**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention**

**Sexual Assault Awareness Month Toolkit**

**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

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 mental health services, 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 a time for advocates to raise awareness about sexual violence and educate communities about preventing sexual assault. With origins in the 1970s, the observance was expanded from one week to a month in the 1990s and was officially recognized in 2001.
  + Every April and throughout the year, VA works to increase public understanding of the impact of military sexual trauma (MST) on Veterans and to build awareness of VA’s free services and support for MST survivors.
  + VA’s SAAM campaign aims to let all Veterans know that if they have experienced MST, a community of support is available to help them on their path to recovery.
  + Everyone can make a difference this April by sharing information about VA’s MST-related resources and programs and by letting survivors know that they are not alone.

**About MST**

* ***What is MST?***
  + Military sexual trauma (MST) is the term VA uses to refer to sexual assault or sexual harassment 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 threatened into sexual activities.
    - Overpowered or physically forced to have sex.
    - Sexually touched or grabbed in an upsetting way, including such contact during hazing experiences.
    - Subjected to repeated comments about a person’s body or sexual activities.
    - Subjected to unwanted sexual advances.
    - Subjected to any other sexual activity that is unwanted or nonconsensual (i.e., when asleep or intoxicated).
  + 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 you know or a fellow service member.
* ***How does MST affect survivors?***
  + Veterans react to MST in many different ways, which may vary based on age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, previous stressful life experiences, and other background factors.
  + Some people may recover from MST without significant long-term difficulties. For others, MST has long-term effects on their mental and physical health, work, relationships, or everyday life, even many years after the experience.
  + More information on the effects of MST can be found on [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/index.asp).
* ***How many Veterans have experienced MST?*** 
  + If you experienced MST, you are not alone. When screened by VA health care providers, almost 1 in 3 women and 1 in 50 men report a history of MST.
  + Given the far greater number of men than women in military service, there are significant numbers of both men and women who have experienced MST.
* ***What VA services are available for MST survivors?***
  + VA provides free treatment for any physical or mental health conditions related to MST (see “Who is eligible for VA’s MST-related services?” below).
  + Every VA health care facility has an MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues and can assist Veterans in accessing care.
  + Outpatient MST-related services are available at every VA health care system. MST-related outpatient counseling services are available through VA’s community-based Vet Centers. VA also has residential and inpatient treatment services.
  + Veterans may meet with a female or male clinician, if they have a preference.
* ***Who is eligible for VA’s MST-related services?***
  + Eligibility for MST-related care is expansive. 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.
  + There are no time limits on eligibility for this care, meaning that 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 may also receive certain MST-related services. For more information, please contact your local VA medical center and ask to speak to the MST Coordinator.
* ***Where do I start?***
  + VA is here for you. If you are a Veteran, speak with a VA health care provider or call [your local VA facility](https://www.va.gov/find-locations/?facilityType=health) and ask to speak with the MST Coordinator.
  + You can learn more 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 are Veterans themselves.
  + No matter what your next steps are, please know that you are **not** alone, that healing **is** possible, and that MST is **never** your fault.