

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:

The exercise consists of a hierarchy of structured and explorative touching **with no particular goal in mind**. You are encouraged simply to take the attitude that whatever happens, happens. That is, there is no goal of arousal, erection, orgasm, or even penetration.

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

BENEFITS OF SENSATE FOCUS

The main benefit of sensate focus is to help you dial down the volume on your internal mind chatter and focus on tuning into your body. Being in your body, focusing on the experience (mindful), and being present for your own curiosity and enjoyment all help with intimacy and sexual difficulties (e.g. low desire, arousal, erections).

Other benefits include:

- Learning to reduce/manage anxiety
- Learning to address self and partner pressure
- Increasing comfort and emotional connection
- Cultivating a sense of sexual desire

Now, let's get started!

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR SENSATE FOCUS HIERARCHY

Together with your therapist, you will build your individualized sensate focus hierarchy to best suit your needs.

A general sequence for sensate focus involves:

1. Self sensate focus
2. Breast, chest, and genitals off limits
3. Breast, chest, and genitals are okay
4. Mutual touching without breasts, chest, and genitals
5. Mutual touching with breasts, chest, and genitals

Now is the time to complete your individual hierarchy located at the end of this handout.

STEP 2: 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.

We suggest that sensate focus be a scheduled priority occurring 2-3 times per week. That's the equivalent of 3 episodes of your favourite TV show! Try and arrange for 30-60 minutes of uninterrupted time per session.

Your therapist at the [Tri Health Clinic](#) can work with you to plan and problem-solve if you have any challenges practicing Sensate Focus.

STEP 3: THE MAIN EVENT- SENSATE FOCUS

What Sensate Focus looks like

1. Preparation (5-15 minutes)
2. Partner A touches partner B (5-15 minutes)
3. Partner B touches partner A (5-15 minutes)
4. Debrief (5-15 minutes)

Preparation

- ✓ Clothing off or as little clothing as comfortable
- ✓ Limit alcohol or other substances
- ✓ Make your space comfortable. Have some lighting on and make sure the room is at a comfortable temperature.
- ✓ Limit your verbal communication

During sensate focus

- ✓ Each partner will take roughly 5-15 minutes to explore their partner with touch. You do not need to set a timer (but some people find it is helpful to do so)! You are simply aiming to spend enough time exploring your partner to allow for your initial anxiety or discomfort to lower but not too long as to get bored
- ✓ Each partner is **touching for themselves** and focusing on their own experience of touch. You are **not** focusing on what you think your partner may enjoy or find pleasurable.
- ✓ In order to do this, you will be focused on 3 properties of touch (“TPT”):
 1. **TEMPERATURE.** Is the area cool or warm?
 2. **PRESSURE.** What happens when I apply soft or hard, light or firm pressure?
 3. **TEXTURE.** Is the area smooth or rough?
- ✓ When your attention drifts to anything other than TPT (and it will!), redirect it back to the touch sensations
- ✓ The partner being touched (the “touchee”) can protect the toucher from doing anything that is physically or emotionally uncomfortable or ticklish by nonverbally moving their hand away
- ✓ During sensate focus, the touchee is also focused on the sensations of touch applied to their body (i.e. TPT)

After sensate focus

- ✓ Take a few moments to enjoy each other's company before moving on to debriefing

STEP 4: DEBRIEF

Debriefing is an essential part of sensate focus. Use the following questions as a guideline for reflection:

- ✓ Were you able to touch for yourself and your own interest?
- ✓ Were you able to focus on temperature, pressure, and texture?
- ✓ What were the distractions?
- ✓ Were you able to return your focus to TPT when you found yourself distracted?
- ✓ Did you need to protect your partner from doing anything uncomfortable? If so, did you move their hand away?

At first, it is a good idea to keep a journal of these debriefing questions as they can help guide your discussion with your therapist.

TROUBLESHOOTING: WHAT HAPPENS IF MY PARTNER OR I GET AROUSED?

Physical arousal, mental arousal, or sexual desire might happen during sensate focus. You and your partner should have a game plan for how to manage the arousal. This is a conversation that should happen during the preparation stage. Some options for dealing with arousal/desire during sensate focus include ignoring it or excusing yourself to deal with it. Just make sure you plan ahead of time so sensate focus does not lead to sexual intercourse – that would defeat the purpose!

All of the clinicians at the [Tri Health Clinic](#) are expertly trained in the use of Sensate Focus. Know that we are here to help if you get stuck along the way. [Contact us today to get started.](#)

MY SENSATE FOCUS HIERARCY

Use the space below to complete your own sensate focus hierarchy. Remember that each step will be mutually agreed upon ahead of time and should be completed at least twice before moving on to the next one. Only move up when you are both ready (i.e. low anxiety or discomfort).

STEP	DESCRIPTION
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