

Persistence in Engaging in Formal Mindfulness Practice

Master's Thesis

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Abstract	viii
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	2
Mindfulness.....	2
Mindfulness-based-stress reduction.....	5
<i>Research on MBSR</i>	5
Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy.....	6
<i>Research on MBCT</i>	6
Acceptance and commitment therapy	7
<i>Research on ACT</i>	7
Dialectical behaviour therapy	8
<i>Research on DBT</i>	9
Formal Practice versus Informal Practice.....	10
Components of Mindfulness.....	12
Attention.....	12
Awareness and healing.....	12
Acceptance.....	12
Non-judgment.....	13
Non-attachment.....	13
Compassion.....	13
Loving-kindness.....	14
Benefits of Mindfulness	14
Mindfulness and well-being.....	14
Mindfulness in psychotherapy	16
Why practice formal mindfulness?	17
Importance and role of regular and continuous practice	18
<i>Frequency of regular practice</i>	19

<i>Duration of each practice session</i>	20
<i>Longevity of practice</i>	20
Previous Research and Persistence.....	22
Purpose of this Study/Research Question	23
Sub-questions.....	23
Conceptual Framework	23
Buddhist psychology	24
Mindfulness and the Brain/Neuroplasticity	25
Chapter 3. Methodology and Method	26
Methodology: Hermeneutic Phenomenology	26
Method	31
Participants	31
Inclusion criteria.....	31
Recruitment.....	32
Participants' background	33
Participants' Mindfulness Practice.....	37
John.....	37
George.....	38
Sarah.....	39
Catherine.....	40
Tim.....	41
Instruments	42
Data Collection	44
Demographic and background information questionnaire	44
Interviews	45
Data Analysis	46
Hermeneutic circle	47
Member checking	48
Trustworthiness	49
Credibility	49

Transferability	51
Dependability	51
Confirmability.....	51
Positioning	52
Chapter 4. Results	57
Descriptions of the Themes	57
Creating appropriate conditions to practice	57
<i>Having or creating space for practice</i>	58
<i>Creating conditions appropriate to focus on mindfulness meditation</i>	60
Flexibility in practice	61
<i>Making adjustments and having options</i>	62
<i>Alternative places to practice</i>	64
Reaching out	65
<i>Accessing resources</i>	65
<i>Learning and understanding mindfulness theoretically</i>	67
<i>Staying connected to the mindfulness community</i>	68
<i>Teaching mindfulness</i>	69
Developing and maintaining habits	70
<i>Forming a habit/ritual of practicing mindfulness</i>	70
<i>Discipline</i>	72
<i>Intention</i>	73
<i>Commitment to practice in line with one's values</i>	73
<i>Record keeping</i>	74
Living the teachings of mindfulness	75
<i>Self-compassion</i>	76
<i>Acceptance of the challenge</i>	78
<i>Nonattachment/Letting go</i>	80
Motivation to experience benefits	81
<i>Motivated by the benefits anticipated</i>	82

<i>Understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice through theoretical learning</i>	84
Learning from lived experience	86
<i>Motivated by the benefits experienced</i>	86
<i>Noticing improvement in practice</i>	91
<i>Motivated to sustain and improve the benefits in the long-term</i>	92
<i>Self-care awareness</i>	94
<i>Understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice through personal experience</i>	95
Chapter 5. Discussion	97
Time for “Being”	97
Sources of motivation	98
Life challenges	99
Benefits of mindfulness and improvements	99
Motivation over the years	100
Actions	101
Discipline and commitment	102
Motivation for commitment	103
Steps following commitment	104
Mindfulness community	105
Flexibility in practice	106
Mindful movement	107
Theory and Practice	108
Dharma and Persistence	110
Implications	113
Limitations	115
Recommendations for Future Research	116
Summary and Conclusion	117
References	120
Appendices	135

A. Request letter to the mindfulness centers	135
B. Recruitment letter	136
C. Questions to screen eligible participants	138
D. Demographic and background information of the participants.....	139
E. Interview protocol.....	140
F. Consent form	141
G. First member check request	143
H. Second member check request	144
I. Meaningful statements	145
J. The researcher's/ My pre-understandings.....	149

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore individuals' experience with persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the main findings derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews with five mindfulness practitioners. Other sources included the pre-interview questionnaire, which asked for experience with mindfulness, field notes, a reflective journal, and feedback from the participants (member-check). Twenty-two codes were identified through the process of thematic data analysis. After grouping them based on relevance, seven themes emerged: (a) Creating appropriate conditions to practice, (b) flexibility in practice, (c) reaching out, (d) developing and maintaining habits, (e) living the teachings of mindfulness, (f) motivated to experience benefits, and (g) learning from lived experience. All codes and themes were related to both sources of motivation and actions taken by participants associated with persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness. The findings of this study have implications for psychotherapists and counsellors who want to incorporate mindfulness into their therapy practice. They contribute ideas for drawing on mindfulness as a self-care practice, and also for enhancing the therapeutic relationship with clients. The study also contributes useful ideas for mindfulness instructors in supporting their trainees in maintaining a continuous and regular practice following a mindfulness program.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist psychology, and is about being present in the moment and practicing awareness of one's inner experience without judgment (Germer, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Since Jon Kabat-Zinn, started a mindfulness-based stress reduction program initially for medical patients at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1979 (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), mindfulness practice has proliferated in North America (Cullen, 2011) and has contributed significantly to helping thousands of people improve their well-being (Germer, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

While attending an eight-week structured mindfulness workshop about nine years ago, I personally learned new ways of relating to my inner experience of life through the practice of mindfulness that included acceptance, nonjudgment, and being present in here and now. I gained a new perspective on life and also experienced an incredible improvement in my well-being. This change inspired me to continue practicing mindfulness and learn more about it. During this time, I realized some individuals may find it challenging to maintain their own regular practice at home (Felder, Dimidjian, & Segal, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2004), especially after the completion of a structured mindfulness program. At a follow-up meeting, some of my classmates who showed a lot of enthusiasm during the mindfulness workshop said that they found it difficult to maintain a regular practice on their own.

I reviewed the literature regarding the benefits of mindfulness meditation and the importance of a continuous, regular practice of formal mindfulness, as recommended by mindfulness teachers. My review of the literature encouraged me to propose the present study to examine what helps individuals maintain a regular practice over the years.

Mindfulness can be practiced as formal mindfulness or informal mindfulness. Formal mindfulness refers to practices such as sitting meditation, body scan, mindful yoga, and mindful walking (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). The formal practice of mindfulness is usually done in a quiet place, with minimal or no distractions. Informal mindfulness refers to practicing the teachings of mindfulness and the acquired skills throughout the day as one is busy with daily activities (Carmody & Baer, 2008). The focus of the present study is persistence with practicing formal mindfulness.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Mindfulness

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of individuals who persist in a regular practice of formal mindfulness in the absence of a structured mindfulness-based program or after the completion of such a program. Mindfulness can be defined as practicing present-moment awareness by purposefully paying attention to one's mental events and experience (e.g., thoughts, feelings, sensations) in the present nonjudgmentally, with acceptance of the experience as it is (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Formal mindfulness refers to practicing mindfulness meditation (Germer, 2013) in a position such as sitting meditation, body scan, walking meditation, or mindful yoga (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

Mindfulness can be better understood in the context of its roots in Buddhist psychology and teachings, which are founded on 25 centuries of rigorous introspective examination of how the mind works. "Buddha" means a person who is awake (Germer, 2013, p. 14). Buddha was a human being who discovered a path to freedom through his enlightenment, and he decided to teach others what he had learned and dedicated his life to alleviating psychological suffering (Germer, 2013). Practicing mindfulness is considered the main practice of Buddhist psychology with the goal of reducing suffering, and it has been practiced for more than 2,500 years. Buddhist psychology developed based on the teachings of Buddha, including those regarding what causes suffering and how to end or reduce suffering (Germer, 2005). The term *mindfulness* is an English translation of the word *sati*. In Pali, the language of Buddhist psychology, this word refers to awareness, attention, and remembering to reorient one's attention to the experience of the present moment (Germer, 2005). Buddhist psychology does not have a religious connotation, and its goal of alleviating suffering is compatible with the interests of psychotherapists (Germer, 2013).

In recent years in Western society, mindfulness practices have been found beneficial, especially from a clinical perspective, to improve health, mental health, and addiction (Shonin, Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014). Mindfulness has been reported to be helpful in improving psychological well-being (Carmody & Baer, 2008) and emotional well-being (Keune & Forintos, 2010), and reducing symptoms of anxiety (Evans et al., 2008) and depression (Strauss, Cavanagh, Oliver, & Pettman, 2014). It has also been shown to be beneficial for individuals suffering from trauma (Goodman & Calderon, 2012), chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985), and alcohol and drug use (Grow, Collins, Harrop, & Marlatt, 2015). Research

with a three-year follow-up suggested that practicing mindfulness can create sustainable improvement in the significant reduction of symptoms of depression and anxiety (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995). Mindfulness training has been reported as a feasible and well-accepted program with a high adherence rate (92%) among individuals with multiple sclerosis (MS) (Grossman et al., 2010). Practicing mindfulness meditation in a structured program (e.g., MBSR) has been shown to create significant increases in the brain activity of meditators associated with positive affect, as well as an improved immune function (Davidson et al., 2003).

Relevant to the focus of this study, which is persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness, most of the existing research studies have addressed the relation between regularity and duration of practice and the outcomes (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Crane et al., 2014; Keune & Forintos, 2010), or have suggested that long-term practice of meditation can be very beneficial (Luders, Clark, Narr, & Toga, 2011; Lykins & Baer, 2009). The findings of these studies will be described in more detail in the section about the importance of regular practice. However, there is little known in the empirical literature about what helps with persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness. Only a few studies have explored people's motivations for practicing mindfulness or meditation (Pepping, Walters, Davis, & O'Donovan, 2016) and goals for meditation (Shapiro, 1992). These studies will be further discussed in the section "Why practice formal mindfulness?"

While a myriad of benefits has been reported in the literature, some critics argue that there is a lack of published research on the risks of mindfulness practice, and that this limitation does not necessarily mean that there is no potential harm (e.g., Howard, 2016). To present evidence of harm, Howard (2016) referred to others (e.g., Kuijpers, Heijden, Tuiner, & Verhoeven, 2007), who mentioned possible adverse effects of meditation such as psychotic episodes. Kuijpers et al. (2007) described a case where a vulnerable patient developed a psychosis episode during an intense and unguided meditation session. However, it is worthy to note that the meditation in this case may have been a different kind of meditation than mindfulness because Kuijpers et al. described meditation as experiencing a "trance" or "transcendence of conscious awareness" (p. 461).

Irving, Dobkin, and Park (2009) also emphasized that even though scholars have reported some harm experienced when practicing meditation (e.g., Allen et al., 2006), there is a noticeable lack of research on the potential harms or adverse effects of mindfulness, which may falsely

create an impression that mindfulness is good for everyone. They say that some vulnerable individuals, such as those with a history of psychosis who practice intense meditation (Allen et al., 2006) may experience an exacerbation of psychiatric symptoms when practicing meditation. Allen et al. (2006) also stated that instructor training and skillfulness are important to manage potential challenges that may arise for some students. Other scholars and mindfulness teachers also emphasized the importance of mindfulness teachers practicing mindfulness themselves, as mindfulness should not be treated as merely a technique to teach to others, but rather needs to be practiced (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kostanski & Hassed, 2008).

An important contribution to the growth of mindfulness practice in the Western culture was the establishment of the Center for Mindfulness in 1979, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where more than 15,000 patients have benefited from the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program that he developed (Germer, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Kabat-Zinn (2004) recommended continuing the practice of formal mindfulness following a structured eight-week program. He suggested that mindfulness practice become part of a person's life, and that individuals make time for it every day. Even though it is ideal to practice formal mindfulness for 45 minutes, Kabat-Zinn (2004) recognized that many people may find it difficult to find that time, and therefore he recommended practicing sitting meditation or body scan for at least 20 minutes. He added that on days when one cannot find that time either, even sitting for a few minutes would be helpful as long as it is done with full awareness and complete presence (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

In recent decades in North America, several therapy modalities have been designed based on mindfulness, in addition to Kabat-Zinn's MBSR (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). These include mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al., 2002), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes & Strosahl, 2004), and dialectic behaviour therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 2000). In the following sections, I review each of these interventions, how they apply mindfulness, and some of their benefits reported in the literature regarding their clinical application. After that, I explain formal mindfulness based on the literature and some of the core components of mindfulness, and then focus on the benefits of practicing formal mindfulness and the importance of persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness as reported by mindfulness teachers and relevant research studies.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction. MBSR program improves mindfulness skills by focusing attention in the present moment in a nonjudgmental manner (Dreeben, Mamberg, & Salmon, 2013). This eight-week structured program is designed to enhance coping skills beneficial for dealing with physical and emotional difficulties (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). It offers weekly sessions of 2.5 to 3 hours in addition to an all day intensive mindfulness session during the sixth week. Initially it was developed for patients with chronic pain, but the participants may benefit from this program for different disorders and challenges with the aim of reducing their stress, and cultivating moment-to-moment awareness. The program begins with an orientation session when the group instructor explains the rationale and the methods of the program, and encourages the participants to ask questions. During the course of the program the participants are recommended to commit to a regular formal practice of 45 minutes per day for 6 days per week. In the class they are encouraged to participate in group discussions in addition to the exercises they are guided to practice. The formal practice of mindfulness in MBSR include: body scan, sitting meditation, hatha yoga, and walking meditation (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006).

The MBSR program was initially developed with the intention of helping medical patients find relief from suffering. Over the years, it has offered help to patients with a wide variety of health-related issues and diagnoses, helping individuals find their own inner strength, and take responsibility for their own well-being through paying attention to their experience and actively participating in their journey of well-being. In the years since the development of the MBSR program, many hospitals and clinics around the world have been offering MBSR and related programs (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Research on MBSR. Research studies on MBSR have mostly focused on its benefits. Song and Lindquist (2015) compared a group of university students who completed an eight-week MBSR program to a control group. The students in the MBSR program showed significant reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress compared to the other group (Song & Lindquist, 2015). A study on MBSR showed that mindfulness skills and perceived stress changed significantly over the course of the program, and that improvement in mindfulness skills predicted change in perceived stress. Follow-up analyses showed that participants' home practice time increased during the fourth week of the program and decreased during the last week of the program (Baer, Carmody, & Hunsinger, 2012). Regarding persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly at home, Carmody and Baer (2008) found that time spent practicing

formal mindfulness at home was significantly related to the level of mindfulness in most aspects of mindfulness (e.g., observing, non-reactivity, and acting with awareness), and psychological well-being (Carmody & Baer, 2008).

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is also a structured eight-week program, but it is especially designed for individuals who have experienced major depressive episodes in the past to help them prevent a relapse into depression (Segal et al., 2002). This program was designed based on a combination of MBSR techniques and cognitive therapy strategies (Segal et al., 2002). MBCT provides tools and skills for individuals prone to depressive relapse, by helping them to effectively interfere with the psychological processes that previously made them prone to depression and risk of relapse. These skills include becoming more aware of how one relates to his or her thoughts, feelings, and other inner experience including bodily sensations, and then acknowledging them through mindful awareness and acceptance instead of getting caught up in “automatic reactive” patterns. In the early sessions of an MBCT program, participants learn how to identify the “doing mode” and to engage more in the “being mode.” As they develop mindfulness skills throughout the course of the program, they practice paying attention to when they are experiencing negative thoughts or are in a “reactive mode,” learning how to return to the “being mode.” During the program, the teacher emphasizes daily home practice in addition to the practices in the class, so that the individuals develop long-lasting skills. After the completion of the program, there are four follow-up meetings with the students throughout the following year (Segal et al., 2002).

One of the main skills practiced in MBCT is “learning to step out of ruminative thinking” (Crane, 2009, p. 16). This skill is taught through consciously paying attention to one’s experience (Crane, 2009). For example, paying attention to and directly experiencing one’s bodily sensations prevents the person from engaging in ruminative thinking and the negative cycles of the conceptual mind (Crane, 2009). Another skill practiced in this program is “learning to recognize and be more aware of relapse-related modes of processing” (Crane, 2009, p. 17). This skill is developed as MBCT participants practice mindful awareness, becoming familiar with their habitual patterns of automatic pilot and ruminative thinking cycles (Crane, 2009).

Research on MBCT. Barnhofer et al. (2015) suggested that mindfulness training can be helpful for individuals who experience recurrent depressive symptoms with reducing their vulnerability for relapse to suicidal depression. In a follow-up study for individuals suffering

from diabetes and emotional distress, attending MBCT helped with sustained reductions in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Van Son et al., 2014). Regarding persistence in practicing formal mindfulness as part of MBCT-assigned home practice, it has been shown that regular practice of formal mindfulness at home for individuals attending MBCT is associated with better results. Individuals attending this program who practice formal mindfulness at home for longer periods of time and more frequently are at less risk of relapse to depression (Crane et al., 2014).

Acceptance and commitment therapy. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), is an approach to psychological intervention presenting a model which consists of six psychological processes. These processes revolve around ACT's main purpose, which is "psychological flexibility." The six processes are: acceptance, de-fusion, and noticing self, being present, values, and committed action. They form two main groups of processes: mindfulness and acceptance processes, and commitment and behavioural activation processes. Rather than trying to change the client's psychological processes, ACT helps clients improve the practicality of their psychological processes, and the way they relate to them, through acceptance, mindfulness, and cognitive de-fusion. Participants develop psychological flexibility by applying mindfulness skills and acceptance on one hand, and commitment and behaviour change (including cognitive de-fusion) on the other hand (Hayes & Strosahl, 2004).

De-fusion, which is one of the processes of ACT, can be distinguished from "cognitive fusion." Cognitive fusion refers to becoming fused with one's cognitions—a process which may lead to suffering, as the person has difficulty distinguishing awareness from cognitive narratives and the mode of mind, which may include mind activities that are not always beneficial (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). In this approach, the client is not viewed as helpless or damaged. ACT uses metaphors, experiential exercises, and self-exploration as it seeks to empower the clients in an interactive way, and to link clients' behaviour with their values and pragmatic goals (Hayes, Pistorello, & Levin, 2012). Practicing acceptance is encouraged as opposed to "experiential avoidance" which refers to unwillingness to remain in contact with one's private experiences such as thoughts, memories, emotions, and bodily sensations (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012).

Research on ACT. ACT has been shown to be highly beneficial for individuals with anxiety disorders (Arch et al., 2012). This evidence-based intervention has been shown to have

high treatment acceptability, completion, and patient satisfaction, with sustained treatment effects at the three-month follow-up (Villatte et al., 2016). According to a meta-analysis study, ACT has been suggested to be an effective intervention for substance use disorders (Lee, An Levin, & Twohig, 2015). Juarascio et al. (2013) suggested that, compared to usual treatments for eating disorders such as cognitive behavioral therapy, ACT can be a practical treatment with more sustainable results. This effectiveness may be attributed to what ACT focuses on, such as awareness, motivation, and acceptance instead of avoidance (Juarascio et al., 2013). ACT has also been shown to be beneficial for veterans with PTSD, contributing to significant improvement in their parenting behaviour such as increased parental acceptance and warmth, and decreased aggression and hostility. Some participants also showed improvement in parental satisfaction and psychological flexibility (Casselman & Pemberton, 2015).

Dialectical behaviour therapy. Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) was developed by Marsha Linehan (1993a, 1993b) to help individuals with borderline personality disorder (BPD) (Nee & Farman, 2008), and it was first applied to help suicidal women with BPD (Koerner & Dimeff, 2007). Incorporating components of psychodynamic, client-centered, Gestalt, and strategic approaches to therapy (Heard & Linehan, 1994), DBT applies mindfulness skills and CBT techniques with a dialectical philosophy (Koerner & Dimeff, 2007). The dialectical aspect of DBT refers to the combination of two views: completely accepting the person/self as one is, and empowering the person to make the necessary cognitive and behavioural changes (Nee & Farman, 2008).

Integrating change strategies from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and acceptance strategies from Eastern Zen teachings and mindfulness practice, a DBT therapist experiences the dialectic approach through accepting the client as the person is, while being dedicated to behavioural change (Welch, Rizvi, & Dimidjian, 2006).

In DBT, mindfulness is considered as experiencing the present moment directly and immediately through completely entering the moment. There are seven skills required to conceptualize the practice of mindfulness in DBT (Welch et al., 2006). These seven skills are known as: wise mind, observing, describing, practicing, non-judgmentally, one-mindfully, and effectively. The “wise mind” is an abstract concept which is described as an integration of *emotion mind* and *reasonable mind*. Individuals with BPD feel that their thoughts and behaviours are controlled by their emotions, and that therefore they are in their emotion mind all the time. In

contrast, the reasonable mind is the logical, calm, and calculating mind. The wise mind is a combination of these two states, forming an integrated intuitive deep knowing. Observing, describing, and practicing are called the *what* skills of mindfulness (Welch et al., 2006). Being non-judgmentally, one-mindfully, and effectively are known as the *how* skills. For example, “Effectively” refers to doing what works effectively considering the circumstances and the situation instead of proving what is “right.” This skill set applies to dangerous and difficult situations (Welch et al., 2006).

The purpose of applying mindfulness skills in DBT is to help clients with their challenges with emotion regulation, as in DBT the central problem of BPD is considered emotion regulation. The skills practiced in DBT help individuals be present with their emotions, and improve their awareness. This improved awareness facilitates better assessment of their problems and therefore better problem solving. Also, mindfulness helps clients with the self-invalidating behaviour which is a common challenge for BPD clients. “Mindfulness directly targets the tendency to self-invalidate and judge, helping clients take a gentler, more accepting stance toward themselves and others” (Welch, Rizvi, & Dimidjian, 2006, p. 122).

Research on DBT. Even though borderline personality disorder (BPD) is difficult to treat, studies have suggested that if individuals actively participate in their DBT treatment plan, they are more likely to experience a reduction in anxiety, depression, self-harm, and hospital admission (Binks et al., 2006; O’Connell & Dowling, 2014). Dialectic behavioural therapy has been shown to be beneficial for college students who met three or more borderline personality criteria, and have attempted at least one suicidal or self-injury act (Pistorello, Fruzzetti, Maclane, Gallop, & Iverson, 2012). Pistorello et al. (2012) suggested that students who completed DBT treatment had significantly greater decreases in suicidality, depression, and self-injurious behaviour, and significantly greater improvement in social adjustment, than the control group. A study on applications of DBT for family caregivers of persons with dementia suggested that DBT was helpful in reducing fatigue, improving problem-focused coping, and improving emotional well-being (Drossel, Fisher, & Mercer, 2011). Drossel et al. (2011) also suggested that high-risk individuals may need continuing support to maintain treatment benefits.

Formal Practice versus Informal Practice

Mindfulness can be practiced in a formal or informal manner. Informal mindfulness practice can be described as bringing mindfulness awareness into daily activities (Carmody & Baer, 2008). Common activities associated with informal mindfulness include washing dishes, going for walks, tending a garden, and so on. Informal mindfulness involves extending the mindfulness skills learned in formal mindfulness training into one's daily life to further benefit from them (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). In contrast to informal practice, the focus of this study is the long-term practice of formal mindfulness.

Formal mindfulness in MBSR and MBCT occurs in one of the widely practiced traditions of sitting meditation, body scan (Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Segal et al., 2002), walking meditation, or mindful yoga, (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), and it can be practiced in longer forms or shorter forms (Crane et al., 2014). Participants are typically encouraged to engage in home-based formal mindfulness, for 30-40 minutes, in addition to practicing it in the treatment sessions (Perich, Manicavasagar, Mitchell, & Ball, 2013) or workshops. In some cases, such as in MBSR programs (Robinson, Mathews, & Witek-Janusek, 2003) or MBCT (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Segal et al., 2002), practicing formal mindfulness for 45 minutes per day is required. In ACT, a 15-30 minute daily practice is recommended (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Hayes & Smith, 2005). In the present study, I adopt a definition of formal mindfulness practice as practicing mindfulness through sitting meditation, body scan, walking meditation, or mindful yoga, as described above (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), but for at least 20 minutes daily without interruption instead of the ideal 45 minutes. Twenty minutes is generally regarded as a practical amount of time to set aside; for example, Crane et al. (2014) reported that participants who benefited from longer duration home-based practice in their study practiced formal mindfulness for an average of 21.31 minutes per day. It can be challenging to set aside longer duration sessions of formal mindfulness in many settings because, as opposed to informal mindfulness, meditation requires minimizing external input and distractions (Gunaratana, 2002). It is typically recommended that formal mindfulness be practiced in a quiet place (Gunaratana, 2002).

Formal mindfulness meditation includes variations such as focused attention (concentration) or open monitoring (Germer, 2013). In focused attention practice, which is also known as concentration meditation, focusing one's attention on an internal or external pleasant object is practiced. The meditators are instructed to gently bring their attention back to that

object when they notice their mind wandering. The object of attention may be internal such as sensations of one's breathing, a part of one's body, or a word or phrase. External objects of attention include an image, a sound, a candle flame or a dot on the wall (Germer, 2013). Open monitoring can be described as a searchlight as opposed to the laser beam of the single-focused/concentration meditation. In open monitoring meditation, one is receptive to the stimuli that show up; the practice is about monitoring and becoming aware of one's thoughts, intentions, feelings, bodily sensations, and emotions. The instruction in open monitoring meditation is to notice what predominates in one's field of open awareness in the moment (Germer, 2013).

In formal mindfulness practice, as one's mind is naturally wandering, the transition from single focused attention to open monitoring can enhance awareness as one notices and names the experiences such as "judging" or "worrying" (Germer et al., 2013). However, when the goal is practicing single-focused attention, it is recommended to bring one's attention back again to the object of attention.

Open monitoring or "open field" awareness may become overwhelming for individuals who have suffered from traumas, because open awareness may bring difficult memories and emotions to the surface (Germer, 2009). Germer (2009) suggests that in working with trauma, the practice of open awareness should be balanced with single focused practice.

Germer (2009) also points out that when a person focuses attention on the body, it is more likely that one's difficult memories surface. For individuals who have experienced trauma, the body is where trauma is stored, and drawing attention to the body risks surfacing disturbing emotions. Therefore, it is usually recommended that attention be focused on a calming external object such as the sounds of nature (Germer, 2009).

Some individuals may believe that if they practice mindfulness skills—such as awareness, non-judgment, and being present in the moment—throughout the day while engaging in other activities, they may not need to practice formal mindfulness. Although several studies indicate an association between formal mindfulness and outcomes, they did not find significant results regarding impact of informal mindfulness practices (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Crane et al., 2014; Hawley et al., 2014). These findings indicate that practicing formal mindfulness is important and beneficial in order to strengthen daily mindfulness. Regular practice of formal mindfulness at home, in addition to weekly practice at a workshop, have been shown to be beneficial in promoting mindfulness in participants. Bowen and Kurz (2012) found that the

degree participants practiced at home between sessions within an eight-week mindfulness program, predicted their level of mindfulness following the completion of the program.

Components of Mindfulness

Attention. One of the main components of practicing mindfulness is bringing attention to the present moment in a non-judgmental manner (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Paying attention to the mind's activity, one realizes that a great amount of energy is spent on the mental and emotional activity that is going on without interruption, and usually without much awareness. Paying attention to the mind's activity helps one become aware that a lot of inner conflicts and obstacles to one's calmness are related to these activities of the mind (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Paying close attention to one's thoughts, sensations, perceptions, and emotions helps people experience greater well-being and connectedness to their experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Awareness and healing. Awareness in mindfulness refers to paying attention to one's experiences in the present moment and seeing things as they are, without attempting to change them (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). The difference between attention and awareness is that awareness refers to the broader aspect of consciousness, whereas attention refers to focusing on a particular experience or what is salient in the moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Germer, 2013).

Healing happens through receptivity and acceptance as people connect with and experience their wholeness through awareness without striving to control their experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Paying close attention to one's experience in the moment, such as a thought or pain, changes one's relationship to the experience, as the person notices that there are layers of thought around that pain. Becoming aware of these additional layers can liberate one by transforming emotional pain, or alter how a person relates to the experience of physical pain (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Awareness has been linked to emotional well-being, as the person who notices disturbing thoughts or unpleasant experiences does not fight against or suppress them (Bien, 2006).

Acceptance. Acceptance in mindfulness is a quality that refers to non-judgmental awareness that helps people embrace their experience of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Acceptance does not mean being passive or tolerant (Hayes & Strosahl, 2004). It does not mean approving of everything that is not consistent with a person's values or principles. It means being willing to perceive things as they really are. This way one will act more appropriately as understanding is not blurred by the mind's judgments and prejudices (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). In mindfulness meditation, people develop acceptance by being fully receptive to

their feelings and experiences in each moment, rather than imposing ideas of how they should be feeling or thinking. By forcing situations to be different than what they actually are, people may lose a lot of energy denying and resisting their experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Mindfulness and acceptance-based therapies have been shown to increase levels of mindfulness and acceptance, and to lower levels of anxiety, depression, and rumination (Kocovski, Fleming, & Rector, 2009).

Non-judgment. The human mind has the habit of constantly judging one's perceptions. Practicing mindfulness allows one to pay attention to this constant stream of judgment by stepping back from one's inner and outer experiences, and the judgments about them, as if one is an observer of the experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Observing one's thoughts or experience, and not reacting to them, allows a person to remain with the experience, without judging, evaluating, avoiding, or controlling it (Baer, 2007; Larouche, Côté, Bélisle, & Lorrain, 2014). Awareness of one's automatic judgments, assumptions, and worries lets a person feel free of the chains of these patterns. As Kabat-Zinn (2004) suggested, it is better not to force one's mind to stop judging: "No need to judge the judging, and make matters even more complicated" (p. 34).

Non-attachment. In mindfulness, through practicing awareness, one may observe and realize this tendency of human mind to hold on to some thoughts longer than it would be beneficial, or on the other hand to reject and avoid some other inner experience as they may be too painful. One of the fundamental teachings of mindfulness known as "non-attachment" or "letting go" refers to letting go of one's impulses and automatic urges of holding on too long to one's inner experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). It also entails practicing acceptance of our experiences as they are in the moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Segal, William, & Teasdale, 2002), and not avoiding them. According to Segal and colleagues (Segal et al., 2002), becoming aware of the mind's activity such as repeated mind wandering is probably more beneficial than "staying on the breath/body 100% of the time" (p. 93), and the out-breath can be used in practicing letting go.

Compassion. Compassion is a generous response to pain and encompasses kindness, empathy, equanimity, and acceptance. It includes the acknowledgment that pain may not always be "fixed" or "solved," and suffering can be more approachable through understanding, empathy, and compassion (Feldman & Kuyken, 2011). The roots of this word—*com* (*with*) and *pati* (*suffer*)—refer to recognizing someone's pain, and letting go of one's resistance or fear of their suffering, so that kindness flows naturally (Germer, 2009). Practicing mindfulness in

mindfulness group programs has been shown to decrease stress and increase self-compassion, a phenomenon useful to individuals working in helping professions (Newsome, Waldo, & Gruszka, 2012). Most therapists consider compassion as an important part of psychotherapy, and emphasize that it enhances clients' resilience and interpersonal functioning. Working with self-compassion in mindfulness practice involves turning towards one's painful thoughts and emotions and observing them as they are, without pushing them away (Germer & Neff, 2013).

Loving-kindness. Loving-kindness can be described as recognizing human connectedness. It has been defined as extending friendship to oneself and others, while not necessarily approving of everyone and their behaviour but acknowledging that all human beings share similar wishes and vulnerabilities. Mindfulness may improve loving-kindness by reducing habitual and disturbing reactions of the mind such as delusions and aversion (Salzberg, 2013). Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005), said:

We resonate with one another's sorrows because we are interconnected. Being whole and simultaneously part of a larger whole, we can change the world simply by changing ourselves. If I become a center of love and kindness in this moment, then in a perhaps small but hardly insignificant way, the world now has a nucleus of love and kindness it lacked the moment before. This benefits me and it benefits others. (p. 162)

Benefits of Mindfulness

Mindfulness and well-being. Through improving awareness of one's feelings, emotions, and thought processes (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), mindfulness has been found to help with managing distress (Bishop et al., 2004), therefore benefitting emotional and psychological well-being. For example, mindfulness may help reduce symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (Evans et al., 2008), and it can be also helpful for individuals experiencing depression (Strauss, Cavanagh, Oliver, & Pettman, 2014). Practicing mindfulness meditation was shown to be helpful for patients with chronic pain in improving their psychological well-being, and reducing their present-moment pain (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985). Keune and Forintos (2010), suggested that practicing mindfulness meditation regularly was associated with higher emotional well-being, including positive affect, positive emotion, and attentiveness. Carmody and Baer (2008) found that practicing formal mindfulness was associated with improved psychological well-being. Grow, Collins, Harrop, and Marlatt (2015) suggested that an increase in mindfulness home practice was associated with lower alcohol and drug use and craving. Goodman and

Calderon (2012) suggest that mindfulness can be applied in trauma counselling, as it can be beneficial for trauma survivors in reducing their symptoms of stress, developing coping skills, and enhancing their sense of strength.

Mindfulness-based therapeutic approaches have been found to be helpful in reducing psychological distress, as well as improving emotional, and spiritual well-being for individuals suffering from cancer or caregivers assisting them (Fish, Ettridge, Sharplin, Hancock, & Knott, 2014). Similarly, mindfulness-based stress reduction has been shown to be helpful for cancer patients and their partners, as well as to reduce symptoms of stress and mood disturbance (Birnie, Garland, & Carlson, 2010).

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy has helped prevent depression relapse in individuals with recurrent depression and childhood trauma (Williams et al., 2014). This practice also reduces remaining depressive symptoms for individuals with a history of major depression regardless of the number of previous episodes (Geschwind, Peeters, Huibers, van Os, & Wichers, 2012). As a nonpharmaceutical intervention, MBCT has been helpful to older adults with depression and anxiety (Foulk, Ingersoil-Dayton, Kavanagh, Robinson, & Kales, 2014). A study with a two-year follow-up on the effectiveness of MBCT for individuals who take antidepressants showed that individuals who participated in an MBCT program experienced major depressive episodes 47 days less than individuals who only took anti-depressants (Meadows et al., 2014). People who are more vulnerable to depression often interpret events in a way that are self-deprecating and destructive; through practicing mindfulness, individuals learn to separate external events from their own interpretations of the events (Segal et al., 2002).

Based on a qualitative study on benefits of mindfulness for youth, Monshat and colleagues (2013) suggested that mindfulness training can be beneficial for youth in improving their sense of calmness, as well as their confidence and competence in regards to emotion regulation and managing life challenges. The participants (16-24 years old), also reported improved consideration for others leading to having better relationships, instead of confrontation (Monshat, et al. 2013).

In a qualitative study on the benefits of MBSR for older adults, Do (2011) showed that improving mindfulness skills, such as awareness of one's thinking patterns, being more present, and paying attention to breathing, benefitted physical and emotional well-being. The benefits

included decreased fear, improved relaxation, improved social connection, reduced pain, and improved coping skills when facing challenges related to the medical system (Do, 2011).

Considering the connection between mind and body, mindfulness may benefit physical health as a consequence of improving one's psychological well-being. For example, Roberts and Danoff-Burg (2010), in a study measuring mindfulness through the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006; Roberts & Danoff-Burg, 2010), found that levels of mindfulness were associated with better health and improved health behaviour, such as improved physical activity. Reduction in stress levels partially mediated this relation (Roberts & Danoff-Burg, 2010).

Mindfulness in psychotherapy. As indicated in the studies cited above and elsewhere in the literature, the practice of mindful awareness can reduce the risk of suffering associated with being preoccupied with thoughts about the past or worries about the future. This way of being can also be important and beneficial in the work of therapists as they help clients heal. It helps them to be more present with their clients, and also it provides the therapists with more resilience and resourcefulness (Siegel, 2010).

Hick believes that “mindfulness guides us to be deeply present with ourselves and others” (Hick, 2008, p. 13). Mindfulness is about developing, maintaining, and incorporating a way of paying attention in our work in order to become aware of how individuals' thoughts and emotions change, fading in and out. This supports therapists, community workers, or group counsellors in connecting with the clients, rather than appearing as distant experts (Hick, 2008).

Empathy is well-recognized as one of the core components of effective psychotherapy or counselling. Reflective listening is necessary both to communicate to the client that the therapist cares, and is engaged and present. It is also useful to support therapists in training to enhance their capacity for empathy (Walsh, 2008). Because practicing mindfulness requires remembering to return to the present moment while being aware of the thoughts and emotions that flow (Walsh, 2008), it is likely to help psychotherapists to be fully present with clients and to cultivate genuine acceptance, empathy, and active reflective listening.

The core components of mindfulness practice, such as being present in the here and now, practicing moment to moment awareness, and paying attention non-judgmentally with an open heart acceptance and compassion, are consistent with the client-therapist relationship that is required in therapy. Therapists who practice mindfulness regularly to enhance their present

moment awareness may be better prepared for the “here and now” technique in counselling described by Yalom (2003). “Within the client-therapist relationship, mindfulness is a way of paying attention with empathy, presence, and deep listening that can be cultivated, sustained, and integrated into our work as therapists through ongoing discipline of meditation practice” (Hick, 2008, p. 5). Mindfulness practice—typically described as a “being mode” rather than the “doing mode”—puts the therapist in contact with the client’s experience in the “here and now” (Hick, 2008, p.5).

The revered Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the healing qualities of mindfulness, saying that when we are mindful, we are stronger and more stable as well as better prepared to deal with the suffering both inside us and in others as we are more in touch with the healing qualities of life (Hick, 2008). Mindfulness practice has been shown to provide additional skills to help strengthen the work of psychotherapists and counsellors who frequently work with individuals in distress (Hick, 2008; Lang, 2013; Lin & Seiden, 2015). The wholehearted openness and acceptance practiced through mindfulness includes receptivity to difficult emotions. This can be very helpful to the therapeutic relationship because, as a consequence, clients don’t feel the need to “censor” themselves (Fulton & Siegel, 2013).

Why practice formal mindfulness? As Kabat-Zinn (2004) explained, many people may feel anxious and overwhelmed by having many tasks to do in a limited amount of time, and their minds can get trapped by thinking about how they can do them all. A lot of times as they get caught up in “doing” and striving to manage all the tasks that need to be done, they may forget about enjoying the experience of “being.” Many people come to MBSR workshops to find peace and ways to manage or reduce their daily stress. When one feels overwhelmed by too many tasks, formal mindfulness practice provides a safe and peaceful space to free oneself from the stress of doing tasks in a rushed way; to feel more in touch with one’s being; and to restore balance, sanity, and well-being. Therefore, formal mindful meditation can help people return to what they need to do in their daily lives with much more clarity, balance of mind, and strength as their actions are based on “being” (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Some studies suggest that practicing formal mindfulness shows significant benefits to individuals’ well-being, whereas significant results have not been shown for informal mindfulness (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Crane et al., 2014; Hawley et al., 2014). These findings suggest that practicing formal mindfulness is important. A few studies have explored the reasons and motivations for practicing formal

mindfulness. Shapiro (1992) acknowledged three goals or expectations for practicing meditation: (a) motivation for reducing stress and pain, and improving well-being (self-regulation); (b) spiritual reasons or personal growth (self-liberation/compassion); and (c) motivation for increasing self-awareness and self-understanding (self-exploration). With the aim of exploring the motivation behind practicing mindfulness meditation, Pepping et al., (2016) studied the reasons for beginning and continuing mindfulness meditation by applying both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The results of their study showed that the majority of the participants (94.74%) reported that they practiced mindfulness meditation and continued this practice to reduce emotional distress and improve emotion regulation, especially related to stress, anxiety, panic, and depression. Many participants (31.05%) reported that they practiced mindfulness to improve their well-being (Pepping et al., 2016).

Importance and role of regular and continuous practice. Mindfulness teachers typically recommend regular and even daily practice of mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). They usually encourage their students to develop routines to practice formal mindfulness on their own, reminding them of the importance of regular practice and especially recommending a daily practice to develop and strengthen their mindfulness skills. They remind students that in order to benefit from mindfulness in the long term, they should continue practicing on their own after the formal mindfulness workshop (e.g., MBSR, MBCT) ends (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). It is also typical for teachers to keep in touch with their students through follow-up sessions (Segal et al., 2002).

Regular practice of formal mindfulness can also be beneficial for therapists and their work. Some therapists have found it helpful to practice mindfulness before a session to help them bring their mindful awareness and calmness to therapy, or to start the therapy session with a ten-minute mindfulness practice (Bell, 2009). Incorporating mindfulness into therapy may be very beneficial when clients are interested and agree.

Regular practice has also been shown to make a difference with regard to brain functioning. Research on the brain activity of meditators suggests that continuous meditation benefits the brain through increasing the volume of gray matter (Holzel et al., 2011; Luders, Toga, Lepore, & Gaser, 2009; Vestergaard-Poulsen et al., 2009). Luders et al. (2009) suggested that the larger gray matter found in the frontal cortex of meditators is responsible for cultivating positive emotions, emotional stability, and mindful behaviour. Cortical thickness associated with

cognitive processes such as sustained attention was found in long-term meditators who practiced regularly (Lazar et al., 2013).

The majority of studies have focused on the benefits of practicing mindfulness in general or during an eight-week program, for example, as opposed to examining long-term practice. However, there are some studies that have been more specific in their examination of the effects of regularity and continuation of formal practice, and I will discuss them in the following sections. I have adopted the word *persistence* (Williams, 2010) to refer to the regular and continuous practice of formal mindfulness, which, based on the relevant literature described below, can be understood along three dimensions: frequency of practice (how many days per week), duration of each practice session (how many minutes per session), and longevity of practicing in the long term (how many years one continues after an initial introduction, such as through participation in a structured workshop).

Frequency of regular practice. Keune and Forintos (2010) found that individuals who practice mindfulness meditation regularly report higher levels of emotional well-being compared to individuals who do not practice. The findings of this study were predicted by duration and frequency of mindfulness meditation practice (Keune & Forintos, 2010). However, one of the limitations of their study may be that they compared meditators with nonmeditators, not those who practice mindfulness more frequently with those who practice less. Another limitation may be how they defined meditators, as they considered anyone who has practiced meditation at least once in the past eight weeks.

Crane et al. (2014) explored the role of frequency of practicing formal mindfulness. The results of their study were significant and showed that participants who practiced mindfulness at least three times a week during the program were almost half as likely to relapse into depression compared to participants who practiced mindfulness less frequently (fewer days per week). Crane and colleagues suggested that it is beneficial to practice formal mindfulness more frequently (three or more days per week). A limitation of this study may be that even though participants' depressive symptoms were measured after the study at follow-ups, the researchers limited their study of the frequency and duration of mindfulness practice at home to the period during a mindfulness program, and did not examine if and how participants practiced mindfulness regularly after the structured mindfulness program ended.

Duration of each practice session. Carmody and Baer (2008) showed that after completing the MBSR program, participants' scores on all mindfulness facets increased significantly, and that the amount of time spent engaging in formal daily home-practice (body scan, mindful yoga, or sitting meditation) was associated with levels of mindfulness, reduction in stress, and improvements in psychological functioning and well-being. Overall, participants in their study reported practicing formal mindfulness for an average of about 33 minutes per day. After completing the MBSR program, participants' stress levels and medical and psychological symptoms were reduced, whereas their levels of mindfulness and well-being improved.

Crane et al. (2014) also explored the role of the duration of practicing formal mindfulness. The results of this study suggested a significant association between daily duration of formal mindfulness practice (on average) and outcomes regarding reduced risk of relapse to major depression. Their findings suggest that practicing mindfulness meditation for longer is beneficial.

Keune and Forintos (2010) also suggested that the duration of practicing mindfulness was one of the predictors of the benefits that participants experienced regarding their well-being. Their findings suggest that participants who practiced mindfulness for longer per session benefitted more from it. Session duration was shown to be associated with positive affect, attentiveness, positive emotion, and vitality (Keune & Forintos, 2010).

Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2004) examined the effects of a mindfulness-based relationship enhancement for couples. The results of their study suggested that this mindfulness program was beneficial for the couples improving their levels of relationship satisfaction, relatedness, closeness, and acceptance of one another, while reducing their relationship and individual psychological distress. Carson et al. (2004) also suggested that in their study, allocating more time to the practice of formal mindfulness was associated with greater relationship happiness, improved acceptance of partner, improved relationship, and reduced psychological distress, as well as more optimism.

Longevity of practice. The number of studies that have examined long-term regular practice of formal mindfulness is limited, but findings suggest that the long-term practice of mindfulness is important and may be associated with better results in terms of improvement of well-being and self-regulation (Lykins & Baer, 2009). Lykins and Baer (2009) suggested that long-term regular practice is beneficial and is associated with higher levels of mindfulness and improved psychological well-being, but their study did not compare long-term meditators to

short-term meditators to specifically examine the differences. They compared long-term meditators (average of 7.6 years) to non-meditators (Lykins & Baer, 2009).

The results of a study on the experiences of MBSR experts practicing mindfulness suggest that practicing mindfulness enhances attention-related processes that are involved in how mindfulness experts experience consciousness of their bodily sensations (Delevoye-Turnell & Bobineau, 2012). Thus, those who have practiced mindfulness for a long time may experience the ability to pay attention to the present with a different quality than those who are beginners in practicing mindfulness.

Perlman, Salomons, Davidson, and Lutz (2010) compared experienced meditators with novice participants and found that those who were considered long-term meditators reported lower levels of perceived unpleasantness in regards to painful stimuli. This difference was reported in the case of open monitoring meditation, not single focused attention. Long-term meditators were individuals who reported total hours of their formal meditation practice over the years to be at least 10,000 hours, and the highest total hours of practice was 45,000 hours. The novice meditators were participants who had no previous experience in meditation, but were instructed before the study and practiced meditation for seven days (30 minutes a day) at home.

Grant, Courtmanche, Duerden, Duncan, and Rainville (2010), studied brain regions and pain sensitivity of Zen meditators. They found that the participants who meditated for more years showed thicker gray matter in their cortex, and lower sensitivity to thermal pain.

A study on Sahaja yoga meditation suggested that grey matter volume was larger in experienced meditators, in several areas across the brain compared to non-meditators. According to regional analysis, two brain regions were significantly larger in grey matter volume in meditators. Non-meditators did not show any larger grey matter area compared to the meditators. The meditation group reported having five to twenty-six years of meditation practice experience (average of 14 years). Sahaja yoga meditation has similar goals to mindfulness meditation and some other Buddhist meditation, but also includes experiencing mental silence (Hernández, Suero, Barros, González-Mora, & Rubia, 2016).

Luders and colleagues (2011) found enhanced structural connectivity in different pathways of the brain among long-term meditators. They applied Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI), and Atlas-based Tract Mapping methods to examine 20 different fibre tracts in the white matter of the brain, comparing experienced meditators with a control group. The participants in

the long-term meditation group reported practicing meditation for 5 to 46 years (23.3 years on average). Luders et al. (2011) looked at 9 tracts in each hemisphere, and 2 inter-hemisphere tracts. They also explored the relation between the amount of one's meditation experience and white matter fibre connectivity. Even though they did not find significant correlation between the years of experience and the white matter integrity, they observed significantly larger fractional anisotropy (FA), an indicator of white matter integrity in long-term meditators compared to the control group, in several fibre tracts of the brain. Some of these fiber tracts were larger in the right hemisphere and some larger in the left hemisphere (Luders, Clark, Narr, & Toga, 2011). These studies suggest that long-term meditation leads to structural changes in the brain.

Previous Research and Persistence

As mentioned earlier, the studies that are most relevant to the proposed study have some limitations in regard to persistence. For example, some studies compared long-term meditators with non-meditators and not short-term meditators (Keune & Forintos, 2010). Other studies examined the benefits of the duration and frequency of regular mindfulness practice, but they did not explore what helps individuals persist in practicing formal mindfulness after a workshop ends (Crane et al., 2014).

Some studies have examined aspects of practicing mindfulness regularly or home practice of mindfulness meditation, but the majority of existing studies have focused on the benefits of regular practice and not what contributes to persistence in an on-going regular practice. There is little evidence on how individuals actually maintain their regular practice.

As part of their data analysis, Carmody and Baer (2008) examined whether pre-treatment levels of mindfulness or psychological functioning were related to participants' likelihood of engaging in their assigned home practice of mindfulness. The results in this regard were nonsignificant (Carmody & Baer, 2008). Also, Crane et al. (2014) explored the correlation between treatment plausibility and amount of home practice, but did not find significant results in this regard. Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, Burncy, and Sellers (1987) explored participants' adherence to practice following a structured mindfulness program. They also tested the effects of attending follow-up maintenance programs on frequency and duration of practice over time, and they did not find significant results in this regard. Wahbeh and Oken (2012) explored predictors for adherence in ongoing mindfulness meditation, and they found no predictors.

In the empirical literature, there is little known about what contributes to regular persistence in practicing formal mindfulness. A few studies have investigated motivation and reasons behind practicing mindfulness (Pepping et al., 2016) and meditation (Shapiro, 1992). Other studies have explored the relation between regular practice of formal mindfulness and outcomes (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Crane et al., 2014; Keune & Forintos, 2010) and the relation between long-term practice and outcomes (Grant, Courtmanche, Duerden, Duncan, & Rainville, 2010; Lykins & Baer, 2009). However, they did not investigate what helps individuals persist in practicing formal mindfulness, and maintain a regular practice in the long term.

Purpose of this Study/Research Question

Previous studies have shown the benefits associated with the frequency and duration of regular formal mindfulness practice. However, as described earlier, there is little known about what contributes to persistence in practicing formal mindfulness over time. The present study aims to explore the experience of individuals who have been persistent in engaging with formal mindfulness practice and successful in maintaining their regular practice in the long term. The findings of this study may assist both counsellors interested in applying mindfulness skills and mindfulness teachers to help their clients and students maintain regular mindfulness practices successfully in the long term. Therefore, the research question leading this study is: What do individuals who have practiced formal mindfulness regularly for two years or more report about what contributes to their persistence in maintaining their regular practice in the absence of a structured workshop?

Sub-questions include:

- 1-What motivates individuals to maintain their regular practice in the long run without the help of a weekly workshop?
- 2-What actions do individuals take to help them maintain their regular practice of formal mindfulness?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is the lens through which I look at my research question and findings. It was developed based on the purpose of practicing formal mindfulness as described in Buddhist psychology; findings of studies regarding the effects of meditation on brain functioning; recommendations of mindfulness teachers regarding regular practice; and

findings of studies on the benefits of practicing formal mindfulness, especially its relevance to frequency, duration, and continuation (longevity) of practice.

Buddhist Psychology

In the Buddhist tradition, it is suggested that attachment contributes to the experience of suffering (Goldstein, 2013), whereas mindfulness practice helps to reduce suffering by improving awareness through non-judgmental and nonreactive observation of one's experience (Witkiewitz, Bowen, Douglas, & Hsu, 2013). Repeatedly observing the mind and accepting one's moment-to-moment experience in mindfulness practice is meant to lead to insight into how the mind works, and to bring relief from suffering (Fulton & Siegel, 2013). According to Carmody and Baer (2008), daily and regular practice in addition to the practice in a class is expected in the Buddhist meditation tradition and mindfulness programs.

Formal mindfulness practice is a key component of Buddhist teachings (Shaw, 2009). In Buddhist psychology, the basic framework for understanding psychological suffering is based on the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha (Fulton & Siegel, 2005): "suffering, the orientation of suffering, cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering" (Olendzki, 2013, p. 312). The term *suffering* refers to un-satisfaction as part of the human condition, which may take different forms, varying in degrees of complexity from a simple discomfort to sickness and existential challenges (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013). The orientation of suffering points out the discrepancy between what one is really experiencing, versus what the person desires to experience. Cessation of suffering can take place when a person becomes aware of the relation between suffering and the orientation of suffering, and therefore eliminates that desire of wanting something different than what is.

Suffering can decrease or even fade away when individuals change their perspective towards resistance to what they consider as unpleasant. However, thoughts and sensations may still exist as part of one's experience (Germer et al., 2013). Over Buddhism's 2500 years, many strategies and paths have been developed to end suffering and promote healing. Traditionally, this healing program is called the *Noble Eightfold path* (Germer et al., 2013).

The Eightfold Path is the Buddhism's response to the dilemma of suffering and includes right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Goldstein, 2013). Kornfield (2008) explained how in Buddhist psychology, mindfulness contributes to awakening and liberation through a practice of

nonidentification with one's fears. He recommended a daily meditation practice as a regular cleansing of the mind and heart, beginning with sitting for ten or twenty minutes at a time.

Mindfulness and the Brain/Neuroplasticity

Studies suggest that on-going and long-term meditation leads to changes in the structure of the brain which translate to improved functioning. Prolonged mindfulness practice has shown to increase gray matter density in brain regions related to learning, memory, emotion, and regulation (Holzel et al., 2011) as well as in regions related to cardiorespiratory control (Vestergaard-Poulsen et al., 2009). Luders, Toga, Lepore, and Gaser (2009) suggested that larger volumes of gray matter associated with long-term meditation account for emotional regulation.

Other studies suggest an association between long-term meditation and enhanced cortical thickness in areas related to observing one's sensations, and areas in the frontal cortex related to decision-making and cognitive processing (Lazar, 2013). Researchers also observed less age-related decline in thickness. This may be related to the development of neural connections in areas that are activated through an on-going practice (Siegel, 2010).

Lazar (2013) explains that long-term meditation may also affect the brain areas related to sense of agency, memory, and emotion regulation. Also, through lowering the cortisol level, and reducing or managing stress, long-term meditation "may hold the potential to prevent the detrimental effects of stress on the brain" (Lazar, 2013, p. 288).

These various studies converge on a view of ongoing meditation practice as a keystone toward liberation from suffering. They also contribute to informing the conceptual framework of this study, which seeks to understand the role of persistence in formal meditation practice.

Rather than thinking of the "mind" as merely the brain's activity, Daniel Siegel (2010) discusses how the collective findings of recent scientific studies are consistent with the idea that the human mind has the capacity to activate the brain's circuitry and make changes in the brain's structural connections in the direction of growth. By practicing mindfulness and cultivating "presence," we can monitor our inner experience and change it, as "being present" is a learned skill that helps us become more aware of the mental patterns (Siegel, 2010). Therefore, mental training such as regular mindfulness meditation may accomplish more than change in "state"; it may contribute to "trait" changes as well by altering the brain's neural firing patterns. This improvement can take place through practicing mindful awareness as one observes the activities of the mind and acknowledges one's thoughts as "mental events" in the field of one's awareness

(Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Papies, Pronk, Keesman, & Barsalou, 2014), rather than facts (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Interestingly, even though mindfulness is more in line with “non-doing” (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), it can still be considered a form of mental training as it encourages participants to bring their attention to the present moment every time they notice their mind is wandering.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Method

Methodology: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

In this study, I approach the research question through the perspective of hermeneutic phenomenology. Historically, there have been differences and even contradictions between the philosophical foundations of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Kakkori, 2009) or hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003), and there are variations of each (Kakkori, 2009). Yet, this combination offers advantages for this study. According to Taylor and Bogdan phenomenology refers to understanding and describing the world as experienced and perceived by participants (Kvale, 1996; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The difference between phenomenology as used in this study and traditional phenomenology is related to its hermeneutic dimension, which separates hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology from traditional or descriptive phenomenology in the following areas: lived experience, the essence of the participants’ experience, bracketing, and the role of pre-understandings related to individuals’ historical, social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and contexts.

Regarding the concept of lived experience, descriptive phenomenology aims at grasping and describing first-hand experiences from the perspective of those who experienced them (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015; Wertz et al., 2011). However, hermeneutic phenomenology explores the participants’ experience while acknowledging that the researcher’s understanding is an interpretive process (Roach, 2015). In this study, I offer my interpretation of the participants’ understanding of their experience. According to Gadamer (1987), understanding and interpretation are closely and “indissolubly” linked (Annells, 1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that all understandings are interpretive and subjective (Roach, 2015), and interpretation (which is considered critical to the process of understanding) is influenced by a person’s historical background (Laverty, 2003)—a key point emphasized by Heidegger (1962).

Like descriptive phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is also concerned with understanding and exploring lived experience, but the difference is that hermeneutics recognizes

lived experience as historically situated (Lavery, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology which is interpretive, suggests that taking participants' various contexts—e.g., social, cultural, or political contexts—into consideration contributes to a deeper understanding, and explains why this approach does not claim to grasp a first-hand or “pure” description of the participants' experience (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

The phenomenological dimension of this study refers to the goal of understanding and capturing peoples' lived experience (Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1997) in relation to their persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly, and the hermeneutic dimension of this study recognizes and acknowledges that, as the researcher, I need to be aware of my own background, as it contextualizes my interpretations and understandings of the participants' experience. The hermeneutical approach requires researchers to reflect on their assumptions and biases, which impact their interpretations (Lavery, 2003).

Another relevant concept that creates a difference between traditional phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology is capturing the essence. Descriptive phenomenology aims at searching for common features of experience and capturing a universal essence (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015) among a variety of forms that all participants' experience could take (Kvale, 1996). Hermeneutics, however, is not oriented toward universal experiences, but rather understands experience as always reflecting the context, because different participants as well as the researcher may bring different pre-understandings from their own historical and cultural backgrounds (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). A hermeneutic approach recognizes that each person makes meaning from within their historically situated context, which Gadamer referred to it as “horizons of understanding” (Palmer, 1969; Roach, 2015).

Gadamer integrated Husserl's concept of horizon and Heidegger's claim about the historical dimension of human's understanding (Dostal, 2002; McManus Holroyd, 2007), and explained the concept of “horizons of understanding” to refer to how people's understandings of a text, for example, is historically situated (Roach, 2015) and not isolated from their past (McManus Holroyd, 2007).

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher seeks to understand participants' experience by considering the participants' personal backgrounds and historical, social, cultural, linguistic, and personal contexts, while simultaneously being aware of the researcher's own personal background and contextual influences (Lavery, 2003).

Searching for the common essence of experience in traditional phenomenology is done through bracketing in order to reach an unprejudiced and an unbiased description of the essence of experience separate from the researcher's presuppositions as much as possible (Kvale, 1996). In descriptive phenomenology, bracketing is used to help the researcher "abandon" their own perspectives, and understand the participants' experience in its "purest form" (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015; Wertz, 2005; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This is in line with the "reduction" that Husserl proposed as a methodological tool to set aside the researcher's prejudices and presuppositions, or put them "in brackets." His aim was to completely separate the researcher's pre-suppositions from the participants' lived experience, and therefore to grasp the "pure essence" of the participants' experience (Kakkori, 2009; Spiegelberg, 1984).

Heidegger argued that in hermeneutic phenomenology, preconceptions are part of the process of understanding (Wilcke, 2002). Therefore, bracketing is not assumed, as the pre-understandings become integrated in the research process (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). Influenced by Heidegger's (1962) perspective, a hermeneutic approach recognizes that it is not possible for researchers or any interpreter to completely step outside of their pre-conceptions and pre-suppositions, which are shaped and contextualized by a person's historical, including cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds (Lavery, 2003).

Therefore, the hermeneutic approach adopted in this study presupposes that essentialism or searching for a universal essence of experience is not realistic or practical, because capturing the "pure" or "universal essence" is assumed to be done through a reductive process in traditional phenomenology (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015), while reduction is not assumed in hermeneutics. The rationale for this distinction is that as Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1960/1989) explained, fore-structures and fore-conceptions are part of all interpretations (McManus Holroyd, 2007). This quality of hermeneutic as applied to this study requires researchers' awareness of their pre-suppositions, as well as an acknowledgement that each participant may have their own unique pre-understandings, which influence their individual interpretation of the same term or topic. Each examined phenomenon, such as persistence in practicing mindfulness, may have different meanings for different individuals. As Heidegger (1962) recognized, peoples' perceptions of a concept or word are at least partly shaped by their personal backgrounds, past experience, culture and social context, and other contextual influences (Lavery, 2003). Therefore, the hermeneutic dimension of this methodology

acknowledges that the experience of each participant is contextual, not universal. As an example of the contexts of meaning, I am aware that the word *persistence* in regards to practicing mindfulness may not have the same meaning for everyone. In line with this aspect of the hermeneutic phenomenology, during the interviews in this study, I asked my participants “What does persistence mean to you?” This question was not in the interview protocol, but the interviews were semi-structured. When I discussed the main focus of my study with the participants, being aware of this dimension of hermeneutics, I asked each participant what persistence means to him or her.

In hermeneutic understanding and interpretation of a text, the interviewer needs to be knowledgeable, sensitive, and aware of the nuances of meanings expressed in different contexts (Kvale, 1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretive, in contrast to descriptive phenomenology, which strives to capture the participants’ experience as described by the participants (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015; Wilcke, 2002) in a supposedly “first-hand” manner (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

In addition to considering the participants’ different backgrounds, the hermeneutic dimension also acknowledges the researchers’ interpretations, as influenced by their contextual experience and personal background (Heidegger, 1962; Lavery, 2003). As described earlier, the hermeneutic approach recognizes that it is not possible for the interpreters, researchers, or participants to “jump outside” of the context or presuppositions that shape their understanding. However, it is important to become conscious and aware of these pre-suppositions (Kvale, 1996) because the interviewer co-creates the results of the study with the participants, and this co-creation is unavoidable (Kvale, 1996). This may also apply to participants, who are perceiving and interpreting researchers’ questions and their own answers through the lens of their own backgrounds and prior understandings.

According to Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach, pre-understandings that are formed by a person’s historical background always accompany a person’s view, and are not easy to completely set aside (Heidegger, 1962; Lavery, 2003). Lavery (2003) explained that “Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experience” (p. 24).

Therefore, meaning-making in hermeneutic phenomenology is considered as “shared meaning-making,” which refers to being created “co-constitutionally,” (Flood, 2010, p.10; Matua

& Van Der Wal, 2015, p.25) described, or as the “fusion of horizons” that Gadamer explained (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015, p.25). A “fusion of horizons” refers to the dialogical process of understanding that takes place between a reader and a text (Roach, 2015), and may also include the fusion of the researcher’s horizon or perspective with a participant’s horizon or perspective (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

My epistemological position in this study is consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenology approach, which means I am aware that meaning is co-created (Kvale, 1996). Every time I interact with and interview a participant, we both understand and interpret each other as influenced by our own past experiences and personal backgrounds. In line with how the hermeneutic approach was described earlier, the participants will understand and interpret their personal experience and the interview questions of a qualitative study through the lens of their context and personal, historical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, the researcher’s report may be described as an interpretation of participants’ interpretations, as the researcher’s expectations and understanding interact with the meaning of the text in an evolving process (Laverty, 2003).

This hermeneutic process can be described in three main steps. First, when the researcher interviews participants, the participants perceive, understand, interpret, and respond to the questions through the lens of their own historical, personal, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Second, when the participants answer, the researcher perceives, understands, and interprets those responses through the researcher’s historical, personal, cultural, and linguistic background. Third, when the researcher asks a follow-up question, and during data analysis (e.g., the stage of member checking), the researcher and the participants are co-creating meaning related to the research question.

As a researcher adopting a hermeneutic approach, I acknowledge that my own personal background and presuppositions shape and influence my understanding and interpretation of the participants’ descriptions of their experience. This awareness happens both during the interview process and when I read and interpret the transcribed text. I am not applying “bracketing” as proposed by Husserl in traditional phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). However, I am aware of and express my personal background related to the research question and I will make it as explicit as possible. In the thesis, I will describe my personal background regarding my experience with practicing formal mindfulness in order to situate my position (Creswell, 2013). This positioning

will also promote the trustworthiness of my findings, which I will describe in further detail in the relevant section.

Consistent with the features of the hermeneutic approach, to be more aware of participants' backgrounds, I will gather demographic information from participants as well as necessary information related to their background regarding formal mindfulness practice. I will apply techniques such as member checking, a reflective journal, and an audit trail, which are described in the method section and represent engagement with the hermeneutic circle (Kvale, 1996). In my data analysis, the hermeneutic circle will be manifested in the way I cycle between the whole and the parts several times until I reach a cohesive meaning (Kvale, 1996). This will be explained in further detail in the method section.

Method

Participants

I recruited five participants for this study. Considering that the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize the findings, the sample size is usually small. Qualitative research typically focuses on a limited number of individuals (Morrow, 2005) to gather extensive detail about each participant (Creswell, 2013). For phenomenology studies, studying three to ten participants is often recommended (Creswell, 2013; Dukes, 1984).

Inclusion criteria. Eligible participants for this study were adults (18 years of age or older) who had engaged in practicing formal mindfulness meditation regularly for at least two consecutive years. Formal mindfulness meditation was defined as practicing mindfulness in one of the following forms/positions for at least 20 uninterrupted minutes per session: sitting meditation, body scan, walking meditation, or mindful yoga. Regular practice was defined as practicing formal mindfulness meditation for at least three days per week on average (for at least 20 uninterrupted minutes each time). Potential participants were individuals who had participated in a formal structured workshop, such as MBSR, MBCT, or a similar eight-week mindfulness-based program, or they may have learned how to practice formal mindfulness meditation in other ways such as through reading books, attending one-day workshops or events, using CDs, or engaging in other research into the formal practice of mindfulness.

Interested individuals needed to be available to answer a short series of questions on the phone for a maximum of 30 minutes (to screen eligible participants) and to participate in a one-and-a-half-hour interview, which would preferably be face-to-face. Individuals who lived in

Ottawa were prioritized. If some of the eligible individuals had lived outside Ottawa, they would have been interviewed via Skype. The interview session consisted of two parts: one was focused on gathering demographic and background information relevant to the study, and the other one was a semi-structured interview focused on questions related to the research study. The dates and times of the screening and the formal interview were arranged after distribution of the recruitment text to mindfulness centers in Canada, and after eligible individuals who were interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher.

Recruitment. I recruited five participants based on the inclusion criteria outlined above, applying purposeful sampling—specifically criterion sampling—as the participants in this study needed to have experienced the phenomenon I was studying (Creswell, 2013), which means they needed to be individuals who had practiced formal mindfulness regularly over time. Participants were selected among adults who had been practicing formal mindfulness for two or more consecutive years. I decided that two years would be a reasonable and viable minimum time frame as a study on long-term outcomes of practicing mindfulness by Meadows et al. (2014) was a two-year follow-up on participants who had at least one year of regular mindfulness practice. In the current study, regular practice involved practicing at least one of the forms of sitting meditation, body scan, walking meditation, or mindful yoga for at least 20 minutes per day at least three days per week. I decided this based on Lykins and Baer's (2009) study of long-term mindfulness meditation practitioners who reported practicing mindfulness for 21 to 45 minutes per day for three to six days per week. I started by targeting Ottawa mindfulness centers and planned to continue recruiting in Canada if a sufficient number of participants was not found in Ottawa. I found five participants in Ottawa. I sent a request letter (Appendix A) along with a recruitment letter (Appendix B) to the mindfulness centers by email. In the request letter, which was addressed to the managers of the mindfulness centers, I introduced myself and the study, and requested that they distribute the recruitment letter among their instructors and students. When I contacted the mindfulness centers in Ottawa, interested individuals who met the inclusion criteria were invited to contact me by email. Then I arranged a time to speak with each of the interested individuals by phone, in order to screen out eligible participants. Nine individuals contacted me and showed interest in participating in the study. The questions I asked them (Appendix C) were prepared based on the inclusion criteria. I then arranged a time for interviews with the first five eligible individuals, and I thanked three others who did not meet the inclusion criteria, and one

who contacted me after the recruitment was done. I was able to recruit all five participants among the individuals who contacted me in Ottawa. Based on their answers to the screening questions (Appendix C), I identified them as eligible. Because I was able to recruit all of the participants in Ottawa, I was able to conduct face-to-face interviews.

Participants' backgrounds. The interviews started with questions regarding demographic and background information (Appendix D). The questionnaire will be described in more detail in the instruments section, and the process will be described in the data collection section. All participants agreed to respond to the relevant questions. The participants' demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, and cultural background are presented in Table 1. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms are used.

Table 1

Demographic information of the participants

Participant	John	George	Sarah	Catherine	Tim
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male
Age	69	44	41	33	60s
Nationality	Canadian	French Canadian	Canadian Venezuelan	American	Canadian
Ethnicity	Caucasian	Caucasian	Hispanic	American	Caucasian
Religion/ Spiritual beliefs	Buddhism (Mindfulness)	Catholic	Baptist background (Now spiritual)	Spiritual (Interested in Buddhism, related to mindfulness)	“Complicated”
Cultural background	Canadian	French Canadian	Latin American	American	Canadian
Languages	English/ French	French English	English French Spanish	English	English
Marital status	Married	Married	Divorced	In a relationship	Married
Number of children	2	3	1	0	4

Elaborating on the demographic question of religion/spiritual beliefs, John explained that by Buddhism he means mindfulness and that he does not call himself a Buddhist, but that he practices Buddhism as he practices mindfulness. Catherine said that she does not have any affiliation with any religion, but that her mindfulness practice is more in line with Buddhism in a spiritual manner.

Table 2 presents a summary of the participants' prior engagement with formal mindfulness practice. The case of Sarah is worth elaborating upon because of her idiosyncratic approach to formal mindfulness. Her practice typically consisted of a flexible integration of

formal and informal mindfulness. Her definition of formal mindfulness, especially regarding her style of practicing, was slightly different than the other participants' and also than the way formal mindfulness is usually recognized (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). We both realized this in the middle of the interview. This difference inspired more reflection and discussion about what defines formal mindfulness. For example, based on what she explained I realized that she incorporated movement into her formal mindfulness practice more frequently than other participants, and that sometimes she practiced sitting or walking meditation in places that were not entirely quiet, or were part of public places. However, because what she described showed that her style of practice was more often sufficiently close to the definition of formal mindfulness that is adopted in this study (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), I decided to include her interview in the study. For example, she practiced mindful yoga and mindful movements that were close to mindful yoga, and mindful yoga is considered formal mindfulness. Having presented a summary of the participants' experience in Table 2, I describe each of the participant's overall experience with mindfulness practice in the following section.

Table 2

Participants' background information regarding their mindfulness practice

Participants	Frequency (per week)	Duration (minutes)	Number of years	Programs /How they started	Forms of practice
John	5-6	45	17	1999: Attended A program based on Mindfulness-Based- Stress Reduction	Sitting meditation, body scan, mindful yoga, mindful walk
George	3-4	20-45	4	2012: Practiced mindfulness during psychotherapy sessions and group therapy 2014: Attended Self- compassion retreat, and a mindfulness program for chronic pain	Sitting meditation, mindful walk, body scan
Sarah	3+	20	6	2010: Attended a stress management and stress reduction mindfulness program	Body scan, mindful walk, mindful yoga
Catherine	4-5	30-45	4	2012: Attended a structured mindfulness program	Sitting meditation, mindful yoga
Tim	Daily	30-120	10+	40 years ago: Practiced meditation at a Buddhist Monastery for 3 weeks. 10 years ago: Decided to practice formal mindfulness on his own.	Sitting meditation

Participants' Mindfulness Practice

In this section, I describe each of the participants' background and experience with mindfulness practice, as they described it mostly through the background information questions discussed in the interviews. In order to protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the participants.

John. John has been practicing formal mindfulness since the middle of 1999, devoting about three quarters of the calendar days to practice, most (75-80%) of the time 5-6 days per week. For many years he practiced for about 30 minutes per day on average (ranging from 24 to 45 minutes), but for the last few years he has been practicing formal mindfulness for 45 minutes per day. Throughout the years, the average duration of his practice has been gradually increasing. John has recorded the statistics of his practice each time, and he said that this has helped him monitor his progress in terms of the duration of his practice sessions. Currently he is retired and he finds having enough free time helpful, but his interview demonstrates that he was practicing formal mindfulness regularly when he was working full-time and had a busy schedule.

Regarding the forms of mindfulness practice, John practices 45 minutes of breath meditation/sitting meditation, following a 5-minute body scan. Also, for two thirds of the days, before beginning the sitting meditation, he practices 10 minutes of yoga or walking meditation because being physically active helps him to be in the here and now and strengthens his meditation practice.

John started practicing formal mindfulness 17 years ago when a psychologist whom he saw for anxiety recommended it to him and soon after he took an eight-week course based on Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR taught in Ottawa. After that workshop, John continued practicing formal mindfulness on his own, and also stayed connected to the mindfulness community. He initiated a group of his classmates when the mindfulness workshop ended. They met once a month for a year, and meditated for 20 minutes, talked about some readings, and had a general discussion.

Two years after the MBSR workshop, John joined the Ottawa Buddhist Society, which offered days of mindfulness once a month and retreats a few times per year, as well as an evening sitting. John went there two times per month and found it helpful to have community support at that time. This helped him to continue his practice. For four years, he took on some

responsibilities with the Ottawa Buddhist Society, which also encouraged him to continue going there. Since 2001, he has also attended one-week retreats once a year.

Then, about six or seven years ago, John joined a monthly sitting “Sangha” group that meditated, and talked about mindfulness and Buddhism. When they began to talk about world news three or four years ago, John became discontent and he went on to form his own group. This group sits for 45 minutes, and has a structured discussion more focused on mindfulness for an hour, like a book club. John finds this group “immensely helpful.”

John said that at the beginning the reason he started practicing formal mindfulness was mostly his willingness to sustain the calmness that he had first achieved through attending the mindfulness course, as well as to prevent any future anxiety related to work. Then as he experienced mindful awareness, he continued and maintained his regular practice of formal mindfulness, because he wanted to maintain a high level of mindful awareness or even improve it.

George. George has been practicing formal mindfulness since 2012, three to four times a week for a duration of 20 to 45 minutes per day. For the past year, he has been practicing formal mindfulness every day for 30 to 90 minutes per day, including short meditations, which are an average of 30 minutes of uninterrupted formal mindfulness practice. George explained that when he started practicing formal mindfulness, his practice consisted more of five- to ten-minute meditations, three to four times a day and three to four times a week, but then he gradually increased the duration and frequency of his practice. Regarding the forms of practice, George usually practices sitting meditation, walking meditation, and body scans on his own, as well as group meditations, which are twice a month follow-up sessions with the same group who attended a mindfulness workshop together.

George explained that at the beginning he was introduced to mindfulness through reading, online research, listening to Jon Kabat-Zinn CDs, and his therapist who was a psychologist. His therapist helped him learn how to practice formal mindfulness. George also practiced formal mindfulness with a group during group therapy. Then last year, he attended a seven-day mindfulness retreat for self-compassion, and after that an eight-week program on mindfulness for chronic pain and chronic fatigue. He said that these programs helped him practice formal mindfulness more regularly.

George, whose previous occupation exposed him to repeated traumatic situations, is now retired and he said that having enough free time helps him maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness. Managing his life challenges, especially PTSD symptoms, suicidal thoughts, sleeping problems, and chronic pain, is a critical reason for him to start and continue practicing formal mindfulness regularly. Through practicing formal mindfulness, he has been able to get off his sleeping medication, because he was able to meditate when he was reminded of difficult experiences, and go back to sleep. George explained how practicing formal mindfulness has been incredibly helpful to him and has improved his well-being. He described his experience with practicing formal mindfulness as a “life-saving journey.”

Sarah. Sarah has been practicing formal mindfulness since 2010, in the form of body scan, walking meditation, and mindful yoga for 15 to 60 minutes, for an average of 20 minutes per day without interruption, at least three times a week, and some weeks on a daily basis. During the interview, when we engaged in a more in-depth conversation about her experience practicing mindfulness, it became clear for both of us that the way she defines formal mindfulness is to some extent different than how it is defined conventionally, in that she frequently integrates formal and informal mindfulness. She further explained that incorporating movement and sometimes other relaxing and self-care activities such as her physical exercises or resting into her mindfulness practice has been helpful for her in maintaining her regular mindfulness practice.

Sarah attended an eight-week mindfulness program in 2010 that was designed for stress reduction and management. She found this program very helpful, especially because the theory of mindfulness and how it helps improve one’s awareness of thought patterns and emotions was explained very well in that workshop. Sarah also explained that prior to attending the mindfulness workshop, she learned and practiced meditation in some other workshops and classes, which she perceived as being related to religious or spiritual groups. Consequently, she explained that she has found it helpful to be flexible in the form and style of practicing mindfulness, and it works better for her not to feel the pressure to adhere to “rigid rules.” In addition to practicing mindfulness at home, Sarah is able to practice sitting meditation at work when needed, as she is able to “mute” the external noises and distractions. Also, she has integrated movement into her practice in a more flexible way compared to other participants, as sometimes her style of practice is closer to an integration of formal and informal mindfulness.

She said she finds rigid rules regarding the style of practice restrictive. Adopting this flexible mindset and integrating formal and informal mindfulness has helped Sarah to maintain her regular practice of mindfulness. Because of Sarah's somewhat idiosyncratic perspective, the term *mindfulness* is used instead of *formal mindfulness* when referring to her experience in this study.

Catherine. Catherine has been practicing formal mindfulness consistently and regularly since 2012, except for about a month in 2013, when there was a family emergency, during which she practiced informal mindfulness. She typically practices formal mindfulness for 30 to 45 minutes per day, and sometimes for shorter durations. In addition to practicing sitting meditation, which is a form of formal mindfulness, she also practices mindful movements both formally (mindful yoga) and informally (other mindful movements integrated in her daily life).

Regarding the duration and frequency of formal mindfulness, when she practices sitting meditation, it is usually for an average of 30 minutes (ranging from 20 to 45 minutes per session), and when she practices mindful movements (which in her case mainly consist of mindful yoga), it lasts for 45 minutes. In terms of frequency, Catherine practices formal mindfulness four to five days a week on average, with a minimum of three days per week. She said that if she also counts her mindful movements, in total she practices for five to six days per week.

Regarding the form of practice, Catherine usually practices sitting meditation on a mat or cushion, but also sometimes practices mindful yoga. In addition to formal mindfulness, she also practices short meditations such as a three-minute breathing meditation during the day, as well as informal mindfulness in her daily life, such as mindful eating, informal mindful movements, and practicing mindfulness in different activities.

Catherine explained that when she was doing research as a graduate student in 2009 she learned about and became interested in mindfulness. She also experienced burnout in 2010, and started exploring healthy ways to "meet that burnout." Catherine searched for mindfulness programs in Ottawa, and took a course at the Ottawa Mindfulness Clinic in 2012. Even though she had previously experimented with meditation on her own, it was during that program that she formally learned and came to understand formal mindfulness practice.

Catherine has made it a habit to practice mindfulness as part of her daily routine. At the beginning, as well as in the middle of an eight-week program, she experienced some challenges and difficulties, such as difficult emotions. But she was able to continue and maintain her regular

practice of formal mindfulness, and now she teaches mindfulness. Catherine also explained that she has been experiencing and practicing teachings of mindfulness such as compassion, nonattachment, and acceptance. She described how practicing mindfulness has been beneficial for her to experience improved well-being, increased feelings of being calm and relaxed, improved awareness, feelings of efficacy, and improvement in her relationships. She also said that staying connected to the mindfulness community has been very important and helpful for her.

Tim. Tim has been practicing formal mindfulness for over ten years, and practices every day. In terms of the duration of his practice sessions, his baseline is a minimum of 30 minutes per day, but he sometimes practices for 45 minutes, or even for an hour or two. In addition to his daily practice, sometimes he goes on weeklong retreats where he practices formal mindfulness for many hours a day.

Prior to starting his regular and continuous practice, Tim spent three weeks in a Buddhist Monastery in Sri Lanka while he was travelling in Asia in his twenties. He described that experience as his most intensive period of meditation, to the point that he felt uncomfortable with how his mind was experiencing stillness. He said that after he left the monastery, he only meditated sometimes until he encountered Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness about ten years ago. Tim said that he learned this way of mindfulness practice through his own readings only, and that he did not attend any structured workshops. As he learned more, he realized that it would be beneficial for him to "commit to practicing formal mindfulness in a more systematic way." His motivation at that time was to reduce and manage stress related to work, and also to improve some of his significant relationships. He then started practicing formal mindfulness regularly and consistently with a strict discipline on his own. As his practice developed, he began teaching and he now leads mindfulness workshops.

Even though he experienced some difficulties related to meditation in the early years, Tim came to a point in his life when he became committed to maintaining regular formal practice. During the interview he explained how in the past ten years, he has been able to practice formal mindfulness on a daily basis with a strong sense of discipline. Tim emphasized that practicing formal mindfulness has been an integral part of his life, and that it has been very valuable for him. Therefore, he practices it every day. He also explained how practicing formal mindfulness has been beneficial for him.

Instruments

I used two instruments for my data collection. One was the Demographic and Background Information Questionnaire (Appendix D), and one was the Interview Protocol (Appendix E). I describe the use of each in the following section. My interview was semi-structured (Kvale, 1996), but I used my interview protocol as a guide, and then during the interview I asked follow-up questions. In this section, I describe how I developed my interview protocol. I developed my interview protocol mainly based on my research question and sub-questions. I developed open-ended questions in the interview protocol, starting with broad questions followed by more specific questions pertinent to the focus of the study. For example, the first question in my interview protocol was: “How would you describe your experience of beginning to practice formal mindfulness?” I asked this and other open-ended questions to allow the participants to speak freely about their experience (Creswell, 2013). One of the final questions in the interview protocol was “What helps you to maintain your regular practice?” This question was much more specific than the first question, and it was focused on persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly.

Based on my personal experience and academic discussions, I also considered different aspects of my research question and sub-questions that needed exploration. For example, in order to explore the role of a structured program or its absence in one’s persistence, and whether or not it makes a difference, I asked open-ended questions about different phases of the participants’ experience with formal mindfulness. For example, I asked them: “What was your experience during the structured formal mindfulness workshop/program?” After the participants completely answered that, similar to Pepping et al. (2016), I asked questions that began to illuminate participants’ motivation behind continuing a formal mindfulness practice: “How would you describe your experience of practicing formal mindfulness after the workshop?” I then asked: “What motivates you to maintain your regular practice of formal mindfulness?” and also: “What actions do you take to maintain your regular practice?” I asked these as two independent questions.

Some other questions were designed mainly based on the concept of persistence in maintaining a regular practice. I thought of the possible obstacles that the term *persistence* implies. Difficulty with maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness because of having a busy life has been reported in the literature (Felder, Dimidjian, & Segal, 2012). Also, based on

personal experience and professional discussions, I had learned that for some individuals maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness may be difficult once they are no longer in a structured program. Therefore, I asked questions such as: “What challenges or obstacles (if any) have you encountered in maintaining a regular practice?” and “What helps you to maintain your regular practice despite those challenges?” Regarding my sub-questions, I developed two questions in the interview protocol that directly addressed motivation and action. Question number five addressed the sub-question regarding motivation: “What motivates you to maintain your regular practice of formal mindfulness?” and question number six addressed the sub-question regarding action: “What actions do you take to maintain your regular practice?” Other questions in the interview protocol contributed to my knowledge and understanding in relation to the research question and sub-questions in a broader way, as the participants’ answers included clarifications about motivation and action, for example, question number three: “How would you describe your experience of practicing formal mindfulness after the workshop?” question number nine: “What helps you maintain your regular practice despite those challenges?” and question number ten: “What do you think helps you maintain your regular practice?”

In addition to these two instruments, as a researcher and an interviewer conducting a qualitative study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012), I could also be considered an instrument delivering semi-structured interviews (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). I was also aware that as an interviewer who is also considered an interpreter based on the hermeneutic approach, my presuppositions entered the interview questions (Kvale, 1996). To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I present my pre-understandings (Appendix J).

The semi-structured interview allowed me to ask follow-up questions as needed based on the participants’ responses in order to explore more dimensions and new aspects of their experience. The participants’ new responses provided a rich context for understanding their experience. For example, in my interview with Tim, after I asked him when he started practicing formal mindfulness, he said that he started practicing mindfulness regularly and consistently over 10 years ago, but that although he had practiced mindfulness meditation many years ago he did not continue consistently back then. Then he said: “Just over 10 years ago I realized that it would be good for me to commit to it in a more systematic daily practice.” My follow-up question was: “How did you come to this conclusion?” This question led to a richer answer from Tim, which

allowed me to learn more about his motivations for starting and maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness in a persistent and consistent manner.

Data Collection

For data collection in this study, I conducted individual interviews with the participants one by one. The date and time of each interview was arranged considering their availability, after they each passed the screening stage. With their agreement, I conducted each interview in a closed-door study room to protect confidentiality and privacy at the library of the University of Ottawa.

I began by describing the timeframe to the participants as well as the details outlined in the consent form regarding confidentiality, and protection and use of the data as well as the interview being audio recorded (Appendix F). Participants were provided an opportunity to ask questions or identify any concerns they had about the study. After each participant signed the consent form, we began the interview session and I recorded the interview with their consent.

I started each interview session by gathering demographic and background information (Appendix D), and then I started posing the interview questions (Appendix E). I allocated half an hour for the demographic and background information and one hour to one and half hours (in cases when the participant was interested in elaborating on their responses) for the interview questions.

Demographic and background information questionnaire. I began the interview session by gathering demographic and background information (Appendix D). This was consistent with the hermeneutic aspect of my study, which helped me to become aware of the contexts of the participants' experiences, particularly those associated with mindfulness practice. For example, I asked them about the number of years they had practiced mindfulness, whether they learned mindfulness through a workshop or program (e.g., MBSR or MBCT), and whether they practiced formal mindfulness prior to attending the workshop or if the workshop was their introduction to mindfulness. The demographic information also helped me develop an understanding of the participants' individual contexts by learning about their personal, historical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. During the interview and data analysis, my awareness of these contexts informed my interpretation of the findings.

For example, based on the demographic information I knew that one of the participants had an extremely busy schedule as a father who worked full-time when he decided to practice

formal mindfulness regularly and consistently. This contextual information helped me ask relevant follow-up questions during the interview, and also contributed to a deeper understanding of his experience regarding the strength of his motivation and commitment to persist and maintain a disciplined regular practice. A brief summary of the demographic information is provided in Table 1. The participants' background information regarding their mindfulness practice is summarized in Table 2, as mentioned earlier, and it will be further described in the introduction of the results chapter.

Interview. After gathering the demographic and background information, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gather data regarding my research question. All participants were in Ottawa and, therefore, we were able to conduct face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interviews let me gather information focused on the main phenomenon of my study (Creswell, 2013), and allowed the participants to speak openly about their experience regarding persistence in practicing formal mindfulness in order to add to the depth and richness of the content (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Bu, 2014). It also allowed a better exchange between the researcher and the participants by offering flexibility and variation in the use of questions, especially open-ended questions (Galletta, 2012), which allowed me to clarify my understanding and interpretation of the participants' answers and rephrase my questions. The structured part of the interviews was based on an interview protocol (Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As described earlier, I developed my interview protocol based on my research question and sub-questions. During the interviews, I asked follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. I mostly asked open-ended questions (Creswell, 2013) informed by my research question and my interview protocol, followed by relevant follow-up questions when needed. Open-ended questions encourage participants to open up freely and talk more about their experience (Creswell, 2013). The follow-up questions, which included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowed me to clarify my understanding of the participants' responses, as well as to let them speak more about the specifics of their experience. Some follow-up questions were thought of in advance (Appendix E), but some follow-up questions were created in the moment as the interview was proceeding, based on the participants' responses as I described earlier.

An example of a follow-up question thought of ahead of time is the one in parenthesis following question number 4 of the interview protocol:

4 - (If you have not participated in a structured workshop): How would you describe your experience of learning about mindfulness meditation?

(Follow-up questions regarding how they learned it, and how they practiced formal mindfulness based on that learning)

After completing the interviews, I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim (Creswell, 2013). I checked the transcribed texts and my interpretations with the participants through the technique of member checking. First I checked the transcribed texts through member checking (Appendix G) by sending the texts via email. After I received participants' responses, I engaged in the process of data analysis, which I will describe in the following section. After completing the data analysis, I checked a summary of the findings through second member checking (Appendix H). I further describe member checking in the relevant section. The rationale for the second member check was to be respectful to the participants who took time out of their days and patiently assisted me with this study by being interviewed. Also, consistent with the characteristics of the hermeneutic approach, especially the "co-creation of meaning" (Kvale, 1996), I intended to offer the participants a chance to review and comment on the way that I had analyzed and interpreted what they had reported in the interviews.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts (van Manen, 1997). By reading each transcribed text several times (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), examining each response sentence by sentence, I isolated chunks of text that were focused on single points and inserted ellipses in cases where brief stretches of verbiage deviated from the main point being expressed. These meaningful statements represented patterns of experience, behaviour (Richards & Morse, 2013), or thought (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), and were meaningful to participants' lived experience (van Manen, 1997) and related to the research question (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

After identifying meaningful statements in all the transcribed texts (from the five interviews), I reviewed them thoroughly several times. When I found meaningful statements that had a common central main point, I grouped those meaningful statements together, and attached codes (Creswell, 2013) to these groups. A code is a word or phrase that captures the main point of the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). To assist me in this process of finding the relevant meaningful statements that could be grouped and assigned a code, I summarized the long

meaningful statements for my own purpose into sentences that highlighted the main point of each meaningful statement. Writing down these summaries to see which ones were expressing similar ideas helped me identify the meaningful statements that could be grouped together in a more organized way.

The next step was to find themes based on the similarity of these codes. When a collection of codes had similar or relevant main points, representing “salient themes or patterns,” I organized them into broader categories as themes (Cresswell, 2013). I assigned a theme title to each collection of codes that became a theme (Table 3). Van Manen (1997) described themes as elements that occur frequently and are structures of lived experience of participants representing the focus of the experience or meaning. In phenomenological studies, which are typically open-ended and rely on interview findings, the researcher searches for the themes that represent meaning in participants’ lives (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Consistent with the process of the hermeneutic circle, I continued my thematic analysis (van Manen, 1997) back and forth between the parts and the whole (Kvale, 1996), considering the contexts of meaning. The contexts of meaning included the participants’ background information, as well as additional information that participants provided during the interview, such as some of their personal experiences that they decided to share. For example, some of them discussed their relationships with family members or colleagues, and that provided additional and contextual information regarding their motivation to practice formal mindfulness. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I detailed all the activities, steps taken, and details as an audit trail, and also I wrote down my personal reflections and the process of my interpretation in a self-reflective journal.

Hermeneutic circle. One feature of my methodology was the hermeneutic circle (Laverty, 2003), which enabled me to attain a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the participants’ experience by building on and completing my data analysis and interpretation as I connected the parts to the whole several times until I reached a coherent meaning (Kvale, 1996). This was a process of co-creation with the participants, in which meaning was produced through a circle of readings, reflective writing, and interpretations (Laverty, 2003). This included member checking, which I will explain below, and consideration of participants’ contexts. I used a reflective journal to document these reflections as I read and re-read the transcribed text; these reflections contributed to my interpretations (Laverty, 2003).

In this study, the word *part* may refer to one quote, or an answer to a single question or each meaning unit, theme, or subtheme, as well as specific elements such as transcript samples, the reflective journal, and the demographic questionnaire. The *whole* took three forms: the *whole* of each participant's report of his or her experience regarding my research question (each interview); the *whole* meaning all participants' responses (all interviews), which provides a larger context; and the *whole* referring to the literature relevant to practicing formal mindfulness regularly and persistence in doing so.

For example, the Dharma—referring to the teachings of Buddhism (Kabat-Zinn, 2016) and theoretical foundation of mindfulness—has been discussed in the mindfulness literature. Compassion is one of the components of Dharma (Monteiro, 2015). When the participants discussed self-compassion for example, I knew that they learned it as one of the core components of mindfulness. Recognizing that connection between the parts, which in this case was the participants' experience with self-compassion, and the whole, which was the Dharma in the literature, helped me realize that the participants were living the teachings of mindfulness, which in this case meant practicing self-compassion. Through the process of the hermeneutic circle, my data analysis suggested that practicing self-compassion is one of the components of mindfulness that helped participants with their persistence in maintaining their regular practice of formal mindfulness.

Member checking. To make sure my interpretations of participants' responses were as accurate as possible, I applied member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I did this once after data gathering to check the transcribed texts of the interview, and once after the preliminary data analysis to check a summary of the codes and themes, including relevant quotes. I emailed the texts to the participants with brief instructions (Appendix G & H), and I gave the participants two weeks to reply each time. After receiving their responses, I revised my texts accordingly.

After transcribing the interviews, I checked the transcribed texts through member checking (Appendix G) by sending the texts to the participants via email. Four out of five participants responded. Three of them provided minor corrections of some words, and one of them completely approved the full text. After I received their responses, I engaged in the process of data analysis, as described earlier.

After I completed the data analysis, I checked the summary of the findings with the participants through the second member checking (Appendix H). I sent each participant the parts

of the findings that corresponded to his or her respective interview, including the overview of his or her practice, the codes, and the themes. Three of the participants responded. They all approved of how the data were analyzed. Two of them provided me with minor corrections for a few words in their quotes.

Trustworthiness

Instead of the terms *validity* and *reliability*, which apply to quantitative studies, *trustworthiness* is a more suitable term for qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that are evaluative criteria in qualitative studies instead of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. However, it should be noted they are not expected to accomplish the exact same goals as their correspondent standards in quantitative studies (Morrow, 2005).

Credibility. Credibility refers to the question regarding how much confidence one can have in the “truth” of the study’s findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is sometimes named “internal consistency” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Morrow, 2005) to ensure and clearly communicate thoroughness in the research process (Gasson, 2004; Morrow, 2005). To ensure the credibility of this qualitative study, I applied techniques such as triangulation, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), reflexivity (Morrow, 2005), and thick description (Geertz, 1973, 1983; Morrow 2005). These techniques are described below.

Triangulation has been described as having four different modes (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985): “the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). I used different sources in my data collection and data analysis; I used information from demographic surveys (background information), formal interviews, a literature review, and a self-reflective journal. This helped me develop contextual validation by comparing information from different sources of evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was consistent with the hermeneutic aspect of my methodology.

Member checking refers to actively and directly checking the findings and interpretations with the participants of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As I described earlier, I conducted member checking once after data gathering, and once after the preliminary data analysis. Checking the transcribed text of the interview and a summary of the themes helped clarify what

the participants meant in their responses and helped ensure the credibility of my findings by minimizing researcher bias and any chance of deviation from participants' intended meanings.

Reflexivity is “self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254; Rennie, 2004, p.182). One of the best ways to utilize reflexivity is to keep a self-reflective journal to record every step and all the details from the start to the end of the research (Morrow, 2005). In my journal, I recorded all my experiences, understanding, reactions, and interpretations, as well as self-reflections on my assumptions, pre-suppositions, or biases. This way, I was able to clarify the influence of my personal background and experience on my analysis. I also applied positioning (Creswell, 2013) by clearly describing my personal experience and background regarding practicing formal mindfulness and my related understanding of persistence. In the thesis, I explain my personal background and position regarding the research question, in the “positioning” section.

Thick description refers to providing “detailed and rich descriptions not only of participants' experiences of phenomena but also of the contexts in which those experiences occur” (Geertz, 1973, 1983; Morrow, 2005, p. 252). This study explores and describes the multiple layers of culture, backgrounds, and contexts in which the experiences have formed. This is consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology methodology. Being aware of the contexts and history, thick description provides depth to the analysis of the findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). To provide a thick description, I integrated material from the interview transcripts, demographic survey, and my self-reflective journal (Morrow, 2005; Richards & Morse, 2013).

For the purpose of trustworthiness, I made “thick description” more transparent in the Results and Discussion chapters, by making it clear when I reflected upon the life stories and contextual information that the participants told me. For example, I write: “Through listening to and reflecting upon her life stories, I gained a deeper understanding of how and why flexibility in time, place, form, and style of mindfulness practice has been crucial and beneficial for Sarah's well-being.” In this example, as I was listening to Sarah's life stories, I learned more about the role of flexibility in her persistence with practicing mindfulness, even though her focus was to explain the reasons why she started and continued this practice.

Another example is that, as Tim was describing an earlier time of his life to explain his motivation for practicing mindfulness, I also learned that he was able to maintain a regular

practice of formal mindfulness on a daily basis, even when he had an extremely busy schedule raising four children and working full-time.

Transferability. Transferability involves demonstrating the findings of a study can be applicable in other contexts or with other participants. Given the small sample sizes and different methods (not statistical analysis) (Morrow, 2005) used in qualitative studies, researchers do not expect generalizability. In qualitative study researchers are considered instruments, and their subjectivity and interpretations are reflected upon as part of the research process. To achieve transferability, researchers should provide enough information about themselves, the research context, processes involved in the study, the participants, and the researcher-participant relationship (Morrow, 2005). Providing enough contextual information, including a sufficient “thick description,” helps the reader decide how much he or she can transfer the results of the study to other situations (Shenton, 2004). Transferability is about a subjective evaluation of the applicability of the findings to *related* contexts. Thick description provides researchers with rich descriptive detail for evaluating transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability. Dependability refers to the consistency of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is “consistency of the way a study is conducted across time, researchers, and analysis techniques” (Gasson, 2004; Morrow, 2005, p. 252). To meet this standard, the research process should be made “explicit and repeatable as much as possible” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). The researcher needs to carefully keep track of the research design and develop an *audit trail* (Morrow, 2005). I wrote down all my research activities and processes in detail, from the stages of participant recruitment and selection, to the data collection and analysis, to the development of the themes and categories. This audit trail, which will help others examine the process of the study and will show the authenticity and accuracy of the findings, includes all the documents, records, interview results, summaries of findings, and theoretical notes, methodological notes, personal and reflective notes, and information including the surveys (Halpern, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail ensures confirmability and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are not shaped by the researcher’s bias and motivation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, since my methodology has a hermeneutic dimension, I am aware that my interpretations of the participants’ interpretations are contextualized, as described earlier. Nevertheless, I applied

techniques such as audit trail and reflexivity suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to establish confirmability as much as possible. Acknowledging that the research can never actually be objective, confirmability is applied instead of “objectivity.” It refers to the main issue of presenting the findings of a research such that, as much as possible, they represent the researched findings that are not distorted by the researcher’s biases (Gasson, 2004; Morrow, 2005). The researcher should properly and clearly connect the findings and analysis such that the reader will be able to confirm the sufficiency of the findings. Many of the techniques applied to dependability are also used here such as preparing an audit trail and managing subjectivity (Morrow, 2005).

Positioning

As part of the process of trustworthiness, in this section I share my reflections on my personal experience with practicing mindfulness, and also with regard to persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly. In order to provide more transparency, I explain how I learned about mindfulness and started practicing, how my experience with practicing mindfulness has been since then, and what has helped me to continue and persist despite some challenges. I would also like to reflect on what mindfulness means to me, the value it has for me, and how it has enriched my life.

I have been familiar with Yoga and breathing meditation since childhood, but the first time I learned about the concept of mindfulness, and also how to practice it as I do now, was about nine years ago when I attended an eight-week mindfulness program based on Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

In my first personal experience with formal mindfulness through the MBSR workshop I experienced a tremendous improvement in my well-being. I also gained new perspectives regarding how to look at different life situations and my inner experience of them. In addition to finding the mindfulness practice itself incredibly beneficial, I found the group support in that class and the calming atmosphere of it very helpful. In that program, I learned and practiced sitting meditation, body scan, mindful yoga, and mindful walking. We also had group practice and group discussions which enhanced our learning of mindfulness as well as our sense of human connectedness. The supportive and accepting atmosphere of that workshop and the peaceful and mindful approach of our instructor contributed to the sense of calmness, and to my motivation for practicing formal mindfulness during and after the workshop. I learned how to be

truly present in the “here and now,” and that gave me a sense of stable hope and confidence every time the instructor reminded us that we could take this sense of inner peace everywhere with us through practicing presence. I also learned that when we face challenging situations or experience difficult emotions, instead of striving to control the situation or our own inner experience such as thoughts and feelings, we can learn to manage them in a healthy way.

In addition to experiencing great improvements in my health, I learned valuable skills that were applicable in managing stress when needed in different situations outside the class. These motivated me to practice formal mindfulness daily at home as recommended by our instructor, and helped me with my persistence during that time. On the last day of the program, our mindfulness teacher recommended continual and regular practice. Those eight weeks became such a rich and insightful turning point in my life that greatly inspired me to practice mindfulness in the long-term, and to learn more about it.

Since then, I have practiced and benefitted from mindfulness, but after the workshop, there were times when it was challenging to keep practicing regularly without the supportive environment of the class. I still persisted in practicing formal mindfulness regularly, but sometimes I felt like practicing alone regularly was more challenging than practicing as part of a group, as the group practice improved my motivation. From three years ago, when I decided to study to become a psychotherapist, and to help others through incorporating mindfulness in my work with the clients, my personal practice of formal mindfulness has been more consistent in terms of frequency. My decision to become a psychotherapist strengthened my motivation for maintaining a regular practice, and this enhanced motivation helped me with my persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly. During the past three years, I have been practicing formal mindfulness for 15- 30 minutes at least four times a week. I am currently increasing both the duration and the frequency of my practice. Some of the actions that help me with my persistence in maintaining a regular practice during busy times include scheduling my practice and using different reminders, as well as reminding myself of the value that this practices has both for me personally and for my long-term goals. I believe that practicing mindfulness will help me become a better therapist, because I have learned for myself that this way of practice strengthens qualities such as open-hearted attention, awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, and genuine compassion. These qualities will help me to be more present with my clients as I experienced it during my practical training as well.

I have personally experienced a difference between practicing formal mindfulness meditation more frequently and relying merely on informal mindfulness practice. I think practicing formal mindfulness is an essential foundation for sustaining informal mindfulness. When practicing formal mindfulness, there is a chance to observe one's inner experience in the field of awareness. Through eliminating or minimizing distractions, and withdrawing from everyday tasks, the silence and stillness of formal mindfulness practice provide a safe space for this self-awareness. There is little or no external disturbance to one's mind if the person practices mindfulness in a quiet place. Therefore, there is more space to improve awareness as one pays attention mainly to one's inner experience of thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations. Even if there are some external stimuli during formal practice, such as sounds of birds singing, or a candle to focus on while meditating, a person has a better chance of becoming aware of how they experience the environment, as opposed to paying some attention during informal mindfulness to other activities such as daily tasks.

Practicing mindfulness has been very beneficial to my well-being, but it also has changed the way I look at my experiences in different areas of my life. I have learned to become more aware of my thoughts and emotions, practicing nonattachment to expectations such as wishes and goals, as well as any judgments or conclusions that my mind may form about situations, myself, or the behaviour of others. One of the group discussions that my classmates and I had during that mindfulness workshop, included that nonattachment (letting-go) is not always easy to fully achieve, but we also learned that mindfulness is not about striving or achievement. It is a practice of gently reminding ourselves to be present, and not be taken away by different thoughts, worries, or assumptions. We learned to remind ourselves that our inner world including my thoughts, emotions, images, and memories may be different than the external reality. They are our interpretations and products of the mind that can be utilized more efficiently when we are aware of them and not consumed by them.

In my personal experience, the duration, frequency, and consistency of formal mindfulness greatly influence the results related to awareness and well-being. These experiences have sparked my curiosity about the perspectives of long-term meditators regarding their experience of persistence in practicing formal mindfulness. For some individuals, maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness may be difficult in the long term without the support of a structured program. What has helped me with my persistence in practicing formal mindfulness

regularly includes the positive effects of practicing formal mindfulness that I have personally experienced, and the steps I take. In this regard, reminding myself of how much mindfulness has been beneficial for me, my well-being, and how I interact with the world has greatly inspired me to persist. I also take steps such as writing “mindfulness meditation” in my daily schedule, using visual and phone reminders, and finding the time and place that is the best for maintaining a regular practice.

Table 3

Themes emerging from codes

Themes emerging from codes	Codes forming each theme
Creating appropriate conditions to practice	• Having or creating space (time and place for practice) • Creating conditions appropriate to focus on mindfulness meditation
Flexibility in practice	• Making adjustments and having options • Alternative places to practice
Reaching out	• Accessing resources • Learning and theoretically understanding the teachings of mindfulness • Staying connected to the mindfulness community • Teaching mindfulness
Developing and maintaining habits	• Forming a habit/ritual of practicing mindfulness • Discipline • Intention • Commitment to practice in line with one's values and intention • Record keeping
Living the teachings of mindfulness	• Self-compassion • Acceptance of the challenges • Nonattachment/Letting go
Motivated to experience benefits	• Motivated by the benefits anticipated • Understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice in order to benefit (through theoretical learning)
Learning from the lived experience	• Motivated by the benefits experienced • Noticing improvement in practice • Motivated to sustain and improve the benefits in the long-term • Self-care awareness • Understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice (through personal experience).

Chapter 4: Results

As I explained in the Method section, after reading the transcribed interviews several times, through the process of thematic analysis, I found meaningful statements, codes, and themes. I describe the codes and themes in this chapter. Table 3 shows all the codes and themes, and explains which codes form which themes.

Descriptions of the Themes

As described in the Method chapter, after reviewing the codes, I identified and grouped the codes that had relevant contents, and described a central theme. Seven themes emerged after grouping the codes: 1) Creating appropriate conditions to practice, 2) flexibility in practice, 3) reaching out, 4) developing and maintaining habits, 5) living the teachings of mindfulness, 6) motivation to experience benefits, and 7) learning from lived experience. These themes are centered on the research question: What helps individuals persist in maintaining their regular practice of formal mindfulness? In the section below, I explain each theme in more detail, and specify which codes formed each theme. For each theme, I first describe the theme, what it means, and the different aspects of each theme. Then, I describe each of the codes that formed an aspect of the theme, in addition to samples of what the participants described.

Creating appropriate conditions to practice. This theme refers to creating appropriate conditions to practice formal mindfulness. It is mainly about the efforts that participants make beyond merely the formal practice, by taking actions that increase the chances of practicing formal mindfulness. The appropriate conditions in this theme refer to the conditions that are frequently cited by practitioners as necessary for practicing formal mindfulness such as a quiet and consistent location, a regular and appropriate time to practice, the elimination of distractions, and mental focus. The participants achieved this through having or creating space (time and place) for practice, as well as creating conditions for mental preparation preceding practice. In other words, this theme emerged from two codes. One was having or creating space for practice, which had two dimensions: time for practice and place for practice. The other code was creating conditions appropriate to focus on mindfulness meditation. This code referred to activities that enhanced mental preparation for practicing formal mindfulness.

In the following sections, I describe each of the codes that formed this theme, with examples of what the participants said during the interview.

Having or creating space for practice. This code relates to the comments (based on significant statements) about having or setting aside time to practice, as well as having or creating a place for practice, which helped the participants maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. The comments referred to consistency of both time and location as supportive of persistence. Regarding time, the participants spoke about: scheduling regular practice (finding the appropriate time of the day, and setting that time aside to practice), finding time in one's schedule to still practice formal mindfulness on very busy days, having enough free time to practice, and prioritizing meditation in one's daily schedule despite having a busy life. Regarding place, the participants spoke about allocating a quiet spot at home or a room for meditation.

The participants discussed the matter of having or creating time for practice. John, George, and Tim said that because they are currently retired, on most days they have enough free time and that has helped a lot with maintaining a regular practice, although they were persistent in maintaining their regular practice of formal mindfulness even when they were working full-time. I learned this about them based on some of the contextual stories that they told me in response to different questions of the interview, when speaking about some of the challenges they faced, and their experience of practicing mindfulness during the first years of their practice. John, Tim, and George, who previously worked full-time, previously had to manage extremely busy schedules, and they still have some busy days. Catherine and Sarah explained that they currently have extremely busy schedules. The participants added that they persistently take some actions to allocate or create time for their practice of formal mindfulness, and that they are able to maintain their practice even on busy days. Scheduling time, finding the time of the day that works for each person, and prioritizing their formal mindfulness practice were emphasized. Participants who emphasized scheduling, followed their schedules for the majority of the days. They also mentioned that on days when they are very busy, and they have to do other tasks during the usual time of their formal mindfulness practice, they still manage to make time for their practice of formal mindfulness. These actions suggest that participants actively and creatively respond to scheduling challenges, demonstrating the priority they put on regular practice.

Regarding scheduling, John said that pre-determined scheduling ensures the practice gets done. He also emphasized the importance of finding the best time of the day to practice: "Yes, it's always been in the morning ... plus lunch hour 10 minutes, and I look forward to that each

day.... Probably because I'm ... a morning person." Tim also said scheduling was key, and that choosing the specific time of the day for one's practice should be tailored to personal needs:

You need to find a time in your day when it works for you. So I couldn't do it in the late afternoon for example, because I probably would have fallen asleep and dozed off.... For whatever reason it works beautifully for me in the morning.

Setting a baseline for the duration of daily practice is another way participants find time on very busy days. Tim mentioned that he does a minimum of 30 minutes of formal mindfulness practice per day, and on very busy days, he still maintains that baseline. He also said: "If my schedule is such that I have an appointment or something in the morning, I may not practice it then, but invariably I end up doing it later in the day.... So I'll always practice it, but sometimes I'll do it more."

In addition to creating time for practice, creating space for practice is also important to participants, and includes dedicating a place or location to practice formal mindfulness. The statements related to having or preparing a place to practice mindfulness included: having an appropriate place for meditation, and having no or less distractions in one's environment. Sarah said that due to reduced distractions at home she has been practicing mindfulness more.

Some participants said that they allocate an appropriate and quiet place at home specifically for practicing mindfulness meditation. Creating a quiet, special, and consistent place for one's practice in this manner is in line with the conventional way of practicing formal mindfulness. Some participants also used a visual reminder in their home, especially in the place for meditation. Tim and John explained how having a meditation room that is very inviting and appropriate for the formal mindfulness practice help them maintain their regular practice.

Regarding having or preparing an appropriate place for practicing mindfulness meditation, Catherine's interview suggested that setting aside a physical location is a key aspect of maintaining a regular practice. She said:

I also have set up a space in my house to practice. I have my mat and my cushion regularly sitting out, like it's part of our living room decor.... So I think that that it's constantly reminding me to sit.... It's also developing [an understanding that it is] nonnegotiable, like this is a big part of my life.

Here, Catherine described how she takes initiative to remind herself that mindfulness practice is an important part of her life, and that she is willing and determined to maintain her

regular practice of formal mindfulness. These initiative actions include setting a specific and appropriate place for formal mindfulness practice.

John and Tim both explained how creating an appropriate environment in their meditation room helps them to be more willing to practice. Tim said:

My meditation room is very inviting. It has all my books in it, and a nice little desk, so that if I decided I want to write something, then I can sit at the desk. And it has a nice little easy chair where I can sit and read.... It's only for reading and writing and meditation, but I basically only meditate in there.

Creating conditions appropriate to focus on mindfulness meditation. This code emerged based on statements that referred to creating appropriate (mostly psychological) conditions for focusing on and practicing meditation in one's environment. The main significant statements summarized that formed this code were: effective communication with others (such as one's partner) about the importance of one's regular practice, and engaging in relevant activities to create "mental preparation" such as exercising and practicing yoga, listening to relaxing music, and reading about mindfulness and relevant topics before practicing mindfulness meditation.

In addition to creating space for formal practice described earlier, some participants also engaged in activities that improve mental preparation for practicing mindfulness. John said that he creates a relaxing environment in his meditation room through eliminating distractions, and using several soothing elements (e.g., visual, auditory, and temperature level). He also said that reading and writing about mindfulness and practicing yoga prepare him for his sitting meditation. John's experience suggests that these are actions or practices in themselves—less formal, but ancillary to and supportive of the formal mindfulness practice.

Responding to the question "How do you maintain your regular practice?" John said:

I try to create conditions that increase the probability of my practicing it.... So when I get up, I use between six and eight to do things that help with meditation ... put on classical music which I love, and I read magazines or books about mindfulness or Buddhism, which is very relaxing. I love to read, I'm learning, and I'm also, it's inspiring. I want to get off the desk and go and sit on my bench and meditate. So that helps, the time of day helps, the things I do before, including the yoga. It's in a quiet room.... I'm private, I can regulate the temperature. I light a candle. I do some bowing. I have a singing bowl. So all

of these things, visual, sounds, help create a mood.... It's a mental preparation, at least that's how I regard it.

As John explained, creating conditions in his environment, and engaging in activities that help him be mentally prepared to practice formal mindfulness, help him maintain a regular continuous practice.

Catherine pointed out that communicating to family members about the importance of one's regular practice of formal mindfulness helps create a more supportive environment. In Catherine's experience, family members have been supportive of her and respect the time and space that she needs to dedicate to her practice of formal mindfulness in order to focus on her practice when she needs to. This helps Catherine to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness.

The theme described above and its codes suggest that creating appropriate conditions to practice helps with maintaining one's regular practice of formal mindfulness. These appropriate conditions include setting time and place for practice, as well as engaging in activities that help one with mental preparation. Whereas, individuals might expect to have the focus and commitment to engage in formal practice after scheduling their practice and arranging a place for it, there are additional steps that they can take to increase the chances that they will be mentally prepared for the practice of formal mindfulness.

Flexibility in practice. This theme is mainly about how the participants' experience suggested that at times having some flexibility and making some small modifications that deviate slightly from the traditional ways of practicing formal mindfulness helps them maintain and continue their regular practice. Whereas "Creating appropriate conditions to practice" refers to creating time, place, and conditions that are consistent with what is preferable and often recommended in the conventional way of practicing formal mindfulness, "Flexibility in practice" refers to being free from those rigid rules to some extent. This theme emerged out of the following two codes: 1) making free adjustments and having options, which refers to having flexibility in the form and style of practicing formal mindfulness as well as flexibility in the time and schedule of practice, and 2) alternative places to practice. Although mindful practice is characterized by rigour and ritual, it seems that many of the participants manage to sustain their practice by allowing themselves to deviate from rigid routines. In the following sections, I

describe each of the codes that formed this theme, presenting examples of what the participants described.

Making adjustments and having options. This code refers to making adjustments and having or creating alternative options regarding the form or style of one's mindfulness practice, or regarding time for practice. It applies to a number of statements referring to: integrating and combining different forms of practicing mindfulness; incorporating movement into practicing mindfulness; having the freedom to practice mindfulness with flexibility between formal and informal mindfulness; not feeling forced to practice formal mindfulness with strict rules regarding format or style; having the option of practicing mindfulness without association with any religious or spiritual groups, beliefs, or rituals; practicing shorter meditations on very busy days or when needed; and flexibility in one's daily schedule on busy days.

Regarding flexibility in the form and style of practicing, the participants spoke about how incorporating movement into their practice of formal mindfulness, and combining formal and informal mindfulness help them maintain their practice over time. For example, Catherine said that in addition to practicing formal mindfulness 4-5 times a week in the form of sitting meditation, she also practices mindful movements as part of her informal practice.

Sarah explained how her mindfulness practices, which more often consist of an integration of formal and informal mindfulness, help her to be more efficient in her mindfulness practice in terms of utilizing the only free time that she had. Sarah's interview suggested that this flexibility in form and style helps her to maintain her continuous and regular practice of mindfulness. For example, she said that she incorporates her yoga practice as well as other physical exercises into her mindfulness practice, and sometimes she integrates activities that are usually considered informal mindfulness with her formal mindfulness practice. She also explained that she practices mindful walking slightly differently than the conventional way. For example, sometimes she takes a mindful walk in a quiet garden close to her work place; while her feet are not bare. Her style is slightly different than the conventional way of formal walking meditation, but she still moves at a slow pace and it is calming. She also said that sometimes she combines physical exercises or yoga movements with practicing mindfulness with more flexibility than what is typically known as formal mindfulness. For example, in responding to my question "What actions do you take to maintain your regular practice of formal mindfulness?"

she said: “I’m going to do some exercises, so I include the meditation in that.... The walking can be depending on where I am. If I can go for a walk, I try to be mindful in that time.”

Regarding flexibility between formal and informal practice, and incorporating movement into one’s mindfulness practice, Sarah prefers to have more flexibility, compared to the other participants in this study, and her description of her mindfulness practice indicated a continuum between her formal and informal practice. Sarah said that finding time is sometimes a challenge for her, and also that she does not like rigid rules about formal practice. The stories that Sarah told during the interview about her personal life suggest that she has been dealing with various sources of stress at home and at work, in addition to several challenges related to managing multiple responsibilities as a single mother. Through listening to and reflecting upon her life stories, I gained a deeper understanding of how and why flexibility in time, place, form, and style of mindfulness practice has been crucial and beneficial for Sarah’s well-being, because not only is her schedule busy, but she manages a variety of stressful situations on her own. Having this flexibility allows Sarah to maintain her regular practice of mindfulness.

John and Catherine have been practicing formal mindfulness, as described in this study, for at least 20 minutes per day, at least three days per week, but they also mentioned that in addition to practicing formal mindfulness they practice informal mindfulness too. They also said that sometimes they find that integrating some movements into their practice of formal mindfulness is helpful.

In regards to flexibility in time, participants said that on very busy days, having some flexibility in their daily schedule helps them to still practice formal mindfulness by changing the usual time of their practice. Varying the length of practice sessions is another way that participants demonstrate flexibility in time. As part of the background information about their mindfulness practice, some participants mentioned practicing shorter meditations on days when they were very busy, or as they needed it throughout the day in addition to their longer practice. Participants’ comments suggested that practicing short meditations helps them overcome the challenge of lack of time during busy times, and still maintain the consistency and continuity of regular practice of formal mindfulness instead of abandoning it during busy and challenging times. John said that in addition to practicing longer mindfulness meditations at home in the morning, he also practices formal mindfulness during lunchtime at work in his own office with

the door closed. This additional meditation serves as a “mental shower” to maintain his calmness and mindful awareness throughout the day at work.

Regarding flexibility in time and scheduling, participants described how some flexibility in their daily schedule when needed helped them maintain their practice during busy times when they had competing demands. The participants explained that when they have a very busy schedule that does not allow them to practice formal mindfulness at their usual time, they find another time during the day. For example, if they usually practice mindfulness in the morning, on a busy day when other tasks need to be done early in the morning, they allocate time to practice later in the day. Therefore, they still keep meditation in their daily schedule and they still practice it. This way, they overcome the challenges of a busy schedule.

Tim said: “My schedule is such that I have an appointment or something in the morning. So, I may not do it [practice formal mindfulness] then, but invariably I end up doing it later in the day....” Similarly, John said: “When I organize each day, I have a planner, and I list the things I want to do.... So in a sense, meditation is my number 1 each day, so even if I don’t do it in the morning, I try and do it later on. The obstacles are temporary, they’re not chronic.” Also, in regards to flexibility in duration of practice, all the participants mentioned practicing short meditations in addition to longer practice, and found that helpful in maintaining their regular practice during busy times.

Alternative places to practice. Whereas the code “creating space” in the previous theme refers to creating special and sacred places for practicing formal mindfulness, such as a meditation room, this code refers to utilizing alternative places that are not typically associated with formal mindfulness practice. For example, the participants referred to using one’s office at work during lunchtime or a garden near work. John said that in addition to his daily practice at home, sometimes he also uses his office at work during lunchtime to practice sitting meditation. Sarah said how she sometimes practices mindfulness at work or places that are not always quiet. This helps her maintain her regular practice of mindfulness when she does not have access to a completely quiet place during the time that she could use to practice mindfulness.

When Sarah mentioned flexibility in the place of her practice, she said that she is able to meditate at work even when it is not completely quiet, as she is able to “mute” external distractions and noises. She explained that because she has developed the ability to mute external noises and distractions, she is able to practice what she considered as similar to formal

mindfulness even at work, in addition to her mindfulness practice at home. She said: “It’s like putting on mute. You’re hearing, but you’re not following what they’re saying.... to the point that you can concentrate on what you’re doing, or you can take the time to relax, and scan yourself [practice body scan].”

The theme “Flexibility in practice” suggests that having some flexibility regarding time, place, and style of practice helps the participants maintain their regular practice of formal mindfulness.

Reaching out. This theme refers to reaching out to supportive external resources to maintain one’s regular practice of formal mindfulness. It speaks about the resources and the mindfulness community that support the continuous practice. It suggests that sustained formal practice does not merely happen in isolation but is supported by utilizing resources that facilitate its consistency and regularity. More broadly speaking, a commitment to sustained practice is a commitment to more than the formal sitting, but to a lifestyle that supports the practice. This theme emerged out of the following codes: accessing resources, learning and theoretically understanding mindfulness, staying connected to the mindfulness community, and teaching mindfulness. These codes indicate reaching out to resources, the community, and the teachings that support one’s practice of formal mindfulness.

Accessing resources. In this study the code “Accessing resources” refers to a number of statements about seeking out learning opportunities. This includes learning mindfulness through a structured program or workshop, attending retreats and other group practices, using handouts and CDs to guide one’s practice at home, and learning about mindfulness through reading about it continuously.

Proactively seeking out resources to support their learning and their practice helped the participants in their continuation of formal mindfulness and therefore contributed to their ability to maintain a regular practice. John said:

There were two other factors that helped sustain my practice. One was that when the MBSR class ended in June 1999, I initiated that anyone from that group of 12 people, whether they would like to meet once a month and meditate, and maybe some reading, and then we had a discussion, like a social time, and that lasted for about a year, and then about six or seven years ago I joined a monthly sitting group Sangha.... I set up my own

group four years ago, we sit for 45 minutes and we have a structured discussion for an hour on, often, it's like a book club. So that's immensely helpful too.

John also described how taking initiative in forming a practice group with his classmates, when the first structured mindfulness workshop that he attended was coming to an end, was helpful in maintaining a continuous practice of formal mindfulness. He said:

In the seventh session, the lady teaching the class said: "This is going to end in a week...." I [had] just been reflecting [for] a few minutes upon the fact that this is going to end, what does everyone think of that? And almost without thinking when it came to me, I said: "I don't want this to stop," and then I started thinking, "How can I make it continue" and I said: "Well, do some of you want to continue?"

Seeking out learning resources helped to provide a theoretical background that encouraged ongoing commitment. It contributed to a better understanding of why and how practicing formal mindfulness was helpful. It also became a starting point for developing long-term habits. The participants talked about how they accessed resources that supported their learning and motivated them to continue their regular practice of formal mindfulness. Examples of accessing resources include: learning mindfulness from a workshop or structured program, receiving handouts and CDs from the mindfulness workshop to guide one's practice at home, and learning about mindfulness through readings.

Participants found that resources, including the CDs and instructions that they received from their mindfulness teachers, were helpful in guiding their home practice. The participants also said that attending group practice sessions was helpful, and both George and John emphasized the role of retreats and other groups after their participation in a structured mindfulness program. Sarah explained how her learning in the structured mindfulness workshop encouraged and helped her to continue and maintain a regular practice. She said, "that makes me persevere because I understood the rationale of it, and I experienced the benefits, so I want to keep practicing that, you know?" She also emphasized that the CDs and the instruction handouts that they received in the workshop to take home for their home practice were very helpful.

Catherine explained that attending a structured program helped her develop a habit of scheduling and maintaining a regular practice. Catherine also said:

I really enjoyed going to the class. For me a big thing in this whole experience and why I kept going is the sense of community, to be with other people. I find it very courageous

in others and in myself to just show up, and to sit, and to see what comes up for you, and be with that. I think that takes a lot of courage to do.

Tim and John explained how reading and writing about mindfulness has helped them to learn more and also to be connected to others who practice mindfulness. Tim said that he decided to practice formal mindfulness regularly over ten years ago after reading Jon Kabat-Zinn's books and articles about mindfulness. Accessing resources such as structured workshops and mindfulness programs, participating in retreats and other group practices, using CDs and practice instructions, as well as reading books and articles about mindfulness encourage the participants to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness.

Learning and understanding mindfulness theoretically. This code refers to actively learning and understanding the teachings of mindfulness theoretically, based on what the participants described regarding how they acquired that knowledge. John, Tim, George, and Catherine said that they read about mindfulness in addition to learning about it through structured workshops. Sarah said that she found the eight-week mindfulness program very helpful, because the teachers explained the theory behind mindfulness very well, and she learned about the connection between one's thought patterns and emotions. She said:

The meditation training was very useful to know this theory ... because they explain really well how the practice is linked to your way of thinking, and how your thoughts or your thinking patterns impacts your emotions.... That's what really got me more interested, because I knew why I was doing it very well, and they taught us some techniques.

I found that by doing the workshop the rational part [of me] understood the logic and I said okay, when I'm in this rush of the routine and I feel stressed I can rationally identify the emotion or the thought or the feeling that is bothering me, and I can allow myself to relax, and to consciously let that go, and my subconscious feels more relaxed, so then I can sleep better at night ... and let that heal. That makes me persevere because I understood the rationale of it, and I experienced the benefits, so I want to keep practicing that.

For Sarah, what she learned at the structured workshop about the theory of mindfulness has helped her a lot to feel motivated to continue her practice of mindfulness, because as she said, she knew and understood why it is helpful to practice mindfulness.

In regard to understanding the theory behind mindfulness, four participants who had attended a structured mindfulness workshop reported that they found the workshops very helpful. Other participants emphasized how continuous reading about mindfulness helps them understand it theoretically.

Staying connected to the mindfulness community. This code is about the role of the mindfulness community in maintaining one's regular and continuous practice of formal mindfulness. Some participants mentioned that after the first mindfulness workshop, or after their initial introduction to formal mindfulness, they stayed connected to the mindfulness community. Tim, John, and Catherine explained how they stayed connected to the community of mindfulness through forming, participating in, and leading practice groups. John, George, and Sarah also mentioned the importance of follow-up sessions and group practice after the first structured workshop. The participants emphasized the role of human connectedness, group support, and forming and maintaining connections in mindfulness community in strengthening their persistence with practicing formal mindfulness regularly.

Staying connected to the mindfulness community refers to staying connected after the first mindfulness workshop, through attending follow-up sessions as well as other group practices, retreats, or mindfulness societies. John formed and joined mindfulness groups following his completion of a structured eight-week mindfulness workshop. He talked about his support network and connections as a source of motivation. Like John, other participants also reported that they found group practices and follow-up sessions after their initial workshop helpful. This aspect of "reaching out" suggests that practicing formal mindfulness as part of a community and proactively staying connected to that community provides emotional and motivational support to maintain one's regular practice.

Based on what the participants said, staying connected to the mindfulness community, has been very helpful and a great source of support in maintaining their regular practice of formal mindfulness. For example, when talking about how she persists in her regular practice, Catherine said: "This is really important for me in my life [as is] staying connected to the community.... That helps." When I asked Catherine about how she stays connected to the community and how often they meet, Catherine said:

Another big piece for me is the sense of community that I have with practicing.... I think that's a major part of maintaining practice, to have a community.... I deeply care about

that community.... Our thread and our commonality is that we uphold strong personal practice.

She also explained that she learns a lot from being connected to and talking to more experienced mentors with whom she works, and mentioned that she meets with her co-teachers. She continued:

So that's another part of my community. It's the people that I teach with, and [feel] a strong connection with.... I think there's comfort in knowing that I'm not alone.... That practicing can be very challenging at times, for the things that come up, but other people are also going through those challenges as well. What I also find helpful at the community is seeing people maintain a regular practice of their own and they have very busy lives too. So [I know] I'm not the only one who has a lot going on in my life and they're also dedicating portions of their day to commit to this practice, and I really appreciate that.

The community contributes to Catherine's persistence in her practice, as it helps her to find support to overcome the challenges of maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness.

When I asked John if he continued his practice of formal mindfulness after the eight-week program he had completed, he said that he joined a mindfulness society and attended some retreats: "Most of my practice was at those types of events because I think it's important to have community. It's hard to do just on your own unless you have a lot of experience." Emphasizing the important role of the community support, he also explained that since then he has joined and formed other mindfulness groups as well.

Teaching mindfulness. Some of the participants (John, Catherine, and Tim) said that they were or still are mindfulness teachers and that teaching mindfulness helps them to engage more in their own practice of formal mindfulness. They emphasized the role of "walking the talk," and practicing one's own teachings in their persistence with maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness.

When discussing what helps him maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness, John talked about how teaching mindfulness supported his own practice and persistence, as well as the sense of pride and praise related to his identity as someone who practices mindfulness meditation and teaches mindfulness. He added:

I get some praise from the fact that I teach mindfulness and meditation, and I know quite [well] how to deal with it because I don't become attached to it. But occasionally I say, "How about when I stop teaching? Will I practice less?" ... I don't know, ... but is that a source that keeps me going? It is, and so one perspective on that is if it keeps you going ... and ... brings so much enjoyment in my life, then great.... It's like a feedback loop. If I can teach this, that helps me practice, as it certainly does. Because that's been a motivation, if I teach this subject, I better walk the talk.

When responding to the question "What motivates you to maintain your regular practice of formal mindfulness?" Catherine explained how being a mindfulness teacher helps her because it enables her to be inspired by other mindfulness teachers and co-teachers, as described earlier, and also it motivates her to walk the talk. She said: "and a lot of it is to be able to walk the talk, as teachers.... So, I'm motivated for those reasons." Tim said: "One of the nice things about teaching it is because I was teaching it, I think it's good for my practice."

Teaching mindfulness was another way that helped some participants stay motivating to maintain their own regular practice of formal mindfulness, as they said they were inspired to "walk the talk." Being a mindfulness teacher may motivate one to persist in a regular practice of formal mindfulness by virtue of being a guide or a role model for their students, in addition to having the opportunity to share their experience with other mindfulness teachers and students.

Developing and maintaining habits. This theme refers to a disciplined procedure of developing and maintaining habits of practicing formal mindfulness on a regular basis. It emphasizes the importance of building regular practice into one's daily life according to pre-determined schedules, and being committed to them based on self-discipline, and in line with one's values. This theme emerged out of the following codes: forming a habit/ritual of practicing mindfulness, discipline, intention, commitment to one's values and intention, and record keeping.

Forming a habit/ritual of practicing mindfulness. This code speaks to the role of establishing a habit of regular practice and, for some participants, considering it a ritual. It applies to statements that describe these main points: considering mindfulness practice as a ritual, practicing it as a strong habit, considering it as an integral and valuable part of one's daily life, learning and forming a habit of practicing it regularly since the completion of a structured workshop, and getting back to a routine of regular practice soon after an interruption. Forming

this habit seems to be closely linked to scheduling one's practice and finding the right time that works for the person every day or most days. For example, Tim said:

I am motivated for various reasons, but [I] also have introduced it as a very strong habit. So, I can't see myself not doing it, and it's just there every day. So I think that's very valuable.... I always give myself ... a lot of time in the morning, because that's valuable time for me, and the meditation is valuable time, so it's there and so that is huge, and it's still huge. I think it's just habit.

Tim also said:

You got to make it a habit, and you have to do it consistently over time. So if not every day, every second day, because otherwise it's not going to have an effect.... My understanding is that this is a physiological thing too, it essentially alters your mind.... It kind of reboots, rewires your mind and you can't do something, so significant by occasionally meditating.... It's not going to work.

Some participants emphasized that forming a habit or ritual of regular practice helps them a lot in making sure that their practice of formal mindfulness takes place on a highly regular basis. This was linked to prioritizing their practice of formal mindfulness, finding a time of the day that works best for each person, and scheduling it, and also considering it as a habit, that is, as a valuable and integral part of one's life. Catherine said that the workshop helped her to form this habit of regular practice at home and, when the workshop ended, she had already formed that habit, and it was easier for her to continue and maintain her regular practice. John said at times when there are occasional interruptions in his practice due to illness or other life challenges, he returns to his routine of regular practices as soon as he can. Tim also said that he considers his practice of formal mindfulness as a ritual, and an integral and valuable part of his life. He also emphasized that he was highly disciplined and that helped him maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. The participants also described how reminding themselves of their intention and developing a strong commitment to their practice of formal mindfulness, which was in line with their values, contributed to their persistence.

As described earlier, Catherine had said that the eight-week workshop helped her to get into the routine of scheduling her practice every day, and continuing that regular practice. She said the workshop helped her a lot in setting time aside for her practice on a regular basis. She said:

It's a practice. It's something that needs to happen regularly ... to sustain ... some of the things I had learned. So after the eight weeks, I was pretty eager to keep going and practicing. I would schedule sessions to practice mindfulness.... At the end of the eight weeks, I was very good at setting time aside every day.

When discussing how to overcome challenges in the way of maintaining a regular practice, John said: "Illness is a challenge. Some days, I just I can't do this, so you get back to it as soon as you can." Developing and establishing a strong habit of regular practice for John has helped him overcome the challenges that have occurred in the way of his persistence.

Discipline. This code is about the importance of developing a strong self-discipline in order to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. For example, Tim said that being very disciplined has helped him maintain his regular practice despite having very busy days, especially in the past when he was working full-time. He said that he has maintained his regular practice of mindfulness meditation in a similar way as his practice of running three times a week. Regarding practicing mindfulness meditation, when I asked him what made him different from some of his mindfulness students who said they were busy and not able to practice formal mindfulness, Tim said:

Good question, I'm very disciplined.... I run regularly three times a week. I've been doing it for 20 years, and with almost no exceptions unless I was injured. So I guess that's discipline, a combination of discipline and an understanding that these things are good for me.... So I built it into my routine, so a combination of needing it, a combination of being disciplined, a combination of understanding how the mind works.

He used the example of running, but he was responding to a question about practicing formal mindfulness. This indicates that he has the same sense of discipline about both practices, knowing that they are good for him. Tim emphasized that he has been highly disciplined throughout his life and also in regards to his practice of formal mindfulness. Based on some of the stories that Tim told me, I learned that he was practicing formal mindfulness regularly in a highly disciplined manner even when he was still working full-time. During those years, he was managing stressful situations at work, and life was extremely busy for him and his wife, and they were also raising their four children. During that very busy time, Tim's strong discipline helped him maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness.

Intention. In this study, intention refers to how much a person is actually willing to practice formal mindfulness and maintain a regular practice despite facing challenges such as having very busy days. Catherine said: “When it’s really busy, it’s [about] coming back to my intention often.... You know, what is my intention for sitting on the mat every day?” It seems like for Catherine, her persistence in maintaining a regular practice is linked to bringing her attention back to her intention regarding practicing formal mindfulness on a regular basis. As she reminds herself of the reasons she practices formal mindfulness, her persistence is strengthened.

When discussing what suggestions for a future mindfulness student regarding maintaining regular practice at times when one is struggling, Tim suggested re-evaluating how one manages one’s time during the day, and then emphasized the importance of intention or desire to practice saying: “I think there’s always time, so maybe time is probably not the issue, the desire or the need [to practice is].”

Commitment to practice in line with one’s values and intention. This code refers to a strong sense of commitment to maintaining one’s regular practice of formal mindfulness, associated with knowing why one practices formal mindfulness. This code emerged from statements that referred to: a sense of commitment to practicing formal mindfulness in line with one’s values, as well as a feeling of being accountable to oneself to maintain one’s regular practice; reminding oneself of one’s intention and the value of practicing mindfulness, and coming back to that intention at challenging times such as very busy days; and, experiencing mindfulness as being in line with one’s core beliefs such as wanting no harm. For example, George, who was previously exposed to harmful experiences and trauma, found mindfulness helpful, peaceful, and in line with his value of wanting people to not experience harm. He said: “Well, my core belief is [that] mindfulness is not something that is doing bad.... [There is] no harm in it.”

George said that mindfulness is in line with his core beliefs because it does not hurt anyone, and it’s a good tool to increase awareness.

About very busy days, Catherine said: “When it’s really busy, it’s coming back to my intention often.... You know, what is my intention for sitting on the mat every day?” When talking about maintaining her regular practice despite challenges such as experiencing agitation or feeling tense during her practice sometimes, she added: “That’s the crazy thing about the practice ... it’s a life-long practice, if you’re committed to doing that.”

Tim, who had emphasized how he was committed to a life-long practice of formal mindfulness with a strong discipline, also clarified he found the formal practice of mindfulness in line with values such as not being judgemental and having compassion that he wants to practice in his life, and that formal practice was important in order to practice these values during the day as well. He said:

In a sense the formal meditation is always a kind of a condensed, more intense practice session for your life. And so you step from your cushion into your life, and you've been practicing awareness, acceptance, non-judging, in the sense that you're non-judging yourself, presence, because that's what you're doing, and ideally compassion, because hopefully you've been told or you've read that somewhere that you should increasingly be non-judgmental of yourself and compassionate within your meditation, for yourself, and you bring that from the cushion to your real life.

Regarding commitment to maintaining a regular practice, Tim mentioned that even on very busy days, he still practices for 30 minutes per day as a minimum baseline, in addition to having a ritual of practicing, being very disciplined, and viewing his mindfulness practice as a part of his life. Also, he mentioned that in order to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness, one needs to be really committed. Tim linked this sense of commitment to searching for something that would help from the beginning of the practice. In regard to his commitment to maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness, despite some challenges, Tim added:

My regular practice has almost never been challenged [over the past] 10 years ... that I can recall... Whatever has been a challenge is not to the practice.... A challenge can be challenging without threatening the end of something.... I honestly believe one of the beauties of the ... meditation practice is that it follows at a pace that it will not become too challenging.

Record keeping. This code is about recording and monitoring the specifics of one's formal mindfulness practice time. John said that he has recorded the duration and the frequency of his practice since 2004. When I asked him how he maintains his regular practice, and what actions he takes in that regard, after explaining about what he did for mental preparation, he added:

Also I keep statistics. So each time I do it, it's not just an event in my life, it's an event in a program of trying to achieve an objective.... In a month... I know that if the cumulative minutes are higher, the results are going to be higher, so those things help.

Considering that John told me he maintained a regular practice to keep his mindful awareness up, his record keeping seems to be linked to that purpose. It is an action that has helped him monitor his practice in the long run, but also the statistics that he records motivate him to maintain his regular practice and also to improve the average duration of his daily practice. He added:

The target is 45 minutes a day, and so I keep statistics on a daily basis.... At the end of the calendar month, ... I draw a line and say "Ok, how was November?" So the target is 45, and this month I think I'm going to get 37.... It's a daily average. So I look at that and I say "It's better than ... I have been doing [practicing formal mindfulness] so far this year, but I like this year to be better than last year."

John has kept records of the time (duration and frequency) of his regular practice since he started practicing, and mentioned that record keeping among other actions that he took has been helpful for him in maintaining his regular practice.

Based on what the participants reported regarding the theme described above, developing habits of practicing formal mindfulness regularly, maintaining it as a ritual, having a discipline, remembering one's intention and values, and committing to one's values and practice, along with supportive habits such as keeping records of one's practice all contribute to persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly.

Living the teachings of mindfulness. Whereas the theme "Developing and maintaining habits" referred to a disciplined procedure of developing a structure for maintaining a regular practice, this theme refers to an internal process of drawing from spiritual and/or psychological teachings in support of one's persistence with mindfulness practice. The participants explained how practicing and living these teachings supported their persistence by overcoming potential discouragement due to some difficulties that one may face on the way to maintaining a regular practice in the long-term. Living the teachings of mindfulness here refers to practicing and living these teachings and components of mindfulness such as compassion, acceptance, and nonattachment in addition to practicing them during one's formal mindfulness practice. The participants in this study explained how they experience these qualities through practicing formal

mindfulness but also by extending their experience of mindfulness to their daily life “off the mat.” This theme more specifically emerged out of the following codes: self-compassion, acceptance of the challenges, and nonattachment/letting go, all of which are the teachings of mindfulness.

Self-compassion. This code was based on what some participants said regarding what helps to maintain one’s regular practice when facing challenges such as difficult thoughts and emotions that may arise while practicing formal mindfulness. Self-compassion was the participants’ internal experience of understanding human suffering and showing compassion to oneself, informed by teachings on compassion in mindfulness traditions. Sarah said that through practicing self-compassion, she has learned to not pressure herself regarding the routine of her daily tasks as well as the rigid rules of practicing formal mindfulness regularly.

Catherine, who elaborated on self-compassion as part of her mindfulness practice, said: I notice judgment come up for myself, and ... emotions and stuff.... Those moments I come back to the breath, I try to come back to the body ... sometimes I meet those tensions with compassion, reminding myself this is a difficult situation, and or that I’m suffering.

This self-compassion in the face of the challenges that Catherine has experienced during her formal mindfulness helps her to meet those challenges in a healthier way, and also maintain her practice of formal mindfulness.

Also, the self-compassion that Catherine has practiced through practicing formal mindfulness has been extended to times when she is not meditating and helps her when facing challenges such as a racing mind. She described a time when she woke up in the middle of the night thinking and planning ahead about everything that she needed to do the next day, and then she couldn’t go back to sleep and that led to her judgmental mind worrying about being exhausted the next day. Then she said:

It was really interesting, when this happened a few weeks ago, that all of a sudden that came up, my mind started racing and ... I didn’t think about it, but how I met that was [to think] “Oh thank you, thank you mind, I really appreciate that you’re trying to help me get done with school, and you’re already planning, but right now, I can just take a step back and I don’t need to wake up just yet, and I can go back to bed.”... It’s funny, but I was meeting myself with so much more compassion, and gratitude than the judgment.... I

... normally would have met something like that with a lot of judgement and ... all of a sudden, because I do a lot of self-compassion practice and meditations as well, that compassion for myself ... just showed up, which was really cool. I didn't have to think about being compassionate, it just ... rose up.

In this instance, the self-compassion that Catherine initially practiced through formal mindfulness expanded to her practice of informal mindfulness when she needed it, and her regular practice of formal mindfulness and compassion meditation helped her to experience self-compassion "off the mat" naturally.

Regarding how self-compassion helped him navigate some of the difficulties of practicing mindfulness such as self-judgment, Tim said:

In terms of what was going on in the mind, that became the most intriguing and in some ways disturbing thing as well. Because you become witness to what goes on in your mind, and what goes on in your mind is not always nice, right? ... In the sense that I became too conscious of what was going on in my head, and I wasn't happy with what was going on in my head. So in the sense that I believe it goes on in everybody's head, as in we tend to be extremely judgmental.... And we're human, but for that stretch, it was, I didn't like what I saw and I was unforgiving and judgmental of myself. So, that was a very difficult period, but I got beyond that too. So to get beyond that is to essentially ... befriend yourself, in the sense that wow, I'm human, and we're all human, and in a way, that's I think in this process of ... my practice. It's movement towards ultimately compassion, and that's where I'm working on now. There's a great line, it's kind of a chant I guess, and it basically says: "each moment, life as it is the only teacher. This moment, being just this moment, being just this moment, compassion's way." And I think that's kind of where you end up, compassion's way. So being just that, at this moment, in a way implies that you are not, you've kind of gotten past the ego. And in being fully present, your compassion's way, and to me, that's the goal, the ultimate awakening.

Tim also allowed himself to learn and practice mindfulness at his own pace, and this self-compassion helped him maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness, despite some difficulties throughout years.

Based on what the participants described, it seems that the self-compassion that they practice as a core component of mindfulness has not only helped them meet difficult thoughts

and emotions in a healthier way, but has also contributed to their persistence in continuing her regular practice of formal mindfulness, as their self-compassion protect them from getting discouraged by the difficulties that still arise.

Catherine explained how practicing mindfulness has helped her to improve her sense of self-compassion, and also how experiencing and practicing self-compassion helps her to meet or manage the difficulties she faces during her practice of formal mindfulness, such as difficult emotions and thoughts that arise. It seems fair to assume that feeling disappointed with difficult emotions and thoughts during the meditation may be an obstacle to persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly. Catherine's interview suggests that practicing and experiencing self-compassion, which is one of the key components of mindfulness, has helped her to maintain her regular practice, instead of abandoning her practice and feeling disappointed. She also said that she experiences self-compassion "off the mat," as the self-compassion that she practices during formal mindfulness permeates her daily life when experiencing other challenges, such as worrying thoughts about having a very busy schedule, feeling exhausted, and needing to rest. Therefore, her practice of living the teachings of mindfulness through practicing formal mindfulness extends to and enhances her experience of living the teachings of mindfulness during her daily life, which is known as informal mindfulness. Most other participants also reported that practicing formal mindfulness extends to and helps them with their informal mindfulness during their daily lives.

Acceptance of the challenges. Acceptance was another aspect of mindfulness that helped the participants with managing challenges of persistence in practicing formal mindfulness. George described how practicing mindful awareness can contribute to the approach that one takes toward a life challenge or a difficulty such as pain during practicing formal mindfulness, and that this awareness has helped him to choose acceptance. He said:

The stances that you want to take also, is important.... My back ceases up, or I can't do anything for a week, so there's stances you can take, oh, okay, you're aware of that, you're mindful about your back, but what stance? How am I going to deal with this situation? Am I going to get angry? Am I going to accept it? And kind of ease that transition? So, the stances that you take [are] important.

George also explained that because of practicing mindful awareness and acceptance, he is now easier on himself and others in life, as he is more aware of his automatic judgments, and

chooses acceptance. He also said that acceptance of his chronic pain helps him to make necessary adjustments in order to maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness.

When Catherine discussed how her mindfulness practice has improved over the years, she said that her practice has become more accepting. She said:

I think continually practicing helps to increase that acceptance.... I also think what helps is that ... I feel at times you know I want to do things ... with a lot of energy, etc., and with the practice, that acceptance is giving myself permission to be a really slow learner in this practice.

Catherine also talked about meeting difficulties that arise during her practice and during the day with more acceptance and that her regular practice helps to promote that acceptance. She also described that for her this acceptance entails realizing that practicing formal mindfulness does not necessarily take her to a place that nothing is negative, or a place of total positive experiences, and that her “internal landscape” of inner experiences including the difficult ones is always there.

She said:

The only way I could see that ... is because I practice often. I think if I wasn't practicing often, I would assume that I still have higher expectations, that things would change, or that [I would] just have positive experiences.

This indicates that practicing often or regular practice has helped Catherine develop and improve her acceptance of difficult experiences both while practicing formal mindfulness and throughout the day. Consequently, this improved level of acceptance seems to have supported Catherine in continuing her practice of formal mindfulness as she does not have high expectations from formal mindfulness such as reaching a point where everything would be positive, and therefore she has not been discouraged by the difficulties.

She also explained that she experiences acceptance of judgment that arise while practicing. She said:

The non-judgment piece is huge. I think that's another piece of this acceptance ... for me ... when things arise ... judgment still comes up, so you can notice the judgment.... Just kind of embracing those sides of myself and ... my humanness, and that even though sometimes difficult things will arise and I find myself judging those things ... and [I can] become aware of that judgment, and be like okay, there's judgment again.

Catherine's experience suggests that acceptance of one's judgmental mind while practicing formal mindfulness may help the person maintain their regular practice. As Catherine does not expect to reach a level of pure non-judgment, she is not easily disappointed when she experiences judgment even though she has been practicing for a few years.

Regarding practicing acceptance, Catherine said that her practice of formal mindfulness has become more accepting, meaning that she has become more accepting of the difficulties she may experience during her practice of formal mindfulness. This may indicate that she may experience greater acceptance towards herself too, and also towards other challenges that she may experience in her daily life. Catherine explained that with practicing formal mindfulness often, she realizes that people do not necessarily reach a point in their practice of formal mindfulness where everything is just positive or neutral. Rather, people realize the impermanence of their experiences. She also said that if she was not practicing so often, she might have had high expectations of her experience with mindfulness. Therefore, persistence in regular practices of formal mindfulness has helped Catherine practice and experience this level of acceptance, and then her acceptance of difficult emotions and thoughts has helped her maintain her regular practice even further because she does not expect her experience of formal mindfulness to be "all positive" or "all neutral." As a result, she will not quickly quit her practice when experiencing difficulties. Practicing acceptance as part of living the teachings of mindfulness helps Catherine with her persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly as she realizes and acknowledges that acceptance of her difficult thoughts and emotions is part of practicing mindfulness and actually living it.

Non-attachment/letting go. Non-attachment or letting go, which is one of the main teachings of mindfulness, helped the participants in this study manage some of the difficulties while practicing formal mindfulness and supported their persistence in maintaining a regular practice. John, George, and other participants talked about how they have learned to let go of some of the difficulties that they sometimes experience during their practice such as stress-related thoughts or back pain. Letting go (non-attachment) supports the participants' persistence.

Catherine explained how she experiences nonattachment when she notices her attachment to expectations while practicing formal mindfulness but that it is challenging at times. She said:

Nonattachment is big.... I still see [striving] come up now...., Sometimes I notice [that] the challenge of practicing is expecting that you're going to get somewhere.... It's

something to sit down almost every day, and you just see when it arises. For me, sometimes it's a challenge, because [I think] where am I going? Where is this taking me? Where? When am I going to see benefits? ... That's something that comes up, and so, part of this is noticing when that preferential mind arises.... So the nonattachment is something I play with and try and notice, but it definitely comes up because I see that attached outcomes process.

Even though Catherine is still practicing non-attachment, her experience with becoming aware of her attachments, and trying to practice nonattachment seems to have helped her with her persistence in maintaining her regular practice of formal mindfulness. She has become aware that attachments of her "preferential mind" are natural and she is able to observe and acknowledge them instead of pushing them away or ignoring them. Therefore, it has become a practice of not being attached to her expectations about the mindfulness practice, and any specific outcomes or immediate benefits.

Catherine said that she had been practicing nonattachment or "letting go," but also struggling with it. Non-attachment seems to be connected to the concept of acceptance for her, and also she explained how observing her processes of attachment to her expectations and then practicing nonattachment are important parts of her mindfulness practice. Based on what she described in the interview, Catherine is aware of her attachment to the outcome and benefits of mindfulness, and still practices acceptance and nonattachment. As she explained, she considers "nonattachment" as an important part of mindfulness practice.

This awareness and one's experience with non-attachment, even if people don't fully feel nonattached, may help people continue and maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness as they are not expecting to reach a point of pure contentment in their practice. They will not quit their practice, as they realize that there may be difficult emotions and challenging experiences while they are practicing formal mindfulness, and they are not attached to a specific expected outcome such as experiencing only positive emotions and the absence of all difficult experiences.

Motivation to experience benefits. This theme refers to the participants' motivation regarding the benefits that they were hoping to experience through practicing formal mindfulness prior to starting or at the beginning of their practice, which usually entailed improving some aspects of their well-being or relationships. Some of these benefits included those they had heard about from others, such as mindfulness teachers or psychologists, or learned about through their

own readings and research. They were anticipating long-term benefits after they started practicing mindfulness, and this motivated them further to continue and maintain their regular practice of formal mindfulness. This theme emerged out of the following codes: motivated by the benefits anticipated (including long-term benefits), and learning about and understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice in order to benefit. The learning about the importance of continuous regular practice that is considered in this theme was accessed through theoretical learning from teachers and readings.

In the paragraphs below, I describe each code that represents an aspect of this theme.

Motivated by the benefits anticipated. This code emerged from the relevant comments and statements that indicated motivation to practice formal mindfulness regularly based on the benefits that the participants anticipated experiencing either before or at the beginning of starting to practice, as well as the benefits that they expected to experience in the long run by continuing to practice and maintaining their regular practice. The relevant significant statements indicated the following main points: finding something helpful at the beginning, needing something that would make a difference and having faith in it, learning healthy ways to manage burnout, improving one's mental health, experiencing more acceptance and mindfulness in dealing with one's challenges such as PTSD, becoming more aware, sustaining and improving one's level of mindful awareness in the long run, and experiencing the long-term benefits of mindfulness. For example, when describing his experience of beginning to practice formal mindfulness, Tim explained that at the beginning it was difficult for him to sit for a long time, and to pay attention in a quiet manner, and that required commitment. He then added that a lot of people who begin practicing mindfulness are looking for something that would help them, and knowing or anticipating that mindfulness would help motivates them to practice despite some difficulties: "They've been told 'this is going to help,' and so they sit, and it's very difficult." Tim also explained that he has made a habit of practicing. I asked him: "What motivates you to make it a habit?" and he said: "At the very front, what made it a habit was I needed it, I needed something, it hadn't proven itself yet, but in a way, that was an act of faith to believe that it would make a difference."

Regarding motivation to maintain her regular practice of mindfulness, Sarah explained that from the beginning she was looking for something that would help her reduce her stress

level and prevent burnout, because she had experienced burnout several times. Also, having a child and feeling responsible made her realize that she needs regular self-care. She said:

I was looking into something.... I read about that and I said, "I really need to keep myself on a regular routine for self-care, because now I have a responsibility and I need to feel good about myself." ... I had health issues as I said, I was letting a lot of tension build up, pain.... But when you have a child ... the child makes your schedule ...and if you don't have the energy to provide and to follow-up ... the child suffers.

About the benefits that she was hoping to experience by practicing mindfulness, Catherine said:

Being a graduate student I was doing some research in another area, and then mindfulness came up, and I got really interested in it, from a conceptual level.... Then in 2010, I was going through my own burnout with school, being a graduate student, and I was interested in exploring healthy ways to meet that burnout.

Further in the interview, explaining her experience of the time she began practicing formal mindfulness, Catherine said that based on her previous knowledge regarding the benefits of mindfulness from her research, she hopes to learn to relate to life challenges in a healthier way through practicing mindfulness.

Regarding anticipated benefits at the beginning of practicing formal mindfulness, Catherine said:

I would say when I first started I was definitely eager and enthusiastic to practice. Also, I wanted to see what would happen ... knowing from a research background, the benefits of mindfulness, but also ... seeing how it could help me relate in healthier ways to areas in my life.

John said that the reason he started practicing formal mindfulness at home was mostly his motivation to sustain the calmness that he had first achieved through the first sessions of mindfulness program, as well as to prevent any future anxiety related to work through reducing and managing his stress. George started practicing formal mindfulness hoping to improve his well-being and manage his chronic pain and PTSD symptoms. John said he was motivated to reduce and manage his stress related to work, and Sarah said that she wanted to prevent more burnouts. Other participants also explained how they were hoping to improve different aspects of their well-being and relationships. Similarly, all the participants in this study explained that the

benefits that they hope to experience motivated them to make a conscious decision to start and continue practicing formal mindfulness on a regular basis.

Benefits that motivated the participants to begin and continue practicing formal mindfulness regularly included experiencing, sustaining, and improving one's mindful awareness; and improving one's physical and/or psychological well-being to reduce or manage challenges such as chronic pain, PTSD symptoms, depression, anxiety, or other life challenges.

The benefits that the participants were anticipating motivated them to begin practicing mindfulness, attend the structured workshops, and commit to regular practice. This commitment was accompanied by their knowledge about and interest in experiencing improvements and benefits in the long term, which led to persistence in practicing regularly.

Motivation to experience some benefits in the long term is more about the person's willingness to improve some aspects of their lives or their well-being in the long term, which is the reason they are motivated to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness over time. For example, John explained that he wanted his mindfulness awareness to stay at a high level or even to improve in the long term, and that he believed persistence in practicing formal mindfulness was required to have this experience. Tim also said that he was determined to continue practicing formal mindfulness for all his life as experiencing mindfulness through maintaining a regular formal practice has been beneficial and valuable for him. Using the analogy of peeling more layers of an onion, John and Tim both said that they thought that through continuous regular practice of formal mindfulness over time, one would experience a greater progress in gaining awareness and insight.

Understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice, through theoretical learning. This code emerged based on the significant statements that referred to the participants' awareness and understanding of how important, valuable, or beneficial it is to continuously practice formal mindfulness, when this awareness was based on what the participants had learned from their mindfulness teachers or through readings and theoretical learning.

Even though Sarah often integrates formal and informal mindfulness, she also said that she realizes how important it is for her to regularly and continuously practice mindfulness. Sarah said: "I realized that the regular practice [of mindfulness] was more, it was imperative by doing the workshop." This indicates that during the mindfulness workshop Sarah learned about the importance of regular practice of formal mindfulness. In addition to her practice, she became

more aware of the importance of continuous regular practice through what she theoretically learned during the workshops, because, as described earlier, she also found the workshop to be very helpful since the mindfulness instructors explained the theory behind mindfulness really well, and therefore, she learned why the practice was important. At the end of the interview, Sarah once again demonstrated her awareness of the necessity of regular practice of mindfulness by explaining her knowledge of how the brain can be re-trained through regular continuous practice of formal mindfulness.

Also participants who teach mindfulness, such as Catherine, spoke of how returning to the theoretical understanding of the need for continuous regular practice supported them in doing just that in their own practices. Catherine emphasized that as teachers they are committed to practice what they teach, and said her community of co-teachers motivates her to maintain her regular practice.

After Tim explained that making regular practice a habit (which refers to maintaining one's regular practice of formal mindfulness) has been very important for him, I asked him how he knew or realized that making it a habit was important. He explained that he read about the connection between habit formation through maintaining a regular and ongoing practice of meditation, and creating lasting and long-term desired neurobiological changes.

Participants had learned about the importance of continuous regular practice through workshops, readings, and teachings. This knowledge and awareness helped and motivated them to continue and maintain their regular practice of formal mindfulness as they considered long-term and continuous regular practice beneficial. Tim demonstrated his knowledge and awareness of the importance of persisting in regular practice of formal mindfulness in order to benefit from it in the long run by saying what he read about how regular practice creates changes in the brain.

Also, reflecting upon what Tim described throughout the interview, I think the same experiences that show a strong sense of discipline in him (as described earlier) also highlight his strong motivation to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. I think his determination to maintain that discipline, and to maintain a habit of regular practice, suggest that through his readings and theoretical learning, he had realized that during very busy times, maintaining his regular practice of formal mindfulness would actually benefit him through helping him feel calmer, and be better equipped to manage all the stress of a busy life. Through theoretical

learning and readings, the participants developed an awareness of the importance of regular and continuous practice, and this awareness enhanced their motivation for persistence.

Learning from lived experience. This theme refers to the participants' motivation to persist in a regular practice of mindfulness based on the benefits that they personally experience through practicing formal mindfulness. Participants who had attended a structured mindfulness program personally experienced benefits regarding noticeable improvement in their well-being during the time that they attended the structured mindfulness workshop, but all the participants also experienced significant benefits throughout the years that they continued practicing formal mindfulness.

This theme is different than the previous theme, labelled "Motivation to experience benefits," in two ways: 1. The benefits in this theme are those that participants personally experienced through practicing formal mindfulness and are motivated to maintain, whereas the benefits in the previous theme are mostly those that the participants hoped (anticipated) to experience either prior to starting their journey of mindfulness practice, or as they started practicing. In other words, the benefits in the previous theme highlighted the participants' expectations, whereas the benefits in this theme are what the participants personally experienced; 2. The awareness regarding one's need for self-care as well as the importance of continuous regular practice in this theme is more based on participants' personal experience, whereas the awareness in the previous theme was more based on theoretical learning, through readings or workshops.

The theme "Motivation to experience benefits" emerged out of the following codes: motivated by the benefits experienced, improvement in practice, motivated to sustain the experienced benefits in the long term, self-care awareness, and understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice when this understanding was more based on one's personal experience.

This theme refers to the participants' lived experience regarding practicing mindfulness in a way that has motivated the participants to persist in their regular practice of formal mindfulness.

Motivated by the benefits experienced. This code emerged based on what participants told me about the actual benefits that they have experienced through practicing formal mindfulness. The participants in this study directly and indirectly expressed their gratitude

towards the benefits of mindfulness as a source of motivation to continue practicing. In this regard, the interviews indicated that the benefits that the participants experience are greater than the initial difficulties and challenges of practicing formal mindfulness, and also the regular practice of formal mindfulness has been increasingly beneficial for the participants over the years.

The relevant statements from the interviews that led to forming this code indicated the following benefits experienced by the participants: self-awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, feeling more connected to oneself and to others, emotional regulation, reduced stress, feeling more present, preventing the accumulation of tension or stress, relaxing, regular self-care, feeling more connected to one's feelings and others' feelings, creating a balance between caring for oneself and caring for others, learning how to relate differently to difficult emotions and thoughts, experiencing living more consciously, realizing that practicing mindfulness may help one to be more efficient, and finding mindfulness realistic and empowering. The participants mentioned that mindfulness practice is not a "quick fix" but it helps people access their internal resources, manage their relationships, and set healthy boundaries. The participants find mindfulness helpful when medication or other treatments are not enough. According to what the participants described in the interviews, the benefits that they experience through practicing formal mindfulness motivate them to continue and maintain a regular practice.

In this regard, responding to my question "What motivates you to maintain your regular practice of formal mindfulness?" John said: "Just an appreciation of the benefits, the results, benefits of seeing more of what I'm experiencing outside and inside, [an] ability to calm my mind on a regular basis." He then explained how this practice has given him the ability to calm his mind in stressful situations. He said:

Also [in] a crisis situation, I know how to clear my mind. I just focus, and that gives me a lot of confidence as well as knowing that more and more I can deal with the types of events that used to be stressful and now they're much less, and a general feeling of being happier with life.

As John described, the benefits that he experiences, such as feeling more content with himself, feeling more connected to others, and experiencing more calmness and confidence, motivate him to continue his regular practice of formal mindfulness.

About the benefits she has experienced that motivate her to maintain her regular practice of formal mindfulness, Catherine said:

What motivates me is that ... I see benefits. I see myself relating to things or meeting things in my life in a different way off the mat. So, I'm motivated to sit down.... I see how that practice manifest[s] in other areas of my life off the mat, and so that's what motivates me to keep going and to keep practicing it.

Catherine also explained how practicing mindfulness has benefitted her in feeling more connected to her relationships and through improving her self-care and her efficacy in regards to being present with life difficulties and not getting “knocked over” by them.

Sarah, who has practiced mindfulness with more flexibility between formal and informal mindfulness, explained how practicing mindfulness has helped her extend her mindful awareness into her daily life and benefit from it through helping her to respect herself more, set boundaries in her relationships as needed, and reduce her stress. George explained that practicing mindfulness has helped him to become more aware of his feelings, including his chronic pain related to PTSD, and said that mindfulness has helped him to take better care of himself. Tim said: “Then there's the all the motivators which we've talked about, all of ... the pluses are the things that keep me coming back to my cushion.” Other participants also showed that as they found practicing mindfulness beneficial, they were more motivated to continue and maintain their regular practice. The benefits were related to improved well-being and reduced stress.

The participants' experiences included the benefits they experienced through practicing mindfulness that motivated them to continue and maintain their regular practice further. These benefits include self-awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, feeling more connected to oneself and to others, improved emotional regulation, reduced stress, feeling more present, preventing tension or stress from being accumulated, relaxing or feeling calm, regular self-care, creating balance between caring for oneself and caring for others, learning how to relate differently to difficult emotions and thoughts, improved efficiency, finding mindfulness realistic and empowering, managing one's relationships, as well as other benefits.

When John started practicing formal mindfulness regularly, he found it beneficial for his well-being, and therefore his motivation to continue practicing strengthened because he wanted to maintain the high level of his mindful awareness or even to improve it. This mindful awareness was associated with the benefits that he was experiencing such as a sense of calmness

and confidence in managing his thoughts and emotions, especially in a stressful situation. John described some of the benefits that he experienced:

During the formal mindfulness meditation, the positive experiences are... a deep sense of ease, of relaxation, mental ease, mental relaxation, sometimes great happiness and joy, sometimes connection with other people.... Sometimes it just feels awesome,... a sense of awe.... It just can be lovely. Now some of those continue during the day,... the ability to see much more of what's going on outside and inside, and the peace of mind, the contentment with myself, and my life, much more than it used to be the case, and my skill in being able to know this when I am worrying, experiencing anxiety, and knowing, having tools of how to switch those negative thoughts to positive thoughts. It just gives me huge confidence, huge confidence.

As John described, he experiences benefits such as calmness, contentment, confidence, continually learning about himself, living happily and healthfully, and meeting new friends and connecting with people who are interested in mindfulness. These positive experiences motivate him to continue his regular practice of formal mindfulness.

In one of the contextual stories that John told me during the interview, he explained how the mindfulness skills that he had developed through practicing formal mindfulness regularly helped him during a meeting at work to reduce and manage his stress and to actually stop physical pain that he was experiencing. Through this example, I learned that John was practicing formal mindfulness regularly during the time that he was still working full-time and had a busy schedule, as the benefits that he experienced by practicing mindfulness motivated him greatly to maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness, despite having a busy life.

George also said that practicing formal mindfulness helped him to manage his chronic pain and PTSD symptoms to the point that he was able to stop taking medication for a while. Improved well-being through practicing mindfulness, which has no harmful effects, as well as gaining a better understanding of challenges of other human beings have motivated him to continue practicing formal mindfulness. Also, he experiences practicing mindfulness as beneficial to his well-being, and this motivates him to persist in maintaining his regular practice of formal mindfulness. The benefits he experiences included feelings of calmness, being more present, feeling more connected to oneself and to others, and an improved ability to become more aware of and to manage his train of thought, his chronic pain, and difficult feelings such as

anger, sadness and frustration. George described his experience with practicing formal mindfulness as a “life-saving journey.”

Sarah said that practicing mindfulness helps her manage and reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, burnout, and stress related to different life challenges. She also said that practicing mindfulness helps her manage her relationships more effectively. These benefits motivate her to continue practicing mindfulness (integrating formal and informal style).

Catherine and Tim also explained how their experience with practicing mindfulness have been beneficial for their well-being and have improved their awareness, and that they are motivated to continue their practice, despite challenges and difficulties that may experience, such as not experiencing immediate results (as Catherine mentioned). Catherine said:

I find motivation in mindfulness because I think it's realistic.... It's responsibility, it's experiential responsibility, and I find that that's scary at times, because there is no magic ... But I also find ... it's empowering because within me is the ability to meet and handle the things that come up in my life.

Reflecting upon what she described, I would suggest that Catherine finds motivation in the process of practicing formal mindfulness regularly. Catherine realizes that people who practice mindfulness have the responsibility of managing and regulating their inner experience. For this reason, even though practicing mindfulness can be challenging at times, Catherine finds practicing mindfulness empowering as it improves her sense of efficacy, because ultimately she is the person who manages her state of “being” and mindful awareness.

Speaking about how her experience during the structured mindfulness workshop motivated her to continue practicing mindfulness, Catherine also added:

When I was brought into mindfulness ... I was very burnt out with some stuff with school. So I was feeling ... this disjuncture, and feeling my own anxieties in my life. And so it was a nice change to feel some calm and also to feel, there's some efficacy behind it too. Because I could sit, right, something that I felt “Okay, I can do this”.... Overall, I would say I had a really good experience, ... hence why I continued to practice and now teach mindfulness.

She also explained how practicing formal mindfulness helps her develop a greater awareness of herself, and also her relationship patterns. She said that even though practicing formal mindfulness includes facing difficult emotions and thoughts that come up, it is helpful to

observe them and to become more aware of the ways she can relate to her experiences, and therefore practice healthier ways of relating to her emotions and thoughts as well as healthier ways of relating to other people or situations.

Tim explained how persistence in practicing formal mindfulness can be beneficial and that benefitting from it can lead to more persistence:

It has a pay-off.... As you persist, there are significant changes in your mind and consequently in your behaviour, and how you interact with the world. So, the persistence ... becomes ... self-generating, in a sense that basically as you persist, there's [an] effect, and consequently you continue to persist because the effect is valuable.

About the benefits he experienced through practicing mindfulness, Tim explained how practicing mindfulness meditation has helped him to experience a sense of calm, and also to manage the stress that he had at work when he was a high school teacher much better than before as he learned to relate differently to challenging situations. He also mentioned experiencing non-judgment and compassion towards others, including his students, and towards himself. Tim added: "Once the benefits are experienced then you stay with it [practicing mindfulness] for the benefits."

George told me some stories about his previous occupation related to his chronic pain and PTSD symptoms. He explained how practicing formal mindfulness regularly helps him get off his medication by helping him become more aware of his train of thought and changing the course of his thoughts when he wants to, and these benefits motivate him to continue and maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness.

Noticing improvement in practice. This code was formed based on the significant statements that refer to two main points: gaining mastery and improvement in practicing mindfulness in the long term, as well as overcoming the initial challenges of practicing formal mindfulness in each session. As participants experienced progress in the long term regarding how well they could practice formal mindfulness and also how they experienced the teachings of mindfulness both during their meditation and during the day, it became easier for them to continue and maintain their regular practice.

John explained that as he has persisted in each of his practice sessions of formal mindfulness, he has noticed that the initial difficulty gradually dissipates. This persistence in each session has then extended to persistence in practicing mindfulness regularly and

consistently. For example, when discussing Catherine's experience of continuing her practice, after talking about the challenges that she had experienced regarding practicing formal mindfulness, she explained that she knew in order to sustain the benefits that she had experienced during the eight-week mindfulness program, she needed to continue practicing. She also said:

After the eight weeks, I was pretty eager to keep going and practicing.... I relate to the practice differently now than when I was starting in those eight weeks.... Now it's more of that welcome attitude to the practice.... So the quality of my practice ... has gotten better in a sense that ... I'm a lot more open to what's coming up.... My practice is much more accepting.

Regarding how practicing formal mindfulness more often can help one become better at experiencing informal mindfulness during the day, Tim said:

Being better at the formal mindfulness makes you better at the informal mindfulness.... That's almost a natural by-product, and that's kind of a conscious process. But at the same time, it's also through the process of formal meditation [that] it is increasingly easier to informally be mindful.

Also, connecting the progress that he experienced in general with the progress that he experienced while practicing, Tim said: "You become more efficient, your mind becomes less cluttered and you tend to procrastinate less, and somehow it all becomes easier, and practice is easier." Noticing improvements in their practice of formal mindfulness has helped the participants persist and maintain a regular practice.

Motivated to sustain and improve the benefits in the long term. This code emerged based on the statements and comments that indicated participants' motivation to sustain the benefits that they were already experiencing through practicing formal mindfulness, over time or in the long term. For example, Tim said:

In the sense that you know what the benefits have been and you know what those benefits increase could be, then you persist further in the mindfulness because you see their potential benefits, the potential of the benefits.... I think it heightens awareness, the more persistently over time you become increasingly aware of what's going on around you and what's going on inside you.

Paying attention to the importance of benefiting from mindfulness in the long term, Catherine said:

After the eight weeks, I wanted to keep practicing ... and I knew that the benefits, [the] things I had seen, and the work I had done in those eight weeks, would only last so long.... It is a practice; it's something that needs to happen regularly ... to sustain ... some of the things I had learned. So after the eight weeks, I was pretty eager to keep going and practicing.

The benefits that she had experienced during the eight-week program motivated Catherine to continue her practice regularly.

John explained that after the eight-week mindfulness program, he wanted the beneficial experience to continue and for this reason he asked his classmates if they were also interested in continuing, and they formed a group. The benefits that John had experienced during the time of the program motivated him to continue practicing regularly on his own as well. He said that prior to the program he had experienced “an abnormal amount of anxiety” for years, but then found mindfulness practices as a source of peace of mind; as a result, he wanted to sustain that sense of calmness that he experienced both during the meditation and during the day, through practicing mindfulness. He said: “I certainly experienced it when I was meditating, and tastes of it during the day, which I knew came from that, and I thought there's something there that I really want to continue.”

About the role of persistence in sustaining one's mindful awareness, through practicing formal mindfulness regularly, John said:

I like to use the analogy of going to the gym, so it's [a] regular work out. Instead of building muscles, we're building awareness, and persistence is totally required to practice mindfulness. If I don't persist with the formal meditation, my level of mindfulness goes, decreases over time, and I want it up here [showing it with his hands drawing a graph in the air], and I like it up here.

After I asked him a question of clarification to compare practicing regularly with not practicing on some days, he replied: “I want my mindfulness to get higher.” The benefits that the participants experience through practicing formal mindfulness motivate them to persist in practicing regularly in order to sustain and improve those benefits.

Self-care awareness. Self-care awareness in this study refers to the participants gaining awareness of their needs regarding their well-being and the importance of maintaining a regular self-care practice. Whereas self-compassion is the emotional and spiritual practice of showing understanding and compassion toward oneself, self-care awareness is the intellectual understanding of the necessity of engaging in regular self-care, with mindfulness practice being a key component. The participants in this study explained how their personal experience including life challenges and health-related challenges on one hand and, on the other hand, finding mindfulness practice beneficial led them to realize the importance of regular practice of formal mindfulness for self-care. For participants, this awareness has helped them in their persistence in practicing mindfulness regularly. This code emerged based on the statements that described: being aware of one's psychological needs, practicing mindfulness more when needed, and being aware of one's self-care needs; considering mindfulness as part of one's day, and as a regular and healthy self-care; feeling responsible towards one's child and therefore becoming more aware of one's own need for regular self-care; desire to prevent burnout due to accumulation of stress; desire to reduce stress and prevent further anxiety; responding to one's body's needs; and managing one's health challenges (e.g., PTSD, and chronic pain) and life challenges.

All of the participants expressed an interest in and awareness of the value and necessity of self-care when they talked about their motivation to practice mindfulness regularly. In this regard, Tim, Catherine, and John clearly spoke about formal mindfulness. For example, Catherine said:

Sitting, formally sitting, or doing the movements is integral to standing up for my self-care.... So I have to schedule it in, and make it a huge ... priority. This is really important for me in my life, so that's how I keep it as a regular part of my every day.

Every time I sit on the mat, it's committing to trying to just be as aware as I can of what's going on in my life, and it also gets into my values [of] being present, in the moment. I very much value self-care but I also very much struggle with it. So simply stated, sitting on that mat every day is my way of saying to myself that I care about myself, even though it's really hard sometimes to do it.

John said that after experiencing anxiety for years, he found formal mindfulness very helpful and beneficial, and his desire to prevent or manage possible future anxiety motivates him to maintain his regular practice of formal mindfulness. Sarah also said a few times that practicing

mindfulness helps her to reduce and manage her symptoms of depression and anxiety, and it also helps her to manage her relationships. Additionally, she emphasized that having a child is a strong motivation to want to practice and maintain a form of regular self-care to be able to take care of her child regularly. George explained how having PTSD and chronic pain motivates him to take care of himself by maintaining his regular practice of formal mindfulness and also helps him be mindful during the day.

Understanding the necessity of continuous regular practice through personal experience. When discussing the relationship of persistence to the components of mindfulness such as awareness of one's thoughts and emotions and acceptance, Tim said that persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly is important as it increases awareness and acceptance "in depth and degrees." Speaking about formal and informal mindfulness, Tim also demonstrated his understanding of the important role of regular practice of formal mindfulness in connection to improving the informal mindfulness during one's daily life. Tim said:

If we had an awareness muscle ... the formal meditation is exercising that muscle. So in a sense you're increasing over time your powers of awareness.... So in a sense the formal meditation is always a kind of a condensed, more intense practice session for your life, and so you step [away] from your cushion into your life, and you've been practicing awareness, acceptance, and non-judging... and you bring that from the cushion to your real life.

When explaining her experience regarding how mindfulness meditation helps reduce her stress and regulate her emotions, Sarah demonstrated her awareness and understanding of the importance of regular practice of mindfulness and said:

I'm aware that by practicing regularly I take care of myself better on a day to day basis.... I see it as part of my day.... I need my mind and my body to relax on a daily basis, and especially when things come up and they're heavy on emotions, so I'm stressed.... It's better to take care of them now than let them accumulate.

She also explained that because of the responsibility of having a child who needs regular care, in addition to her personal experience with accumulation of stress and having a "burnout" several times, she has realized how crucial regular self-care was to her. At that point, practicing mindfulness became the regular self-care practice that she found beneficial.

Catherine explained that practicing formal mindfulness regularly improves the acceptance that she described previously. Also, she explained that when she's practicing formal mindfulness regularly, she is more aware of her automatic patterns and she is less reactive.

Comparing practicing mindfulness to fitness exercises, she said:

You can't just go and do it one time and expect to see changes.... You have to show up constantly and consistently and a lot of times those changes are ... not guaranteed to happen right away, but you notice them organically rise. I definitely think that with the consistent practice [of formal mindfulness] you start to see the ways the practice is helping that awareness and attention and non-reactivity.

The participants in this study showed their awareness and understanding of the importance of regular practice of formal mindfulness, based on their personal experience.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this study, the term *persistence* (Williams, 2010) was adopted to refer to the regular and continuous practice of formal mindfulness. Based on the relevant literature described, persistence in practicing formal mindfulness was organized along three dimensions: frequency of practice (how many days per week), duration of each practice session (how many minutes per session), and longevity of practice (how many years one continues after an initial introduction, such as through participation in a structured workshop). The participants in this study discussed their experience with practicing formal mindfulness, the reasons they were motivated to start and continue this practice, some of the challenges they faced in regards to maintaining a regular practice, what helped them with their persistence (e.g., sources of motivation, actions, discipline, and practicing the Dharma), and how this persistence has been beneficial and valuable for them. In this section, I discuss the most salient topics that the participants elaborated on and emphasized in the interviews in regard to the research question and the sub-questions (e.g. motivation, action), and the connections that I found between some of these topics, based on the data analysis. I also discuss their connections to the literature.

Time for “Being”

This study explored the participants’ experience with persistence in practicing formal mindfulness. In this section, the terms formal mindfulness and meditation are used interchangeably. As one of the participants noticed in her interview, the term “persistence” implies overcoming some challenges on the way. In today’s modern world, where the majority of people have extremely busy lives and need to manage competing demands, maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness—making time for a silent meditation and actually stopping all actions on a regular basis—may be very challenging (Felder, Dimidjian, & Segal, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Moreover, perceiving this process to be difficult may be discouraging for some individuals (Rowe, Shepstone, Carnelley, Cavanagh, & Millings, 2016). In mindfulness programs such as MBCT, mindfulness teachers acknowledge that students may face some difficulties in their persistence in practicing formal mindfulness at home every day. They take some time during the class to discuss these issues, and to collaboratively support the students. Felder et. al. (2012) used a case illustration to show how some individuals who have very busy lives struggle with finding the time to practice formal mindfulness on a daily basis.

All of the participants in this study mentioned or discussed the issue of time. Even the participants who were retired at the time of the interview and mentioned having enough time to meditate on most days described the challenges of busy lives. While they reported having very busy schedules when working full time, they said they still have busy schedules on some days, with competing demands or tasks requiring their time and attention. Some participants discussed the matter of “time” directly, and I learned about the other participants’ relationships to time mostly through the contextual information embedded in their stories about practicing mindfulness initially and over the years.

Kabat-Zinn (2004) addressed this issue, and recognized time as one of the “biggest stressors” of today’s society. He realized that it may be a challenge for someone who is feeling overwhelmed by the pressures of time to take time away from the tasks they “have to do” in order to practice stillness. Nevertheless, Kabat-Zinn (2004) suggested that commitment to take some time to practice mindfulness, even for a short amount of time, helps people experience more awareness and fullness in their moments when they go back to continue their daily tasks. He added: “So if you are pressed for time, being in the present gives you more time by giving you back the fullness of each moment that you have” (Kabat-Zinn, 2004, p. 350).

The findings of this study suggest that one of the main reasons individuals who were successful and persistent in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness despite having very busy schedules, was that they made the practice of formal mindfulness a priority. Therefore, when on busy days, they had to take care of other tasks with competing demands, the participants in this study still made time for their practice of formal mindfulness, because the practice was a priority for them. Adjusting their schedule in a way that would allow them to make time for their practice of formal mindfulness helped them persist in maintaining a regular practice.

What motivates a very busy person to prioritize sitting in silence and practicing “non-doing” for twenty to forty-five minutes? In the next section, based on the findings of this study, I discuss what helps with persistence in practicing formal mindfulness both in terms of personal motivation and necessary actions.

Sources of Motivation

A few studies in the empirical literature have explored motivation or reasons for practicing formal mindfulness (Pepping, Walters, Davis, & O’Donovan, 2016; Shapiro, 1992). The findings of this study, guided by the research question and the sub-questions, suggest the

following points in regard to the motivation of participants for practicing formal mindfulness regularly and persisting with regular practice. These main points are: life challenges, benefits of mindfulness and improvement, and motivation over the years.

Life challenges. The interviews in this study referred to how aversive life circumstances (life challenges) may actually contribute to a person's motivation to start a self-care practice such as meditation. It can also serve as an ongoing source of motivation, when individuals remember what life was like without mindfulness. This is in line with findings of a recent study (Pepping et al., 2016) that explored motivation for starting and continuing meditation. Pepping et al. (2016) found that for the majority of the participants in their study, reducing emotional distress was one of the main reasons for continuing formal mindfulness practice.

For some, formal mindfulness has come to be viewed as a regular self-care practice. The participants' initial motivation for practicing mindfulness developed following their previous life challenges, including experiences of burn-out, stress, anxiety, depression, challenging relationships, PTSD symptoms, and chronic pain. For most of the participants, aversive life experiences were a strong source of motivation to pay much more attention to their self-care, and led them to place more value on the practice of mindfulness. As they learned about mindfulness through readings and workshops, they became more aware of the importance and necessity of a consistent and regular practice. They learned both through theoretical teachings and their own personal experience that in order to optimally benefit from their mindfulness practice, it was important to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness.

For the participants in this study, the sources of motivation to start practicing formal mindfulness were initially related to finding a new healthy way to manage and reduce the stress related to some difficult life experiences. As mentioned, these life challenges included symptoms of burn-out, anxiety, depression, PTSD, chronic pain. They also had heard or read that it would be good for their well-being, calmness, and relationships to practice mindfulness, but my interpretation after analyzing the interviews is that the bigger impetus was life challenges that motivated them to start searching for a self-care practice, and to start learning and practicing formal mindfulness.

Benefits of mindfulness and improvements. This study suggests that as individuals continue their practice, improvements in one's life, finding it beneficial for one's well-being relationships, etc.), and improvement in the practice of mindfulness itself may serve as long-term

sources of motivation. The findings of this study suggest that as the participants found practicing formal mindfulness beneficial in different areas of their lives, including well-being and relationships, they were encouraged to maintain a regular practice despite the challenges of having a busy schedule.

Some of the benefits of practice that served as sources of motivation for the participants were improvement in well-being, reduction in stress, increased calmness, the discovery of inner resources, improvement in relationships, and increases in mindful awareness both during the formal practice and during the day. Most of these have been reported in the literature (see Baer, Carmody, & Hunsinger, 2012; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Keune & Forintos, 2010). The present study suggests that awareness of these benefits, as well as personally experiencing them even during the first few weeks of a mindfulness workshop, can become a strong source of motivation supporting persistence for individuals who want to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. Also, this study provides a thick description of how these benefits support one's persistence in this journey through discovery of one's inner resources, for example.

As they practiced formal mindfulness regularly, participants experienced mindful awareness that promoted calmness, and helped them reduce and manage their stress-related symptoms. The interviews in this study suggested that the participants' major source of motivation after practicing for a few weeks or more was their desire to sustain this mindful awareness and the myriad of benefits to their well-being that resulted from their practice.

Motivation over the years. Shapiro (1992) recognized three goals or reasons for meditation: self-regulation, self-liberation, and self-exploration. He suggested that individuals experience a shift on a continuum (from self-regulation to self-liberation to self-exploration) over the years, meaning that the more experienced they are in meditation, the more they move towards self-liberation.

I observed that even though finding mindfulness practice beneficial for their well-being was in line with participants' initial expectations, there was a slight shift in motivation between the time the participants decided to begin practicing and the time of the interview, which was a few years for some participants and more than 10 years of practice for others. At the beginning of their practice their motivation was more focused on reducing stress and managing the aversive conditions such as pain, anxiety, and PTSD. This is in line with self-regulation being the reason

for meditation (Shapiro, 1992). After years of practice, the participants in this study seemed to be more focused on self-awareness that they developed through practicing mindful awareness. This is in line with self-exploration (Shapiro, 1992) being the reason for meditation. The participants in this study also spoke about the value of mindfulness practice in relation to inner peace and nonattachment. These are more consistent with the self-liberation goal (Shapiro, 1992).

Actions

The interviews of this study suggest that regular scheduling, prioritizing one's practice of formal mindfulness, and recording the time duration of one's practice every time are some of the actions that individuals can take to maintain their practice of formal mindfulness. Another activity that helps to keep practice as a priority is the setting aside of a quiet and private meditation room for practice at home.

The participants explained how they overcame the challenge of busy times. Tim, who was very successful at maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness when he was working full-time, explained that having strong self-discipline and considering the practice of formal mindfulness as an integral part of his life helped him in this regard. Catherine also said that her practice was an important and valuable part of her life, and therefore she made time for her practice despite having an extremely busy lifestyle.

Typically, mindfulness teachers recommend making time for a regular practice of formal mindfulness at home (Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). The actions participants of this study took included scheduling a regular practice, using reminders to follow their schedule, recording their practice time, engaging in relevant activities for mental and physical preparation (e.g., reading and writing about mindfulness, exercising or practicing yoga before sitting meditation, listening to relaxing music prior to the practice), and creating space and appropriate conditions for practice. Creating space for mindfulness meditation through designating a time and a quiet place is typically recommended by mindfulness teachers (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

Regarding preparation, in the Buddhist teachings, some basic practices are considered preparatory phases that prepare a person for more advanced practices (Lomas & Jnanavaca, 2015). Similarly, in this study, some participants practiced yoga before their sitting meditation, but preparation also included other activities such as reading and writing about mindfulness,

lighting a candle, bowing, and listening to relaxing music prior to one's formal mindfulness practice.

The rituals described above—lighting candles, bowing, and listening to relaxing music—are commonly used in formal mindfulness practice. However, one of the contributions of this study is illuminating the role of these and other forms of mental and physical preparation as support for persistence in formal practice. In addition to the aforementioned rituals, reading and writing about mindfulness, bowing prior to practicing any form of formal mindfulness, or practicing movement prior to sitting meditation or body scan were all cited as helpful for preparing to engage in formal mindfulness in a calmer and more focused state. This study suggests that feeling prepared for this practice may support individuals' persistence in maintaining a regular practice, as practitioners are more likely to be present and more focused during the practice of formal mindfulness, and their motivation to continue the practice regularly is enhanced.

The findings of this study also refer to some other perspectives, behaviours, and experiences that are connected to both motivation and taking action. They include discipline, commitment, and staying connected to the mindfulness community.

Discipline and Commitment

One of the findings of this study refers to how having strong self-discipline is connected to persistence with practicing formal mindfulness, when it is a priority for the person. As Tim's interview suggests, when life is very busy and maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness may be challenging, having strong self-discipline becomes critical. With regard to the discipline of practicing formal mindfulness, making the time to practice on a daily basis, and preferably early in the morning, Jon Kabat-Zinn explained that having a daily discipline and a commitment to getting up early helps people meditate regardless of their temporary mood and whether or not they want to practice on any particular morning. The practice of "non-doing" and waking up early for it requires remembering the value of wakefulness and becoming more aware of our automatic patterns. This daily discipline reminds us that "there is far more to life than getting things done" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 181). During busy and challenging times when there is a lot to be done, and one's mind is in "turmoil," it may actually be even more beneficial to have the discipline to practice formal mindfulness in order to experience the moments more meaningfully, and to "navigate" through challenging life circumstances (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

As some of the participants spoke about their discipline, they also used terms such as “ritual” and “routine” to refer to maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (2005) explained that mindfulness is not a routine, and it is actually the opposite of routine. Perhaps, the word does not fit for mindfulness because mindfulness is a practice based on cultivating awareness and consciousness—including becoming aware of old routines and automatic patterns of the mind. However, the participants seemed to be using the term in a different manner; when they spoke of “daily routine,” “ritual,” and “habit formation” they seemed to indicate that they considered their practice of formal mindfulness “an integral part of their life” on a daily basis, and had strong discipline for it. Tim emphasized strong discipline, and John showed his statistical recording of the duration and frequency of practice throughout the years. Other participants also explained how commitment and having a discipline has been important in their persistence with practicing formal mindfulness.

Motivation for commitment. In addition to finding mindfulness beneficial, the participants’ commitment to regular practice of formal mindfulness was related to discovering that mindfulness practice was in line with their values, beliefs, and intentions. For example, George said that this practice was consistent with his value of “do no harm.” Catherine explained that reminding herself of the values that are fortified by her practice, such as self-care, relationship, and human interconnectedness, helped her maintain her regular practice despite the challenges (e.g., lack of time on busy days, and difficult emotions and thoughts that still showed up).

Clinical psychologists and mindfulness teachers have acknowledged that for many mindfulness students, emotional suffering or pain motivates them to explore and start practicing mindfulness to improve their well-being (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Among the research studies that have explored motivation for initiating and continuing formal mindfulness practice, the reasons cited include reducing emotional distress, and enhancing emotional regulation and well-being (Pepping, Walters, Davis, & O’Donovan, 2016). Shapiro (1992) cited additional goals and intentions for practicing mindfulness, including self-regulation, self-exploration, and self-liberation. A contribution of the present study is its finding that values and intentions regarding practicing formal mindfulness such as these can strengthen commitment for persisting with maintaining a regular practice.

Steps following commitment. This inquiry suggests that one's commitment to practicing formal mindfulness regularly needs to be followed by taking action, both of which are necessary to persist with practicing formal mindfulness regularly. In order to bring that commitment to life, individuals need to schedule their practice and follow through on their schedules with a strong sense of discipline.

Reflecting on what participants described, I found connections between their commitment, discipline, prioritizing formal mindfulness practice, and taking necessary actions. The steps that participants took included forming a habit of regular practice, scheduling it regularly, following one's schedule for this practice, finding new ways for making time for meditation even during busy times, as well as creating an appropriate environment for one's practice.

Actions described earlier are connected to the commitment that individuals have for maintaining a regular self-care through practicing formal mindfulness. Commitment needs to be followed by actively taking the necessary steps. Considering formal mindfulness as self-care practice, one needs to create space for it, which includes making time and preparing an appropriate place for it. For some of the participants, creating an appropriate place for practice included finding a quiet room at home and creating a calming environment. This strategy was accompanied by engaging in relevant activities that prepare one's mind to practice mindfulness. For example, as John explained, he prepared himself for meditation by reading and writing about mindfulness, practicing yoga before his sitting meditation, lighting a candle, and putting on meditation music. Eliminating distractions and creating an appropriate atmosphere and environment for practice are examples of preparing oneself for practicing formal mindfulness.

Reflecting on the interviews in this study, my interpretation is that other than preparing one's mind to focus on mindfulness, engaging in relevant activities such as reading and writing about mindfulness, and creating an inviting place for meditation, may also increase a person's motivation to maintain a regular practice. This is an example of when actions and motivation for meditation can be connected. As described earlier, Buddhist literature has described other forms of mental preparation, but this study highlights the role of relevant activities prior to one's formal mindfulness practice that can support one's persistence with maintaining a regular practice.

Another example of actions that help with persistence is recording or journaling one's practice. John explained that he has been carefully recording the statistics of his practice sessions

on a daily and monthly basis. This way he has monitored the duration and frequency of his regular practice of formal mindfulness carefully over the years. Recording and monitoring the frequency, duration, and longevity of his practice has strengthened his motivation for further persistence. In some mindfulness programs (Segal, William, & Teasdale, 2002) and research studies (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Crane et al., 2014), the instructors encourage the participants to record their daily practice of formal mindfulness. In addition to satisfying the purpose of a research study examining the relation between frequency and duration of one's practice to the outcome, it may be helpful for the person to monitor their own self-care behaviour and how they can persist in maintaining a regular practice at home.

Mindfulness Community

Another element contributing to one's persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness includes staying connected to the mindfulness community. A community of individuals with similar values and practice, or "Sangha," is one of the core components of the Buddhist tradition. It refers to the community of followers and supporters of Buddha, and it is one of the three "jewels," Buddha, Dharma, Sangha (Morris, 2008). Sangha support in Buddhism is considered valuable in regard to practicing and living the teachings of mindfulness. It provides spiritual support, guidance, and assistance, as well as comfort and connection. For example, individuals may look up to more experienced members of the group when they have a question, or need a reminder about the teachings (Phillips, 2009). Mindfulness practitioners today may benefit from the support of their community when they join a mindfulness group or groups with similar values, regardless of their religious or spiritual background. They practice mindfulness meditation as a group, and can continue learning about mindfulness through their meetings and discussions.

Most participants spoke about staying connected to a mindfulness community as an important part of their journey regarding their motivations for practicing formal mindfulness and for continuing their practice. Some participants, such as John and Catherine, talked extensively about the role of the community, stating that it motivated them to persist in their practice. John clearly emphasized the importance of community support, and explained how he took initiative to form groups in addition to joining groups and communities that already existed. Some participants mentioned the support of the mindfulness community as playing an important role in their learning about mindfulness, and also motivating them to continue their practice.

Participants who have become mindfulness teachers also mentioned staying connected to the community of mindfulness teachers, saying this has been helpful and encouraging for them.

This study suggests that staying connected to the community has two dimensions. For one, it is an example of demonstrating initiative and taking action. For example, John formed groups with his classmates, in addition to finding and joining other mindfulness organizations throughout the years. Other participants also explained how they stayed connected to the mindfulness community through finding and attending retreats, follow-up meetings, and mindfulness events and joining community mindfulness groups, societies, and gatherings that have regular group meditation.

The other dimension of the role of community is that it can support one's persistence by strengthening one's motivation for regular practice. When one joins a group and attends his or her meetings and practices monthly or even weekly, it is more likely to follow a structure and schedule in regard to one's practice. Group participants feel the added push of attending the pre-scheduled event, and being beholden to other group members. The benefits of community extend beyond the initial connection as well. Staying connected to the mindfulness community, and having the support of a group after completing the first structured program, can be encouraging and strengthen one's motivation to persist in practicing formal mindfulness regularly.

The participants in this study explained staying connected to the mindfulness community promoted feelings of human interconnectedness and motivated them to continue their practice. Catherine was also inspired to see that others who also had challenges and busy lives maintained a regular practice. She said she learned from those members in the community who were more experienced and had been practicing formal mindfulness for longer.

Flexibility in Practice

One of the surprises for me in this study was the role of flexibility—especially in form and style—and how important it was for some participants. Sarah stated this helped her to maintain her regular practice. In her interview she clarified how she distinguishes “formal mindfulness” as opposed to “informal mindfulness.” Other participants also mentioned flexibility, describing how they integrated more freestyle movement into their practice or sometimes broke down long periods of meditation into a few shorter blocks.

It was interesting to note that participants who found mindful movement helpful were the ones who also said they benefitted from short periods of meditation in addition to their regular

long periods of meditation. In describing the reasons for both of these preferences, participants mentioned time restriction, fatigue, and physical conditions such as pain. Mindful yoga and mindful walking have very gentle movements, and some of the participants described these as helping when suffering from physical pain. The findings of this study suggest that in cases when rigid conventional rules of formal mindfulness may make it difficult for some individuals to persist in maintaining a regular practice, some flexibility in practice, such as incorporating movement and the integration of formal and informal mindfulness, can make the maintenance of a regular practice more sustainable.

Mindful movement turned out to be more central to the practice of participants than I had anticipated. I previously thought that the stillness in practicing body scan or sitting meditation might be more in line with the purpose of practicing “non-doing,” and might create more space for observing one’s inner experience of “being.” But four out of five participants said they found mindful walking and or mindful yoga and mindful movements very helpful, and this motivated them to persist in their practice of formal mindfulness. Finding mindful movement beneficial enhanced the participants’ motivation to continue their practice, and this helped them with their persistence in maintaining a regular practice.

Mindful movement. The participants in this study discussed how they benefitted from incorporating movement into their mindfulness practice both formally and informally. The formal style was through mindful *hatha* yoga, which is also practiced in some mindfulness-based programs such as MBSR (Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, & Sephton, 2009).

In regards to mindful yoga, Kabat-Zinn (2004) reminded us that there are different ways of being present in one’s body to promote change and healing through mindful awareness. One of the most transformative ways that is also gentle and pleasant is *hatha yoga*, which consists of gentle and slow stretching and strengthening exercises. Mindful *hatha* yoga, is one of the forms of formal mindfulness practiced in Kabat-Zinn’s stress reduction clinic. He says that many people prefer it to sitting and doing a body scan, as they enjoy the relaxation, flexibility, and freedom to move after several weeks of practicing stillness. The benefits of practicing mindful yoga go beyond the benefits of exercising or relaxing one’s body. It is much more than exercise. It is another way of practicing mindfulness, as one learns about and experiences oneself as a whole, regardless of one’s level of fitness (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). “Done mindfully, it is meditation just as much as the sitting or the body scan is” (Kabat-Zinn, 2004, p. 96).

“We practice the yoga with the same attitude that we bring to the sitting meditation or the body scan” (Kabat-Zinn, 2004, p. 96). Kabat-Zinn (2004) explained the purpose of practicing mindful yoga as not forcing or pushing one’s body (mindful yoga is about being present with one’s body), practicing and maintaining present-moment mindful awareness, accepting one’s body, and being patient with oneself, regardless of one’s level of fitness or physical condition. Kabat-Zinn (2004) clarified the difference between mindful yoga and other exercises:

This is a far cry from most exercise and aerobic classes and even many yoga classes, which only focus on what the body is doing. These approaches tend to emphasize progress. They like to push, push, push. Not much attention is paid to the art of non-doing and nonstriving in exercise classes, nor to the present moment for that matter, nor to the mind. In exercise that is totally body-oriented, there tends to be little explicit care given to the domain of being ... it is a lot harder to find (being) if the atmosphere and attitude are diametrically opposed to such experiences. (p. 96)

In a study by Carmody and Baer (2008), practice time for mindful yoga showed significant correlation with mindfulness skills and improved well-being, more so than doing a body scan or sitting meditation. The researchers speculated that because the participants practiced body scans for the first two weeks of the programs, they may have come to mindful yoga with a higher level of mindfulness.

It may also be easier for participants to bring mindful attention to the body while it is moving or stretching as the yoga requires, than while it is still as in the body scan or sitting meditation, and this feature may also facilitate the transfer of the resultant mindfulness into everyday life (Carmody & Baer, 2008, p. 31).

Theory and Practice

According to the interviews in this study, the contributors to persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly can be divided into a theoretical aspect and a practical aspect. These two aspects can also be described as two phases, because initially what the participants learned theoretically (through workshops, programs and readings) about mindfulness and its potential benefits motivated them to start practicing formal mindfulness. This theoretical learning guided them to become more aware of the importance of self-care, and the role of mindfulness practice in that regard. This self-care awareness, guided by theory, motivated them to practice

formal mindfulness regularly and to continue. Then their personal experience with the practice of formal mindfulness inspired them further to persist and maintain a regular practice.

All the participants in this study showed awareness about the role and importance of continuous regular self-care, but they also learned that mindfulness as a self-care practice is not a “quick fix,” as Catherine said. The participants explained that consistent and regular practice is needed to create lasting changes in the brain and in one’s behaviour and well-being. My interpretation is that their awareness about the importance of regular self-care, as well as their knowledge about how regular continuous meditation is important for creating lasting changes, motivated them to persist in practicing formal mindfulness regularly. The participants gained this awareness in two ways: 1) through theoretical learning at workshops and programs as well as their own readings, and 2) through practice and personal experience.

According to what they described in the interviews, their theoretical learnings, which were through workshops and readings, included learning about the brain changes and re-wiring that results from consistent and continuous regular practice. This enabled them to become more aware of their habits of mind: their trains and patterns of thought, emotions, and behaviour. With improved mindful awareness, they were able to change these habits and form new healthier behaviour.

Buddhist teachings (Dharma) are typically a key component of structured mindfulness programs (Monteiro, 2015), and in most structured mindfulness programs theoretical teaching/ psychoeducation and practice are considered integral components (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Although many of these programs are secular and presented for clinical purposes, these teachings constitute a theoretical foundation for the practice and are typically included as a psychoeducational component.

Participants’ practical learning took place through their direct experience practicing mindfulness, through noticing the evolution of their practice, as well as changes in their well-being. Tim and John both used the analogy of “peeling the layers of an onion” to show their understanding of why continuous practice of mindfulness is important and beneficial, especially regarding the mindful awareness that a person gains, which improves over time. Speaking about the benefits of practicing formal mindfulness, the participants also demonstrated their understanding and awareness of the role of continuous and regular practice in order to sustain the benefits regarding well-being. They compared it to physical exercise and running, as it needs to

take place on a regular basis. They characterized formal mindfulness as not only a self-care practice, but a mental practice with the potential of improving a person's psychological well-being. The participants demonstrated they had taken the necessary actions to act upon this understanding.

One's personal experience with practicing formal mindfulness includes the experience while meditating, as well as the overall experience throughout the day and over time during a period of maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness. Participants' experiences included feeling calm and peaceful, increased well-being, improvements in relationships, and feeling more connected to themselves and to others.

In addition to self-care awareness and considering mindfulness as a self-care practice, the interviews in this study suggest that after being inspired through theoretical learning, one's personal practice with formal mindfulness may contribute to solidifying persistence. This dimension encompasses practicing the core components of mindfulness such as self-compassion, non-judgment, acceptance, and nonattachment—even when a person may not see immediate benefits from formal mindfulness. The results of a recent experiment also suggest that self-compassion may improve one's willingness to engage in further mindfulness training or practice after one's first experience (Rowe, Sheptstone, Carnelley, Cavanagh, & Millings, 2016).

Dharma and Persistence

This study suggests that while there are actions which contribute to persistence, such as creating space for practice and scheduling, the core teachings of mindfulness Dharma itself provide great resources to support a continuous practice of formal mindfulness. Dharma refers to teachings of the Buddha and consists of the "Four Noble Truths," which explain the root of human suffering as being related to the habit of clinging or attachment to one's inner experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2016).

The teachings of the Buddha are central to mindfulness traditions and include non-judgment, nonattachment (Eriksen & Ditrich, 2015), acceptance, and compassion (Rosenzweig, 2013). Each of these may be very helpful in the face of distractions, frustrations, and challenges of practicing formal mindfulness. In a sense these teachings are antidotes to discouragement when experiencing an obstacle; when a person remembers and practices nonattachment and self-compassion, it supports persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness.

Practicing mindfulness is about becoming more aware of and accepting one's experiences as opposed to suppressing or avoiding them (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). Because of this, another potential obstacle to persistence in regular formal mindfulness practice is the difficult thoughts and emotions, as well as sensations such as physical pain, that may arise as one practices silence and stillness. Observing and letting all kinds of thoughts, emotions, and memories come up in the process of silent awareness may be emotionally challenging and difficult at times. As Catherine and Tim mentioned, it is for this reason that meditation can continue to be a challenge at times, even after years of practice.

When Tim started meditation in his early twenties at a monastery, he was not comfortable with what he experienced while meditating. After three weeks of meditation, he left the monastery and did not continue his practice. However, about ten years ago, Tim learned about formal mindfulness through reading about Jon Kabat-Zinn's work and made a conscious decision to practice formal mindfulness regularly. What he described about his life experience around that time suggests he had a different perspective and a greater motivation for practicing formal mindfulness. He has consistently maintained his regular practice since then. Tim mentioned that sometimes he does not like what he observes or feels while meditating, but that over the past ten years, these challenges never have gotten to the point of disrupting his regular practice.

What helped Catherine in managing the difficult emotions and thoughts that came up during her meditation was practicing self-compassion, acceptance of her experiences, and nonattachment to any expectations regarding specific outcomes. Also, her understanding that formal mindfulness is not a "quick fix" and that it will not lead to pure positive experiences helped her find meaning in her commitment to a life-long practice. Catherine explained that she realized through her personal practice that meditating for 30 minutes does not always lead to ultimate peace, and total absence of any stress and all difficult emotions. Catherine's descriptions here, and in other parts of her interview, indicate that through letting go of expectations, and trusting the process, she has experienced beneficial changes that have motivated her to maintain a regular practice. Letting go which can also be called "nonattachment" is one of the core components of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), and it is part of practicing the Dharma. Consistent with the core teachings of mindfulness, which include nonattachment or letting go, Catherine has learned to let go of her expectations regarding outcomes of practicing formal mindfulness. Practicing nonattachment to one's inner experience includes nonattachment to

one's judgments, thoughts, and emotions, which may include nonattachment to one's specific expectations.

What is the purpose of practicing regularly for years, if we need to let go of our expectations regarding the outcomes? As the findings of this study suggest, individuals practice formal mindfulness for the value it has for them, as they have experienced positive outcomes, and have found this practice beneficial for their well-being. Nevertheless, practicing nonattachment to one's expectations regarding specific outcomes of practice can be very helpful to one's persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness.

As most participants in this study mentioned, difficult experiences that one may have during practicing formal mindfulness, such as feelings of frustration, grief, or anger associated with memories of a trauma or expectations and judgments that one may have towards oneself or others, may not always disappear by practicing formal mindfulness. However, paying attention to the core teachings of mindfulness such as nonattachment and compassion may offer a deeper insight that helps with navigating through those obstacles.

Formal mindfulness practice involves observing and becoming more aware of all kinds of thoughts and emotions non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). The Dharma encourages acceptance, as opposed to avoidance (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012), of those experiences. This connects to *living the Dharma*, which means practicing and living the core teachings of mindfulness such as awareness, acceptance, compassion, non-judgment, and nonattachment. When a person encounters difficult inner experience—for example, difficult emotions, thoughts, memories, and judgments—during their practice of formal mindfulness, it is helpful to practice acceptance, self-compassion, and nonattachment to one's expectations regarding specific outcomes. These core teachings can be beneficial not only to the person's well-being, for example through practicing self-compassion (Germer, 2009; Germer & Neff, 2013), but also to help maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness, and not be discouraged by the difficulties.

For all the participants in this study, the benefits of practicing formal mindfulness regularly have been a great source of motivation to persist and maintain their regular practice of formal mindfulness, even though mindfulness also includes the practice of nonattachment. "Nonattachment" is one of the core teachings of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). It is about not clinging to mental phenomena such as specific thoughts, judgments, and interpretations, and it

involves letting go (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) of one's expectations regarding specific outcomes of the mindfulness practice itself.

Considering that this study focused on persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly, and that finding this practice beneficial was one of the major contributors to persistence, the question arises: How do we engage persistently in this practice, being passionate about its benefits, and still maintain an attitude of nonattachment?

Reflecting on the literature and findings of this study, I believe practicing nonattachment is not necessarily in contradiction with being strongly motivated to engage in regular formal practice. One can both strive for certain goals and be nonattached to outcomes. For example, Catherine discussed how she practiced nonattachment, yet also explained how she was motivated to maintain her regular practice of formal mindfulness as she experienced the benefits of this practice.

This study suggests that more important than the particular actions or strategies that individuals can take in order to ensure they practice formal mindfulness regularly, the most encouraging and helpful component contributing to one's persistence may be discovered in the Dharma itself, which offers a reminder that mindfulness is not about achievement, or performance, or getting somewhere specific. The core teachings of mindfulness such as self-compassion, and nonattachment offer key resources to individuals for finding mindfulness more helpful when facing obstacles on the way of persistence. This offers practical help in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness. Reflecting on the wisdom of nonattachment, one can let go of specific challenges and expectations, resuming one's regular practice after encountering an obstacle.

Implications

Previous research has highlighted the importance of regular and long-term practice of formal mindfulness (Crane et al., 2014; Luders et al., 2009). However, there has been little evidence presented on what helps with persistence in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness. The findings of this study offer suggestions to individuals who are struggling to maintain a regular, long-term practice of formal mindfulness. It is also useful to teachers supporting students in this same quest.

This study explored what contributes to persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly, including what motivated the participants to continue and maintain a regular practice,

as well as the actions that the participants took in this regard. The study also produced some novel findings regarding flexibility of practice. It showed that while discipline and commitment in developing and maintaining habits of regular practice according to organized schedules are extremely helpful for some individuals, others find it helpful to suspend preordained structures and protocols when they are unfeasible. In these cases, practitioners adapted to the circumstances at hand in a manner that sustained their practices in the long term. This suggests that strategies for maintaining a regular practice throughout the years may depend on the unique needs of each person.

This study also showed how the central theme of compassion found in Buddhist teachings plays a role in supporting persistence in formal practice. The practice of self-compassion, which entails expressing understanding and kindness towards oneself when one is suffering, is a skill recommended to clients of therapy to support themselves in between sessions, and it has also been endorsed to develop a mindful self-compassion program (Germer & Neff, 2013). In this study, participants reported on how self-compassion helped them to persist in regular practice despite an inclination to discontinue based on self-critique of their progress.

In relation to issues of counselling practice, the findings of this study can be helpful for counsellors and psychotherapists who want to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. It can be also helpful for psychotherapists who hold mindfulness workshops or practice mindfulness with their clients. It is common for people engaged in mindfulness practice to experience difficulty in maintaining their home practice (Felder, Dimidjian, & Segal, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2004). As a result, learning more about persistence in formal practice and about the challenges involved will prepare counsellors, psychotherapists, and mindfulness teachers to anticipate the obstacles when working with clients and also help them support clients engaging with persistence in order to reap the benefits of continuous practice.

This study also has implications for psychotherapists and counsellors (Germer, 2013) interested in developing regular long-term personal practice of formal mindfulness, and applying mindfulness in psychotherapy. The therapist's personal practice can be helpful to their self-care (Fulton, 2013; Keane, 2014), and it can also enhance the therapeutic relationship (Hick, 2008). Mindfulness may help therapists in tailoring the therapy according to each client's individual needs, because a mindful therapist can be more present with the client, connecting to the client's experience in a non-judgmental way (Hick, 2008; Siegel, 2010).

Some therapists who find it helpful to introduce and teach mindfulness in therapy sessions (Pollak, 2013) may hear from their clients that although they are interested in mindfulness, they find it hard to practice regularly on their own at home. The findings of this study can help therapists support their clients in maintaining a regular practice of mindfulness if they are interested and also in maintaining other forms of regular self-care practice. They usually begin with a focus on psychoeducation about mindfulness and how the human mind wanders to thoughts about the past and future. It is helpful for the counsellor or psychotherapist to normalize this mind wandering for the clients so that the clients do not feel that they have failed if they are not fully present each moment during the meditation (Brown, Marquis, & Guilfrida, 2013). Brown et al. (2013) suggested that it is also important to inform clients about the research behind the outcomes of mindfulness meditation, and the mainstream literature offering guidance regarding how to practice mindfulness (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Many individuals who find mindfulness beneficial may find it challenging to continue the practice on their own. The findings of this study have implications for therapists and mindfulness teachers because it provides information about what may help clients who are interested in practicing mindfulness at home maintain a regular practice on their own over a period of years. Also, it is helpful for therapists who are interested in maintaining a regular self-care practice of their own.

Finally, the findings of this study may have implications for all individuals including psychotherapists, counsellors, clients, and students who may have attended a mindfulness program and are interested in continuing, but have experienced some challenges on the way with their persistence. The findings of this study suggest ways to sustain their motivation and also point to some actions they may take in this regard, such as creating appropriate conditions for practice.

Limitations

It should be remembered that this qualitative study set out to learn about the experience of persistence among practitioners of mindfulness, and thus it does not suggest any cause and effect relationship. That said, there are some limitations to the study.

One limitation has to do with one participant's understanding of the distinction between formal and informal practice. Although participants were screened rigorously (Appendix H) and reminded of the definition of formal mindfulness both during the screening and before starting the interview, it became clear part way into her interview that one participant had a slightly

different understanding of formal mindfulness. She integrated formal and informal mindfulness more often than other participants. As discussed earlier, it was determined that her results were worth including because despite her idiosyncratic definition, she displayed the key characteristics of eligible participants as outlined in Appendix A.

Considering the qualitative nature of this study, and the time frame that I had for this study, I selected five participants. However, a larger sample size in future studies may contribute more to the findings, as some aspects of the participants' experience regarding what helps them to persist in sustaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness or any self-care practice, may differ from others, based on individual needs and life circumstances.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may be able to provide more dimensions to the findings through applying a mixed method. For example, a qualitative part to explore what helps individuals to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness, followed by a quantitative part to examine which variables contributed more to persistence, might be applied. A longitudinal study, because it allows for exploring what contributes to individuals' persistence throughout the years, would also provide a broader picture of the phenomenon of persistence. It might also be useful to employ a qualitative design distinguishing participants by years of practice. Including novice meditators as well as medium-term and long-term meditators might allow for further insight into what sources of motivation and actions are helpful for individuals when starting practice, and what helps them persist throughout the years.

Another recommendation is that future qualitative studies compare persistence in relation to both formal and informal mindfulness. One interview might focus on what helps individuals persist in practicing formal mindfulness similar to the current study, with another interview asking the same participants what helps them to sustain their informal mindfulness during the day while not formally meditating. This might shed light on how one practice may support the other.

I also suggest that future studies provide a more extensive explanation of formal mindfulness or any other key terms during the screening and recruiting to ensure all participants have the same or a close understanding of the main concepts explored in the study. For instance, it might be useful to ask participants questions such as: "How do you define formal mindfulness?" as opposed to presenting a definition and asking if they agree with it.

Summary and Conclusion

In this research, I addressed the question: What do individuals, who have practiced formal mindfulness regularly for two or more years, report about what contributes to their persistence in maintaining their regular practice in the absence of a structured workshop?

My research question was followed by two sub-questions:

1-What motivates individuals to maintain their regular practice in the long run without the help of a weekly workshop?

2-What actions do individuals take to help them maintain their regular practice of formal mindfulness?

Through thematic data analysis, I identified 22 codes. After grouping the relevant codes, seven themes emerged from the codes: 1) creating appropriate conditions to practice, 2) flexibility in practice, 3) reaching out, 4) developing and maintaining habits, 5) living the Dharma, 6) motivation to experience benefits, and 7) learning from lived experience. Some codes and themes corresponded more to the actions that the participants took to maintain a regular practice, while other related to prime motivators. For example, under the theme “creating appropriate conditions to practice,” scheduling was an action participants took consciously and proactively. With regard to motivation, the benefits of practice emerged as a prime impetus to developing persistence. All the participants emphasized how enhanced peacefulness, focus, and attention (among other things) motivated them to continue and maintain a regular practice. According to the interviews, this emerged as the major source of motivation for the participants.

The findings of this study have implications for psychotherapists and counsellors who would like to incorporate mindfulness in their work either through their own personal practice of mindfulness, or by introducing mindfulness to their clients as part of the therapy. The findings of this study also offers implications for mindfulness instructors and therapists who offer mindfulness-based interventions and programs, and would like to help their students in maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness during and after completing the program. Based on the findings of this study, the following main points were addressed in the Discussion section:

1. The matter of time in regard to persistence was discussed. Maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness may be very challenging when one has a busy schedule. The

participants in the study also discussed the issue of time. They described how they overcame this challenge. What helped them in this area included what motivated them, the actions they took, having a strong self-discipline, staying connected to the community of mindfulness, and living the Dharma.

2. Sources of motivation for persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly were explored. Based on the findings of this study, this included life challenges and finding mindfulness beneficial.
 - a. This study suggests that difficult life circumstances can turn into a great source of motivation for individuals to start and maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. This may apply to self-care in general, but some of the participants described how they realized that they needed a new way to improve their well-being, in addition to what they used or practiced previously (e.g., medication and other forms of meditation).
 - b. The findings of this study also highlighted the value of practicing formal mindfulness regularly to best access its benefits. As the participants continued the practice of formal mindfulness, they found it beneficial. Experiencing improvements in their well-being and relationships motivated them to continue and maintain a regular practice, despite some obstacles along the way.
3. Actions that individuals can take to overcome some challenges, such as lack of time, in order to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness were discussed based on the participants' experience. Some of the actions that support one's persistence include scheduling, arranging an appropriate place for practicing meditation, and engaging in relevant activities (e.g., reading and writing about mindfulness).
4. Having strong self-discipline was identified as an important personal characteristic that helped individuals to take the necessary actions to maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness. The participants also explained that finding the practice of formal mindfulness in line with their core values and intentions strengthened their commitment to maintain a regular practice.
5. The community of mindfulness was identified as a great resource that contributed to the participants' persistence in maintaining a regular practice. This was related to both motivation and actions. The participants had to take initiative (e.g., forming and joining

mindfulness practice groups) and, following these actions, staying connected to the community of mindfulness motivated them to persist and continue meditating on a regular basis.

6. The participants described how they found some level of flexibility helpful to maintain a regular practice. This flexibility included making adjustments regarding the time and place of their practice, and sometimes in the form and style of practice, by incorporating more movement in their practice of mindful yoga.
7. Theory and practice: Two phases can be described in how individuals became more aware of the value of practicing mindfulness in regard to self-care, and are motivated to practice formal mindfulness regularly.
 - a. Theoretical learning inspired individuals to start and continue practicing.
 - b. Personal experience with practicing formal mindfulness strengthened one's motivation and persistence.

This study suggests that theoretical learning and personal practice are very important in regard to one's persistence. They both contribute to a person's motivation to maintain a regular practice, as one learns and experiences the benefits of practicing formal mindfulness.

8. Dharma was discussed in relation to persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly. This study suggests that in addition to having strong self-discipline, and taking the necessary actions, the core teachings of the mindfulness (Dharma) can provide important resources to support a continuous practice of formal mindfulness. For example, practicing acceptance, non-judgment, nonattachment, and self-compassion help people continue their regular practice, because they do not become discouraged by the obstacles and challenges along the way. Practicing the Dharma includes not judging oneself when the mind wanders repeatedly during a sitting meditation, and accepting the difficult emotions and different thoughts that may arise while practicing mindfulness in silence. In this regard, practicing nonattachment includes not being attached to the expectations that one may have regarding specific outcomes of the practice of formal mindfulness.

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Appendix A
Letter to the Mindfulness Centers
(Request to distribute the Recruitment Letter)

Dear (*Name of the manager of the center*)

My name is Narges Khazraei. I am a Master's student at the University of Ottawa supervised by Professor David Paré. I am recruiting participants for my Master's thesis research, which is a qualitative study about the regular practice of mindfulness meditation. The purpose of the study is to explore the experience of participants who have practiced formal mindfulness regularly.

Please find attached a recruitment letter. If it is possible, I would greatly appreciate your help and support in distributing this letter to your students, teachers, and clients. All individuals who practice mindfulness meditation regularly are invited to participate. The details of eligibility are described in the recruitment letter.

Thank you very much for all your help and support.

Sincerely,

Narges Khazraei

Appendix B
Recruitment Letter

Invitation to participate in a qualitative study on mindfulness meditation

Greetings,

My name is Narges Khazraei. I am a Master's student at the University of Ottawa supervised by Professor David Paré. I am recruiting participants for my Master's thesis research, which is a qualitative study on mindfulness. The purpose of the study is to explore the experience of participants with persistence in engaging in practicing formal mindfulness regularly.

Inclusion Criterion: Eligible participants are adults (18 years or older) who have engaged in practicing formal mindfulness meditation regularly for at least two consecutive years. Formal mindfulness meditation is defined as practicing mindfulness in one of the following forms/positions for at least 20 uninterrupted minutes per session: sitting meditation, body scan, walking meditation, or mindful yoga. Regular practice is defined as practicing formal mindfulness meditation for at least three days per week on average (for at least 20 uninterrupted minutes each time).

Your Participation: Interested individuals should be available to answer a short series of questions on the phone for a maximum of 30 minutes (to screen out eligible participants) and to participate in a one-and-a-half-hour interview, which will preferably be face to face. Individuals who live in Ottawa will be prioritized. Eligible individuals living outside Ottawa will be interviewed via Skype. The interview session consists of two parts: One is focused on gathering demographic and background information relevant to the study, and the other one is a semi-structured interview focused on questions related to the research study.

Confidentiality: Your personal information will be kept confidential. Some quotations may be used anonymously (pseudonyms will be used) with your permission. The data used in this study will be kept for five years in a confidential manner in a locked filing cabinet. There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits: It is very common for people engaged in mindfulness practice to discontinue formal practice after a period of time. Learning more about how people are successful in maintaining

regular formal practice, and also about the challenges involved, will help prepare counsellors to anticipate the obstacles when working with clients and also to help them support clients engaging with persistence in order to reap the benefits of continuous practice.

If you have any questions regarding this study or if you meet the inclusion criteria described above and are interested in participating, please contact Narges Khazraei () or Professor David Paré ().

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Best regards,

Narges Khazraei

Appendix C
Questions to Screen Out Eligible Participants (over the phone)

- What is your age?
- Do you currently practice formal mindfulness (in one of the forms of sitting meditation, body scan, walking meditation, or mindful yoga) regularly?
- How often do you practice formal mindfulness?
- What is the duration of each of your (uninterrupted) practice sessions at home?
- For how long (how many months/years) have you practiced formal mindfulness regularly and consistently?

What I mean by regularly is: practicing formal mindfulness/mindfulness meditation for at least three days per week, and for at least 20 minutes each time.

What I mean by consistently is: continuous practice for at least two consecutive years.

- Have there been any interruptions in your regular practice during this time? If yes, how long did the interruption last? Please describe.

Appendix D

Demographic and Background Information Survey

Background Information

- During this time (of engaging in a regular practice of formal mindfulness) have there been changes in the frequency and duration of your practice? Please describe.
- When did you first learn about formal mindfulness practice/mindfulness meditation?
- How did you first learn about formal mindfulness practice? And where?
- Have you attended any structured workshop/program or events on mindfulness meditation?
- If yes, please describe the program (title, length of the program, frequency and duration of the sessions, content, practice in the class, practices assigned for home, and the goals).
- Did you practice formal mindfulness prior to the workshop? If yes, for how long before the workshop? And how often?
- If you have not participated in a structured eight-week mindfulness program, how did you learn about mindfulness meditation?
- What does “persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly” mean to you?

Demographic information

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Nationality:

Canadian residency status:

Cultural background:

Religion/Spiritual beliefs:

Profession/Occupation:

Language/s: Spoken Written

Marital status:

Number of children:

Other information (Participants may voluntarily add demographic or background information if they think it is relevant):

Appendix E

Interview Questions

1-How would you describe your experience of beginning to practice formal mindfulness?

2-(If you have participated in a structured workshop on mindfulness meditation): How was your experience during the structured formal mindfulness workshop/program?

3-How would you describe your experience of practicing formal mindfulness after the workshop?

(Follow-up question if not answered in the demographic survey: How often do you practice? For what duration each time? How long have you been practicing formal mindfulness?)

4-(If you have not participated in a structured workshop): How would you describe your experience of learning about mindfulness meditation?

(Follow-up questions regarding how they learned it, and how they practiced formal mindfulness based on that learning)

5- What motivates you to maintain your regular practice of formal mindfulness?

6-What actions do you take to maintain your regular practice?

7-How would you describe your experience with practicing mindfulness during busy times? (e.g., on days when you have a very busy schedule)

8- What challenges or obstacles (if any) have you encountered in maintaining your regular practice?

9-What helps you to maintain your regular practice despite those challenges?

10-What do you think helps you maintain your regular practice?

11-What benefits have you experienced from practicing formal mindfulness regularly?

Appendix F
Consent Form

Project Title: Persistence in engaging in formal mindfulness practice.

Name of researchers and contact information:

Narges Khazraei Cell: Email:

Thesis supervisor: Professor David Paré Email:

Purpose of the study: The purpose of the study is to learn more about persistence in practicing formal mindfulness regularly.

Participation: My participation will consist of sharing demographic and background information at the beginning of the interview session, as well as answering interview questions for a semi-structured interview that will be conducted by Narges Khazraei in person or via Skype. The whole process will take one and a half hours. The interview will be audio recorded.

Assessment of risks: My participation in this study will have no predictable risks. If I experience any discomfort at any time during the study, I am fully welcome to withdraw with no consequences. I understand that I cannot withdraw after the thesis has been submitted and published.

Benefits: By sharing my experience regarding practicing formal mindfulness, I may contribute to a growing knowledge about persistence in practicing formal mindfulness. The findings will benefit individuals, counsellors, and therapists who are interested in applying mindfulness skills.

Privacy of participants: Narges Khazraei has assured me that the information I share will remain strictly confidential. My anonymity will be protected, and any potential identifying information will be removed or altered to keep complete confidentiality.

Confidentiality and protection of data: I acknowledge that my responses will be used for Narges Khazraei's Master's thesis and subsequent publications. Narges Khazraei has assured me that the audio recordings of our interview will be kept strictly confidential in a locked filing cabinet during the course of the research and will be deleted after the thesis is submitted and published. All the other data will be kept for five years by Narges Khazraei in a strictly confidential manner, and all the related material will be shredded and securely erased.

Voluntary participation: I am aware that my participation in this study is completely voluntarily, and I have the right to withdraw at any time. I also have the right to refuse to answer

any questions. If I choose to withdraw from the study, all the data about me will be destroyed. However, I am aware that I cannot withdraw after the thesis has been submitted. If I choose to participate and stay until the end of the interview, a transcribed text of the interview and a summary will be sent to me to review. I will have two weeks to respond to each document. I will check the details and provide the researcher with my feedback regarding the accuracy of the summaries to clarify that what my intended meaning is reflected in my responses.

Acceptance: I, -----[name of participant], agree to participate in the research study described above conducted by Narges Khazraei, as part of her Master's research, at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, supervised by Professor David Paré. If I have any questions regarding the study I can contact the researcher Narges Khazraei or Professor David Paré.

If I have any questions or concerns regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity, at the University of Ottawa:

Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5

Email: ethics@uOttawa.ca

Tel: 613-562-5387.

There are two copies of this consent form, and one of them is mine to keep.

Participant's Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix G

First Member Check Request (sent by email)

A transcribed text of our interview is provided in the attached document. I invite you to read the text of the interview, and let me know if they accurately represent what you meant in your responses or if you see any differences or deviation. Please return your response to me by email, within two weeks. Your feedback is valuable and important to me, as it will help me ensure that my interpretations of your responses match your intended meanings as much as possible. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Thank you very much for your participation and co-operation.

Sincerely,

Narges Khazraei

(email:)

Appendix H

Second Member Check Request (sent by email)

A summary of my data analysis of the transcribed interview is provided in the attached document. I invite you to read the summaries, and let me know if they represent what you meant in your responses or if you see any differences or deviation. Please return your response within two weeks. Your feedback is valuable and important to me, as it will help me ensure that my interpretations of your responses match your intended meanings as much as possible. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Thank you very much for your participation and co-operation.

Sincerely,

Narges Khazraei

Appendix I

Meaningful statements (10 examples)

Catherine: “**I schedule it, in my schedule book, I have to, I also have set up a space in my house to practice,** I have my mat and my cushion regularly sitting out, like it’s a part of our living room décor, right? So I think that that it’s **constantly reminding** me to sit, I usually like to practice right away in the morning, it’s a nice day for me to start my day and it just sets the intention for my day, and so, it’s kind of, it’s also developing that **nonnegotiable, like this is a big part of my life,** it’s like brushing your teeth, or I really appreciate this practice in the sense that, and it’s get into your last question about motivation, I really struggle with self-care, and sitting, formally sitting, or doing the movements is integral to standing up for my self-care, and so I have to schedule it in, and make it a huge, like make it a priority, this is really important for me in my life, so that’s how I keep it as a regular part of my every day, and also staying connected to the community, right? That helps,”

Catherine: “when we do we have team meetings and then when I’m actually teaching I’m seeing the co-teacher for 8 weeks in a row, so that’s another part of my community, it’s the people that I teach with, and feeling a strong connection and that we’re both are doing personal practices, and I think there’s comfort in knowing that I’m not alone, you know that practicing can be very challenging at times, for the things that come up, **but other people are also going through those challenges as well, and what I also find helpful at the community is seeing people maintain a regular practice of their own and they have and they have very busy lives too, so it’s that OK, again, I’m not the only one, who has a lot going on in my life** and they’re also dedicating portions of their day, to commit to this practice, and I find that, I really appreciate that...”

Catherine: “yeah, and it’s **letting go of expectations that just because you sit down on a mat one day that suddenly the rest of your day, is all of a sudden gonna be great, it’s letting go of expectations that I see an outcome right away,** that on demand, I practice, I wanna see some benefit from it, and I think it’s just softening around that too, a lot of this is the trusting the process, that’s really hard, we **trusting a process** that how do you see , again how do you see changes, how do you see the changes in your life, and they do, they come up, but I think to see that is to consistently practice. Yeah.”

Tim: “one of the reasons I guess that I have been so successful in maintaining my practice is [that] it is ritual. So, I would never, I would almost never think about practicing. For me, it would be like going in a day without brushing my teeth. It’s just part of my life...”

Tim: “I read constantly, so my practice I guess is more than the sitting, so I sit for half an hour in the morning which doesn’t sound like very much really when I think about it, but I also read for half an hour to an hour every morning, in the area of mindfulness or Buddhism, but it all has to do with my practice. So, much of my, not much of, but a portion, a significant portion of my morning is involved with that, and so for example, when I taught for both of them, but especially the adults mindfulness course, I always accompanied every class with a number of readings and, so the readings are in accompaniment to the practice and they ground the practice or explain the practice or highlight aspects of the practice so that inevitably kind of makes it more relevant in your own head, right?”

Tim: “Well, I guess as I have suggested already, I am motivated period (.), for various reasons, but I’m also have introduced it as a very strong habit. So, I can’t see myself not doing it, and it’s just there every day. So, I think that’s very valuable and I would teach it, I would emphasize it, and emphasize that you need to find a place, you need to dedicate that place if you can to meditation, you need to find a time in your day when it works for you. So, I couldn’t do it in the late afternoon for example, because I probably would have fallen asleep and doze off, and for whatever reason it works beautifully for me in the morning...”

Tim: “I read constantly, so my practice I guess is more than the sitting, so I sit for half an hour in the morning which doesn’t sound like very much really when I think about it, but I also read for half an hour to an hour every morning, in the area of mindfulness or Buddhism, but it all has to do with my practice. So, much of my, not much of, but a portion, a significant portion of my morning is involved with that, and so for example, when I taught for both of them, but especially the adults mindfulness course, I always accompanied every class with a number of readings and, so the readings are in accompaniment to the practice and they ground the practice or explain the practice or highlight aspects of the practice so that inevitably kind of makes it more relevant in your own head, right?”

Tim: “So, let’s say going back to the idea that you’re kind of re-wiring your brain, it won’t re-wire it too quickly. If it did re-wire it too quickly, then you would probably, as I happened to me, when I was young, I got frightened and left, it doesn’t do that when you’re practicing I think in the form that I am practicing now, which is you know half an hour a day, over a long period of time, that does the re-wiring kind of solely and carefully enough that it’s not threatening. Does that make sense?”

Tim: “I believe, well not I believe, but it is a very long-term process, so you know you’ve began, you’ve developed these conditionings and this ego if you will and then you begin to meditate and you begin to see the workings of all of this, and gradually like realizing that you are not your thoughts, you are not your patterns of thoughts, you are not in a sense the ego that you believed yourself to be, and all of these are, you know the, I think products of the mind exactly, but you require insights into this through a process over time, of meditation and mindfulness, and that’s where it’s I think ultimately truly valuable.”

John: “..., well for a while, but then, um, I joined the Ottawa Buddhist Society, partly, because they offer days of mindfulness once a month, and they offer a few times a year a week long retreat, and so then, most of my practice was at those types of events because I think it’s important to have community. It’s hard to do just on your own unless you have a lot of experience”

John: “**just an appreciation of benefits, the results, benefits of seeing more of what I’m experiencing outside and inside**, ability to calm my mind on a regular practice but also, when you know in a sort of a crisis situation, I know how to clear my mind, I just focus, and that gives me a lot of confidence as well as knowing that more and more I can deal with the types of events that used to be stressful and now they’re much less, and a general feeling of being happier with life,”

John: “well during the formal mindfulness meditation, the positive experiences are when it occurs and when it doesn’t occur every time, but a deep sense of ease, of relaxation, mental ease, mental relaxation, um, sometimes great happiness and joy, sometimes connection with other people , --- I don’t know, sometimes it just feels awesome, the word that your generation uses more than my generation uses, um, but there is a sense of Aw, that what’s going on here, and it’s just can be lovely, now some of those, continue during the day, if there was a sense of Aw in the morning when I was meditating , the lingering sense of that during the day, so some of those things that occurred in the morning meditation will occur, and those are worthwhile, and satisfying and enjoyable, --but more importantly is the ability to see much more of what’s going on outside and inside, and the peace of mind, the contentment with my self, and my life, much more than it used to be the case, and my skill in being able to know this when I am worrying, experiencing anxiety, and knowing, having tools of how to switch those negative thoughts to positive thoughts, -- it just it gives me huge confidence, huge confidence...”

John: “I try to create conditions that increase the probability of my doing it, ...I wake up early ..., and I’ve always gotten up at 6 or 7, so instead of spending , so I re-arrange my time, so when I get up, I use between 6 and 8 to do things that help with meditation, but first of all, before I meditate, I get a cup of coffee which I love, put on **classical music** which I love, and I read magazines or books about mindfulness or Buddhism, which is very relaxing, **I love to read**, --I’m learning, and I’m also it’s inspiring, I want to get off the desk and go and sit on my bench and meditate. **So that helps, the time of day helps, the things I do before, including the Yoga**, um it’s in a quiet room, the cat can’t bother me, ..., So the conditions, so **it’s quiet, I’m private**, I can regulate the temperature, there’s a heating, because I’m sort of, having a good tempreature helps, so I can **regulate the tempreature**, um other things, **I light a candle, I do some Bowling**. I have a singing bowl, so all of these things, visual, sounds, help create a mood. It’s like going to a cubical, you go to the same cubical, when you approach that cubical, your mind says “Ok, now we’re gonna study.”

George: “Walking meditation, it’s just another way of, not that I can’t sit for an hour, but,-- because of my back and neck, I need to be mindful of that, ...**so walking sometimes it’s easier to do walking meditation than a sitting. So, it gives you options again.**”

Sarah: “but what I want to say is that the meditation training was very useful to know this theory behind that, because they explain really well, how the practice is linked to your way of thinking, and how your thoughts or your thinking patterns impacts your emotions, and how you can stop other comments or things from impacting you, you know, so I found that the instructors did a great job at explaining the theory, and that’s what, and with the practice, that’s what really got me more interested, because I knew why I was doing it very well, and they taught us some techniques and then I participated in a workshop that they did months later, and it was a walking meditation weekend...”

Sarah: “What helps me to practice? Well, reminding myself, you know? A couple of times I crashed, you know? **This is too much of stress, so I’ve known, I had to take time off to recover from the stress**, and that helps me to remind me I don’t want to be at that point, I want to take that **more of a self-care practice** to avoid accumulating and draining myself, and having my daughter reminds me you know I have a schedule, and I want to do that and I enjoy better, because then once you get super drained, it’s always hard to recover, it takes longer, it takes more effort, you can lose more, you know? In terms of you lose time, and you lose energy, and once, if you become stressed too often, and if you crash too often, so then it becomes always harder to recover, next time, so by practicing in fact regularly, now I know that I can relax faster, and prevent, and you know, get to a relaxation much faster...”

Appendix J

The researcher's/My pre-understandings

1. Maintaining a regular practice of formal mindfulness in the long term may be difficult for some individuals, especially without the support of an instructor and a class/group (e.g. after completion of a mindfulness program, when students need to continue their practice on their own).
2. Some of the obstacles on the way of one's persistence, may include: lack of time, especially when one has a very busy schedule; lack of connections with others who maintain a regular practice of formal mindfulness; and lack of motivation.
3. Persistence in maintaining a regular practice may require a strong motivation, so that one can overcome the challenges.
4. Motivation needs to be complimented by taking actions.