

# VETERANS AFFAIRS



You Are Not Alone.  
Healing After  
Military Sexual Trauma

# Introduction

Sexual assault is one of the most underreported violent crimes in America and, unfortunately, the military is not immune to this trend.

If you have been the victim of a sexual assault, it is important to understand the resources that are available to you. You do not have to go through this alone.

This guide will walk you through what can often be an overwhelming process – surviving a sexual assault.

## Sexual Assault Is a Crime

If you were sexually assaulted, nothing you did or did not do makes you responsible for that crime. Even if you:

- » Said yes, but later changed your mind.
- » Had sex with this partner before.
- » Were drinking alcohol.
- » Were wearing sexy or revealing clothes.

### QuickFact

You always have the right to say no. No matter what the circumstances – you are not to blame.



# Military Sexual Trauma

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) uses the term “military sexual trauma” (MST) to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred while the Veteran was in the military.

It includes any sexual activity a person is involved in against his or her will. For example, he or she may have been pressured, threatened, forced or unable to **consent**.

## QuickTerm



Consent means to give permission for something to happen or be done, or to agree to do something. A person who is drugged or unconscious cannot give consent.

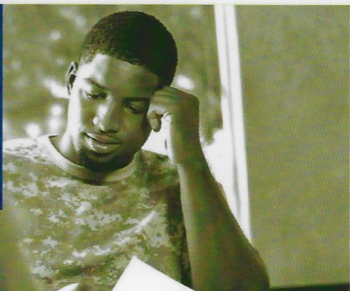
The definition of MST comes from the U.S. Code:

- » Physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature or sexual harassment that occurred while a 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 that is threatening in character.

## QuickNote



The location, genders of the people involved and their relationship to each other do not matter.



## The Effects of MST

MST is an experience, not a diagnosis or a mental health condition. As with other forms of trauma, Veterans may have a variety of reactions to MST.

Often, victims of sexual assault feel that no one can help, that they are powerless and that it may happen again.

If you are a survivor of MST, your military experience may make these feelings more intense because the person responsible might:

- » Work with you and live close to you.
- » Have some control over your needs, such as medical care.
- » Have some control over your promotions and career.

The bonding with your unit could make it hard for you to report the assault.

- » You might feel torn between loyalty to your unit and loyalty to yourself, or you might feel that you need to keep quiet for the good of the group.
- » You might feel forced to choose between your military career and continued contact with the person who assaulted you.



### QuickNote

People may suggest that it was your fault or that you need to just get over it. You are not to blame, and healing takes time.

## Who Experiences MST?

MST can happen during war, peace or training. It can be man-to-woman, woman-to-man, woman-to-woman or man-to-man.

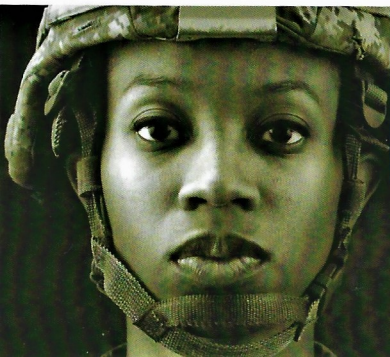
Data from VA medical records indicate that about:

- » 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men seen for VA health care services have told their VA health care providers that they experienced sexual trauma while in the military.

Although rates of MST are higher among women, because there are so many more men than women in the military, there are actually significant numbers of women and men seen in VA who have experienced MST.

VA provides free confidential counseling and treatment for mental and physical conditions related to MST.

- » You do not need to have reported the incident when it happened or have documentation that it occurred.
- » You do not need to be service-connected (i.e., have a VA disability rating), and you may be able to receive this benefit even if you are not eligible for other VA care.



**QuickFlip** 

For more information, flip to the **"VA Services"** tab.

# Common Effects of Trauma

Sexual assault is a violation that can have lasting negative effects on every part of a victim's life.

## Physical Effects

You may experience physical effects, from minor injuries to long-term health problems:

- » Injuries from the attack
- » Upset stomach, digestive problems, loss of appetite
- » Trouble sleeping, exhaustion
- » Pounding heart, rapid breathing, edginess, sweating
- » Facial pain, teeth-grinding
- » Migraines, frequent headaches
- » Physical harm caused by unhealthy coping behaviors (e.g., not eating well, not practicing safe sex, abusing drugs or alcohol)

## Drug Side Effects

If you were given a "date rape" drug, you may experience side effects such as amnesia or a hangover. If you suspect you were drugged, consider getting a urine test as soon as possible.

## Sexually Transmitted Infections

You may have contracted a sexually transmitted infection (STI) from your assailant. Many STIs can go unnoticed until they have caused irreversible damage.

Consider getting tested for chlamydia, gonorrhea, hepatitis B, herpes simplex virus, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), syphilis and trichomoniasis.

## Psychological Effects

You may experience a wide range of emotional responses for days, weeks and even months after the assault:

- » Shock, denial
- » Feeling nervous, helpless, fearful, sad
- » Feeling hopeless about the future and detached or unconcerned about others
- » Feeling numb and unable to experience love or joy
- » Avoiding people, places and things related to the assault
- » Withdrawing, feeling rejected or abandoned
- » Being irritable, easily upset or having outbursts of anger
- » Feeling on guard, constantly alert and easily startled
- » Not being able to trust others, being overly controlling
- » Having nightmares, memories or flashbacks

Traumatic events cause severe stress reactions that have nothing to do with weakness. Although traumatic memories cannot be erased, the stress they cause can be managed. For more information, flip to the "Coping" tab.

### Self-Blame, Guilt and Shame

Some survivors blame themselves or feel ashamed of having been assaulted. These feelings may be especially strong if the victim knew the attacker. Try to remember that you are not to blame.

### Self-Harm

Some survivors hurt themselves to cope with difficult or painful feelings. Self-harm can cause permanent damage to the body and feelings such as guilt, depression, low self-esteem or self-hatred.

## Depression & PTSD

### Depression

Depression is a common result of sexual assault. The two main symptoms are:

- » Feeling sad or hopeless.
- » Losing interest or not being able to find enjoyment in most of your daily activities.

### QuickNote

If you experience either of these symptoms nearly every day for at least two weeks, you may be depressed.

### Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD involves a pattern of symptoms that occur after a traumatic event. Some of the most common symptoms of PTSD include:

- » Recurring memories or nightmares of the event
- » Thinking you are always in danger
- » Having difficulty sleeping
- » Losing interest in things you cared about or feeling numb
- » Feeling anxious, angry and irritable

How you react to these symptoms can also be problematic:

- » Avoiding places or things that remind you of the assault
- » Using drugs or alcohol to cope with your feelings
- » Working all the time to occupy your mind
- » Pulling away from people and becoming isolated

### QuickContact

If you experience suicidal thoughts, contact the Veterans Crisis Line:

Online: [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)

Call: 800-273-TALK (8255), press "1"

Text message: 838255



# Note to Male Victims

Sexual assault does not happen only to women. In fact, men and boys are often victims of sexual assault, sexual abuse and rape.

- » Men can be victims of sexual violence, regardless of their sexual orientation.
- » Some men who are assaulted experience an erection or ejaculation during the assault. This is a physiological response (the body's normal functioning). It does not mean that the victim wanted or enjoyed the assault – or that he is gay.
- » If the perpetrator was a woman, men may feel unheard and unrecognized as victims.
- » Men may feel that to get help, they must disclose their sexual orientation – which they may not want to do.

## Reactions

While not every male survivor reacts the same way, they may experience these common reactions:

- » Blame themselves for not being “strong enough” to fight off the attacker
- » Be confused about the physical arousal they experienced
- » Not seek help for fear of how others will react

Heterosexual men may:

- » Fear that the attack will make them gay.
- » Feel that they are “less of a man.”

Homosexual men may:

- » Feel that the crime is “punishment” for being gay.
- » Fear that they were targeted because of their sexual orientation.

# Coping with Stress Reactions

Coping with your stress reactions in an active way puts you in control and helps you overcome feelings of helplessness. Active coping means recognizing and accepting the impact the trauma had on your life. It means taking direct action to improve your situation.

## QuickNote



Talk to your counselor or doctor about any symptoms you experience.

There are many things you can do to cope with post-traumatic stress symptoms. Like other skills, coping skills improve with practice.

## Anxiety or Panic

- » Know that stress reactions such as a pounding heart and light-headedness are usually caused by rapid breathing. These reactions would probably not cause you to worry if you had them while exercising.
- » It's the scary thoughts (e.g., "I'm having a heart attack") that make stress reactions so upsetting.
- » The feelings will pass; try to slow your breathing.
- » Every time you cope with stress reactions in a positive way, you work toward making them happen less often.
- » Remind yourself that they are only memories and that it's natural to have some memories of the assault or rape.

## Distressing Memories, Images or Thoughts

- » Talk about your memories with someone you trust.
- » Remember that these reminders will likely lessen over time.

## Flashbacks

- » Keep your eyes open. Notice where you are.
- » Remind yourself where you are and that you are safe. The trauma happened in the past, and you are in the present.
- » Get up and move around. Have a drink of water or wash your hands.
- » Call someone you trust and tell him or her what is happening.

## Nightmares

- » If you wake up in a panic, remind yourself that you are reacting to a dream.
- » Consider getting out of bed to reorient yourself to the present. Clear your head by doing something calming, such as listening to music.
- » If possible, talk to someone.

## Sleep Difficulties

- » Stick to a regular bedtime schedule and routine.
- » Avoid strenuous exercise for a few hours before bedtime.
- » Try not to use your bedroom for activities other than sleeping or sex.
- » Avoid alcohol, tobacco and caffeine. These affect your ability to sleep.
- » If you can't fall asleep, don't lie in bed thinking or worrying. Get up and do something relaxing instead.



## Irritability, Anger and Rage

- » Take time to cool off or think things over. Walk away from the situation.
- » Exercise daily to reduce stress and express your anger in a productive way.
- » Remember that staying angry increases your stress and can cause health problems.
- » If you blow up at family members or friends, talk to them about it. Explain how you feel and what you are doing to cope with your reactions.

## Concentration Difficulties

- » Slow down. Give yourself time to focus on the task.
- » Write things down. To-do lists can be helpful.
- » Break down tasks into easy-to-handle steps.
- » Be realistic about how many events or tasks you can attend or accomplish each day.

## Difficulty Feeling or Expressing Positive Emotions

- » Know that this is a common reaction after a trauma. You are not doing this on purpose, and it is not your fault.
- » Continue to participate in activities that you once enjoyed. You may get into it and end up feeling pleasure.
- » Show your loved ones that you care. Express yourself in little ways: a card, a small gift or a phone call to say "hi."

## Harmful Coping Behaviors

### Using drugs and alcohol

You may think substances help you to relax, to forget about the assault or to go to sleep. In fact, alcohol or drug use causes more problems than it cures.

### Avoiding other people

Social occasions may cause you stress, but isolating yourself can cause you to feel lonely, sad and afraid. Social support is critical to healthy coping. Try to take part in social activities, even if you don't feel like doing so.

### Getting angry

Anger may temporarily keep bad emotions away, but it can also stop you from connecting with people and getting help from loved ones.

### Being on guard all the time

You may feel the need to be on the lookout for danger at all times, but this way of coping won't help you recover. You'll end up feeling stressed, fearful and worn out.

### Avoiding reminders of the assault or rape

Avoiding people, places and things that remind you of the assault or rape may temporarily reduce your distress, but avoidance allows the trauma to control your life and prevents you from coping and recovering.

### Throwing yourself into work

Working too much can be a form of avoidance. It interferes with your health, relationships and recovery.

# The Recovery Process

“Getting better” can mean different things for different people. You will probably have ups and downs, and you may feel frustrated for not recovering as quickly as you or other people think you should. Be patient. Everyone goes through the process of healing at his or her own pace.

- » Recovery is an ongoing, gradual process. It is not a matter of suddenly being cured.
- » Some amount of continued reaction to the traumatic event(s) is typical and reflects how our bodies and minds are wired.

Healing doesn't mean forgetting traumatic experiences or not having emotional pain. Healing may mean:

- » Fewer symptoms.
- » Symptoms that are less disturbing.
- » Greater confidence in your ability to cope with your memories and reactions.
- » An improved ability to manage your emotions.

There are things you can do to help your recovery:

- » Respect the way you feel and your right to feel that way.
- » Talk about your feelings with people you trust.
- » Connect with other survivors of violence.
- » Do not be afraid to seek professional help.
- » Exercise, eat nutritious food and take deep breaths when you feel tense.
- » Do not abandon hope: Healing is possible.

## Promote Healing

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recommends that you start your healing process by thinking about how you would like to feel. Write it down or tell someone else.

SAMHSA also recommends that you work on one or more of the following issues if you think doing so might help you heal:

### Set boundaries and limits.

In all relationships, you have the right to set your own limits and boundaries so that you feel comfortable and safe. Say no to anything you don't want. For example, if someone calls you five times a day, you have the right to ask that person to call you less often. Expect and insist that others respect your boundaries.

### Learn to be a good advocate for yourself.

Ask for what you want and deserve. Work toward getting what you want and need for yourself. For example, if you want to get more education, find out about available programs and do what is needed to reach your goal.

### Build your self-esteem.

You are a wonderful and special person. You deserve all the best things that life has to offer. Remind yourself of this. Read books on building self-esteem.

### Change negative thoughts to positive ones.

You may have lots of negative thoughts about yourself. Work on changing these to positive thoughts. The more you do, the better you will feel. If you often think that you will never feel better, replace that thought with, "Every day I am feeling better and better."

## What You Can Do to Feel Better

### Do something fun or creative.

Do something you really enjoy, such as drawing, reading, playing a game, fishing, watching a movie or gardening.

### Exercise.

Exercise is a great way to feel better while improving your overall stamina and health.

### Write.

You can keep lists, record dreams and explore your feelings. Don't worry about how well you write. Writing about the traumatic event can help some people safely process the emotions they are experiencing.

#### QuickNote

Do not use this exercise if you feel worse afterward.

### Use your spiritual resources.

For some people, this means praying or going to church. For others, it means meditating or reading inspirational material – whatever feels right. You can be spiritual without being religious.

### Do something routine.

Do something that is part of an everyday routine. For example: Take a shower, make a sandwich, call a friend, make your bed or walk the dog.

### Wear something that makes you feel good.

Everybody has certain clothes or jewelry that they enjoy wearing to boost his/her confidence.

### Get little things done.

Accomplishing something feels good. Give yourself a simple task. For example: Clean out one drawer, do a load of laundry, etc.



### **Learn something new.**

Choose a topic that you are interested in but have never explored. Research it or take a class.

### **Be in the moment.**

If you focus on the future or think about the past, you can miss out on fully experiencing the present. Make an effort to focus on what you are doing right now and what is happening around you.

### **Focus on something beautiful or meaningful.**

Stop what you are doing and take a long, close look at a flower, the sky, a painting or a special photograph.

### **Play with children in your family or with a pet.**

Activities like romping in the grass with a dog, petting a kitten and reading to a child can have a calming effect.

### **Do a relaxation exercise.**

Try different relaxation exercises or listen to a relaxation tape for 10 minutes each day.

### **Take a warm bath.**

It is simple, but it helps: Warm water is relaxing and healing.

### **Use aromatherapy.**

Uplifting essential oils, such as bergamot, cinnamon, geranium, lavender and neroli, can be dabbed on your wrists or used in a bath or in massage oil.

### **Make or listen to music.**

Pamper yourself with music you really enjoy. Or, play an instrument and write your own music.

# Department of Veterans Affairs

## MST-Related Services

In response to concerns about MST issues, Congress passed a law in 1992 mandating that VA health care providers receive training and education related to MST. Under this law, VA is also required to provide counseling services to women Veterans who report MST.

Subsequent laws have mandated VA to provide this care to both male and female victims of MST and for the duration of care provided to be limitless.



The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has issued directives requiring all Veterans who receive VA services to be screened for MST and for each facility to have a MST coordinator to oversee screening, treatment and staff education related to MST.

- » All counseling and treatment for mental and physical conditions related to MST are provided free of charge.
- » Veterans do not need to be service-connected (i.e., have a VA disability rating) to receive this benefit. You may be able to access MST counseling and treatment even if you are not eligible for other VA health care.
- » You do not need to have reported the incident when it happened or have other documentation that it occurred to receive VA MST health care.

## How VA Can Help

Every VA health care facility has a designated MST coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help you find and access VA services and programs. He or she may also be able to suggest helpful state and Federal benefits and resources.

- » Every VA health care facility has providers who are 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.

If you do not feel comfortable in a mixed-gender setting, ask about separate programs for men and women. Also, some programs are offered in residential or inpatient settings for people who need more intense treatment and support.

Feel free to ask to meet with a provider of the same or opposite sex if it would make you feel more comfortable.

### QuickContact

#### To get help:

- » Speak with your VA health care provider.
- » Contact the MST coordinator or the women Veterans program manager at your local VA medical center.
- » Contact your local Vet Center.
- » Call the VA hotline: **800-827-1000**



## Benefits for Victims of MST

Veterans suffering from the effects of MST may be eligible for Disability Compensation for Personal Assault or Military Trauma.

How VA defines personal assault or military trauma:

VA defines personal assault as physical or psychological violence, domestic battering or stalking. One type of personal assault is MST. Trauma is defined as any lingering physical, emotional or psychological symptoms.

Can I receive compensation?

Yes. If it is determined that your disabilities are a result of, or have been made worse by, injuries or diseases incurred during military service, you may be eligible.

To receive compensation, you must meet both of the following criteria:

- » You must not have been separated under dishonorable conditions.
- » You must currently suffer from a disabling condition. A common disability resulting from a sexual or personal trauma is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

### How to apply:

- » Complete VA Form 21-526, Veteran's Application for Compensation and/or Pension.
- » MST Specialists and Women Veterans Coordinators can help you apply for MST benefits. Contact your local VA medical facility or Vet Center to request assistance. You can also apply at:  
**[www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov)**

# Resources

## VA Resources

Make the Connection

[www.maketheconnection.net](http://www.maketheconnection.net)

Mental Health

[www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp)

VA Facility and Service Locator

[www.va.gov/facilities](http://www.va.gov/facilities)

VA Readjustment Counseling Services

Contact your local Vet Center

[www.vetcenter.va.gov/vet\\_center\\_services.asp](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/vet_center_services.asp)

Vet Centers

[www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov)

Women Veterans Health Care

**855-VA-WOMEN (829-6636)**

[www.womenshealth.va.gov](http://www.womenshealth.va.gov)

Women Veterans Program

[www.va.gov/womenvet](http://www.va.gov/womenvet)

## Military Resources

After Deployment

[www.afterdeployment.dcoe.mil/  
topics-military-sexual-trauma](http://www.afterdeployment.dcoe.mil/topics-military-sexual-trauma)

Department of Defense (DoD)

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO)

[www.sapr.mil](http://www.sapr.mil)

DoD Safe Helpline

**877-995-5247**

[www.safehelpline.org](http://www.safehelpline.org)

## MST Advocacy Groups

Military Rape Crisis Center

[www.stopmilitaryrape.org](http://www.stopmilitaryrape.org)

Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)

[www.servicewomen.org](http://www.servicewomen.org)

VetWow

[www.facebook.com/vetwow](https://www.facebook.com/vetwow)

## Community Resources

National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence  
(NCDSV)

[www.ncdsv.org](http://www.ncdsv.org)

National Sexual Violence Resource Center  
(NSVRC)

[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network  
(RAINN)

800-656-HOPE (4673)

[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

## Prevention Resources

Men Can Stop Rape

[www.mencanstoprape.org](http://www.mencanstoprape.org)

MyStrength

[www.facebook.com/mystrength](https://www.facebook.com/mystrength)

PreventConnect

[www.preventconnect.org](http://www.preventconnect.org)

## Resources for Men

1 in 6

[www.1in6.org](http://www.1in6.org)

MaleSurvivor

[www.malesurvivor.org](http://www.malesurvivor.org)

Pandora's Project

[www.pandys.org](http://www.pandys.org)

## Domestic Violence Resources

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

[www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)

National Domestic Violence Hotline

800-799-SAFE (7233)

[www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

Futures Without Violence

[www.futureswithoutviolence.org](http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org)

Women of Color Network

[www.wocninc.org](http://www.wocninc.org)

## Other Resources

National Center for PTSD

[www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Office on Women's Health (OWH) – Mental Health

[www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/veterans](http://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/veterans)



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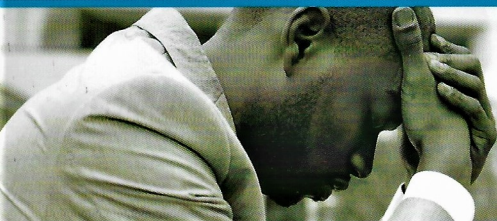
You Are Not Alone.

## Healing After Military Sexual Trauma

If you experienced sexual trauma while you were in the military, this guide will help you understand the resources that are available to you through VA. It will walk you through what can often be an overwhelming process – surviving a sexual assault.

- » Definition of military sexual trauma (MST)
- » Common reactions after trauma or sexual assault
- » VA services and benefits for survivors of MST
- » The recovery process and tips to promote healing

Includes recovery information from the National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).



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