

SENSATE FOCUS

Sensate focus is an exercise that uses mindfulness skills to reintroduce sexual intimacy, without a strict focus on erections, orgasms, or any other sexual “goal”. Whether couples are currently sexually intimate or not, sensate focus allows you to experience intimacy in a new way.

THE GOAL IS NO GOAL:

With **sensate focus**, you are encouraged simply to adopt a **non-goal directed approach to intimacy**. That is, taking the attitude that whatever happens, happens. This might include you and your partner taking turns at touching one another and simply experiencing those touches, mindfully noticing what occurs, and having **no particular goal in mind** (e.g., no goal of arousal, erection, orgasm, penetration).

The purpose of sensate focus is to **un-pair** sex from all the crappy stuff that gets associated with sex over time (e.g., guilt, low desire, pain, embarrassment, self-judgement, performance demands).

With Sensate Focus, we are trying to accomplish 3 things:

1. **PRACTICE COMMUNICATING SEXUAL NEEDS:** You have a right to ask for what you want in the bedroom, in the same way that your partner has a right. It's not fair to expect your partner to read your mind!
2. **BEING “SELFISH”:** If we focus all of our attention on the other person, how can we ensure that we're getting enough enjoyment to stay turned on, or to have sexual desire?
3. **BRINGING MINDFULNESS INTO THE BEDROOM:** Mindfulness has been shown to improve people's sex lives! Sensate Focus is the perfect opportunity to practice mindfulness with your partner.

PLAN PLAN PLAN!

In sensate focus, planning is *necessary*. **Not all good sexual encounters need to be spontaneous.** Think about it: Consider some valued, important, enjoyable things in your life (e.g., your career, spending time with family or friends, hobbies, going on vacation). Of these activities, how many of them do you just expect to happen spontaneously, without any planning or communication at all? Probably not many. So why do we expect sex to come spontaneously, too?

Guiding each other during sensate focus is necessary for creating a healthy, happy sexual life together (remember we aren't mind-readers, and we can't *know* what our partner wants unless they *tell* us! And vice versa!). That may feel awkward at first. In fact, *expect* it to be awkward and a

bit artificial. With practice, it will soon feel much more comfortable. Experiencing sex or intimacy so differently over a number of times in a short space of time can really change old patterns of thinking and being.

A regular mindfulness practice will really assist sensate focus.

THE 4 STAGES OF SENSATE FOCUS:

There are 4 stages to sensate focus. We generally recommend practicing 1 time per week, but the more you do it the more benefit you will see. With this exercise, you should practice each stage for the very minimum of 1 week; but note that results tend to be best when each stage is practiced for longer than a week. The general guideline is to only move onto the next stage when both partners are completely comfortable – bordering on bored – with the current stage. This may take a while.

Also, in more traditional sensate focus practices, the couple would agree not to attempt penetration at all until they reach the fourth stage (this could take weeks or even months). We take a less strict approach. Instead, we recommend that if a couple is still engaging in penetration, and both partners agree, the couple does not need to stop penetration all together before they reach the fourth stage. However, it is very important that **no attempts at penetration happen immediately after a couple practices sensate focus**. This is because if one or both members of the couple are anticipating an attempt at penetration during the exercise, then they are not practicing the goal of having no goal! In other words, if penetration *might* happen after sensate focus, then the pressure to perform is still on. We want to eliminate that pressure and practice being sexually intimate with absolutely no goals.

The 4 stages of sensate focus are as follows:

STAGE 1: No genitals, breasts, or buttocks, and no penetration attempts

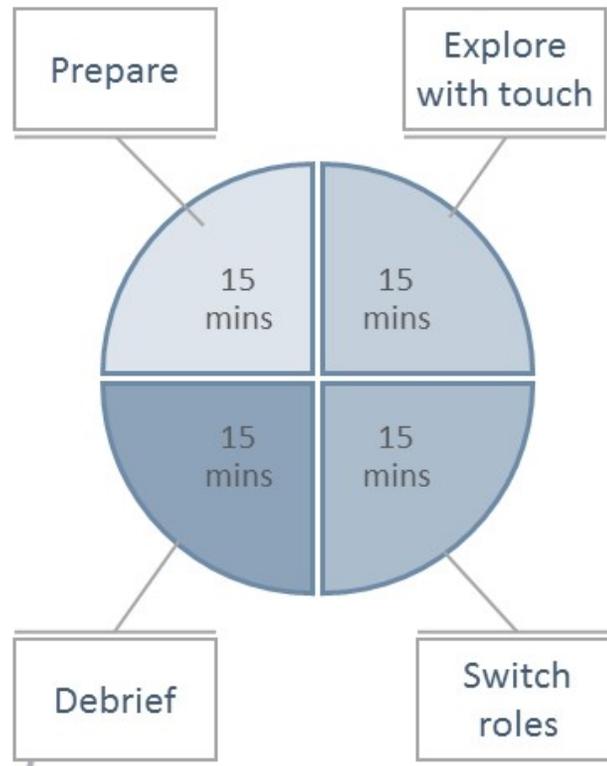
STAGE 2: No genitals, but breasts and buttocks are ok and no penetration attempts

STAGE 3: Genitals, breasts, and buttocks are ok and no penetration attempts

STAGE 4: All body parts are ok; partners touch each other at the same time. Penetration attempts are ok.

WHAT SENSATE FOCUS LOOKS LIKE:

Make a commitment to practice sensate focus approximately **1 time per week**. You should set aside **1 hour** for this activity. That hour will look like this:



15 MINUTES: PREPARE! Find a comfortable spot, make sure you and your partner will be uninterrupted for the duration of this hour. Some people like to light candles, turn on “mood lighting”, or play some nice music.

15 MINUTES: EXPLORE WITH TOUCH! Partners designate themselves as the *giver* or the *receiver* of touch. For this 15 minutes, the giver will touch the receiver all over the body. It is each partner’s responsibility to focus on the sensations of either doing the touching or receiving the touching. Think about the different qualities of touch: temperature, pressure, texture. During this time, it is the receiver’s responsibility to provide feedback (verbal or non-verbal) if there is touch that they do not like. Remember that providing feedback is the most important thing that the receiver can do, as it reassures the giver that they will not be giving unwanted touch or making their partner uncomfortable in any way.

15 MINUTES: SWITCH ROLES! Now the person who was the giver becomes the receiver of touch, and vice versa. Again, remember that there is no goal in this exercise other than to pay attention to the sensations of either touching or being touched. Also, the receiver must be sure to provide feedback, if needed.

15 MINUTES: DEBRIEF! This part is the most important! Take the last 15 minutes to *talk* about what the experience was like for both parties. Remember to provide feedback in non-critical and loving ways. Explore with one another what came up for you both. What did you learn? What did you experience?

WHAT HAPPENS IF MY PARTNER OR I GET AROUSED?

Physical arousal, mental arousal, or sexual desire might happen during sensate focus. If you are at stage 4, you may decide to attempt penetrative intercourse if both parties agree. If you are not at stage 4, however, you and your partner should have a game plan for how to manage the arousal. This is a conversation that should happen during the 15 minutes of preparation. Here are 3 options for dealing with arousal/desire during sensate focus:

- 1. IGNORE IT.** Know that the arousal will go away with time. Simply continue the sensate focus activity without changing your behaviour in response to the arousal/desire.
- 2. DEAL WITH IT.** The person who experiences the arousal/desire will excuse themselves from the room and deal with it. That may be via a shower, distraction, or self-stimulation. The person will return after the arousal/desire has been dealt with.
- 3. GO WITH IT...YOURSELF.** If the decision is for the person experiencing arousal/desire to “go with it” in the moment, they can bring themselves to climax with their partner present. However, it is important that the person who chooses to bring themselves to climax does so on their own, without the aid of their partner. Again, this is to ensure that there is no “goal” or “pressure” on either of partners to provide pleasure. Perhaps both members of the couple may choose to bring themselves to climax in each other’s presence. This is fine, as long as each person is responsible for their own climax (i.e., each person can masturbate on their own in the presence of their partner).