

Transcript for Enhancing Your Immune Health Podcast

Recorded by Lisa Razzano and Jessica Jonikas

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Lisa: Hello. My name is Dr. Lisa Razzano. I'm here today with Jessica Jonikas, lead author of the Center's manual called, *Enhancing Your Immune Health*. This manual grew out of a collaboration between our UIC Center and our long-time partner, the Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, or CSPNJ. It's available for free download from UIC's online Solutions Suite.

Lisa: Let's get started by talking about why the team decided to create a resource on immune health. What inspired you?

Jessica: Well, nobody likes being sick, whatever the cause, so most of us want to know how to avoid infection and illness. Research suggests that certain health behaviors can improve immune function, decrease damage to tissues from oxidative stress, and potentially increase our longevity. And, of course, it's important that we all keep up with recommended health screenings and vaccinations. We also know that stress and inadequate sleep over time are associated with weakened immunity, which negatively impacts our body's ability to fight infection. Altogether, there is ample evidence that a healthier lifestyle, comprised of adequate sleep, less stress, a balanced diet, and certain functional foods and immunity aids, can lessen our vulnerability to a variety of infections. This includes colds, flus, and novel viruses like COVID-19.

At the same time, we're all exposed to a lot of myths and misconceptions about how immunity works, and we don't always have easy access to information about proven strategies. The fact is, aside from vaccinations, our immune systems cannot technically be "boosted," even though many people on TV, the Internet, and social media say otherwise. What we can do is engage in certain health behaviors to support our immune system's ability to fight pathogens. And, we can use simple precautions to avoid infections and illnesses. So, our mission, Lisa, was to create a manual that emphasizes building on what people already do for their immune health, while encouraging them to consider some new strategies.

Lisa: That's interesting. Can you say more about this?

Jessica: For a variety of reasons through the years, we've seen a lot of confusion and unreliable information out there about viruses, especially ones that are potentially life-threatening. So, we wanted to help people identify science-informed ways that they can take control of their own immune health, based on what they *already* do well and on their interest in trying some new things. We wanted to empower people to work on their immune health as feels best and achievable for them.

Lisa: How does that work?

With CSPNJ, we developed a framework for the manual that we call the Three Es. The first E is **Explain**. We explain, as simply as possible, the key information in each area. The second E is **Evaluate**. Using exploration and activities, we evaluate what participants already know about immune health. We do not judge, or often even immediately correct people, but instead, take note of what they do and don't know, to then work on developing a deeper understanding of immunity

over time. The third E is **Engage**. Each module includes engaging activities to help people support their immune health. We also include information and activities to help people assess the quality of health information, especially from online sources.

Lisa: That sounds great and like it will work with learners of all ages! Would you share with our listeners an overview of the manual's content?

Jessica: Sure. The manual has 5 modules. People can use each one separately to educate about enhancing immune health. Or, they can use all of the modules together to teach a 5-session class. We designed the 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 first module is called, What is Immune Health? In it, we cover the basics of natural and learned immunity. We also cover the fundamentals of infection and inflammation. Additionally provided are simple strategies to avoid getting or spreading infection, such as thorough handwashing and proper sneezing etiquette.

The second module, Vaccination & Health Screening, discusses the importance of vaccination, and how vaccines work. This is broader than the COVID-19 vaccine, since there are many important immunizations that we all need throughout the course of our lives. We also cover the importance of annual screenings with a health provider, since many medical conditions can weaken immunity.

Next is a module on the role of adequate sleep for immune health. Believe it or not, even one night of poor sleep can reduce a person's immune response. We discuss why, and provide many tips for getting a good night's sleep on a regular basis. We also include a sleep tracking activity to record daily behaviors that can impact the quality of sleep. This information can be used to set an achievable sleep goal.

The fourth module addresses the impact of chronic stress. Research suggests that one of the best things we can do to improve our immune health is to reduce our stress and daily hassles. We share why, and offer many stress-relief strategies. Participants set a stress reduction goal and they learn a short mindfulness relaxation exercise.

The final module covers functional foods and immunity aids supported by credible research. Again, none of us are immune – pun intended there! – to the amount of poor information out there about what we can eat or take to supposedly “boost” our immune systems. In reality, there's a limited number of foods and supplements shown to be effective in supporting immunity. On the upside, though, this means that it's easier to use what actually works, as long as we consult a health provider before taking anything new. In this module, we also offer a framework for assessing the quality and reliability of online health information to help people make the most informed decisions.

Lisa: Does this manual have to be delivered by people with medical training? Or, can others deliver it, too?

Jessica: Oh, that's an important question, thanks. We designed this manual so that it can be taught by anyone who has experience leading health education groups or teaching health-related content. You don't need to be a medical provider or have a medical background to use our manual. That said, on the web page for it, you'll see that we recommend reading through informational web sites on immune health, such as those provided by Harvard Health and the Cleveland Clinic, to get a solid foundation in what's covered in our manual.

Lisa: Thank you, Jessica. We are pleased to offer **Enhancing Your Immune Health** as part of our Solutions Suite to promote wellness and self-direction for people in recovery from mental health conditions.

Announcer: Thank you for listening. You can obtain additional Solutions Suite recordings, or download a transcript, by visiting the Center's web site.