

Promoting Recovery from Military Sexual Trauma/Sexual Assault: Opportunities for Chaplains

Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and TBI (DCoE) Chaplains Working Group Call

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Goals for Today

- Define military sexual trauma (MST)
- Discuss the impact of MST/Sexual Assault on health and functioning
- Share select literature on spirituality and trauma recovery
- Discuss ways in which trauma-related difficulties can affect spirituality
- Identify opportunities for chaplains in promoting recovery from MST/Sexual Assault
- Solicit feedback for chaplain-focused training and resource development

What is MST?

- VA's definition of MST comes from Title 38 US Code 1720D but in general is sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred during a Veteran's military service
 - Can occur on or off base, while a Veteran was on or off duty
 - Perpetrator identity does not matter
 - Both men and women can experience MST
- MST/ is an experience, not a diagnosis
- Veterans from all eras of service have reported experiencing MST

What Behaviors Are We Talking About?

- Any sort of sexual activity in which someone is involved against his or her will
- Someone may be:
 - Physically forced into participation
 - Unable to consent to sexual activities (e.g., intoxicated)
 - Pressured into sexual activities (e.g., threats of consequences or promises of rewards)
- Can involve things such as:
 - Threatening, offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities
 - Threatening and unwelcome sexual advances
 - Unwanted touching or grabbing
 - Oral sex, anal sex, sexual penetration with an object and/or sexual intercourse
- Compliance does not mean consent

Prevalence

- This can be difficult to know, as sexual trauma is frequently underreported
- About 1 in 5 women and 1 in 100 men have told their VA health care provider that they experienced sexual trauma in the military
- Although women experience MST in higher proportions than do men, because of the large number of men in the military there are significant numbers of both men **and** women seen in VA who have experienced MST

The Impact of MST/Sexual Assault

Video Clip from Make The Connection: Healing and Wholeness after MST

http://maketheconnection.net/stories/story.aspx?story_id=433



The Impact of MST/Sexual Assault

- There is no one way that Veterans respond to MST
 - Many cope quite well and recover without professional help
 - Some continue to have difficulties at times or strong reactions to certain situations
 - Some experience more profound or longer-term problems
- MST can cause difficulties in a diverse range of areas
 - Interpersonal difficulties or avoidance of relationships
 - Difficulties getting and maintaining employment
 - Difficulties with parenting
 - Difficulties with identity and sense of self
 - Spirituality issues/crisis of faith
 - Sexual health, functioning and well-being
 - Homelessness
 - Physical health problems
 - Mental health symptoms

Not All Traumatic Events Are Created Equally

- Research has shown that sexual assault is more likely to result in symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) than are most other types of trauma, including combat
- Sexual assault in the military may be more strongly associated with PTSD and other health consequences than is civilian sexual assault
- Potential reasons that MST/Sexual Assault can have such a negative impact include:
 - MST is an interpersonal trauma and may be ongoing over time
 - Social support may be limited
 - “Meaning” of sexual trauma
 - Age/developmental level
 - Socialization and values secondary to military service
 - Other experiences of trauma

For Discussion

In what ways can trauma affect spirituality?

In what ways can spirituality affect a
person's experience of trauma?

The Impact of Trauma on Spirituality

Polarized thinking that helps maintain a sense of control/safety	Rigidity or concreteness of religious beliefs
Difficulties with trusting others	Mistrust of God, higher power, religious community; decreased willingness to share trauma-related details or seek/rely on spiritual sources of support
Difficulties with trusting oneself	Questioning of judgment and doubting spiritual decisions
Sense of hopelessness and despair	Lack of spiritual meaning and purpose
Anger	“How could God let this happen?”
Feelings of unworthiness	Feeling undeserving of a spiritual relationship; feeling permanently damaged

The Impact of Trauma on Spirituality

Issues of self- blame and self-forgiveness	Self-blame for not working harder on spirituality, feeling punished by God
Issues of other-forgiveness	“Do I need to forgive the perpetrator to fully heal?”
Shattering of beliefs and difficulty reconciling trauma with belief system	Feelings of disillusionment and betrayal if trauma contradicts spiritual beliefs
Issues related to sexual functioning and well-being, sexual orientation	Sense of shame if perceived taboo/stigma within spiritual community and/or if struggles conflict with belief system
Interpersonal difficulties	Strong reactions to situations in which control is surrendered and/or when one person has power/authority over another
Existential dilemmas	“What kind of God would let this happen?” “Does God love me?”

For Discussion

What opportunities exist for chaplains to play a role in promoting recovery from MST/Sexual Assault?

Opportunities for Chaplains Exist Across Phases of Recovery

- Providing supportive verbal and nonverbal responses when sexual assault is disclosed
 - When complex situations arise, focus on providing a supportive human response in the moment
 - Consider parallels to other situations you encounter as chaplains and apply those skills in this context
- Supporting survivors in an ongoing way
 - Help survivors consider pros/cons of options for treatment, reporting, etc. and make choices that are consistent with their values and faith
 - Promote forms of religious coping that can facilitate recovery
 - Help survivors cope with existential issues and crises of faith
 - Share information about options for treatment and services when appropriate
- Being mindful and aware of internal reactions and how they are affecting both you and the survivor
 - Implement self-care and other strategies to effectively manage your reactions
- Collaborating with other providers involved in supporting MST survivors

For Discussion

Chaplains' Strengths That are Relevant to Supporting MST/Sexual Assault Survivors

Ways Chaplains Can Provide Support to MST/Sexual Assault Survivors

- Protecting privacy and confidentiality
- Expressing genuineness and compassion
- Maintaining flexibility and openness while also guiding the interaction when needed
- Facilitating expression and processing of emotions
 - May parallel grief processing
- Supporting survivors as they navigate spiritual struggles and work toward/maintain spiritual health
- Building trusting relationships with survivors that they perceive as safe
- Finding ways to honor your background/belief system while also focusing on meeting the survivor's needs

Ways Chaplains Can Provide Support to MST/Sexual Assault Survivors

- Providing validation: *“I am honored that you felt comfortable sharing this with me and think it is a huge strength of yours that you are reaching out for help.”*
- Providing empathy: *“It seems like this experience has understandably been very painful.”*
- Providing education and normalization in a way that instills hope: *“Many Veterans have had experiences like yours and for some, it can continue to affect them even many years later. However, people can and do recover.”*
- Listening non-judgmentally and conveying attentiveness verbally/non-verbally
- Sitting with and “witnessing” disclosure without problem-solving immediately
- Expressing willingness to have conversations about the impact of MST on spiritual health and well-being
- Following the survivor’s lead in staying on the topic
- Refraining from blaming the survivor or questioning his or her actions
- Monitoring body positioning, eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice

It's Important to Remain Self-Aware

- Reactions and responses can be shaped by our background/history, cultural beliefs, values and practices, as well as religious traditions and denominational guidance
- Be mindful of the ways in which your thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs both FACILITATE AND INTERFERE WITH YOUR ABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY PROVIDE SUPPORT
- BE MINDFUL OF YOUR REACTIONS TO INFORMATION ABOUT THE SURVIVOR, PERPETRATOR, AND CONTEXT/DETAILS OF THE MST/SEXUAL ASSAULT
 - Key issues may include gender of both survivor and perpetrator, sexual orientation, relationship status, nature of trauma, substance use behaviors
- Be honest with yourself about the limitations of your role
 - Seek support and consultation as needed when deciding whether and how to connect the survivor with someone else
- Make connections in a thoughtful and compassionate way
 - Find a way to be transparent with the survivor about your limitations while also honoring that he or she sought support from you

Facilitating Self-Awareness

- Key questions to consider:
 - In what ways are my beliefs, values, thoughts, feelings, and aspects of my background/history both facilitating and interfering with my ability to effectively provide support?
 - At this time, would it be useful for me to raise these issues with the survivor and/or seek support for myself?
 - How can I respond in a supportive, nonjudgmental way?
 - Am I able to fully engage this survivor in a helpful way that supports recovery?
 - Do I need to connect this person with another chaplain and/or health care provider? If so, how can I do that in a thoughtful and compassionate way that will not negatively affect his or her recovery process?
 - Should I seek support and/or consultation as I am wrestling with these issues and decisions?

Practicing

- Video Clips from Make the Connection: Tawayna and Matt
 - Tawayna: http://maketheconnection.net/stories/story.aspx?story_id=262
 - Matt: http://maketheconnection.net/stories/story.aspx?story_id=354
- When watching the following clips, stay mindful of your thoughts, feelings, and reactions



For Discussion

In what ways might your beliefs, values, thoughts, feelings, and reactions to Tawayna and Matt both facilitate and interfere with your ability to effectively provide support?

Collaborating with Others

- Introduce yourself to the providers in your facility
- Recognize the specialized skills and support you can offer and be able to communicate this to other providers
 - You may need to provide education about your role
- When appropriate, ask survivors whether, and to what extent, they'd like your involvement in their treatment team and/or treatment plan
- Continue educating yourself
- Seek support and consultation as needed

Sharing Information about VHA's MST-Related Health Care

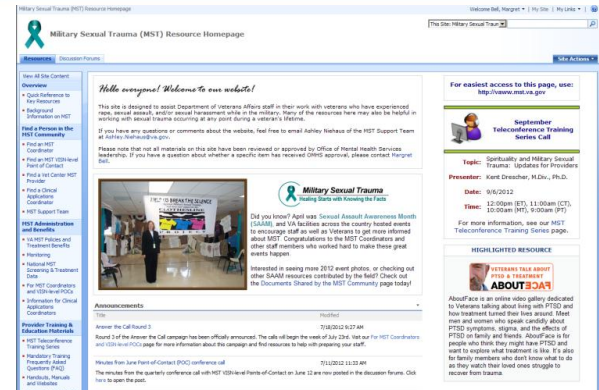
- VHA is committed to ensuring that Veterans who experienced MST have access to health care services and benefits that can facilitate recovery
- National VHA policy specifies that all VA Medical Centers must:
 - Screen all Veterans for experiences of MST
 - Provide free treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST
 - Eligibility is expansive
 - A continuum of MST-related health care exists
 - Have a designated MST Coordinator to serve as a point person for MST issues at the facility
 - Ensure staff receive training on issues related to MST
 - Engage in outreach to ensure Veterans are aware of services available
- VHA's Mental Health Services (MHS) has funded a national MST Support Team to perform national monitoring, to coordinate MST-related education and training, and to promote best practices in the field

Veterans and Service Members Can Access MST-Related Health Care in a Number of Ways

- Learn about the processes at your facility
- To access care, Veterans can:
 - Ask their existing VA health care provider for a referral for MST services
 - Contact the MST Coordinator at their local VHA facility
 - Contact their local Vet Center
- Veterans who were deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan can also contact the OEF/OIF Coordinator at their local VHA facility
- Information about services and how to access care is available at:
 - www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp
 - VA's general information hotline (1-800-827-1000)

Additional Resources

- VA Intranet MST Resource Homepage
 - vaww.mst.va.gov
 - Accessible to all VA staff
 - Veteran outreach/informational materials, including brochures that can be ordered through TMS
 - List of facility MST Coordinators
- Information for Veterans is available on the Internet at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp



Information That Will Help Guide Training Efforts

- What content do you think is important to include in chaplain-focused training on MST/Sexual Assault?
- What do you view as barriers and facilitators to supporting MST/Sexual Assault survivors who seek you out for help?
- What are some of chaplains' strengths in responding to Service Members and Veterans who have experienced MST/Sexual Assault?
- What are some areas in which would you like to become more skilled?
 - Particular presenting concerns?
 - Particular spiritual issues?
 - Particular clinical or mental health issues?
- How do factors within your facility influence your work with individuals who have experienced MST/Sexual Assault?
 - Policies?
 - The parameters of your responsibilities/roles?

Thank you

We appreciate your support in assisting Service Members and Veterans who have experienced MST/Sexual Assault.

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