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Turning stress into success: A festschrift in honor of Janice Kiecolt-Glaser

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I'm pleased and honored to have this opportunity to write a festschrift in recognition of Janice Kiecolt-Glaser. I have had the unique opportunity to work Jan as both a trainee and a colleague. As a graduate student at the Ohio State University, I completed my PhD with Jan. I then went on to a faculty position at the Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research where I was most fortunate to join her as a colleague. Jan's work, as well as the doors she has opened for me, have inspired and shaped my career in ways that can't be overstated.

Jan is an exemplary scholar and mentor. Her work in psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) began at a time when the intersection of psychology, neuroscience, and immunology was still uncharted territory. Her curiosity and creativity led her to explore how stress, emotions, and social interactions impact our immune system. With a keen eye for interdisciplinary collaboration, she embarked on groundbreaking studies that bridged these seemingly disparate fields. As one of the founders of the field of PNI, she creatively used an inspiring variety of both research models and focus on different populations to truly create new knowledge and forge a new field – rare and enviable accomplishments.

Her research illuminated the profound effects of chronic stress on immune function. From caregivers of spouses living with dementia [1–20], to medical students during exams [21–24], to cancer survivors [25–57], married couples [58–82], and other populations, Jan's work verified that stress alters immune responses, leaving individuals more vulnerable to infections and diseases. Her work has underscored the importance of the mind-body connection, emphasizing that mental well-being directly influences physical health. As such, it has had far reaching impact, not only on avenues of research, but also on clinical approaches to care and the now mainstream acceptance that stress measurably and substantially impacts health.

Critically, Jan's work has explicated not only the effects of stress, but also factors contributing to resilience. In particular, her work has emphasized the critical role of marital interactions and relationship quality. Support from one's spouse has important beneficial effects on stress hormones and inflammation [61,78,80]. In contrast, marital discord has significant negative effects that she has documented through

elegantly designed studies which included conflict interactions between couples in the lab [61–73,75,81]. Her findings have had impact not only within, but also well beyond academic circles. With relevance to clinicians, researchers, as well as the general public, her work resonates broadly by emphasizing power of relationships to hurt as well as to protect and heal.

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Image 1. Colleagues at the Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research in September 2019 (left to right): Leah Pyter, PhD, Lisa Christian, PhD, Tamar Gur, MD, PhD, Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, PhD, William Malarkey, MD, John Sheridan, PhD, and Olga “Niki” Kokiko-Cochran, PhD.

Beyond her research, Jan’s influence extended to mentorship. As a guiding force for countless students and early-career scientists, she nurtured curiosity, critical thinking, and resilience. Reflecting her awareness of the importance of social support and preventing isolation, she aimed to time recruitment of new trainees in a way to ensure that they would have collaborative partners around at the same time. This created a dynamic and supportive working environment.

Jan’s mentoring style is disciplined but fair, with high expectations, not only of her trainees, but also for herself as a mentor. She provided incredibly speedy and thorough feedback. In addition to written notes in the margins, she used her own unique method of mini-cassette tape recordings which provided a conversational nature to feedback, as well as greater context and tone. Rather than only receiving written notes in the margin with instructional fixes, Jan’s tapes provided unvarnished critiques as well as sincere encouragement. Indeed, one of the most important benefits of this approach to provide edits is the clarity in feedback as well as the lack of ambiguity about your mentor’s thoughts on your overall writing quality and style. It is truly a unique and valued approach.

In addition, she instilled essential writing habits through consistent recommendations to read (and re-read) “Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing” by Robert Boice [83]. In this superlative guide, Dr. Boice details his research on writing habits among professors, and identifies the characteristics that differentiate the highly productive from the not-so-productive. Now a classic, from 1990, this book has never lost its relevance. I revisit these principles myself when “getting off track” and have gone on to standardly recommend this to all mentees. A key take-away point is to write daily, and in short bouts. Don’t wait until you have 3–4 h uninterrupted; not only may that never occur, but writing in long bouts contributes to burnout rather than continued productivity. Understanding this approach was transformative to my own writing style, productivity, and ability to enjoy the

writing process – at least some of the time!

Of course, any ode to Jan would not be complete without fully appreciating her partner in the lab and in life, Ronald Glaser. Together, with colleagues whom they considered close friends, they established the Institute of Behavioral Medicine Research (IBMR). The IBMR was founded in 1996, with the goal of stimulating interdisciplinary research and creating a pipeline of new and established investigators in the field. The IBMR moved into its own building in 2009, a milestone close to Ron’s heart. Indeed, stimulating collaboration as well as building a pipeline of trainees and junior faculty to grow and build the field of PNI was near and dear to both Ron and Jan.

As celebrated in this special volume, many of Jan’s mentees have gone on to shape the field in their own unique ways, carrying forward her legacy. My research is no exception, having been strongly guided by taking models Jan had used, and applying them to a population that she had not explored – perinatal women.

In some initial work in my lab, I utilized a stress reactivity paradigm, the Trier Social Stress Test (TSST) to examine inflammatory and cardiovascular responses to acute stress among African American and European American women during pregnancy and non-pregnancy [84,85]. This study was inspired by work prior with my master’s thesis mentor, Dr. Catherine Stoney on cardiovascular reactivity [86] as well as Jan’s work on neuroendocrine and immune reactivity to acute stressors [66, 71,72,87,88]. My work in this area demonstrated that inflammatory responses to acute stress were attenuated during pregnancy, but a main effect of race was observed whereby African American women showed greater inflammatory responses than European American women during pregnancy as well as non-pregnancy, and also showed differential adaptation in heart rate variability [84,85].

Jan & Ron’s work examining reactivation of latent Epstein Barr virus (EBV) was seminal in the field, showing that psychological stress can affect cell-mediated immunity. Their studies demonstrated EBV reactivation among medical students in response to the short-term stress of examinations as well as in the context of chronic stress among spouses providing caregiver for a partner with dementia [24,38,89–93]. My work examining observational longitudinal changes in inflammation as well as EBV across pregnancy and postpartum as a function of race and racial discrimination was directly informed by these studies [94,95]. Taking this paradigms and applying it in a new context and new population proved to be a fruitful direction.

My work using influenza virus vaccine models to examine inflammatory and antibody responses during pregnancy also drew directly from Jan’s prior work [96–99]. A foundational study from Jan, Ron, and colleagues published in *JAMA Psychiatry* showed that in a sample of older adults (mean age 71.21 ± 8.68 years), mild depressive symptoms predicted more robust and prolonged inflammatory responses to seasonal influenza virus vaccine [99]. Their studies also showed effects of stress on antibody and responses to influenza virus vaccination and hepatitis-B vaccination in older and younger adults, respectively [96]. While later work from Jan’s lab went on to also utilize typhoid vaccine as a novel immune challenge, demonstrating effects of chemotherapy, obesity, and physical fitness on innate immune responses (IL-6, IL-1 receptor agonist, and white blood cell) among breast cancer survivors [46,50]. In parallel, my studies in pregnant and non-pregnant women demonstrated the trajectory of the inflammatory response to influenza virus vaccination pregnant and non-pregnant women [100,101], showed similar effects of depression on inflammatory responses to influenza vaccination during pregnancy [102], demonstrated that subjective symptoms following receipt of vaccination were associated with the magnitude of inflammatory responses [103], and demonstrated effects of prior maternal vaccination on antibody transfer to the neonate [104]. There is still much to be explored in this area of stress and vaccination.

Jan’s contributions in the area of aging have been incredibly influential to myself and the larger scientific community. For example her work on telomere length, a key indicator of biological aging [105], has

demonstrated that dietary factors, particularly omega-3 fatty acid intake, and psychological stress including childhood adversity and caregiving stress affect the rate of aging [15,106–108]. In investigating similar questions, my colleagues and I have found effects of childhood adversity and social support on telomere length in perinatal women, a population for which aging has unique potential health implications [109]. In addition, Jan's extensive data in the area of the gut microbiome and leaky gut has demonstrated how marital distress and depression negatively affect gut microbiome composition as well as the presence of leaky gut, or dysbiosis of the gut that results in translocation of bacterial endotoxin, contributing to systemic inflammation [73,74, 110–114]. This work inspired me to examine related research questions. My data in women and toddlers showed associations between the gut microbiome in early life with both maternal obesity and measures of temperament in toddlers [115–117], and we are currently exploring how leaky gut changes across the course of late pregnancy through postpartum.

The examination of stress reactivity paradigms, inflammation and Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) latency, influenza virus vaccine models, biological aging, the gut microbiome, and more have provided an outstanding basis for a productive independent research career. And, through new grants of my own, and "inheriting" ongoing studies upon Jan's retirement, I endeavor to continue to broaden my scope to the examination of other populations and biomarkers including studies of stress and resilience among sexual and gender diverse populations [118], adults living with cancer and their partners [119,120], and caregivers for spouses with Alzheimer's and related dementias [20]. Jan has always been on the cutting-edge of research, as demonstrated by the diversity and wide-ranging impact of her studies. As shown by my the connections between Jan's work and my own, I have benefited from the opportunity to address related questions, and I am only one of the numerous trainees she has launched.

In sum, Jan truly turned stress into success. Not only for herself, but for her mentees and colleagues. Jan's legacy certainly isn't confined to academic journals. It lives in the people she influenced, mentored, and sponsored along the way - the students who discovered their passion, and the colleagues who admired her talent, work ethic, and collaborative spirit. Her ability to translate complex science into practical advice make her a sought-after speaker. The enduring relevance and applicability of her work is evident. Her impact on the field, her mentees, and her colleagues will only continue to grow as their efforts continue and they train future generations of scholars. I am fortunate to count myself among them.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lisa M. Christian: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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