

Help for Veterans Distressed by Recent Events Related to Military Sexual Trauma and Violence Toward People of Color

The horrific deaths of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillén, Army Sergeant Elder Fernandes, and other people of color may bring up painful memories and strong feelings. This may be very hard for those who have experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault during military service, also called

military sexual trauma (MST). Harassment and discrimination related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or gender can further impact experiences of and recovery from MST. Increasingly, many Veterans and Service members have been speaking out about these experiences. Even though public discussion and sharing about the reality of these experiences is vital, it is often still emotionally painful for other survivors to hear.

This handout has information and resources to help.

Please know that we see you. We hear you.

You are not alone.

*The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
and other sources of support are here to help.*

Common Reactions to Recent Events and Public Discussions

You may notice more sudden, strong emotions, or thoughts like, "That could have been me"; images of your own unwanted sexual experiences or experiences of harassment or discrimination; trouble concentrating; poor sleep or nightmares; feeling helpless, anxious, or depressed; or other changes. These are normal reactions, and it does not mean there is something wrong with you or you've had a setback in your recovery. If it bothered you then or bothers you now, please take your reactions seriously.

Things That Can Help

- ***Remind yourself it is okay to feel upset.*** It is very normal to have more struggles than usual right now. This can make it important to spend more time doing things that help you support and care for yourself. Try to eat healthy, leave enough time to sleep, and do relaxing and fun activities. Exercise or try to find other ways to be active. Find more wellness and support resources for MST survivors even during periods of physical distancing here: <https://tinyurl.com/MSTNavigatingReactions>.
- ***Inspire yourself.*** Remember you have already overcome great challenges, and it took great strength to do it. You may want to find an inspiring quote or write a letter to yourself that reminds you of this when you're hurting. Some people choose to turn their pain into action by speaking out about their experiences, engaging in local advocacy efforts, or providing support to others with similar experiences. It is also okay to choose to focus on your own self care if you need to do so.
- ***Do what works for you.*** Try things that helped you cope during difficult times in the past. As long as you stay safe, whatever works is okay. Know that you may need to try more than one thing, and it may take more energy or effort than usual.
- ***Limit exposure to media.*** Notice how social media or news stories affect you, and limit time spent on them if needed. It's okay to balance being informed and speaking out with caring for your own emotional needs. You can also focus more on reading stories that give you hope or help you feel seen and supported.
- ***Get support.*** Connect with supportive people by phone, text, email, or if possible safely, in person. Even if you do not tell others about your own experiences of MST, it can still help to connect with others. You can say, "I'm having a rough time right now," without sharing details if that feels right.

MST and racism-related stress can both affect mental and physical health, even years later.

Please know it is possible to heal. It's never too late, and even little steps can make a big difference.

- **Remind yourself recovery is a journey.** You will have ups and downs, and there will be some times that are harder than others. It may help to recognize the positive steps you've taken so far, and remember that over time, you can continue to move forward and feel better.
- **Learn more.** Visit these resources for more information about coping and recovery:
 - VA's Military Sexual Trauma homepage: www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp
 - VA's Minority Veterans Programs Coordinators: www.va.gov/centerforminorityveterans/mvpc
 - Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture at Boston College Racial Trauma Toolkit: www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/sites/isprc/isprc-advisory-board.html
 - Make the Connection (hear stories of recovery from other Veterans): www.maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma
 - Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network: www.rainn.org
 - 1in6 (for male survivors): www.1in6.org

Professional Support

There are many ways to recover. Although you may feel trusting others or talking to them about these issues is hard, for some people, talking to a health care professional can help. If you are:

- Having thoughts about harming or killing yourself
- Feeling helpless, hopeless, or that you can't take any more stress
- Drinking or using substances to cope
- Taking risks or not taking care of yourself,

or if you are worried about yourself, **please** consider talking to someone.

To connect with care:

- VA providers have expertise in working with survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment in both military and civilian settings and of all backgrounds. Some VA facilities also have groups focused on race-based stress and trauma. Contact your local VA healthcare facility from the list at www.va.gov and ask to talk with someone about mental health services.
- The "Find Local Support" section of the Make the Connection website (<https://maketheconnection.net/resources>) can help you locate resources. Or, try the program locators on the RAINN (www.rainn.org) or the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (www.nsvrc.org/organizations) websites.
- Talk to a mental health provider near you. Ask if the provider has expertise in working with survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment or people of color. Find more tips for choosing a therapist on the National Center for PTSD website (www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/find_therapist.asp).
- If you are still in the military and have had an unwanted sexual experience, consider contacting the Department of Defense Safe Helpline anonymously at www.safehelpline.org or 877-995-5247 to learn about help and support options. If you are worried you may be harmed again, please reach out to one of the sources above or someone else you trust. Although you may feel alone, help is available.

*If you are in **crisis** or need **immediate assistance**, please contact the free, confidential Veterans Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255 (then press 1)** or www.veteranscrisisline.net.*

*One core VA mission is to help Veterans live full, healthy lives and recover from service-related experiences that affect their well-being. To assist with this, **VA has free services for Veterans who experienced MST.** Veterans do **not** need any evidence that the MST occurred and do **not** need to file a disability claim to receive this care. You may be able to receive free MST-related care even if you are not eligible for other VA services.*

Contact your local VA facility and ask to speak to the MST Coordinator or visit

www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp to learn more.