

Sensate Focus

Introduction

Sensate Focus was developed by Masters and Johnsonⁱ as a way to help couples learn about themselves and each other, and to move towards a more fulfilling intimate relationship. The aim of Sensate Focus is to build trust and intimacy within your relationship, helping you to give and receive pleasure. It emphasises positive emotions, physical feelings and responses while reducing any negative reactions.

The program can help overcome any fear of failure that may have existed previously, building a more satisfying sexual relationship in which both partners feel able to ask for what they want and are able to give and receive pleasure.

Sensate Focus is not a race to an end. Continuous reinforcement is needed to overcome negative reactions to intimacy. How long you spend on the program is up to you. Typically, sessions might last twenty to sixty minutes, two to three times a week, spread over six or more weeks. It is important to go at your pace, taking your time and only moving on when you are both ready. It's also important to commit time to the program on a regular basis. If you don't, it's very easy to put off doing the exercises. Commitment and planning are important.

Ground Rules

- Choose a time and place acceptable for both of you, where you won't be disturbed.
- Make the surroundings as pleasant as possible, choosing music, lighting and aromas to suit you.
- Turn off the phone and, if necessary, lock the door.
- Take turns giving and receiving touch, allowing equal time for each of you.

- The goal is enjoyment and pleasure. Enjoy the journey rather than aiming towards any specific destination.
- Take as long as you want over each phase. Often, the slower you take it, the more you will get out of it.
- Only move from one stage to the next when both partners agree.

Phase 1: Non-genital Sensate Focus

The Aim

The first stage of Sensate Focus puts the emphasis on sensuality, the simple enjoyment of physical touch, rather than sexuality or the pursuit of orgasm. This phase focuses on touch and mutual exploration free from any concern that it will lead to sex. It's important, therefore that you abstain from any form of sexual activity during this stage. Even if you become very aroused, you don't touch one another's genitals or breasts, attempt to have intercourse, oral sex or any other type of sexual activity. Do not attempt to have or give an orgasm. Abstaining from sexual activity removes any pressure on either partner to get an erection, become aroused or perform in any other way. It also helps break any established patterns of behaviour that may have become routine and/or boring.

Ground Rules

- While it is preferable to be naked, you can wear underwear or relaxed clothing if that feels more comfortable.
- You may find a book or DVD about massage useful, if you want to learn different techniques.
- At this stage, avoid touching the obvious erogenous zones: breasts, nipples, vulva, clitoris or vagina, penis or testicles.
- Only move from one state to the next when you both feel you are ready.
- Sexual intercourse, oral sex and orgasm are not permitted during this phase.

Instructions

- Before the first session, decide who is going to go first, then take turns.
- During first sessions, concentrate on touching the parts of the body normally visible: the hands, arms, feet, scalp and face.
- When you are ready, include the back, neck, arms, buttocks and legs, not neglecting the hands, feet and face.
- Finally bring in the chest, stomach, shoulders and thighs, but avoid the breasts, tops of legs and the groin area.

Phase 2: Genital Sensate Focus

Ground Rules

- Having spent some time on non-genital sensate focus, you can bring in touching of the breast and genital areas. You might want to spend some time at this stage before moving on to the next.
- Continue to pay attention to the parts of the body that you explored in the previous sessions, as well as the new areas that you are incorporating.
- The main aim of these stages is to increase each person's pleasure and awareness of each other's responses to different types of stimulation. If one or both of you become aroused this is fine, but it is not the aim of the exercise.
- During genital stimulation it is often useful to use a water-based lubricant. Oil-based products should not be used near condoms.
- Sexual intercourse and penetration is not permitted during this phase.

Instructions

- First incorporate touching of breasts and nipples. Remember, men have nipples too.
- Next include the areas around the genitals, including the testicles of a man.
- Then introduce touching of the genitals themselves (the labia, clitoris and entrance to the vagina on a woman; the penis, shaft and glans on a man).

- After a while you may also want to incorporate oral as well as manual touching (kissing, licking and sucking) into both non-genital and genital touching.
- You may want to try the 'teasing technique'. Manually stimulate the other person's genitals, gently at first then increase the speed of stimulation. Take a rest for a few minutes and then begin again.
- If orgasm occurs at this or later stages, that is fine, but that is not the aim of the process.

Phase 3: Penetrative Sensate Focus

Ground Rules

- Having spent some time on non-genital and genital sensate focus you can begin to include penetration, using fingers, toys and the penis.
- Continue to pay attention to the other parts of the body that you explored in the previous sessions.
- The person being penetrated should be in control of the depth of penetration and the amount of time spent on it.
- While orgasm and intercourse is permitted in this phase, this is not the goal: the aim remains to enjoy the growing intimacy between you.

Instructions

- First begin to incorporate forms of gentle penetration, initially try this with little or no thrusting, just enjoying the sensation of containment.
- Try it first with one person on top and then the other.
- Later you can incorporate more thrusting, again with the person being penetrated in control.
- You might find some books of sexual positions useful at this point so you can find out which positions are most comfortable and pleasurable for you, according to the part of the body being caressed.

ⁱ Masters, W. H, Johnson, V. E. & Kolodny, R. C. (1994) *Heterosexuality*, HarperCollins: New York