

Military Sexual Trauma

What is military sexual trauma (MST)?

Military sexual trauma, or MST, is the term used by VA to refer to experiences of sexual assault or sexual harassment experienced during military service.

More concretely, MST includes any sexual activity that you are involved with against your will. Examples include:

- Being pressured into sexual activities (such as with threats of negative treatment if you refuse to cooperate or promises of better treatment in exchange for sex)
- Sexual contact or activities without your consent, including when you were asleep or intoxicated
- Being overpowered or physically forced to have sex
- Being touched or grabbed in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable, including during hazing experiences
- Comments about your body or sexual activities that you found threatening
- Unwanted sexual advances that you found threatening



The identity or characteristics of the perpetrator, whether you were on or off duty at the time, and whether you were on or off base at the time do not matter.



How common is MST?

VA's national screening program, in which every Veteran seen for health care is asked whether he or she experienced MST, provides data on how common MST is among Veterans seen in VA.

National data from this program reveal that about 1 in 3 women and 1 in 50 men respond "yes," that they experienced MST, when screened by their VA provider. Although rates of MST are higher among women, because there are so many more men than women in the military, there are significant numbers of women and men seen in VA who have experienced MST.

How can MST affect someone?

Although trauma can be a life-changing event, people are often remarkably resilient after experiencing trauma. Many individuals recover without professional help; others may generally function well in their life but continue to experience some level of difficulties or have strong reactions in certain situations. For some people, the experience of MST may continue to affect their mental and physical health in significant ways, even many years later.



MST is an experience, not a diagnosis or a mental health condition, and as with other forms of trauma, there are a variety of reactions that someone can have in response to MST. The type, severity, and duration of an individual's difficulties will all vary based on factors like whether he/she has a prior history of trauma, the types of responses he/she received from others at the time of the MST, and whether the MST happened once or was repeated over time. Although the reactions men and women have to MST are similar in some ways, they may also struggle with different issues. Race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and other cultural variables can also affect the impact of MST.



Some of the difficulties people may have after MST include:

Strong emotions: feeling depressed; having intense, sudden emotional reactions to things; feeling angry or irritable all the time

Feelings of numbness: feeling emotionally 'flat'; difficulty experiencing emotions like love or happiness

Trouble sleeping: trouble falling or staying asleep; disturbing nightmares

Difficulties with attention, concentration, and memory: trouble staying focused; frequently finding their mind wandering; having a hard time remembering things

Problems with alcohol or other drugs: drinking to excess or using drugs daily; getting intoxicated or "high" to cope with memories or emotional reactions; drinking to fall asleep

Difficulty with things that remind them of their experiences of sexual trauma: feeling on edge or 'jumpy' all the time; difficulty feeling safe; going out of their way to avoid reminders of their experiences

Difficulties in relationships: feeling isolated or disconnected from others; abusive relationships; trouble with employers or authority figures; difficulty trusting others

Physical health problems: sexual difficulties; chronic pain; weight or eating problems; gastrointestinal problems

Although posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is commonly associated with MST, it is not the only diagnosis that can result from MST. For example, VA medical record data indicate that in addition to PTSD, the diagnoses most frequently associated with MST among users of VA health care are depression and other mood disorders, and substance use disorders.

Fortunately, people can recover from experiences of MST, and VA has services to help with this.

What MST-related services does VA offer?

VA is strongly committed to ensuring that MST survivors have access to the help they need in order to recover.

- Every VA health care system has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help individuals find and access VA services and programs.
- Recognizing that many survivors of sexual trauma do not disclose their experiences unless asked directly, VA health care providers ask every Veteran whether he or she experienced MST. This is an important way of making sure MST survivors know about the services available to them.
- All treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to experiences of MST is provided free of charge.
- To receive free treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST, Veterans do not need to be service connected (or have a VA disability rating). Veterans may be able to receive this care even if they are not eligible for other VA care. They do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred.
- MST-related services are available at every VA medical center and MST-related counseling is also available through community-based Vet Centers. Services are designed to meet Veterans where they are at in their recovery, whether that is focusing on strategies for coping with challenging emotions and memories or, for Veterans who are ready, actually talking about their MST experiences in depth.
- Nationwide, there are programs that offer specialized sexual trauma treatment in residential or inpatient settings. These are programs for Veterans who need more intense treatment and support.
- To accommodate Veterans who do not feel comfortable in mixed-gender treatment settings, some facilities have separate programs for men and women. All residential and inpatient MST programs have separate sleeping areas for men and women.



How can Veterans get help?

For more information, Veterans can speak with their existing VA health care provider, contact the MST Coordinator at their nearest VA medical center, or contact their local Vet Center. A list of VA and Vet Center facilities can be found at www.va.gov and www.vetcenter.va.gov. Veterans should feel free to ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if it would make them feel more comfortable.

Veterans can also learn more about VA's MST-related services online at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp and see video clips with the recovery stories of Veterans who have experienced MST at <http://maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma>.

Note: Although this document refers to Veterans, most former Service members with an Other Than Honorable or uncharacterized (entry-level) discharge can also receive MST-related care from VA. Former National Guard and Reserves members with federal active duty service or a service-connected disability who were discharged under honorable conditions or with an Other Than Honorable discharge are also eligible; the service-connected disability does not need to be related to your experiences of MST. Current Service members can receive services related to MST, although for some types of services, a Department of Defense referral may be required. For more information, please contact your local [VA medical center](#) and ask to speak to the MST Coordinator.



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