

Research Article

# Role of diet and yoga in managing mental health

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## A B S T R A C T

Mental well-being is a growing concern in today's world with the growing burden of suicide and psychological disorder. A sedentary lifestyle, chronic stress, and unhealthy dietary habits disrupt the gut-brain axis, thereby contributing to the development of mental disorders. Anxiety, depression, and mood disturbances are now commonly observed across individuals of all age groups. According to Ayurveda, swasthya (health) is defined as the equilibrium of doshas, dhatus, and malas, along with a balanced thought process and proper digestive fire (agni). Yoga and meditation have been shown to influence brain regions associated with fear and aggression while activating pleasure centres that reduce anxiety and promote a greater sense of well-being. Regular physical exercise improves stamina, enhances metabolism, and brings harmony to thought processes. Yoga and meditation further cultivate mindfulness, strengthen cognitive function, and provide a holistic way of life. Unlike physical illnesses, which manifest through clear symptoms and signs, mental illness often remains unpredictable and difficult to detect. Facial expressions alone cannot accurately reflect emotions or mental well-being. Therefore, it becomes essential to adopt a wholesome diet along with yoga practices to improve mental health. Scientific and technological advancements have yielded both benefits and drawbacks, including environmental pollution, the development of destructive weapons, and the promotion of sedentary lifestyles that contribute to human laziness. The regimens described in Ayurveda, such as dinacharya (daily routine) and ratricharya (sleep regimen), when combined with yoga and meditation, act as key determinants in enhancing psychological health and promoting social harmony.

**Keywords:** Yoga, Stress, Dinacharya, Mental Health, Cognitive Function

## Introduction

Health is increasingly compromised due to both physical and mental illnesses. Lifestyle changes associated with modernisation, such as sedentary routines, disrupted wake-sleep cycles, and constant competition across all age groups,

are major contributors to the growing burden of mental health disorders. A healthy diet is fundamental to a healthy mind, as food and mental well-being remain central to human life. According to Ayurveda, Tri-upasthambha—the three pillars of health—comprise ahara (dietary regimen), nidra (sleep regimen), and brahmacharya (wholesome

conduct). Imbalance in these pillars leads to vyadhi (disease) and deterioration of swasthya (health). Ongoing stress, anxiety, depression, mood disorders, metabolic syndromes, and functional conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome are directly or indirectly linked to disturbances in sleep and thought patterns. Mindfulness can be cultivated by integrating proper diet, adequate sleep, yoga, and meditation into daily life. Regular physical activity enhances the regulation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis and enhances sleep quality and has furthermore been shown to alleviate various psychiatric disorders. This review intends to outline the prevailing concepts and perspectives on how diet, yoga, and meditation contribute to improving mental health and promoting holistic well-being.

## Review of literature

Acharya Charaka describes ‘dharniya vega’ and mentions one should suppress ‘lobha’ (excessive desire), ‘soka’ (grief), ‘bhaya’ (fear), ‘krodha’ (anger), ‘mana’ (arrogance), ‘nirlajja’ (shamelessness), and ‘irsya’ (envy). Atiraga (over attachment) and abhindyā (desiring for others’ wealth) for

the well-being of life.<sup>1</sup> Prajnaparadha (~improper actions done by speech, mind and body) is one among the three causative factors of disease, which is the root cause of manovikara~mental disorders. In a huge perspective, manovika are explained in the context of unmada as Vibram (~perversion or confusion) of mana (mind), buddhi (intellect), Sanjna (consciousness), jnana (knowledge), smṛti (memory), bhakti (iccha-desire), sila (temper or attitude), cesta (activities) and acara (conduct).<sup>2</sup> Acharya Caraka described that jnana (spiritual knowledge), vijnana (scriptural knowledge), dhairya (courage), smṛti (memory) and samadhi (meditation) are the treatment modalities of manovika. Manas prakriti determines the manobala of a person, i.e., the capacity to withstand stresses. If the capacity is less, a person is prone to get disease. In a person with rajasa or tamasa prakriti and less satva guna (alpa satva), an imbalance of dhi (knowledge), dhṛiti (intellect), and smṛti (recall memory) takes place, and they are prone to mental illness.<sup>3</sup> Dietary regimen for mental health Pathya (wholesome diet) and apanya (unwholesome diet) mentioned in classics have been presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Dietary Regimen For Mental Health Pathya (Wholesome Diet) And Apanya (Unwholesome Diet) Mentioned In Classics.<sup>4</sup>**

Pathya	Apanya
Godhuma (wheat), mudga (green gram), rakta Sali (red rice), dharoshna dugdha (warm milk), satdhautsarpi (ghee washed for hundred times), patol (pointed gourd), leaves of brahmi, draksha (raisins), panasam (jackfruit), svadudadimam (pomegranate), amla (Indian gooseberry), parushak (phalsa), narikela jalac (coconut water)	Madyam (wine, beer, alcohol), virudhasan (incompatible food substances), ushnabhojan (hot food), nidraksudhatrtkrta vegadharanam (suppression of sleep, hunger, thirst, and natural urges), tikta (bitter)

From a nutritional perspective, the Mediterranean Diet (MD) is characterised by low intake of saturated fats and animal proteins, coupled with high levels of antioxidants, dietary fibre, and monounsaturated fats, as well as a balanced omega-6: omega-3. The associated health benefits are largely attributed to its abundant supply of antioxidants, dietary fibre, monounsaturated fats, omega-3 fatty acids, phytosterols, and probiotics.<sup>5</sup> The Mediterranean diet improves cognitive function, metabolism and mental health.

Dietary patterns characterised by frequent consumption of processed and energy-dense foods, such as those found in the Western diet—comprising fried foods, refined grains, high-sugar products, and alcoholic beverages—have been linked to higher General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12) scores, reflecting an increased likelihood of psychiatric symptoms and mental health disorders.<sup>6</sup> Junk food is typically energy-dense, containing excessive amounts of sugar, unhealthy fats, and sodium, which contribute to its hyperpalatability. However, it is often deficient in essential nutrients, including dietary fibre, protein, and vital micronutrients such as vitamins and minerals.<sup>7</sup> Examples

of junk food include candy, soft drinks, baked goods, salty snacks, and refined products such as white bread. Fast food, a subset of junk food, refers to mass-produced food items intended for commercial resale, where the emphasis is placed on rapid preparation and service. The term “fast food” typically applies to items sold in restaurants or retail outlets that utilise frozen, preheated, or precooked ingredients and are usually served in disposable packaging for takeout or takeaway consumption.<sup>8</sup> Consumption of fast food and junk food is directly associated with the chance of cardiovascular disease, obesity, dyslipidaemia, diabetes, and depression.

## Lifestyle and behaviour changes

In ayurveda enormous factors are explained for vitiation of doshas leading to disease. Lifestyle modification is a preventative as well as curative aspect for mental illness. Dincharya (daily regimen) and ritucharya (seasonal regimen) play an indispensable role in maintaining swasthya. Dincharya practices from waking up to sleep and their benefits are described in Table 2

**Table 2: Dincharya and its benefits<sup>9-12</sup>**

Practice	Description	Benefits
Prātaḥrutthāna (Waking up)	Wake up during Brahma Muhurta (last yāma of night); at this time nascent oxygen readily binds with haemoglobin.	Enhances oxygenation and nourishes tissues rapidly.
Uṣa Jala Pāna (Drinking water at dawn)	Drink 1–2 glasses of water kept overnight before sunrise.	Aids bowel movement, improves digestion, and prevents constipation and flatulence.
Śaucavidhi (Evacuation)	Timely elimination of waste.	Clears rectum, stimulates digestive power, prevents toxins.
Ācamana (Sipping water)	Ritual sipping of water.	Prevents eye disorders, purifies senses.
Dantadhāvana (Brushing teeth)	Cleaning teeth with herbal sticks or paste.	Stimulates taste buds, increases salivation, and salivary amylase protects teeth from bacterial decay.
Jihvā-nirlekhana (Tongue scraping)	Cleaning tongue surface.	Improves oral hygiene; via acupressure, supports liver, kidney, bladder, stomach, and intestine functions.
Sneha-Gandūṣa (Oil pulling)	Holding medicated oil in the mouth.	Improves oral circulation, strengthens gums, and massages mucosa.
Añjana (Collyrium)	Applying herbal collyrium to eyes.	Enhances vision and prevents dry eyes and computer vision syndrome.
Nasya (Nasal therapy)	Application of medicated oil/drops into nostrils.	Protects nasal tract from dust, stimulates nerve endings, and improves CNS functions.
Dhūmpāna (Medicated smoking)	Inhaling medicated herbal smoke.	Stimulates the brainstem respiratory center, maintains respiratory health.
Vyayāma (Exercise)	Daily physical activity.	Enhances carbohydrate metabolism, induces fat breakdown, increases O <sub>2</sub> supply, and removes toxins via perspiration.
Cankramana (Walking)	Gentle walking after meals or in the morning.	Clears channels (srotas), enhances sensory perception.
Abhyanga (Oil massage)	Application of medicated oil to the body.	Improves blood circulation, strengthens tissues, and carries drug potency to target sites.
Snāna (Bathing)	Bathing with clean water.	Promotes enthusiasm, strength, and appetite, and removes impurities.
Sandhyopāsana / Maṅgalakṛtya (Prayer/meditation)	Worshipping God and practicing meditation.	Promotes mental peace, discipline, and positivity.
Bhojana (Diet)	Consuming wholesome (satmya) food with a pleasant mind; drinking warm water.	Supports digestion, nourishment, and overall health.
Tāmbūla Sevana (Chewing betel leaves/herbs)	Chewing betel leaves with condiments.	Stimulates taste buds, increases salivation, and removes deposits from oral cavity.
Nidrā (Sleep)	Proper and timely sleep.	Essential for growth, strength, mental clarity, and longevity.

**Table 3: Seasonal wholesome diet and unwholesome diet <sup>13</sup>**

Season	Wholesome diet	Unwholesome diet
Shisir Ritu (winter)	Rice ( <i>Oryza sativa</i> ), Wheat ( <i>Triticum aestivum</i> ), Tila ( <i>Sesamum indicum</i> ), etc. Milk and milk products, sugarcane ( <i>Saccharum officinarum</i> ) and its products -jaggery, etc, fats, edible oil, flour products, green vegetables, Sunthi ( <i>Zingiber officinale</i> ), Lashuna ( <i>Allium sativum</i> ), Haritaki ( <i>Terminalia chebula</i> ), pippali ( <i>Piper longum</i> ) etc.	Cold drinks. Vata-aggravating foods like Bengal gram / Chana ( <i>Cicer arietinum</i> ), etc. Too much of foods having sour, bitter and astringent tastes
Vasant Ritu (spring)	Rice ( <i>Oryza sativa</i> ), Wheat ( <i>Triticum aestivum</i> ), maize ( <i>Zea mays</i> ), barley ( <i>Hordium vulgare</i> ), green gram ( <i>Vigna radiate</i> ), lentil ( <i>Lens culinaris</i> ), red gram ( <i>Cajanus cajan</i> ), etc. Honey, Khadir ( <i>Acacia catechu</i> ), Musta ( <i>Cyprus rotundus</i> ), ginger ( <i>Zingiber officinale</i> ), haridra ( <i>Curcuma longa</i> ), tulsi ( <i>Ocimum sanctum</i> ), neem ( <i>Azadirachta indica</i> ) leaves etc.	Cold drinks and too much of sweet foods, like sweets prepared from milk. Sour foods like curd, etc. Fatty and oily foods Heavy foods like meats (in excess), new grains, black gram ( <i>Vigna mungo</i> ), etc.
Grishma Ritu (summer)	Rice ( <i>Oryza sativa</i> ), green gram ( <i>Vigna radiate</i> ) etc. Fruits such as mango ( <i>Mangifera indica</i> ), watermelon ( <i>Citrulus vulgaris</i> ), fruit juices, coconut water, takra (buttermilk), curd with pepper ( <i>Piper nigrum</i> ), meat juices, jaggery (Gur), fennel ( <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> ) etc.	Heavy and warm foods like Urad/ black gram ( <i>Vigna mungo</i> ), mustard ( <i>Brassica compestris</i> ), etc. Excess of meat, salt, chilli, etc.
Varsha Ritu (monsoon)	Old barley ( <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> ), Rice ( <i>Oryza sativa</i> ), Wheat ( <i>Triticum aestivum</i> ) etc Meat soup, yusa (soup), pachakola ( <i>Piper longum</i> , <i>Piper chaba</i> , <i>Plumbago zeylanicum</i> , <i>Zingiber officinale</i> ), saindhav lavana (rock salt) etc.	Excessive liquid and wine, river water, churned and fermented preparations, etc. Heavy diet, excess salts etc.
Sharad Ritu (autumn)	Easily digestible cereals and whole pulses, green gram ( <i>Vigna radiate</i> ) etc. Sarkara (sugar-candy), flesh (jangala mamsa), vegetables like Patola ( <i>Trichosanthes dioica</i> ), fenugreek ( <i>Trigonella foenum</i> ), etc., fruits such as amalki ( <i>Phyllanthus emblica</i> ), dates ( <i>Phoenix sylvestris</i> ), grapes ( <i>Vitis vinifera</i> ) etc.	Sour and fermented foods such as curd etc. Fats and oils, meat of aquatic animals etc.
Hemant Ritu (late autumn)	Rice ( <i>Oryza sativa</i> ), Wheat ( <i>Triticum aestivum</i> ), black gram ( <i>Vigna mungo</i> ), etc. Milk and milk products, sugarcane ( <i>Saccharum officinarum</i> ) juice and its products, fats and oils, fermented preparations, Sunthi ( <i>Zingiber officinale</i> ), Lashuna ( <i>Allium sativum</i> ), Haritaki ( <i>terminalia chebula</i> ), pippali ( <i>Piper longum</i> ), fenugreek ( <i>Trigonella foenum</i> ), tila ( <i>sesamum indicum</i> ) etc.	Cold drinks, Vata-aggaravating foods, such as Bengal gram/ chana ( <i>Cicer arietinum</i> ) etc. Light foods, such as puffed rice etc.

## Yoga and meditation

Yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline that originated in India, with Sage Patanjali systematising its practices into the eight limbs (Ashtanga Yoga). These comprise ethical restraints (Yama), personal disciplines (Niyama), body positions or physical poses (Asana), breath control (Pranayama), sensory detachment or sense withdrawal (Pratyahara), focused attention or mental concentration (Dharana), deep contemplation or meditative absorption (Dhyana), and self-realisation through union with universal consciousness (Samadhi).<sup>14,15</sup> An escalating volume of evidence emphasises the therapeutic benefits of yoga in mental health promotion. Regular practice has been shown to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress, while enhancing overall psychological well-being. In addition, yoga-based interventions have demonstrated improvements in cognitive abilities, including attention, memory, and executive functions, across a population covering youth to elderly.<sup>16,17</sup>

These findings hold particular relevance for child and adolescent mental health. Academic pressure, parental expectations, psychosocial stress, and socioeconomic challenges are major contributors to psychological morbidity in this age group. With its holistic approach, yoga emerges as a promising school- and community-based intervention to strengthen resilience, enhance emotional regulation, and promote overall mental well-being among vulnerable young populations.<sup>18</sup>

Meditation is a way of spiritual well-being with enhanced physical and mental health, along with boosting the immune system and genetics. It brings peace and harmony of excess thoughts and great impact in mental disorders like anxiety, depression, and mood disorders, as well as metabolic disorders. It improves sleep, focus, and mood stabilisation.

## Conclusion

A wholesome sãttvika āhāra, comprising fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, milk, ghee, and nuts, nurtures the manas, whereas rājasic and tāmasic foods are detrimental to mental clarity. Medhya rasāyana, such as Brahmī and Aśvagandhā, serve as neurocognitive enhancers, fostering tranquillity and resilience. Yogic practices, including Padmāsana, Vajrāsana, and Śavāsana, combined with prāṇāyāma techniques like Anuloma-Viloma and Bhrāmarī, regulate prāṇa vāyu and stabilise the manovaha srotas. Regular dhyāna with mantra japa pacifies rajas and tamas, enriching sattva guṇa. Thus, integrated dietary discipline, yoga, and meditation collectively promote swasthya—mental equilibrium, emotional balance, and spiritual well-being.

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