

Can Sensate Focus Help with Sexual Difficulties?

What is sensate focus?

Sensate focus is a longstanding and evidence-based approach to treat sexual difficulties developed by Masters and Johnson in the 1950s and 60s.¹ Sensate focus involves a series of structured behavioural exercises where partners take turns touching one another.^{2,3}

When a person is receiving touch from their partner, they are paying attention to the sensations, and practicing nonjudgmental awareness, making the practice similar to mindfulness-based exercises.³

Sensate focus targets a person's tendency to be performance-focused, and their bias to engage in "spectatoring" which involves watching themselves and their responses as if from a distance.² Instead, sensate focus teaches a person to focus on their sensations in the present moment and to challenge distractions while learning to relax when with a partner.³

Can sensate focus help with sexual difficulties?

Most of the research evaluating sensate focus was completed over 20 years ago and more recent research has integrated sensate focus in other treatment modalities (like CBT or mindfulness).²

Despite this lack of research, sensate focus is generally accepted as effective, is widely practiced, and is often seen as the default method in sex therapy.³ Sensate focus can help couples to work on communication in a safe and structured environment.³ The accessibility of sensate focus in popular books, its longstanding use, and the relative simplicity of the approach make sensate focus an excellent treatment option for women and gender-diverse people with sexual difficulties.



Who is a good candidate for sensate focus?

Since sensate focus is a behavioural technique that can identify problems with attention and distraction during sex and promote non-judgmental mindful awareness, the clinician should consider sensate focus for patients experiencing any of the following challenges³:

- lack of body awareness
- high anxiety levels
- cognitive distraction during sexual activity related to performance demands
- avoidance of sexual activity
- a rigid repertoire of sexual behaviours
- avoid sexual communication

If a patient also has significant body image distortions or body shame, caution should be exercised in administering sensate focus.²

How can a practitioner use sensate focus in their practice

Sensate focus instructions can be delivered face-to-face or remotely. It can be recommended on its own, or integrated into other therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy or mindfulness-based therapy.³

For couples with significant interpersonal challenges, sensate focus might best be delivered by a licensed therapist or counselor so that it can be informed by broader therapeutic skills and couples therapy skills.³ However, for less complex situations, any primary healthcare provider can provide instructions on sensate focus.

To initiate discussions about sensate focus with a patient you might say:

"There's an approach called sensate focus that's designed to take the pressure off performance and focus more on the experience of touch. It involves taking turns with your partner to explore touch without aiming for any particular outcome."

- In **Phase 1** of sensate focus, the giver of the touch is instructed to touch the receiver head to toe, excluding the chest and genitals. The receiver is invited to focus on the sensations experienced during touch, with the aim of reducing anxiety related to expectations of arousal or pleasure.³
- In **Phase 2** of sensate focus, the giver of the touch now touches all over the receiver's body, and there may be more of a focus on interpersonal processes, such as sexual communication.³

On the next page is a resource that you can share with your patients to guide them through Sensate focus - [Sensate Focus](#)





Masters and Johnson developed "Sensate Focus" as a component of sex therapy, and it has been used in most sex therapy settings for several decades. It was originally designed to minimize "anticipatory anxiety," or the anxiety that a partner has prior to a sexual encounter when fearing the outcome of that encounter. It also targets "spectatoring," which Masters and Johnson described as "watching oneself" while being sexual.



How it Works

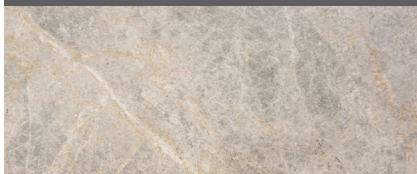
We will use these exercises very deliberately to heighten your sense of awareness when being sexual with a partner. There are three stages to Sensate Focus that we would like you to consider practicing at home with your partner. Each session takes about an hour to complete, and we recommend practicing this exercise approximately once per week.

Sensate Focus



Rules

When practicing Stage 1, there is no sexual intercourse or touching of genital and sexual areas of the body (i.e., breasts, penis, vulva, vagina, testicles or clitoris). You can be naked, or you can wear underwear or relaxed clothing, if that feels more comfortable. Set times and dates aside where there can be private time to do the exercise; turn off the phone, and eliminate other distractions.



Goals

To Relax

Allow your body and mind to relax into the exercise.

To fully tune in

Tune in to the sensations that you are receiving. If you find it helpful, you may want to silently note/describe the sensations using words in your head such as cold, smooth, tingling, prickly, soft, vibrating, etc.

To communicate

Learn to communicate to the partner giving touch with directions on how to touch (e.g., keep touching there, that feels good, that is too hard, move to the right a bit).



Stage One

The first 15 minutes are about setting the stage.

This may include showering or having a bath with candles and soft music, adjusting the temperature of the room, putting kids to bed, ensuring privacy, setting ambiance, etc. You may find it useful to have lotion or oil to massage each other with (e.g., Johnson's baby lotion, massage bars/lotions from Lush, or products from the Body Shop).

During the second 15 minutes, one person (e.g., your partner) will touch the other person (e.g., you) head to toe, but as noted above, the genitals and breasts are offlimits.

The goal is not to evoke or sense sexual arousal; rather, it is to focus on and be mindful of the sensations generated, possibly describing them silently to yourself at each stage in a non-judgmental way. The person doing the touching uses their own interest and curiosity to guide where and how to touch. The person receiving the touch should provide feedback (verbal or non-verbal) to their partner about where to touch and not touch. When it is your turn to touch, take plenty of time to explore your partner's body, avoiding sexual areas: stroke, tickle, gently touch and massage your partner's body all over. Experiment with different sensations. Focus on your own pleasure in experiencing the texture, form and temperature of your partner's body. Try to discover the degrees of pressure and types of touch that your partner finds most pleasurable by encouraging feedback or by placing your hand under his/her hand so they can show you.

On your first turn at touching, get your partner to lie on their front and massage their back, neck, arms, buttocks and legs, not neglecting the hands and feet. On your second turn, get the other person to lie on their back and massage their neck, chest (if male), stomach, shoulders, arms and legs. You may also gently massage their scalp and face. When it is your turn to be touched, make sure you let your partner know what you like and don't like. Sometimes a touch will be too light, gentle or ticklish, or too heavy or uncomfortable. You can say how you feel, make appreciative noises, or move your partner's hand to where you want to be touched.

After 15 minutes, the roles are reversed and who previously was the receiver of touch now becomes the giver. Again, the goals for the person receiving the touch are relaxation, mindfulness of sensations, and communication to the partner giving the touch.

The final 15 minutes are devoted to general feedback in which you and your partner share how the experience was for you, discuss any emotional reactions, etc.

Stage Two

In the next stage of sensate focus, touching is expanded to include the breasts and genitals. The person doing the touching is instructed to begin with general body touching—not to immediately move to the genitals or breasts. Again, the emphasis is on awareness of physical sensations and not the expectation or anticipation of sexual arousal. Intercourse remains 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, you can indicate if you would like more or less pressure, a faster or slower pace, or a change to a different spot. The goal in providing your partner with this feedback is to give him/her some guidance, not to control how he/she is touching you.

In stages 2, 3, and beyond, orgasm and/or ejaculation are not the primary goal. However, if the couple wishes to proceed to this stage of arousal, that is acceptable.



Stage Three & Beyond



In stage 3 of sensate focus, instead of taking turns touching each other, try some mutual touching. The goal is to practice a more natural or real life form of physical interaction and to help each partner shift attention to a portion of his or her partner's body and away from watching his or her own response. Remember that no matter how sexually aroused you feel, intercourse is still off limits.

Later stages of sensate focus continue with mutual touching but also move into the female-on-top position, initially without attempting insertion of the penis (or dildo) into the vagina. In the female-on-top position, you can rub your partner's genitals against your own, regardless of the presence of arousal. Then, you can progress to putting the tip of the penis (or dildo) into your vagina, 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.

Note that if you are still experiencing vulvar-vaginal pain, you should not attempt these later stages.

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- 1 Masters, W. H., & Johnson, V. E. (1970). *Human sexual inadequacy*. Bantam Books.
 - 2 Avery-Clark, C., Weiner, L., & Adams-Clark, A. A. (2019). Sensate focus for sexual concerns: An updated, critical literature review. *Current Sexual Health Reports*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-019-00197-9>
 - 3 Weiner, L., & Avery-Clark, C. (2017). *Sensate Focus in Sex Therapy: The Illustrated Manual (1st ed.)*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315630038>



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