Sensate Focus: A Technique for Intimacy and Exploration


Sensate focus consists of touching, caressing, and sensual massage during noncoital loveplay. First described by Masters and Johnson (1970, 1986), it may be sexual or sensual. Sensate focus is an exercise program that has been used for over 3 decades, and is documented as an effective method of increasing sexual satisfaction. It is one of the key elements typically used in sex therapy, and often, in couples therapy. Initially the exercises are done without leading to intercourse. This may alleviate the pressure couples may feel with regard to performance anxiety, or issues of orgasm. The goal is to promote physical closeness and positive touch to increase intimacy.

These exercises consist of planned home tasks aimed at exploring each other’s bodies through touching, stroking, kissing, embracing, and caressing in ways that are mutually gratifying. Allow approximately 30-60 minutes per session. Focus on the feelings and sensations, rather than performance. Each partner will take a turn being the ‘giver’ and then the ‘receiver.’ This technique allows partners to know and understand their own body and that of their partner, which can be highly effective.

Sensate Focus Stages

Remember that each partner should take turns being the ‘giver’ and the ‘receiver.’ The receiver should focus on the sensations and the intimate presence of their partner. Use the hand to guide the giver’s motions, but otherwise, remain passive and receptive. The focus is experiencing each other’s bodies and discovering what brings each person pleasure. Each individual is responsible for communicating the experiences that bring him or her most enjoyment. Self-awareness of feelings and sensations are crucial to sensate focus. Couples are highly encouraged to be creative with each other and to try new and exciting things. For one person the lighter touch of a feather may be pleasing while another person may prefer a more aggressive deep touch. Masters & Johnson recommended the use of lotion for about 50% of their couples; this is a personal choice. If lotion or oil is used, it should be alcohol-free for use on genitals.

Stage 1

Each partner explores the other’s body while avoiding the genitals and breasts.

Level 1: Sitting or lying face to face – touching above the waist
Level 2: Sitting or lying face to face – touching entire body permissible
Level 3: Embrace with exploration
**Stage 2**

Exploration of the entire body including genitals and breasts. Intercourse is strongly discouraged in this stage. Focus may be put on different types of touching and stroking of the genitals and the sensations associated with this. Mutual masturbation resulting in orgasm may be an option at this stage of sensate focus (level 3).

Level 1: Sitting or lying face to face – light genital touching along with all other touching

Level 2 options:
- Male reclines against the headboard and female reclines against his chest to allow him access to her body. This position may be reversed.
- Female sits upright facing her fully reclining partner (her legs may be placed over his). This position may be reversed.

Level 3: Genital touching with climax allowed.

**Stage 3**

It is still crucial for the couple to continue with mutually satisfying loveplay prior to and during intercourse. Thus, the prior stages can be incorporated into Stage 3. Couples progress through the levels of Stage 3 at their own pace. After sessions where the penis has simply been placed in the vagina, couples next progress to the stage where gentle thrusting or rotating is acceptable. Finally the couple progresses to intercourse with thrusting to the point of orgasm being permissible. Here, particular attention should be given to female sexuality as many women (e.g., 50%) do not typically orgasm during intercourse. Thus, the couple can include in their exploration techniques that are pleasurable to her.

Level 1: Penis place in vagina; no thrusting or movement

Level 2: Penis place in vagina; light thrusting from the female

Level 3: Full-thrusting intercourse with resulting climax

Sensate focus allows couples to enjoy exploring each other’s bodies and learning more about pleasuring one another. Couples should avoid the pressure of performance and fear of failure during these exercises. The partners work as a team to rediscover each other’s bodies. The exercises are aimed at helping couples recapture loving intimacy and gaining knowledge to improve the overall and sexual relationship. Many couples express a longing for increased sensual and sexual closeness; sensate focus offers a proven method of regaining and expanding intimate experiences.