



Solutions Suite
Tools for Health

Enhancing Your Immune Health

Facilitator's Guide

Module 4



**UIC Center on Mental
Health Services
Research and Policy**



**Collaborative
Support Programs of
New Jersey**

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are seeking information and tips for enhancing their immune systems. Nobody likes being sick, whatever the cause, so it's natural to look for ways to avoid infection and illness. We want our bodies to be as strong as possible!

It's important to understand that our immune system is not a single organ in our bodies. Instead, it is a complex system that works on many different levels to fight infection. This means that our immune systems cannot technically be boosted, even though many people on TV, the internet, and social media say otherwise. However, we can improve our immune health to feel better and be healthier. Also, we can take precautions to avoid infections and illnesses.

This manual has 5 modules. You can use each one separately to educate about enhancing immune health. Or, you can use all of the modules together to teach a 5-week class on improving immunity. We've designed this material specifically to educate people with lived experience of mental illness, but it can be used by anyone who wishes to understand and enhance their immune health.

The modules are:

Module 1: What is Immune Health?

Module 2: Vaccination & Health Screening for Immunity

Module 3: Adequate Sleep for Immune Health

Module 4: Managing Stress for Stronger Immunity

Module 5: Functional Foods, Immunity Aids, & Credible Health Information

Each module uses an “**Explain, Evaluate, and Engage**” framework. We **explain** the key information to know in each area. Using exploration and activities, we then **evaluate** what participants already know about immune health. This is followed by further information. Each module also includes **engaging activities** to work on improving immunity and health.



Module 4: Managing Stress for Stronger Immunity

Explain

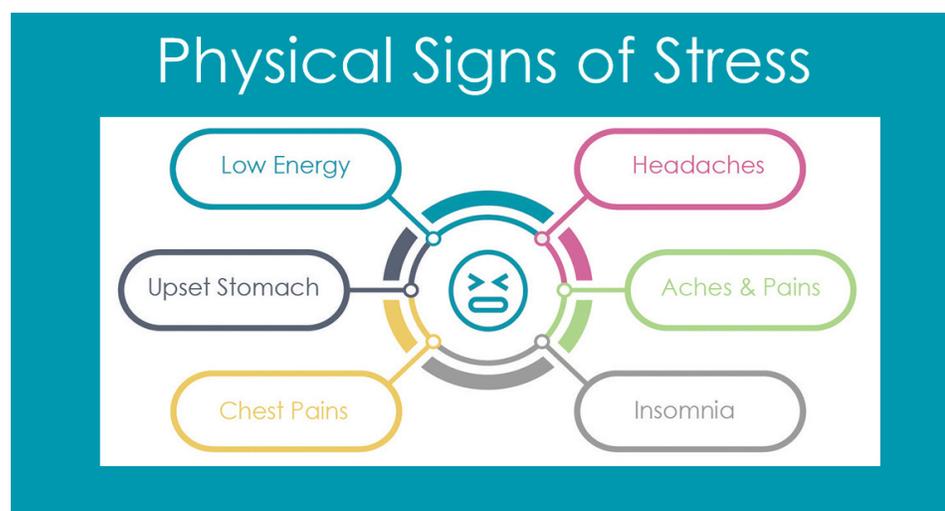
Everyone experiences stress. There are different types of stress that can be bad for physical and mental health. A stressful situation may happen just once, or happen over a short time, or it can happen a lot over a long time. People deal with stress differently. Some have better ways of coping and recover from stressful events more quickly than others. The good news is that there are many things you can do to manage stress.

Examples of stress or daily hassles include:

- Ongoing stress related to the pressures of family, work, school, and other daily responsibilities.
- Stress related to living with long-term health and mental health challenges.
- Sudden negative changes cause stress, such as losing a job, divorce, illness, or bad things happening in the world.
- Traumatic stress experienced during an event such as a major accident, war, assault, tragedy, or natural disaster.

People react differently to stressful situations. Some common signs of feeling stressed include:

- Physical discomfort, like shoulder tension, headaches, or jaw pain
- Mood changes, like feeling overwhelmed, anxious, sad, impatient, or angry
- Trouble with concentration
- Changes in appetite, energy, and sleep habits



Evaluate

Invite participants to reflect on their experiences of stress or daily hassles.

Choose from the following questions.

How do you know when you are stressed?

What is an example of a situation that is a hassle or stressful for you?

How have you dealt with stress in the past?

Explain

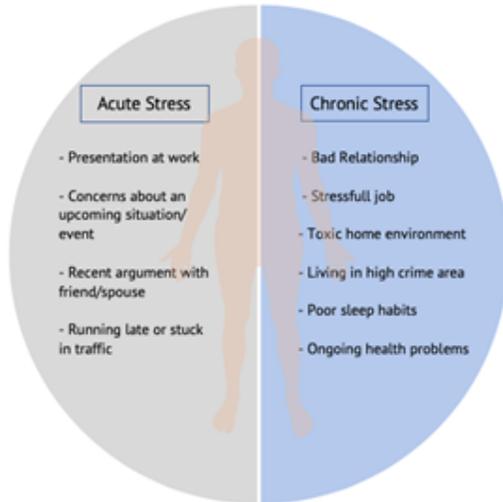
You may be surprised to learn that not all stress is bad for your immune health. Short-term stress improves your body's protective responses. When your body is healing from a cut or wound, you get a vaccine, or you are fighting an infection or tumor, your body's stress response triggers your immune system. In other words, short-term stress helps your body do what it's supposed to do.

Early human beings evolved to experience stress in response to immediate short-term dangers, like a falling rock or a charging tiger. In this situation, stress is helpful. The body responds to a danger like this by mobilizing energy to help us act quickly to survive. To do this, the body must limit energy used for "background functions" like immune health. After all, when you're in immediate danger, fighting off infection is less important than avoiding the tiger or the falling rock.

Today, we don't need to worry about tigers, but we still experience dangers like crossing busy streets or traffic accidents. In these situations, our natural stress response gives us the energy we need to get to safety.

Explain

Examples of Acute and Chronic Stress



Short-term, or acute, stress comes and goes. Your body reacts. Your body recovers from the stress.

When you feel stressed for a long time, though, that's called **chronic stress**. Chronic stress has different effects on our bodies. With chronic stress, the body never receives a clear signal to return to normal functioning and doesn't have a chance to recover.

Over time, chronic stress can affect your immune system, and can even cause a harmful immune response. Part of your natural stress response is to produce a **hormone called cortisol**. Long-lasting stress leads to the production of high levels of cortisol, which makes it harder for your body to manage inflammation. As discussed in Module 1, inflammation is your immune system's way of fighting harmful germs and promoting healing from injuries. However, chronic inflammation is bad for you. With lasting inflammation, you are more vulnerable to infection and to repeat infection. Stress also decreases your white blood cells. These are cells that your body uses to fight infection. The lower your level of white cells, the less able your body is to fight infection. If you are older, isolated, or lonely, or already have medical conditions, stress is even more likely to harm your immune health.

Long-Term Effects of Stress

Stress has both immediate and long term effects on the body.

While **acute stress** can help protect the body from dangerous stressors, **chronic stress** can have harmful effects on the body.

During the **stress response** the body releases hormones into the bloodstream that cause changes all over the body.

During acute stress, the level of these hormones returns to normal fairly quickly so their effects on the body are short lived.

During chronic stress, the level of these hormones stay elevated for long periods of time and their effects on the body are more long-term and harmful.

The infographic includes illustrations of a person reacting to a spider (acute stress), a person at a desk (chronic stress), a blood vessel with hormones, a stopwatch, and a calendar.



Evaluate

Invite participants to reflect on the connection between stress and immune health by choosing from the following questions.

What are some short-term stresses or hassles you've faced in your life?

What are some examples of chronic stress from your life?

Does what you've learned about stress and the immune system fit with your experience?

Explain

There are plenty of things you can do to manage stress for better immune health. We'll talk about several stress relief tips, so you can choose what works best for you.

 <p>TAKE BREAKS FROM THE NEWS</p>	 <p>EAT HEALTHY, BALANCED MEALS</p>	 <p>AVOID ALCOHOL AND DRUGS</p>
 <p>MAKE TIME TO UNWIND</p>	 <p>STRESS RELIEF TIPS cdc.gov</p>	 <p>CONNECT WITH OTHERS</p>
 <p>EXERCISE REGULARLY</p>	 <p>GET PLENTY OF SLEEP</p>	 <p>TAKE DEEP BREATHS</p>

Explain

- Many people have found that when they meditate, or engage in mindfulness activities, for even a few minutes several times a week, their stress goes down. Meditation reduces cortisol levels and reduces inflammation.
- Deep breathing exercises reduce stress and help your body work against infection. Consider doing deep breathing daily, 5 to 10 minutes at a time.
- Some people use free smartphone applications (apps) to reduce stress. Calm and Headspace are two free phone apps that people use for meditation and calming exercises. They can be used at any point in the day for meditation or to help with deep breathing.
- Activities like yoga lower stress hormone levels and calm the nervous system to reduce inflammation.
- Regular physical activity, like walking or gardening, can be very helpful to reduce stress.
- Hobbies and enjoyable activities have been shown to reduce stress, like playing or listening to music, gaming, crafting, and reading.
- Connecting with other people, online or in-person, is another way to reduce stress and deal with daily hassles.



Engage

Help participants practice a relaxation exercise together.

This activity takes 1 to 3 minutes. There are three steps to the activity.

1. Check in.

Sit quietly. Stay upright and awake through the practice. Relax. If you want, you can try closing your eyes.

Become aware of the feelings in your body.

- What do you hear around you?
- What do you feel? Notice what it's like to sit. Pay attention to how your clothes feel against your skin. Feel what it is like to be in your body.
- You don't need to change anything, just become aware.

2. Focus on the breath.

Now, become aware of your breathing.

- Notice the sensations of your breath coming in and going out. You don't need to change your breath at all. Just be aware of breathing.
- Make your breath the focus of attention.
- Your mind will wander. That's fine. When you notice you are thinking or worrying, just shift your focus back to your breathing.
- Some people like to say something to themselves as they breathe in or breathe out like "calm" or "peace."

3. Proceed (with awareness).

Before you end your short pause, refocus on how your body feels.

- Notice your whole body.
- Have any sensations changed?
- Don't worry about what you're thinking or if you're doing this correctly.
- Thank yourself for making time to pause. As you move back into your daily activities, take some of your fresh awareness and your appreciation with you.



Evaluate

Invite participants to reflect on activities to reduce stress or reactions to daily hassles.

Here are some sample questions to choose from.

What did you think about this short mindfulness meditation?

What other meditation, deep breathing, or relaxation techniques have you tried?

What else helps you manage stress? For example, what hobbies or other entertainment do you find relaxing?

Engage

Help participants complete the **Module 4 Review** worksheet to reinforce important terms and concepts.

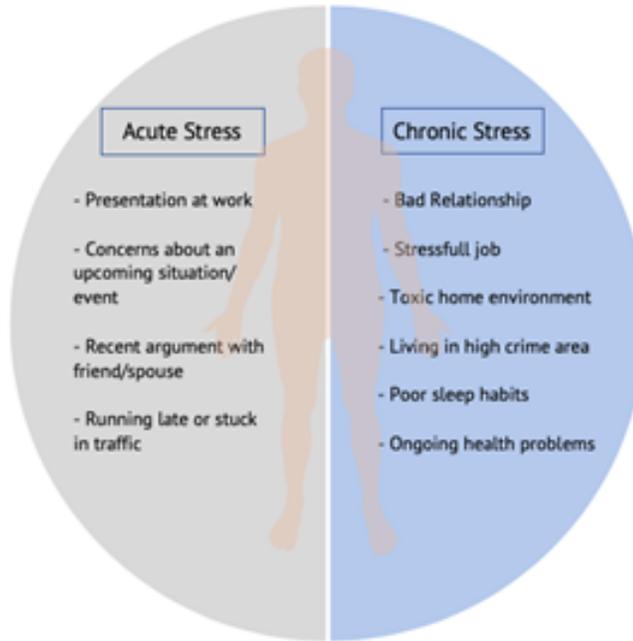
Invite participants to complete the **My Stress Relief Goal** handout.

MODULE 4 HANDOUTS & WORKSHEETS

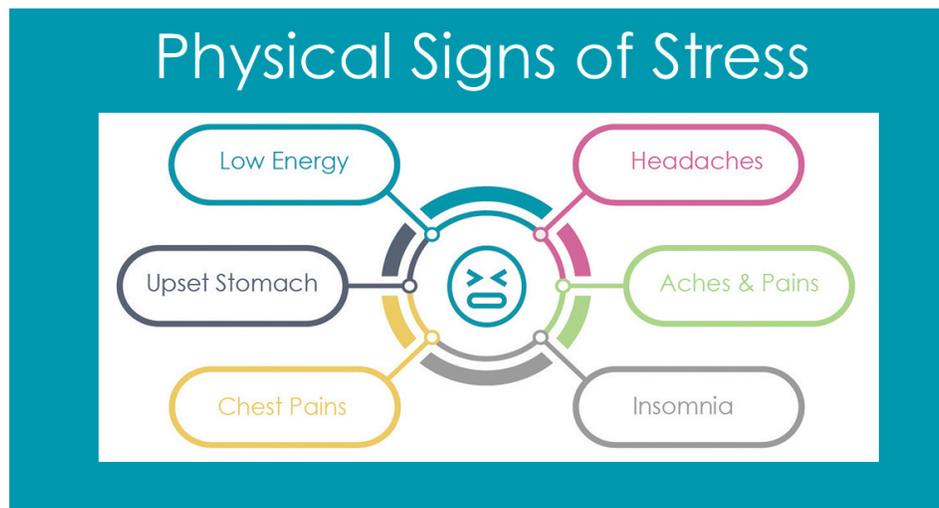


The differences between acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term) stress.

Examples of Acute and Chronic Stress



How stress feels in your body.



What happens from long-term stress?

Long-Term Effects of Stress

Stress has both immediate and long term effects on the body.

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During acute stress, the level of these hormones returns to normal fairly quickly so their effects on the body are short lived.

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Stress relief is possible!

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 <p>MAKE TIME TO UNWIND</p>	 <p>STRESS RELIEF TIPS cdc.gov</p>	 <p>CONNECT WITH OTHERS</p>
 <p>EXERCISE REGULARLY</p>	 <p>GET PLENTY OF SLEEP</p>	 <p>TAKE DEEP BREATHS</p>

Module 4 Review

How short-term stress helps healing from infections or injuries:

How long-term stress delays recovery from infections or injuries:

2 or 3 activities that can reduce stress:

My questions or notes

My Stress Relief Goal

01

Habits or life situations that are causing me stress or hassle:

02

One thing I will change or add to my routine to reduce my stress:

03

Some steps I can take to work on my goal this week:

04

My confidence for making this change or addition, with 1 being not confident and 5 being very confident:



To succeed, choose something specific, manageable, and measurable. This means saying what you'll do, how often/much, where, and why. For example, "I'll take a 20-minute walk outside for 3 evenings this week to release the negative energy from my day. This will help me feel calmer, sleep better, and improve my immune health."

If your confidence is lower than 3, see if you can adjust your goal or steps to be smaller or less frequent to start with.

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Images

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The long-term effects of stress:
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