

MSHN Veteran Navigator Update: Military Sexual Trauma (MST)



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Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is the term that the Department of Veterans Affairs uses when defining sexual assault or sexual harassment that has occurred while a Veteran (male or female) served in the Armed Forces. The definition used by the Department of Veterans Affairs comes from Federal law (Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D) 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, active duty for training, or inactive duty training*" (National Center for PTSD, 2017).

Sexual trauma during military service most often occurs in a setting of the victim's home or unit, and in most cases, the victim(s) must continue to live and work closely with their perpetrator(s), often leading to an increased sense of feeling helpless, powerless, and at risk for additional victimization. Sexual victimization that occurs in this setting often means that victims are relying on their perpetrators (or associates of the perpetrator) to provide for basic needs to include medical and psychological care (ptsd.gov, 2017). Perpetrators may be peers or supervisors responsible for making decisions about work-related evaluations and promotions. Therefore, victims may be forced to choose between continuing their military careers during which they are forced to have frequent contact with their perpetrators or sacrificing their career goals to protect themselves from future victimization (ptsd.gov, 2017).

Concerns Commonly Reported by Women Who Have Experienced MST:

- Strong emotions
- Family & relationship problems
- Eating or body image issues
- Difficulties with trust or communication
- Pain & physical problems
- Self-esteem problems
- Sexual concerns
- Work or School problems
- Avoidance or isolation
- Reckless behavior

One in four female Veterans and one in a hundred male Veterans report they have experienced MST (Veterans Health Administration, 2017). Female Veterans of **ALL BACKGROUNDS** have experienced MST, independent of factors such as era of service, age, race, rank, or sexual orientation (va.ptsd.gov, 2017). Studies of sexual assault identify posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder, and substance use as frequent outcomes following MST. The rates of PTSD in both men (65%) and women (45.9%) following MST are higher than the rate reported by men following combat exposure (38.8%) (va.ptsd.gov, 2017).

Military Sexual Trauma can be a very difficult topic for the survivor to discuss. When you encounter a Veteran that has revealed their military sexual trauma, the MSHN Veteran Navigator is available to assist with providing information for military sexual assault coordinators within the Department of Veterans Affairs health system.