Sensate focus is an exercise program prescribed for many couples during sex therapy and consists of touching, caressing, and sensual massage during noncoital loveplay. This technique was first described by Masters and Johnson (1970, 1986) and has been used in sex therapy since that time. Levine (1976) described sensate focus as being one of the key elements in sex therapy. Sensate focus is also used as a phrase to describe intimate touch that may be sensual or sexual. Initially the exercises are done without leading to intercourse to alleviate the stress and pressure couples may feel with performance anxiety related to intercourse. The goal of this therapy is to promote physical closeness and positive touch to increase intimacy and this is demonstrated in Kaplan’s The Illustrated Manual of Sexual Therapy (1987). Sensate focus is used in conjunction with an explicit sex history and physical exam, exploration of the overall and sexual relationship, and with other treatment options (medications, vacuum devices, etc.).

Sensate focus exercises consist of planned methodic home tasks aimed at exploring each other’s bodies through touching, stroking, kissing, embracing, and caressing in ways that are mutually gratifying. Couples allow approximately 30 to 60 minutes a day for loveplay sessions. Focus is placed on the feelings and sensations of each partner, not performance. Each person assumes the active and passive roles at different times during the session. This technique allows patients to know and understand each other’s bodies and can be highly effective (Renshaw, 1996).

**Sensate Focus Stages**

There are several stages (see Table 1) typically associated with sensate focus according to Masters and Johnson (1986), which are described by Ramage (1998). In the first stage, each partner explores the other’s body while avoiding the genitals and breasts. The second stage allows exploration of the entire body including genitals and breasts, but intercourse is still forbidden. Focus may be put on different types of touching and stroking of the genitals and the sensations associated with this. Mutual masturbation resulting in orgasm may be an option at this stage of sensate focus. During the final stage of sensate focus exercises, intercourse is permissible. It is still crucial for the couple to continue with mutually satisfying loveplay prior to and during intercourse. This stage begins with allowing the penis to simply be contained within the vagina without thrusting. Couples progress through the levels of this stage at their own pace. After sessions where the penis has simply been placed in the vagina, couples next progress to the stage where gentle thrusting or rotating is acceptable. Finally the couple progresses to intercourse with thrusting to the point of orgasm being permissible. Couples must consent and agree on the rate of progression through

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the stages and levels of the sensate focus exercises. These stages can be modified for gay couples to include their sexual practices. Couples may be given very specific assignments each week, such as facial exploration only (Renshaw, 1984) or a full-body embrace for a certain amount of time. Each level builds upon the last and it is important to go through the pleasurable portions of the previous exercises during the current loveplay exercise.

The focus of each session is placed on experiencing each other’s bodies and determining what brings each person pleasure. Each individual is responsible for communicating the experiences that bring him or her the greatest pleasure or enjoyment. Self-awareness of feelings and sensations are crucial to sensate focus. Couples are highly encouraged to be creative with each other and to try new and exciting things. For one person the lighter touch of a feather may be most pleasing while another person may prefer a more aggressive deep touch. Couples are encouraged to write in a journal or express feelings related to their loveplay exercises to further promote self and partner awareness. The established ground rules and focused exercises alleviate and diminish feelings of self-doubt and anxiety.

**Recapturing Intimacy**

Sensate focus allows couples to enjoy exploring each other’s bodies and learning more about pleasing one another. Couples should avoid the pressures of performance and fear of failure during these exercises. The partners work as a team to rediscover each other’s bodies. The exercises are aimed at helping couples recapture loving intimacy and gaining knowledge to improve the overall and sexual relationship.

The urologic health care clinician can teach clients to use sensate focus, along with other prescribed treatment options, to recapture the intimacy and sensuality they seek in their relationship. Giving patients this type of homework gives them permission to focus on each other on a regular basis and to enjoy each other’s bodies. Clinicians may teach sensate focus to patients in a variety of ways. From a practical perspective, clinicians may not have multiple visits with patients, but a simple sheet explaining sensate focus can be given to clients during an office visit. If the couple will return to the clinic for another visit, the clinician may ask them to report (in writing or verbally) on their progress with sensate focus. It may only be possible for a couple to do a few sessions of sensate focus, but however many times they do the exercises it can lead to new and exciting discoveries and more sensual loveplay. Many patients express a longing for increased sensual and sexual closeness and sensate focus allows them to regain those lost intimate moments together.

**References**


