

Help for Veterans Affected By Recent Public Discussions About Sexual Abuse

In recent months, many women and men have spoken up publically about being sexually assaulted or sexually harassed. Many Veterans of all backgrounds have had unwanted sexual experiences during their military service or at other times. Because of this, public discussions about these topics may bring up painful memories and feelings. Even if you think the public discussion is a good thing, it may still be difficult. **This handout has information and resources to help.**

*Please know that **you are not alone** in what you have been through or in your recovery.*

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and other sources of support are here to help.

The terms “sexual assault” and “sexual harassment” in this handout mean any type of unwanted sexual experience against your will or when you were unable to say “no.” If it bothered you then or it bothers you now, it is important to take your reactions seriously.

Common Reactions to the Public Discussion

You may notice more sudden, strong emotions; images of your own sexual assault or sexual harassment experiences; trouble concentrating; poor sleep or nightmares; feeling helpless, anxious, or depressed; or other changes. This is normal, and it does not mean there has been a setback in your recovery.

Things That Can Help

- **Remind yourself it is okay to feel upset.** It is very normal to have more struggles than usual, and you may need to spend more time doing things that help you support and care for yourself. Try to eat healthy, leave enough time to sleep, and do relaxing and fun activities. Exercise or find other ways to be active. You might consider downloading a smartphone app that teaches coping strategies. See examples at the VA App Store (<https://mobile.va.gov/appstore/mentalhealth>) or look for the National Center for Telehealth and Technology’s “Virtual Hope Box.”
- **Inspire yourself.** Remember that you and people like you have already overcome great challenges, and it took great strength to do it. Find an inspiring quote or write a letter to yourself that you can read when you’re feeling upset to remind you of this.
- **Do what works for you.** Try things that helped you cope during difficult times in the past. As long as you stay safe, whatever works is okay. Know that you may need to try more than one thing, and it may take more energy or effort than usual. That’s normal.
- **Limit exposure to media.** Notice how the news or social media stories are affecting you, and if need be, limit how much you look at them. You can also focus on reading the stories that give you hope or make you feel supported, and avoid the rest.
- **Get support.** Spend time with people you enjoy. This helps everyone get through tough times. Even if you do not tell others about your own experiences of sexual assault or sexual harassment, it can still help to be with others. You can say, “I’m having a rough time right now,” without sharing details if that feels right. Or, you can spend time with someone without telling them that you are struggling.
- **Remind yourself recovery is a journey.** You will have ups and downs, and there will be some times that are harder than others. Please remember that over time, you can move forward and feel better.

Sexual assault and sexual harassment can affect mental and physical health, even years later.

*Please know **it is possible to heal and move forward.** It’s never too late, and even little steps can make a big difference.*

- **Learn more.** Visit these resources for more information about coping and recovery:
 - VA’s Military Sexual Trauma homepage (www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp)
 - Make the Connection (www.maketheconnection.net) – hear stories of recovery from other Veterans; click on “Conditions” and then choose “Effects of Military Sexual Trauma”
 - National Center for PTSD (www.ptsd.va.gov) – search for “sexual trauma” and “sexual assault”
 - RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network; www.rainn.org)
 - 1in6 (www.1in6.org) – for men
 - Lean In (<https://leanin.org/meeting-guides/self-care-after-sexual-harassment>) – for women
 - Department of Defense Safe Helpline (www.safehelpline.org)

Professional Support

There are many ways to recover and for some people, talking to a health care professional can help. If you are:

- Having thoughts about harming or killing yourself
- Feeling helpless, hopeless, or that you can’t take any more stress
- Drinking or using substances to cope
- Taking risks or not taking care of yourself
- Not keeping up with daily work, school, or family responsibilities,

or if you are worried about yourself, **please** consider talking to someone.

*If you are in **crisis** or need **immediate assistance**, please contact the free, confidential Veterans Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255 (then press 1)** or www.veteranscrisisline.net.*

To connect with care:

- VA providers have expertise in working with survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment in both military and civilian settings and from many different backgrounds. Contact your local VA health care facility using the list at www.va.gov and ask to talk with someone about mental health services.
- Visit the program locators on RAINN’s (www.rainn.org) or the National Sexual Violence Resource Center’s (www.nsvrc.org/organizations) websites. The Make the Connection website (www.maketheconnection.net) can also help you locate VA and community resources – click the “Find Local Support” button at the top of the page.
- Contact a mental health provider near you. Ask if the provider has expertise in working with survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Find tips for choosing a therapist on the National Center for PTSD website (www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/find_therapist.asp).

If you had an unwanted sexual experience at work that is recent or ongoing, think about talking to programs at your work such as Employee Assistance Programs or Equal Employment Opportunity Programs. If you are in the military, contact the Department of Defense Safe Helpline anonymously at www.safehelpline.org or 877-995-5247, connect with a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Coordinator, or contact your Military Equal Opportunity program. If you are worried that the perpetrator may harm you again, we **strongly** encourage you to get help from workplace programs or other sources of support.

*One core VA mission is to help Veterans live full, healthy lives and recover from service-related experiences that affect their well-being. To do this, **VA has free services to help with recovery from sexual assault or sexual harassment during military service, also known as “military sexual trauma” (MST).** You may be able to receive free MST-related care even if you are not eligible for other VA services. You do **not** need any evidence that the MST occurred. **Contact your local VA facility and ask to speak to the MST Coordinator** or visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp to learn more.*