

Massachusetts General Hospital BMT Survivorship Program

Sexuality and Intimacy

A transplant can affect sexuality and intimacy in many ways for both men and women. You may find that this can be an opportunity to redefine or shift your views on sexuality and intimacy and can thus lead to an enjoying and fulfilling sex life.

Redefining Intimacy

Intimacy does not have to equal intercourse. Intimacy can be physical, non-physical, and non-sexual. You can be intimate with your partner in many ways; holding hands, taking a long walk, taking a bath, gently touching, or even having a conversation. This is an opportunity to experiment and find new ways to be intimate with your partner. In some cases, perhaps due to physical pain, finding sexual pleasure may mean longer foreplay or shifting the focus away from the genital area to other erogenous zones in the body, such as the neck, ears, inner thighs, feet, and toes. In the past, you may have felt desire spontaneously. Now, you may need to plan in advance and initiate foreplay and physical touching in order to be aroused. Candles can help create a romantic atmosphere or can create a soft flattering light if you are uncomfortable with some of the physical changes from the transplant.

Resuming Sexual Activity

Reclaiming your sexuality after transplant can be difficult. Sex, just like exercise, is harder to resume if you haven't been doing it. You may need to start slowly, find ways to initiate contact, and then build upon that. If you have taken a long break from sexual activities and are nervous about it, it may be helpful to find non-physical ways to bring romance and intimacy into your life. Have some fun and enjoy the process, even if it is different from what was familiar and normal in the past.

Sensate Focus Exercises

General Introduction

Sensate Focus exercises help to regain intimacy with you and your partner. The focus is to increase both partners' ability to provide and receive pleasure. Sensate focus is a gradual process by which the focus is on facilitating positive emotional experience during the process. The goal is to reduce fear, anxiety, pain and other negative emotions regarding intimacy. The program is meant to be gradual; the more time spent in each phase, the better. It is best for both partners to complete each phase to the point of not only being comfortable, but to experience positive emotions during the activity and to then move on to the next phase when both partners are ready. Think of sensate focus activities as a marathon—not a race. It is helpful to take things slow, pace yourself, and enjoy the process along the way. It is important that you and your partner provide positive reinforcement to each other along the

way. This can facilitate positive emotions during the process. It is recommended to practice sensate focus exercises for 30 minutes to an hour, two to three times a week for at least six weeks. Take your time.

General Ground Rules

- Sensate focus should be done in a place mutually acceptable for both of you.
- Try to choose an isolated place where you both are unlikely to be disturbed.
- Get creative with the atmosphere—engage all senses in pleasure. Light candles, put on pleasant music, dim the lights, and put away all electronic devices.
- Sensate focus is a reciprocal process; switch off giving and receiving pleasure.
- Sensate focus is a journey, not a destination. Be mindful during the process and allow yourself to enjoy the pleasure you are giving and receiving.
- There is no time limit on how long you spend in each phase; the slower the better!
- Both partners must agree before moving on to the next phase.

General Instructions

- One partner can start by touching the other partner. Start with the partner's hand and then move your hand(s) to other parts of your partner's body. Notice the texture, temperature, and energy you are feeling at each body part. Really take your time to notice things about your partner's body you haven't noticed before.
- Try to learn the amount of pressure and motions your partner finds most pleasurable. Ask them to give you verbal or non-verbal feedback expressing their enjoyment. Your partner can also guide your hand to areas where they enjoy the feelings the most.
- Remember this process for when it is your turn. Provide positive reinforcement for the areas, pressure, and motions you enjoy most. This can be verbal or non-verbal feedback.
- Do not say anything negative- as to avoid discouragement. Instead, try stating "I enjoy this motion/ area better..."
- After each sensate focus session, connect with your partner by discussing the positive aspects of the session, e.g., "I loved it when you..." You can also take this time to brainstorm ideas for next session.

Phase 1: Non-genital Sensate Focus

Ground Rules

- Wear clothing that is comfortable or no clothing at all, whichever makes you feel relaxed.
- Massage techniques may be used—feel free to gather resources (for example videos, books, etc.).
- This stage is non-genital and encourages you to stay away from the typical erogenous zones. Avoid those areas (breasts, nipples, vulva, clitoris, vagina, penis, testicles).
- Do not engage in intercourse and orgasm during this stage.
- Only when both partners are ready, may you move to the next phase.

Instructions

- Touch your partner on any area of the body that is non-genital/ non-arousal. Try your partner's hands, feet, face, and back.
- Move your hands all over the body to any other body parts, buttocks, arms, and scalp. Notice how your partner feels in these areas. Make note of any nonverbal and verbal feedback you are receiving and tailor your touch to those areas.
- Finally touch the chest, stomach, shoulders, and any other areas (remember avoid: breasts and groin region).
- Switch places, it's now your partner's turn. Repeat steps.

Phase 2: Genital Sensate Focus

Ground Rules

- During this phase, you can begin to bring in some genital touch.
- Take your time in this phase.
- Attend to the body parts you have already touched in the previous section and then explore new areas.
- The goal of this phase is to allow each partner to become more comfortable with giving and receiving pleasure through different kinds of touch.
- The goal of this phase is not to become aroused—but it is okay if both or one of you do.
- Do not engage in intercourse during this phase's activity.

Instructions

- Touch your partner on one of the areas you touched in the prior session (non-genital/arousal).
- Begin to incorporate one of the arousal areas (breasts, nipples for both men and women).
- Then move your hand to other areas of the body that are erogenous (genitals).
- You can explore all areas of the genitals (clitoris, entrance to vagina, penis, shaft, glans).
- As you both feel more comfortable, you can incorporate oral stimulation to the body parts (lick, kiss, suck) for both erogenous and nonerogenous zones.
- It may be pleasurable to go back and forth between erogenous to non-erogenous zones. This is sometimes called “teasing.” Try focusing on a genital area for a couple minutes and then switching to a non-genital area like the back or stomach. Then go back to the erogenous zone.
- Orgasm is permitted during this phase, but it is not the goal.

Phase 3: Penetrative Sensate Focus

Ground Rules

- During this phase, penetration by any means is allowed (sex toys, penis, fingers).
- Attend to all parts of the body during this phase, as you did in the prior phases.
- The partner that is penetrated is supposed to control the course of penetration (pressure, speed, and time).
- Orgasm is allowed in this phase, but again is the not primary aim. The goal is to enjoy the process of becoming more intimate.

Instructions

- First, begin with touching the genital areas of the body. This is sometimes called “foreplay.”
- Spend some time beginning to stimulate the erogenous zones.
- Then, you can start with gentle penetration. Take your time and enjoy holding back from thrusting.
- You can even switch positions (for example both can try being on top).
- As you get more comfortable, you can increase thrusting. Always allow the person being penetrated to control the pressure speed and time.
- As you get even more comfortable, you may experiment with different positions. You may even seek out other resources to get ideas.

Quick Tips

Treatments can affect everyone differently and may or may not work. It may also take time to see results. Stick with it! As always, it’s important to remember that intercourse is only one among many ways to express sexuality and be intimate.

Here are some quick tips for improving intimacy:

- Engage in small gestures to show affection (kissing each other goodbye, holding each other’s hands).
- Show emotional support for your partner.
- Create a positive, accepting, loving environment.
- Schedule time for just the two of you (without kids, without cell phone).
- Refrain from judging your partner.
- Think about good memories that you and your partner shared.
- Listen to your partner.
- Do not go to bed angry with each other.
- Say “I love you” to your partner, often.