About the Homework for MBSR

Participants in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) are asked to do some homework every day, while they are in the program. Some participants are surprised by this, and some find it difficult to imagine that they will "find the time" to do homework activities. And it can, indeed, be a challenge.

Why homework? The short answer is this: If you don't practice the skills that you are being taught in the program, then you won't learn the skills, and you won't be able to apply them in your life. It isn't enough just to learn the "theory behind" mindfulness, or to learn "about" mindfulness, or to "talk about" mindfulness in the class sessions. If you don't set aside time to actually practice mindfulness, then your brain will not learn the "how-to-do-it" aspect of bringing mindfulness into your daily life.

What is the homework? You will be asked to spend around 20 - 30 minutes per day, engaging in "formal" mindfulness practice, doing the activities that you are taught in class. These activities include: the body scan; sitting meditation; walking meditation; and mindful movement. You will also be asked to keep some (brief) written notes, or records, about what you do, how you are feeling, and circumstances you encounter.

What if I don't like meditation? That's OK! There are a variety of mindfulness practices you can do. And, one of the things you will learn about mindfulness (meditation) practice is that it might or might not be pleasurable each time. Often what seems difficult or unpleasant at first becomes something people love to do. Some participants find that they enjoy the practice; some find that they sometimes enjoy it; others find that they are uncomfortable with the practice (at first, it can seem really difficult just to sit still!). We ask all participants to do the assigned practice, and simply take ongoing notice of what they are feeling and thinking. This is truly the heart of the practice, and the heart of what we are teaching in MBSR: that is, to approach all of our lives (and not just the pleasant parts) with curiosity and compassion.

Recent Research about “Homework”

One of the relatively unexplored areas in mindfulness-based interventions involves the issue of “homework” practice. The traditional standard that arose out of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), as created by Jon Kabat-Zinn, has been that participants are assigned to engage in 45 minutes of “formal mindfulness practice” daily, throughout the traditional 8 weeks of the MBSR program. So-called “informal” mindfulness practice (or “mindfulness in everyday life” is also very much encouraged; however, most MBSR teachers, and mindfulness teachers in general, believe that it is formal practice that creates the mental capacity for everyday practice. In other words, you really do need to set aside time for such practices as sitting meditation, the body scan, and mindful movement (mindful yoga), in order to be able to reliably and frequently bring your mindfulness capacities to the dynamic interactions of ordinary life. Just learning “about” mindfulness, or making efforts to “be more mindful” are probably not going to produce measurable benefits.

Nevertheless, the questions as to how much formal practice is really necessary, and how frequent must it be, remain to be answered. Many teachers, and many participants in mindfulness-based intervention programs, believe that something less than 45 minutes per day (and fewer than 6 or 7 days per week) might very well provide an effective “dose” of formal practice. At an MBSR (2008) research conference, two scientists presented their data on those very questions.
1. Ruth Baer, PhD (at the University of Kentucky): The Importance of Homework Practice in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. Dr. Baer (who is a very prominent researcher in the field of mindfulness) studied 174 adults who completed the MBSR program at the University of Massachusetts. They closely monitored their at-home, between-session mindfulness practice time. Overall, the participants showed improvements on various symptoms, and on a measure of well-being; and, significantly, the amount of time they spent on “formal” mindfulness practices (sitting meditation, the body scan, and mindful yoga) was “significantly related to the extent of [their] improvement.”

**Summary:** Some individuals may derive measurable benefits (of some types, e.g., quality of sleep) with as little as 5-10 minutes of sitting meditation, 2-3 times per week; it is also possible that there is an optimum period of routine formal practice, above which benefits (of some types, e.g., quality of sleep) may stabilize or even decrease (perhaps at around 40 minutes per day).

**Implications:** So-called “informal” mindfulness practice, by itself, is probably not sufficient to cause the sorts of changes in attentional skills and mental habits that can cause measurable improvements. On the other hand, teachers of mindfulness-based interventions should be sure that participants in their programs are not frightened away by what might seem to be overly daunting homework requirements; also, one should not convey the idea that very long periods of meditation will necessarily result in more measurable benefits (depending, of course, on what sort of benefits one is seeking). Some researchers and clinicians have found that an “invitational” approach to homework is at least as effective as a more authoritarian “required homework” approach in gaining and maintaining adherence to acceptable frequencies and durations of formal mindfulness practice.

**Mindfulness: Alternate Pathways?**
(or: Are There Any Shortcuts?)

By now, everyone has heard about the benefits of mindfulness meditation; not only in the popular press, but in top-ranked scientific journals. Training in meditation has been linked (in some cases, very consistently) with: reductions in blood pressure; improvements in mood; reductions in compulsive or addictive behaviors; improvements in capacity to pay attention; and many other positive results.

Anyone who hears about these benefits will be likely to say “I want that!” (After all, who doesn’t?)

But then, having said this, that same person will be met with the realization that getting the benefits of meditation would seem to require that one actually engage in meditation. Oh. “Well, what if I don’t like meditation?” would be the next question, and it has been asked innumerable times. I have heard Jon Kabat-Zinn say that his response (at least sometimes) might be: “You don’t have to like it. You just have to do it.”

The question really can be stated as follows: “Is it necessary to engage in a meditation practice to gain the benefits of meditation?” Or, put more simply: “Isn’t there a shortcut?”

There are at least two related topics are raised by this question.

1. The meaning of “mindfulness”: The scientific study of the benefits of meditation is chiefly centered on a type of meditation practice that is usually called “mindfulness meditation.” It is drawn from Buddhist tradition, adapted for health care settings by Jon Kabat-Zinn as “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR). It is understood to involve the attentional, intentional, and attitudinal stance that is adopted by a person who engages in mindfulness
meditation: in this sense, to be “mindful” is to intentionally, and non-judgmentally, pay attention to the present moment. The idea is that one engages in “mindfulness” both in formal meditation practice, and also, as often and consistently as possible, in everyday life. Formal meditation practice is considered to be a foundation for improving one’s capacity to consistently bring the practice of mindfulness into daily living. There is a very significant and compelling body of scientific findings that demonstrates the benefits of engaging in formal mindfulness practice, or meditation.

The terms “mindfulness” and “mindful” are used in other contexts, as well, and not always in reference to the meditation tradition just described. Sometimes this contributes to the natural question: “Can’t I be more “mindful,” without engaging in meditation?” The answer to that question would seem to be “maybe,” but it doesn’t seem likely. So far, there is not a body of scientific findings indicating that this kind of “informal,” or “everyday” mindfulness practice (by itself) results in the same benefits as are associated with mindfulness meditation. This does not mean that it cannot be beneficial; only that any potential positive effects have not been well-demonstrated or scientifically supported.

2. The desire for shortcuts: Human beings love to look for short-cuts. One could easily speculate that there an evolutionary advantage to a capacity for finding more efficient, easier ways to arrive at desired ends. While this is entirely understandable, it can sometimes lead us astray. I tend to be skeptical about any path that is advertised as a “simple” or “easy” or “effortless” or “quick” way to do something that is generally understood to be time-consuming, and/or difficult. As a teacher, I find that I am often in the position of delivering to my students what is received, more or less, as the “bad news”: that is, that you can’t adequately learn new skills without putting in some real practice, or work. This is true across disciplines: for learning calculus; for learning a golf swing; and also for creating a new positive habit (consistent exercise; healthy food choices; meditation; etc.).

Are there “non-meditative” (or alternate) pathways, for attaining the benefits of meditation? Probably so, depending on which of those “benefits” one is interested in. Here are some of the "alternative pathways" that are also demonstrated to provide various of the benefits that are associated with meditation:

Hypertension: exercise; dietary changes; pharmaceuticals (medication)

Improved mood: exercise; pharmaceuticals (medication)

Improved attentional capacity and skills: behavior therapy; pharmaceuticals (medication)

Reduction or elimination of compulsive/addictive behaviors: cognitive-behavioral therapy; 12-step programs

BUT: Is there a "non-meditative" mindfulness pathway, equivalent to meditation in its various beneficial effects? Not that I know of.

http://crimlawdoc.typepad.com/kc_mindfulness/about-the-homework-for-mb.html