



## MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

*"The VA's national screening program reveals about 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men respond "yes" that they have experienced MST." ref: VA MST Fact Sheet*

### **What is a Military Sexual Trauma (MST)?**

Military Sexual trauma is a term the military community uses to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred while the person was in the military. It includes any sexual activity where someone is involved against his or her will – he or she may have been pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied faster promotions or better treatment in exchange for sex), may have been unable to consent to sexual activities (for example, when intoxicated), or may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other experiences that fall into the category of MST include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities; and/or threatening or unwelcome sexual advances.

### **The effects of MST.**

Some of the physical effects of sexual abuse are immediately apparent and can include bruises, cuts, burns, injury to genitals, damage to reproductive and other internal organs, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases.

The psychological effects of sexual abuse may appear immediately, but often are delayed. Sexual abuse can destroy trust and warp the victim's perception of a normal, loving relationship. Victims frequently feel they are at fault for the abuse and have low self-esteem. These feelings can lead to depression, eating and sleeping disorders, and suicide attempts.

Victims may fall into a pattern of searching out marital and sexual partners who abuse them. They may find it difficult to form meaningful and lasting relationships with members of the opposite sex or to have normal sexual relations. They may use sex to gain attention or affection and may see themselves worthy only as sex objects. Victims also resort to defense mechanisms to blot the incidents from their mind. These repressed feelings of anger and guilt may lead to physical and psychological problems. Physically, repressed feelings may cause ulcers, colitis, and migraine headaches, for example.

Psychologically, repressed memories of abuse may resurface as symptoms of other mental illnesses. Unless a history of abuse is revealed, a victim may be treated for a mental illness while the real cause of the symptoms goes untreated.

### **Treatment.**

The physical trauma of sexual abuse usually heals without long-lasting effect. The psychological trauma also can be treated successfully. Through support groups and individual and group therapy, a victim can overcome the barriers that the memories and pain of abuse place in the way of a normal, happy, and productive life. Recovery may take anywhere from three to five years of intensive therapy and years of follow-up and support.

### **What can be done?**

If you, or someone you know, is a victim of sexual abuse and in need of counseling, contact a community mental health provider or the Missouri Department of Mental Health's Division of Behavioral Health Division at (800) 575-7480.

*For your convenience in finding behavioral health resources, the Missouri Department of Mental Health (DMH), in partnership with the Missouri Behavioral Health Alliance (MO BHA), has compiled this list. These links will take you out of the DMH website. DMH and MO BHA do not endorse or take responsibility for the content of other organization's websites.*

### **Resources.**

*DoD Safe Helpline* is a crisis support service for members of the Department of Defense community affected by sexual assault. Through the Safe Helpline, you can “click, call or text” to receive anonymous one-on-one advice, support, and information 24/7. The DoD has contracted The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) to provide this confidential and anonymous service.

<https://www.safehelpline.org/>

*Make the Connection* explains how military sexual trauma (MST) affects Veterans, treatments, services, tools to help manage reactions to your experiences with MST and other resources.

<http://maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma>

*Vet Centers* provide confidential counseling services and screening to combat Veterans and their families. Counseling services include military sexual trauma and deployment related traumas. For more information or to find the nearest Vet Center visit: <http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/index.asp>