

Military Sexual Trauma

What is military sexual trauma (MST)?

In both civilian and military settings, women and men can experience a range of unwanted sexual behaviors that they may find distressing. Within the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans are likely to hear these sorts of experiences described as “military sexual trauma”, the overarching term the VA uses to refer to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening acts of sexual harassment. The definition used by the VA is given by U.S. Code (1720D of Title 38) and 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.”

More concretely, MST includes any sexual activity where someone is involved against his or her will - he or she may have been pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied faster promotions or better treatment in exchange for sex), may have been unable to consent to sexual activities (for example, when intoxicated), or may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other experiences that fall into the category of MST included unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities; and/or threatening and unwelcome sexual advances. If these experiences occurred while an individual was on active duty or active duty for training, they are considered to be MST.

How common is MST?

Information about how commonly MST occurs comes from VA’s universal screening program. Under this program, all Veterans seen at Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities are asked whether they experienced sexual trauma during their military service; Veterans who respond ‘yes’ are asked if they are interested in learning about MST-related services available. Not every Veteran who responds ‘yes’ needs or is necessarily interested in treatment. It’s important to note that rates obtained from VA screening cannot be used to make any estimate of the rate of MST among all those serving in the U.S. Military, as they are drawn only from Veterans who have chosen to seek VA health care. Also, a positive response does not indicate that the perpetrator 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, because of the disproportionate ratio of men to women in the military there are actually only slightly fewer men seen in VA that have experienced MST than there are women.

How can MST affect Veterans?

It's important to remember that MST is an experience, not a diagnosis or a mental health condition in and of itself. Given the range of distressing sexually-related experiences that Veterans report, it is not surprising that there are a wide range of emotional reactions that Veterans have in response to these events. Even after severely distressing experiences, there is no one way that everyone will respond -- the type, severity, and duration of a Veteran's difficulties will all vary based on factors like whether he/she has a prior history of abuse, the types of responses from others he/she received at the time of the experiences, and whether the experience happened once or was repeated over time. For some Veterans, experiences of MST may continue to affect their mental and physical health, even many years later.

Some of the difficulties both female and male survivors of MST may have 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; difficulty trusting others

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

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

Among users of VA healthcare, medical record data indicates that diagnoses of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety disorders, depression and other mood disorders, and substance use disorders are most frequently associated with MST.

Fortunately, people can recover from experiences of trauma, and VA has services to help Veterans do this.

How has VA responded to the problem of MST?

Since 1992 VA has been developing programs to monitor MST screening and treatment, provide staff with training on MST-related issues, and engage in outreach to Veterans about services available.

Services available to Veterans include:

- All Veterans seen in VA healthcare are asked whether they experienced MST and all treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to experiences of MST is free for both men and women.
- Every VA healthcare facility has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs. He or she may also be aware of state and federal benefits and community resources that may be helpful.
- Every VA healthcare facility has providers knowledgeable about treatment for the aftereffects of MST. Many have specialized outpatient mental health services focusing on sexual trauma. Vet Centers also have specially trained sexual trauma counselors.
- 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.

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

How can Veterans get help?

For more information, Veterans can speak with their existing VA healthcare 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 online at www.va.gov and www.vetcenter.va.gov. Veterans can also call VA's general information hotline at 1-800-827-1000 or visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp. Veterans should feel free to ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if it would make them feel more comfortable.

People can recover from experiences of trauma. Please speak with us to learn more.
