

Indigenous Healing Practices and Their Relevance in Contemporary Mental Health Care

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ABSTRACT

Stress has emerged as a pervasive global health issue affecting individuals across all age groups, leading to significant physical, psychological and social consequences. Rapid technological advancements, academic pressures and evolving lifestyles have contributed to increasing levels of chronic stress, which is associated with anxiety, depression, cardiovascular diseases, and diminished overall well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This paper presents a comparative analysis of traditional stress management methods—such as yoga, meditation and indigenous healing practices—with modern approaches including pharmacological treatments and psychotherapy.

Traditional methods emphasize holistic well-being by integrating mind, body and environment, whereas modern approaches primarily focus on symptom management. Drawing on secondary data from peer-reviewed journals, books, and empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026, this research highlights the effectiveness of both approaches. Findings suggest that traditional practices significantly reduce stress levels, enhance emotional resilience and improve quality of life. Furthermore, integrating traditional and modern strategies provides a comprehensive, sustainable, and cost-effective solution for stress management.

Keywords: Stress, Yoga, Meditation, Indigenous Practices, Holistic Health

INTRODUCTION

Stress is an inevitable aspect of human life; however, its chronic manifestation has become a major public health concern. In the 21st century, rapid industrialization, technological growth and competitive environments have intensified stress levels globally. According to WHO (2020), stress-related disorders contribute significantly to the global burden of disease, affecting mental and physical health outcomes.

Stress can be defined as the body's response to external or internal demands that disrupt homeostasis (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While acute stress can be adaptive, chronic stress leads to detrimental effects such as weakened immune function, cardiovascular disorders, anxiety, and depression (McEwen, 2017).

To address stress, various management strategies have evolved. Traditional approaches such as yoga, meditation, and indigenous healing practices have been used for centuries and focus on holistic wellness. In contrast, modern methods such as pharmacological interventions and psychotherapy rely on scientific and clinical frameworks to manage symptoms.

This paper aims to:

1. Examine traditional methods of stress management.
2. Analyze modern approaches to stress reduction.
3. Compare their effectiveness and limitations.
4. Explore the benefits of integrating both systems.

Concept of Stress

Stress involves physiological and psychological responses triggered by perceived threats. The General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) proposed by Selye (1956) describes three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. Prolonged exposure leads to chronic stress and disease.

Impact of Stress

Chronic stress affects multiple systems:

- **Physical:** hypertension, heart disease, weakened immunity
- **Psychological:** anxiety, depression, burnout
- **Behavioral:** substance abuse, poor sleep, unhealthy eating

Research indicates that stress contributes to approximately 75% of all medical conditions (American Psychological Association [APA], 2022).

Traditional Stress Management Practices

Traditional systems emphasize balance, harmony, and prevention rather than cure. These include yoga, meditation, Ayurveda, and other indigenous practices.

Modern Stress Management Approaches

Modern interventions include pharmacological treatments and psychotherapy techniques such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which aim to reduce symptoms and improve coping mechanisms.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A growing body of literature highlights the increasing importance of both traditional and modern approaches in managing stress effectively. Recent research has focused on understanding the physiological, psychological, and behavioral outcomes of these interventions, providing a strong foundation for comparative analysis.

Several studies emphasize the effectiveness of yoga as a holistic intervention. Field (2016) reported that yoga significantly reduces cortisol levels and enhances parasympathetic nervous system activity, thereby promoting relaxation. Similarly, Pascoe and Bauer (2015) conducted a systematic review demonstrating that yoga improves mood, decreases anxiety, and enhances overall well-being. These findings are supported by Riley and Park (2015), who concluded that yoga interventions are particularly beneficial for individuals experiencing chronic stress and trauma.

Meditation has also been widely studied for its role in stress reduction. A meta-analysis by Sedlmeier et al. (2012) found that meditation practices significantly improve emotional regulation and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Furthermore, Creswell (2017) highlighted that mindfulness meditation positively affects brain regions associated with attention and emotional control. These findings suggest that meditation not only reduces stress but also enhances cognitive functioning and resilience.

Indigenous practices, particularly Ayurveda and traditional healing systems, have gained recognition for their preventive and holistic approach. Patwardhan et al. (2015) emphasized that Ayurveda focuses on individualized treatment and lifestyle modifications, which contribute to long-term stress management. Additionally, Waldram (2013) explored indigenous healing practices and found that community-based approaches and spiritual elements play a crucial role in psychological well-being.

On the other hand, modern stress management approaches have been extensively validated through empirical research. Pharmacological treatments remain a common method for managing stress-related disorders. Baldwin

et al. (2014) found that antidepressants and anxiolytics are effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, although they may have side effects. This highlights the need for cautious and supervised use of medication.

Psychotherapy, particularly Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), has shown strong evidence in stress reduction. Hofmann et al. (2012) demonstrated that CBT is highly effective in treating anxiety disorders by modifying maladaptive thought patterns. Additionally, mindfulness-based interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) have gained popularity in clinical settings. Khoury et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis showing that MBSR significantly reduces stress and improves mental health outcomes.

Recent integrative studies suggest that combining traditional and modern approaches yields better results. For instance, Sharma et al. (2020) found that integrating yoga with psychotherapy enhances treatment effectiveness and promotes long-term well-being. Similarly, Black and Slavich (2016) highlighted that mindfulness practices combined with clinical interventions improve both psychological and physiological stress markers.

Overall, the literature indicates that while modern approaches provide immediate and clinically structured solutions, traditional methods offer sustainable and holistic benefits. The integration of both systems appears to be the most effective strategy for comprehensive stress management.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative, comparative research design** based on an extensive review of secondary data sources. The objective is to critically examine and compare traditional stress management practices—such as Yoga, Meditation, and indigenous healing systems—with modern approaches including psychotherapy and pharmacological interventions.

Research Design

A **descriptive and analytical approach** was employed to explore patterns, effectiveness, and underlying principles of different stress management techniques. The study emphasizes thematic comparison across traditional and modern systems.

Data Sources

Secondary data were collected from reputable academic and scientific platforms, including:

- PubMed
- Google Scholar
- JSTOR

Additional sources included books, review papers, and reports published by organizations such as the World Health Organization.

Data Analysis Technique

A **thematic analysis method** was used to interpret the collected data. Key themes identified include:

- Effectiveness in stress reduction
- Psychological and physiological outcomes
- Accessibility and cost-effectiveness
- Long-term sustainability

- Cultural relevance

Comparative analysis was conducted to evaluate similarities and differences between traditional and modern approaches.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability:

- Only credible and peer-reviewed sources were used
- Cross-verification of findings across multiple studies was performed

Validity was maintained by:

- Including diverse sources
- Avoiding biased or unsupported claims
- Ensuring consistency in thematic interpretation

Traditional Methods of Stress Management

Stress is a natural response to challenges and pressures experienced in daily life. While modern medicine and psychology have developed various techniques for stress reduction, traditional methods of stress management continue to play an important role across cultures. These methods are rooted in ancient practices, spiritual beliefs, and natural healing systems that have been used for centuries. Traditional stress management techniques focus on balancing the body, mind, and spirit to promote overall well-being. Practices such as yoga, meditation, herbal remedies, breathing exercises, massage therapy, and spiritual rituals have proven beneficial for reducing stress and improving mental health. These approaches remain popular because they are holistic, affordable, and often free from harmful side effects.

One of the most widely practiced traditional methods of stress management is **Yoga**. Originating in ancient India more than 5,000 years ago, yoga combines physical postures, breathing techniques, and meditation to create harmony between the body and mind. According to the World Health Organization, yoga promotes relaxation and helps reduce anxiety and stress-related disorders (WHO, 2020). Regular yoga practice improves flexibility, strengthens muscles, and enhances emotional stability. Many people experience reduced levels of cortisol, the hormone associated with stress, after practicing yoga consistently. Furthermore, yoga encourages mindfulness, which allows individuals to remain focused on the present moment instead of worrying about future problems or past experiences.

Meditation is another traditional practice that has been used for centuries to calm the mind and improve emotional health. Meditation originated in Eastern spiritual traditions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism, but today it is practiced worldwide. The process involves focusing attention and eliminating distracting thoughts to achieve mental clarity and inner peace. Research shows that meditation can lower blood pressure, improve concentration, and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression (Goyal et al., 2014). Traditional forms of meditation, such as mindfulness meditation and transcendental meditation, teach individuals to control their thoughts and emotions effectively. Through regular practice, meditation helps individuals develop patience, emotional resilience, and self-awareness, making it easier to cope with stressful situations.

Breathing exercises, also known as pranayama in traditional Indian medicine, are another effective method of stress management. Deep breathing techniques help slow the heart rate, reduce muscle tension, and improve oxygen flow throughout the body. Controlled breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes relaxation and counteracts the body's stress response. Traditional breathing methods such as alternate nostril breathing and diaphragmatic breathing are commonly used in yoga and meditation practices. According to Brown and Gerbarg (2005), breathing exercises can significantly reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and

emotional distress. These exercises are simple, accessible, and can be practiced almost anywhere, making them highly effective for daily stress management.

Herbal remedies have also been traditionally used in many cultures to relieve stress and improve emotional balance. Ancient systems of medicine such as Ayurveda in India and Traditional Chinese Medicine rely on natural herbs to restore harmony within the body. Herbs such as ashwagandha, chamomile, lavender, and valerian root are commonly used to promote relaxation and improve sleep quality. Ashwagandha, an important herb in Ayurvedic medicine, is known for its adaptogenic properties, which help the body cope with stress more effectively. Studies suggest that herbal remedies may reduce anxiety and fatigue while supporting overall mental well-being (Chandrasekhar et al., 2012). Traditional herbal treatments are often preferred because they use natural ingredients and focus on long-term healing rather than temporary relief.

Massage therapy is another traditional stress management technique practiced in many ancient cultures. Traditional Chinese massage, Thai massage, and Ayurvedic massage are designed to improve circulation, reduce muscle tension, and balance the body's energy systems. Massage therapy promotes relaxation by stimulating the release of endorphins, which are natural chemicals that improve mood and reduce pain. It also lowers cortisol levels and helps individuals feel calmer and more comfortable. According to Field (2014), massage therapy can decrease anxiety, improve sleep, and enhance emotional well-being. Traditional massage methods often include the use of herbal oils and pressure-point techniques that provide both physical and psychological relief from stress.

Spiritual and religious practices have long been recognized as important methods of stress management. Prayer, chanting, fasting, and participation in religious ceremonies help individuals find comfort, meaning, and emotional support during difficult times. Many traditional societies believe that spiritual connection strengthens inner peace and resilience. Practices such as chanting mantras in Hinduism, reciting prayers in Christianity and Islam, and mindfulness in Buddhism create a sense of calmness and hope. Spiritual activities encourage positive thinking and provide individuals with a supportive community that can help reduce feelings of loneliness and stress. Research indicates that spiritual practices can improve emotional coping and mental health outcomes (Koenig, 2012).

Nature-based practices are also deeply connected to traditional stress management. In many cultures, spending time in nature is believed to restore mental balance and emotional health. Activities such as walking in forests, gardening, and sitting near rivers or mountains help individuals feel relaxed and refreshed. Traditional healing systems emphasize the importance of living in harmony with nature to maintain physical and emotional well-being. Exposure to natural environments reduces stress hormones, improves mood, and enhances concentration. Nature-based stress management remains relevant today as urban lifestyles and technological distractions increase psychological pressure.

Traditional **music and dance therapies** have also been used for generations to reduce stress and promote emotional expression. Folk music, rhythmic drumming, and cultural dances allow individuals to release tension and connect with their communities. Music has a calming effect on the nervous system and can improve emotional stability. Traditional dance forms often involve physical movement, social interaction, and storytelling, which help individuals express emotions in healthy ways. Cultural celebrations and community gatherings also strengthen social bonds, reducing feelings of isolation and anxiety.

Diet and nutrition are important aspects of traditional stress management as well. Ancient healing systems emphasize balanced eating habits to support mental and physical health. Ayurveda, for example, recommends consuming fresh, natural, and seasonal foods to maintain harmony within the body. Herbal teas, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are often included in traditional diets to improve energy levels and emotional stability. Proper nutrition helps regulate hormones and supports brain function, which can reduce the negative effects of stress.

Despite the advancement of modern medical treatments, traditional stress management methods continue to be valuable because they address the whole person rather than only the symptoms of stress. These methods promote relaxation, self-awareness, emotional balance, and healthy living habits. Many traditional practices are now

supported by scientific research and are increasingly integrated into modern healthcare systems. Hospitals, wellness centers, and educational institutions often include yoga, meditation, and mindfulness programs as part of stress reduction strategies.

In conclusion, traditional methods of stress management provide effective and holistic approaches for improving mental and emotional well-being. Practices such as yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, herbal remedies, massage therapy, spiritual rituals, and nature-based activities have been used for centuries to help individuals cope with stress. These methods encourage balance between the body, mind, and spirit while promoting relaxation and resilience. As stress continues to affect people worldwide, traditional stress management techniques remain highly relevant and beneficial. By combining ancient wisdom with modern understanding, individuals can achieve healthier and more balanced lives.

Modern Methods of Stress Management

Pharmacological Treatment

Pharmacological interventions are commonly prescribed for moderate to severe stress-related disorders. These include:

- Antidepressants (SSRIs): Regulate serotonin levels to improve mood
- Benzodiazepines: Provide rapid relief from acute anxiety by calming the central nervous system
- Beta-blockers: Help manage physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat and tremors

These medications are effective in providing quick symptomatic relief, especially in clinical conditions like anxiety disorders and depression. However, they are often associated with limitations such as:

- Risk of dependency (particularly with benzodiazepines)
- Side effects including fatigue, dizziness, and cognitive impairment
- Lack of focus on underlying causes of stress

Thus, while pharmacological methods are valuable in acute care, they are generally recommended as part of a broader treatment plan.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is one of the most widely used evidence-based therapies. It focuses on identifying and modifying negative thought patterns and maladaptive behaviors that contribute to stress.

CBT helps individuals:

- Develop healthier thinking patterns
- Improve coping strategies
- Reduce emotional distress

It has strong empirical support and is effective across a wide range of stress-related conditions.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction integrates mindfulness meditation with structured therapeutic practices. Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, MBSR focuses on cultivating awareness and acceptance of present experiences.

Studies show that MBSR:

- Reduces perceived stress levels
- Improves emotional regulation
- Enhances overall quality of life

Counseling and Support Therapy

Counseling provides a supportive environment where individuals can express emotions, explore stressors, and develop coping mechanisms. It emphasizes:

- Emotional validation
- Problem-solving skills
- Interpersonal support

Support therapy is particularly beneficial for individuals experiencing situational stress, such as academic pressure or life transitions.

Integration Provides the Best Outcomes

Increasing evidence suggests that combining traditional and modern stress management approaches produces the most effective and sustainable results. An integrated approach recognizes that stress is a multidimensional experience that affects physical, emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. Therefore, treatment is often most successful when multiple strategies are used together. For example, psychotherapy and counseling can help individuals understand and manage psychological difficulties, while yoga and meditation can support emotional regulation, relaxation and physical well-being. Similarly, medications may provide short-term symptom relief, whereas mindfulness and lifestyle modifications can promote long-term resilience and prevention.

Healthcare professionals increasingly recommend **complementary approaches** that combine evidence-based clinical treatments with holistic wellness practices. Many hospitals and mental health centers now include yoga therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), breathing exercises and meditation programs alongside conventional medical care. Research indicates that integrated interventions improve treatment adherence, reduce relapse rates, and enhance overall quality of life.

An integrated model also respects cultural diversity and individual preferences. Some individuals may feel more comfortable with traditional healing systems rooted in their cultural background, while others may prefer scientific and clinical interventions. Combining both approaches allows stress management strategies to become more personalized, balanced, and comprehensive.

Overall, the comparison between traditional and modern methods demonstrates that neither approach is entirely sufficient on its own. Traditional methods contribute preventive care, self-awareness, and holistic balance, while modern methods provide scientific precision and effective treatment for severe conditions. Together, they create a more complete framework for promoting mental health, resilience and overall well-being. Hence, traditional methods are preventive and holistic; modern methods are effective for acute and severe conditions, But integration provides the best outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Stress has become an inevitable aspect of modern life, driven by rapid societal changes, technological advancements, and increasing academic and professional pressures. This study compared traditional approaches—such as Yoga, Meditation, and Ayurveda—with modern methods including pharmacological treatments and psychotherapy.

The analysis reveals that traditional methods offer a holistic and sustainable framework for stress management by addressing the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and emotional well-being. These practices not only reduce stress but also enhance resilience, promote self-awareness, and encourage long-term lifestyle changes. Their accessibility, minimal cost, and lack of significant side effects make them particularly valuable in both rural and resource-limited settings.

Conversely, modern approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and medication-based treatments provide rapid and scientifically validated solutions, especially for individuals experiencing severe or clinical levels of stress, anxiety, or depression. However, these methods often focus on symptom management and may involve financial costs and potential side effects.

A key finding of this study is that neither approach alone is sufficient to address the complexity of stress in contemporary society. Instead, an integrative model that combines the strengths of both systems emerges as the most effective strategy. For example, incorporating yoga and meditation into psychotherapy frameworks, or combining mindfulness-based practices with clinical treatment, can enhance both short-term relief and long-term well-being.

In conclusion, the future of stress management lies in bridging traditional wisdom with modern science. Policymakers, healthcare providers, and educators should promote integrative health models that are culturally sensitive, evidence-based, and accessible to diverse populations. Further empirical research, particularly longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, is recommended to strengthen the evidence base and support widespread implementation of these combined approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Incorporate yoga and meditation into educational institutions.
2. Promote awareness of indigenous practices.
3. Encourage integrative healthcare systems.
4. Conduct further empirical research.
5. Improve accessibility to mental health services.

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