



SexHealthMatters.org is brought to you by the Sexual Medicine Society of North America, Inc.

Sensate Focus

Amanda was nervous about bringing Paul with her for sex counseling. She had struggled with sexual relations for all of her adult life after sexual abuse as a teenager. She had made some progress with therapy. But this was the first time she had ever included a partner; indeed, it was the first time she had ever trusted a man enough to even consider it.

But Paul was different from the other men she'd dated. He was patient and understanding. He was willing to take it slow. And he wanted to help her through this process so that they could enjoy sex together.

She didn't enjoy it much, she had to admit. As much as he assured her that everything was fine, she was always worried that she wasn't pleasing him and that he would leave the relationship as a result. These thoughts distracted her from sex, made her body tense, and kept her from enjoying anything.

After a few sessions, when the therapist felt she knew them and their dynamics as a couple, they started a technique called sensate focus. Today, we'll talk a bit about what this technique involves and how it may help couples.

What is Sensate Focus?

Developed by sex researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson, sensate focus emphasizes the physical sensations of touch. The technique starts with non-sexual touching and becomes more sexual as weeks go by. It is designed to foster trust and intimacy between partners and can help reduce anxiety by focusing on mutual pleasure.

The stages of sensate focus can vary depending on the sex therapist and couple, but in general, the process goes like this:

- **Stage 1.** Partners take turns touching each other in non-sexual ways, focusing on areas like the hands, feet, face, and torso. Couples may be clothed or unclothed. They are free to explore each other's bodies as much as they like, but are not allowed to touch the genitals or any other sexual areas, such as the breasts or nipples. Intercourse and penetration are not allowed.

- **Stage 2.** At this point, couples touch each other's genitals as well as the other parts of the body touched during stage 1, taking turns. The goal is to bring pleasure and become more aware of how the partner responds to certain types of touching. Again, intercourse and penetration are not allowed, even if the touching session becomes very arousing. Some couples try oral stimulation during this phase and some participants do reach orgasm, but that is not the end goal.
- **Stage 3.** During this phase, couples start mutual touching. They may also try gentle penetration, which may occur with a sex toy, finger, or penis. This might just involve inserting the tip of the penis into the vagina. The partner being penetrated controls the depth and force of penetration. Eventually, the couple may proceed to full intercourse.

Why Do Some Therapists Recommend Sensate Focus?

Sensate focus can provide couples with the opportunity to reconnect with each other. For some couples, making intercourse off limits reduces the anxiety to perform. With this pressure lifted, couples can rediscover what they enjoy about intimacy.

For Amanda, sensate focus was a relief. She did not worry about disappointing Paul and found that she could concentrate more on the sexual pleasure they experienced. This helped them bond and made her want to explore other ways to be intimate with him.

Is Sensate Focus for Everyone?

Not necessarily. While sensate focus is helpful for many couples, others find other sex therapy strategies more beneficial. An experienced therapist can guide couples on the most effective techniques for them.

However, if you think sensate focus would be worthwhile for you and your partner, be sure to talk to your doctor, counselor, or sex therapist. He or she can help you tailor the technique for your situation.

Resources

Counselling-Matters.org.uk

“Sensate Focus”

<http://counselling-matters.org.uk/sites/counselling-matters/files/SensateFocus.pdf>

[Discovery Health](#)

“Sensate Focus”

(April 25, 2005)

<http://health.howstuffworks.com/sexual-health/sexuality/sensate-focus-dictionary.htm>

University of Notre Dame Marital Therapy and Research Clinic

“Sensate Focus Exercise: Non-Sexual Intimacy”

http://www3.nd.edu/~pmtrc/Handouts/Sensate_Focus.pdf