



Start the Conversation: *Information for Veterans Dealing With the Effects of Military Sexual Trauma*

Both female and male Service members sometimes have upsetting, unwanted sexual experiences, including sexual assault or sexual harassment. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) refers to these experiences as “military sexual trauma.”

It’s not uncommon for people who experience sexual assault or harassment during their service to blame themselves or feel ashamed. It is important to remember that MST is not your fault. Nothing ever justifies sexual harassment or assault.

EFFECTS OF MST

MST is an experience, not a diagnosis or condition in and of itself, and Veterans may react to it in a wide variety of ways. The emotional impact and other effects may not surface until months or years after the MST, and sometimes not until after a Veteran has left military service. For some Veterans, MST may affect their mental and physical health, work, relationships, and everyday life many years after the experience.

Military sexual trauma (MST) includes:

- ▶ Any sexual activity in which you were involved against your will, whether you were physically forced or not
- ▶ Sexual activities that happened while you were unable to give your consent, such as when intoxicated
- ▶ Unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about your body or your sexual activities; and threatening and unwelcome sexual advances

It’s important to know that MST can occur on or off base, during war or peacetime, and while a Service member is on or off duty. Perpetrators may be men or women, military personnel or civilians, or superiors or subordinates in the chain of command. They may be a stranger — or even a friend or intimate partner. Veterans from all eras of service have reported experiencing MST.



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Some of the difficulties that MST survivors may face include:

- ▶ Strong emotions: feeling depressed; having intense, sudden emotional responses; feeling angry or irritable much of the time
- ▶ Numbness: feeling emotionally flat
- ▶ Sleep disturbances: trouble falling or staying asleep; bad dreams or nightmares
- ▶ Trouble with attention, concentration, and memory: difficulty 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
- ▶ Disturbing reminders of the trauma: feeling on edge or jumpy all the time; not feeling safe; going out of your way to avoid reminders of the trauma; having trouble trusting others
- ▶ Problems in relationships: feeling alone or disconnected from others; engaging in abusive relationships; conflicts with employers or authority figures
- ▶ Physical health problems: sexual issues; chronic pain; weight or eating problems; stomach or bowel ailments

WARNING SIGNS OF A CRISIS

Not all distressing thoughts and emotions lead to a crisis — but if left unchecked, they could become a serious issue over time.

Learn to recognize these warning signs of a mental health crisis. If you notice any of the following, get help immediately or encourage your Veteran to do so:

- ▶ Engaging in self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse or reckless use of weapons
- ▶ Thinking about hurting or killing oneself
- ▶ Looking for ways or having a set plan in place to kill oneself
- ▶ Talking about death, dying, or suicide
- ▶ Saying final goodbyes to friends and family
- ▶ Putting personal affairs in order or giving away possessions

VA OFFERS VETERANS TREATMENT AND SERVICES TO COPE WITH THE EFFECTS OF MST

Fortunately, people can recover from experiences of trauma, and VA has services to help Veterans move their lives forward. Treatment often involves counseling to help survivors cope with the effects of MST and manage difficult emotions and memories.

At VA, Veterans can receive free, confidential treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST — sometimes even if they’re not eligible for other VA services. To receive these services, you don’t need a VA service-connected disability rating, you don’t need to have reported the incident when it happened, and you don’t need any other documentation that it occurred. Every VA health care facility has an MST coordinator who can answer questions about VA’s MST services.

It’s important that you talk to someone right away if you have thoughts of harming yourself, death, or suicide. You can always contact the **Veterans Crisis Line** by calling **1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1**, using the online chat, or **texting to 838255**. These services provide free, **confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year**.

For additional information and resources to help a Veteran you’re concerned about, visit *Start the Conversation: New Tools for Veteran Suicide Prevention* at www.VeteransCrisisLine.net/starttheconversation