

# *Sensate Focus Exercise: Non-Sexual Intimacy*

Sex is a natural function. When it is not working well, it is because there are barriers to its natural expression. Therapy involves removing these barriers, not somehow enhancing the natural function itself.

One of the most common barriers to the natural expression of sexuality is distraction. This “Sensate Focus” exercise is a way of helping you to overcome distraction. Sensate focus is not a behavior, it is an attitude. You can touch each other a million times and nothing will change. The key is the attitude you bring to that touching.

The problem attitude is that sexually you are going to try to make something happen -- say, an orgasm -- for your partner. However, this is just like trying to make your partner digest their food or fall asleep. You can't make any of these things happen, you can just get out of the way of it happening naturally. The alternative to this “touching to make something happen” attitude is “touching for your own interest.” The best thing you can do for yourself and your partner is to be involved with your partner's body for YOUR interest. In fact, that's how most people start out thinking sexually. It is not selfish, because selfish would entail disregarding your partner's desires. You will care about your partner's desires, and your behavior will be within bounds your partner sets. However, you will not be trying to accomplish anything for your partner during your interactions. Your partner will actually enjoy being with you more if you enjoy it than if you were trying to do something specific to them.

The aim of this exercise is to help you to really enjoy physical contact with your partner, set aside distractions that may interfere, and to learn more about the kinds of touch and contact that are interesting and enjoyable for you. Hopefully, the exercise will allow both of you to feel more relaxed and to become aware of and concentrate more on the pleasurable feelings that enhance sex. You might also find that this will help you and your partner communicate better. Even more importantly, Sensate Focus should be enjoyable for both of you.

The expression of physical affection and pleasure through physical contact does not necessarily mean that touch has to be sexual in nature. The sensations experienced in all parts of the body are important, and it is possible for pleasure to occur that is not sexual and does not involve the genitals. There are many different types of touch that can provide pleasant feelings, such as stroking, caressing, kissing, licking, massaging, fondling, and tickling, just to mention a few. Different people find different forms of touch pleasurable at different times. It is important that you are aware of the pleasant feelings that touch can provide and be able to concentrate on these feelings without feeling tense, embarrassed, or distracted by other things.

We suggest that you practice the Sensate Focus exercise at a time when you are both feeling relaxed, comfortable, and not too tired. Some people prefer not to wear any clothes, while others find it better to keep their under-clothes on. It is up to you to decide what to wear, but you will

need to remove some clothing for back rubs or leg massages. It is best to pick a warm, comfortable place, at a time when you won't be disturbed. There should be no more than 2 drinks in any 24 hour period during this time, because although sometimes people think of alcohol as something that can help them relax and enhance positive feelings, it can also exacerbate negative feelings, particularly any feelings of anxiety you may be experiencing. There should also be no TV, no talking, no music, the phone should be off the hook, and no other distractions present at all. Remember, that right from the start the aim is not to be sexual, but to enjoy the pleasurable feelings.

We suggest that you take it in turns to explore and to receive. It is a good idea to decide in advance who will explore and who will receive. You might feel embarrassed about this, so perhaps you could toss a coin to decide. Try to work out beforehand when will be a good time to practice the exercises and then really make an effort to stick to this plan. Once you get started it will be much easier.

The explorer's goal is to interact with and explore their partner's body for their own interest. The explorer should focus on temperature (warmer vs. cooler), texture (smooth, rough), and pressure (hard vs. soft) of all the parts of the body. Try to experiment with different types of touch, perhaps using massage oils or talcum powders on different parts of the body. The face, neck, shoulders, back, stomach, arms, and legs can be explored, remembering to avoid any overt sexual contact. Don't think about anything else either (e.g., shopping list, kids, work). Instead, you'll have a specific focus. Don't worry about having to redirect your focus frequently. In fact, the more frequently you find your mind wandering from temperature, texture, or pressure and re-direct yourself back the better. **ESPECIALLY**, don't think about how it feels to your partner. Get right back to temperature, texture, and pressure. It is not your job to get into your partner's head to figure out what they want; the goal of this exercise is to focus on your own sensations.

The person who is receiving should just relax and concentrate on enjoying the experience. Concentrate on how you are feeling and what types of touch you find pleasurable and the parts of your body where you enjoy being touched. If your partner uses some form of contact that you do not find pleasurable (i.e. results in pain or discomfort), it is important to communicate this in a sensitive and positive way. Gradually, you will find these exercises easier to do and we realize that you may find them difficult at first... but please try really hard to make them work.

After you have had your turn at being the explorer or receiver for about 10 minutes, it is time to change over. We suggest that you take it in turns as to who will be the explorer each time you practice these exercises. Then, try to make each session last about 40 minutes, which should give you both 2 chances at being the explorer and receiver. One last point: you are welcome to do less of this exercise but not more. Occasionally, you may feel tempted to break the rules and move on to include sexual areas of the body or even to take part in sexual intercourse. Please try not to do this, as it goes against the whole aim of the exercises. The aim is not to become sexually aroused, but to allow you to practice these focusing exercises in a relaxed way, where you do not feel pressured at all to take part in sexual activities.