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This text is a heavily condensed version of a chapter entitled “Sex and Sensuality,” (pp 25-41) of the book “Heterosexuality,” written by William H. Masters, PhD, Virginia E. Johnson, and Robert C. Kolodny, MD; HarperCollins, New York, 1994. Despite the title of the book, these exercises are applicable to (and adaptable for) couples of all sexes, genders, and sexual identities.

What is sensate focus?

Sensate focus is about touching and being touched — two distinct activities. You can maximize the potential of sensate focus by beginning without preconceived notions— of what you will experience, how it will feel, how much pleasure it will produce. In other words, begin with an open mind so as not to color your experience and feelings.

Try to avoid being judgmental or evaluative. Judgmental thinking boxes us in: Was it good? boring? ecstatic? Evaluative thinking— judgmental thinking that occurs as something is happening, not when it’s over— is even more self-defeating as it puts you in the position of being an observer rather than a participant. Observing brains are blocked from *experiencing*; they think too much and feel too little.

Instead of judging or evaluating, try to simply “be” and “experience.” *Notice what’s happening in terms of physical feelings.* By simply noticing how your partner’s skin feels (smooth, rough, warm, moist) you avoid evaluating and are able to simply focus on the experience.

Sensuality vs sexuality

Set the stage for sensuality rather than sexuality. This means that no matter how turned on you might become, please consider “off limits” the touching of genitals or breasts, having oral sex, intercourse, or other type of sexual involvement.

This “prohibition” sets a clear focus on the *sensual* side of touching as a distinct entity in its own right. It also serves to remove any pressure on either partner to respond in some particular way. In addition, it allows for new discoveries and avoids ingrained behavior patterns. Many couples find that time spent on the sensate focus process can be a useful and pleasant way to reawaken their own sensual (and sexual) feelings.

Try these exercises when both partners are relaxed, rested, and feeling kind toward one another. Do your best to ensure privacy and reduce distractions. Allow 30 to 40 minutes to practice. Note: These exercises rely upon extensive, unimpeded skin-to-skin contact. Nudity is optimal, but if it’s not possible, avoid constricting clothing.

Step 1: non-genital touching

Ideally, both partners are undressed, showered, and free of watches or jewelry. Designate one partner as the “toucher” and the other as the “receiver” to get things started.

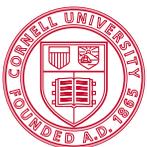


Key ingredients: Two trusting partners of any sex/gender.

The receiving partner should primarily focus on their own sensations while being touched. For the moment, they are not to reciprocate touching. Instead, the receiver should simply notice the sensations—not in terms of evaluating or analyzing them, but experiencing the touch fully. The receiving partner should, however, speak up if the “toucher” does something physically or psychologically uncomfortable. We recommend this touching continue for at least 15 minutes—especially since, at the beginning, it may seem a bit awkward or unnatural, and a few minutes might be needed to get past the initial strangeness. On the other hand, we urge touching not be prolonged to the point of boredom or fatigue for either partner.

Here are some suggestions to consider with regard to the various types of touching that can be explored.

- Play a “texture awareness” game. Notice differences in the surface texture of skin on different parts of the body. How does the texture on the cheeks compare to the backs of the hands, calves, or neck? Which skin is especially silky or supple?
- Vary the firmness and tempo of touch. Feel the difference between a long-drawn-out, touch and a slightly firmer and quicker touch. Switch to a staccato type of rhythm for a while, and then back to a smoother, more languorous touch. Does changing the tempo of your touch alter sensation?
- See how touching with your whole hand feels compared to touching just with fingertips. Notice how touching with two hands differs (or whether it differs) compared to the tactile



sensations from just using one hand.

Below are three points of clarification about the process:

- If you find yourself becoming sexually-aroused, avoid turning this exploration into a sexual encounter.
- Either partner can ask to end the touching session. If you start to fall asleep, try again another time when you are both well-rested.
- The point of sensate focus is not to give your partner a massage (although that may be wonderful on another occasion) or to touch in a way that you think will make them happy. The point is to allow the person doing the touching to take in a variety of sensory experiences and to notice what they feel like, without any distractions or “shoulds.”

The second part of this exercise simply involves reversing the roles. Unless necessary, try not to take a break before switching. Avoid comparing touching styles. There’s no reason to take the same approach to touching or use the same touching sequence; you are two different people with individual feelings, instincts, and perceptions.

Some couples enjoy repeating Step 1 for a series of days. Often they notice things differently each time, and they also try out variations in technique and timing that allow them to experiment in a non-pressured way with their sensual perceptions. The decision on whether to repeat this exercise or to move on to the next step is flexible: there’s no test to pass before you “graduate” to the next level.

Step 2: include genital and/or breast touching

In this next step, the breasts and genitals are included in the exploration. *Kissing and intercourse are not.* The basic guidance for Step 2 is the same as before: privacy, nudity, cleanliness, etc. And, to begin, one person should be designated the “toucher” and one the “receiver.”

It is often advisable for the receiver to start out lying face-down on the bed to facilitate this process. Even though the “ban” on touching the breasts and genitals is no longer in effect, the toucher should not to change the nature of the overall touching experience. The point is not to try to be turned on or to make

something happen for your partner, but to pay attention to your sensations in the context of exploring your partner’s body as a sensual, sensory tactile experience.

If the impulse toward sexual touch is overwhelmingly tempting, think back and try to repeat some of what you learned in the previous step of sensate focus. Slow things down. Feel the curve of your partner’s back and compare it to the contour of their hips; trace along the edge of their spine and see how this feels compared to the softer tissue on the back of their upper arms. Run your fingers through their hair as though feeling its texture and thickness for the first time. After you are comfortable and feeling in the rhythm of the moment, as well as feeling you are connecting with the sensations that are registering through your fingertips, then shift the receiver into a new position.

Place a few pillows behind the toucher’s back so they can sit against a wall with legs slightly spread in a V. The receiver sits between the toucher’s legs, their back against the toucher’s chest. By reaching down or around the receiver, the toucher can reach most of the receiver’s body (perhaps not the lower legs and feet).

At this juncture, as the toucher continues a general exploration of the receiver’s body, a new twist is added to enhance nonverbal communication: the receiver puts a hand on top of the toucher’s as they continue exploration. The intention of this “hand-riding” technique is *not* for the receiver to suddenly to take the lead in directing the action but rather to provide a simple, quick, effective way to transmit additional information to the toucher as they explore in a non-goal-directed manner; however, the receiver has the opportunity to provide nonverbal feedback about subtle preferences.

Although it is not the toucher’s job to anticipate the receiver’s feelings, responding to silent messages provides a way to integrate the receiver’s reactions. With the hand-riding technique, the receiver can show a partner where they like a firmer touch, where they’d like to linger, etc. The receiver can also indicate when a slower touch might be especially sensual, or when to move from one part of the body to another.

The toucher doesn’t have to abide; but with a little practice, they can learn how

to combine personal feelings and needs with messages provided by the receiver. The toucher should also recognize that a signal to their hand is not a criticism of what’s happening; instead, it means, “how about if we try this?”

As mentioned earlier, the toucher is free to incorporate genital touching into the tactile explorations. However, they should not shift the nature of touching to a sexual experience. This means, for example, that it is usually best to touch briefly in or around the genital area and then move elsewhere on the receiver’s body for a while, returning to the genitals in the natural ebb and flow of exploratory touching. When the toucher adds gentle caresses of the breasts and genitals to a broader repertoire of touching that includes all of the partner’s body, then the range of sensual experiences will be expanded.

If the receiver become sexually excited, the toucher doesn’t need to direct their attention to genital stimulation, but if their partner wants to receive further genital touching, either partner can provide stroking (with or without hand riding to guide tempo and firmness). If either partner feels the touching has turned into an obligation, it’s advisable to stop.

Here are a few additional pointers to keep in mind:

- Feel free to move into positions different from the one suggested (although generally receivers report feeling especially relaxed in the position described).
- Receivers should give their partner signals while being touched in the genital area so the toucher doesn’t guess at what is preferred. It isn’t necessary to know in advance what will feel pleasing, only to be open to feedback.
- Abstain from kissing, as it often pushes people into “cruise control” when it comes to sensual/sexual behavior, and what you are trying to accomplish here is to break old patterns, not solidify them.
- If the receiver finds they aroused enough to orgasm, it is okay to let orgasm occur. Don’t however, try to make it happen.

As in Step 1, either participant can say “I’d like to switch” during Step 2. There is no specific time requirement or limitation, although once again, try to avoid having either person becoming

bored or tired. Be sure both partners experience both roles before ending.

Step 3: adding lotion

One of the ways to enhance sensory awareness is to alter the medium of touch. Adding lotion or oil creates a slicker, silkier dimension. We suggest using a nonalcoholic, hypo allergenic lotion, but baby oil will do.* You may want to warm the container of oil or lotion in a basin of water before using it. Avoid dripping the oil/lotion onto your partner's body. Instead, put it in the palm of your hand and rub it briefly to warm it.

Some couples like to begin touching without lotion and then add it partway into the experience for contrast. Others experiment by using it on one hand and not the other, comparing and contrasting sensations. Some use the lotion from the very beginning. Whichever approach you choose, the point of the exercise is still to focus on sensation (not massage).

STEP 4: mutual touching

Now, it's time to extend the scope of the touching experience by removing the artificiality of "your turn/my turn". This gives each person the opportunity to use their newly improved sensory awareness to focus simultaneously on fingertip sensations from touching your partner and on the physical sensations your own body registers from being touched.

Continue to refrain from kissing and intercourse. Remember, what you are trying to achieve here is a way of adding new sensual dimensions to your lives.

If you decide that you are becoming too sexually (*as opposed to sensually*) focused, it's perfectly fine to lie back and let your partner do the touching for a while. It's also useful to direct attention to less sexual areas. Try to steer clear of sexual fantasy during the exercises.

One variation in the mutual touching is to incorporate oral stimulation as part of your sensual play. This doesn't mean oral sex per se; it means using your lips and tongue as a way of sensually exploring your partner's body. There is a big difference in these two intentions. If you've engaged in oral sex before, see how different it can be when you approach it as *sensual* exploration.

Another variation you might want to try

is changing the scene of your sensate focus activities (e.g., from the bed to the shower). This can provide an interesting change of feelings and perceptions.

Step 5: sensual intercourse

Now it's time to include sensual (rather than sexual) intercourse. In *this* version of sensate focus, you extend the gains made in emphasizing your awareness of physical sensations into the realm of genital contact. Here again, the goal is to discover what feels interesting and pleasurable.

Start this exercise with a period of general body (non-genital) touching. Allow yourselves to get into a rhythm and focus: be aware of what your fingertips are telling you and don't worry about becoming aroused.

Gradually extend the scope of the touching to include exploration of the breasts and genitals. Don't be shy about using the hand-riding technique to show your partner what you like, but avoid directing every move.

When you are both comfortable, move into a position that could allow for intercourse—but do not insert a penis, finger, or other object yet. Use the same principles of sensate focus you've been using to continue your touching, but now extend the touching so your genital areas can touch, too. Explore all of the sensations of touching and rubbing.

At this stage, the "recipient" doesn't need to be a passive participant. They can actively touch anywhere that is interesting or pleasurable, too. Notice the sensations you both are receiving from this type of contact. If sexual intercourse is desirable, start with only partial penetration.

Go slowly and take time to fully feel the sensations of warmth and contact. Hold absolutely still for a few seconds; see what different sensations subtle movements produce. Slowly withdraw for 20 or 30 seconds and then resume intercourse.

Once you've tried such sensual variations, you may certainly want to move deeper or faster. Some couples find it's enjoyable to establish a quicker, shallower thrusting for a while. (In fact, many women find this especially sensual, since nerve endings in the vagina

A note about erections ...

If the toucher develops an erection, try to ignore it during the sensate exercise and remain focused on the receiver.

If the recipient becomes erect, the toucher can stroke the penis for a bit but then deliberately move their hand to a different area, rather than staying focused on the genitals. In addition to touching or stroking the penis (whether or not it is erect), the toucher might also use fingertips to explore the scrotum, testicles, and perineum.

are more heavily concentrated in the outer portion of the vagina). However you proceed, try to keep your focus on sensations, and give yourself the opportunity to enjoy this "new" way of having intercourse.

If you enjoy sensual intercourse and want to use this approach from time to time, let your partner know in advance what you're desiring. Communication is key to a healthy sensuality and sexuality.

10/18/19

* Note: as a reminder, oil-based lubricants should never be used with latex products, as they can degrade/break the latex