

Military Sexual Trauma

Arizona Coalition for Military Families
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WE BELIEVE
YOU AND
WE BELIEVE
IN YOU

**Adapted from presentations by Brynne Johannsen, Ph.D. & Margret Bell, Ph.D.*



Objectives

- ▶ Military Sexual Trauma (MST)
Defined
- ▶ Diagnoses & Reactions to
MST
- ▶ Eligibility/Benefits
- ▶ Treatment & Resources

What is MST?

- ▶ VA's definition of MST, comes from Public Law (section 1720D of Title 38 US Code), is **sexual assault** or **repeated**, **threatening sexual harassment** that occurred during a Veteran's military service.
 - ▶ Where does MST occur?
 - ▶ Does the perpetrator also have to be in the military?
 - ▶ Does MST only happen to women?
 - ▶ Does era matter?
- ▶ **Is MST an experience or a Diagnosis?**

What is MST?

- ▶ Any form of sexual activity in which someone is involved against his/her/their will
- ▶ Someone may be:
 - ▶ Physically forced into participation
 - ▶ Unable to consent to sexual activities (e.g., intoxicated)
 - ▶ Pressured into sexual activities (e.g., with threats of consequences or promises of rewards)
- ▶ **Compliance does not mean Consent**

How Common is MST?

This can be difficult to know, as sexual trauma is frequently underreported.



About 1 in 3 women and 1 in 50 men have told their VHA healthcare provider that they experienced sexual trauma in the military. The DOD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) annual report, released in May 2020, on sexual assault for FY19 cited a 3% increase in sexual assault in DOD.



Although women experience MST in higher proportions than do men, because of the large number of men in the military there are significant numbers of men and women seen in VA who have experienced MST.

Common Mental Health & Medical Diagnoses & Reactions Related to MST



Impact

People are remarkably resilient after experiencing trauma

There is no one way that Veterans respond to MST

OEF/OIF/OND Veterans' MST experiences may be relatively recent and their distress more acute

Mental Health Diagnoses Commonly Associated With MST

- ▶ Among users of VA health care, the mental health diagnoses most commonly associated with MST are:
 - ▶ PTSD
 - ▶ Depressive Disorders
 - ▶ Anxiety Disorders
 - ▶ Bipolar Disorders
 - ▶ Drug and Alcohol Disorders
 - ▶ Schizophrenia and Psychoses
 - ▶ Eating Disorders
 - ▶ Dissociative Disorders
 - ▶ Somatization Disorder
- ▶ Rates of sexual trauma are high amongst individuals with certain personality disorders



Common Mental Health Symptoms and Problems

Extremes of emotion and emotional lability

Emotional disengagement or flatness

Difficulties with attention, concentration, and memory

Re-experiencing and strong emotional reactions to reminders

Hypervigilance

Trouble sleeping, nightmares

Suicidal thoughts or behavior

Self-harm

Disordered eating

Dissociation

Drinking and drug use

Revictimization

Difficulties with hierarchical environments

Physical Health Problems Associated with MST

- ▶ A range of physical health conditions are also associated with sexual trauma
 - ▶ Chronic fatigue
 - ▶ Chronic pain (e.g., lower back pain, headaches)
 - ▶ Gastrointestinal problems (e.g., Irritable Bowel Syndrome)
 - ▶ Fibromyalgia
 - ▶ Sexually Transmitted Diseases
 - ▶ Gynecological problems (e.g., menstrual disorders, pelvic pain)
 - ▶ Women: Obesity, weight loss, hypothyroidism
 - ▶ Men: HIV/AIDS

Other Common Symptoms and Problems

- ▶ Difficulties in core areas of functioning and well-being
 - ▶ Interpersonal difficulties or avoidance of relationships
 - ▶ Difficulties getting and maintaining employment
 - ▶ Difficulties with parenting
 - ▶ Difficulties with identity and sense of self
 - ▶ Spirituality issues/crisis of faith

Eligibility & Benefits



Free MST-Related Care

- ▶ Free care is provided for all Medical and Mental Health conditions related to MST
- ▶ **Service connection is not required**
 - ▶ Treatment is independent of the VBA disability claims process
 - ▶ Veterans do not need to have reported the MST at the time or have other documentation
- ▶ **Veterans may be able to receive free MST-related care even if they're not eligible for other VA care**
 - ▶ There are no length of service or income requirements to receive MST-related care
 - ▶ MST survivors with an OTH discharge are now immediately eligible for MST-related medical care as well as mental health care. These patients are no longer limited to mental health care eligibility only.
 - ▶ Character of discharge adjudication is still required, but OTH MST survivors may continue receiving the full range of MST-related care unless VBA determines that a statutory bar applies (dishonorable for all VA purposes, 12C)
- ▶ Never assume someone isn't eligible for MST-related care



Screen for MST

VA screens all Veterans for experiences of MST-Mandate is 100%- MST designation does not move with the Veteran.

- Most patients do not disclose a trauma history unless asked directly
- Studies have consistently shown that most sexual trauma survivors favor routine screening for sexual trauma and other forms of interpersonal violence

In screening for MST, VA uses trauma-informed care principles.

Awareness to barriers to disclosure

- Shame or self-blame
- Fear of becoming emotionally overwhelmed
- Societal stigma associated with sexual trauma, especially for men
- Unsupportive and/or blaming responses to previous disclosures

Treatment & Resources



Referring for Treatment

Every VA Medical Center has providers knowledgeable about MST




Every VA Medical Center provides MST-related mental health outpatient services

Formal psychological assessment and evaluation, psychiatry, and individual and group psychotherapy

Specialty services to target problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, depression, and homelessness

Evidenced-based therapies are available at all VA Medical Centers

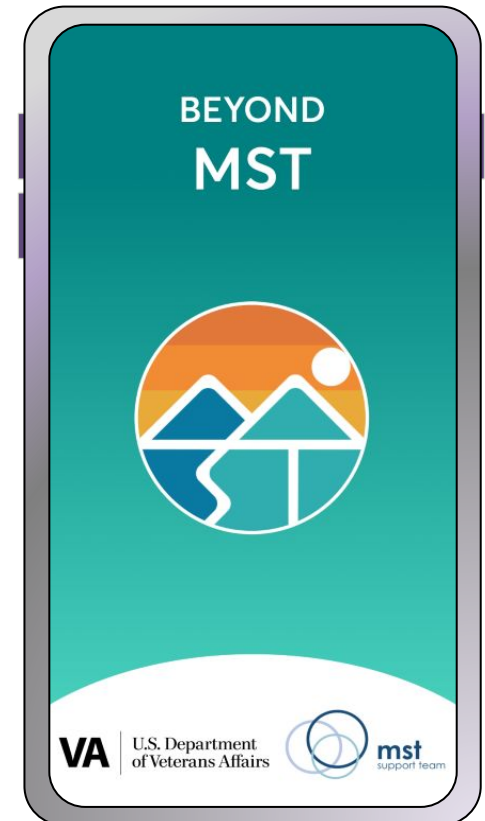


Vet Centers have specially trained counselors

Beyond MST is a free, secure self-help mobile app created by VA specifically to support the health and well-being of survivors of military sexual trauma (MST).

Learn and practice skills to:

- Work through self-blame and identify your strengths
- Manage stress, reduce unhelpful thoughts
- Improve communication in relationships
- Create self-care plans to support your physical and emotional well-being
- Find hope and build the life you deserve





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**NORTHERN ARIZONA VA HEALTH CARE
SYSTEM AND PHOENIX VA HEALTH CARE
SYSTEM INVITE YOU TO**

Join us

**For the Inaugural Military Sexual Trauma
(MST) & Sexual Assault Awareness Month
(SAAM) virtual 5k during the month of April.**

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Whether you are a Veteran, Family Member of a Veteran, VA Staff Member, Community Partner or Citizen, please join us to raise awareness and show support for our Veteran survivors of MST.
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To register for this **FREE** and **Awesome** event. Please use the link below or QR code to visit the event bright registration page.

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/inaugural-military-sexual-trauma-sexual-awareness-month-virtual-5k-tickets-139975798381>



For more information or questions, please contact the MST Coordinator, Julie Borovik for more information.

928-445-4860 ext. 4831



Questions?

