

AYURVEDA: AN ANCIENT SCIENCE FOR THE MODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT: This editorial dives into the applications of Ayurveda to manage stress and anxiety, which include the benefits of oil massage, Shirodhara, yoga, and meditation. In the past few decades, pioneers of this system such as Harish Johari, Dr. Vasant Lad, David Frawley and also scientific research present that Ayurveda can be a complementary medicine to Western medicine. Ayurveda, known as the “Mother of All Healing” despite being an ancient healing art, has many uses today when searching for mental balance.

Introduction

Ayurveda is translated from Sanskrit as “the science of life and longevity”, a system originating from ancient Vedic scriptures dating back 5,000 years. Its purpose is to maintain quality and longevity of life through practical, daily habits (Lad, 2002). In today’s world where we encounter experiences that give us stress and anxiety, Ayurveda provides tools to manage our body and mind, such as massage, oil treatments like Shirodhara, yoga, and meditation. While Western medicine focuses on pathology, trauma, and emergency care. Eastern medicine deals with living from a philosophical and physical standpoint. This does not mean that Ayurveda replaces Western medicine. On the contrary, it can be complementary to allopathic medicine. Integration can be pursued in fields of allopathic medicine such as internal, family, and preventive medicine.

According to Ayurveda, every individual is a special phenomenon with their own chemical blueprint. This is known as the tridosha theory, which encompasses three bodily humors—vata, pitta, and kapha. The fundamental tridosha theory is how Ayurveda categorizes different types of energies in our body. Vata being energy of movement- like blood circulation, pitta the digestive system and homeostasis, and kapha our tissues, ligaments, the “glue” that holds us (Lad,

2016). Similar concepts are found in areas of medicine. For example, Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine separated the three bodily humors as blood, bile, and phlegm respectively (Shanbhag, 1994). These are basic attributes that are used in Ayurveda to understand one’s constitution and how to maintain balance.

Ayurvedic oil massage is a simple remedy for anxiety and stress that accumulate in our system (Johari, 1998). When in stress, the acidity in our body increases and exhausts us. As a result of constant stress and tension, this acidity is a precursor to premature aging. However, oil massages establish an alkaline blood chemistry and restores electrochemical balance within our bodies. Therapeutically, massages with oil are used for insomnia, headaches, arthritis, mental disorders, and many other conditions. A regular self-massage increases circulation of the blood, lymphatic fluids, and reduces physical and mental fatigue (Johari, 1996). Even a simple foot massage with oil before bedtime induces deep sleep and decreases fatigue (Johari, 1996). Therefore, daily massages also increase life span through relaxation of the body.

During Shirodhara a person has oil poured continually over the forehead while lying on their back. Sustained oil flow to the forehead is beneficial for general stress management, as it can promote sound-sleep, relieving stress and

anxiety (Frawley, 2012). Shirodhara is also said to be helpful for sinus headaches, migraines, neck pain, and balancing the cerebro-spinal fluid in the body (Lad, 2012). One study concluded that Shirodhara initiates a relaxation response and reduces anxiety, balancing respiration rate, systolic, and diastolic blood pressure. Patients who had multiple treatments of Shirodhara were observed to have reduced tensions and anxiety within one month (Kuriyama et al., 2008). This suggests that Shirodhara can be used as a solo or complementary therapy for stress management (Lad, 2012).

Traditionally, yoga was used by Hindu sages to release tension in the body before beginning meditation practice. Referencing “The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali” the second sutra states: “the restraint of the modifications of the mind is yoga”, meaning yoga practices are firstly for balance of the mind before perfecting and toning our physical body (Satchidananda, 1990). Now, yoga is a renowned practice globally. It is recognized as a complementary treatment for anxiety and other depressive symptoms by institutions such as the Canadian Network for Anxiety Treatments and Veterans Health Administration (Showroneck, 2014). Studies have shown that consistent yoga exercise reduces anxiety for people from flood survivors and patients with chronic illnesses to people working in finance (Showroneck, 2014). Even the Anxiety and Depression Association of America recommends yoga as a tool to manage anxiety and stress (ADAA, n.d.).

Meditation is the art of unifying our body, mind, and consciousness, a discipline of the mind to no effort and no concentration (Lad, 1998). Although one could imagine meditation as a monk sitting in the lotus pose with their eyes closed in the Himalayas, it is a practice that can be incorporated into any aspect of our lives. This could be in writing, painting, or Tai Chi (Johari, 1998). Meditation is a great anxiety and stress reliever, as studies have observed a reduced stress response, increased experience of

joy and gratitude, and a more positive outlook on life (Oman, 2008). From children in elementary school to students and the elderly, meditation contributes to a calmer mindset, minimizing depression and anxiety. On a cellular level, one technique such as prolonged practice of mindfulness meditation has been discovered to preserve nerve fibers between the brain and spinal cord which supports longevity (Laneri, 2016).

Ayurveda is a medicine that guides each individual through all stages of life. From our deepest questions of “who am I? What is my purpose?” to the most down-to-earth thoughts of “how do I heal my sore throat?” Ayurveda has answers that are realistic and meaningful (Lad, 1998). Living in a fast-paced world, Ayurveda teaches us to read the language of our body to maintain our health. The principles of massage, Shirodhara, yoga, and meditation can become valuable to improve our mental well-being and minimize stressors and anxiety. In quote from Harish Johari, “those who wish to live happy, healthy, and inspired lives can benefit from the wisdom Ayurveda holds” (Johari 1996).

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