



REVIEW ARTICLE

PSYCHOCUTANEOUS DISORDERS IN AYURVEDA- AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

Psychodermatology is a new discipline which deals with the interaction between skin and mind. Skin diseases are considered to be major cause of chronic suffering as they affect both body as well as mind. Psychodermatological disorders significantly affect the emotional sphere and psychosocial functioning of patients. Physiological and pathological association of these two entities is well established in ayurveda. Treatment of psychocutaneous disorders in ayurveda is a combined approach including both pharmacological and nonpharmacological interventions. A better understanding of psychocutaneous disorders help in an effective management and improving the quality of life of patients. The article is a narrative review with references collected from authoritative texts, hand searches and computerized databases.

**Keywords:** Psychodermatology, Psychosomatism, *Kustha*.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Ayu* (life) is an amalgamation of *shareera*(body), *indriya* (senses), *sattwa* (psyche) and *Aatma* (soul) which signifies the concept of psychosomatism in ayurveda<sup>[1]</sup>. All ancient text books of Ayurveda have explained the interrelationship between mind and body through various analogies. The disease is not only biological but also a social phenomenon. There will be both somatic and psychic sufferings. The word disease is composed of Dis-Ease which means feeling of uneasiness. The sense of pain is experienced by mind, body as well as senses<sup>[2]</sup>.

Psychodermatology is a new branch which addresses the interaction between skin and mind. The complex interplay between neuro-immuno-cutaneous system (NICS) connects the two disciplines of psychiatry and dermatology, where psychiatry is more focused on the 'internal' invisible disease and dermatology deals with the 'external' visible disease. The interaction between nervous system, skin and immunity has been explained by release of mediators from NICS<sup>[3]</sup>. This system gets disturbed in several inflammatory skin diseases. Skin diseases are considered to be major cause of chronic suffering as they affect both body as well as mind. In more than one third of dermatological patients, an effective management of the skin condition

involves consideration of associated psychological factors<sup>[4]</sup>.

In Ayurveda '*Kushta*' is considered as a group of skin diseases. It is one of the oldest diseases of mankind with mythological importance. Skin and mind share an inseparable relationship with each other<sup>[5]</sup>. Skin diseases develop deformity and make the entire body obnoxious<sup>[6]</sup>. This leads to deterioration in quality of life and causes cosmetic nuisance, anxiety, depression and other psychological problems. Patients having skin disorders always experience physical, emotional and socio-economic embarrassment in the society, further leading to aggravation of already existing disease.

### **Physiological relation between skin and mind:**

Skin and mind grossly differ with each other but share some similar characteristics. *Vata* (humour which governs all movements of mind and body) being the controller and stimulator of mind has an inseparable relation with the skin, which is responsible for tactile sensation<sup>[7,8]</sup>. *Hridaya* (heart) and the entire body are considered to be abode of *manas*(mind)<sup>[9,10]</sup>. Among the five varieties of *vata*, *vyana vata* (humour which has multidirectional movement and responsible for all types of bodily functions) has a greater influence on mind due to its existence in both *twak*(skin) and *hridaya*<sup>[11,12]</sup>. The functions of *pitta dosha* (humour responsible for digestion

and metabolism) and *kapha dosha* (humour responsible for stability and unctuousness) depend on *vata dosha* [13]. Hence they are also involved in the functions of skin. Gross part of digested food nourishes the body while subtle part nourishes mind [14]. Hence the source of sustenance is same for both skin and mind.

Skin is the major sense organ among five, which covers the entire body. Likewise *manovaha srotas* (channels of mind) resides all over the body [15]. The tactile cognition is perceived through an association of skin and mind leading to all pleasurable and painful sensations [16]. Skin is closely connected with the nervous system and it is acutely sensitive to emotional events as well. It turns pale and clammy during fear, it blushes when embarrassed and it glows due to happiness.

Anger, depression and elation cause subtle and measurable changes to the skin [17].

**Pathological relation between skin and mind:**

The etiological factors of *kushta* are divided as dietary, lifestyle and psychological factors. The skin diseases are also mentioned to be a resultant of previous sinful acts like disrespecting or abusing teachers, dieties etc. These antiritualistic behaviours impose a greater psychogenic stress. Fear, excessive mental and physical exhaustion are also important contributing factors of *kushta* [18]. *Rasavaha* (channels carrying *rasa dhatu*), *ambuvaha*(channels carrying lymph)and *swedavaha srotas*(channels carrying sweat) are the three major channels involved in *kushta*. Certain psychological factors are responsible for vitiation of these channels.

**Table no.1: Psychological causes of *Srotodushti* (vitiation of channels)**

Psychological causes	Vitiated channels
Excessive thinking	<i>rasavaha srotodushti</i> (vitiation of channels carrying <i>rasa dhatu</i> ) [19]
Fear	<i>ambuvaha srotodushti</i> (vitiation of channels carrying lymph) [20]
Anger, sadness and fear	<i>swedavaha srotodushti</i> (vitiation of channels carrying sweat) [21]

Skin and mind derive their nutrients from *rasa dhatu* (the fluids of body- first result of metabolism). So consumption of food and drinks which are mutually contradictory,

unclean and unwholesome have a greater impact on either entities [22,23]. *Bhagavadgeeta* explains about the close relationship between food and psyche. Intake of sour, hot, spicy and

fried food leads to vitiated *rajo guna*(attribute of psyche) which in turn disturbs the mind <sup>[24]</sup>. This kind of food is also responsible for *rakta dushti* (vitiating of blood) which is a key factor in developing *kushta*<sup>[25]</sup>. Consumption of half cooked, stale, foul smelling and left over food vitiates *tamas*(attribute of psyche)<sup>[26]</sup>.

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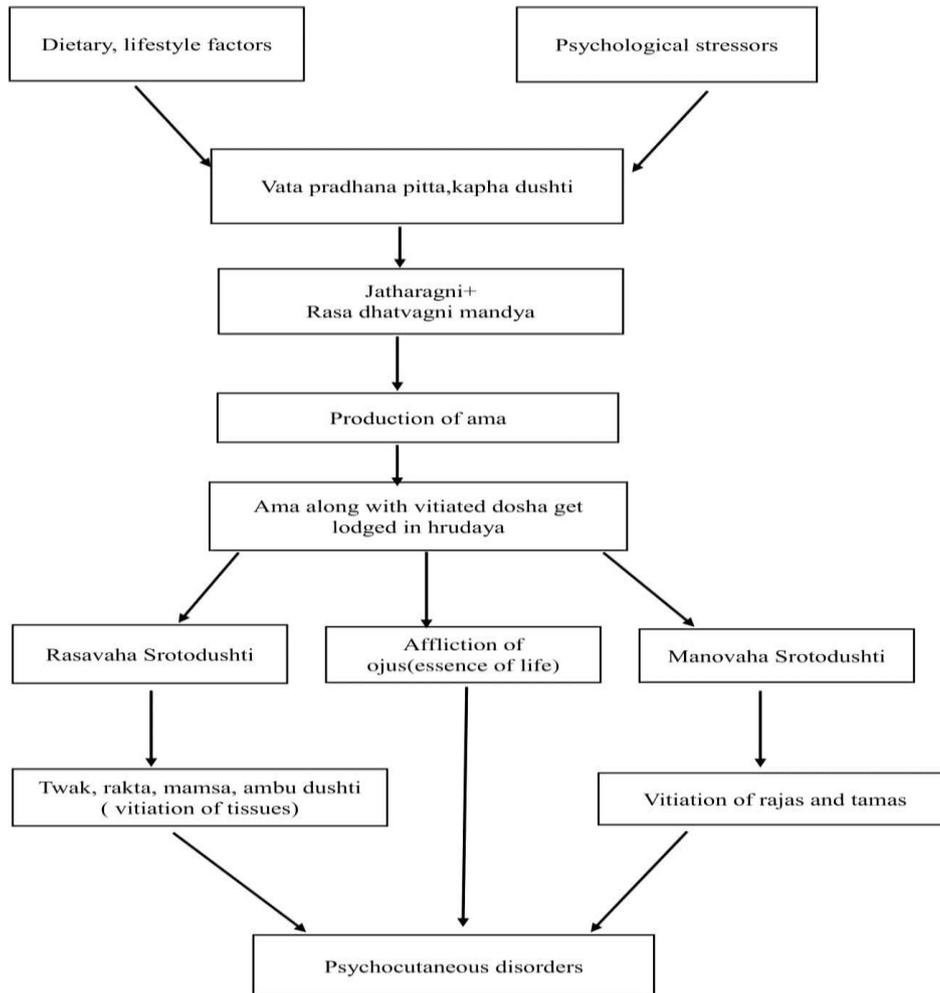
- Psychophysiological disorders due to stress or other emotional states.
- Psychiatric disorders with dermatological symptoms
- Dermatologic disorders with psychiatric symptoms<sup>[27]</sup>.

Stress represents an internal or external force that threatens to disrupt the homeostasis of an organism. It activates 2 major neuronal pathways; the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and the sympathetic nervous system. When an external stress is being identified, these two systems get activated. Chronicity of this stress disturbs the ability of an organism to balance acute homeostatic challenges resulting in exhaustion, distress and disease or flare-up of pre-existing dermatoses <sup>[28]</sup>. Commonly occurring Psychodermatological disorders are psoriasis, dermatitis artifacta, urticaria, neurotic excoriations, atopic dermatitis and acne etc<sup>[29]</sup>.

#### **Pathological relation between skin, Agni and mind:**

Psychological stress is associated with impairment of *jatharagni* (digestive fire) further producing *dhatvagnimandya*(impaired tissue metabolism). This hampers the process of digestion and metabolism starting from *rasa dhatu* producing *ama*(undigested food material)<sup>[30]</sup>.The nourishment of skin is derived through *rasadi dhatu*(consecutive body tissues starting from *rasa*). Hence vitiation of these contributes to the manifestation of various skin diseases.

### Pathogenesis of Psychodermatological disorders



#### Ayurvedic management

A combined approach including pharmacotherapy and psychotherapies are administered in the management of psychocutaneous disorders. Modern science considers skin and mind as two separate entities. Hence symptomatic treatments are practiced considering psychological and skin manifestations. Some of the modern medicines used in treating chronic skin diseases can manifest psychological symptoms and some psychotropic medicines also show their adverse drug reaction on skin.

Ayurveda being a holistic science establishes the relation between skin and mind. Various treatment approaches in ayurveda focus on eliminating disease from its root and providing a sense of well-being. Management of psychocutaneous disorders in ayurveda aims at a multidimensional approach through *daivavyapashraya* (Psychospiritual therapy), *yuktivyapashraya* (pharmacotherapy) and *Sattwavajaya* (Psychic intervention).

#### Daivavapashraya Chikitsa:

This is the psychospiritual mode of treatment. Following spiritual practices like *vrita*, *seva* (service), *tyaga* (renunciation), *daana* (offering) worship of deities, friendly behaviour with everyone etc are advised in treatment of *kushta* caused due to *papa karma* (sinful activities)<sup>[31]</sup>. When practiced for longer duration these spiritual activities tend to decrease the stress level, improve confidence in cure and enhances mental wellbeing<sup>[32]</sup>. This idea has been upheld by recent researches also. There is a custom of offering prayers for the cure of chronic debilitating skin disorders exists in certain temples of southern India. This is specially practiced when other treatments fail and the disease is believed to be due to sinful activities. The faith of patient on god, clinically translates into a psychological coping mechanism due to which patients may rely on to proceed with their lives.

**Antarparimarjana (Internal treatments):**

The main line of treatment in psychodermatological diseases is *shodhana chikitsa* (Purificatory procedures) which removes the disease from its root, provides

excellent complexion and clarity of mind, senses and intellect<sup>[33]</sup>. Oral administration of ghee (clarified butter) is a chief line of treatment in both *kushta* and *unmada* (group of psychiatric disorders)<sup>[34,35]</sup>. Ghee is known to pacify the vitiated *vata dosha* which is the first humour to be affected.

*Shamana* (Palliative therapy) follows *shodhana chikitsa*. This includes administration of various drugs which have their combined effect on both mind as well as skin. Ghee preparations such as *brahmi ghrita*, *kalyanaka ghrita* and *mahatiktaka ghrita* are indicated in both *unmada* and *kushta*<sup>[36,37,38]</sup>. *Brahmi churna* is indicated where there is altered sensation in *kushta* which is a potent *medhya* drug<sup>[39]</sup>. *Medhya rasayana* like *brahmi* (*Bocopa monnier*), *yashtimadhu* (*Glyceriza glabra*), *shankhapushpi* (*Convolvulus pluricaulis*) etc. are used for an effective management of psychocutaneous disorders. According to recent researches some of the single drugs useful in skin disorders also exhibit anxiolytic and antidepressant property and drugs acting on brain also have an effect on the skin.

**Table 2: List of single drugs acting on skin and mind**

Sl.No	Name of the herb (sanskrit)	Botanical name
1	Mandukaparni	<i>Centella asiatica</i>
2	Brahmi	<i>Bacopa monnieri</i>

3	Shankhapushpi	<i>Convolvulus pluricaulis</i>
4	Yashtimadhu	<i>Glycerizza glabra</i>
5	Jyothishmati	<i>Celastrus paniculatus</i>
6	Haridra	<i>Curcuma longa</i>
7	Jatiphala	<i>Myristica fragrans</i>
8	Shatavari	<i>Asperagus recemosa</i>
9	Vacha	<i>Acorus calamus</i>
10	Jatamamsi	<i>Nardostachys jatamansi</i>
11	Amalaki	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i>
12	Bhallataka	<i>Semicarpus anacardium</i>
13	Nagabala	<i>Grewia hirsute</i>
14	Madayantika	<i>Lawsonia inermis</i>

**Table 3: List of polyherbal formulations acting on skin and mind mentioned in classics**

Sl. No	Name of the formulation
1	Kalyanaka ghrita
2	Mahatiktaka ghrita
3	Tiktaka ghrita
4	Brahmi ghrita
5	Siddhartaka ghrita
6	Mahabhutarava ghrita
7	Brahmi churna
8	Haritaki rasayana
9	Amalaka ghrita
10	Shilajitu rasayana
11	Bhallataka rasayana
12	Triphala rasayana

**Bahirparimarjana(External treatments):**

Experimental studies have shown that massage and other touch treatment modalities soothes or stimulate the nerves there by modulate psychosomatic arousal. External treatments like *abhyanga*(oil massage), *udvartana*(powder massage), *parisheka*(pouring medicated liquid) are practiced in psychodermatological disorders. *Vata* being situated in skin gets pacified with the administration of these external therapies.

Physical pressure of massage induces softness in the external skin and soothes internal viscera and tissues. At motor end plates acetylcholine acts as transmitter in the presence of calcium ion and facilitates synaptic action potential. Na and K ions are responsible for repolarization in the nerve

fibre. This action with the association of melatonin a by-product of serotonin (synthesized from tryptophan) and a neurochemical causes pleasantness and calming effects by the process of massage<sup>[40]</sup>. Practicing of *shirodhara*, *shiropichu* and *shirobasti* based on doshic predominance are also helpful in reducing the associated anxiety and insomnia.

**Satwavajaya Chikitsa (Psychic intervention):**

*Satwavajaya chikitsa* potentiates *sattva* (psychological threshold) by modifying maladaptive characteristics caused by *rajas* and *tamas* (mental factors). Mind is trained to restrain from unwholesome objects by means of *jnana* (insight, orientation), *vijnana* (scientific awareness about the disease), *dhairya* (building confidence) etc<sup>[41]</sup>. These help in removing pessimism and fear associated with psychocutaneous disorders by providing emotional support and boosting up confidence. Psychological measures are especially beneficial in chronic skin diseases like psoriasis associated with anxiety and depression. Apart from these practicing self-relaxation techniques, *yoga*, *pranayama* and meditation also play a role in bringing down the stress associated with the skin diseases and help in improving coping abilities.

**CONCLUSION:**

Psychodermatology is a relatively new discipline in dermatology which deals with the

diseases affecting mind and skin. Psychological factors responsible for skin diseases and vice versa is demonstrated in the classics of ayurveda. Psychological stress is one of the major factors which hampers the immune system thereby making a person susceptible to various skin disorders. Associated anxiety, depression or other psychological problems worsen the previously existing skin condition and affect the quality of life. The management of psychodermatological disorders in ayurveda involves various therapies and life style modifications that preserve the mental balance and healthy skin.

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