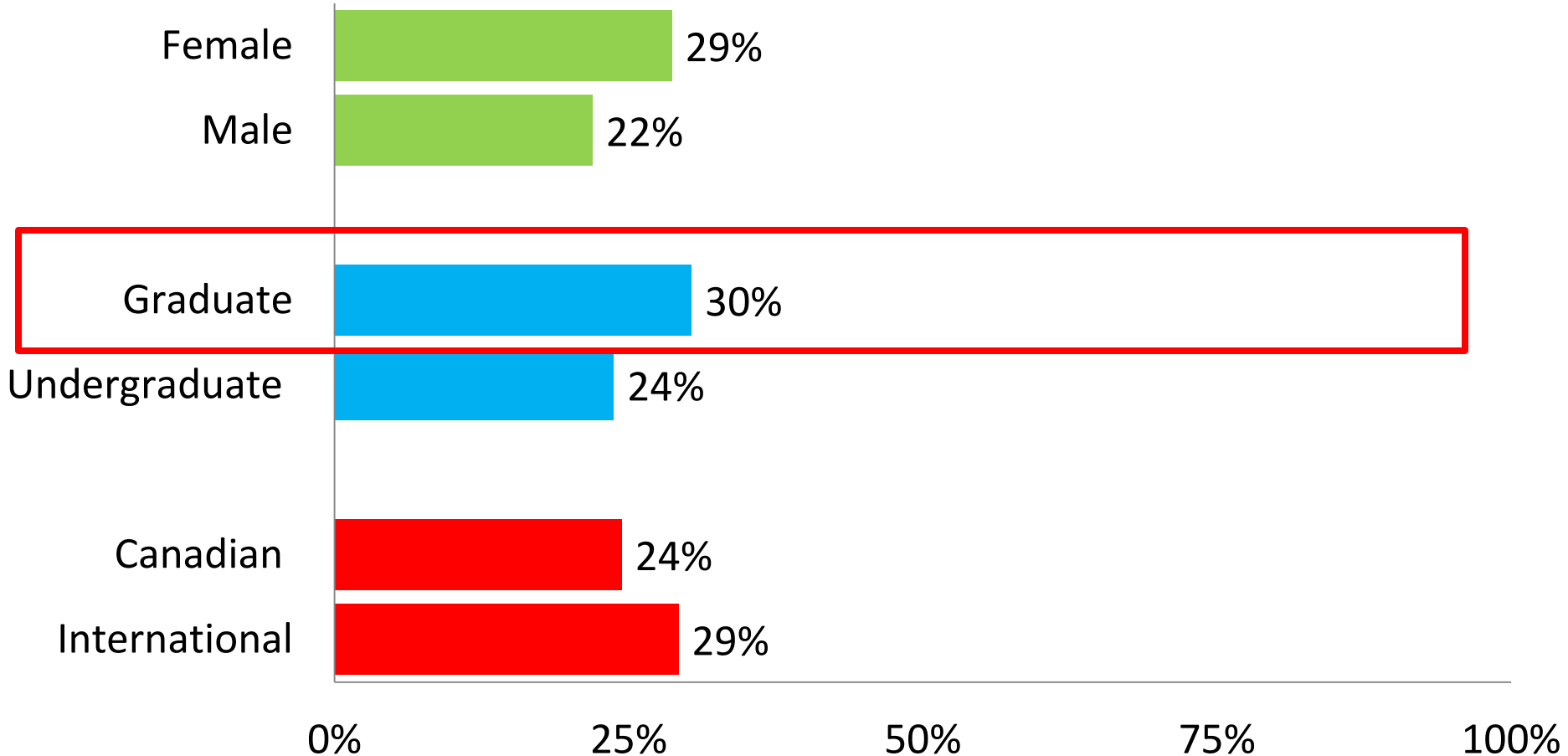


Made a suicide attempt while at University

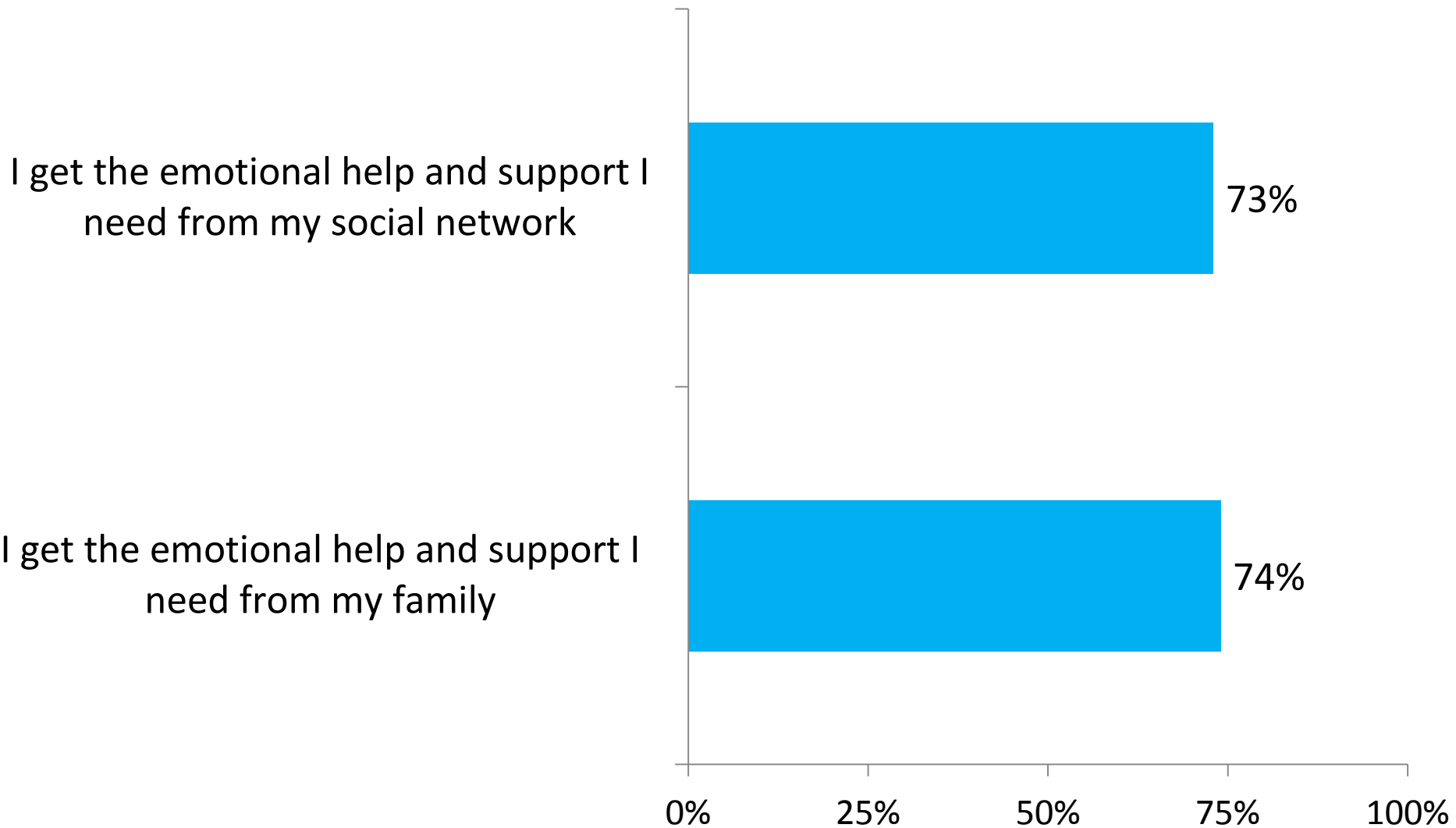


Financial distress

Current Financial Situation (Often and Always Stressful)



Social support



Responding to distress

Your role in assisting distressed students

- You play a central role in a student's help-seeking efforts: in a direct position to observe a student and be aware of their behavior.
- Students frequently turn to faculty and staff like you to obtain advice and support
- Although you are not expected to provide psychological counselling
 - At different times in your career you may find yourself having to advise students on issues other than purely academic matters

What You Should Know About Student Problems

- Stress, pressure, and problems are a normal part of university life.
- While many students cope with these demands successfully, a significant number of students have difficulties that **interfere with their performance and general well-being.**

Common stressors that students experience

- Isolation and loneliness
- Identity confusion
- Cultural oppression/discrimination
- Serious illness
- Low motivation or inability to establish goals
- Academic pressure or failure
- Prolonged unresolved problems with a supervisor
- Break-up of intimate relationship
- Parenting responsibilities
- Outside work or family pressures
- Rejection by family

Characteristics of distressed students

- Sometimes it is very clear when a student is having difficulty coping and sometimes their distress is masked with less obvious characteristics.
- Some obvious and not-so-obvious **signs of distress** to look for are...
 - 1) Problems with academic performance
 - 2) Traumatic change in academic status
 - 3) Unusual behaviour
 - 4) Traumatic change in relationships

1) Problems with academic performance

- Poor academic performance: a change in previous functioning
- Excessive absence or tardiness: a change in previous functioning
- Chronic indecisiveness or procrastination
- Repeated request for special considerations
- Increased concern about grades despite satisfactory performance
- Increased dependence

2) Traumatic change in academic status

- Academic Probation: e.g., failing comprehensive exam
- Academic Dismissal

3) Unusual behaviour

- Listlessness, lack of energy, or falling asleep in class
- Disruptive classroom behaviour
- Changes in personal hygiene
- Impaired speech or disjointed, confused thoughts
- Aggressive or threatening behaviour
- Extreme mood changes or excessive, inappropriate display of emotions
- Hyperactivity, irritability, or heightened anxiety
- Prolonged or extreme emotionality
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain with no apparent physical illness/reason
- Bizarre or strange behaviour indicating a loss of contact with reality

4) Traumatic change in relationships

- Death of a family member or close friend
- Difficulties in a marriage or close relationships
- Problems with family or roommates
- Issues with supervisor

Guidelines for responding to students in distress

A few guidelines for responding to distressed or distressing students are summarized below:

OBSERVE

- The first important step in assisting distressed students is to be familiar with the symptoms of distress and attending to their occurrence.

INITIATE CONTACT

- Don't ignore strange, inappropriate or unusual behaviour-respond to it!
- Talk to the student privately, in a direct and matter-of-fact manner, indicating concern
- Early feedback, intervention, and/or referral can prevent more serious problems from developing

CLARIFY YOUR ROLE

- When you assume or are placed in a helping role, role conflicts are possible and must be understood.
- Some students may see you as a figure of authority and thus perception may influence how helpful you can be.
- You may feel friendly with your students, which may make it difficult for you to act objectively in an academic or class management role.

LISTEN OBJECTIVELY

- Listening has frequently been called an art, but it is also a skill that can be acquired with practice.
- Refrain from imposing your own point of view: withhold advice unless requested, concentrate on the feelings and thoughts of the person you are trying to help, instead of your own.
- Some things to listen for include:
 - a student's view of him/herself,
 - view of his/her current situation environment and
 - the view of the future.

OFFER SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE

- Among the most important helping tools are interest, concern, and attentive listening.
- Avoid criticism or judgmental comments.
- Summarize the essence of what the student has told you in a way to clarify the situation.
- Encourage positive action by helping student to define the problem and generate coping strategies.
- Suggest resources that the student can access: friends, family, clergy, or professionals on campus

KNOW YOUR LIMITS!!

- Only go as far as your expertise, training and resources allow.
- If you are uncertain about your ability to help a student, it is best to be honest about it.
- Trust your feelings when you think an individual's problem is more than you can handle

Signs that assistance of a professional is warranted:

- You find yourself feeling responsible for the student
- You feel pressure to solve their problems
- You feel you are over-extending yourself in helping the student
- You feel stressed-out by the student's issue(s) or behaviour
- You see a behavioural pattern repeating itself in your interaction with the student
- You feel that the problems the student brings to you are more than you can handle
- You feel anxious/angry or overwhelmed when the student approaches you

OBSERVE

INITIATE CONTACT

CLARIFY YOUR ROLE

LISTEN OBJECTIVELY

OFFER SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE

KNOW YOUR LIMITS!!!

References to suicide or homicide

- Overt (or veiled) references to suicide – verbally or in writing
- Statements of helplessness or hopelessness
- Indications of persistent or prolonged unhappiness
- Isolated self from friends and family
- Pessimistic feelings about the future
- Homicidal threats

If you feel that a professional intervention is needed...

- Inform the student in a direct, concerned, and straightforward manner.
- Because many students initially resist the idea of getting help, it is useful to be:
 - caring, but firm, in your judgment that counselling will be useful;
 - to be clear and concrete regarding the reason you are concerned;
 - to be familiar with the help-giving agencies on campus.
 - **except in emergencies, it is important to allow the student to accept or refuse your recommendations**

If you feel that a professional intervention is needed...

- *Suggest that the student call or come in to make an appointment at Counselling Service OR Mental Health*
- *Sometimes it is helpful to assist the student more directly in...making an appointment*
 - You might offer the use of your phone or call yourself, while the student is in your office.
 - Occasionally, you may actually walk the student over. This can be especially helpful to students who are intimidated about meeting with a mental health professional for the first time

What you should know about responding to student emergencies

Emergency situations are **rare**: however, **immediate and decisive action** is necessary when they do occur. Generally, a psychological emergency involves one or more of the following conditions:

- A suicidal attempt, gesture, threat, or stated intention
- A homicidal attempt, gesture, threat, or stated intention
- Behaviour posing a threat to self
- Behaviour posing a threat to others
- Disorganization to the point loss of contact with reality
- Inability to care for oneself

In the event of an emergency, it is helpful to follow these basic guidelines:

- Stay calm, as this will help you respond more effectively; and also help to reduce the student's anxiety or agitation
- If possible, provide a quiet, private place for the student to rest while further steps are taken
- Talk to the student in a clear, straight-forward manner
- If the student appears to be dangerous to self or others, do not leave the student unattended unless it is safe to do so
- Make arrangements for appropriate intervention or aid by calling the Office of the Dean of Students and Campus Security or 911

Campus Resources

- Office of the Executive Director, Services for Students:
 - Counselling Service (514-398-3601)
 - Mental Health (514-398-6019)
 - Health (514-398-6017)
 - Office for Students with Disabilities (514-398-6009)
 - and other services: <http://www.mcgill.ca/student-services/>
- Office of the Dean of Students:
<http://www.mcgill.ca/deanofstudents/helpingstudents>