



Review Article

ROLE OF PANCHAKARMA IN THE MANAGEMENT OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION A  
KAYACHIKITSA AND MANAS ROGA PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety and depression are highly prevalent mental health disorders that significantly impair quality of life, social functioning, and productivity. This has created a global need for safe, holistic, and sustainable treatment modalities. **Ayurvedic Perspective:** Ayurveda describes anxiety (*Chittodvega*) and depression (*Vishada/Avsad*) as conditions arising from vitiation of *Tridosha* (predominantly *Vata* and *Kapha*) along with imbalance of *Rajas* and *Tamas gunas*. Disturbance of *Agni*, accumulation of *Ama*, and dysfunction of *Manovaha Srotas* are central to their pathology. *Panchakarma*, the fivefold purification therapy, is considered a cornerstone of Ayurvedic management, aiming to remove aggravated *Doshas*, restore equilibrium, and enhance *Ojas* (vital essence). **Therapeutic Rationale:** *Panchakarma* procedures such as *Virechana*, *Basti*, and *Nasya*, along with supportive measures like *Shirodhara* and *Abhyanga*, are effective in calming hyperactive *Vata* (linked with anxiety) and reducing *Kapha-Tamas* dominance (linked with depression). These therapies nourish the nervous system, detoxify systemic channels, and restore mind-body harmony. **Modern Insights:** Contemporary research supports the efficacy of *Panchakarma* in reducing stress biomarkers, modulating the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, improving neurotransmitter regulation, enhancing sleep, and strengthening the gut-brain axis. Clinical trials have shown improvements in Hamilton Anxiety and Depression scores following *Panchakarma* interventions. **Conclusion:** *Panchakarma* offers a holistic, safe, and integrative approach to the management of anxiety and depression, addressing both root causes and symptomatic relief. While preliminary research is promising, further large-scale randomized controlled trials and standardized protocols are essential to validate its global applicability. *Panchakarma*, when integrated with modern psychiatry, holds the potential to create a comprehensive biopsychosocial-spiritual model of mental health care.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety and depression are among the most pressing public health challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is a leading cause of disability worldwide, while anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health conditions, often coexisting with

depression and significantly impairing quality of life.<sup>[1]</sup> Conventional medical management largely relies on pharmacotherapy- such as anti-depressants, anxiolytics, and mood stabilizers- alongside psychotherapy. While effective in many cases, these treatments are often associated with limitations, including adverse effects, drug dependence, incomplete remission, and high relapse rates. Consequently, there is an urgent need for safe, holistic, and sustainable treatment strategies that address both the root cause and the overall well-being of patients.<sup>[2]</sup>

Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine of India, offers a unique perspective on mental health through the disciplines of *Kayachikitsa* (internal medicine) and *Manas Roga* (psychological disorders).

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Unlike modern psychiatry, which often emphasizes neurochemical imbalances, Ayurveda views anxiety (*Chittodvega*) and depression (*Vishada/Avsada*) as disturbances of the *Tridosha* (especially *Vata* and *Kapha*), along with derangement of *Rajas* and *Tamas gunas*. Such imbalances disrupt the functioning of the *Manovaha Srotas* (channels of the mind), leading to emotional instability, cognitive impairment, and psychosomatic manifestations.<sup>[3]</sup>

Within this framework, *Panchakarma* therapy- the fivefold bio-purificatory procedures- plays a central role in restoring balance and promoting mental health. These therapies include *Vamana* (emesis), *Virechana* (purgation), *Basti* (enema), *Nasya* (nasal medication), and *Raktamokshana* (bloodletting), supported by preparatory measures such as *Snehana* (oleation) and *Swedana* (sudation). *Panchakarma* not only removes accumulated toxins (*Ama*) and corrects disordered metabolism (*Agni*), but also directly influences the nervous system, endocrine function, and mind-body equilibrium.<sup>[4]</sup>

From a modern biomedical perspective, *Panchakarma's* actions may be explained through mechanisms such as modulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, reduction of oxidative stress, improvement of gut-brain axis integrity, and enhancement of neurotransmitter function. The incorporation of therapies like *Shirodhara*, *Nasya*, and *Medhya Rasayana*-based *Basti* further strengthens its application for mental health by providing calming, neuro-nourishing, and rejuvenating effects.<sup>[5]</sup>

Given the growing global interest in integrative medicine, it is timely to critically examine the role of *Panchakarma* in managing anxiety and depression. This review explores its therapeutic potential from both Ayurvedic (*Kayachikitsa* and *Manas Roga*) and modern psychiatric perspectives, synthesizing classical references with emerging clinical evidence.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To review the role of *Panchakarma* therapy in the management of anxiety and depression.
- To analyze the condition from *Kayachikitsa* and *Manas Roga* perspectives.
- To highlight the therapeutic principles and mechanisms of *Panchakarma* in restoring mental and physical health.
- To summarize clinical evidence supporting *Panchakarma* interventions for anxiety and depression.
- To identify gaps in research and propose directions for future studies.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review is based on:

- Classical Ayurvedic Texts
- Charaka Samhita (*Kayachikitsa* and *Manas Roga Chikitsa Adhyaya*).
- Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya for *Panchakarma* references.
- Commentaries by Chakrapani, Dalhana, and Arunadatta for interpretative insights.

## Modern Scientific Literature

Research articles, clinical trials, and systematic reviews published in databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and AYUSH research repositories (2000–2024).

Studies assessing *Panchakarma* modalities (*Virechana*, *Basti*, *Nasya*, *Shirodhara*) on stress, anxiety, and depression parameters.

## Conceptual Framework in Ayurveda

### *Kayachikitsa* Perspective<sup>[6]</sup>

*Dosha* Involvement: *Vata* vitiation is primarily implicated in anxiety, while *Kapha* and *Tamas* predominance contributes to depression.

*Agni & Ama*: Disturbed digestive fire (*Agni*) and accumulation of metabolic toxins (*Ama*) are considered contributing factors.

Therapeutic Goal: *Panchakarma* corrects *Doshic* imbalance, improves *Agni*, eliminates *Ama*, and strengthens *Ojas* (vital essence).

### *Manas Roga* Perspective<sup>[7]</sup>

- Psychological Basis: Anxiety arises from excessive *Rajas*, while depression stems from aggravated *Tamas*.
- *Manas Doshas*: *Panchakarma* therapies stabilize the mind by influencing neurotransmitter balance and regulating stress responses.
- Holistic Integration: Therapies are complemented by *Satvavajaya Chikitsa* (counseling, mindfulness) and *Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa* (spiritual practices).

## *Panchakarma* Therapies for Anxiety and Depression

*Panchakarma*, the fivefold purification therapy, is the cornerstone of Ayurvedic bio-cleansing. It is not only intended for detoxification but also for *Dosha shodhana* (elimination of aggravated *Doshas*) and *Manas shuddhi* (psychological cleansing). Each *Panchakarma* modality has specific relevance in the management of *Chittodvega* (anxiety) and *Vishada/Avsada* (depression) when viewed through the lens of *Kayachikitsa* and *Manas Roga*.<sup>[8]</sup>

### *Purva Karma* (Preparatory Measures)

- *Snehana* (Oleation): Internal and external administration of medicated oils and ghee (such as *Brahmi Ghrita*, *Ashwagandha Ghrita*, *Ksheerabala*

*Taila*). These substances penetrate tissues, pacify aggravated *Vata dosha*, and provide nourishment to the nervous system. External oil massage (*Abhyanga*) also induces relaxation, reduces muscle tension, and improves sleep quality.<sup>[9]</sup>

- **Swedana** (Sudation): Induces sweating through herbal steam therapy, eliminating toxins, reducing stiffness, and relaxing the mind. In anxiety, *Nadi Sweda* (localized steam) and *Bashpa Sweda* (steam chamber) are used to pacify *Vata* and *Kapha*.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **Vamana (Therapeutic Emesis)**

Although not commonly applied in anxiety disorders, *Vamana* is indicated when *Kapha dosha* predominance contributes to depression with symptoms such as lethargy, dullness, heaviness, excessive sleep, and lack of motivation.<sup>[11]</sup>

- **Mechanism in Ayurveda:** Expels morbid *Kapha* from the upper channels, clears mental fog, and promotes clarity of thought.
- **Modern Correlation:** May stimulate autonomic balance and improve gut-brain axis functioning, which is increasingly linked to mood regulation.

### **Virechana (Therapeutic Purgation)<sup>[12]</sup>**

*Virechana* is particularly effective in conditions where *Pitta* and *Vata* imbalance contribute to irritability, restlessness, insomnia, and mood swings.

- **Ayurvedic Rationale:** Clears excess *Pitta* from the gastrointestinal tract and systemic channels, thereby calming the mind and stabilizing emotions.
- **Common Drugs:** *Trivrit*, *Draksha*, *Haritaki*, and medicated ghee preparations.
- **Modern Insight:** Improves gut health, reduces systemic inflammation, and normalizes serotonin production in the gut-brain axis.

### **Basti (Medicated Enema)<sup>[13]</sup>**

*Basti* is considered the supreme therapy for *Vata* disorders, making it most relevant for anxiety, panic states, and psychosomatic manifestations.

Types:

- *Niruha Basti* (decoction enema) with formulations such as *Dashamoola Kwatha* for detoxification.
- *Anuvasana/Matra Basti* (oil-based enema) with *Ashwagandha Taila*, *Bala Taila*, or *Brahmi Ghrita* for nourishment.

**Therapeutic Action:** Balances *Vata*, promotes stability of the nervous system, enhances mental clarity, and alleviates restlessness.

**Modern Perspective:** *Basti* may modulate the enteric nervous system, reduce oxidative stress, and enhance neurotransmitter balance.

### **Nasya (Nasal Medication)<sup>[14]</sup>**

*Nasya* is particularly emphasized for *Urdhwajatrugata Vikara* (diseases of the head and mind). It delivers medicated oils or powders directly to

the nasal cavity, influencing the brain and higher centers.

- **Dravyas:** *Brahmi Taila*, *Anu Taila*, *Shadbindu Taila*.
- **Ayurvedic Rationale:** Clears accumulated *Doshas* in the head, nourishes the brain tissues, and balances *Prana Vata*, which governs mental activity.
- **Modern View:** May improve neurotransmitter regulation, enhance blood flow to the brain, and reduce stress-related neurohormonal activity.

### **Shirodhara and Related Procedures (Adjunct to Panchakarma)<sup>[15,16]</sup>**

Although technically classified as *Upakarma* (supportive therapies), *Shirodhara*, *Shiroabhyanga*, and *Shirobasti* are highly effective in psychiatric conditions.

**Shirodhara:** A continuous stream of medicated oil, buttermilk, or decoction poured on the forehead.

- Calms the mind, reduces stress hormones, and induces deep relaxation.
- Documented to lower cortisol levels, enhance serotonin, and regulate sleep-wake cycles.

**Shiroabhyanga** (Head Massage): Strengthens hair roots, relaxes cranial muscles, and stimulates *Marma* points related to mental stability.

**Shirobasti:** Retention of medicated oil on the head within a cap-like apparatus, useful in chronic insomnia, memory disturbances, and severe anxiety.

### **Synthesis of Ayurvedic and Modern Insights<sup>[17]</sup>**

- For anxiety (*Chittodvega*): *Vata*-pacifying therapies like *Basti*, *Nasya*, and *Shirodhara* are prioritized.
- For depression (*Vishada/Avsad*): *Kapha*- and *Tamas*-pacifying therapies like *Vamana*, *Virechana*, and *Medhya Rasayanas* are more relevant.
- For mixed states: Combinations of *Panchakarma* procedures, tailored to patient constitution (*Prakriti*) and *Doshic* imbalance, provide holistic management.

### **Clinical Evidence and Research**

- Clinical trials suggest *Panchakarma* procedures reduce Hamilton Anxiety and Depression scores significantly.
- Neurophysiological studies report improved sleep quality, lowered heart rate variability, and enhanced cognitive functions.
- Biochemical evidence indicates *Panchakarma* reduces oxidative stress and inflammatory markers implicated in mood disorders.

### **Integration with Modern Psychiatry<sup>[18]</sup>**

*Panchakarma* may be viewed as a complementary approach:

**Adjunctive Role:** Can be combined with psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy to reduce side effects and relapse rates.

Lifestyle Integration: Diet (*Pathya-Apathya*), Yoga, and *Satvavajaya* strategies ensure sustained benefit.

- Need for standardization of *Panchakarma* protocols.
- Integration into mainstream psychiatry requires interdisciplinary collaboration.

### Challenges and Future Directions

- Lack of large-scale randomized controlled trials.

### Panchakarma Procedures in Anxiety and Depression– Ayurvedic Rationale, Modern Insights, and Evidence<sup>[19,20]</sup>

Panchakarma Procedure	Ayurvedic Rationale ( <i>Kayachikitsa &amp; Manas Roga</i> )	Modern Biomedical Insights	Reported Outcomes / Data
<i>Snehana &amp; Swedana</i> (oleation & sudation)	Pacifies <i>Vata</i> , liquefies morbid <i>Doshas</i> , induces relaxation.	Improves circulation, reduces muscle tension, promotes parasympathetic dominance.	Clinical reports show reduction in insomnia, anxiety, and somatic symptoms.
<i>Vamana</i> (therapeutic emesis)	Eliminates excess <i>Kapha &amp; Tamas</i> causing lethargy, dullness.	Gut-brain axis stimulation, removal of endotoxins.	Used selectively in depressive states with <i>Kapha</i> dominance; case studies show improvement in energy levels.
<i>Virechana</i> (purgation)	Clears <i>Pitta-Vata</i> imbalance, reduces irritability & restlessness.	Improves gut health, reduces systemic inflammation, regulates serotonin.	RCTs (n=45, India) reported significant reduction in Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale scores after <i>Virechana</i> with <i>Trivrit Lehya</i> .
<i>Basti</i> (medicated enema)	“ <i>Ardha Chikitsa</i> ” for <i>Vata</i> disorders, stabilizes mind, nourishes tissues.	Modulates enteric nervous system, reduces oxidative stress.	A pilot study (n=30) with <i>Brahmi-Ashwagandha Basti</i> showed improvement in sleep, reduced anxiety by 35%.
<i>Nasya</i> (nasal therapy)	Directly acts on brain centers, clears <i>Prana Vata</i> disturbances.	Enhances cerebral blood flow, neurotransmitter regulation.	Clinical trial (n=40) with <i>Brahmi Taila Nasya</i> showed decreased depression scores (BDI scale).
<i>Shirodhara</i> (Adjunct)	Balances <i>Rajas &amp; Tamas</i> , calms <i>Manas</i> , improves clarity.	Reduces cortisol, enhances serotonin & melatonin.	Controlled studies show significant reduction in stress & anxiety; improved sleep quality in 60–70% of patients.
<i>Shirobasti / Shiroabhyanga</i> (Adjunct)	Nourishes brain tissue, strengthens mind.	Localized absorption of phytochemicals, stress modulation.	Case reports show effectiveness in chronic insomnia, irritability, and anxiety disorders.

### DISCUSSION

The management of anxiety and depression presents a unique challenge as these disorders are multifactorial, involving neurobiological, psychological, and socio-environmental dimensions. Conventional psychiatric treatments, including antidepressants, anxiolytics, and cognitive therapies, primarily focus on symptom reduction, yet issues of side effects, relapse, and incomplete remission remain. *Panchakarma*, as outlined in *Kayachikitsa* and *Manas Roga*, provides a holistic, multi-dimensional approach that complements these gaps. <sup>[21]</sup>

### Panchakarma and Neurobiological Correlates<sup>[22]</sup>

Recent studies suggest that *Panchakarma* therapies exert measurable effects on neuroendocrine pathways:

- *Shirodhara* and *Nasya* have been linked with modulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, reducing cortisol levels and promoting parasympathetic dominance.
- *Basti* therapy, particularly with *Medhya Rasayana* formulations (*Brahmi, Ashwagandha*), demonstrates anxiolytic and adaptogenic effects, comparable to modern antidepressants.

- *Virechana* detoxifies and improves gut-brain axis functioning, reflecting modern insights into the role of microbiota in mood regulation.

### Mind-Body Integration

Unlike symptomatic suppression, *Panchakarma* operates at both *Sharirika* (physical) and *Manasika* (mental) levels. Classical texts emphasize that disorders like *Chittodvega* (anxiety) and *Vishada* (depression) arise from imbalances of both *Tridosha* and *Manas Dosh* (*Rajas* and *Tamas*). *Panchakarma* restores equilibrium by reducing accumulated toxins (*Ama*), enhancing *Agni* (digestive/metabolic fire), and nourishing *Ojas* (vital essence), which can be correlated with improved immunity and psychological resilience in biomedical terms.<sup>[23]</sup>

### Comparison with Modern Psychiatry

While modern psychiatry often compartmentalizes treatment into pharmacological and psychological domains, Ayurveda inherently integrates body-mind-spirit. *Panchakarma's* inclusion of physical detoxification, sensory therapies, and nervous system nourishment positions it as an integrative treatment model. Unlike pharmacotherapy, which may induce dependence, *Panchakarma* offers non-addictive, restorative interventions.<sup>[24]</sup>

### Challenges and Limitations

Despite promising evidence, several barriers exist:

- Lack of large-scale randomized controlled trials (RCTs) limits universal acceptance.
- Standardization issues: Variability in formulations, techniques, and practitioner expertise.
- Integration gaps: Limited collaboration between Ayurvedic practitioners and psychiatrists reduces the scope for combined therapies.

### Future Prospects

The integration of *Panchakarma* with evidence-based psychiatric care could represent a biopsychosocial-spiritual model for mental health. Modern tools like neuroimaging, biochemical assays, and psychometric scales should be employed to validate Ayurvedic claims. Additionally, long-term follow-up studies are essential to establish *Panchakarma's* role in preventing relapse and promoting overall well-being.

### CONCLUSION

The Ayurvedic science of *Kayachikitsa* and *Manas Roga* emphasizes that health is not merely the absence of disease, but the balanced state of body, mind, and consciousness. In this context, *Panchakarma* therapy offers a multidimensional approach for managing anxiety and depression, two of the most common and debilitating mental health disorders of the present era. By addressing the root cause- *Dosha* imbalance, disturbed *Agni*, accumulation of *Ama*, and derangement of *Manas Dosh* (*Rajas* and *Tamas*)-

*Panchakarma* seeks not only to relieve symptoms but also to restore equilibrium and prevent recurrence. From the *Kayachikitsa* perspective, *Panchakarma* detoxifies and rejuvenates the body, strengthens the nervous system, and enhances *Ojas*, thereby improving resilience against stress and emotional instability. From the *Manas Roga* perspective, therapies such as *Nasya*, *Basti*, and *Shirodhara* act directly on the mind-body axis, calming hyperactivity of *Rajas* in anxiety and pacifying the inertia of *Tamas* in depression. Modern research increasingly validates these traditional concepts, showing that *Panchakarma* interventions reduce stress hormones, improve neurotransmitter activity, regulate the gut-brain axis, and enhance overall quality of life. While these findings are promising, larger randomized controlled trials and standardized treatment protocols are necessary to establish stronger scientific credibility and facilitate global acceptance. *Panchakarma* can be envisioned as a complementary and integrative approach in the management of anxiety and depression. It offers not only symptomatic relief but also long-term healing through detoxification, rejuvenation, and psychological balance. With further evidence-based validation, *Panchakarma* has the potential to bridge traditional wisdom and modern psychiatry, creating a holistic model of mental health care that is preventive, curative, and promotive.

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