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Ayurvedic insights for Psychological wellness

Dr. Satish Kumar Soni ^{1*}, Satyanarayan Sharma ²

¹ Associate Professor and HOD, Department of Maulik Siddhant & Samhita, Govt. Ayurved College, Sikar, Rajasthan, India

² Professor, Principal, Govt. Ayurved College, Sikar, Rajasthan, India

* Corresponding Author: Dr. Satish Kumar Soni

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Abstract

Psychological wellness is a critical aspect of overall health, encompassing mental clarity, emotional balance, and resilience. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of holistic medicine, offers a unique perspective on psychological well-being by emphasizing the interconnection between the mind, body, and spirit. This article explores the Ayurvedic approach to mental health, focusing on the concept of *Manas* (mind), the influence of the three *gunas* (Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas), and the role of *dosha* imbalances in psychological disorders.

Ayurveda's strategies for promoting mental health include a balanced diet, daily and seasonal routines, and the use of specific herbal remedies such as Ashwagandha, Brahmi, and Shankhapushpi. Additionally, therapeutic practices like Panchakarma, Nasya, Shirodhara, and meditation are highlighted for their effectiveness in enhancing psychological wellness. The article also discusses the relevance of mindfulness and meditation in cultivating a *Sattvic* mind, which is essential for achieving mental stability and clarity.

In the modern context, Ayurveda's principles are increasingly integrated into contemporary mental health care, with growing scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of Ayurvedic practices. As the demand for holistic and natural approaches to mental health continues to rise, Ayurveda's comprehensive and individualized strategies present a valuable complement to conventional treatments, offering a promising path toward sustained psychological wellness.

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1. Introduction

Psychological wellness refers to a state of mental well-being where an individual can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community. It encompasses emotional balance, mental clarity, resilience, and a sense of purpose. Psychological wellness is not just the absence of mental illness but the presence of positive mental health attributes such as self-esteem, optimism, and the ability to maintain fulfilling relationships. Ayurveda, an ancient Indian system of medicine, is a holistic approach to health that emphasizes the balance between the mind, body, and spirit. Originating over 5,000 years ago, Ayurveda aims to prevent illness and promote health through natural means, including diet, lifestyle, herbal remedies, and spiritual practices. Unlike Western medicine, which often focuses on treating symptoms, Ayurveda seeks to address the root cause of imbalances in the body and mind, thus ensuring long-term well-being.

Ayurvedic Perspective on Mind and Mental Health

Concept of Mind in Ayurveda

In Ayurveda, the mind (*Manas*) is a crucial component of health, influencing and being influenced by the physical body.

The mind is considered the driver of the body's actions and is responsible for perception, cognition, and emotions. Ayurvedic texts describe the mind as subtle and connected to both the soul (Atma) and the body, forming a triad essential for life. Maintaining mental clarity and stability is seen as vital for overall health.

Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas

The three gunas — Sattva (purity), Rajas (activity), and Tamas (inertia)—are fundamental qualities of the mind that govern mental and emotional states:

- **Sattva:** Represents purity, wisdom, and harmony. A Sattvic mind is calm, balanced, and clear.
- **Rajas:** Associated with passion, desire, and restlessness. An excess of Rajas leads to agitation, anxiety, and hyperactivity.
- **Tamas:** Linked to darkness, ignorance, and lethargy. Dominance of Tamas causes depression, confusion, and sluggishness.

The balance among these gunas determines an individual's psychological state. Ayurveda emphasizes increasing Sattva through proper diet, meditation, and ethical living.

Mind-Body Connection

Ayurveda views the mind and body as deeply interconnected. Mental imbalances can manifest as physical ailments, and physical disorders can disturb mental health. For example, stress (Rajas) can lead to digestive problems (Pitta imbalance), and a poor diet can cloud the mind (Tamas). Thus, Ayurvedic treatment focuses on restoring balance to both the mind and body to achieve holistic well-being.

Common Psychological Disorders in Ayurveda

Ayurvedic Classification of Psychological Disorders

Ayurveda classifies psychological disorders under the broader term Manas Roga (diseases of the mind). These are often linked to imbalances in the three doshas — Vata, Pitta, and Kapha—and disturbances in the gunas.

- **Unmada:** Refers to a range of mental disorders akin to psychosis, characterized by delusions, hallucinations, and erratic behaviour.
- **Apasmara:** Similar to epilepsy, involving seizures and loss of consciousness, often attributed to a Vata imbalance.
- **Chittodvega:** Describes anxiety and nervous disorders, linked to Vata and Pitta imbalances. Causes of Psychological Imbalance
- According to Ayurveda, psychological disorders arise from a combination of factors:
- **Dosha Imbalance:** Imbalances in Vata, Pitta, or Kapha can disturb the mind. For example, Vata aggravation causes fear and anxiety, while Pitta leads to anger and irritability.
- **Improper Diet and Lifestyle:** Unhealthy eating habits, lack of exercise, and irregular routines disrupt the balance of gunas and doshas, leading to mental disorders.
- **Emotional Disturbances:** Unresolved emotions like grief, anger, or fear disturb mental peace and contribute to psychological disorders.

Ayurvedic Approaches to Psychological Wellness

Diet and Nutrition

Ayurveda places great importance on diet as a primary tool for maintaining psychological wellness. *Sattvic* foods,

such as fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy, are recommended for promoting mental clarity and calmness. These foods are believed to increase Sattva and reduce Rajas and Tamas, fostering a balanced and harmonious mind. Avoiding Rajasic foods (spicy, fried, or stimulants) and Tamasic foods (stale, processed, or heavy) is advised to prevent mental disturbances.

Lifestyle Practices

Ayurvedic lifestyle practices, including Dinacharya (daily routine) and Ritucharya (seasonal routine), are essential for maintaining mental health. A regular routine that includes proper sleep, exercise, and relaxation helps stabilize the mind and reduce stress. Seasonal adjustments in diet and activity help maintain the balance of doshas and prevent mental imbalances caused by external environmental changes.

Herbal Remedies

Ayurveda offers a variety of herbal remedies to support psychological wellness

- **Ashwagandha:** Known for its adaptogenic properties, Ashwagandha helps reduce stress and anxiety, promoting mental calmness.
- **Brahmi:** A revered herb for enhancing cognitive function, memory, and concentration.
- **Shankhapushpi:** Traditionally used to manage anxiety, insomnia, and mental fatigue. These herbs work by balancing doshas and enhancing Sattva, contributing to a stable and clear mind.

Therapies and Treatments

Ayurveda employs specific therapies to restore psychological balance:

- **Panchakarma:** A detoxification procedure that removes toxins from the body, helping to clear mental fog and reduce stress.
- **Nasya:** Nasal administration of medicated oils, which can calm the mind and improve mental clarity.
- **Shirodhara:** A therapy involving the continuous pouring of warm oil on the forehead, deeply relaxing the mind and alleviating stress, anxiety, and insomnia.
- **Meditation and Pranayama:** Breathing exercises and meditation are integral to calming the mind and enhancing focus and mental resilience.

Mindfulness and Meditation in Ayurveda

Importance of Mindfulness

Mindfulness in Ayurveda is about maintaining awareness of the present moment and one's actions, thoughts, and emotions. It involves conscious living and self-awareness, which are essential for preventing mental disturbances and promoting emotional stability.

Ayurvedic Meditation Practices

Ayurveda includes various meditation practices tailored to balance the mind:

- **Dhyana:** A form of deep meditation that helps achieve mental tranquility and spiritual insight.
- **Pranayama:** Controlled breathing techniques that regulate the flow of prana (life force) in the body, calming the mind and reducing anxiety.
- These practices not only balance the gunas but also help in the development of a Sattvic mind, which is essential for psychological wellness.

Modern Applications and Integration

Ayurveda in Contemporary Mental Health Care

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in integrating Ayurvedic principles with modern mental health care. Practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and herbal supplements are increasingly being adopted in holistic wellness programs. Ayurveda's emphasis on individualized care and preventive approaches resonates with modern psychological wellness trends.

Research and Evidence

There is a growing body of research supporting the efficacy of Ayurvedic practices in mental health:

Studies have shown that Ashwagandha reduces cortisol levels, thereby lowering stress.

Meditation and Pranayama have been scientifically proven to reduce anxiety, depression, and enhance overall well-being. Ayurvedic detoxification therapies like Panchakarma have shown promising results in improving mental clarity and reducing psychological distress.

Conclusion

The article explored the comprehensive approach of Ayurveda towards psychological wellness, focusing on the balance of mind, body, and spirit. It discussed the Ayurvedic perspective on mental health, common psychological disorders, and the various dietary, lifestyle, and therapeutic measures to maintain mental balance.

As the world continues to seek holistic and natural approaches to mental health, Ayurveda's role is expected to expand. Its time-tested practices and emphasis on individual care offer a promising complement to conventional mental health treatments, potentially leading to more integrative and effective care models in the future.

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