

Military Sexual Trauma

National Center for PTSD

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What is military sexual trauma (MST)?

In both civilian and military settings, service members can experience a range of unwanted sexual behaviors that they may find distressing. These experiences happen to both women and men. "Military sexual trauma" or MST is the term used by the Department of Veterans Affairs to refer to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening acts of sexual harassment.

The definition of MST used by the VA is given by U.S. Code (1720D of Title 38). It is "psychological trauma, which in the judgment of a VA mental health professional, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty or active duty for training." Sexual harassment is further defined as "repeated, unsolicited verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature which is threatening in character."

In more concrete terms, MST includes any sexual activity where you are involved against your will. You may have been pressured into sexual activities. For example, you may have been threatened with negative consequences for refusing to go along. It may have been implied that you would get faster promotions or better treatment in exchange for sex. You may not have been able to consent to sexual activities, for example, if you were intoxicated. You may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other MST experiences include:

- Unwanted sexual touching or grabbing.
- Threatening, offensive remarks about your body or your sexual activities.
- Threatening and unwelcome sexual advances.

If these experiences occurred while you were on active duty or active duty for training, they are considered to be MST.

How common is MST?

Data from VA's universal screening program give us an idea of how common MST is. Under this program, all Veterans seen at Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities are asked whether they went through sexual trauma during their military service. Veterans who respond "yes" are asked if they are interested in learning about MST-related services. Not every Veteran who responds "yes" needs to be treated or wants to learn about treatment.

Please note that the rates obtained from VA screening cannot be used to estimate the rate of MST among all those serving in the U.S. military. The screening data are drawn only from Veterans who have chosen to seek VA health care. Also, keep in mind that a positive response does not mean that the person who committed the sexual trauma was a member of the military.

About 1 in 5 women and 1 in 100 men seen in VHA respond "yes" when screened for MST. Though rates of MST are higher among women, there are almost as many men seen in VA that have experienced MST as there are women. This is because there are many more men in the military than there are women.

How can MST affect Veterans?

It's important to remember that MST is an experience. It is not a diagnosis or a mental health condition in and of itself. Given that Veterans report a wide range of distressing sexually-related experiences, it is not surprising that they have a wide range of emotional responses.

There is no one way that every person will respond, even after a very distressing experience. A Veteran's response may vary in terms of the type of response, how severe it is, and how long it lasts. For some Veterans, experiences of MST may continue to affect their mental and physical health, even many years later. Your response may depend on factors such as:

- Whether you have a prior history of trauma.
- The types of responses you received from others at the time of the experience.
- Whether the experience happened once or was repeated over time.

Here are some of the difficulties both female and male survivors of MST may have:

- Strong emotions: feeling depressed; having intense, sudden emotional responses to things; feeling angry or irritable all the time
- Feelings of numbness: feeling emotionally "flat"; trouble feeling love or happiness
- Trouble sleeping: trouble falling or staying asleep; bad dreams or nightmares
- Trouble with attention, concentration, and memory: trouble staying focused; often finding your mind wandering; having a hard time remembering things
- Problems with alcohol or other drugs: drinking to excess or using drugs daily; getting drunk or "high" to cope with memories or unpleasant feelings; drinking to fall asleep
- Trouble with reminders of the sexual trauma: feeling on edge or "jumpy" all the time; not feeling safe; going out of your way to avoid reminders of the trauma; trouble trusting others
- Problems in relationships: feeling alone or not connected to others; abusive relationships; trouble with employers or authority figures
- Physical health problems: sexual issues; chronic pain; weight or eating problems; stomach or bowel problems

Among users of VA healthcare, medical record data indicates that the mental health problems most often seen with MST are:

- PTSD
- Other anxiety disorders
- Depression and other mood disorders
- Substance use disorders (alcohol and drug problems)

How has VA responded to the problem of MST?

Fortunately, people can recover from experiences of trauma. VA has services to help Veterans do this. Since 1992 VA has been developing programs related to:

- MST screening and treatment.
- Training staff on MST-related issues.
- Outreach to Veterans about available services.

Services available to Veterans include:

- All Veterans seen in VA are asked whether they experienced MST. All treatment for physical and mental health problems related to MST is free for both men and women.
- Every VA facility has an MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs. The MST Coordinator may also be aware of state and federal benefits and community resources that may be helpful.
- Every VA facility has providers that know about treatment for the effects of MST. Many facilities have special outpatient mental health services for sexual trauma. Vet Centers also have specially trained sexual trauma counselors.
- Across the country, VA also has special residential (live-in) or inpatient sexual trauma treatment programs. These are programs for Veterans who need more intense treatment and support.
- Some Veterans do not feel comfortable in mixed-gender treatment settings. For this reason, some facilities have separate programs for men and women. All residential and inpatient MST programs have separate sleeping areas for men and women.

Veterans can receive free, confidential counseling and treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST. Veterans do not need to be service-connected (have a VA disability rating). You may be able to receive this benefit even if you are not eligible for other VA care. You do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened. You do not need to have proof that they occurred.

How can Veterans get help?

For more information, you can:

- Speak with your VA health care provider.
- Contact the MST Coordinator at your nearest [VA Facility](#)
- Contact a [Vet Center](#) near you.
- Call [Safe Helpline](#) at 877-995-5247 to get confidential one-on-one help. Safe Helpline provides 24 hour a day, 7 day a week assistance for victims of military sexual trauma.
- Call VA's general information hotline at 1-800-827-1000 .

- Feel free to ask for a provider of the gender -- male or female -- with which you would feel more comfortable.

People can recover from experiences of trauma. Please contact VA to learn more.