

# INFORMATION FOR CURRENT AND FORMER SERVICE MEMBERS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL TRAUMA



If you experienced sexual trauma during your military service, the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have programs to assist you.

The information in this handout may be useful to you as you complete your Separation Health Assessment (SHA).

## What is sexual trauma/military sexual trauma (MST)?

DoD and VA use different terms to describe experiences of sexual trauma during military service.

DoD uses the terms “sexual assault,” “intimate partner sexual abuse,” and “sexual harassment.” “Sexual assault” refers to intentional sexual contact characterized by use of force, threats, intimidation, or abuse of authority when the victim does not or cannot consent. “Intimate partner sexual abuse” refers to sexual violence (up to and including sexual assault) in the context of adult domestic abuse. “Sexual harassment” refers to unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors, and deliberate or repeated unwelcome verbal comments or gestures of a sexual nature by any member of the Armed Forces or civilian employee of the DoD.

VA uses the term “military sexual trauma” (MST) to refer to sexual assault or threatening sexual harassment experienced during military service. MST includes sexual activity in which a Service member was involved against their will or when unable to say “no” or provide consent. It may include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing (including hazing experiences), comments about a person's body or sexual activities, and unwelcome sexual advances they found threatening, including sexual texts or online messages. Visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mst](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mst) to learn more.

This handout uses the term “sexual trauma” to include all experiences listed above.

Both men and women can experience sexual trauma. Sexual assault, intimate partner sexual abuse, and sexual harassment can be committed by Service members or civilians. You do not need to know their identity. Sexual trauma can occur while on or off duty and while on or off base.

## This handout provides information on the following topics:

- ◆ [What is sexual trauma/military sexual trauma \(MST\)?](#)
- ◆ [Why am I being provided this information at the SHA?](#)
- ◆ [What should I know about sharing information about sexual trauma experiences during the SHA?](#)
- ◆ [What sexual trauma-related services are available to \*\*current\*\* Active Duty, Reserve, or National Guard members?](#)
- ◆ [What are my reporting options within DoD?](#)
- ◆ [What MST-related health care services are available to \*\*former\*\* Service members through VA?](#)
- ◆ [What MST-related benefits, other than health care, are available through VA, and what should I know about the disability claims process?](#)



## Why am I being provided this information at the SHA?

Service members are remarkably resilient after stressful events that occur during their service. For many, sexual trauma may affect their mental or physical health long after the event, even many years later.

DoD and VA want to make sure you have access to the support and services you may need. This handout provides important information about programs and services for survivors of sexual trauma, including: DoD support services and reporting options; health care services available through VA; and available assistance in filing a VA disability claim.

## What should I know about sharing information about sexual trauma experiences during the SHA?

The SHA serves to document, prior to your discharge, health conditions related to your service. There are important things to know if you are considering sharing information about a sexual trauma experience during the SHA, including:

- Discussions during the exam will be included in documentation that becomes part of your Service Treatment Records and may compromise the confidentiality of a Restricted Report related to sexual trauma (see below to learn more about reporting options).
- Some state laws require clinicians to report sexual assault and/or sexual abuse to authorities.

These considerations may affect whether you choose to share your experiences of sexual trauma with the SHA examiner. **You can still access DoD and VA benefits, health care services, and support related to sexual trauma even if you choose not to share your experiences of sexual trauma during the SHA.**

## What sexual trauma-related services are available to current Active Duty, Reserve or National Guard members?

### DoD Safe Helpline

DoD Safe Helpline (SHL) service is anonymous, confidential, and available 24/7 online at <https://www.safehelpline.org> or by calling 877-995-5247. SHL is available to members of the DoD community affected by sexual assault. It provides access to one-on-one support, peer-to-peer connections, informational resources, and self-care tools. Safe Helpline personnel are available to discuss your needs and refer you to crisis response services and care resources in your local community. They can also connect you with a Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) at a nearby installation. For assistance, please visit: <https://www.safehelpline.org/nearme>.

### DoD InTransition Program

If you are looking for help connecting to mental health care or support, you may contact the DoD inTransition Program at 1-800-424-7877 or <https://health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Psychological-Health-Center-of-Excellence/inTransition>. The inTransition program is a free, confidential program offering specialized coaching and assistance with finding mental health care for Active Duty Service members, National Guard members, Reservists, Veterans, and retirees who need access to mental health care.



## What sexual trauma-related services are available to current Active Duty, Reserve or National Guard members? (cont'd)

### VA's Vet Center Services

Current Service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserve forces, may be eligible to receive MST-related counseling at VA community-based Vet Centers, regardless of sex or era of service. No DoD referral is needed, and services are confidential. To learn more about your eligibility and options, call a Vet Center near you ([www.va.gov/find-locations](http://www.va.gov/find-locations)) or visit [www.vetcenter.va.gov/Military Sexual Trauma.asp](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/Military_Sexual_Trauma.asp).

### VA Medical Facility Services

Current Service members may receive care, including care for MST-related conditions, at VA medical facilities with a DoD referral and TRICARE authorization. Current Service members' records from services at VA medical facilities are available to DoD through VA-DoD electronic health record exchange. For more information, visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mst](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mst).

## What are my reporting options within DoD?

### Reporting options for sexual assault

Service members have two reporting options: Restricted Reporting and Unrestricted Reporting. For **Unrestricted Reporting**, both the command and law enforcement are notified. With **Restricted (Confidential) Reporting**, you can access health care, advocacy services, and legal services without notification to command or law enforcement depending on when the report is made and to whom a report is made.

DoD Safe Helpline staff can tell you more about making a report to authorities. You can also find additional information at the following link: <https://www.sapr.mil/reporting-options>.

### Reporting options for sexual harassment

Reporting options include reporting the incident to your commander, supervisor, the Inspector General's office, Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) office, staff designated by the Military Service to receive harassment complaints, or an Army Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) representative. DoD policy allows for formal, informal, and anonymous complaints.

- A **Formal Complaint** is an allegation in writing to the staff designated to receive such complaints in Military Department operating instructions and regulations; or an informal complaint, which the commanding officer or other person in charge of the organization, determines warrants an investigation.
- An **Informal Complaint** is an allegation, made either orally or in writing, that is not processed or resolved as a formal complaint through the office designated to receive harassment complaints. The allegation may be submitted to a person in a position of authority within the Service member's organization or outside of the Service member's organization. Such complaints may be resolved at the lowest appropriate level through intervention by the first-line supervisor, using alternative dispute resolution techniques such as informal mediation.



## Reporting options for sexual harassment (cont'd)

- An **Anonymous Complaint** is a complaint received by a commanding officer or supervisor, regardless of the means of transmission, from an unknown or unidentified source, alleging harassment. The individual is not required to divulge any personally identifiable information. It is considered neither formal nor informal. Actions taken regarding anonymous complaints will depend upon the extent of information provided.

Your military service may have other options for reporting sexual harassment. It is important to understand that, under current law, if you choose to make an informal or anonymous report of sexual harassment, these reports may end up in a formal investigation if an anonymous complaint contains sufficient information to permit the initiation of an investigation.

## What MST-related health care services are available to former Service members through VA?

VA provides free treatment for any physical or mental health conditions related to experiences of MST.

MST-related health care services are available to former Service members with Veteran status and most former Service members with an Other Than Honorable or uncharacterized (entry-level) discharge. VA disability compensation is not required for these individuals to receive care, and you may be able to receive MST-related care even if you are not eligible for other VA care. No evidence or documentation of your MST experience is required.

To receive MST-related care, former National Guard and Reserve members must have Federal active duty service or a service-connected disability and have been discharged under honorable conditions or with an Other Than Honorable discharge. The service-connected disability does not need to be related to your experiences of MST.

Services include:

- Outpatient MST-related treatment available at every VA health care facility.
- Residential and inpatient mental health programs that provide more intensive treatment.
- Community-based Vet Centers that provide MST-related outpatient counseling and referral services in a non-medical facility setting.

To access VA's MST-related health care services, contact your local **Veterans Health Administration (VHA) MST Coordinator**. You can find their contact information at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/vha-mst-coordinators.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/vha-mst-coordinators.asp) or by calling your nearest VA medical facility and asking to speak to the MST Coordinator. You can also contact your local Vet Center. A list of VA health care facilities is available at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) and [www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov). More information is also available at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mst](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mst), in the Beyond MST mobile app, or by calling 1-800-MyVA411 (1-800-698-2411); press 9 to speak with a live agent 24/7.



## What MST-related benefits, other than health care, are available through VA, and what should I know about the disability claims process?

VA offers a variety of benefits and services, including disability compensation for a mental or physical health condition that developed or was aggravated during military service because of an MST experience.

Claims related to most mental or physical health conditions require direct evidence that you have an injury or disability that began or worsened during your military service, or documented health problems related to the MST during service, which may include a report (if one was made) to authorities at the time of the experience. For claims for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to MST, VA developed special policies to assist individuals because direct evidence can be difficult to obtain. For these claims, VA accepts indirect evidence, or “markers” of the MST occurrence. Markers can include records other than service records and behavior changes occurring during or after service, as described below.

Sources and records for markers of the MST experience include, but are not limited to:	Behavior changes that may be considered markers of the MST experience include, but are not limited to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Law enforcement authorities</li><li>• Rape crisis centers</li><li>• Mental health counseling centers</li><li>• Hospitals</li><li>• Physicians</li><li>• Pregnancy tests</li><li>• Tests for sexually transmitted infections</li><li>• Letters shared in confidence, diary or journal entries, emails, text messages, or social media posts</li><li>• Statements in support of the claim from:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family members</li><li>• Roommates</li><li>• Fellow Service members</li><li>• Clergy members</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Requests for transfer to another military duty assignment</li><li>• Change in work performance</li><li>• Difficulties with substance abuse</li><li>• Episodes of depression, panic attacks, or anxiety</li><li>• Unexplained economic or social behavior changes</li><li>• Increased use of leave</li><li>• Relationship conflicts, divorce, or other interpersonal difficulties</li><li>• Other unexpected behavioral changes, such as overly controlling or perfectionistic behavior</li><li>• Sexual health difficulties</li></ul>



### *How can I collect this evidence?*

VA has a duty to assist current and former Service members in collecting evidence to support their disability compensation claims. Every Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Regional Office has MST Outreach Coordinators who can assist with MST-related claims. Individuals may specifically request to be assisted by a male or female VBA MST Outreach Coordinator, if preferred. You can find their contact information at:

[www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/mstcoordinators.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/mstcoordinators.asp).

VA knows it can be difficult for individuals who have experienced MST to locate direct and indirect evidence, particularly if they decide to file a claim many years after their experience(s). VA encourages Service members to retain all materials that might later serve as evidence, such as copies of reports to authorities, copies of treatment records, or documentation of your difficulties while on active duty. For example, if you confided in a friend or family member about your experiences of MST, consider asking them to write a brief note stating this, or keep a list of people you told.

However, VA recognizes that experiences of sexual trauma are often difficult and retention of documentation may not be a priority at that time. Therefore, DoD coordinated with VA to provide access to a limited set of information regarding Unrestricted Sexual Assault Reports made to DoD authorities for closed cases.

Even if you do not want to file a claim now, this evidence may be useful if you later decide to file.

More information is available by calling 1-800-827-1000 or visiting:

<https://www.va.gov/resources/military-sexual-trauma-and-disability-compensation>.

Thank you for your service to our country.