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AN AYURVEDIC OVERVIEW OF DEPRESSION AND ITS MANAGEMENT THROUGH YOGA

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ABSTRACT:

Depression is a very common health problem with high global incidence. According to World Health Organization, depression accounts for about 15% of diseases in the world¹. These depressive disorders are not new but they have been with the mankind since the beginning of the recorded history. In the time period of samhitas it is described as a state of increased tamas and kapha. Here it is known as Vishada, which is one of the eighty Vataja Nanatmaja Vikara, which indicates that it cannot occur without the involvement of vata dosha.¹ It is treatable condition but high rate of relapses and the side effects of anti depressive drugs have forced the world to search for other options, like yoga. Yogic practices like Asana, Pranayama, Shatkarma etc. have positive effect on body and mind both. These procedures also remove the energy blocks and recirculate it, and thus restoring the energy, vitality, and positive attitude towards life

KEY WORDS: Asana, Depression, Pranayama, Vishada, Yoga

INTRODUCTION

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Body and mind constitute the substrata of diseases and happiness (positive health). Balanced utilization of time, mental faculties, and object of sense organs is the cause of happiness.³ Mind is also

one among the three basic pillars of life along with body and soul.⁴ In its holistic approach, *Ayurveda* gives prime importance to positive mental health. Anything that disturbs the balance of body and mind is known to produce a disease.

Depression is a very common condition having a high global incidence, which according to World Health Organization accounts for about 15% of disease in the world.⁵ These depressive disorders are not new; they have been with the mankind since the beginning of the recorded history. In *Ayurvedic* texts it is described as *vishada*, a state of increased *tamas* and *kapha*. It is one of the eighty *vataja nanatmaja vikara*,⁶ which indicates that it cannot occur without the involvement of *vata dosha*.

VISHADA IN CLASSICAL TEXTS:

Although *Samhitakaras* like *Caraka*, *Sushruta* and *Vagbhata* highlighted the topic at various places, commentators like *Chakrapanidatta*, *Dalhana*

elaborated it and had given specific definitions which match to the modern scientific views.

Acharya Dalhana defines *vishada* as a condition originated from apprehension of failure resulting into incapability of mind and body to function properly. There is significant reduction in both the activities.⁷ *Chakrapani* comments that *vishada* is a feeling of incompetence to accomplish or perform a desired work. This refers to the loss of self confidence in the disorder leading the person to triad of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness.⁸ *Vishada* comprises a condition *Avasada* i.e. lassitude of speech, body and mind.

Dalhanacharya clearly indicates it as the feeling of unwillingness to respond or retardation of physical and mental activities.⁹ *Vishada* is a persistent feeling of sadness and inappropriate guilt which are the cardinal signs of depression as it is stated by *Gangadhara* and *Arunadatta*, commentators of *Caraka Samhita* and *Ashtanga*

Hridaya respectively. ,^{10,11} Again according to *Dalhanacharya*, *avasada* is defined as lassitude of mind and body in their functions. As narrated above *avasada* may be a partial condition in *vishada*.¹²

Modern science defines depression is a syndrome- which reflects a sad and / or irritable mood exceeding normal sadness or grief which is characterized by a greater intensity and by more severe symptoms and functional disabilities than normal. And clinical depression is a persistently sad, hopeless and sometimes agitated state that profoundly lowers the quality of the life and that, if untreated can result in suicide.

EPIDEMIOLOGICAL FACTS

Clinical depression is currently the leading cause of disability in North America as well as other countries, and is expected to become the second leading cause of disability worldwide (after heart disease) by the year 2020, according to World Health Organization.¹³ In

India, prevalence of all psychiatric disorder is 65.4 per 1000 population out of which total 51% i.e.31.2 per 1000 population is affected by depressive illness.¹⁴

CAUSES OF DEPRESSION

There is no single known cause of depression; rather, it results from a combination of genetic, biochemical, environmental and psychological factors. Researches indicate that depressive illnesses are the disorders of the brain. It has been demonstrated by Brain-imaging technologies such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) that the part of brain responsible for regulating mood, thinking, sleep, appetite, and behavior appear to function abnormally in persons with depression. In addition, important neuro transmitters also appear to be out of balance. Also some stressful conditions like trauma, loss of loved one or any such condition can act as a trigger for depression.

In our classical texts, description of specific causes of *vishada* is not available, but it can be inferred according to the *doshic* predominance involved in the pathophysiology. Physical body and Psyche together constitute the substrata of disease and happiness.¹⁵ *Rajas* and *tamas* are the two pathogenic factors in mental disorders. *Rajas* is responsible for all the activities, while *tamas* regulates and at times inhibits the actions.¹⁶ In depression, all activities are reduced that may be due to improper functioning of *rajas* and excess functioning of *tamas*. So, on the basis of *Karana- Karyavada*, the probable causative factors for *vishada* are categorized as follow.

- *Aharaja Nidan-*

Tamasika ahara including unhygienic, improperly cooked, stale food.

- *Kapha vriddhikara ahara*, which may

cause *jadatva* (heaviness), *gaurava*, *avasada* leading to reduced activities.

- Improper dietary habits like *adhyashanam* and *vishamashanam*. These may cause *vishada* because of *pradnyaparadha*.

These are more related with the lack of self control over eating and show greedy nature in dietary habits.

- *Viharaja Nidan-*

- *Avyayama* (lack of physical and mental exercise) is the vital cause of depression.

- *Divaswap*.

- Unnecessary and/or excess indulgence of stressful mental and physical activities.

- *Rogaja Nidan-*

Vishada is observed as a symptom in *vataja jvara* in the classics. But it can occur in all somatic disorders, because, if allowed to persist for long time, psychic diseases and somatic diseases get combined with each other.¹⁷ Some of the medical conditions in which there is depressed mood are listed below.¹⁸

- Endocrine disorders: Hypothyroidism, Cushing's syndrome, Addison's disease.
- Metabolic disorders: Diabetes mellitus, Porphyria.
- Neurological diseases: Parkinson's disease, Cerebrovascular diseases, Cerebral tumors, Dementias, Huntington's disease.
- Drug Induced: Antihypertensive drugs, Antimalarial drugs.
- *Manasika Nidan-Shoka* produced due to loss of beloved one or any financial or social loss,¹⁹ *bhaya*, *irshya*, *dainya*, *lobha*, *chinta*, *krodha* may lead to *vishada*.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The signs and symptoms of depression are characterized not only by negative thoughts, moods and behaviors, but also by specific changes in bodily functions (crying spells, low energy or libido, body aches, problems with sleeping, weight gain and eating). These functional changes of clinical depression are often called as Neurovegetative Signs.

Symptomatology of *vishada* and *avasada* can be inferred from the various definitions given by the commentators of classical texts. Bhagvad Gita mentioned the symptoms of Arjuna's *vishada*, which can be described as most similar to that of acute anxiety neurosis followed by prolonged episode of depression. This led Arjuna in a state of reduced physical and mental activities, finally refusing to perform his duties on the battle field. On the basis of references available, the clinical symptomatology can be described as follow.

Dukhatvam (Feeling of sadness or depressed mood), *Atmano ashktata* (loss of Self confidence), *Asiddhi bhaya* (fear of failure to perform), *Anavasthita Chitta* (instability of mind and poor concentration), *Nidravaishamya* (Sleep disturbances), *Ati chintana* (excessive thoughtfulness and worries), *Apravritti* (lack of activities or decreased productivity), *Aruchi* (loss of interest), *Vishama abinivesha* (improper perception or delusion), *Dainya* (misery and helplessness), *Kheda* (inappropriate guilt), *Chiitodvega* (anxiety), *Dourbalya* (weakness), *Nairashya* (hopelessness), *Smriti rhasa* (decreased memory), *Apraharsha* (anhedonia or lack of pleasure), *Vishama Samvega* (emotional disturbances), *Shoka* (excess grief), *Krodhadhikya* (increased anger and irritability) and thoughts of death or suicide.

MANAGEMENT OF DEPRESSION

Depression is highly treatable disorder even in the most severe

cases for which the most common methods are medication and psychotherapy. Acharya Caraka described same line of treatment for all mental disorders as:

*Manaso Gyana Vigyana Dhairya Smriti Samadhibhihi*²⁰

Means the pathogenic factors of mind can be reconciled only by taking resource to spiritual and scriptural knowledge, patience, courage, memory, and meditation. Thus Caraka advised Psychotherapy to get rid of *vishada*.

Still, the high incidence of relapses, the side effects of anti-depressant drugs, the loss of productivity to the nation and economic loss has aroused the need for other effective management options, *yoga* being one amongst them.

INTEGRATIVE APPROACHES OF YOGA IN DEPRESSION

Yoga is an ancient Indian science and way of life which induces a balanced mental state and brings about relaxation.²¹ *Yoga*

includes *asanas* (physical postures), *pranayama* (voluntarily regulated breathing), *dhyana* (meditation), and philosophical principles which help to reach a balanced mental state. Depression can be treated through yoga by the following way-

- **ASANAS-** *Surya Namaskara, Bhujangasana, Ushtrasana, Dhanurasana, Sarvangasana, Halasana, Sheershasana.*
- **PRANAYAMA-** *Bhastrika, Ujjayi.*
- **SHATKARMA** - *Jihwa Shodhan, Kunjal Kriya, Jala Neti, Kapalbhata, Trataka.*
- **BANDHAS-** *Mool Bandha, Uddiyana Bandha.*
- **DHYANA**
- **YOGA NIDRA**

EFFECTS OF ASANAS IN DEPRESSION

- *Surya Namaskara-*

The set of *asanas* refreshes mind, promotes clarity of thoughts and consciousness.²² It helps the mind to get rid itself of negative energy and effective in relieving stress and

anxiety. *Surya Namaskara* promotes feeling of wellbeing and it is an excellent way to prepare oneself for a brand new day both physically and mentally.

- *Bhujangasana, Ushtrasana, Dhanurasana-*

These three strong backward bending *asanas* are ideal because of their direct effect upon the adrenal glands and less directly on the thyroid gland. But, of course, this depends on the fitness and age of the person.²³

- *Sarvangasana, Halasana, Sheershasana-*

These inverted *asanas* have profound effect on body and mind. Because these positions increase the blood level of oxygen and glucose, going to the brain to create more dopamine and serotonin, and reduce the level of cortisol (the stress hormone).

A study reveals that levels of two stress hormones, cortisol and corticotrophin dropped in patients immediately after practicing yoga

and yoga can be a beneficial treatment for depression.²⁴

EFFECTS OF PRANAYAMA IN DEPRESSION

- *Bhastrika-*

Bhastrika is the cleansing breathing exercise that leads to an initial excitation of the CNS with a subjective experience of stimulation, followed immediately by relaxation during spontaneous pause. This leads to visceral nerve endings, which eventually activates the parasympathetic nervous system (calming and relaxing).

- *Ujjyai-*

Ujjyai acts as a tranquilizing pranayama which soothes the nervous system and calm the mind. It has a profoundly relaxing effect at the psychic level.²⁵

EFFECTS OF SHATKARMA IN DEPRESSION:

- *Jihwa Shodhan-*

It produces gag reflex which raises energy immediately.²⁶

- *Kunjla Kriya-*

It removes the energetic blocks which have formed as a result of constantly repressed physical emotions.²⁷

- *Jala Neti-*

Jala neti removes the excess *kapha* and has an awakening or stimulating effect to the brain.²⁸

- *Kapalbhati-*

It is vitalizing *pranayama* which enable the practitioner to raise their energies level quickly. It gives them the energy and power to face the day instead of succumbing to their inclination to remain in bed etc.²⁹

- *Trataka-*

Trataka stimulates the pineal gland. The scientific circles recognize under stimulation of the pineal by light as a significant contributor to seasonal affective disorder.³⁰

EFFECTS OF BANDHAS IN DEPRESSION

- *Mool Bandha-*

It lifts energy and begins the process of bringing the repressed experiences into conscious awareness.³¹

- *Uddiyana Bandha-*

This *bandha* is useful in reducing the feeling of emptiness which is so very often experienced by depressed people.³²

EFFECTS OF *DHYANA* IN DEPRESSION

Dhyana helps the patient realize the actual cause of depression. In this state, after the initial phase of body stillness and sense withdrawal, the practitioner observes the activities of mind as a witness.

In later stages, meditative processes work with thought, fear

Depression is a common public health problem due global affliction. Although it is treatable disease but high rate of relapses and side effects of anti depressive drugs so *yoga* is better option for management of this disease. *Yogic* procedures have positive effect of the mind-body complex establishing the balance between these two entities and synchronizing their activities by

and memories which cause distress to the practitioner-thus eventually disempowering them and liberating the energy which was utilized conscious awareness. This gradually helps the depression to eliminate from its root.³³

EFFECTS OF *YOGA NIDRA* IN DEPRESSION

Yoga Nidra relaxes the psycho-physiological system. It develops body awareness. When the body is completely relaxed, awareness of the mind increases develops *pratyahara*.³⁴

CONCLUSION

normalizing the biochemical and psychological disturbances. Not only this, the practice of above stated yogic practices also removes the energy blocks and re-circulates the blocked energy thus restoring the energy, vigor, vitality and positive attitude towards life in the individual giving him the courage to face life and its challenges with confidence.

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