

## MEDITATION AS THERAPY IN ALLEVIATING COVID-19 ANXIETY AND IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE : A REVIEW

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**Abstract:** Extreme social distancing in coronavirus pandemic has affected individuals with stress, anxiety and other psychological issues. In turn, the psychological issues reduce quality of life. Introducing any meditation style in daily routine may be beneficial to improve psychological health as well as quality of life. Among various meditation styles, the most preferred ones are Vipassana, Mindfulness and TM. In these meditation techniques the focus is given to one's mind with the help of chanting or in silence. Scientific research on meditation practice has shown benefits against psychological issues including stress, anxiety and insomnia while improving memory, self awareness and quality of life.

**Methods:** The following electronic databases such as Pubmed, Scopus, Cochrane Library and Google Scholar from the inception till 2021 were searched to obtain eligible studies. Studies of all types that used meditation as an intervention to enhance quality of life for people with anxiety and/or psychological disorders were considered. Finally, 35 studies were included after meeting eligibility criteria.

**Key Words:** Coronavirus, Pandemic, Meditation, Quality of Life, Anxiety.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Covid-19 virus which spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose.<sup>[1]</sup>The coronavirus has taken millions of lives across the world and due to social isolation nearly half of the people in world experience an anxiety disorder. Anxiety caused by Covid-19, which is more prominent, is strongly correlated with a lower quality of life.<sup>[2]</sup> The advantages of yogasana, pranayama and meditation have been recommended as one of the ways to lower emotional impact of lockdown. Various relaxation techniques may be helpful in these situations to reduce anxiety and other psychological problems while also enhancing quality of life. During the pandemic stress and anxiety is unavoidable due to excess worry for various dimensions of life. Different relaxation techniques are popular as stress and anxiety reducing techniques. Meditation is one of several yoga techniques that provide immediate deep relaxation to melt away excess worry by reprogramming the neural pathways of the brain. The physiological and psychological effects of meditation have been examined by various scientific studies in great detail and affirmed that meditation induces anti-inflammatory response against stress and anxiety. During meditation the activities of the sympathetic nervous system are reduced, resulting in a reduction of lactate production and consequently reducing blood pressure and all types of anxiety symptoms.<sup>[3]</sup> Researchers have found that high level of lactate is associated with anxiety. There are many different types of meditation techniques in order to encourage positive changes in life for well being. Transcendental meditation (TM), Mindfulness and Vipassana meditation are the most popular type of meditation techniques that will rise spiritual awakening and train mental faculties to adjust stressful conditions in a more relaxed way.

### 2. COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ANXIETY:

New research suggests that anxiety level has significantly increased due to challenges especially the tips to protect the people from Covid-19 outbreak. Probable reasons related to Covid-19 anxiety are social distancing, mask mandate, quarantine, lockdown of non-essential services, complete ban on public gathering as Janta curfew and implementation of other emergency protocols. Persistent fear due to consistent exposure to the news of worldwide mortalities, trouble sleeping, death of a loved one and loss of employment are the major stressors which increase the risk of mental disorders. The pandemic has led to an increase in the demand for yoga as a necessary tool to counter the

ravaging effects of a coronavirus. The data source from Office for National Statistics (UK) and Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (US) suggests that the symptoms of anxiety and depression in people have surged during the pandemic from its initial point and the picture shows 19% of UK adults experiencing symptoms of depression during the pandemic as against the 10% before the pandemic.<sup>[4]</sup> US adults reported symptoms of anxiety and depression during the pandemic are 42% in Dec 2020, an increase from 11% before pandemic.<sup>[4]</sup> According to a study conducted by ‘The Centre of Healing (TCOH)’, the 74% of Indian population facing the symptoms of stress and 88% reported anxiety and the second wave of Covid-19 is still taking a toll on mental health.<sup>[5]</sup> Hence yoga based meditation technique is a great option to deal with increased anxiety among the public.

### **3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANXIETY AND QUALITY OF LIFE:**

Quality of life is a general well being. According to WHO, the Quality of Life is; “an individual’s perception of his/her position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which he/she lives and in relation to his/her goals, expectations, standards and concerns”.<sup>[6]</sup> There are numerous tools available for evaluating quality of life (QOL). The WHOQOL-BREF evaluates quality of life in four areas, including environment, social relationships, psychological well-being, and physical health. Quality of life is a personalized measure of happiness, and the factors that contribute to it change depending on individual preferences. Quality of life depends on multiple factors including job satisfaction, good physical and psychological health, and strong social relationships and/or etc. Having an anxiety disorder may lower one's quality of living as well as quality of life.<sup>[7,8,9]</sup> If anxiety affects one's psychological domain on quality of life, access to one of the holistic therapeutic interventions may hold promise for enhancing quality of life. One comprehensive yoga approach that might demonstrate a practitioner's total well-being is meditation. The benefits of meditation in fostering a healthy quality of life by lowering anxiety levels have been supported by numerous studies.<sup>[10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15]</sup>

### **4. CONCEPT OF MEDITATION IN YOGA FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING:**

Meditation finds seventh position in the Maharishi Patanjali’s eight limbed path of yoga. The sequence goes from outer to inner aspect in supporting mental health by reducing stress and anxiety. Yama-Niyama and their subsequent limbs provide the foundation for the higher practices of meditation. According to Visnupurana, when mind is unidirectionally absorbed in one object alone and is detached towards everything else, it is called dhyana or meditation. The effectiveness of meditation on the reduction of stress and anxiety and promoting psychological wellbeing has been mentioned in various yoga texts and scriptures.<sup>[3, 16, 17]</sup>

Psychological wellbeing is the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively.<sup>[18]</sup> Psychological wellbeing is associated with decreased risk of disease and very low social problems which are core features of mental health. The ultimate goal of meditation is to create a feeling of relaxation by altering the brain wave activity and plays a key role in achieving psychological wellbeing.

### **5. ROLE OF MEDITATION FOR PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19 ANXIETY:**

In the context of Covid-19 pandemic, prevention and management of anxiety is crucial as anxiety leads to mimic the symptoms of Covid-19 complications like respiratory problems including shortness of breath. Any form of meditation may reduce anxiety of all kind and restores the happy state of mind. Out of the many branches of meditation styles, Mindfulness is the meditation practice that was created in 1979 by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Mindfulness teaches the skill of paying attention to the present by noticing when the mind wanders off, come back to breath as it is a place where one can rest and settle one’s mind.<sup>[19]</sup> In a study conducted by Lenze et al., 2014<sup>[20]</sup> on mindfulness based intervention, it was concluded that the practice reduced worry in individuals with significant anxiety related distress. The results showing effects of mindfulness meditation in reducing anxiety and depression is in consistent with the results of other studies.<sup>[21, 22]</sup> In a study conducted by Hoge et al. in 2018 and published in the Journal Psychiatry Review, found that individuals with generalized anxiety disorder reduced their anxiety level after practicing mindfulness based stress reduction program.<sup>[23]</sup> In addition to mindfulness meditation, transcendental meditation technique has found to be highly effective for stress and anxiety related symptoms. TM is a type of mantra based meditation technique that was introduced near 1950s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. In TM the practitioner has to keep his/her eyes closed and silently chant the mantra. The mantra is a meaningless sound that absorbs the mind into the tranquil state. TM doesn’t focus on breathing or chanting like other forms of meditation, actually it encourages a restful state of mind beyond thinking.<sup>[24]</sup> Here the chanting of mantra is effortless and without concentration unlike other meditation techniques. Studies that evaluated the efficacy of TM to reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety induce a sense of acceptance as a perfect method of intervention. Various studies indicate that practice of TM reduces stress, anxiety and other psychological issues.<sup>[25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33]</sup> Most of the meditation practices are similar in their purpose of addressing mind but the technique to

acquire the tranquil state of mind is different. Vipassana is one such techniques of insight observation to see things as they really are. Vipassana meditation was taught by S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin and is the process of self purification beginning by observing the natural breath to concentrate the mind.<sup>[34]</sup> Vipassana may be used to produce general physical and mental wellbeing and among psychiatric disorders anxiety neurosis, depression, phobias, and personality problems may be benefitted by this technique.<sup>[35]</sup> A case study report of Mr. B was published in Vipassana Research Institute under the column of Anxiety panic disorder. The vicious cycle of accumulated mental reactions of aversion to the unpleasant sensations triggered off by the panic attacks was the central theme of this person's problem and as his equanimity increased due to daily practice of Vipassana, the anxiety related defilements automatically decreased to a significant extent.<sup>[36]</sup> Khurana and Dhar, 2002, in their study conducted on mild to moderate cases of anxiety, depression and adjustment problems and were shown complete recovery as a result of Vipassana. There are many other studies who claimed Vipassana meditation as stress and anxiety reducing technique. <sup>[37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42]</sup>

The benefits of practicing various meditation styles are extensive including physical and mental benefits. The mental health benefits of meditation include reduced stress and anxiety attacks, promotes emotional health, better focus and well-being.

## **6. ROLE OF MEDITATION FOR IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE:**

The practice of meditation enhances one's physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being and controls a number of bodily functions. The various techniques of meditation have been shown to improve brain function and aid to balance hormonal imbalances. Mental health is enhanced by the practice of meditation because it fosters inner tranquility and relaxation. Grey matter density in the regions of the brain associated with stress and anxiety changes as a result of meditation. Quality of Life is the capacity to manage and maintain control over one's own decisions, emotions, behaviour, and level of health, comfort, and joy. <sup>[43, 44]</sup> Studies indicate that meditation can enhance one's quality of life and level of attentiveness. <sup>[45, 46]</sup> The efficacy, wellbeing, and job satisfaction of employees can all be increased by the appropriate use of meditation in the workplace. <sup>[47]</sup> The data suggests that the meditation intervention benefited the participants in a number of ways. Because quality of life encompasses physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains, meditation is a technique that positively affects all of these aspects of quality of life.

## **7. CONCLUSION:**

Based on an investigation of multiple empirical studies, this review concludes that various meditation styles including Mindfulness, TM and Vipassana facilitates well-being by reducing stress and anxiety related to Covid-19 pandemic. Anxiety contributes to various psychological dysfunctioning, which in turn lowers quality of life. This is due to various physical barriers imposed by government as emergency protocols against Covid-19 pandemic. The most common treatment option available for anxiety is antidepressants. There are various evidences where patients report treatment failure and sometimes incomplete recovery and other complications after taking depressants. The role of meditation based approach may offer an alternative for anxiety related symptoms in people who don't want to take antidepressants. Meditation contributes in regulating emotional responses to perceived threats. The practice of meditation also helps to calm down hyperactive brain, lowers blood pressure and gradually settles down the symptoms of stress and anxiety. It is evident that by improving an individual's psychological state, holistic health is acquired in a more relaxed manner. When the symptoms of anxiety and other psychological issues disappear due to meditation practice, the quality of life automatically improves as the quality of life deteriorates due to disturbances in the psychological domain. Research on various meditation styles had already begun and the paper attempts to summarize these findings but further studies are also needed to be run to authenticate the role of meditation in anxiety and Quality of life.

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