
About.com Post Traumatic Stress (PTSD)

Military Sexual Trauma and PTSD among Female Veterans

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People who have experienced a [sexual assault](#)¹ (for example, rape) are at a [high risk for developing PTSD](#)². In fact, being raped has been found to be more likely to lead to PTSD than [other traumatic experiences](#)³.

Military Sexual Trauma

The experience of a sexual assault (ranging from unwanted sexual contact to rape) is also a widespread problem in the military (often referred to as military sexual trauma or MST). Studies indicate that around 23% to 33% of female veterans report experiencing a MST. In addition, there is some evidence that women who have experienced MST are at high risk for [developing PTSD](#)⁴. One study found that approximately 42% of women who had experienced a MST also had PTSD as a result of the MST. Other studies have found that MST was more likely to lead to PTSD than other military or civilian traumatic events.

A Study of Civilian Trauma, MST, and PTSD

Dr. Naomi Himmelfarb and colleagues at the VA West Los Angeles Healthcare Center and the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine looked at the relationship between nonmilitary sexual trauma, MST, and rates of PTSD among 196 female veterans ranging in age from 22 to 88.

Consistent with other studies, high rates of MST (and other non-military sexual assaults) were found:

- 41% had experienced a MST
- 19% had experienced a sexual assault before the military
- 24% had experienced a sexual assault after the military

High rates of PTSD were also found among those exposed to MST. Approximately 60% of women exposed to MST had PTSD. In addition, MST was more likely to be associated with developing PTSD than the experience of a sexual assault while not in the military. Finally, they found that a MST (as well as the experience of a sexual assault before entry into the military) increased risk for the experience of a sexual assault after the military.

Why is MST More Likely to Lead to PTSD?

A number of explanations have been proposed to explain why a MST may be more likely to lead to PTSD than civilian traumas. One explanation is that service members face high levels of stress. When a traumatic event such as a MST is experienced, these higher than normal levels of stress may increase the likelihood that PTSD develops. It is also possible that some service members may not have easy access to social support or medical and mental health services during active duty, putting them at risk for PTSD following a MST.

How To Get Help

If you have experienced a sexual assault in the military or otherwise, it is important to take action right away. The [United States Department of Health and Human Services](#)⁵ provides information on sexual assault, as well as on what to do if you have been sexually assaulted. Information on MST and how to get help is also available

through the [National Center for PTSD](#)⁶.

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6. http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/Military_Sexual_Trauma.asp