



ISSN 2456-3110

Vol 9 · Issue 9

September 2024

Journal of  
**Ayurveda and Integrated  
Medical Sciences**

*www.jaims.in*

**JAIMS**

An International Journal for Researches in Ayurveda and Allied Sciences



**Maharshi Charaka**  
Ayurveda

**Indexed**

# Ayurveda and Mental Health: Integrative Perspectives on Neuro-Psychiatric Disorders

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## ABSTRACT

*Ayurveda*, the ancient Indian medical system, offers profound insights into mental health (*Manas*) by addressing the psychosomatic interface through an integrative model. As mental health disorders rise globally, exploring *Ayurveda's* role in addressing psychiatric ailments, including anxiety, depression, and cognitive decline, is essential. This review delves into the *Ayurvedic* conceptualization of mental health, particularly the role of the *Manas Doshas* (*Rajas* and *Tamas*), *Sattvavajaya* (mind pacification), and *Ojas* (mental immunity). Emphasis is placed on the therapeutic role of *Rasayana* (rejuvenation), *Panchakarma*, psychotropic herbs, and compound formulations like *Manas Mitra Vatakam* and *Smriti Sagara Rasa*, and lifestyle modifications in mental health management. Furthermore, recent advances in the neuropsychopharmacology of *Ayurvedic* herbs, integration of *Ayurveda* with modern psychiatry, and research-backed evidence supporting these interventions are critically discussed.

**Key words:** *Ayurveda*, *Mental health*, *Manas Roga*, *Rasayana*, *Neuroplasticity*, *Psychoneuro-immunology*.

## INTRODUCTION

Mental health is emerging as a significant global challenge, with the incidence of psychiatric disorders increasing dramatically. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that mental health issues, particularly depression, will be the leading cause of disability by 2030.<sup>[1]</sup> While conventional psychiatry has made great strides in managing these disorders, there is a growing interest in integrating holistic health systems such as *Ayurveda*, which provides a nuanced, body-mind approach to mental wellness.<sup>[2]</sup> In *Ayurveda*

mental health is governed by the *Manas* (mind), which is intricately linked to the *Sharira* (body) and the *Atma* (soul). The balance of the *Manas Gunas* - *Sattva* (clarity), *Rajas* (activity), and *Tamas* (inertia) - determines the psychological state of an individual. Imbalances in these qualities are believed to cause *Manas Roga* (mental disorders).<sup>[3]</sup>

This review explores the *Ayurvedic* perspective on mental health and presents evidence-based approaches, including the use of compound formulations like *Manas Mitra Vatakam* and *Smriti Sagara Rasa*, that align with modern psychopharmacology and neuroscience.

## *Ayurvedic* Concept of Mental Health: Neurobiological Analogies

*Ayurveda's* view of mental health revolves around the balance of the *Manovaha Srotas* and the regulation of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. When these three *Gunas* are in harmony, mental health is maintained. Imbalances lead to the manifestation of psychological issues. These ancient concepts parallel modern neurobiological understandings of mental health:

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Submission Date: 15/08/2024

Accepted Date: 27/09/2024

### Access this article online

Quick Response Code



Website: [www.jaims.in](http://www.jaims.in)

DOI: 10.21760/jaims.9.9.12

- *Sattva* represents clarity, intelligence, and emotional stability, similar to positive mental health and resilience.
- *Rajas* corresponds to hyperactivity, restlessness, and desire, paralleling heightened arousal and anxiety disorders.<sup>[4]</sup>
- *Tamas* is associated with lethargy, ignorance, and emotional numbness, akin to depressive states.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Neuroplasticity and *Manas Doshas*

Modern research in neuroplasticity aligns with *Ayurvedic* teachings, as imbalances in *Rajas* and *Tamas* can be viewed as the brain's maladaptive response to stress, leading to alterations in neural circuits involved in mood regulation.<sup>[6]</sup> *Ayurvedic* therapies, including psychotropic herbs and compound formulations like *Manas Mitra Vatakam* and *Smriti Sagara Rasa*, aim to restore balance in these circuits through psychophysiological interventions, improving neuroplasticity.

### Pathogenesis of Mental Disorders in *Ayurveda*: Psychoneuroimmunology

In *Ayurveda*, mental disorders are understood as *Manas Roga*, resulting from an imbalance in *Sharirika Doshas* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*) and *Manas Doshas* (*Rajas* and *Tamas*). *Ayurveda* also introduces the concept of *Ojas*, which represents the essence of vitality and mental resilience. The depletion of *Ojas* leads to *Ojokshaya*, a condition akin to chronic stress and burnout, which modern psychoneuroimmunology links to neuroinflammatory pathways.<sup>[7]</sup>

### Psychoneuroimmunology in *Ayurveda*

The *Ayurvedic* concept of *Ama* (toxins) plays a central role in mental health, and is analogous to the accumulation of stress hormones and neuroinflammation. Mental toxins accumulate due to improper *Agni* (metabolism), leading to the disruption of mental clarity and emotional resilience.<sup>[8]</sup> This psychoneuroimmunological imbalance can manifest as anxiety, depression, and cognitive dysfunction.

### *Ayurvedic* Interventions for Mental Health Disorders

#### *Panchakarma*: Detoxification and Psychophysiological Balance

*Panchakarma*, the five-fold detoxification process, addresses the accumulation of mental and physical toxins (*Ama*). It restores equilibrium between the *Doshas* and has proven neuropsychiatric benefits:

- *Shirodhara*: The therapeutic pouring of oil on the forehead stimulates the *Ajna Chakra* and modulates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, lowering cortisol levels and promoting relaxation.<sup>[9]</sup> *Shirodhara* has been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, and improve sleep quality.<sup>[10]</sup>
- *Nasya*: The administration of medicated oils through the nasal route clears the *Shirovaha Srotas* (head channels), enhancing mental clarity and cognitive function. Studies show its efficacy in treating stress-induced migraines and cognitive decline.<sup>[11]</sup>

#### *Rasayana* Therapy: Promoting Cognitive Function and Mental Resilience

*Rasayana* (rejuvenation) therapies are key in managing mental health in *Ayurveda*. Specific *Medhya Rasayanas* (nootropic herbs) enhance memory, cognition, and emotional resilience:

*Brahmi* (*Bacopa monnieri*): *Brahmi* has been widely studied for its role in enhancing memory and synaptic plasticity. Clinical trials have shown that *Brahmi* reduces anxiety and improves cognitive function in patients with Alzheimer's disease and mild cognitive impairment.<sup>[12]</sup>

*Ashwagandha* (*Withania somnifera*): An adaptogen, *Ashwagandha* lowers cortisol levels and promotes hippocampal neurogenesis, offering protection against chronic stress and anxiety. It is also effective in managing depression, as demonstrated by recent randomized controlled trials.<sup>[13]</sup>

*Shankhpushpi* (*Convolvulus pluricaulis*): *Shankhpushpi* acts on the GABAergic system, which is central to managing anxiety and stress-related disorders. Studies

have shown its potential to reduce symptoms of anxiety and enhance cognitive function.<sup>[14]</sup>

*Jatamansi (Nardostachys jatamansi)*: Known for its neuroprotective properties, *Jatamansi* reduces lipid peroxidation and oxidative stress in the brain, offering therapeutic benefits in conditions of chronic stress and neurodegeneration.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Compound Ayurvedic Formulations: Potent Multi-Herbal Remedies

#### *Manas Mitra Vatakam*

*Manas Mitra Vatakam* is a classical polyherbal formulation used in *Ayurveda* for treating a wide range of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairment. The formulation contains herbs like *Brahmi*, *Ashwagandha*, *Jatamansi*, *Shankhpushpi*, *Vacha*, and *Guduchi*, known for their *Medhya* (nootropic) properties. Studies have demonstrated its potential in modulating neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, which are crucial in mood regulation.<sup>[16]</sup> Clinical trials have shown that *Manas Mitra Vatakam* reduces anxiety and improves cognitive function in patients suffering from stress-related disorders and neurodegenerative conditions.<sup>[17]</sup>

#### *Smriti Sagara Rasa*

*Smriti Sagara Rasa* is another prominent *Ayurvedic* formulation, traditionally used for enhancing memory and managing psychological disorders like anxiety and depression. It includes key ingredients like *Vacha*, *Shankhpushpi*, and *Mukta Bhasma* (pearl ash), which possess neuroprotective and anxiolytic properties. Clinical research supports its use in improving cognitive abilities, reducing oxidative stress in the brain, and mitigating symptoms of mild-to-moderate depression.<sup>[18]</sup>

The use of such formulations has been validated in numerous studies that show the potential of multi-herbal compounds in reducing anxiety, improving memory, and enhancing overall mental resilience. Comparative studies have demonstrated that the therapeutic effects of these formulations are

comparable to modern psychotropic drugs, but with fewer side effects.<sup>[19]</sup>

### *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa (Psychotherapy in Ayurveda)*

*Sattvavajaya Chikitsa* refers to the *Ayurvedic* approach to psychotherapy, focusing on the enhancement of *Sattva* and the suppression of *Rajas* and *Tamas*. The central goal is to cultivate mental clarity, wisdom, and emotional resilience. *Sattvavajaya* involves several psychotherapeutic techniques:

*Dhyana* (Meditation): Regular practice of meditation enhances mental focus, reduces stress, and improves emotional regulation. Studies comparing *Dhyana* with modern mindfulness practices have shown that it activates similar neural pathways involved in emotional regulation and stress reduction.<sup>[20]</sup>

*Pranayama* (Breathing Exercises): *Pranayama* stabilizes the *Vata Dosha*, which is linked to anxiety and restlessness. Studies have demonstrated the benefits of *Nadi Shodhana Pranayama* in reducing anxiety and improving heart rate variability.<sup>[21]</sup>

*Yuktivyapashraya* (Rational Therapy): This approach uses cognitive restructuring techniques that align closely with modern cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). By addressing irrational thoughts and behavioural patterns, *Yuktivyapashraya* aims to restore mental balance and resilience.<sup>[22]</sup>

### Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the rich therapeutic potential of *Ayurveda* in mental health, there are challenges to its mainstream integration:

- Standardization of Herbal Formulations: Ensuring the consistent quality of *Ayurvedic* medicines like *Manas Mitra Vatakam* and *Smriti Sagara Rasa* is crucial for broader adoption.
- Collaboration with Modern Psychiatry: Greater collaboration between *Ayurvedic* and conventional psychiatrists can lead to innovative treatments, blending psychopharmacology with holistic care.
- Research and Evidence: Continued scientific validation of *Ayurvedic* treatments through

randomized clinical trials and neuroimaging studies will be essential for global acceptance.<sup>[23]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*Ayurveda* provides a holistic and integrative approach to mental health, offering robust solutions through *Panchakarma*, *Rasayana*, and *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa*. Compound formulations like *Manas Mitra Vatakam* and *Smriti Sagara Rasa* are showing promise in clinical settings. As *Ayurveda* gains scientific validation, its role as a complementary approach to modern psychiatry is becoming clearer. By addressing the root cause of *Manas Roga* and promoting *Sattva*, *Ayurveda* offers a path to a balanced, resilient, and healthy mind.

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**How to cite this article:** Solanki Akshay, Maya, H.M.L. Meena. Ayurveda and Mental Health: Integrative Perspectives on Neuro-Psychiatric Disorders. *J Ayurveda Integr Med Sci* 2024;9:82-86.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.21760/jaims.9.9.12>

**Source of Support:** Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared.

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