

Military Sexual Trauma & Survivor Panel

Perry Foundation 2021



Amanda Turner, LCSW
PTSD Clinical Team Social Worker
MST Coordinator

VA Sierra Nevada Health
Care System

VA Services for Military Sexual Trauma:



Help
Hope
Healing

About 1 in 3 women and 1 in 50 men have told their VA healthcare provider that they experienced sexual trauma in the military.



Over one-third of MST survivors seen in VHA are men.

There are thousands of individuals who never reach out. Whose stories are never told.

The [U.S. Department of Defense](#) reports that more than 20,000 active-duty Service members experienced MST in 2018 alone.

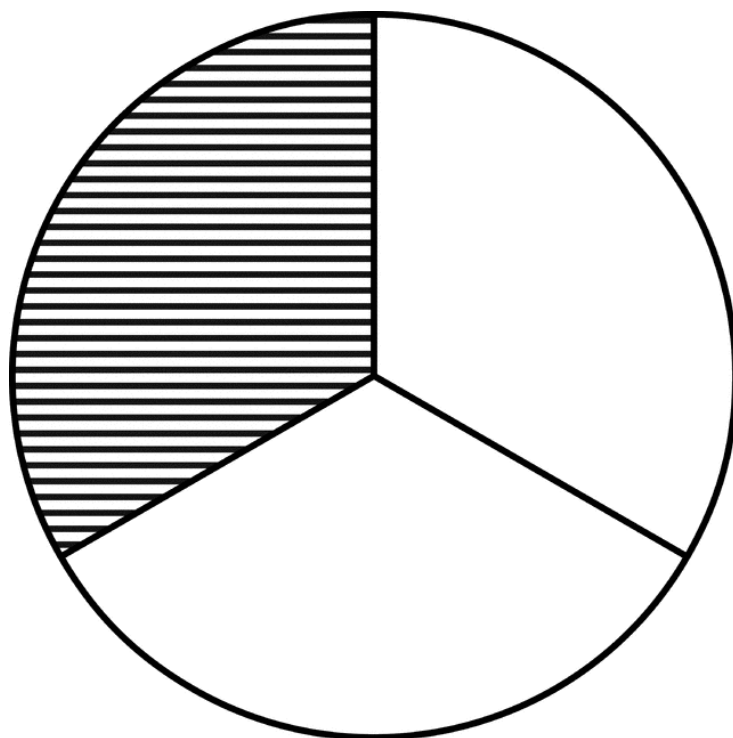
MST is An Interpersonal Trauma

- Perpetrated by another human being
 - Frequently a friend, intimate partner, or other trusted individual
 - Involves a profound violation of boundaries and personal integrity
 - Sends confusing messages about what is acceptable and expected behavior from a trusted other, what rights/needs the victim has, and what is “theirs” versus publicly available
- May be particularly confusing in the military context where rely on others to be “Service members in arms”
- Has significant implications for survivors’ relationships and understanding of themselves

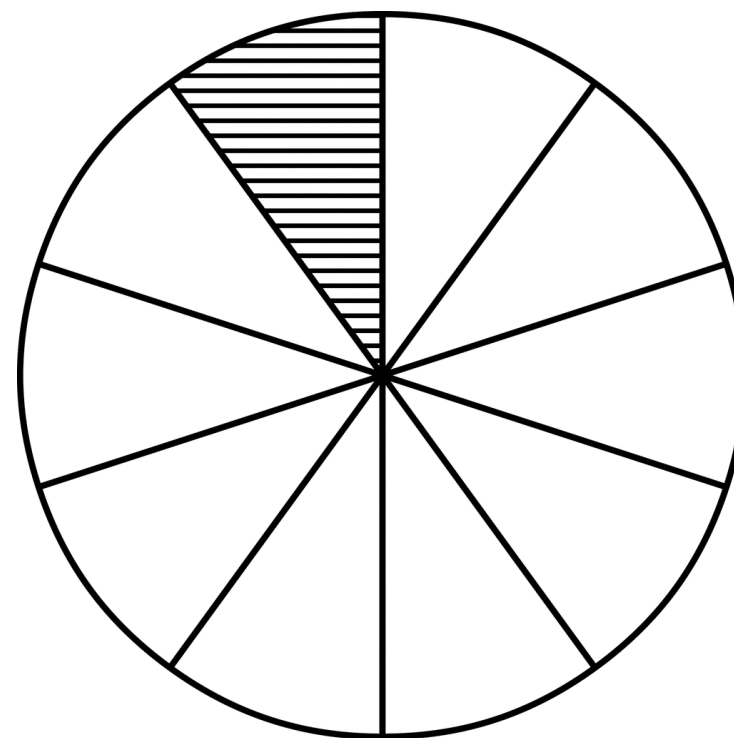


Secretary of the VA Denis McDonough provided a powerful keynote address at our MST Annual Conference, and he made some important points I'd like to share.

Experienced Military Sexual Trauma



Experienced serious injury while in the military



MST May Be Ongoing Over Time

In the military, there are often few boundaries between work and home life and in both spheres, individuals may interact with the same group of people

Survivors may continue to have interactions with their perpetrator

May be ongoing potential for revictimization

Can increase feelings of helplessness and of being trapped

Parallels with childhood abuse



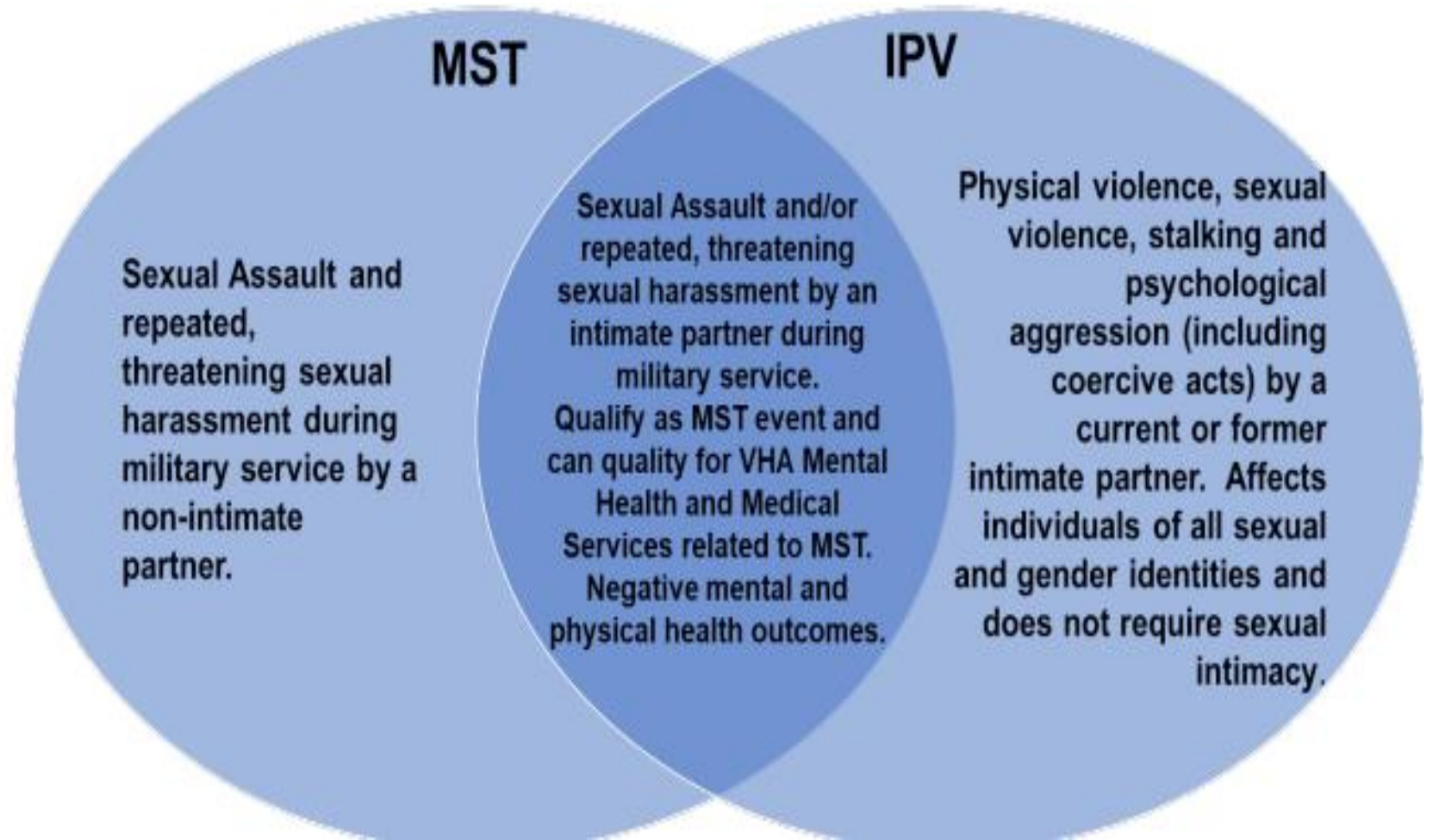
Despite its name, sexual abuse is more about power than it is about sex.

- Sexual Assault and Harassment have nothing to do with sex.
- Rape is not about sex.
- Although the touch may be sexual, the words seductive or intimidating, and the violation physical, when someone rapes, assaults, or harasses, the motivation stems from the perpetrator's need for dominance and control. In heterosexual and same-sex encounters, sex is the tool used to gain power over another person.

Reports and accountability

- MST often goes unreported because there are too few protections in place for survivors.
- When sexual trauma happens in the military, it is generally reported through the member's chain of command and not an independent human resource department.
- This leaves room for fears around confidentiality, safety and retaliation.
- And, while cases of MST are on the rise, hardly any perpetrators are held accountable for their actions further legitimizing the fears around reporting in the military.

Overlap with Intimate Partner Violence



Overlap with Intimate Partner Violence

- Evidence suggests that trauma symptoms may be more severe in individuals who had close relationships to their perpetrator prior to the trauma.
- Veterans may experience more severe trauma symptoms if their perpetrator was an intimate partner, or a person whom they worked closely with in military service.

Common reactions to sexual trauma



The Effects of MST

MST affects survivors in many different ways.

Some veterans experience lingering symptoms that can damage their relationships, career, and everyday life if left untreated.

Other difficulties that MST survivors face may include:

- Anger
- Avoidance of reminders- internal and external
- Difficulties with Sleep
- Difficulties with Trust
- Emotional Numbness
- Easily Started
- Fear and anxiety
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Guilt
- Hindsight bias
- Hyperarousal/on guard
- Irritability
- Loss of interest in Sex
- Overestimating danger
- Reexperiencing through memories/nightmares/flashbacks
- Sadness/Grief
- Self blame/self doubt
- Trouble Concentrating

Additional Complicating Factors

- Survivors are often young at the time of their experiences of MST.
- Leaves them vulnerable to developing mental health problems and other difficulties
- To manage symptoms and reactions, may rely on substance use, dissociation, behavioral acting out, or cutting or other forms of self-harm that themselves impair functioning and health

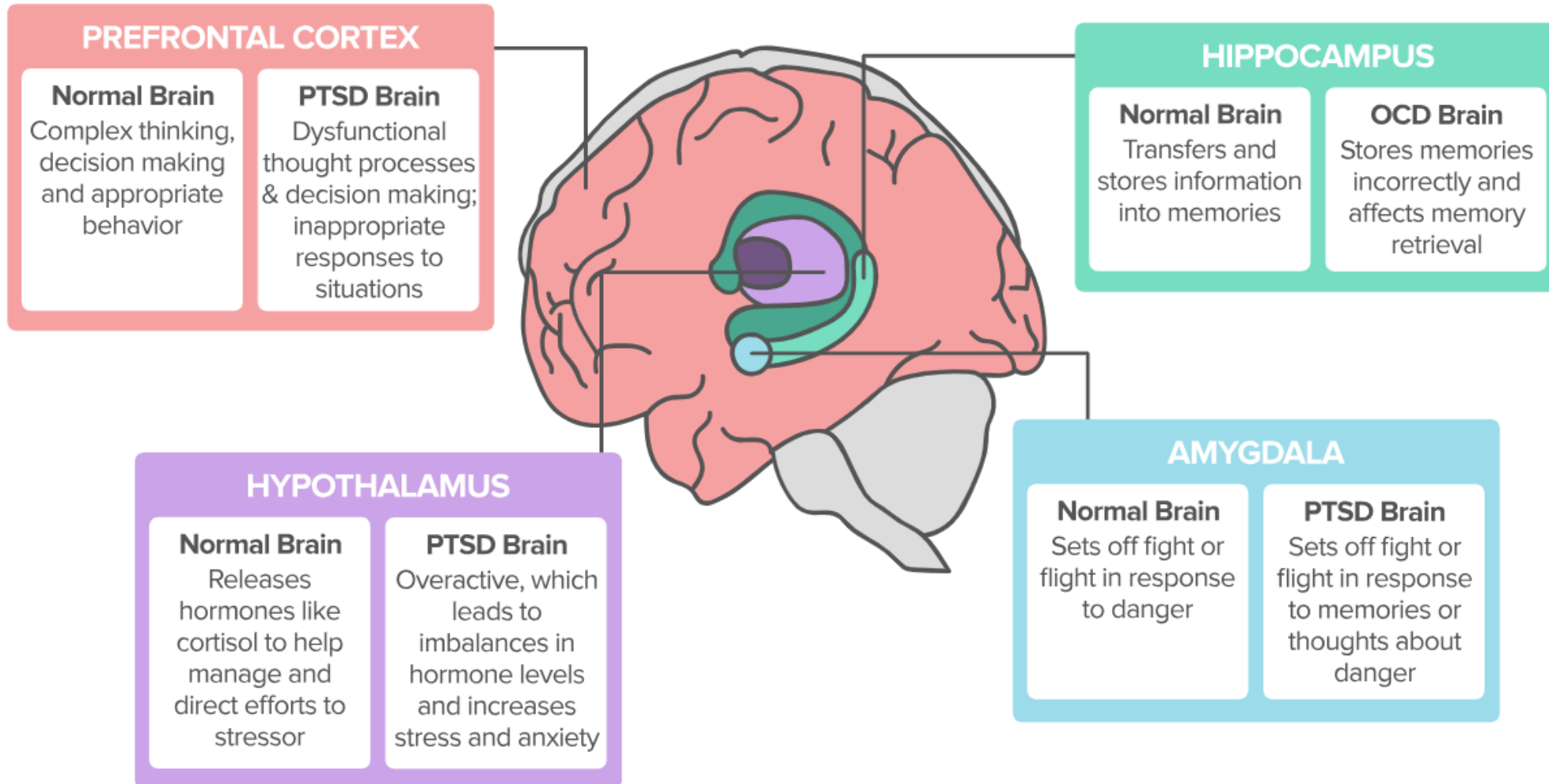
Additional Complicating Factors

Social Support May Be Limited

- At the time of experiences, may be far from friends and family
- May be impacted by societal messages
 - *May believe or be told by others that their experiences are not as "legitimate" as combat trauma experiences*
 - *Blame of victim (intentional or not)*
- May not seek out treatment or disclose to providers

What happens when things go wrong?

NORMAL INFORMATION PROCESSING AND PTSD MALFUNCTIONS IN THE BRAIN



MST affects both mental and physical health.

Mental Health:

- Among users of VA health care, the mental health diagnoses most commonly associated with MST are:
 - PTSD
 - Depressive Disorders
 - Anxiety Disorders
 - Bipolar Disorders
 - Drug and Alcohol Disorders
 - Schizophrenia and Psychoses
 - Eating Disorders
 - Dissociative Disorders
 - Somatization Disorder
 - Personality Disorders

Medical Conditions :

- Headaches
- Back Problems
- Sexual Dysfunction
- Chronic Pelvic Pain
- Teeth Issues From Grinding/Clenching
- Disturbed Sleep
- High Blood Pressure
- GI Issues
- Urinary Tract Infections
- Sexually Transmitted Infections
- Unwanted Pregnancy and Termination Complications

Levels in Mental Health Treatment

1. VA's top Evidence Based Protocols for Trauma disorders include:
 - Prolonged exposure (PE)
 - Cognitive Processing therapy (CPT)
 - Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy (EMDR)
1. General therapy to address day to day stressors. Skill acquisition
2. Group therapy- Substance or topic specific
3. Support and Peer led groups

** Foster maximum self determination on the part of the individual.*



What's the VA is Doing?

Did you know survivors of MST are eligible for FREE services related to MST?
These services include medical and mental health services.

VA's MST-Related Services

- VA provides free care (including medications) for all physical and mental health conditions related to MST
- Service connection is not required
 - Treatment is independent of the VA disability claims process
 - Veterans do not need to have reported the MST at the time or have other documentation
- Veterans may be able to receive free MST-related care even if they're not eligible for other VA care
 - There are no length of service or income requirements to receive MST-related care
- Every VA health care facility has an MST Coordinator
 - Good point of contact for assistance in getting Veterans into MST-related care or for answering any questions about local services

VA's MST-Related Services

- Every VA medical center provides MST-related mental health outpatient services for symptoms following MST event.
 - Formal psychological assessment and evaluation, psychiatry, and individual and group psychotherapy
 - Specialty services to target problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use, depression, and homelessness
- Some VHA facilities have specialized outpatient treatment teams or clinics focusing explicitly on sexual trauma
- Community-based Vet Centers provide MST-related counseling
- For Veterans who need more intense treatment and support, VA has specialized residential and inpatient programs available.

The *Beyond MST* mobile app is here!



Beyond MST is a free, secure and private mobile app created for Veterans who experienced MST by the National Center for PTSD and the MST Support Team with input from MST survivors and other key stakeholders. It has over 30 specialized tools and other features to help MST survivors cope with challenges, manage symptoms, improve their quality of life and find hope.



Please share the news with Veterans--you can find resources [📌 here!](#) Veterans do not need to create an account or be in treatment to use the app. Any personal information entered in the app is private and is not shared with anyone, including the VA.

VA



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Questions?

For additional information or support,
please contact your local VA.

Amanda Turner, LCSW
PTSD Clinical Social Worker

MST Coordinator
775-326-2920

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

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Panel Discussion



Michelle Middleton

is a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program Manager for the 152 Airlift Wing Nevada Air National Guard since February 2017. Michelle has a Master's Degree in Education and a second Masters in Divinity-Chaplaincy. She is currently pursuing her Ed D in Community Care and Counseling with a focus in Marriage and Family Therapy through Liberty University.

Michelle completed one Clinical Pastoral Education unit in 2020 through Emory and has been active in ministry as an ordained Pastor since 2019. Michelle has been recognized by the Wing Commander and the Adjutant General of the Nevada Air National Guard for her program excellence in SAPR. Michelle volunteers for PATH, Center for Adaptive Riding on her weekends and enjoys spending time with her two children on her time off.



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Noelle Porter

Has 11 years combined Military experience. She served 2 years Army Reserve 9 in the National Guard. She has three Military Occupation Specialty Qualifications: Medic, Behavioral Health and Military Police.

Her rank upon exit was E-5, Sergeant. She is MST survivor, Retired Law Enforcement with the State of California.

Was rated for disability just last year and has been in treatment the past 18 months. She has been sober 13 months and change.

She wants to give back and help support other survivors!



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Shane Whitecloud

is a Public Affairs Officer at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System since August of 2019. With a bachelor's degree in film and a master's degree in business, Shane applies both knowledge he's gained in academics with his personality to create valuable connections. He was awarded Veteran of the Month for the state of Nevada in October 2019 and was recognized as one of the 150 most influential people in Reno, Nevada in 2018 by the City of Reno. Prior to joining VA, Shane was a rock radio personality on FM Rock 104.5 for 23 years, host of the radio show/podcast, American Warfighter Radio and has toured the world singing for a southern rock band.

He worked with homeless veterans for almost a decade at a nonprofit before joining the VA family. Shane is also a public speaker on topics of substance abuse, suicide, and military sexual trauma (MST). He is a father of three boys and has one granddaughter. Shane recently started working on his book, "The Path to Empathy" titled after his 2021 Ted Talk on recovery and rebuilding. Look for the Ted Talk to be released mid September 2021 through TEDxVeteransAffairs.



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Discussion questions

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