TOP 10 THINGS ALL HEALTHCARE &
SERVICE PROFESSIONALS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

VA SERVICES for SURVIVORS of MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

1. **Military sexual trauma (MST) is a term used by the Department of Veterans Affairs to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred during a Veteran's military service.** MST can occur on or off base and while a Veteran is on or off duty. Perpetrators can be men or women, military personnel or civilians, commanding officers or subordinates, strangers, friends, or intimate partners. Veterans from all eras of service – from World War II to those who served more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan – have reported experiencing MST.

2. **A significant number of men and women report having experienced MST.** About one in five women and one in 100 men have told their VA healthcare provider that they experienced sexual trauma in the military. Though rates of MST are higher among women, because of the high ratio of men to women in the military there are in fact only slightly less men than women seen in VA that have experienced MST.

3. **MST affects both mental and physical health.** Sexual assault is more likely to result in symptoms of PTSD than are most other types of trauma, including combat. Symptoms of depression and substance abuse are also common. Sexual trauma can also have severe consequences for physical health and is associated with higher rates of headaches, gastrointestinal difficulties, sexual dysfunction, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue. Even survivors who do not experience problems at the level of formal diagnosis may still struggle in certain situations with emotional reactions, memories related to their experiences of MST, or interpersonal issues. Recovery is possible, however, and VA has services to help Veterans with this.

4. **VA has responded to MST in a variety of ways.** Since 1992, the VA has been developing initiatives to improve our ability to identify MST survivors and ensure that they have access to specialized care. For example, all Veterans seen in VA healthcare settings are asked if they experienced MST. All treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to MST is free. VA engages in outreach to Veterans about services available and ensures that staff receive training on MST-related issues. As with disabilities related to other experiences during military service, Veterans can receive compensation for disabilities or injuries resulting from MST.

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VA Cares About Military Sexual Trauma

5. **In VA, treatment for all mental and physical health conditions related to MST is free and unlimited in duration.** Veterans do not need to have a disability rating (that is, be "service-connected"), to have reported the incident(s) at the time, or to have other documentation that MST occurred in order to receive free MST-related care. There are no time limits on eligibility for this care, meaning that Veterans can seek out treatment even many years after discharge.

6. **Veterans may be eligible for free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA services.** There are special eligibility rules associated with MST-related care and many of the standard requirements related to length of service or financial means do not apply.

7. **VA has specialized treatment programming available for MST survivors.** VA facilities have providers knowledgeable about evidence-based mental health care 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. For Veterans who need more intensive treatment and support, there are programs nationwide that offer specialized sexual trauma treatment in residential and inpatient settings.

8. **VA knows that MST survivors may have special treatment needs and concerns.** For example, a Veteran can ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if it would make him or her feel more comfortable. Similarly, to accommodate Veterans who do not feel comfortable in mixed-gender treatment settings, many facilities throughout VA have separate programs for men and women. All residential and inpatient programs have separate sleeping areas for men and women.

9. **Every VA facility has an MST Coordinator who serves as a point person for MST-related issues.** He or she can tell you about treatment and other resources available in your area. Contact your local VA facility for more information.

10. **There are several ways Veterans can get help.** For more information, Veterans can speak with their existing VA healthcare provider, contact the MST Coordinator at their nearest VA Medical Center, or contact their local Vet Center. A list of VA and Vet Center facilities can be found online at www.va.gov and www.vetcenter.va.gov. Veterans and others can also call VA's general information hotline at 1-800-827-1000. More information about MST is available at http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp.