Mental health - An Ayurvedic perspective

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Abstract: Mind (Manas) is considered as one among the three integral parts of human existence (Ayu), the other two being the body (Shareera) and the spirit (Chetana). The knowledge of mind and human behaviour in its normal and abnormal status, ways of maintaining positive mental health and management of mental disorders has been an important part of Indian traditional medical system since its inception.

Ayurvedic concept of mental health management has detail descriptions of various therapeutic and psychotherapeutic procedures and techniques emphasising insight, self-regulation, mental health education and higher awareness.

The Etiopathology, diagnosis and management of various psychiatric disorders has been illustrated in ayurvedic literature. Three modalities of management viz. Yuktivyapashraya (Medicines and therapeutic procedures), Satvavajaya (psychotherapy and counselling) & Daivavyapashraya (Faith therapy) are advocated with an emphasis on psychotherapy as the method of highest order in psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, mood disorders, adjustment disorders and various other psychiatric disorders.

Key words: Manas, Mental health, Mental disorders, Satvavajaya, Psychotherapy.

The science of mental health that deals with mind, mental processes and its disorders is at the same time a very old and a very new branch of study.

It is considered to be the oldest art of medicine because mental disorders were among the first type of illnesses to be recognised. Understanding of human mind from a philosophical perspective and medical perspective has always been a part of Indian culture. The oldest references to mental disorders and their management with herbs and therapies dates back to the period of Veda, Athravaveda in particular.

Ayurveda is considered as an offshoot of Athravaveda. Mental health in Ayurveda is a field where philosophy meets with medicine. Although Ayurveda incorporated into it, the spiritual and philosophical ideas of Veda and Darshana, it gave mental health its scientific spirit. It focussed only such portions which proved to be useful in practical application. After it established itself as a separate system of rational & scientific medicine with Charaka Samhita (1C BC) as its first authentic literature Ayurveda started a thorough probe on every aspect of mind; both in its normal and abnormal states.

Manasaroga Bheshaja which represents the clinical psychology and psychiatry of Ayurveda was probably an area of specialization during ancient times. The statement of Charaka Samhita that patients of mental disorders are to be referred to and treated by Manasaroga Bheshaja Vedi (A physician specialised in treating mental illness) fortifies this opinion.

Ayurveda has a vast conceptual canvas to understand mind and its nature. It includes various hypothesis related to the evaluation of mind, its location in the body, its objects and functions. It also classifies human beings based on their constitution.

The most important concept of mind is of Triguna, three attributes of mind namely Satva, Rajas and Tamas. These Trigunas are the energies through which mind functions in its conscious, subconscious and deep conscious level.

Satva is an attribute of virtue and goodness (Kalyanamsha) which creates harmony, tranquillity, balance and stability. It brings about higher awareness, happiness and contentment. Rajas is the quality of activity and motivation (Roshamsha), which creates activities and cause imbalance. Tamas (Mohamsha) is the attribute of inertia and halting tendencies.

Human mind in its evolved form is the ‘domain of satva’. In a normal state, Satva balances the energy of Rajas and inertia of Tamas to maintain mental health. When Rajas and Tamas, the morbid factors of mind emerge and dominate the Satvik state, it results in various mental disorders. The basic
approach of ayurvedic mental health management is based on efforts to increase and potentiate Satva and regulate the Rajas and Tamas. This is achieved by Satvik diet, Swastha vritta (consisting of healthy lifestyle in relation of daily regimen, seasonal regimen, exercise, sleep, sexual activities, personal hygiene etc) and Sadvritta (social and ethical conduct). Ayurveda gives a detail account of each one of these as a pathway of attaining and maintaining physical and mental health. A detail description of abnormal human emotions and the way to regulate them (Dharaneeya Vegas) are also available. This regulation of abnormal expression of emotions is not to exhibit, restrict or repress the individual, but to help him to internalise his ‘Prajna’; the ability to be aware of sensation and perception. In a conscious individual, Prajna operates in three ways: Dhee (cognitive processes), Dhriti (execution of cognitive and emotional decisions) and Smriti (memory – behavioural modifications from previous experiences). An individual has to optimise and balance these three factors in order to be able to exercise his own judgement and to choose an appropriate behaviour in a given situation. Prajnaparadha, the erroneous cognition and executions on the hand is the root cause of disorders, particularly of the mind.

Health care in Ayurveda is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in its perspective and is concerned with both the biological and psychological aspects of health and diseases. It believes that every disease involves both body and mind, even though some are predominantly physical and others are psychological.

As a system of medicine, Ayurveda has enumerated a number of psychiatric disorders such as unmade (a group of psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, organic psychosis and mania), Apasmarap (epileptic disorders), Atatvabhinivesha (delusional disorders), Chittodvega (anxiety disorders), Vishada (mood disorders), Madataya (alcoholism), Anidra (insomnia), Gadodvega (hypochondriasis), Yoshapasmarap (conversion disorder), psychosexual disorders and other mental disorders. The causation, diagnosis and prognosis of many of these disorders and their management is discussed with a multidimensional approach.

Ayurveda recommends three approaches of treatment viz; Daivavyapashraya, Satavavajaya and Yuktiyapashraya Chikitsa for treating physical and mental illness as well. Daivavyapashraya has been interpreted in many ways such as spiritual therapy, divine therapy and faith therapy. The utility of such a mode of management depends on the nature, faith, religiosity and cultural context of the patient and the physician as well.

The general line of treatment of mental disorders comprises of both Yuktiyapashraya and Satavavajaya. Yuktiyapashraya chikitsa comprise of the administration of various herbomineral medicines and physical therapies helpful in mental disorders.

Satavavajaya chikitsa which is the comprehensive psychotherapy of Ayurveda is the most important modality of management of mental disorders. The aim of this therapy is to restrain mind from unwholesome objects, to potentiate Satva by reducing the levels of rajas and tamas. Ayurveda provides a practical model of holistic psychotherapy which is humanistic and client centred. It comprise of Jnana therapy (insight oriented psychotherapy, knowledge of self), Vijnana therapy (mental health education – textual knowledge), Dhairya therapy (counselling and encouraging about the challenges of life) and Samadhi (higher awareness therapy - Restraining the mind from wordily objects and meditating on the spiritual dimension of personality).

An important approach of Ayurveda is that mental health is to be procured and maintained instead of being provided. People with mental diseases have the ability and responsibility to keep their mind healthy by their continued efforts through regulating their lifestyle and emotions.

In the past few decades, psychiatry as a branch of medicine is undergoing a rapid change and these have been advances in understanding the phenomenology, diagnosis and management of mental disorders. Yet, the age old, time tested wisdom of Ayurveda is still relevant and contribute significantly in ensuing mental health and happiness.

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