



Recovering from Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

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October 2020

Question #1: What is Military Sexual Trauma (MST)?

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- B. Sexual assault of a soldier by a non-soldier during active duty.
- C. Repeated, threatening sexual harassment of a soldier.
- D. All of above

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Question 2:

How many women and men have reported MST to their VA providers?

A. 1 in 20 women, 1 in 300 men

B. 1 in 5 women, 1 in 100 men

C. 1 in 10 women, 1 in 500 men

D. 1 in 100 women, 1 in 900 men

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MST

Refers to both sexual harassment and sexual assault that occurs in military settings.

Definitions

Both men and women can experience military sexual trauma and the perpetrator can be of the same or of the opposite gender.

Sexual harassment: Unwelcome verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that occurs in the workplace or an academic or training setting.

Sexual assault: Any sort of sexual activity between at least two people in which one of the people is involved against his or her will. Physical force may or may not be used.

When does it occur?

During training

During peacetime

During wartime

Stress of war may be associated with increased rates of sexual harassment and assault.

How Does Trauma Affect Survivors?

Physiologically

- Body sensitized to threat
- Disrupted memory / cognitive processing
- Primed for extreme reactions

Emotionally

- Intense feelings that are difficult to contain
- Regulatory systems that promote homeostasis are overwhelmed
- Primed for extreme reactions

Cognitively

- Affects how we view the world
- Disrupts sense of power and control, beliefs about trustworthiness of others, sense of self...
- Tendency towards all-or-nothing thinking

What Affects Survivor's Reactions

Characteristics of the experience(s)

- Single event vs. ongoing set of events
- Rape vs. sexual harassment
- Single perpetrator vs. multiple perpetrators
- Known vs. unknown perpetrator

Characteristics of the individual

- Gender
- Developmental level at time of the event
- Prior trauma experiences
- Available coping strategies

Characteristics of the environment

- Response of others at the time
- Need to keep seeing/working with perpetrator
- Military culture

Common Psychiatric Comorbidities

MST is an experience, not a diagnosis

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Mood Disorder

Anxiety Disorders

Sexual Disorders

Substance Use Disorders

Suicidal Ideation and Attempts

Common Reactions

Strong Emotions: depressed, irritable, angry, shameful

Feeling Numb: flat affect, inability to experience pleasure/joy

Trouble sleeping: including nightmares

Difficulties with concentration, memory, attention (PFC)

Problems with drugs/alcohol: AVOIDANCE

Difficulty with reminders: triggers, flashbacks, intimacy

Difficulties with relationships: self and others

Most common **PHYSICAL** health problems: sexual difficulties, chronic pain, weight or eating problems, gastrointestinal problems

Access to Care

*** Every VA healthcare facility has an MST Coordinator who serves as the contact person for MST-related issues.**

***VA has a protocol that instructs providers to ask EVERY patient DIRECTLY about any experiences of MST.**

***VA provides mandated training to staff on MST-related issues**

*** All treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to the experiences of MST are provided FREE of charge (do not need to be service connected nor documented incidents).**

***Both inpatient and outpatient care is available. Some systems include MST specific programs both co-ed and gender split (such as Las Vegas VA with an MST track within PTSD program).**

VA Services for Military Sexual Trauma:

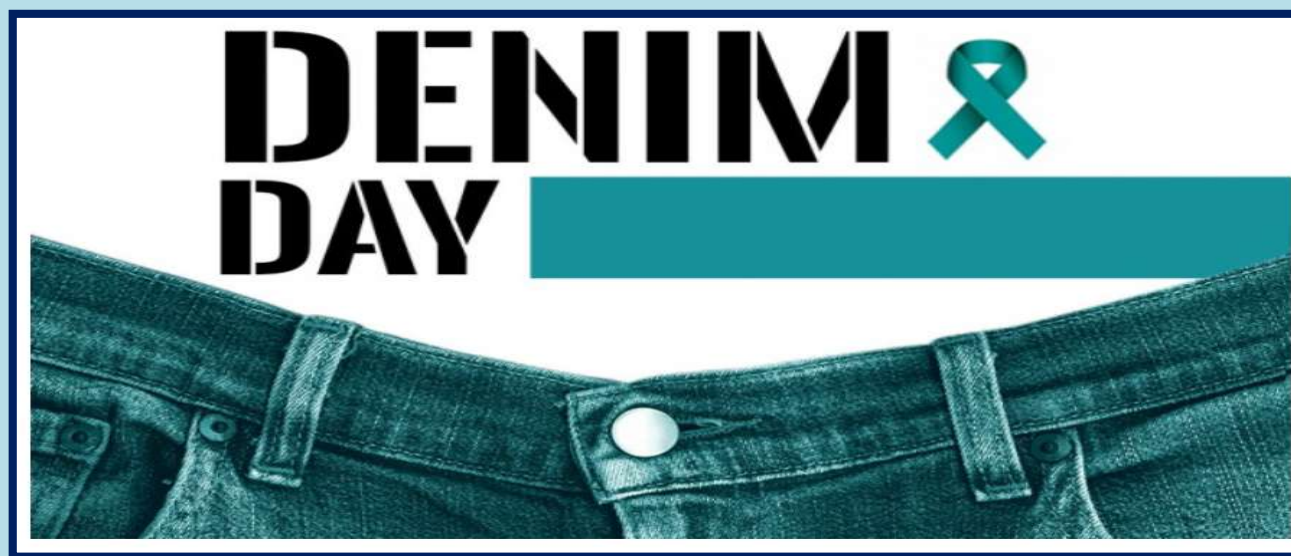


Help
Hope
Healing

S.A.A.M. Every April

(Sexual Assault Awareness Month)

Raise public awareness about sexual assault.



Barriers to Asking about MST

- ° Lack of knowledge
- ° Over-identification
- ° Fear of offending
- ° Time pressures (fear of opening “Pandora’s Box”)
- ° Resources (feeling powerless to “fix” the situation)

Standing Together to
Empower Military Sexual
Trauma Survivors



The VHA response to MST is necessarily focused on screening, detection, and secondary prevention.

Treatment Options



**VA Cares About
Military Sexual Trauma**

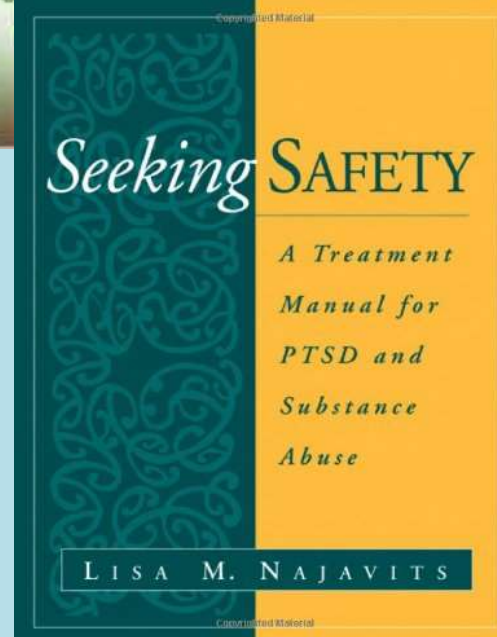
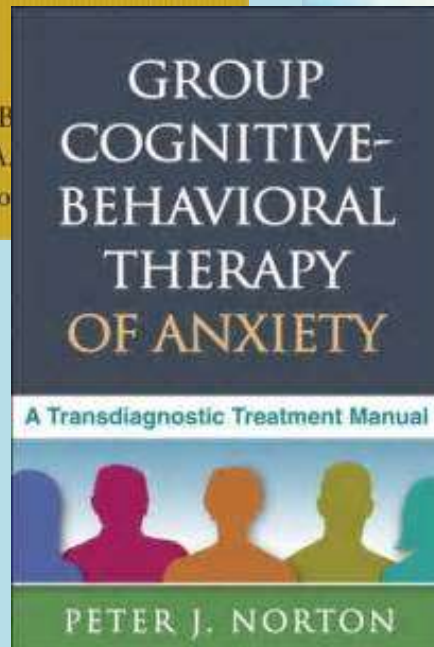
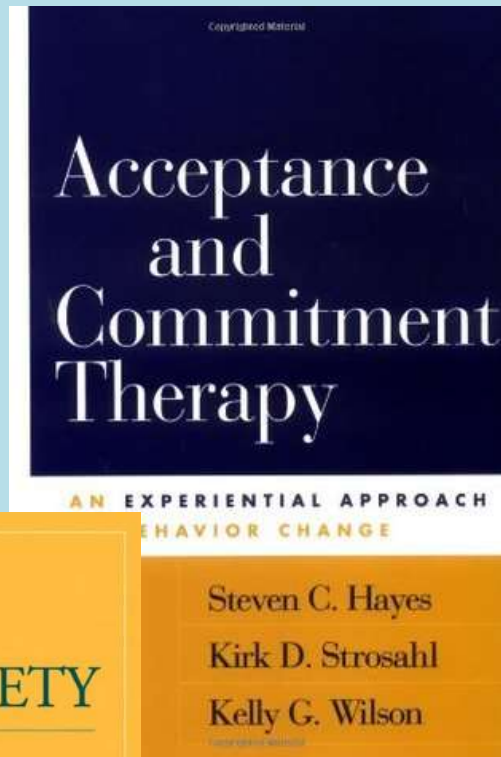
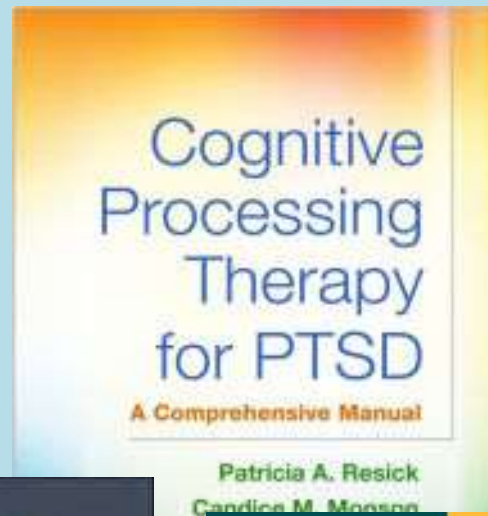
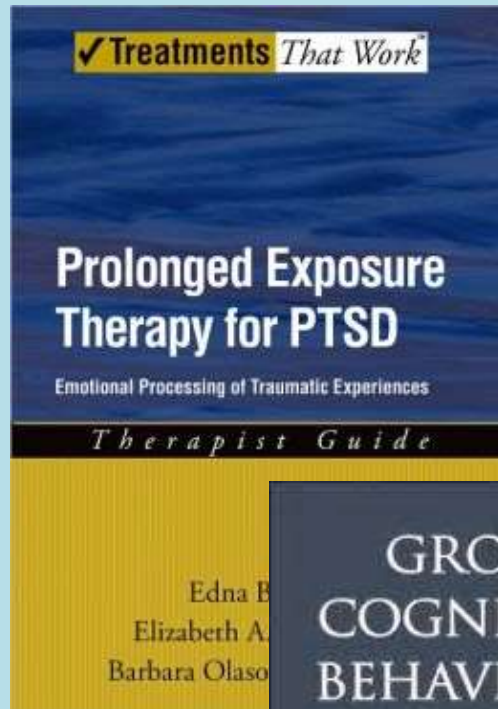
Depends on presenting
SYMPTOMS. One treatment
does not fit all.

MST is an event, not a
diagnosis.

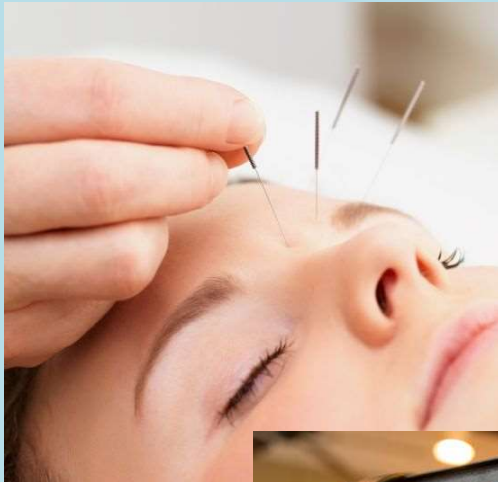
Trauma-focused therapy:

- **Group (process, educational, skills building, support)**
- **Individual (evidence based vs other)**
 - * **Prolonged Exposure**
 - * **Cognitive Processing Therapy**
 - * **Image Rehearsal Therapy**
 - * **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**
- **Family/Couple**

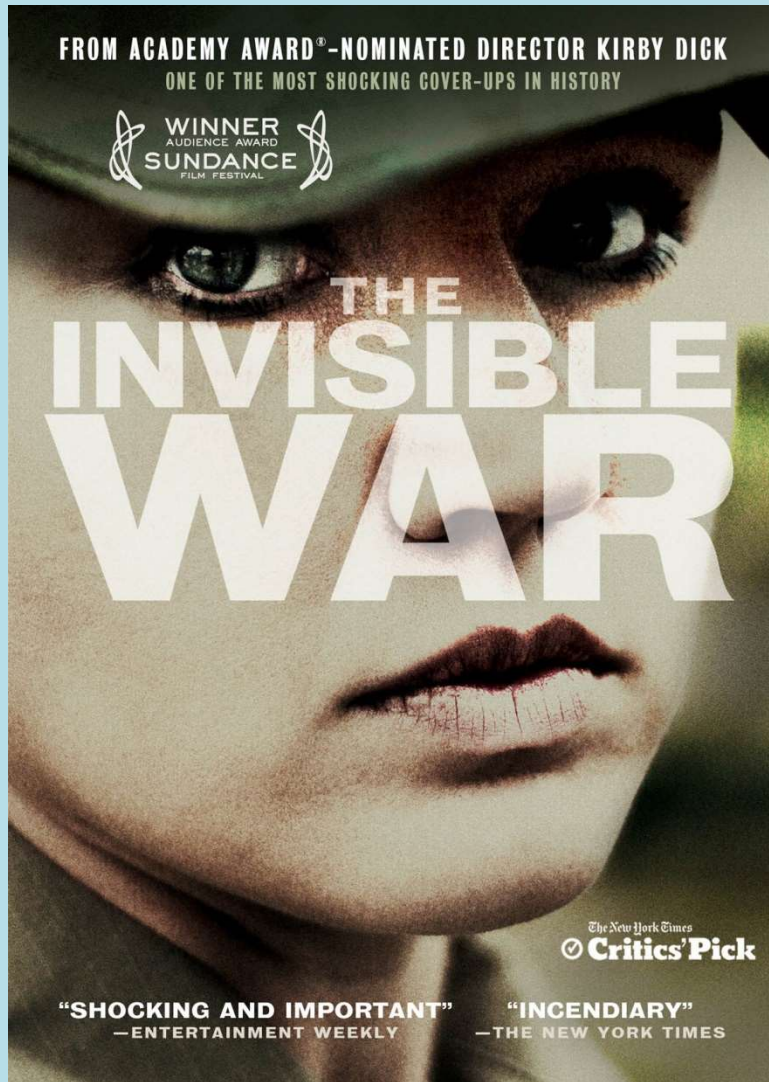
Evidence-Based Therapy



Alternative/Holistic Approaches



CONNECTION. Awareness.



Thank you!

