

What is MST?

Military sexual trauma (MST) affects thousands of military service members every year. MST refers to sexual assault or sexual harassment that occurs while a service member is in the military. Victims of MST can be male or female, just as the perpetrators can be male or female.

How is MST different?

While sexual assault and harassment are traumatic regardless of where they happen, unique problems arise when these acts happen during military service. Victims may find it difficult to move on if they have to continue to live and work with the perpetrator, and, in some cases, rely on him or her for basic needs. Victims may worry that by reporting the assault, it will affect their mission or how their fellow unit members see them. And if the perpetrator holds a higher rank, it's possible that the victim's career advancement may be hindered. There may also be fears about retaliation should the victim decide to report the incident.

Military Sexual Trauma's Effects

Female and male service members who experience MST have high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They may experience flashbacks or nightmares about the incident, become withdrawn and emotionally distant, or constantly feel anxious. Other possible effects include depression, suicidal thoughts, feelings of shame and guilt, and compulsions to self-injure. Substance abuse issues, sleeping and eating disorders, migraines, and stomach problems may also arise.

Military sexual trauma may lead to economic consequences for the victims. The development of PTSD, depression, or substance abuse issues can impact a victim's military career as well as post-discharge careers. Among homeless women veterans, 40% report having experienced sexual assault while in the military.

The Facts About MST

- The majority of cases go unreported.
- Assault rates increase during times of war.
- About 1 in 3 female veterans report experiencing MST.
- About 1 in 50 male veterans report experiencing MST.
- Female veterans who experienced MST were 9x more likely to develop PTSD.

RESOURCES

US Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office:

www.sapr.mil

US Department of Defense Safe Helpline:

www.SafeHelpline.org

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network:

www.rainn.org

800-656-HOPE (4673)

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MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

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Protecting Against MST

Whether a service member is on post, deployed, or elsewhere, there are preventative measures that can reduce the risk of sexual assault.

- Be aware of your surroundings, and avoid isolated or poorly lit areas.
- Travel in groups and keep an eye out for one another.
- Stay sober or drink in moderation. Do not leave your drink unattended or accept drinks from strangers.
- Tell a friend if you plan to go out with someone you don't know very well.
- Lock the doors to your car, barracks, or home.
- Trust your instincts and leave if you feel unsafe.



While Deployed:

- Always travel with a buddy.
- Familiarize yourself with the new facilities and lighting conditions.
- Report any unauthorized people in sleeping areas (tents, bunkers, etc.) and any suspicious activities.
- Be aware that other cultures may treat women differently. If you are uncomfortable with how you are being treated, be assertive, but polite and clear.



If You've Been Assaulted

- Get to a safe place.
- Call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number in the country you are stationed if you need immediate medical attention.
- Save all evidence of the attack. Don't bathe, wash your hands, brush your teeth, eat, smoke, or change clothes.
- Write down all the details of the attack and the perpetrator.
- Get medical care as soon as possible. You may be at risk for sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy. Ask your healthcare provider to perform a sexual assault forensic examination (SAFE) to preserve any physical evidence of the assault.
- Contact a sexual assault response coordinator (SARC) or victim advocate (VA) for support and to get information about your options for reporting the assault.
- Remember that what happened was not your fault, and don't be afraid to ask for help.

The Next Steps

Sexual assault response coordinators arrange care for victims, provide information on

reporting options, and ensure that appropriate care is received. SARCs also assign a victim advocate who provides support, liaison services, and crisis intervention. Victims will have to decide whether they want to proceed with an unrestricted or a restricted report.

Unrestricted reporting includes reporting the sexual assault to military and legal authorities and notifying the chain of command, which then triggers an official investigation.

With restricted reporting, victims confidentially disclose details of the assault, but this disclosure does not notify the chain of command or trigger an investigation. Victims can decide later to begin the official investigation process.

Recovery

Recovering from a sexual assault is not only challenging, but it also takes time. Getting support is a crucial part of recovery. Friends, family, and chaplains can provide support. Sexual assault response coordinators and victim advocates can also assist in finding support resources.



Proper self-care is another important aspect of recovery. Exercising, maintaining a healthy diet, and getting enough sleep will help to ensure physical well-being. Meditation, altruistic pursuits, positive personal relationships, and leisure activities are wonderful ways to promote mental health by helping you to heal and grow.

Active Bystander Intervention

In order to prevent sexual assault, members of the military are encouraged to participate in active bystander intervention. Active bystanders take the initiative to help those who might be targeted for sexual assault or those who may become perpetrators. The point of this intervention is to stop a crime before it even begins.

Active bystanders should:

- Assess the situation for safety. If it's dangerous to intervene, call the authorities.
- Be with others. The intervention is more likely to be successful if you're with a group of people.
- Care for the victim. Ask if they need medical attention, if there is someone you can contact, and if they need other assistance.

By working together, being aware, and being active, you can make military sexual trauma a thing of the past.