

UIC Solutions Suite Webinar Series
Transcript for webinar on Enhancing Your Immune Health
Recorded by Jessica Jonikas

Slide 1 (announcer)

Thank you for visiting the University of Illinois at Chicago's Health & Recovery Solutions Suite. The following recording comes to you from the UIC Center on Integrated Health Care and Self-Directed Recovery. Visit our online Solutions Suite to obtain free tools that promote health, self-direction, and employment for the behavioral health field.

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Hello. My name is Jessica Jonikas. I work at the UIC Center on Integrated Health Care and Self-Directed Recovery. Our Center offers a Solutions Suite of free tools on health, self-direction, and employment for the behavioral health field. You can visit the Solutions Suite on the website where you found this webinar, at www.center4heoigt.alhandsdc.org. In this webinar, I'll discuss a manual called Enhancing Your Immune Health, which is one of the health tools in our Solutions Suite.

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I want to take a moment to acknowledge our funder, the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, without whom this work would not be possible. That said, the contents of this webinar and the manual do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of any Federal agency, or endorsement by the Federal government.

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There are several learning objectives for this webinar. First, you will learn what is known about immune health risks and disparities among people with lived experience of psychiatric disabilities.

Next, you'll be acquainted with what we know about immune health, since there is a lot of unreliable information that circulates on mainstream and social media and the Internet. Next, you will be introduced to our immune health promotion program, and how it reinforces health literacy and the acquisition of practical health promotion skills. You'll also learn about instructor qualifications and how to prepare to teach this content. Finally, you'll receive tips for successfully implementing this program.

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Let's start with a review of immune health risks and disparities associated with viral illnesses among people with psychiatric disabilities. Some of this is disturbing, but there is hope because learning more and using simple skills can help make a difference!

Research suggests that people with psychiatric disabilities are more likely to contract influenza, especially if they smoke cigarettes. They also are more likely to contract multiple forms of pneumonia. Most recently, studies show that they are more likely to contract COVID-19 than their non-disabled counterparts.

Studies also show that people with psychiatric disabilities are more likely to experience adverse outcomes from viral illnesses, including having severer symptoms, being hospitalized, spending time in an intensive care unit, and even dying. This cycle of risk is one that we wanted to interrupt with our manual, hoping to improve both immune health and overall health for people with psychiatric disabilities.

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Unfortunately, these viral risks are elevated, due to the higher prevalence of medical comorbidities in this population, including chronic pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, and obesity.

We also know that racial, ethnic, and other health disparities and inequities underlie these adverse outcomes, which have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further, additional risks are posed by the fact that sizable numbers of people still reside in congregate residential settings, on the streets, in homeless shelters, or in jails and prisons, exposing them to even greater risk for communicable infections.

An estimated 90 million Americans have low health literacy, particularly those with psychiatric disabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic and other health crises have made health literacy even more complex, presenting the public with a huge amount of information that must be assessed for legitimacy, and then, integrated into personal health practices to reduce risk.

Finally, we know that a series of disruptions to one's daily routines often reduce immune health. These disruptions can be due to discrimination, poverty, trauma, pandemics, and other major stressors. The disruptions lead to reactions that reduce immune health, such as increased levels of stress, trouble sleeping, lacking access to healthy foods and needed health care, struggling to get medications, changes in living situations, and being exposed to infections during regular daily activities.

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So, let's take a quick look at what research suggests can help to enhance immune health.

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First, one of the foundational elements of enhancing immune health is increasing health literacy in this area. The more science we know about immune health, the better equipped we are to strengthen it.

In the same vein, when we help people identify specific immune health behaviors that they already are doing, or would like to strengthen, or would like to start doing, they are then more likely to use them.

There are many claims in the public sphere for health habits, supplements, or foods that can quote-unquote "boost" the immune system. In fact, the only proven strategy that actually boosts

immunity to fight disease is vaccination. There are a number of things we can do to *enhance* our immune health, but the only way to *boost* the immune system specifically is vaccination.

We also know that regular health screenings across the lifespan are very important, because many medical conditions are known to weaken immunity, such as diabetes, liver or kidney disease, cancer, or HIV. When we identify any medical conditions we might have, we can then work on managing them, which can also help our immune health.

The beneficial impact of sleep across multiple domains is striking! We've always understood that lack of sleep can reduce emotional and mental health. And, it's also the case that poor sleep is one of the most harmful things to our immune health. That's because sleep strengthens what is known as our "immune memory." It does this by reinforcing our system's ability to remember and destroy harmful bacteria and viruses. Also, sleep frees up the energy our immune system needs to do its critical work.

Sleep problems are very, very common in the U.S., and among people with psychiatric disabilities in particular. This is likely one of the reasons they can be at higher risk for adverse outcomes from viral or bacterial illnesses. The good news is that there are evidence-based strategies to improve the quality and length of sleep, which we offer in the manual.

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We all know that ongoing stress reduces emotional wellness and can increase mental health symptoms. Unfortunately, chronic stress also significantly reduces immune health. When we have continuous, unresolved stress, our body continues to produce a hormone called cortisol. High levels of cortisol make it harder for our bodies to fight inflammation, which makes us vulnerable to infection and repeat infection. Also, chronic stress reduces our infection-fighting white blood cells. All of this means that chronic stress puts people at risk for contracting illnesses and for having adverse outcomes from them.

Stress also is all-too common in the U.S. Again, the good news is that there are evidence-based strategies to reduce the impact of ongoing stress.

Entire industries are built on the notion that certain foods, vitamins, or supplements will quote-unquote "boost" the immune system. Again, this is largely poor information. Certain foods and immunity aids can indeed be helpful to enhancing the immune response, such as prebiotics, probiotics, and Vitamins D, C, B9, and Zinc. But vaccination actually boosts the immune system to fight specific diseases, COVID-19 and otherwise. There are fewer immune health foods and immunity aids that are backed by science than most people realize.

So, we learned that relying **only** on foods and supplements to enhance immune health can be a slippery slope. Also, many supplements can be dangerous if overused and could interact with other medications that people take. So, even though it seems like "all-natural" immunity aids must be safe, it's important to check them out first with a health care provider.

This goes along with the fact that many people rely on inaccurate health information. It is understandable and it is human. But, it can be harmful, especially to people who already have health risks.

Thus, it's important to learn and use strategies to assess both the **sources** of health information and the content for accuracy and evidence, as part of improving health literacy. We teach people to look at who is sponsoring online health information, who actually wrote it, its purpose, and whether it is over-claiming the benefits of what is being promoted.

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What are the connections between mental health, immune health, and needed self-care? With so much on our plates, why should we also attend to immune health for ourselves and for those we serve or support?

There are many ways to view this, but perhaps the most compelling is that the skills we need to regulate our mental health are also the skills that can enhance our immune health. And the reverse is also true: consistently applying immune health behaviors also helps to regulate mental health.

These keys strategies are similar, so we don't necessarily need to take on a whole new set of skills. We'll just be recognizing that supporting our immune health to avoid viral and bacterial illnesses can also improve our mental health. And this is true whether we deliver or receive services, or both.

Additionally, very few people like being sick, which often makes it easier to discuss immune health than mental health. For many people, avoiding viral illnesses is at the top of their minds, again making it easier to engage around this content. Focusing on immune health helps both providers and those served to bump up their self-care skills.

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Let's turn now to the program we developed, that is freely available to the field, called Enhancing Your Immune Health. You'll find a link to download the manual on one of the final slides of my presentation.

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The foundational concepts of our manual include teaching people in simple terms how the immune system works, focusing on natural and learned immunity. We also offer practical skills to improve immune health literacy and behaviors, such as lessening vulnerability to infection by adopting a healthier lifestyle and using simple risk-reduction strategies like handwashing, sneezing or coughing into the elbow, and masking when needed.

We also emphasize the importance of evidence-based immunity aids, age-specific vaccinations across the lifespan, and annual health screenings. And we promote setting and working on small, achievable goals to support immune function.

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We believe that it's important for each of us, and those we serve, to identify science-informed ways to take control of our immune health. This should be based on what we're already doing well and what inspires us to try something new. We want to empower people to work on their immune health as feels best and achievable for them personally. We're all more likely to succeed when we choose what we want to do, based on our strengths and existing skills.

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We developed a learning framework for this material, called The 3 E's. The first E is **Explain**. We explain, as simply as possible, the key information to know in each area about immune health. 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 literacy and behaviors.

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Given all of the risk factors that I outlined earlier, we designed our manual to help people with psychiatric disabilities address their unique immune health risks. That said, it is suitable for any person who wants to learn more about immune health and set goals to enhance it.

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No medical or specialized training is needed to teach this content, but we do strongly recommend reading, and using all the modules personally, before teaching them to others.

On the web page for this manual, we provide links to 2 web sites that we recommend reviewing to gain foundational knowledge. One is provided by the Harvard School of Public Health and the other by the Cleveland Clinic. We also suggest researching any unfamiliar concepts in the manual **before** teaching it, being sure to access reputable medical or health information.

We also recommend that those teaching this content have prior experience running health education groups or teaching health content one-on-one. It is very beneficial when taught or co-taught by people with lived experience of mental illness.

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Some of this content about immune health strategies, such as vaccination, can be sensitive in nature. We strongly recommend avoiding any discussion of politics, and instead, exploring the facts to help people decide for themselves what they would like to do to enhance their immunity.

It's worth remembering that people's past medical experiences can influence their response to this content. If they've had poor treatment, medical discrimination, or fear in medical settings, talking about things like health screenings or bloodwork could be stressful. Take it at each person's pace, and help them to choose initial activities that they feel safe and empowered to do.

Again, in spite of many claims to the contrary in the public sphere, other than vaccination, there are no quick fixes to boost immune health to fight specific diseases. We can do things to enhance our immune health to better fight infection, but claims about quick fixes or remedies should generally be viewed with great caution.

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Our manual can be used in several different ways. We offer it as a 5-session manual for those settings that can offer educational groups.

We also offer each module as a stand-alone session, to make it easier to use during one-on-one learning, or to teach a single module during an educational group. This way, people can take the content that they need, either for themselves or for those they're serving, without having to introduce all 5 sessions. There also is a packet of handouts for participants. These modules are free to the public for programmatic or personal use only.

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Let's review the information covered in each of the 5 modules.

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The first module is called, What is Immune Health? In it, we cover the basics of natural and learned immunity. Natural immunity consists of the protective layers that help our bodies to block or neutralize bacteria, viruses, or parasites. Some of these layers include skin, mucus, or stomach acid.

Learned immunity is when our bodies learn over time to recognize bacteria, viruses, or other germs that cause illness. For many of these illnesses, our immune system learns to remember the harmful pathogen, so the next time it enters the body, it's ready to destroy it.

Also covered are the fundamentals of infection and inflammation. Infection refers to germs entering and growing in our bodies when our protective barriers did not keep them out. Inflammation is what our bodies do to fight infection.

Additionally provided are simple strategies to avoid getting or spreading infection, such as handwashing and sneezing into your elbow. This module also helps people to reinforce existing immune health habits, and to add new ones they think will be beneficial for them and/or their families.

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We offer several strategies for personalizing Module 1 content. First, we emphasize the importance of exploring what participants already know about how people get sick and how the body fights infection. This helps them to consider what they already know, and then, how to address any gaps in their knowledge with credible health information.

Similarly, people are encouraged to use a log to track their immune health habits throughout the week. This helps to reinforce protective behaviors such as handwashing, face masking, sleeping, and taking medications as prescribed.

One way we've made immune health habits more enjoyable is sharing different songs that people can sing to make sure that they're washing their hands for a full 20 to 30 seconds. On this slide, you'll find a link to a web site that allows you to create your own handwashing poster, using a series of popular songs.

Finally, we offer a low-key immune health quiz to help people identify any gaps in their knowledge. This helps the teachers and participants know which information needs additional review.

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The second module, Vaccination & Health Screening, starts with an overview 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. Staying neutral, we address common myths and misconceptions about 2 popular vaccines. This discussion often generates new insights about learned immunity.

The second half of this module addresses the importance of preventive care. We emphasize that an annual physical helps people identify the presence of any medical condition that can make them more vulnerable to viral illnesses. Also covered is the importance of getting bloodwork to establish whether people need extra vitamins or minerals that could enhance their immune health.

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When individualizing Module 2, we emphasize caution when discussing vaccinations because people can be influenced by unreliable or confusing health information. We suggest exploring what they already know about vaccines, as well as their childhood experiences of vaccination to identify any misconceptions or fears. The key for this module is a neutral presentation of the facts so that people can make their own decisions.

Also included in the module are handouts that help participants to identify vaccinations and screenings that are administered over the course of one's life, along with which ones they are missing. We also provide a handout to help participants prepare for visits with their health care providers, including a section to list their own questions.

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The third module addresses the role of adequate sleep in immune health. Believe it or not, even one poor night of sleep can reduce a person's immune response. We explain why this is the case, and provide many tips for getting a good night's sleep on a regular basis. We also include activities to record daily behaviors that can impact the quality of sleep and to set a sleep goal.

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One thing we recommend is to normalize the fact that sleep problems are common, especially for people with psychiatric disabilities. Offering this session in a group setting can highlight the commonality of sleep issues, along with mutual learning about what works to promote restful sleep. Discussion centers around each person assessing their own sleep environment and possible changes they can make to improve it.

We also provide the NIH Sleep Diary, which helps people to track daytime habits that might interfere with adequate sleep, along with specific sleep behaviors and how they feel upon waking.

Finally, this module offers multiple tips to improve sleep habits and routines, and a handout to set a personalized and achievable sleep goal.

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The fourth module addresses the impact of chronic stress. Participants learn the differences between acute stress, which can be beneficial, and chronic stress, which can be quite harmful. Short-term stress improves the body's protective responses. The body's acute stress response triggers the immune system to get to work. On the other hand, chronic stress causes lasting inflammation, making people more vulnerable to infection and to repeat infection, while decreasing white blood cells.

It's not surprising therefore that one of the best things we can do to improve our immune health is to reduce our stress and daily hassles. The good news is that there are many ways to relieve stress, which we share in this module. These tips help participants set a stress reduction goal. Participants also learn a simple relaxation exercise based on mindfulness that can be used anywhere and anytime a person feels stressed.

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Here again we want to normalize the fact that both acute and chronic stress are very common. Participants are accustomed to thinking about how stress impacts their mental health, but we shift this conversation to thinking about how it might affect their immune health. This tends to initiate new thinking about different sources of stress, and the physical and emotional impacts of it.

Also encouraged is consideration of how each person usually reacts to hassles, and whether they'd like to make some changes in this area by setting a stress relief goal.

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The final module covers proven functional foods and immunity aids. As I noted earlier, there are a limited number of foods and supplements actually proven to support immunity. On the upside, this means that it's easier to use what actually works, as long as we consult a health care 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.

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Because this module covers the role of the gastrointestinal system and healthy bacteria for immunity, we also discuss use of prebiotics and probiotics. Prebiotics help feed the good bacteria and microbes already present in one's body. Probiotics are living microbes that are added to the GI system through foods like yogurt or kimchi, or are added through supplementation.

Also assessed in this module is whether participants are taking vitamins or other supplements, and whether they want to get bloodwork to determine whether they have vitamin insufficiencies that need to be addressed.

One enjoyable way we've personalized this module is to provide participants with "goodie bags" that contain affordable immune health foods. We've also shared simple recipes with participants so they can make immune health smoothies, snacks, and soups. We've even made these recipes together when possible.

Finally, it's important to visit online health information together with participants, using the handout that we provide, to help them assess whether or not they have located truly reliable sources.

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One of the best outcomes of facilitating this manual is the realization that it helps both the workforce and those served. Improving immune health is truly a "we thing" that everyone can work on together. Again, improving immune health can enhance mental health, and vice versa. This is a win-win for all.

We have designed this material to allow it to be highly individualized. It can be successfully offered in groups or in one-on-one sessions or both.

Staff become energized by this content when they see not only that it can benefit them, too, but when they are empowered to decide how best to introduce the content in their individual service settings.

We also have found that changing the order in which the modules are offered can be beneficial. For example, if you're working with a person or group that's had a negative medical experience or fears needles, you can offer Module 2 later in the sequence, after building trust and interest.

Of course, as we all know, not everyone is ready to set and act on immune health goals. Some people will benefit simply from learning this new information and contemplating changes they might want to make one day. This goes along with the fact that changing ingrained health habits and behaviors can be quite difficult. Thus, we want to emphasize what people are already doing well, and what they would like to strengthen or add to improve their immune health.

This topic can get weighty for some people, so we recommend trying to bring fun and enjoyment into the process. As I've reviewed, we've done this by using different handwashing songs, making immune healthy meals or snacks together, and even visiting clinics for vaccination as a group for peer support.

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We hope you've enjoyed hearing about our manual and are interested in giving it a try! If you still have questions after this webinar, you can ask for free technical assistance, which is offered on a time-limited basis through the UIC Center. Click on the "free technical assistance" button on the Enhancing Your Immune Health page of our web site.

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