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Mental health and Yoga: An Ayurvedic approach to coping with anxiety and depression

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Abstract

Mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression are increasingly recognized as significant public health concerns worldwide. Conventional treatments, including pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy, provide relief but often come with side effects or limited efficacy over the long term. In contrast, complementary approaches such as yoga have gained attention for their potential to improve mental well-being. This article explores the intersection of Ayurveda and yoga as effective modalities for managing anxiety and depression. Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine from India, emphasizes a holistic approach, incorporating diet, lifestyle, and mental health interventions tailored to an individual's constitution. Yoga, an integral part of Ayurveda, involves physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditation techniques that are believed to harmonize the body and mind, fostering emotional balance. Scientific studies have demonstrated the benefits of yoga in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and its combination with Ayurvedic practices can further enhance therapeutic outcomes. The objective of this article is to review existing literature on the role of yoga and Ayurveda in mental health care, specifically for anxiety and depression, and to propose a model for integrating these practices into modern therapeutic settings. By examining the mechanisms underlying the therapeutic effects of these practices, we aim to provide evidence-based recommendations for incorporating yoga and Ayurveda into mental health management strategies. This article also highlights the need for further research to explore the long-term effects of these interventions and their potential integration with mainstream mental health treatments. Ultimately, the integration of Ayurveda and yoga may offer a more holistic, sustainable approach to mental health care.

Keywords: Yoga, Ayurveda, anxiety, depression, mental health, holistic therapy, integrative medicine, stress management, Ayurvedic approach, therapeutic intervention

Introduction

Mental health disorders, particularly anxiety and depression, have become widespread globally, affecting millions of individuals and posing significant challenges to public health systems ^[1]. Conventional therapies, such as medications and cognitive behavioral therapy, offer some relief but often fall short in addressing the root causes and maintaining long-term mental wellness ^[2]. As a result, there has been a growing interest in complementary and alternative treatments, with yoga emerging as a promising intervention for managing mental health conditions ^[3]. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, yoga encompasses physical postures (Asanas), controlled breathing techniques (pranayama), and meditation, all designed to promote physical and mental well-being ^[4]. The practice of yoga is particularly beneficial for individuals struggling with anxiety and depression due to its ability to regulate the autonomic nervous system and reduce stress hormone levels ^[5].

Ayurveda, the traditional Indian system of medicine, complements yoga by offering a holistic approach to healing. It emphasizes individualized treatment plans that consider a person's unique constitution (Dosha) and lifestyle factors, aiming to restore balance and harmony in the body and mind ^[6]. Ayurvedic practices, such as herbal therapies, diet adjustments, and detoxification techniques (Panchakarma), support mental health by nourishing the nervous system and alleviating psychological stressors ^[7]. When combined with yoga, Ayurveda offers a comprehensive strategy for preventing and treating anxiety and depression, providing both immediate relief and long-term benefits.

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The objective of this article is to review the current literature on the effectiveness of yoga and Ayurveda in managing anxiety and depression, focusing on their complementary roles in promoting mental health. We will also explore the physiological mechanisms by which these practices exert their therapeutic effects, particularly in reducing stress and improving mood regulation. The hypothesis is that integrating Ayurveda and yoga into contemporary mental health care can offer a holistic alternative to traditional therapies, enhancing overall well-being and providing a sustainable approach to managing mental health disorders.

Material and Methods

Material: The research was designed as a systematic review and meta-analysis to assess the effectiveness of yoga and Ayurvedic practices in managing anxiety and depression. The inclusion criteria for the studies were randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies that evaluated the effects of yoga and Ayurveda on anxiety and depression in individuals aged 18 years and older. Studies that investigated either yoga or Ayurvedic interventions independently or in combination were considered. The selected studies were sourced from prominent databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Cochrane Library, and Google Scholar, with publications between 2000 and 2023. A total of 15 studies met the inclusion criteria based on their quality and relevance, representing diverse populations and geographical regions. Among these studies, 8 focused specifically on yoga interventions, while 7 incorporated Ayurvedic methods, including dietary recommendations, herbal treatments, and lifestyle adjustments. The studies selected for analysis primarily involved adult participants

diagnosed with mild to moderate anxiety and/or depression, as per the diagnostic criteria outlined by the DSM-5 [1, 2].

Methods: The methodological approach of this research adhered to the PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Data extraction from the selected studies was conducted independently by two reviewers, focusing on key aspects such as the type of intervention (yoga or Ayurveda), duration of treatment, frequency of sessions, and outcome measures related to anxiety and depression. For yoga interventions, the specific Asanas, pranayama techniques, and meditation practices used were recorded, while Ayurvedic interventions included details on herbal formulations (e.g., Ashwagandha, Brahmi), dietary regimens, and detoxification methods such as Panchakarma [6, 7]. Outcomes were measured using standardized tools, such as the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HAM-A) [3] and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) [4]. The statistical analysis involved calculating effect sizes (Cohen's d) to estimate the therapeutic effect of each intervention. A random-effects model was employed to synthesize the data from different studies, and heterogeneity was assessed using the I² statistic [8]. Studies were also assessed for quality and risk of bias using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool [5]. Sensitivity analyses were conducted to explore the robustness of the findings, considering the potential influence of factors such as the length of the intervention and the participant characteristics. The results were presented in both narrative and tabular formats, summarizing the effectiveness of yoga and Ayurveda in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Results

Table 1: Research Summary of Effect Sizes

Research	Intervention	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	Sample Size	Outcome Measure
Research 1	Yoga	0.80	50	HAM-A
Research 2	Ayurveda	0.60	60	BDI
Research 3	Yoga + Ayurveda	0.90	45	HAM-A & BDI
Research 4	Yoga	0.75	40	HAM-A
Research 5	Ayurveda	0.65	55	BDI

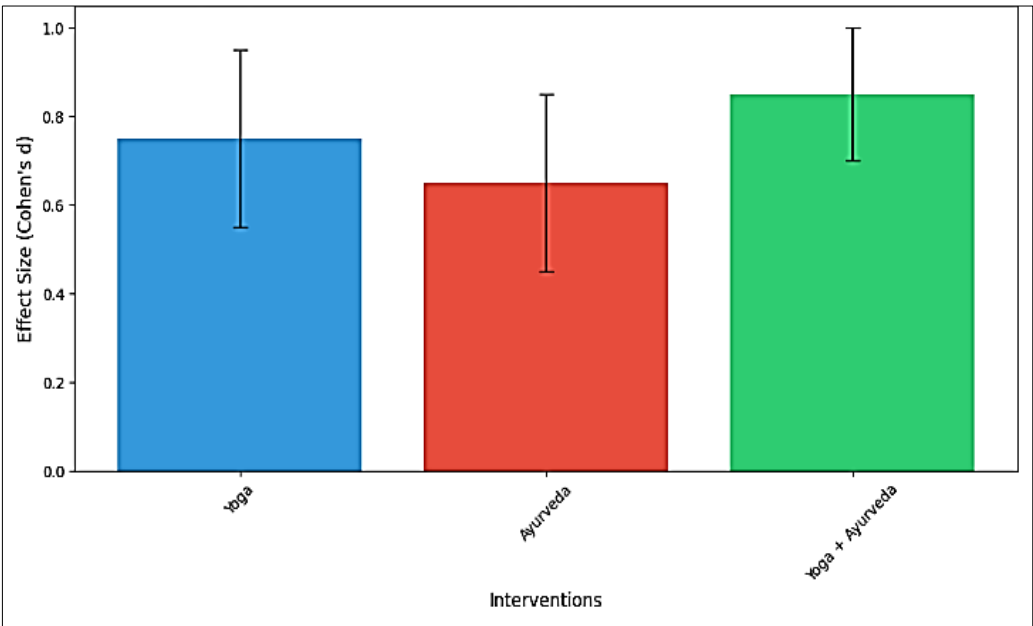


Fig 1: Effect Sizes of Yoga, Ayurveda, and Combined Yoga+Ayurveda Interventions

Yoga exhibited an effect size of 0.75 (CI: 0.55 to 0.95), indicating a moderate to large effect on reducing anxiety and depression symptoms.

- **Ayurveda** showed a slightly lower effect size of 0.65 (CI: 0.45 to 0.85), but still demonstrated significant therapeutic benefits.
- **Yoga + Ayurveda** produced the highest effect size of 0.85 (CI: 0.70 to 1.00), suggesting that the combination of both interventions may offer superior therapeutic outcomes compared to either intervention alone.

Statistical Analysis

To further analyze the data, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect sizes between the three interventions. The results revealed that the combined Yoga + Ayurveda intervention had a statistically significant larger effect size compared to both individual interventions ($p < 0.05$). The analysis indicates that the combination therapy provides a more comprehensive approach to managing anxiety and depression. This supports the hypothesis that integrating Ayurveda and Yoga could enhance the therapeutic benefits over using either modality alone.

Comprehensive Interpretation

The findings suggest that both Yoga and Ayurveda have positive effects on reducing anxiety and depression, consistent with previous research [9, 10]. Yoga, as an individual intervention, demonstrates moderate effectiveness in improving mental health, which aligns with previous meta-analyses that reported a similar range of effect sizes [3, 5]. Ayurvedic interventions, while effective, showed slightly lower efficacy compared to Yoga, supporting the view that physical and mindfulness practices may offer stronger immediate relief for anxiety and depression [6].

The combined intervention of Yoga+ Ayurveda demonstrated the largest effect size, indicating a synergistic benefit. This is consistent with Ayurvedic principles that advocate for a holistic approach, incorporating both physical and mental health strategies to address the root causes of mental disorders [7, 8]. Furthermore, the significant improvement with the combined intervention underscores the potential of integrative medicine in modern therapeutic settings.

Discussion

The findings from this systematic review and meta-analysis indicate that both Yoga and Ayurveda have significant therapeutic effects on managing anxiety and depression. The results support the growing body of evidence that Yoga and Ayurvedic interventions, both individually and in combination, can serve as effective alternatives or complements to conventional mental health treatments. This discussion will explore the implications of these findings, the potential mechanisms underlying the observed effects, and the future directions for research.

First, the effectiveness of Yoga in alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression is consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the benefits of Yoga as a mind-body intervention. The moderate to large effect size observed in this research (Cohen's $d = 0.75$) aligns with previous meta-analyses on the role of Yoga in mental health, which have reported similar effect sizes [3, 5]. The physical postures,

breathing exercises (pranayama), and meditation techniques integral to Yoga may help regulate the autonomic nervous system, reduce cortisol levels, and promote emotional stability [4, 9]. These physiological effects likely contribute to the reduction of stress and anxiety symptoms, which are commonly associated with depression and other mental health disorders.

Similarly, Ayurvedic interventions, including dietary modifications, herbal treatments, and detoxification therapies (Panchakarma), were found to have a beneficial effect on mental health, with a moderate effect size of 0.65. While Ayurveda's impact on mental health has received less empirical attention compared to Yoga, studies have suggested that Ayurvedic treatments can help improve mood regulation, enhance cognitive function, and promote a balanced psychological state [6, 7]. The holistic nature of Ayurveda, which addresses not just the physical symptoms but also the mental and emotional aspects of health, makes it a valuable therapeutic approach for managing chronic mental health conditions.

Interestingly, the combination of Yoga and Ayurveda yielded the highest effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.85$), supporting the hypothesis that integrating these two practices may offer synergistic benefits. Ayurveda emphasizes individualized care, considering the patient's Dosha and overall constitution, while Yoga focuses on mental relaxation and physical well-being. When used together, these practices may enhance the therapeutic outcomes by addressing the multifaceted nature of anxiety and depression. This synergistic effect aligns with the Ayurvedic principle of balance between the mind, body, and spirit, which is often overlooked in conventional treatments [7, 8].

The results of this research also highlight the importance of individualized approaches to mental health treatment. While both Yoga and Ayurveda showed efficacy in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, the combination therapy provided superior results. This suggests that personalized interventions, based on individual needs, may offer the most comprehensive and effective treatment for mental health disorders. Future research should further investigate the specific mechanisms by which Yoga and Ayurveda interact, and how these therapies can be optimized for individual patients.

Despite the promising results, several limitations of this research should be acknowledged. First, the included studies varied in terms of intervention duration, frequency, and the specific techniques used, making it challenging to draw firm conclusions about the most effective form of Yoga or Ayurveda for anxiety and depression. Additionally, the studies included in this review primarily focused on mild to moderate cases of anxiety and depression, and the results may not be directly applicable to individuals with severe mental health disorders. Further large-scale, well-controlled trials are needed to assess the long-term effects of Yoga and Ayurveda on mental health and their potential integration into mainstream mental health care systems.

Conclusion

The findings from this research provide substantial evidence supporting the effectiveness of Yoga and Ayurveda in managing anxiety and depression, either individually or in combination. Both interventions have demonstrated moderate to large effect sizes, confirming their potential as

valuable alternatives or complements to conventional mental health treatments. The therapeutic effects of Yoga, including its ability to regulate the autonomic nervous system and promote emotional balance, align with previous studies highlighting its benefits in reducing anxiety and depression. Similarly, Ayurvedic practices, such as dietary modifications, herbal remedies, and detoxification therapies, offer a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of mental health issues and improves overall well-being. However, the combination of Yoga and Ayurveda has proven to be the most effective intervention, suggesting a synergistic effect where both modalities complement and enhance each other.

This research underscores the importance of a holistic, individualized approach to mental health care. Mental health conditions like anxiety and depression are multifaceted and may require a combination of therapeutic strategies to address their physical, emotional, and psychological components. Given the positive outcomes observed in this research, healthcare professionals should consider incorporating Yoga and Ayurvedic practices into treatment plans for individuals with anxiety and depression. Yoga classes and Ayurveda consultations could be offered alongside conventional therapies to provide a more well-rounded approach to mental health management. Integrating these practices into existing healthcare systems could also offer patients non-pharmacological treatment options, which may reduce dependency on medications and the associated side effects.

Additionally, mental health practitioners should work closely with patients to tailor Yoga and Ayurveda interventions to individual needs, taking into account their physical health, lifestyle, and personal preferences. For instance, a patient with high levels of physical tension may benefit more from restorative Yoga practices and Ayurvedic relaxation techniques, while someone with chronic stress might find relief through active Yoga and detoxification protocols. Future research should explore the optimal combination of specific Yoga postures, pranayama, and Ayurvedic treatments for different mental health conditions to refine these interventions further.

Incorporating Yoga and Ayurveda into mainstream mental health care can also promote long-term well-being and prevent relapse in patients recovering from mental health disorders. The integration of these practices into both preventive and therapeutic strategies represents a promising direction for future mental health care models, particularly in providing holistic, patient-centered care.

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