



### **Colleague's Corner – Professional News from SSTAR Members**

Sensate Focus: Clarifying the Masters and Johnson Model

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Linda Weiner, MSW, LCSW and Constance Avery-Clark, Ph.D. met early in their careers at the Masters and Johnson six-month training program in relationship and sex therapy in 1983. It was the experience of a lifetime. Daily lectures by Institute staff on all aspects of sex therapy with recorded cases illustrating common and critical themes, listening to live two week intensive cases with discussion and question and answer following each successive session, co-therapy with Masters, himself, or other seasoned therapists in dual sex teams. Five years later, both workmates and friends, we went our separate ways, setting up private practices in Florida and St. Louis. Not until our children were raised and Linda was researching sensate focus in preparation for teaching a graduate class at Brown School of Social Work at Washington University did it dawn that despite 25 years of doing sex therapy, neither Masters and Johnson nor the Institute staff had published one new word about how sensate focus had evolved, nor had they ever defined exactly how sensate focus suggestions were given and processed! This was the impetus for the article, "Sensate Focus: clarifying the Masters & Johnson model" published this year in the Routledge's journal *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*. The article details a critical addition to Masters and Johnson's thinking about sensate focus instructions: the need to move away not only from the pressure to respond sexually to touch with arousal or orgasm, but also moving away

from the pressure inherent in their initial instructions for the couple to experience or provide *pleasure*. In the initial stage of dealing with desire, arousal or orgasmic difficulties, Masters and Johnson's modified instructions were to touch focusing on whatever was experienced through the sense of touch, in what we would now call a mindfulness set. In this way, pressures and anxieties were reduced and the body allowed to function by "taking over what it knows how to do" in non-medically challenged couples with sexual difficulties. The response to our publication has been amazing and many seasoned clinicians have encouraged us to continue to contribute to the literature, informing our use and understanding of this foundational aspect of what we as sex therapists actually do, and how we do it. Besides a historical review article on sensate focus, another article on the merging of sensate focus with relational concepts and a third article detailing its current use with diverse populations by today's clinicians with other authors, Constance and I submitted a chapter on the Masters and Johnson approach in the upcoming Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Sex Therapy. Next year we hope to follow up with an illustrated manual of sensate focus. We can feel Bill and Ginny smiling.

