

Sensate focus

The following text is reprinted for the education of Gannett patients and clients. It is an excerpt from Chapter 2, 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.

What is Sensate focus?

Sensate focus is about touching and being touched. Many couples think that this sounds about as exciting as wet sand, but the truth is that the art of touching and the art of being touched have a lot more to them than most people realize. One of the ways of maximizing the potential of sensate focus is to begin without any preconceived notions of what you will feel, how good it will be, or how much pleasure it will produce. In other words, even if the idea doesn't seem thrilling, you need to start out with an open mind about it, because otherwise your expectations tend to color your experience and feelings.

You may also need to reorient your thinking away from being judgmental and evaluative to simply being and experiencing. In sexual matters, judgmental thinking almost always boxes us in:

Was it good? Was it boring? Was it ecstatic? Evaluative thinking— which we define as a form of judgmental thinking

that occurs as something is happening, not after it's over— is even more self-defeating in erotic moments. Just as being a restaurant critic changes the experience of dining out, being evaluative as sex is happening invariably puts you in the position of being an observer as a participant. The part of your mind that is observing is blocked from experiencing, with the all-too-common result that you think too much and feel too little.

The judgmental/evaluative posture also forces us to pigeonhole what's happening in terms of loaded words and concepts. Sex gets rated as good or bad, boring or sizzling, explosive or tame in an artificial way. Part of getting into the sensate focus experience is to avoid judging or evaluating what's happening and to concentrate instead on noticing what's happening in terms of physical feelings. By noticing whether your partner's skin feels smooth or warm or moist, you avoid having evaluative, judgmental thoughts and simply focus on the experience.

In order to set the stage for a new type of touching that puts the emphasis is on sensuality, rather than sexuality, we instruct couples to abstain from any type of sexual activity during the first step of sensate focus. This means that no matter how turned on they might become, touching the genitals (or the woman's breasts) having oral sex, having intercourse, or having any other type of sexual involvement is off limits. This prohibition is partly intended to set a clear focus on the sensual side of touching as a distinct entity in its own right. (Of course, learning to be sensual has something to do with being sexual, too.) It also serves to remove any pressure on either partner to need to respond in some particular way—getting an erection, becoming sexually aroused, or responding in a certain manner to a partner's needs. In addition, this approach is likely to be very different from the way couples usually approach touching, and this is exactly the point: it allows for new discoveries and avoids ingrained behavior patterns that may have gotten stale and unrewarding.

Many couples will find that the time spent on the sensate focus process can be a useful and pleasant way to reawaken their own sensual (and sexual) feelings.

I suggest that you try these exercises when you and your partner are both relaxed, well rested, and affable toward one another. Trying to start at a time when either one of you is tense, tired, or grumpy is not advisable. In the privacy of your own home, at a time when you won't be interrupted by children, telephone or cell phone call, or other distractions and when you have at least 30 to 40 minutes to yourselves, you can begin. As a practical matter, I suggest that it's best to decide in advance who will pick the time for the first touching session; after that, alternate who chooses, so you don't have to deal with the problem of "Are you ready to start touching now?" queries and unnecessary negotiations or guesswork.

STEP ONE: Non-Genital Touching

There are two parts to this step, which we call A and B. For illustrative purposes and grammatical simplicity, assume that it the woman who decides when to begin in part A. (Second-guessing her timing isn't very useful and can get things started on a sour note, so don't turn down her invitation unless you're really tired, distracted or emotionally wrung out.) From the beginning, both partners should be completely undressed. We also suggest the removal of earrings, watches, necklaces, and rings. It also helps to be sure that you're not sweaty or dirty, so a preliminary bath or shower, possibly together may be in order. It isn't necessary, however, to be obsessive about cleanliness, and it's best, too, not to pour on perfume or cologne or aftershave lotion. If nudity distresses either partner, or if overwhelming hostility is a fact of life in your relationship, it is advisable to get professional help before trying these exercises.

The one who issues the invitation to begin is the ACTIVE participant in part A. Her partner lies flat on his back on the bed (or even the floor) his role, for now,



is simply to take in the sensations he is feeling as he is touched by his partner, not to reciprocate her touch (or comment on her touching, or what he is feeling) in any way. Remembering that the man's genitals are off limits, the woman is free to begin exploring her partner's body in any other way that interest her in order to discover what she feels as she does this. Because starting can be awkward, some women prefer to begin at one spot on the man's body-say, the neck or feet-and work their way up or down from there. Other women don't need a definite plan of action and simply explore the various textures and temperatures and contours of their partners' body without any preconceived idea of how they will proceed. Whichever way you choose, the point of this exercise, as the term *sensate focus* implies, is to zero in on the sensations you are experiencing as you touch. There is no right way or wrong way to do this, and the point of this touching opportunity is not to try and turn your partner on, or to make him feel good, or to give him a massage: The point is to try to live through your fingertips, taking in each and every physical sensation they provide, while doing whatever happens to interest you at the moment.

Some women become fascinated by the fine details in the contours and angles on their partner's face. They may never before have taken the opportunity to trace their fingertips lightly along his lips, or to feel the difference in texture between and ear and a cheek, or to notice that the hair at the nape of his neck is softer than the hair on top of his head. Other women move from one region of the man's body to another more quickly, comparing the smoothness of the skin on his thigh to the rougher palm of his hand, or to his toes. Again, there is no right way to do this exercise other than allowing yourself the opportunity to focus on your physical awareness of sensations in a non-evaluative way. At any point during the touching, the woman can ask her partner to turn over so she can touch his back and have easier access to the backs of his legs and neck.

The Man's Role In Part A

The man should primarily focus on his own sensations as he is being touched. For the moment, he is not expected to reciprocate by touching his partner. He should be noticing the sensations he is receiving not in terms of evaluating or analyzing them ("I like that", or "why is she doing that?") but allowing himself to experience them. His only responsibility is to protect his partner from doing something that makes him acutely uncomfortable, either physically or psychologically. If she is rubbing a sore spot on his back, he must tell her immedi-

ately. If her touch is so light that it tickles, he should let her know this as well. This permits the toucher to concentrate on her own feelings without having to worry about her partner's comfort.

We recommend that part A continue for at least 15 minutes-especially since we recognize that, at the beginning, it may seem a bit awkward or unnatural, and a few minutes might be needed to get past the strangeness. On the other hand, we urge touching not be prolonged to the point of boredom or fatigue for either partner.

Part B of this exercise simply reverses the roles of the man and woman, so that now the woman is the one who lies down and the man is the one who does the touching. Unless it's absolutely necessary-such as needing to use the bathroom-we strongly suggest not taking a break of any sort between Parts A & B.

As in Part A, the man is free to touch his partner's body anywhere but the genitals; in addition, he should not touch her breasts for now. His partner's only responsibility is to protect him from doing anything that makes her physically or psychologically uncomfortable. She, as he did, focuses on what her partner's touches feel like to her, avoiding any attempts to evaluate or judge what he's doing. Helpful Hint: neither partner should be comparing the man's touching style with the style the woman used in part A. There's no reason they should be taking the same approach of using the same touches or sequence; they are two different people with individual feelings and perceptions. As the man explores his partner's body from head to toe, it is important that he not set out to try to touch her in a way that he thinks she's going to like, or in a way that he thinks she'll find stimulation. Again, the purpose of this exercise is not to set the erotic juices flowing; it is to let each partner feel her or his own physical sensations in a leisurely, unstructured, non-goal-oriented manner.

Unlike most women, many men aren't used to noticing the tactile sensations deriving from textures or temperatures, so they may need a little while to become acclimated to this process. Here are some suggestions we've found helpful with regard to the various types of touching that can be explored.

- Play a texture awareness game with yourself. First, see if you can notice differences in the surface texture of skin on different parts of her body. How does the smoothness and softness of skin on her cheeks compare to the backs of her hands, her calves, or her neck? Are there areas on her face that seem silkier or more supple than others?

- Vary the firmness and tempo of your touching. Let yourself feel the difference between a long-drawn-out, feathery-light touch on your partner's are (or face or leg) and a slightly firmer and quicker touch, using small circular motions, in the same areas. Switch to a staccato type of rhythm for a while, and then switch back to a smoother, more languorous touch. Does changing the tempo of your touch alter your tactile sensations?
- See how touching with your whole hand feels compared to touching just with your fingertips. Notice how touching with both hands at once differs (or whether it differs) compared to the tactile sensations you get from just using one hand.

Let us reiterate several points. First, the goal of this exercise is not to produce any kind of erotic response. Even if you find yourself becoming greatly aroused, do not turn this into a sexual encounter. Second, either partner can ask to end the touching session. A [part from the 15 minute minimum, as in part A, there is no need for part B to match or exceed part A in duration, but don't touch for so long that you become worn out or uninterested. Note: If you start to fall asleep while you're touching or being touched, it is not apt to be a positive growth experience, is it?] Third, the point of *sensate focus* is not to give your partner a back rub or massage (although either may be a perfectly wonderful and romantic thing to do on another occasion) or to touch her in a way that you think will make her happy. The point is very straightforward: 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 "should" lurking in the background.

Some couples enjoy repeating this version of the *sensate focus* exercises for several days. Often they notice things a little 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. But the decision on whether to repeat this exercise a few times or to move on to the next step is a flexible one: there's no test to pass before you "graduate" to the next level.

STEP 2: Genital Touching

In this next step of *sensate focus*, the prohibition on touching the breasts and genitals is dropped, but you should still abstain from attempting sexual intercourse. As with the preceding step, one person should be designated to pick the time to begin. If you don't simply want to alternate from whoever made this choice the last time, you can always flip a coin to decide. In this example, we will have the

man begin. The background details are also the same as before: privacy, nudity, cleanliness, and so forth.

In part A of this exercise, the man should begin exactly as in the nongenital touching, with general touching of his partner's body. It is often advisable for the woman to start out lying face-down on the bed to facilitate this process so the man doesn't become automatically fixated on her breasts and genitals. Even though the ban on touching the breasts and genitals is no longer in effect, the man should be especially careful NOT to change the nature of the touching experience by rushing immediately and singlemindedly to "sexual" touching. In fact, it is helpful to remember that this is not a torrid X-rated movie but a sensate focus exercise: the point is not to try to be turned on or to make something happen to or 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 action is overwhelmingly tempting, think back and try to repeat some of what you learned in the previous step of sensate focus. Slowly feel the curve of your partner's back and compare it to the contour of her hips; trace along the edge of her spine and see how this feels compared to the softer tissue on the back of her upper arms; run your fingers through her hair as though you were 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 as if you are connecting with the sensations that are registering through your fingertips, then shift into the position shown in Figure 2.1.

If there is no headboard on your bed, a few pillows behind the man's back will provide support for him as he sits with his legs slightly spread in a V. The woman leans back against his chest so that her head is resting on one of his shoulders. By reaching down or around her, the man can touch most of his partner's body (although he probably cannot reach her lower legs and feet in this position).

At his juncture, as the man continues his general exploration of his partner's body, a new twist is added in the form of a special technique to enhance nonverbal communication: the woman puts her hand on top of his as he is touching (as shown in Figure 2.2). The intention of this hand-riding technique is not for the woman suddenly to take the lead in directing the action but rather to provide a simple, quick, effective way for her to transmit additional information to her partner as

FIGURE 2.1
A SENSATE FOCUS POSITION

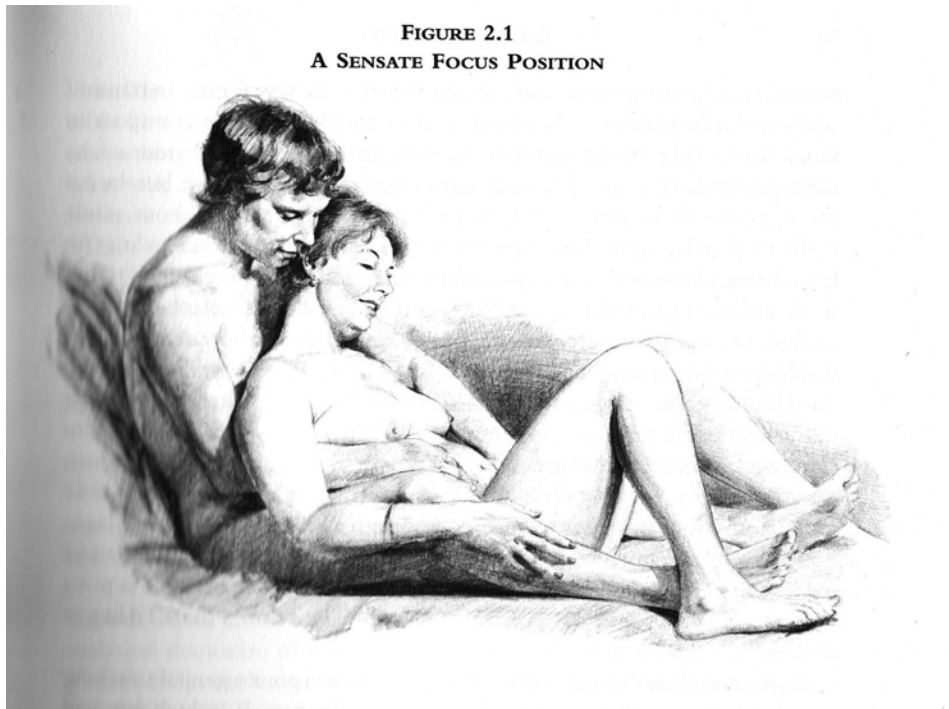


FIGURE 2.2
THE HAND-RIDING TECHNIQUE



he touches her. He continues to touch for what he finds interesting, to distinguish and notice various sensations, and to do so in an open-ended, non-goal-directed manner, but she has the opportunity of providing him with nonverbal feedback about subtle preferences of her own. Although it is not his job to anticipate her feelings (in fact, she may not even be able to anticipate them herself), responding to her silent messages gives him a way to integrate her reactions into his actions.

With the hand-riding technique, the woman can show her partner where she'd like a firmer touch, where she'd like him to linger awhile, or where she'd like a lighter, silky sort of touch. She can show

him when a slower sort of stroking might be especially sensual, or let him know when she'd like him to move from one part of her body to an entirely different spot. The man doesn't have to abide by these tidbits of information as though they were instructions from an airport control tower; with a little practice, he can learn how to combine his own feelings and needs with the messages provided by his partner. He should also recognize that a signal to move his hand is not a criticism of what he's doing; instead, it means, "Right now, I think I'd like to try this".

As we mentioned earlier, the man is free to incorporate genital touching into his tactile explorations in this exercise. (In

part B, which we will describe shortly, the woman will have the same opportunity.) But it is especially important that he does not suddenly shift the nature of his touching into a relentless assault or a feverish push to make his partner quiver and melt in his arms. This means, for example, that it is usually best to touch briefly in or around the genital area and then move elsewhere on the woman's body for a while, returning to the genitals in the natural ebb and flow of exploratory touching. (For those men who may be wondering, "a while", means longer than 3 seconds). If a man literally pounces on his partner's genitals and then concentrates his touching there almost exclusively, without regard to her feelings, it is understandably likely to make her feel like a sex object and not much more. If, instead, the man adds gentle, light caresses of the breasts and genital area (including the lips of the vagina, the clitoris, and the region between the vagina and the rectum) to a broader repertoire of touching that includes all of his partner's body, he extends the range of the sensual experience both he and his partner are having.

Here are a few additional pointers to keep in mind:

- The couple should feel free to move whenever they would like into a position different from the one suggested (although many women report feeling especially comfortable and relaxed in the position illustrated).
- The woman should be especially careful to give her partner signals while he is touching her genital area so he doesn't need to guess at what type of touching she prefers. It isn't necessary that she know in advance exactly what will feel pleasing or interesting, only that she provide him with feedback as he's touching her.
- So that you don't lose sight of the fact that this is a sensate focus opportunity, not just a preamble to sex, we suggest that you abstain from kissing while you are doing this exercise. Kissing often seems to push people into cruise control when it comes to sensual/sexual behavior, and what you are trying to accomplish here is to break old habit patterns, not solidify them.
- If the woman finds that her feelings are aroused enough that she wants to be orgasmic, it is perfectly appropriate to let orgasm occur either by manual stimulation from her partner (with some hand-riding guidance from her) or by using the reverse approach: letting her partner put his hand on top of hers and follow her motions and touches as she

stimulates herself to orgasm. (Men: if you try either of these methods, this is not the time for an analytical discussion of why a particular type of touch feels a certain way). There is no point, however, in working to make orgasm happen. If it gets to feeling like a job, either partner should call "time out".

As in step 1 of the sensate focus exercises, either the man or woman can say "I'd like to switch." There is no specific time requirement or limitation, although once again, our general suggestion is that the touching should not last so long that either person becomes bored or tired.

The procedure for part B should parallel the steps that are outlined above. We suggest that the woman begin with a period of general body touching, permitting herself to flow into the experience by focusing on her tactile sensations. As in the previous phase of sensate focus, she should take time to notice subtle variations in surfaces and contours, textures and temperatures of her partner's body, and she should explore his body in a way that interests her, not in order to make something happen to or for him.

At some point when she is feeling reasonably comfortable and absorbed in the experience, the couple can move into the position shown in Figure 2.3. (This is not a mandatory part of the exercise, but many couples have found it useful.) In this position, where the man is lying on his back with his head pointed away from his partner's body, and his legs bent at the knees and draped over her wait while she is sitting close to him, she is able eas-

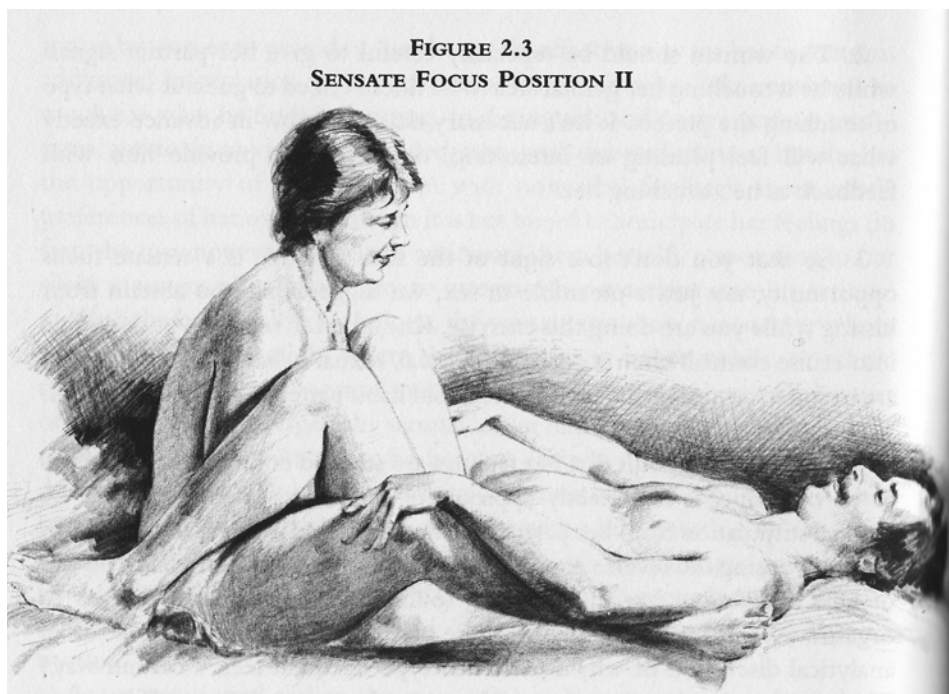
ily to reach forward with access to most of his body. At this juncture, the couple can again use the hand-riding technique, this time with the man's hand placed on top of his partner's as she touches and explores his body.

The woman can now extend her touching to include her partner's genital area as well as other regions. We recommend that the woman simply incorporate genital touching into her general explorations with no specific goal (such as trying to get her partner aroused) and without parking her hand indefinitely in this area. The man may or may not develop an erection, and whether he does or not is unimportant. If he does become erect, the woman should make a point of stroking the penis for a bit and then deliberately moving her hand to a different area, rather than staying focused on his sexual organ.

In addition to touching or stroking the penis (whether or not it is erect), the woman might also want to use her fingertips to explore the scrotum, feeling the texture of the skin of the scrotal sac, gently cupping the testicles in her hands, and running her fingers along the perineum, the sensitive region of skin between the base of the scrotum and the rectum. These are not meant to be suggestions in the how-to-turn-your-partner-on mode: they are meant to provide a greater degree of awareness of your partner's body.

As this touching and exploration continues, the man can use the hand-riding technique to send subtle messages to his partner about the types of touching he finds most comfortable and pleasurable.

FIGURE 2.3
SENSATE FOCUS POSITION II



It's important for both partners to realize that when they receive a message of this sort suggesting they move to a different spot, it doesn't mean they should never return. Both men and women find that what is comfortable pleasing changes with time; a touch that is just perfect right now may be too much, or too little, or off target, in just a few moments. (Here's a perfect case in point. If you've ever tried to have your partner scratch an itchy spot on your back because you couldn't reach it yourself, you know how elusive getting that itch can be. One moment he or she is at exactly the right spot, but then the itch shifts just a little higher or a little lower or a bit to the left, and you've got to ask him or her to move a little to relieve the itch precisely.)

As the woman's exploration of her partner's body continues, the man may well find himself becoming sexually excited, which is perfectly fine and natural. The woman doesn't need to direct her attention immediately to penile stimulation, as though an erection requires emergency care, but if her partner feels that she wants to receive further penile touching and possibly go on to ejaculation, either she can provide this type of stroking for him (with his hand riding on hers to guide its tempo and firmness) or she can instead put her hand on his and follow his motions as he stimulates himself. Either choice is a matter of personal preference at the moment, not a reflection of the state of your relationship. As in part A of this exercise, if either partner starts to feel that the touching has turned into some sort of job or obligation, it's advisable to stop. (If necessary, the man can ejaculate by self-stimulation even if his partner needs to call it quits for now.)

STEP 3: Adding Lotion

One of the ways of enhancing sensory awareness is to alter the medium of touch a bit. Since we don't have volume control knobs on our fingertips, the next best thing is to try the same sensate focus exercise described in step 2 with the addition of a lotion or oil to add a slicker, silkier dimension to your touching. We suggest using a nonalcoholic, hypoallergenic lotion, but many couples find that baby oil or even suntan lotion is convenient, inexpensive, and fun.

If you try this step (which is completely optional), it's best first to warm the container of oil or lotion in a basin of hot water. Another hint to prevent the lotion from feeling chilly is never to drip it onto your partner's body. Putting some lotion in the palm of your hand and then rubbing it briefly also helps to warm it up.

Some couples like to begin touching without the lotion and then add the lotion partway into the experience for contrast. Other couples experiment by using the lotion on one hand and not the other, comparing and contrasting sensations between the two hands. Other couples find it easier to use the lotion from the very beginning of their touching. Whichever approach you choose (and you might want to try each on different occasions), be sure that you don't let the lotion inadvertently turn you into a massage artist. The point of the exercise is still to focus on your sensations.

STEP 4: Mutual Touching

So far, we have deliberately structured the touching exercises so that you were always in a "your turn/my turn" mode. Now, it's time to extend the scope of the touching experience by removing the artificiality of separate turns. This gives each of you the opportunity to use your newly improved sensory awareness to focus simultaneously on your fingertip sensations from touching your partner and on the physical sensations your body registers from being touched and held.

We suggest that the first time or two you try this version of sensate focus, you still refrain from kissing and from attempting intercourse. These simple steps help to prevent you from just reverting to your old, tried and true sexual behavior patterns. Remember, what you are trying to achieve here is a way of adding a new sensual dimension to your lives.

When you become involved in mutual touching, it's useful to view it as a continuation of the earliest sensate focus opportunities, not just another way of getting around to sex. 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 your attention to decidedly nonsexual areas, although it's amazing how absolutely sensuous (and stimulating) your partner's hair or neck or lips can be. Another way of avoiding the problem of turning this into pure sex is to keep yourself from sexual fantasies as the touching is going on. (While we are enthusiastic advocates of sexual fantasizing in lots of other situations, it does have a way of distracting your attention from sensual matters because your brain has to focus on your mental erotic imagery.)

One possible variation in the mutual touching opportunities is to incorporate oral-genital stimulation as part of your sensual play. This doesn't mean using oral sex to make something happen to or for

your partner; 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. Especially if you've done oral sex a lot before, see how different it can be when you approach it as sensual exploration instead of a way of servicing your partner.

Another variation you might want to try is changing the scene of your sensate focus activities from the bedroom to the shower or bathtub. Some couples find that the slippery feel of warm water and soap suds (or with bath gel) gives them a special set of sensations. While this might not be an everyday event, it can provide an interesting change of perceptions.

STEP 5: Sensual Intercourse

Almost everybody knows what sexual intercourse is, but have you ever thought about sensual intercourse? If you haven't tried it, you probably don't know what you're missing.

Sexual intercourse is often a very mechanical act, with an emphasis on thrusting and pushing toward orgasm. In this version of sensate focus, you extend the gains you have already made in emphasizing your awareness of physical sensations into the realm of penile-vaginal contact to find a stylistically different type of intercourse. Here again, there is no right way or wrong way of doing things; instead, the goal is to find out what feels interesting and pleasurable.

As with all of the previous phases of sensate focus, which build on the same foundation, we suggest starting this exercise with a period of general body (non-genital) touching. Allow yourselves to get into a comfortable rhythm and focus: be aware of what your fingertips are telling you and don't worry about whether or not you or your partner is becoming aroused.

Gradually extend the scope of the touching to include exploration of the genital. Don't be shy about using the hand-riding technique to show your partner what you like, but don't try to be a traffic cop and direct every move he or she makes.

When you are both comfortable, move into a position where the man lies on his back and the woman moves astride him, positioning herself so that her vaginal area is close to his penis (see Figure 2.4). Once you've gotten to this point, don't rush things. Use the same principles of sensate focus you've been using all along to continue your touching, but now extend the touching so that it is not only done by your fingertips, but so your genital areas can touch each other, too. It is usually

FIGURE 2.4
A POSITION FOR GENITAL PLAY



easiest for the woman to take hold of the man's penis (which, after all, is fairly easy to find) and move it against herself, rubbing it against her clitoris, or along the lips of the vagina, or playing with the penis around her vaginal opening. The man doesn't need to be a passive participant as this is happening. In addition to focusing on the sensations he is receiving through his penis, he can be actively touching the woman anywhere he finds interesting or pleasurable, whether this involves stroking her hair, fondling her breasts, running his fingers up and down her spine, or reaching up to trace gently the curves of her cheekbones.

When the woman feels ready, she can hold the erect penis at an angle of about 45 degrees (pointed toward the man's head) and slide back slowly on the penis, letting her vagina snuggle around its head without attempting to insert it any further. Once in the position, resist the urge to start thrusting right away. Instead, let the penis rub very gently and slowly in and out of the opening of the vagina, noticing the sensations you both are receiving from this type of contact. After a few minutes, the woman can slide a bit more onto the penis, letting about half of it inside her. Again, instead of immediately establishing a vigorous thrusting pattern, stop to feel the sensations of warmth and contact. Hold absolutely still for a few seconds, and then the woman can squeeze her legs together (or contract the muscles around her vagina) to see what different

sensation these movements produce.

Here again, instead of moving right away into the old, familiar thrusting pattern, continue your sensual intercourse experience by slowly withdrawing the penis from the vagina and playing with it at the external genital area again briefly— for 20 or 30 seconds. Then the woman can slide back onto the penis, repeating any of the above steps that seem interesting or pleasurable, until either partner decides that some deeper thrusting would be desirable.

Once you've tried such sensual variations, you may certainly want to move to a quicker type of thrusting, and you may also instinctively move into a deeper thrusting pattern. Some couples find that it's very enjoyable to establish a quicker, shallower thrusting pattern for a while. (In fact, women find this especially sensual, since nerve endings in the vagina are more heavily concentrated in the outer portion than deep inside). However you proceed, try to keep your focus on your sensations as much as possible, and give yourself the opportunity to enjoy your "new" way of having intercourse.

One final point: if you enjoy sensual intercourse and want to use this approach from time to time, you've got to let your partner know in advance what you're thinking about. If one person is having good old lust sexual intercourse while the other wants a more leisurely sensual experience, it could be like playing a record at 33 1/3 and 45 rpm at the same time.

A woman once wrote us a letter in which she referred to "sense aid" instead of sensate focus. In a way, she was absolutely right. The point of these exercises, after all, is to help your senses: to restore the feeling side to sex.

Ten Ways of Blocking Sensuality

Over the years, we've learned a good deal about what interferes with the sensual side of sex. Here are the most common barriers we've encountered. Not listed in any particular order, they are self-evident enough to require no further explanation.

- The "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" approach.
- Children who pop into your room whenever they want to.
- Time constraints, including always leaving sex for the last thing at night when you and your partner are both tired out.
- The "it's my job to make my partner happy" attitude.
- The notion that sex is serious business.
- The idea that sex is solely for the man's pleasure.
- Inattention to your partner's sensibilities, as demonstrated by cigar breath, a heedful of hair curlers, or unrelenting body odor.
- The mistaken belief that fulfilling sex is only for young and attractive people.
- Thinking (and worrying) too much during sex.
- Being angry with your partner, but keeping your anger to yourself.

Obviously there are many more sources of sexual problems. But it is certain that if a couple manages to maintain a healthy sensuality in their relationship, they will be well on the way to a sexually satisfying life together.

Gannett's Clinical Counselor is available to talk with individuals and couples about how sensate focus activities can be used to enhance sexual health and pleasure.

Appointments with the Clinical Counselor can be made by calling 255-5155. Additional information about sex counseling can be found at www.gannett.cornell.edu.