

## AYURVEDIC APPROACHES TO MANAGING STRESS AND ANXIETY

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Attribution 4.0 International license.**ABSTRACT**

Stress and anxiety represent significant global health concerns, contributing to a wide spectrum of psychosomatic disorders. Contemporary management often focuses on symptomatic relief, whereas Ayurveda emphasizes a holistic approach targeting the root cause. In Ayurvedic literature, stress and anxiety can be correlated with conditions such as *Chittodvega*, *Vishada*, and *Unmada*, arising due to the imbalance of *Manasika Doshas* (*Rajas* and *Tamas*) along with aggravation of *Vata Dosh*, particularly *Prana Vata*. This review explores the Ayurvedic understanding of stress and anxiety through classical concepts including *Nidana* (etiology), *Samprapti* (pathogenesis), and *Chikitsa Siddhanta* (treatment principles). Therapeutic approaches such as *Medhya Rasayana*,

*Panchakarma* procedures, *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa*, and lifestyle modifications are discussed in detail. The integration of these modalities offers a comprehensive and sustainable strategy for mental health management. The study highlights the relevance of Ayurvedic principles in addressing modern psychological disorders and suggests their potential integration into contemporary healthcare systems.

**KEYWORDS:** Ayurveda, Stress, Anxiety, Medhya Rasayana, Panchakarma, Sattava, Rajas, Tamas.

**INTRODUCTION**

Stress and anxiety disorders have become increasingly prevalent due to rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, and psychosocial pressures. According to modern medicine, stress is a

physiological and psychological response to external or internal stimuli, while anxiety is characterized by excessive apprehension, fear, and autonomic disturbances. Ayurveda, the ancient science of life, provides a detailed understanding of mental health through the concept of *Sharirika* and *Manasika Doshas*. The equilibrium of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* determines mental well-being. A predominance of *Sattva* is associated with clarity and stability, whereas *Rajas* and *Tamas* lead to mental disturbances.

Classical Ayurvedic texts such as *Charaka Samhita* describe various psychological conditions.

- *Chittodvega* (anxiety-like state)
- *Vishada* (depression)
- *Unmada* (psychosis)

Among the three *Doshas*, *Vata Dosha* plays a central role in neurological and psychological functions. Its aggravation leads to instability of mind, fear, and worry, which are hallmarks of anxiety disorders.

#### Concept of Mind in Ayurveda (*Manas*)

Ayurveda considers *Manas* as an independent entity responsible for cognition, perception, and emotional processing. It is influenced by three fundamental qualities.

- *Sattva* – purity, harmony, intelligence
- *Rajas* – activity, agitation, stimulation
- *Tamas* – inertia, dullness, ignorance

Mental health is achieved when *Sattva* predominates. Stress and anxiety occur due to.

- Increase in *Rajas* (hyperactivity, restlessness)
- Association with *Vata Dosha*
- Depletion of *Sattva*

#### NIDANA (Etiology)

In Ayurveda, *Nidana* refers not only to causative factors but also to the underlying behavioral, dietary, psychological, and environmental triggers that initiate *Dosha* vitiation and disturb *Manasika* equilibrium. Stress and anxiety (*Chittodvega*, *Vishada*) are considered *Manasika Vikara* with a strong association of *Vata Dosha* and *Rajo Guna* predominance.

### 1. *Manasika Nidana* (Psychological Factors)

The primary etiological factors originate at the level of the mind (*Manas*). Ayurveda gives significant importance to uncontrolled emotions.

- *Chinta* (Excessive worry): Persistent thinking leads to *Prana Vata dushti*, causing instability in cognitive functions.
- *Bhaya* (Fear): Directly aggravates *Vata Dosha*, producing symptoms like tremors, palpitations, and restlessness.
- *Shoka* (Grief): Leads to depletion of *Ojas* and *Sattva*, weakening mental resilience.
- *Krodha* (Anger): Though primarily associated with *Pitta*, chronic anger disturbs mental equilibrium and contributes to anxiety.
- *Irshya, Lobha, Moha*: These negative emotions increase *Rajas* and *Tamas*, impairing mental clarity.

### 2. *Aharaja Nidana* (Dietary Factors)

Diet has a direct impact on both *Sharirika* and *Manasika Doshas*.

- *Vata*-aggravating foods.
  - o Dry (*Ruksha*)
  - o Light (*Laghu*)
  - o Cold (*Sheeta*)
  - o Excess fasting or irregular meals

These qualities increase *Vata*, leading to nervous system hyperactivity.

- *Viruddha Ahara* (Incompatible diet).

Causes *Ama* formation, which obstructs *Manovaha Srotas* and disturbs mental functioning.

- Excess stimulants:
  - o Tea, coffee
  - o Refined sugars
  - o Processed food

These increase *Rajas*, leading to restlessness.

### 3. *Viharaja Nidana* (Lifestyle Factors)

Improper lifestyle is one of the most significant contributors:

- *Nidranasha* (Sleep deprivation).

Leads to *Vata vridhhi* and depletion of *Ojas*, causing anxiety and irritability.

- *Atichintana* (Overthinking).

Constant mental engagement leads to exhaustion of *Manas*.

- *Vega Dharana* (Suppression of natural urges).

Especially suppression of sleep and emotions disturbs *Vata*.

- *Asatmya Indriyatha Samyoga*.

Improper use of senses (excess screen time, noise, overstimulation) disturbs mental balance.

#### 4. *Kalaja* and External Factors

- Environmental stressors
- Occupational pressure
- Trauma or sudden life events
- Social isolation

These act as *Agantuja Nidana* (external causes), triggering internal *Dosha* imbalance

#### 5. *Sharirika Nidana* (Somatic Factors)

- *Vata Prakriti* individuals are more prone to anxiety
- Chronic illness weakens *Ojas*
- Hormonal imbalance contributes to mental instability.

#### 6. *Nidana Panchaka Integration*

- *Hetu* (Cause): Emotional, dietary, lifestyle factors
- *Purvarupa*: Mild restlessness
- *Rupa*: Anxiety, insomnia, fear
- *Upashaya*: Relief with oiling, rest, calm environment
- *Samprapti*: *Vata + Rajas* aggravation

#### **SAMPRAPTI (Pathogenesis)**

The pathogenesis of stress and anxiety in Ayurveda involves a complex interaction between *Dosha* imbalance, *Guna* disturbance, and dysfunction of bodily channels (*Srotas*). *Vata Dosha*, particularly *Prana Vata*, plays a central role in regulating mental activities such as thinking, perception, and emotional responses. When *Vata* becomes aggravated due to various etiological factors, it leads to instability in the nervous system, manifesting as restlessness, fear, insomnia, and lack of concentration. Simultaneously, an increase in *Rajas Guna* results in excessive mental activity, hyper-responsiveness to stimuli, and emotional

turbulence. *Tamas Guna* may also become involved, leading to confusion, lethargy, and depressive tendencies. The disturbance of *Manovaha Srotas*, which are the channels responsible for mental functioning, further impairs the coordination between sensory inputs and motor responses. Over time, chronic stress affects *Ojas*, the vital essence that represents immunity, vitality, and mental strength. Depletion of *Ojas* results in reduced resilience, fatigue, and increased susceptibility to psychological and physical disorders. The cumulative effect of these changes leads to the progression of stress and anxiety from mild disturbances to chronic conditions. Thus, *Samprapti* in Ayurveda provides a comprehensive understanding of how internal imbalances translate into clinical manifestations of mental disorders.

The pathogenesis of stress and anxiety can be explained in the following sequence.

1. Exposure to etiological factors disturbs mental equilibrium
2. Aggravation of *Vata Dosha* (especially *Prana Vata*)
3. Increase in *Rajas Guna* leading to hyperactivity of mind
4. Depletion of *Sattva* (mental resilience)
5. Dysfunction of *Manovaha Srotas*
6. Manifestation of symptoms such as fear, and insomnia

#### *Samprapti Ghataka*

- *Dosha: Vata (Prana Vata)*
- *Dushya: Manas*
- *Srotas: Manovaha Srotas*
- *Agni: Vishama Agni*
- *Udbhava Sthana: Hridaya*
- *Vyadhi Marga: Madhyama*

#### LAKASHANA (Clinical Features)

##### Psychological Symptoms

- Excessive worry and fear
- Restlessness
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Mood fluctuations

### Somatic Symptoms

- Palpitations
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Muscle tension
- Digestive disturbances

### *CHIKITSA SIDDHANT* (Therapeutic Principles)

The management is based on the following core principles.

- *Nidana Parivarjana* – elimination of causative factors
- *Vata Shamana* – pacification of aggravated Vata
- *Rajas–Tamas Shamana* – reduction of mental impurities
- *Sattva Vriddhi* – enhancement of mental strength
- *Rasayana Chikitsa* – rejuvenation of nervous system

These principles ensure a root-cause-oriented and preventive approach.

### *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa* (Ayurvedic Psychotherapy)

*Sattvavajaya Chikitsa* is the cornerstone of mental health management in Ayurveda. It is defined as the control of mind from unwholesome objects (*Ahita Vishaya*).

### Mechanism of Action

- Regulates thought patterns
- Reduces emotional reactivity
- Enhances cognitive control (*Dhi, Dhriti, Smriti*)

### Therapeutic Techniques

- Cognitive restructuring
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Emotional discipline
- Positive thinking reinforcement

### Clinical Relevance

It closely resembles modern psychotherapy but extends beyond it by incorporating ethical, behavioral, and spiritual dimensions, thereby offering deeper and sustained mental stability.

### ***Aushadhi Chikitsa (Pharmacological Management)***

Ayurveda utilizes *Medhya Rasayana* and adaptogenic herbs that act on the central nervous system.

#### *Medhya Rasayana* Drugs

1. *Brahmi* (*Bacopa monnieri*)

- Enhances memory and cognition
- Reduces anxiety

2. *Ashwagandha* (*Withania somnifera*)

- Potent adaptogen
- Reduces cortisol levels
- Improves stress tolerance

3. *Shankhapushpi*

- Calms the mind
- Improves intellectual functions

4. *Mandukaparni* (*Centella asiatica*)

- Neuroprotective
- Enhances mental clarity

#### Classical Formulations

- *Brahmi Ghrita* – improves cognition and calmness
- *Saraswatarishta* – enhances speech and mental function
- *Manasamitra Vatakam* – used in severe anxiety and psychiatric conditions
- *Ashwagandharishta* – reduces stress and fatigue

These formulations work by.

- Modulating neurotransmitter activity
- Enhancing neuroplasticity
- Reducing oxidative stress

### ***Panchakarma Therapy***

*Panchakarma* therapies play a vital role in detoxification and neuro-hormonal regulation.

1. *Shirodhara*

- Continuous pouring of medicated oil on forehead
- Induces deep relaxation
- Regulates hypothalamic activity

## 2. *Abhyanga* (Oil Massage)

- Pacifies *Vata*
- Reduces muscle tension
- Promotes relaxation

## 3. *Nasya* (Nasal Administration)

- Direct effect on brain and nervous system
- Improves mental clarity

## 4. *Basti* (Medicated Enema)

- Most effective for *Vata* disorders
- Regulates nervous system functions

*Panchakarma* provides both detoxification and neuromodulation, making it highly effective in chronic stress disorders.

### ***Ahara Chikitsa* (Dietary Management)**

Diet is a fundamental component in Ayurvedic management.

Recommended Diet (*Sattvic Ahara*)

- Warm, nourishing foods
- Milk, *ghee*
- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Whole grains

Foods to Avoid

- Dry and cold foods
- Processed and junk foods
- Excess caffeine and stimulants

A *Sattvic* diet promotes.

- Mental clarity
- Emotional stability
- Reduction in *Rajas* and *Tamas*

**Vihara Chikitsa (Lifestyle Modifications)**

Lifestyle correction is essential for long-term management.

**Dinacharya (Daily Regimen)**

- Regular sleep-wake cycle
- Balanced work-rest pattern

**Yoga**

- Enhances mind-body coordination
- Reduces stress response

**Pranayama**

- *Anulom Vilom* – balances autonomic system
- *Bhramari* – reduces anxiety

**Meditation**

- Increases *Sattva*
- Reduces mental fluctuations

These practices directly influence the neuroendocrine axis, improving resilience to stress.

**Rasayana Therapy (Rejuvenation Therapy)**

*Rasayana* therapy enhances.

- *Ojas* (vital essence)
- Immunity

It prevents recurrence and promotes long-term well-being.

**Integrative Understanding**

Ayurvedic management of stress and anxiety is unique because it:

- Targets root cause rather than symptoms.
- Integrates body, mind, and behavior.
- Provides preventive as well as curative care.

Modern research supports Ayurvedic interventions:

- *Ashwagandha* reduces cortisol.
- Meditation improves brain plasticity.
- *Panchakarma* enhances autonomic balance.

## DISCUSSION

The Ayurvedic approach to stress and anxiety offers a holistic and integrative framework that differs significantly from the conventional biomedical model. While modern medicine primarily focuses on neurochemical imbalances and symptomatic relief, Ayurveda interprets these conditions as disturbances of *Vata Dosha* and *Manasika Gunas*, particularly *Rajas*, along with depletion of *Sattva*. This perspective enables a broader understanding of the mind–body interaction, where psychological disturbances are closely linked with physiological processes such as *Agni* and *Manovaha Srotas*. The incorporation of *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa* provides a structured method for mental regulation, comparable to modern psychotherapy but with added ethical and spiritual dimensions. Additionally, the use of *Medhya Rasayana* and *Panchakarma* therapies contributes to both neurophysiological balance and mental stability. Lifestyle interventions, including diet, sleep regulation, and *yoga*, further strengthen resilience against stress. Although the Ayurvedic model demonstrates significant potential in managing chronic stress and anxiety, further scientific validation and clinical standardization are necessary for its wider acceptance in contemporary healthcare systems.

## CONCLUSION

Ayurveda provides a comprehensive and time-tested approach to the management of stress and anxiety by focusing on the balance of Doshas, regulation of mental Gunas, and strengthening of the mind-body connection. Through a combination of herbal therapies, dietary modifications, lifestyle interventions, Panchakarma procedures, and mind-body practices, Ayurveda addresses both the symptoms and underlying causes of psychological disorders. Its emphasis on prevention, personalization, and holistic healing makes it highly relevant in the context of modern healthcare. Integrating Ayurvedic principles with contemporary medical practices can enhance the effectiveness of mental health management and provide sustainable solutions for individuals suffering from stress and anxiety.

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