

Pranayama Practice and its Neurophysiological Impact on Depression & Anxiety

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Abstract - Mood disorders such as anxiety and depression represent major global health concerns and are linked to disturbances in autonomic regulation, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis activity, endocrine function, oxygen utilization, inflammatory actions and chronic stress responses provide to constant emotional instability and cognitive deterioration. Regulated breathing practices described in the teachings attributed to Patanjali within the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali outline a systematic approach for influencing bodily and mental processes through conscious respiration. This paper examines Scientific Pranayama as a structured, non-pharmacological intervention for anxiety and depression. Pranayama techniques such as Nadishodhana, Bhramari, and Ujjayi offer the following benefits: · Improve lung capacity and enhance oxygen exchange. · Clear the airways, reducing the risk of infections. · Increase oxygen efficiency, especially beneficial in polluted or high-altitude environments. · Reduce oxidative stress in lung tissues, supporting respiratory health. Chronic stress is a significant contributor to both lung and heart diseases. Pranayama helps reduce stress by calming the nervous system and lowering cortisol levels. Its regular practice offers the following benefits: · Promoting relaxation and stress relief. · Enhances sleep quality and supports recovery, aiding in the repair of vital organs. · Lowers inflammatory markers, thereby protecting the heart and lungs from chronic disease. The cardiovascular system benefits significantly from Pranayama, which helps regulate blood pressure and heart rate. Anxiety and depression arise from interconnected physiological and psychological processes rather than isolated mental phenomena. Through modulation of autonomic activity, oxygen transport, endocrine function, and neurochemical balance, scientific pranayama supports emotional stability and cognitive clarity.

Key Words: Pranayama, Meditation, Neurotransmitters, Anxiety, Depression.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders affect how people think, feel, and behave. They can cause distress and disrupt daily life. Mood disorders like anxiety and depression are significant global health issues. These disorders relate to problems in autonomic regulation, endocrine function, oxygen use, and responses to chronic stress. Breathing practices described in the teachings of Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras provide a method for influencing physical and mental processes through conscious breathing. This study looks at how structured pranayama practice might serve as a non-drug option that impacts brain activity, blood flow, breathing efficiency, detoxification, and hormone levels. Current research shows that these practices improve parasympathetic control, support neurotransmitter balance, enhance oxygen transport, and reduce stress hormone levels. Together, these changes help stabilize emotions and boost mental functioning, making scientific pranayama a practical option for mental health support. Anxiety and depression affect many people around the world and lead to significant disability and economic challenges. Modern medical views increasingly see these conditions as linked to widespread physical imbalances, including issues with the autonomic nervous system, disruptions in hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal signaling, inflammatory responses, and cardiovascular stress. Ongoing stress raises cortisol levels, disrupts restorative sleep, and harms brain flexibility, worsening emotional issues. Breathing stands out because it can be controlled voluntarily but also happens automatically. Structured breath techniques provide a direct way to intervene therapeutically. Scientific pranayama uses specific breathing patterns to influence brain and body activity, promoting a

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return to balance. This discussion examines its relevance for treating anxiety and depression. While researchers have studied breath-focused interventions, there is still limited integration of traditional pranayama methods with scientific approaches, standardized practices, and measurable brain outcomes. This paper aims to address that gap by presenting Scientific Pranayama as a repeatable, evidence-based model.

1.1 METHODOLOGY:

Scientific Pranayama is a structured breathing practice that uses scientific methods to manage normal breathing. It combines traditional pranayama techniques with careful observation, controlled use, and measurable results. This method follows a step-by-step process aimed at maximizing physical and mental benefits while reducing any possible negative effects during and after practice. The focus is on accuracy, safety, consistency, and support from evidence.

Structured breathing regulation includes Anuloma Viloma and Bhramari Pranayama. The suggested effects are: increased vagal tone, reduced sympathetic overactivity, changes in brain wave patterns, and a decrease in anxiety and agitation. It is typical to recommend ten to fifteen rounds under supervision..

1.2 Effects on Nervous System Function

Autonomic Balance: The autonomic nervous system regulates internal functions through sympathetic activation and parasympathetic recovery. Psychological distress often relates to higher sympathetic tone and lower vagal responsiveness. Slow, rhythmic breathing techniques activate restorative parasympathetic pathways. They lower the heart's workload, stabilize blood pressure, and encourage emotional calm. Techniques that alternate nasal airflow have been linked to balanced activity in both brain hemispheres. Breathing that favors the right side usually stimulates arousal. In contrast, patterns that favor the left generally promote relaxation. Switching between these styles helps strike a balance that enhances emotional processing and cognitive flexibility.

Neurochemical Modulation: Better breathing efficiency supports brain oxygen levels and metabolic activity. Research shows links between breath control and changes in neurochemical mediators like inhibitory neurotransmitters and mood-related monoamines. Natural opioids also play a role. These changes often lead to less anxiety and greater emotional stability.

Stress Response Reduction: Long-term stress can negatively impact cardiovascular health, metabolic efficiency, and immune function. Lengthening exhalation during pranayama activates vagal feedback, counteracting excess arousal. Regular practice is associated with better concentration, memory retention, and motor coordination, as well as a decrease in perceived stress. Chronic stress has a significant effect on mental health due to the over activation of the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis, which raises cortisol levels.

One effective method is Pranayama, a yogic breathing practice known to alleviate mood disorders like anxiety and depression in young people. Studies suggest that Pranayama works through the vagus nerve, affecting key brain areas such as the solitary nucleus, thalamus, limbic system, and prefrontal cortex. This practice is believed to increase parasympathetic nervous system activity, helping regulate stress hormones and enhancing GABA inhibition from the prefrontal cortex and insula to the amygdala. This process decreases amygdala hyperactivity, a major cause of stress and emotional suffering.

A recent meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials on breath work and mental health found that

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Individuals who practiced controlled breathing techniques for eight weeks experienced notable improvements in emotional regulation, stress resilience, and overall well-being. Participants reported fewer anxiety and depression symptoms, suggesting that Pranayama could be an affordable and accessible tool for managing mental health.

Organ Protection via Stress Reduction: Chronic stress greatly contributes to lung and heart diseases. Pranayama reduces stress by calming the nervous system and lowering cortisol levels. Regular practice provides several benefits:

- Activates the parasympathetic nervous system to promote relaxation and stress relief.
- Improves sleep quality and supports recovery, helping to repair vital organs.
- Lowers inflammatory markers, protecting the heart and lungs from chronic disease.

Meditation for Prevention of Stress-Related Organ Damage: Meditation, or Dhyana in Sanskrit, is a key part of Ashtanga Yoga (the eightfold path of Yoga) as described by Maharshi Patañjali. It involves a continuous flow of awareness directed at a single point of focus.

Scientific Benefits for Organ Health:

- **Reduces Stress Hormones:** Lowers cortisol and adrenaline, helping prevent hypertension, inflammation, and metabolic problems.
- **Protects the Heart:** Increases parasympathetic activity and heart rate variability (HRV), lowering blood pressure and vascular stress.
- **Supports Brain Health:** Boosts gray matter in areas related to memory and emotion, lowering the risk of cognitive decline.
- **Boosts Immunity:** Lowers pro-inflammatory markers and improves resistance to infections.
- **Improves Metabolism:** Increases insulin sensitivity and decreases oxidative stress, protecting liver and kidney function.

Meditation is a scientifically supported, non-invasive way to reduce stress, maintain important organ functions, and prevent chronic disease progression. Breathing patterns also influence catecholamine regulation, helping sustain attention without overstimulation. This is crucial for maintaining mental clarity and emotional stability.

Lung Protection through Pranayama: Pranayama techniques like Nadishodhana, Bhramari, and Ujjayi offer the following benefits:

- Increase lung capacity and improve oxygen exchange.
- Clear the airways, reducing the risk of infections.
- Enhance oxygen efficiency, especially in polluted or high-altitude areas.
- Decrease oxidative stress in lung tissues, supporting respiratory health.

2. Circulatory and Cardiovascular Influence:

Efficient circulation ensures adequate nutrient and oxygen delivery to neural tissues essential for psychological health. Disturbances in cardiovascular regulation frequently accompany mood disorders. Breath-centered practices support circulation through coordinated diaphragmatic movement that assists venous return and improves thoracic expansion. Stabilization of autonomic signaling contributes to healthier blood pressure patterns and enhanced cerebral perfusion, thereby supporting cognitive function and resilience.

Oxygen Utilization and Cellular Metabolism: Suboptimal oxygen exchange contributes to fatigue and impaired cognition. Structured breathing improves ventilatory capacity, alveolar diffusion efficiency, and hemoglobin

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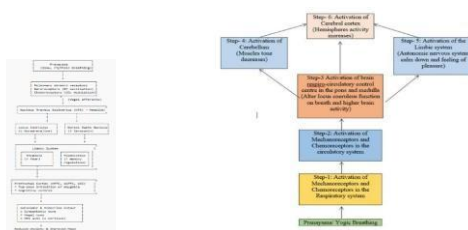
transport dynamics.

Detoxification and Restorative Processes: Physiological stress generates metabolic by-products that burden detoxification pathways. Enhanced circulation and oxygen supply promoted by pranayama support organ systems responsible for metabolic clearance.

Endocrine and Hormonal Regulation: Mood disturbances often coincide with endocrine imbalance. By influencing autonomic tone, regulated breathing indirectly affects hormonal output.

Gut–Brain Communication: Emerging scholarship emphasizes bidirectional communication between gastrointestinal microbiota and neural processes. Individuals with severe respiratory disorders, uncontrolled hypertension, or acute psychiatric instability should practice under trained supervision. Stress-related disruption of digestive function may aggravate mood instability. Stress-induced dysbiosis contributes to mood disorders. Controlled breathing may indirectly support gut homeostasis via autonomic balance.

Clinical Implications: Scientific pranayama addresses numerous physiological contributors to anxiety and depression simultaneously, including autonomic imbalance, endocrine disturbance, inefficient oxygenation, neurotransmitter disruption, and inflammatory stress. Its minimal cost, accessibility, and safety profile make it suitable as both preventive practice and adjunctive therapy. When guided appropriately, consistent application may improve emotional resilience, sleep quality, and overall quality of life. Future structured studies may evaluate HRV indices, salivary cortisol levels, EEG patterns, and inflammatory biomarkers to quantify the physiological impact of Scientific Pranayama. While promising, pranayama interventions require proper supervision, standardization of technique, and long-term follow-up studies to establish dose–response relationships and population-specific outcomes. Individuals with severe respiratory disorders, uncontrolled hypertension, or acute psychiatric instability should practice under trained supervision.



Proposed physiological mechanisms of pranayama (yogic breathing).

Summary: Slow Breathing → Vagal Afferent Activation → NTS → Limbic & Raphe Modulation → Neurotransmitter Balancing → Reduced Amygdala Activity + Enhanced PFC Control → Improved Anxiety & Depression.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Anxiety and depression come from related physical and mental processes, not separate issues. Structured breath regulation provides a practical way to influence these systems at the same time. By changing autonomic activity, oxygen transport, hormonal function, and neurochemical balance, scientific pranayama helps with emotional stability and clear thinking. Ancient insights on breathing and modern medical research show that intentional breathing patterns can affect overall body function. As a preventive practice and a supportive therapy, pranayama has significant potential for tackling mental health challenges today. The blend of ancient yogic

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knowledge and current brain science indicates that being mindful of how we breathe is both a reflective practice and a measurable biological method. Pranayama is cost-effective, easy to access, and has no side effects, making it a great choice for those looking for different or additional mental health options.

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