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Review Article

Yoga And Unani Medicine For Mental Health: An Integrated Approach To Holistic Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline are increasingly prevalent in modern society, demanding holistic approaches to treatment beyond conventional pharmacotherapy. Yoga, an ancient Indian practice, and Unani medicine, a traditional system of medicine rooted in Greco-Arabic principles, both offer unique approaches to mental health through physical, mental, and spiritual practices. This paper examines how these two systems can be integrated to enhance mental health outcomes. The authors have reviewed the mechanisms by which Yoga and Unani medicine influence mental well-being, discussed existing clinical evidence, and proposed an integrative model for the management of mental health disorders. By combining the strengths of both systems, this integrated approach offers a comprehensive and complementary strategy for promoting holistic well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The global burden of mental health disorders is significant, with conditions like depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline contributing to disability and reduced quality of life. Conventional treatment methods, primarily based on pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy, often provide symptomatic relief but may not address the root causes of these conditions or promote

long-term mental well-being. In response to the limitations of conventional treatments, there has been growing interest in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) approaches, particularly those that offer holistic care. Yoga and Unani medicine, both ancient systems of health care, have shown promise in improving mental health through their unique yet complementary

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mechanisms. Yoga integrates physical postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama), and meditation, which together help to balance the mind and body, reduce stress, and enhance cognitive function. Unani medicine, based on the humoral theory, addresses mental health through its various treatment modalities viz. Ilaj bil Tadbeer (regimenal therapy), Ilaj bil Dawa (pharmacotherapy) , and Ilaj bil Ghiza (dietary modifications) aimed at balancing the body's humors. This paper explores the potential for integrating Yoga and Unani medicine to create a comprehensive approach to mental health care, offering an integrated system that targets both the physiological and psychological aspects of mental health.

Mental Health Challenges in Modern Society

Mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline are increasingly recognized as major public health concerns. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, while anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health issues, affecting millions of people globally (WHO, 2020). Cognitive decline, often associated with aging, also poses significant challenges, leading to conditions like dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The complexity of mental health disorders stems from the interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors. While conventional treatments, including antidepressants and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), are effective for many individuals, they are not without limitations. These treatments may have side effects, be ineffective for some patients, and fail to provide holistic care that addresses the full spectrum of mental health needs.

The Role of Yoga in Mental Health

Yoga, a mind-body practice originating in India, has been widely studied for its effects on mental health. The therapeutic benefits of Yoga are

attributed to its ability to harmonize the body and mind, reduce stress, and promote mental clarity.

1. Mechanisms of Action

Yoga's impact on mental health can be understood through several key mechanisms:

- **Stress Reduction:**

Yoga practices, particularly pranayama and meditation, activate the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing stress hormone levels such as cortisol (Sengupta, 2012).

- **Mood Enhancement:**

Yoga has been shown to increase levels of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter associated with mood regulation, thereby helping to alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety (Streeter et al., 2010).

- **Cognitive Function:**

Regular practice of Yoga has been linked to improvements in cognitive functions such as attention, memory, and executive function, which are crucial for mental well-being (Gothe et al., 2019).

2. Evidence from Clinical Studies

A growing body of research supports the effectiveness of Yoga in managing mental health disorders. For example, a study by Gothe et al. (2019) demonstrated that older adults practicing Yoga showed significant improvements in cognitive function and mood. Similarly, Streeter et al. (2010) found that individuals with depression who participated in Yoga sessions experienced a marked reduction in symptoms, attributed to increased GABA levels.

Unani Medicine and Mental Health

Unani medicine, a system of traditional medicine with roots in Greco-Arabic practices, offers a holistic approach to mental health that emphasizes the balance of the body's humors and the use of natural therapies.

1. Ilaj bil Tadbeer (Regimenal Therapy)

Ilaj bil Tadbeer, or regimenal therapy, is a cornerstone of Unani medicine for managing



mental health. This approach includes various lifestyle interventions aimed at restoring humoral balance and promoting mental well-being.

- **Massage (Dalk):**

Therapeutic massage is used in Unani medicine to relieve stress, improve circulation, and promote relaxation, all of which contribute to mental health (Qureshi et al., 2014).

- **Hydrotherapy:**

The use of water in various forms (e.g., baths, compresses) is believed to have a calming effect on the nervous system, helping to alleviate anxiety and depression (Rahman & Ahmed, 2015).

2. Herbal and Dietary Interventions

Herbal remedies and dietary modifications play a crucial role in Unani medicine's approach to mental health. Herbs such as Asgand (*Withania somnifera*) and Ustukhuddus (*Lavandula stoechas*) are commonly used for their calming and mood-enhancing properties.

- **Withania somnifera:**

Known as Ashwagandha, this herb is used in Unani medicine for its adaptogenic properties, helping to reduce stress and improve mental clarity (Singh et al., 2011).

- **Lavandula stoechas:**

Commonly known as Lavender, this herb is valued for its anxiolytic and sedative effects, making it beneficial in the treatment of anxiety and insomnia (Lis-Balchin & Hart, 1999).

Integrating Yoga and Unani Medicine for Mental Health

The integration of Yoga and Unani medicine offers a comprehensive approach to mental health that addresses both the physiological and psychological dimensions of well-being. By combining the physical and mental practices of Yoga with the holistic therapies of Unani medicine, this dual approach provides a more effective strategy for managing mental health disorders.

1. Complementary Mechanisms

The complementary mechanisms of Yoga and Unani medicine enhance mental health in the following ways:

- **Stress and Mood Regulation:**

Yoga's ability to reduce stress and enhance mood through neurochemical changes is complemented by Unani herbal therapies, which provide additional support for mood regulation and anxiety relief (Streeter et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2011).

- **Cognitive Enhancement:**

The cognitive benefits of Yoga, including improved attention and memory, are supported by Unani dietary interventions that promote brain health and reduce oxidative stress (Gothe et al., 2019; Lis-Balchin & Hart, 1999).

2. Evidence from Integrative Studies

Although research on the combined use of Yoga and Unani medicine is limited, existing studies suggest that an integrative approach could be highly beneficial. For example, a study by Qureshi et al. (2014) highlighted the potential for combining physical therapies like Yoga with Unani regimenal therapy to enhance mental health outcomes. Similarly, Rahman and Ahmed (2015) suggested that integrating Yoga with Unani hydrotherapy could provide a more comprehensive treatment for anxiety and depression.

DISCUSSION

The integration of Yoga and Unani medicine in mental health care represents a promising approach that addresses both the physiological and psychological aspects of mental well-being. Yoga's ability to reduce stress, enhance mood, and improve cognitive function is well-documented, while Unani medicine's focus on humoral balance, natural therapies, and lifestyle interventions provides a complementary approach to mental health care. Clinical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of both Yoga and Unani medicine in managing mental health disorders. For instance,



Gothe et al. (2019) found that Yoga significantly improved cognitive function and mood in older adults, while Singh et al. (2011) reported that Ashwagandha, a key herb in Unani medicine, was effective in reducing stress and improving mental clarity.

Table 1: Comparison of Yoga and Unani Medicine Approaches to Mental Health

Aspect	Yoga	Unani Medicine
Primary Focus	Mind-body integration, stress reduction	Humoral balance, holistic treatment
Key Techniques	Asanas (postures), Pranayama (breathing), Meditation	Ilaj bil Tadbeer (regimenal therapy), Ilaj bil Dawa (pharmacotherapy), Ilaj bil Ghiza (dietary adjustments)
Mechanism of Action	Reduces cortisol, increases GABA levels, enhances parasympathetic activity	Balances humors, reduces oxidative stress, enhances mood
Common Applications	Anxiety, depression, cognitive decline	Anxiety, depression, insomnia, stress
Evidence	Multiple RCTs showing effectiveness in mood regulation and cognitive enhancement	Clinical studies on herbal treatments and regimenal therapy effectiveness

Table 2: Integrative Model for Mental Health: Combining Yoga and Unani Medicine

Component	Yoga Practice	Unani Medicine Intervention	Expected Outcome
Stress Management	Pranayama (breathing exercises), Meditation	Hydrotherapy, Massage (Dalk)	Reduction in stress levels, improved relaxation
Mood Enhancement	Asanas (physical postures), Meditation	Herbal treatments (e.g., Withania somnifera)	Improved mood, reduced symptoms of depression
Cognitive Function	Asanas, Meditation	Dietary modifications, herbal remedies (e.g., Lavandula stoechas)	Enhanced cognitive function, improved memory and focus
Anxiety Reduction	Pranayama, Meditation	Hydrotherapy, herbal treatments (e.g., Ustukhuddus)	Decreased anxiety symptoms, improved sleep quality

Table 3: Clinical Studies Supporting Yoga and Unani Medicine in Mental Health

Study	Intervention	Population	Outcomes
Gothe et al. (2019)	Yoga (Asanas, Pranayama)	Older adults	Improved cognitive function and mood
Streeter et al. (2010)	Yoga vs. Walking	Individuals with depression	Increased GABA levels, reduced depression
Qureshi et al. (2014)	Ilaj bil Tadbeer (Regimenal Therapy)	Patients with chronic stress	Enhanced relaxation, reduced stress levels
Singh et al. (2011)	Withania somnifera (Ashwagandha)	Individuals with anxiety	Reduced anxiety, improved mental clarity
Rahman & Ahmed (2015)	Hydrotherapy in Unani Medicine	Patients with anxiety and depression	Improved mental health, reduced anxiety symptoms

Despite the potential benefits, there are challenges to integrating Yoga and Unani medicine in mental health care. One major challenge is the lack of standardized protocols for the combined use of these practices. Both Yoga and Unani medicine encompass a wide range of techniques and treatments, which can vary significantly between practitioners, affecting the consistency and reliability of outcomes. Another challenge is the limited empirical research on the combined use of these practices. While individual studies on Yoga and Unani medicine are promising, there is a need for more rigorous, large-scale studies to evaluate the effectiveness of their integration. Additionally, cultural and societal factors may influence the acceptance and implementation of these integrative practices, requiring careful consideration when developing treatment protocols. Future research should focus on developing standardized protocols for the integrative use of Yoga and Unani medicine in mental health care. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with large sample sizes are needed to evaluate the efficacy of these integrative approaches in diverse populations. Moreover, exploring the mechanisms of action at the neurobiological level will provide insights into their synergistic effects and help refine integrative treatment protocols.

CONCLUSION

The integration of Yoga and Unani medicine offers a holistic and complementary approach to mental health care that addresses both the physiological and psychological dimensions of well-being. By combining the strengths of these two ancient systems, this dual approach has the potential to provide more effective and sustainable outcomes for individuals with mental health disorders. However, further research is needed to establish standardized protocols and evaluate the efficacy of this integrative approach in clinical practice.

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