

Sensate Focus Exercises:

Sensate focus exercises are a series of specific exercises for couples that encourage each partner to give and receive pleasurable touch while paying attention to their sensual experience of both receiving and giving touch. These activities were originally developed by Masters and Johnson (1996) to assist couples experiencing sexual problems, but can be used for a variety of reasons and to heighten personal awareness with any couple.

Stage 1:

You and your partner have two sessions in which each individual takes turns touching each other's body, but with the breasts and genitals off limits. The focus of this stage is to create awareness on sensations by noticing textures, temperatures and contours while doing the touching, or to simply be aware of the sensations of being touched by their partner or in the case of the giver, the sensation of giving touch.

The individual doing the touching is to do what interests him/her, not on any guesses about their partner's likes or dislikes. You and your partner are instructed that if sexual arousal occurs, it can be noticed but not pay any undue attention to it. For the purposes of the exercise, couples are not to touch the breasts or genitals or to initiate intercourse.

The individual being the receiver lies on his/her back and receives touch for 15 minutes and then turns over and receives touch to the back of the body for another 15 minutes. After 30 minutes roles are reversed.

Masters and Johnson (1996) recommend that the initial sessions of sensate focus be silent so that talking does not distract from the awareness of physical sensations. However, the individual receiving the touching must let their partner know if they are uncomfortable at any point in time.

At the end of the touching experiences, each person gives specific feedback to his/her partner: list three things that you enjoyed, and one thing you would like to change next time. Feedback is important to improve communication.

Stage 2:

Touching is expanded to include the breasts and genitals in this stage, but general body touching is to take priority. The emphasis is again on awareness of physical sensations and not the expectations of a sexual response and intercourse and orgasm are off limits.

Take turns trying a "hand riding" technique as a means of nonverbal communication. By placing one hand on top of your partner's hand while being touched, one can indicate if he/she would like more or less pressure, a faster or slower pace, or a change to a different spot.

Masters and Johnson (1996) caution that these nonverbal messages should be conveyed in such a way that the person being touched does not take over full control, but simply adds some additional input to the touching, which is still primarily done based on the interests of the toucher.

At the end of the session, give each other feedback again: three things you each liked and one you each would like to modify.

Stage 3:

You and your partner again take turns being the toucher and the receiver but can progress to helping each other experience orgasm through oral or manual stimulation.

Feedback is repeated: Three things you each liked and one you would modify.

After Stage 3, continue with manual touching, then at some point to move into the female on-top position without attempting insertion of the penis into the vagina.

In this position, the woman can rub the penis against her clitoral region, vulva and vaginal opening regardless of whether or not there is an erection.

In subsequent sessions, she may progress to putting the tip of the penis into the vagina if there is an erection, all the while focusing on the physical sensations and stopping or moving back to non-genital touching if either partner becomes orgasm oriented or anxious.

These fairly simple techniques can have a dramatic effect even in cases where severe sexual dysfunction has been present for many years.

Reference: Sexual Health Counseling and Cancer-IPODE April 8, 2010

Masters WH, Johnson VE. *Human Sexual Response*. Boston: Little, Brown; 1996