

1. What is definition of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) in Canada?

The Canadian definition of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) refers to any sexual or sexualised activity that occurs without consent during military service, together with the traumatic impacts that result from that experience. MST can include sexual assault, coercion, unwanted sexual advances, inappropriate comments, unwanted touching, hazing rituals, and workplace cultures or environments that are hostile, intimidating or sexualised in nature.

Importantly, MST recognises both the act itself and its impact on the person. Many survivors experience long-term effects such as shame, guilt, relationship difficulties, sleep disturbances, physical health issues, loss of trust, and grief associated with leaving military service.

2. Is MST a universal term?

Not currently. Different countries and organisations use different terminology and definitions.

The term MST was first widely adopted by the United States and has since been adapted by other countries, including Canada. Canada developed its definition through extensive consultation with people with lived experience, clinicians, researchers and military stakeholders. Australia is also developing and refining its approach to terminology and definitions.

While definitions may vary, there is growing international recognition of the importance of acknowledging both the experience and its impact on those affected.

3. What are the long-term impacts of MST?

MST can affect many areas of a person's life, including but not limited to:

- Mental health, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, guilt and shame.
- Physical health, including chronic pain and other health conditions.
- Relationships with partners, children and family members.
- Trust in organisations and authority figures.

- Identity, belonging and connection to military service.
- Career progression and transition from military to civilian life.

Many veterans report mourning the loss of their military career and military community as deeply as the traumatic event itself.

4. How can MST affect veterans as they age?

The impacts of MST may persist across the lifespan and can resurface throughout life.

Trauma responses can re-emerge in older age, particularly during periods of illness, cognitive decline or dementia. Anniversary dates, media coverage of military events, personal care activities and other reminders can trigger distress.

This reinforces the importance of trauma-informed care within aged care, healthcare and veteran support settings.

5. Why is trauma-informed care important?

Trauma-informed care is one of the most important capability organisations can invest in. Trauma-informed care recognises that trauma is common and seeks to create environments that promote:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Empowerment

A key principle is ensuring the person affected remains in control of decisions about their care and support. This approach helps reduce the risk of re-traumatisation and supports recovery.

6. What practical actions help create safe disclosure and support pathways?

The following are several practical actions:

- Listen without judgement.
- Make time and give full attention.
- Avoid expressions of shock or disbelief.
- Reinforce that they are not to blame.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Allow the survivor to guide the conversation and determine what they wish to share.
- Follow through on commitments and provide clear information about available supports.

Fear of not being believed, concerns about confidentiality and concerns about career impacts remain significant barriers to reporting.

7. Why is military cultural competency important for civilian practitioners?

Veterans reported that a lack of military understanding can sometimes become a barrier to effective care. Veterans have emphasised the importance of working with clinicians who understand military culture and military service.

Understanding concepts such as:

- Service life as more than "just a job"
- Military rank and leadership structures
- Universality of service
- Military identity and belonging

By understanding these concepts can help clinicians build trust, improve engagement and provide more effective support.

8. What role does peer support and lived experience play in recovery?

People with lived experience played a central role in Canada's MST response and education programs. Many described contributing to system improvement and education as empowering and meaningful.

Peer support and group-based approaches can:

- Reduce isolation and shame.
 - Increase hope and connection.
 - Provide role models for recovery.
 - Build cultural understanding and credibility.
 - Support healing through shared experiences.
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9. What is known about childhood trauma and military populations?

Canadian research has found that rates of childhood trauma are approximately twice as high among military personnel compared with the general population.

Australian research showing a similar pattern among veterans seeking clinical care, where rates of childhood abuse and neglect were reported to be around twice those of the broader population.

Understanding previous trauma can be important because earlier experiences may influence how people respond to later traumatic events, including MST.

10. What lessons can Australia learn from Canada's experience?

The following lessons are important:

- Acknowledge the issue openly and honestly.
- Listen to people with lived experience.

- Involve victim-survivors in designing solutions and reforms.
- Invest in trauma-informed leadership and workplace culture.
- Focus on prevention as well as response.
- Recognise that organisational culture influences operational readiness.
- Commit to sustained change rather than one-off initiatives.

In Canada, meaningful progress occurred when organisations moved beyond denial, openly recognised the issue, and worked collaboratively with those affected to drive reform.

11. How can organisations support staff wellbeing and reduce vicarious trauma?

The importance of strong workplace community, clear supports pathways and organisational cultures that encourage connection and mutual support.

Staff working in MST-related roles benefit from:

- Collegial support.
- Regular reflection and supervision.
- Trauma-informed workplaces.
- Access to appropriate wellbeing resources.
- Opportunities to debrief and connect with others doing similar work.

Creating supportive teams helps sustain the workforce while reducing the risk of burnout and vicarious trauma.