

Sensate Focus

Sensate Focus is one of the main techniques used to cure sexual problems without using medication. It is a gentle way to improve a couple's sensuality and spontaneity whether they experience sexual difficulties or not. Sensate Focus was developed by William Masters and Virginia Johnson, who were key figures of psychosexual therapy in the 1970s. As such this technique is tried and tested and has benefited thousands of couples. It is a behavioral program which involves a couple completing homework assignments in the form of structured touching.

A Brief Introduction to Sensate Focus

The basic idea is that a couple sets a limit to their sexual contact for a while, or whilst doing the exercises, and take turns touching each other in specific ways. For example, in the first stage a couple will be asked to have one partner experience touch and the other give it for twenty minutes, before swapping over and doing another twenty minutes.

The agreement at this stage is that touch is allowed all over the body, but must not include the genital regions and breasts. It is agreed that sex does not go any further and that if one or both partners get aroused, he or she does not take things further. After several weeks of practice a new limit can be set, such as touching the sexual regions of the body, but again no attempt at intercourse is allowed.

Aims of the technique

Sensate Focus works because it eliminates performance pressure for both partners by setting a clear limit to sexual behavior. It means that the man involved (if it's not a lesbian couple) will not need to become erect or turned on, or perform in any other way, and the woman (if it's not a gay couple) will not need to feel aroused. The exercises give both partners time to fully experience their bodies, to listen to their physical sensations and to be playful and relaxed with their partner, rather than feel inadequate or worry about whether they are going to perform or not or feel overwhelmed in some way.

For the partner who is giving the touch, Sensate Focus can mean freedom to really explore the partner's body and to develop a familiarity and sense of ease with it. There is no pressure on him or her to stimulate the partner to become more aroused. A big part of the exercises is for the receiving partner to verbalize and tell the other how things feel and how he or she wants to be touched. For many people it is extremely difficult to verbalize during sex what they would like from each other. Sensate Focus allows people to start communicating about their needs whilst things are only getting sexual gradually.

Sensate Focus is an ideal technique to overcome performance pressure, anxiety, a sense of disconnectedness with your body or the impact of sexual trauma. It's used to deal with

psychosexual problems such as sexual aversion, erectile problems in men, and problems with orgasm in men and women.

Sensate Focus can also be a great thing to do when you want to develop your sex life, even if there are no pressing issues you need to attend to. It is a way of enriching a couple's life and developing greater intimacy and ability to communicate desires.

Sensate Focus: The Exercises

Caution!

First off, Sensate Focus is a powerful technique, which strictly speaking has been designed to be used while a couple is in sex therapy. Although there isn't anything dangerous about the exercises, a lot of emotional stuff may come up between you and your partner once you start on them.

Any other issues which may be there in your relationships - such as power dynamics or the legacy of each person's emotional history - may surface when you start. Please assess whether your relationship is strong enough to tolerate the extra issues which may surface before you attempt Sensate Focus with your partner!

If you have doubts, consider entering couples therapy first, or seek out a qualified psychosexual therapist. A therapist can guide you through Sensate Focus and act as a resource and buffer for any issues which may surface.

Ground rules

- A couple needs to set specific ground rules for Sensate Focus to work. These need to be mutually agreed on and understood. If the ground rules are not followed Sensate Focus won't work!
- During the exercises there is a ban on sexual intercourse and at the start also on genital touching. If a partner gets aroused, he or she can masturbate if necessary after the Sensate Focus session is completed, on his or her own. No attempt should be made to involve the partner in intercourse (i.e. please do not even ask!).
- Set up time to do the exercises at least twice weekly. Setting aside time without stress or pressure to do other things is essential. Start off by spending 20 minutes on the exercises, increasing to 60 minutes in total per session over the next 4 weeks.
- At the start do not talk during the exercises, unless your partner's touch is uncomfortable or painful and you need to let him or her know. Do not have conversations during the exercise about other, unrelated matters, i.e. anything that isn't happening just right now between the two of you. Later you may want to have the receiving partner to verbalize how it feels being touched, but again, stick with talking about what is happening right

here, right now for you. Otherwise conversations will distract you from your own sensations.

- It is all about tuning into your own experience rather than pleasing your partner. The partner giving touch may want to take time to explore and touch without any intention to make the other person feel any particular way. The emphasis is even greater for the receiving partner: your task is to take in the touch without even trying to give anything back!
- The exercises are all about learning to stay with your body and with yourself. If that turns out to be quite difficult for you, don't worry. This is all about learning. Instead of getting worried, approach difficulties with curiosity. Isn't it interesting that you start planning your shopping for the next day when your partner strokes your back? Give yourself time to ponder what that may mean, how you feel at that point, and so on.

Sensate Focus Exercise Plan

Sensate Focus is laid out in a series of stages, which slowly increases the intensity of sexual touch. Stage 1 involves no sex and no genital touching. Stage 2 includes genital touching and starts to explore this area more, however intercourse is still not allowed. Stage 3 includes penetration, i.e., if a penis is involved it can now be placed in a vagina if one happens to be around and its owner is happy with that. During this stage, movement is slowly incorporated to result in thrusting to orgasm.

With each stage really take your time! Please do not rush through the program, even if you feel you are OK with the preceding stage. If you rush you may encourage performance pressure, which invalidates the whole project. If you move on to the next stage and you feel it is too difficult, simply come back to the previous stage and practice some more. You can also discuss with your partner after the exercise is over how things are going and what may have happened to make the next stage difficult. Only move on to the next stage if both of you agree!

If you are struggling with the whole thing, consider getting advice from a qualified therapist. Keep communicating with your partner after the session is over about how the two of you are doing with it.

Getting started

Agree which partner will be giving and which will be receiving to start with. Set aside time to do the exercise. Make sure you switch off the phones or prevent other interruptions. When you are doing the exercise, do the exercise and nothing else. Make yourself comfortable in your bedroom or elsewhere, ensuring the temperature is warm enough and you have plenty of space, and maybe cushions, etc. You could turn down the lights to set the tone but I would suggest not having music, so you don't drift off listening to it but can stay focused on the "here and now" experience. You will need a clock somewhere within reach to watch the time. Both

partners start without clothes on, however if that feels too challenging, start with as few clothes on as feels OK to you. Include an extra stage at the start to get familiar with being naked.

Stage 1

This involves being naked and touching, but without touching the genitals or breasts and without proceeding to intercourse.

Take turns in each session. The first person to receive lies down, facing up or down is OK. Your job is to attend to your emotions and physical sensations as your partner touches you. Concentrate as much as you can on what you're experiencing. If your mind wanders, simply bring yourself and your awareness back into the room and onto your body. Concentrate on how it feels to be the passive one

The giving partner's job is to slowly explore the other's body, avoiding breasts and genitals and avoiding trying to give pleasure deliberately. Stick with how you want to touch the other person for now. Concentrate on how it feels to touch and be the active one.

Continue with these sessions for at least 2 weeks, until you spend 60 minutes per session, or 30 minutes each giving and receiving. You should feel relaxed with a growing sense of trust and familiarity at the end of that period. If you need more time at this level, stay with it as long as you need to. If you feel there are barriers for you to move on, consult with a psychotherapist or psychosexual counselor.

Once you both feel comfortable with this and have agreed to move on, you can include touching breasts and experiment with a variety of touches, for example using oils or powder, or different fabrics. Spend as much time as you need on this level until both of you feel relaxed and present.

Once you are both comfortable and you've agreed once more to move on, include the option for the receiving partner to make requests for a preferred type of touch. If you are not good at making requests, this is the time to practice! You can also include turning over, so both sides of each person's body is involved in the exercise. You can include guiding the other partner's hand to show the touch you want. Again, no genital touching and no progression to intercourse!

If you verbalize what you are experiencing as the receiving partner, stick with what is going on right now, right here. Take plenty of time on this level. I would recommend at least 3 weeks, or a minimum of 6 sessions. This level includes all the main features of good sex later on: no pressure, enjoying your sensations, telling your partner what you want and guiding him or her physically. This level is essential so don't move on until both of you are ready to do so.

Stage 2

Maintain the "no intercourse" rule! Continue your exercises as before, but include genital touching. There are now no "forbidden" areas on the body. For touching the genitals of a woman please make sure you are using some kind of lubricant or oil if she wants it. Otherwise touch may be experienced as uncomfortable. The same may be true for men.

Take as much time as you need to get comfortable and relax at this stage. For the giving partner it is important that the aim here is about exploration, not pleasing your partner. And remember to still mainly focus on the other's whole body, not just their genitals.

Once you are both comfortable and ready to move on again, start to concentrate more on the genitals. You can play with different types of touch, pressure and friction, and explore different areas. The receiving partner will concentrate on the different sensations created through being touched. Spend as much time as you need on this level until both of you feel relaxed and present.

At the end of this stage there is the option to go for mutual masturbation to orgasm. If you are both ready to do so, agree this option before the start of your exercise. However, keep in mind that each one of you is responsible for his or her own orgasm (i.e. it's not about one person having to give the other an orgasm!).

To reinforce this point, I would suggest that you start off with each person masturbating themselves to orgasm in the other's company. It is essential for the performance pressure not to come back and for you to know that your partner can and will satisfy him or herself if they want and need to. Spend as much time as you need on this level until both of you feel relaxed and present.

Stage 3

Continue with all of the above, plus stick with the "ban" on intercourse. The next step is about entering into the vagina without further movement. Or in other words about "containment" without further pressure. This is a really important step for men with erectile problems or premature ejaculation. Do take your time with this step and stick with the no-movement, no-thrusting idea.

For homosexual couples this stage needs to be altered to include intromission of other objects, or entering into the mouth or anus as desired, or holding the genitals against the body of the partner - for example a man may place his penis between the buttocks of his partner . This can also be a useful idea for heterosexual couples, as a lot of the time heterosexual couples can get stuck on the "penis-in-vagina" routine.

Feel free to negotiate inclusion of oral contact with genitals or the use of sex toys at this stage. However, again stick with the "no movement" rule. The aim here is not to get aroused and have

an orgasm, but to experience and experiment. Do not proceed to full intercourse. Spend as much time as you need on this level until both of you feel relaxed and present.

Finally, include some movement when the penis is in the vagina. You can include gentle thrusting and rotating movements. Keep your focus on your own sensations. Do not take responsibility for your partner's level of arousal. Again, he or she can ask for what they need or may masturbate to orgasm if that is what they want. As you get more comfortable at this stage you can include stronger movement.

Once you are both comfortable at the lower levels, the ban on full intercourse is lifted. However, please do not now forget all you have learned and go back to the sexual routine you had previously! Stay with your sensations and your own arousal.

Communicate with your partner as to what you want and satisfy yourself if you need to. Each partner has responsibility for their own arousal and orgasm. Although this ends Sensate Focus, you could agree as a couple to occasionally go back to earlier stages in the process to do refresher sessions.

Final points about Sensate Focus

As already mentioned above, Sensate Focus is an extremely powerful technique. It will bring out any relational difficulties there may be within your relationship. It needs to be treated with respect and dedication. Any problems which arise through it or as a result of trying to implement it are part of what is going on in your relationship. Take time to negotiate and talk about the various issues and get professional help if you need to. Most of all, enjoy yourselves!

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