

## What is Military Sexual Trauma?

Military sexual trauma (MST) is the term that the Department of Veterans Affairs uses to refer to sexual assault or sexual harassment that occurred while a person was serving in the military. It includes any sexual experience that someone is involved in against their will.

Some examples:

- Unwanted sexual touching or grabbing
- Someone taking advantage of a person while she was drunk or incapacitated
- Threatening & offensive sexual remarks
- Being pressured into sex by a superior
- Threatening & unwelcome sexual advances
- Being physically forced into sexual activities

## Common Reactions to MST

MST can affect a person's mental and physical health, even many years later.

Reactions may include:

- Nightmares
- Depression/Sadness
- Trouble sleeping
- Anger/Rage
- Embarrassment/ Shame
- Being "jumpy"/ Anxious
- Memory problems
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Sexuality & sexual functioning concerns
- Avoiding reminders of the sexual trauma
- Feeling emotionally numb or "flat"
- Problems with alcohol or drugs
- Difficulty in relationships & trusting people
- Physical health problems such as sexual difficulties; chronic pain; eating or weight problems; gastrointestinal problems

## Female MST Q & A

**Can women really be sexually harassed or assaulted by someone they know?**

- Yes! Perpetrators can be anyone, including strangers, friends, commanders, or relationship partners. They can be men or women, gay or straight, young or old.

**How many Veteran women using the VA have experienced MST in the military?**

- We know that around 70,000 women using VHA services have reported sexual harassment and/or sexual assault while in the military. This is believed to be an underestimate given that many Veterans are reluctant to report these experiences.

**Is the victim ever to blame for an assault? What if she wore sexy clothing or was drinking?**

- No, the survivor of an assault is never to blame for an assault. A woman, no matter how she may look or act, cannot cause a person to attack her. The perpetrator is always to blame for an assault.

**What if a woman didn't or couldn't fight back?**

- Many women do not or are unable to resist or fight back for a variety of reasons (e.g., fear, physical restraint, intoxication). Also, some may feel forced to engage in sexual acts due to threats or fear of retaliation. If the sexual experience was unwanted and against the woman's will, it is MST.

## Stories of Survivors

"I thought the assault was my fault. A family member said 'what did you expect to happen when you joined the military?' so I stuffed my feelings down inside for many years and got into a lot of unhealthy relationships. Finally, with a friend's encouragement, I was able to start getting help from a psychologist and am slowly getting rid of some of that blame and guilt that I've been carrying around for so long."

—Madeline, Army Veteran

"Once I got out of the military, I had a hard time feeling close to my children and husband. I couldn't keep a job and spent as much time hiding at home as I could. I felt nervous and depressed, but didn't know what to do. My husband finally took me to the VA to talk about it and now I'm opening up about the assault and seeking counseling with my family."

—Teresa, USMC Veteran



"I knew I needed help for a long time, but was too afraid to tell anyone. The VA reminded me of the military and the rape. I didn't feel at ease for a long time. Eventually I decided that I needed to do this if I wanted to get on with my life. I reached out and to my surprise the people at the VA have been for the most part supportive and respectful. They can't take back what happened to me, but they are helping me move forward."

—Jessica, Army National Guard Veteran

"I didn't think the sexual harassment would bother me, and I laughed it off. A few times, I felt threatened and was concerned about my safety, but I was tough and brushed it off. After I got back home, I began thinking about it a lot, having nightmares, and started drinking heavily. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me until my doctor asked me about military sexual trauma."

—Pam, USAF Veteran

## Available VA Services

- The VA provides **free and confidential** counseling and treatment to male and female Veterans for any mental or physical health conditions related to experiences of MST.
- You do not need to be service connected and may be able to receive this free care even if you are not eligible for other VA services.
- You do not need to have reported the incident when it happened or provide any documentation that it occurred.



### How can I find out more about MST services?

- You can talk to a current trusted health care provider, contact your local Military Sexual Trauma Coordinator, contact your local VA clinic or Vet Center, call the general VA hotline at 1-800-827-1000, or visit the MST website at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp)

### What if I only feel comfortable talking to a female (or male) provider?

- You have the right to ask to meet with a clinician of the same or opposite sex if that would make you more comfortable.

### Can I apply for service connection (VA disability rating) for conditions related to MST?

- Yes, you can talk to a Veterans Service Representative at the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) who can provide further information on the program and assist you if you decide to file a claim at 1-800-827-1000.

You've Served  
Your Country.  
It's Time for Us  
to Serve You.



VA General Information Hotlines:  
1-800-827-1000 or 1-877-222-8387

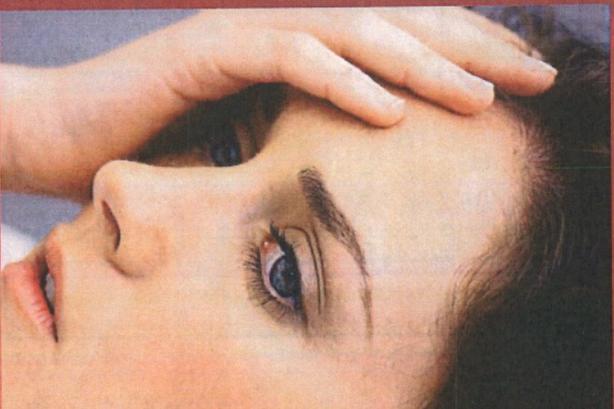
Dr. Laura Johnson  
MST Coordinator  
781-687-2694

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.



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Military Sexual  
Trauma Services for  
Female Veterans



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You Can Get Help Now  
Free Medical and  
Mental Health  
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