

Recovering From Military Sexual Trauma

Military sexual trauma (MST) refers to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment experienced while on federal active duty or active duty for training. About 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men have reported MST to their VA doctors. However, these numbers do not account for those who have not sought health care for their MST experience or who have sought care for MST outside the VA.

Military sexual trauma is:

Military sexual trauma is the term VA uses to refer to sexual assault or sexual harassment that occurred while the veteran was in the military. A victim of MST may have been:

- **Involved in sexual activity against his or her will, by physical force or nonphysical pressure.** Nonphysical pressure includes threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative, or indirect promises of faster promotions or better treatment in exchange for sex.
- **Unable to consent to sexual activities.** This includes intoxication by alcohol or other substances.

Other experiences include sexual touching or grabbing, threatening or offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities, as well as threatening and unwelcome sexual advances.

How do I know if I'm at risk?

Military sexual trauma can occur on or off base and while a service member—man or woman—is on or off duty. Those who commit sexual assault or sexual harassment can be men or women, military personnel or civilians, commanding officers or subordinates, strangers, friends, spouses, or intimate partners.

When do I need medical attention?

The VA reports sexual assault is more likely to result in symptoms of PTSD (posttraumatic

stress disorder) than are most other types of trauma, including combat. You should seek medical attention from your primary care doctor, a mental health professional, or your VA facility's MST Coordinator following a MST experience, especially if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts
- Feeling angry or irritable most of the time
- Strong emotional reactions
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Nightmares
- Trouble focusing
- Difficulty remembering things
- Substance abuse
- Trouble feeling safe or trusting others
- Feeling isolated or disconnected from others
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal difficulties
- Sexual dysfunction
- Chronic pain
- Chronic fatigue
- Weight or eating problems

Survivors who are not formally diagnosed may still struggle in certain situations with emotional reactions, memories related to their experiences of MST, or other interpersonal issues.

How is MST treated?

Because MST is an experience, not a diagnosis, treatment needs may vary from patient to patient. However, VA provides free, confidential counseling and treatment to male and female veterans for mental and physical health conditions related to experiences of MST. It is important to note that treatment is available even if the MST incident was not reported at the time it happened.

Your doctor may recommend individual therapy, group therapy, or medication, depending on your

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symptoms. Therapies that may be used to treat MST include:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy.** The main goal of this therapy is to help you change your thought patterns, which will help you change the emotions and behavior connected with the MST experience. A counselor might encourage you to reimagine your trauma repeatedly under controlled conditions—an approach called *exposure therapy*—as a way of learning to cope.
- **Stress inoculation (in-ock-you-lay-shun) training.** This therapy involves combining stress management strategies with stress-relieving techniques, such as muscle relaxation, breathing retraining, self-dialogue, and thought stopping.
- **Group therapy.** This therapy enables you to discuss your trauma with others who have had similar experiences.
- **Inpatient therapy.** Nationwide, there are programs that offer specialized sexual trauma treatment for veterans who need more intense treatment and support, including that for severe depression or substance abuse.
- **Medication.** If your MST experience resulted in PTSD, your doctor may prescribe medication to help control symptoms of anxiety or to help you sleep. Your doctor will monitor you closely for any possible adverse effects of these medications. It is also possible that an STD (sexually transmitted disease) was passed during the trauma, so your doctor may choose to screen you for an STD. If the test comes back positive, your doctor will prescribe the appropriate drug for treatment.

Services are designed to help veterans at all stages of their recovery, whether that is focusing on strategies for coping with emotions and memories or, for veterans who are ready, talking about their MST experiences in depth.

What can I do to cope?

When trauma survivors take direct action to cope with their stress reactions, they put themselves in a position of power. This is called *active coping*,

which involves accepting the impact the trauma had on your life and taking direct action to make improvements.

It is important to remember that recovery is a process and takes time. Healing from trauma, including MST, does not happen all at once, and healing does not mean that you must forget the experience. Instead, it means you have less pain and fewer bad feelings when you think about the experience, and any associated symptoms will over time bother you less.

Discussing your trauma with other survivors in a controlled setting can help you learn that you are not alone or weak. In addition, surrounding yourself with people you can talk to about your MST experience may help you feel more understood. You may even choose to distract yourself with positive recreational or work activities.

When you experience unwanted or distressing memories, remind yourself that they are just memories, and talk about them with someone you trust. If you feel that the trauma is happening again, which is known as a *flashback*, keep your eyes open and remind yourself where you presently are and that the trauma happened in the past.

Although VA and DoD are working to put an end to MST, it is an ongoing problem that affects a large percentage of women and men who proudly serve in the armed forces. For information on how to access free VA services and to determine your eligibility in MST benefits, visit <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp>.

Notes:
