**FAQs**

*MST, SAAM, and VA Recovery Services*

Below are answers to some of the most common questions about military sexual trauma (MST) and Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM). For more information or to explore VA’s services for MST survivors, visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome).

About SAAM

* What is SAAM?
* Short for “Sexual Assault Awareness Month,” SAAM is an annual observance for advocates to raise awareness about sexual violence and educate communities about preventing sexual harassment and assault.
* With origins in the 1970s, SAAM expanded from one week to a month in the 1990s and was officially recognized in 2001.
* What does VA do for SAAM?
* Every April, VA redoubles its ongoing efforts throughout the year to increase public understanding of military sexual trauma (MST), its impact on Veterans, and VA’s free MST-related services and support for survivors.
* VA’s annual SAAM campaign lets all Veterans know that if they have experienced MST, a community of support is available to help them in their recovery.
* VA develops a new SAAM campaign theme each year to help raise awareness and to provide updated information on the many VA services available.
* What is VA’s theme for SAAM 2021?
* This year’s theme delivers VA’s message to survivors in two parts: “We believe you — **and we believe in you**.”
* The first half of the theme, “We believe you,” welcomes survivors into a supportive community of people who understand the effects of sexual violence as well as the importance of not being dismissed or having to recover alone. For MST survivors, just learning that someone believes they were traumatized and understands the many different impacts on survivors can be tremendously healing.
* The second half of the 2021 theme, “We believe in you,” provides affirmation by showing VA’s confidence in Veterans’ strength, resilience, and ability to heal.
* This message also invites allies of survivors to learn about MST, to discover ways to support the recovery of Veterans, and to help by taking practical action as part of the larger supportive community.

About MST

* What is MST?
* VA uses the term “military sexual trauma” (MST) to refer to sexual assault or sexual harassment that occurs during military service. Anyone in the military can experience sexual trauma, regardless of their branch of service, age, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
* MST can include:
	+ Being pressured or coerced into sexual activities, such as with threats of negative treatment for refusing to cooperate or with promises of better treatment in exchange for sex
	+ Sexual contact without your consent, such as when you were asleep or intoxicated
	+ Being physically forced to have sex
	+ Being touched in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable, including during “hazing”
	+ Being subjected to comments about your body or sexual activities
	+ Receiving threatening and unwanted sexual advances
* MST can occur at any time or place during military service, whether on or off duty or on or off base. The perpetrator(s) may or may not be someone known to the survivor and may be a fellow Service member or a civilian.

***If you have experienced MST, regardless of where you are in your recovery, please know that you are not alone, that healing is possible, and that MST is never your fault.***

* How does MST affect survivors?
* Veterans react to MST in many different ways. Some people may experience long-term effects on their mental and physical health, work, relationships, or everyday life — sometimes many years after the experience.
* More information on the effects of MST can be found at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome).
* How many Veterans have experienced MST?
* If you experienced MST, **you are not alone**. When asked by VA health care providers, almost one in three women and one in 50 men report experiencing sexual harassment and/or sexual assault during military service.
* There are significant numbers of both men and women who have experienced MST. In fact, almost one-third of all Veterans who tell a VA provider they experienced MST are men.
* What VA services are available for MST survivors?
* Every VA health care facility has an MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person to assist Veterans in accessing care for MST-related difficulties.
* Outpatient MST-related services are available at every VA health care system. MST-related outpatient counseling services are also available through VA’s community-based [Vet Centers](https://www.vetcenter.va.gov/).
* Veterans can ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if that would help them feel more comfortable.
* VA also has residential and inpatient treatment services available.
* Who is eligible for VA’s MST-related services?
* VA provides free treatment for any physical or mental health condition related to MST.
* Eligibility for MST-related care is expansive, and Veterans may be eligible for MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA services.
* Neither service connection (VA disability compensation) nor documentation of the MST experience is required to get this care.
* There are no time limits on eligibility for this care. Veterans can seek treatment even many years after discharge from the military.
* Although this FAQ document refers to “Veterans,” former Service members who received an other than honorable discharge and current Service members also may receive certain MST-related services from VA. For more information, please contact the MST Coordinator at your local VA medical center.

Next Steps

* Everyone can make a difference by sharing information about VA’s MST-related resources and by letting survivors know: We believe them — **and we believe in them**.
* If you are a Veteran and want to learn more, call your [local VA facility](https://www.va.gov/find-locations/?facilityType=health) and ask to speak with the MST Coordinator or talk with a VA health care provider.
* Veterans and others can also contact a local Vet Center to learn more at <https://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>.
* Learn more about MST and MST-related services at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/).
* ***If you are in crisis and need immediate assistance****,* connect with the Veterans Crisis Line 24/7 by calling 1-800-273-8255 and pressing 1, texting to 838255, or chatting online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat). You will reach a caring, qualified VA responder — many of them Veterans themselves.