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Unani perspective of stress with reference to harkat-wa-sukoon nafsani: A review

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Abstract

Mental, physical, and social health are essential aspects of life that are intricately linked and highly dependent on one another for every individual. The prevalence of mental illnesses, which are among the most disturbing and incapacitating conditions in life, are rising globally. Stress is the way an individual reacts to external demands or pressures. Experiencing some level of stress is a typical aspect of everyday life. However, stress-related illnesses occur when individuals face overwhelming and extended challenges that exceed their capacity to cope. The signs of stress can manifest in both physical and mental forms. *Unani* medicine highlights the unique blend of *Asbab-e-Sitta Zaruriyah* (the six essential factors), which are essential in the prevention and management of various psychological issues including stress. In *Unani* medicine, mental health issues fall under *harkat-wa-sukoon nafsani*, arising from an imbalance in the six essential factors. The English equivalent of *harkat-wa-sukoon nafsani* is Mental Activity and Peace. This review aims to assess the relationship between *Asbab-e-Sitta Zaruriyah* (*harkat-wa-sukoon nafsani*) and mental stress and its prevention and treatment in unani medical system.

Keywords: Stress, mental, *Unani*, *Asbab-e-Sitta Zaruriyah*, *harkat-wa-sukoon nafsani*

Introduction

Stress is defined as a state of worry or tension resulting from a difficult situation. It is a natural human response that prompts an individual to address challenges and threats in his/her lives ^[1]. It is conceptualized as three factors: stressors, stress response, and transaction. "Stressors" refer to stimulants or environmental alterations, which can be significant life events or everyday inconveniences. "Stress response" refers to a person's physical or psychological response to stressors. A "transaction" or a process involves constant interaction and modification between a person and their environment, where the one influences the other ^[2].

According to data from 2024, mental health illnesses are still on the rise worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in eight people worldwide suffers from a psychological disorder ^[4]. One in two urban Indians (53%) report having experienced stress to the point where it affected their day-to-day lives in the past year, according to an Ipsos worldwide study conducted to honor World Mental Health Day in 2024. Thirty-one percent of Indians have experienced stress at least once, and one in four (22%) have been in a difficult situation multiple times ^[3].

According to the NMHS (National Mental Health Survey) 2015-16, India's urban metros had a greater weighted prevalence of psychiatric disorders than both rural and urban non-metro areas (those with fewer than 10 million residents). In urban metro areas, the prevalence of mood disorders (5.6%), neurotic or stress-related disorders (6.93%), and schizophrenia and other psychoses (0.64%) was about two to three times higher ^[4].

According to Unani scholars, stress is a response to the loss of a life, a substance, or an opportunity; an inability to seek justice or stop an adverse scenario⁵. The Greek physician, Buqrat (Hippocrates: 460-370 BC), is credited with bringing the concept of psychological disorders into the field of medicine. His writings discussed delirium (psychoses), acute mental disturbances with fever, mania, chronic mental disturbances without fever, hysteria, and Scythian disease (such as transvestism) ^[6].

In the Unani Medical System, "stress" has the name of "Zahni Dabav". The description of stress-related disorders overlaps with Melancholia (Malankhuliya). Melancholia was first

written about by Hippocrates. He remarked to the fact that "aversion to food, despondency, sleeplessness, irritability, and restlessness" were frequently linked to this clinical condition [7]. Its symptoms include palpitations, stress, sadness, discomfort, and a fear of unfamiliar objects. The USM states that aberrant melancholy humors are one of the primary etiological elements of melancholia (Sawda Ghayr Tabiyya). Melancholia is caused by an excess of black bile (Sawda Ghayr Tabiyya), which alters the brain's constitution.

Stressful situations, even when handled appropriately, can contribute significantly to the development of a variety of mental health conditions. Psychiatric disorders that are specific reactions to stressful situations include:

- **Acute stress disorder:** these are the disorders that start and end shortly after stressful events.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder:** these include the disorders following exceptionally severe stress.

- **Adjustment disorders:** these are the disorders that occur after a change in the circumstances of life [8].

Stress response

Numerous defense systems have been developed by the human body to address perceived dangers. The primary components of the stress response are the sympathetic nervous system and the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis. When the sympathetic nervous system is triggered in response to a threat, the adrenal medulla releases epinephrine, also known as adrenaline. The fight-or-flight response is triggered by epinephrine, preparing the body to react to or escape from a threat. The HPA axis is triggered by stress and the activation of the locus coeruleus (pons), which causes the adrenal cortex to release glucocorticoids. These two pathways alter the body to deal with a threat, and are outlined in Figure 1.

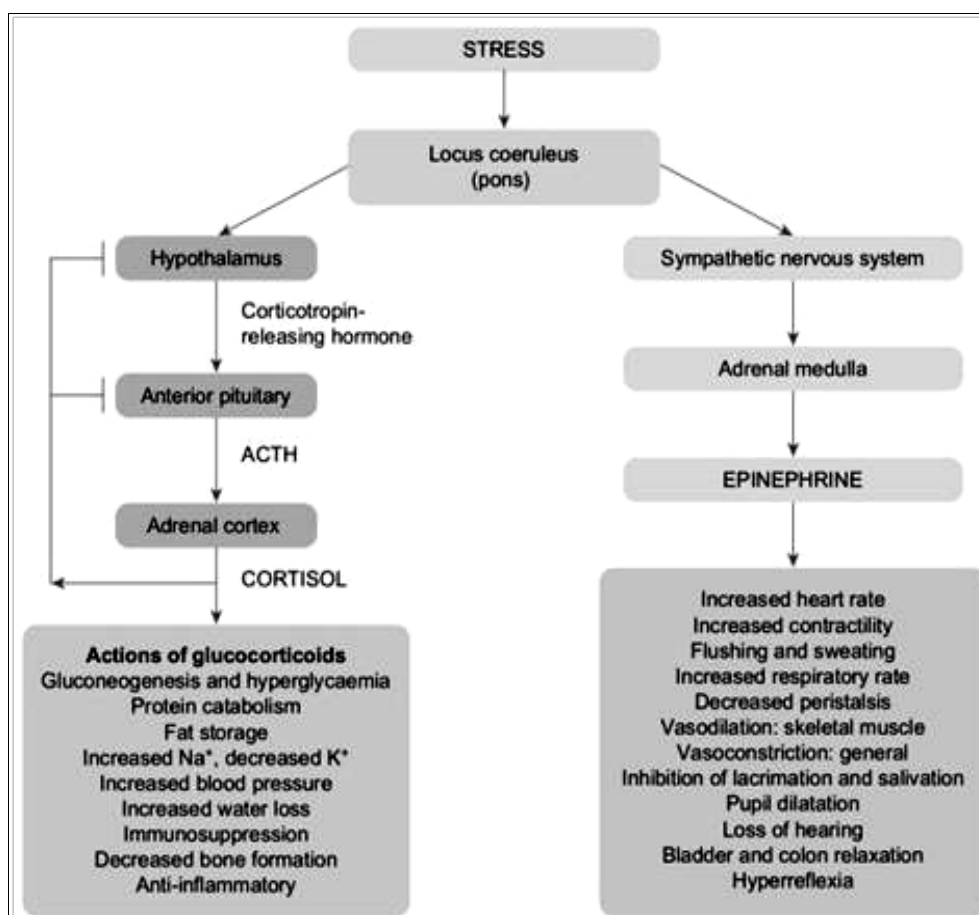


Fig 1: The physiological response to stress [8]

Types

There are three different types of stress: acute, episodic, and chronic. The most prevalent type of stress is "Acute stress", which is associated with the demands and pressures of the recent past. It can be exciting, exhausting, or both. "Episodic stress" is the term used to describe repeated episodes of these acute pressures. It results in tension, anxiety, irritation, short temper, and over-arousal. "Chronic stress" results from persistent demands and pressures that seem to last forever. Suicide, violence, myocardial infarction, cerebrovascular accidents, and possibly even cancer are some of the ways it can be lethal.

Sources of stress

- **Emotional:** Peer pressure, conflicting cultural norms and ideas, coping with uncertainty, and academic failure.
- **Physical:** Poor eating habits, drug or alcohol abuse, staying up late, or not keeping a schedule.
- **Environmental:** Issues with inadequate housing or accommodations, social isolation, unemployment, adjustment to new surroundings, and financial strains.
- **Life changes:** Physical illness, accidents or loss, marriage or childbearing, divorce or relationship dissolution, legal troubles or imprisonment.

Stress impact on the human body

Respiratory system

As the air passage between the nose and the lungs constricts during stress and intense emotions, respiratory symptoms, including shortness of breath and fast breathing, might manifest. For those who already have respiratory conditions like asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD, which includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis), psychological stressors can make breathing more difficult.

Cardiovascular system

A mechanism that is believed to link stress to heart attacks is inflammation in the circulatory system, namely in the coronary arteries, which can be caused by both chronic and recurrent acute stress. Additionally, it seems that a person's cholesterol levels can be influenced by their stress level. Long-term issues with blood vessels and coronary arteries may result from chronic stress. The risk of hypertension, myocardial infarction, or stroke might be increased by a persistent and continuous rise in heart rate, as well as by raised blood pressure and stress hormone levels.

Endocrine system

The hypothalamus, a group of nuclei that links the brain and the endocrine system, signals the pituitary gland to release a hormone "cortisol" when under stress. The body is affected by cortisol, the main stress hormone, in several ways. By improving brain function, raising blood glucose levels, and releasing resources for tissue repair, it first aids the body's reaction to stress. In contrast, long-term or chronic stress can have detrimental effects on the immune system, metabolic (such as diabetes and obesity), reproductive, and digestive systems, as well as raise the risk of diseases like heart disease and depression.

Gastrointestinal system

Pain, bloating, and nausea are all symptoms of stomach discomfort that can be made worse by stress. If the level of stress is high enough, vomiting could happen. Stress may cause a needless rise or decrease in appetite. Changes in gut microbes are linked to stress, and these changes might have an impact on mood. Consequently, the brain is greatly influenced by the gut's bacteria and neurons, and vice versa. Stress can affect the rate at which food passes through the body, which may result in diarrhea and constipation. Furthermore, stress might cause painful gut muscle spasms.

Nervous system

The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) instructs the adrenal glands to release the chemicals cortisol and adrenaline (epinephrine) in reaction to stress. To cope with the emergency, these hormones, in conjunction with the direct actions of autonomic nerves, allow the heart to beat more quickly, the respiration rate to increase, the arms and legs' blood vessels to dilate, the digestive process to alter, and the blood's glucose levels (sugar energy) to rise ^[10].

Cognitive effects

- Having trouble focusing on a tough task and losing focus frequently.
- Both long-term and short-term memory decline.
- Problems that require a quick and spontaneous solution are resolved erratically and randomly.

- Any problem that calls for logical reasoning is likely to be handled with more mistakes than it should.
- The intellect cannot accurately project current circumstances into the future or analyze and assess them.
- Thinking is unorganized and does not adhere to logical and coherent mental patterns.

Psychological/Emotional effects (Feelings and emotions)

- Difficulty relaxing both physically and emotionally.
- Impatience, intolerance, and disregard for other people.
- Decline of self-control.
- Heightened discouragement and diminished will to live.
- Depressive and inferiority complexes.

Behavioral effects (Attitudes and Behaviors)

- Incapacity to talk fluently, stutter, or satisfactorily address a group of individuals verbally.
- Lack of passion for favorite pastimes or hobbies.
- Absence from school or work.
- An increase in drug, alcohol, tobacco, or coffee consumption.
- The energy levels are generally low.
- Sleep habits vary. In general, excessive deprivation is exacerbated by insomnia.
- The tendency towards suspicious increase. A tendency to blame others and put responsibility for mistakes upon others develops.
- The appearance of tics and strange reactions, which are not normally a part of the person, i.e., quick repeated movement of a muscle, appears.
- As suicide attempts rise, so do suicidal thoughts ^[11].

Stress and asbab-e-sitta zaruriyah

The basic framework of the USM is built on profound philosophical notions and scientific grounds. These include the four elements doctrine (air, water, fire, and earth), the four proximate qualities (*Kayfiyat*, i.e., hot, cold, wet, and dry), and Hippocrates' humoral theory. The four humours are blood (*khilt-e-dam*), phlegm (*khilt-e-balgham*), yellow bile (*khilt-e-safra*), and black bile (*khilt-e-sawda*). When these humors are in balance or equilibrium, they are associated with good health; when they are out of balance or there is an excess of one or more of them, they are associated with disease ^[12, 13].

"Asbab" are the elements that function as precursors and affect the human body to either create a new condition or preserve an existing one. In essence, *Asbab-e-Sitta Zaruriyah* are the six necessities of life; without them, human existence would be unimaginable ^[14, 15]. Apart from focusing on curing illnesses, *Unani* medicine also emphasizes preventing them. As a preventative measure, it outlines *Asbab-e-Sitta Zaruriyah* (the six fundamental components), which promotes the maintenance of appropriate equilibrium or balance of the six factors. Adherence to these factors is crucial for preserving both physical and mental health. These factors are as follows:

- *Hawa' muheet* (ambient air)
- *Ma'kul-wa-Mashrub* (foods and drinks)
- *Harkat-wa-Sukoon Badani* (bodily movement and repose)
- *Harkat-wa-Sukoon Nafsan* (psychic movement and

repose)

- *Naum-wa-Yaqza* (sleep and wakefulness)
- *Istifragh-wa-Ihtibas* (evacuation and retention)

It is very evident from the aforementioned principles that the Unani Medical System has promoted the idea of mental wellness since ancient times. When *Harkat-wa-Sukoon Nafsani* is not balanced, *Quwwat-e-Nafsaniyya* (mental faculty), which includes the ability to understand, is disabled [16]. The term "Infelat-e-Nafsaniyah" (psychic reactions). In *Unani* medicine, it refers to mental abilities or psychic reactions that are thought to be crucial for distinguishing humans from other animals. *Infelat-e-Nafsaniyah* causes a variety of bodily changes, including external ones as alterations to facial expressions, alterations in posture and voice. Internal alterations include modifications to the heartbeat, respiration, autonomic nervous system, gastrointestinal processes, skin temperature, salivary secretions, and the skin itself [17]. It is included in *Harkat-wa-Sukoon Nafsani* ranking in fourth position in *Asbab-e-Sitta Zaruriyah*.

The two primary divisions of these mental abilities are the psychic perceptive faculty (*Quwwat-e-Mudrikah*) and the psychic motive faculty (*Quwwat-e-Muharikah*) [18].

Faculties (*Quwa*) are the powers and 'drives' of the body corresponding to the three biological systems-physical, nervous, and vital. The faculties corresponding to these systems are *Quwwat-e-Tabiyya* (natural faculty), *Quwwat-e-Haiwaniyya* (vital faculty) and *Quwwat-e-Nafsaniyya* (psychic faculty). The brain is home to the nervous faculty (*Quwwat-e-Nafsaniyya*), which is responsible for movement and sensation. Every organ and tissue needs vital faculty in order to function and live. It transfers the vital force inwards and outwards, expanding and contracting it.

Vital faculty (*hararat ghariziyah*) is the power that allows organs to accept sensory and motor activity and carry out the different activities of life. Since this faculty is responsible for the expansion and contraction of vital force that accompanies emotions, it is also associated with causing the emotional movements of fear and rage [19]. It originates in the heart and participates in the vital and organic processes of the human body [20, 21]. *Hararat Ghariziyah* functions as a standard tool for all types of *Quwa* (faculties) [22]. Depending on the many psychological states, *tabi'at* (medicatrix naturae) transfers the vital heat (*hararat ghariziyah*) and pneuma (*ruh*) either inside or outside the body. Vital heat is affected by a few psychological factors. Anger or intense excitement causes a sudden migration of essential heat toward the body's outside. While *lazzat* (happiness) is characterized by a steady transfer of essential heat toward the body's surface. Additionally, some emotions, like as fear and grief, cause the vital heat and pneuma to flow inward. In addition to all of these, there are a few extraordinary or unusual circumstances that cause the transfer of pneuma and vital heat from the inside to the outside and the outside to the inside to occur simultaneously, such as fear with anger and anger with shame [23]. Because a person's dominant *khilt* and *mizaj* determine their *nafsiyati awamil* (psychological factors), the body and mind are influenced by one another. Excess of all of these alters temperament and makes the *Hararat-e-Ghariziyah* weaker. The body becomes dry and feeble.

Unani interventions in stress

Since ancient times, *Unani* scholars have used a holistic approach to cure a variety of physical and mental illnesses through the use of different treatment modules, including *Ilaj-bil-Ghiza* (Dietotherapy), *Ilaj-bil-Tadbir* (Regimental therapy), *Ilaj-bil-Dawa* (Pharmacotherapy), and *Ilaj-bil-Yad* (Surgery). The body's *tabi'at* and how it wants to eradicate that specific illness may influence the therapy option, as may the accessibility of drugs and methods. As a result, therapies may focus on both the physical and the psyche (mind) [24]. *Unani-Tibb* considers that the factors which lead to unbalancing of *Infelat-e-Nafsaniyya* can contribute to depression, stress, and other psychological illnesses. Every emotion, including grief, sorrow, anger, pain, and overthinking, disturbs the *mizaj*, makes the body hot, and weakens the *Hararat-e-Ghariziyah*. It makes the body feeble and *yabis*. If these problems continue for an extended period of time, they can lead to numerous other illnesses [25].

Therefore, it is important to prevent overwhelming experiences of these emotions and to establish conditions that can treat these problems and preserve health [26]. The aim of a *Unani* physician should be to introduce preventive interventions, focusing on reducing risk factors and enhancing protective factors associated with mental ill-health [27].

The following lists the *Unani* Medical System's guiding principles for treating psychological disorders, including stress:

1. *Nafsiyati Tadbir* (Psychotherapy)
2. *Ilaj-bil-Ghiza* (Diet therapy)
3. *Ilaj-bil-Tadbir* (Regimental therapy)
4. *Ilaj-bil-Dawa* (Pharmacotherapy) [28]

1. **Nafsiyati Tadbir (Psychotherapy):** Since counselling/psychotherapy is primarily responsible for the maintenance of the psychological fold of the body, it is the first intervention that should be considered when treating psychological problems, including stress.
2. **Ilaj-bil-Ghiza (Diet therapy):** Diet should be planned according to the *Mizaj* of the patient. Among vegetable options, gourd and cucumber are suggested for individuals with long-term stress. Both are known diuretics that facilitate the removal of pathological melancholy [29]. It is advised to limit the intake of high-sodium foods such as processed meats, canned soups, and fast food, which can lead to hypertension, which is linked to increased stress and anxiety levels [30].
3. **Ilaj-bil-Tadbir (Regimental therapy):** The regimens recommended for chronic stress are:
 - **Bakhur (Fumigation):** To produce a pleasant and fragrant atmosphere, frequent fumigation using materials like Oud (*Aquilaria agallocha*), Kafur (*Cinnamomum camphora*), and Sandal (*Santalum album*) is recommended [31].
 - **Hamam (Turkish bath):** Using aromatic medicines such as Oud (*Aquilaria agallocha*), Jawitri & Jaiphal (*Myristica fragrans*), and Kundur (*Boswellia serrata*) eases respiratory issues, promotes circulation, relaxes muscles, and relieves tension [32].
 - **Dalk (Massage):** Using oils like Roghan Zaitun, Roghan Kahu, and Roghan Labub Saba to massage the body help reduce stress, anxiety, tension, and depression while also enhancing overall mood [33].
 - **Riyazat (Exercise):** It is highly recommended by *Unani*

scholars as a treatment for *Malankhuliya* (melancholy). Frequent exercise has been shown to improve mental and physical health, promoting self-worth and reducing stress levels [34].

- **Shamum (Aromatherapy):** It is beneficial to inhale the scent of Sandal (*Santalum album*) and Khas (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*) for reducing stress and anxiety levels.
- **Natool (Shower):** Diluted rose water, Kahu (*Lactula sativa*) decoction and Banafsha (*Viola odorata*) are prescribed due to their exhilarant and sedative property [35].

Ilaj-bil-Dawa (Pharmacotherapy): It includes:

- **Muqawwi A'za Nafsaniyya (Tonics for nervous system organs):** These medications strengthen and support the functions of the brain, spinal cord, cranial nerves, and spinal nerves. A few examples are Maghz Badam Shirin (*Prunus amygdalus*), Brahmi (*Bacopa monnieri*), and Gaozaban (*Onosma bracteatum*).
- **Mufarrihat (Exhilarants):** By reducing mental and emotional stress, this unique class
- of medications creates emotions of happiness. To promote general well-being, they are utilized to treat cardiac and neuropsychiatric conditions like anxiety, depression, and palpitations. Examples include Zafran (*Crocus sativus*), Sumbul-ut-Tib (*Nordostachys jatamansi*), Arq Gulab (*Rosa damascena*), and Arq Bed Mushk (*Salix caprea*) [36].
- **Polyherbal Unani formulation for cooling and moistening the temperament of the brain (Tarṭib-e-Dimagh):** One tola of Khamira Gaozaban wrapped in a Warq Nuqra is given first. Following that, make syrup by dissolving five pieces of Shira Unnab in twelve tolas of Arq Gaozaban and two tolas of Sharbat Banafsha. Finally, before administering, add seven grams of soaked Tukhm Raihan [37].

Modern medicine manages mental stress through a combination of lifestyle modifications, psychological therapies, and pharmacological interventions. These include:

- **General measures:** this is achieved by providing emotional and practical support to the patient.
- **Psychological treatments:** this is achieved by providing Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), self-help materials including problem-solving techniques and supportive brief psychotherapy.
- **Pharmacological measures:** these include:
- **Anxiolytics:** short course (3-5 days) of a benzodiazepine may be indicated in patients with a high level of anxiety immediately after the stressful event.
- **Hypnotics:** A short-term course of a hypnotic can be given for insomnia, especially in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event. A maximum of 3 weeks should be prescribed due to the risks of tolerance and dependence. A short-acting benzodiazepine, such as temazepam, is a recommended option.
- **Antidepressants:** SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Re-uptake Inhibitors) are the most effective drug treatment for PTSD [8].

Conclusion

From what has been mentioned above, it is evident that the

issue of stress and related disorders is constantly increasing worldwide. Stress and its related symptoms manifest with many physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms such as headache, chronic fatigue, difficulty in thought processing, moodiness, sleep disturbances, and palpitations. The *Unani* concept emphasizes that each of the six essential elements plays a role, directly or indirectly, in maintaining or enhancing overall health and well-being. Any imbalance in *harkat-wa-sukoon nafsani* leads to the development of psychological disorders, including stress, depression, and anxiety. Unani medicine integrates psychological and physiological aspects, emphasizing the circulation of pneuma (*Ruh*) and blood, facilitated by the vital faculty (*Quwwat-e-Haiwaniyya*). Different emotions cause *ruh* to move inward and outward. An excess or absence of any kind of emotion can lead to a state of emotional imbalance and *sue mizaj* (dystemperament). It becomes the source of various psychological disorders. Thus, moderation plays a crucial role in *Infelat-e-Nafsaniyya* to prevent psychological disorders among the population. *Unani* Medicine offers cost-effective alternative stress management through *Ilaj-e-Nafsaniyya*, including psychotherapy, regimental therapy, diet therapy, and pharmacotherapy, with fewer side effects and promoting long-term health. These treatments include counselling, various diets, *Dalk* (massage) and *Riyazat* (exercise), as well as tonics (*Muqawwiyyat*) and stimulants (*Mufarrihat*). Modern stress treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), deep muscle relaxation, and medications such as benzodiazepines, SSRIs, and NSSIs are also effective. This review, exploring *Unani* literature, offers perspectives on the treatment of *Amraz-e-Nafsaniyya*. It emphasizes that the *Unani* concept possibly offers holistic care and a rational path to mental health. Maintaining good health and preventing many physical ailments involves a balance between mental activity and rest. "Sound mind in sound body," as the well-known saying goes.

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