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Invisible Wounds of Military Service: The Impact of Military Sexual Trauma

Mid-Atlantic Regional Community of Practice
Professional Training Event

June 11, 2020

Welcome & Introductions

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- Crisis Phone/Text/Chat Line
- Service Coordination for Veterans, Service Members and their Families
- Community Education

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Regional Community of Practice

- EveryMind serves as our Regional Community of Practice Champion for the Mid-Atlantic Region
 - **ServingTogether**, National Capital Region
 - **Mission United**, South Hampton Roads
 - **PA Serves**, Greater Pittsburgh
- Conducting these trainings based on feedback we receive from you
 - More to come soon
 - We need your feedback!



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Invisible Wounds of Military Service: The Impact of Military Sexual Trauma

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INVISIBLE WOUNDS OF MILITARY SERVICE: The Impact of Military Sexual Trauma

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Objectives

1. Define Military Sexual Trauma
2. Describe Common Reactions to MST
3. Discuss the impact of MST on service members and their families

Define Military Sexual Trauma



MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA DEFINED

Military sexual trauma (MST) refers to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment and includes any sexual activity against one's will. The resulting acute or delayed psychological trauma can be quite significant and debilitating.

The definition used by the VA comes from Federal law (Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D) and is “psychological trauma, which in the judgment of a VA mental health professional, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training.”

Examples of Military Sexual Trauma

- Forced or coerced sexual encounters
- Inappropriate sexual jokes or lewd remarks
- Offers of something in exchange for sexual favors
- Threatening, offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities
- Sexual encounters perpetrated while a person is unwilling or unable to give consent
- Unwanted physical contact that makes you uncomfortable (sexual touching or grabbing)
- Repeated threatening and unwelcome sexual advances that a Veteran experienced during their military service

Military Sexual Trauma: Males vs Females

VA looked at data from the "National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans," a survey of 30,000 Veterans deployed to Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) and 30,000 Veterans who served elsewhere during the same time period. The survey included questions from the VA MST clinical screen to find out if study participants had experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault.

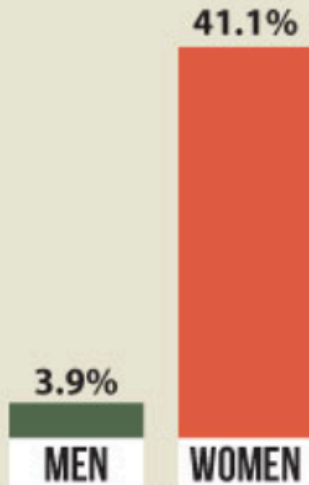
MEN VS WOMEN

● Men ● Women

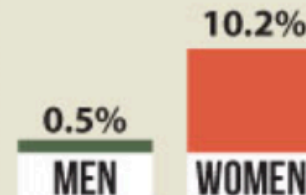
VETERANS EXPERIENCING MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA



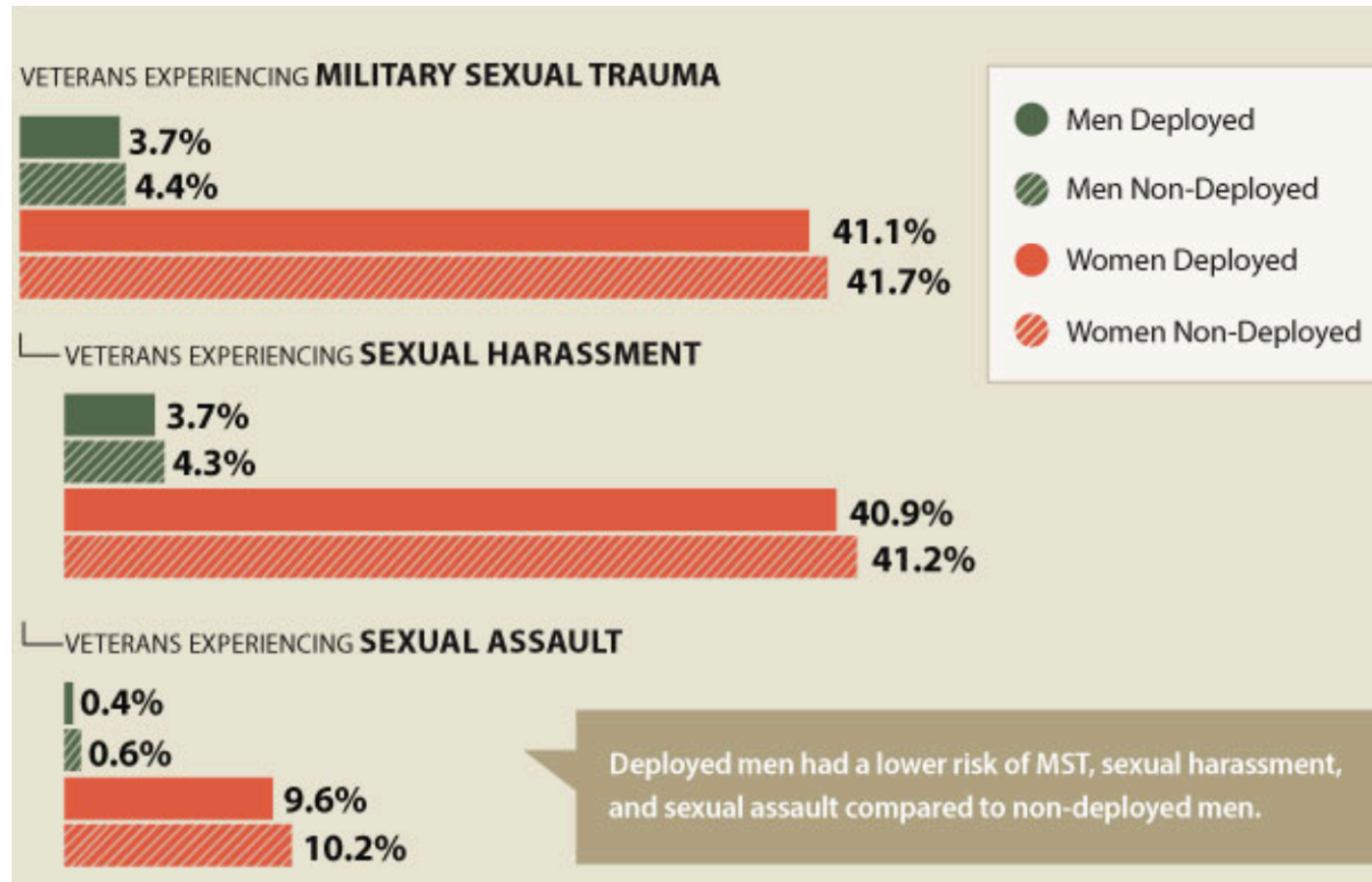
VETERANS EXPERIENCING SEXUAL HARASSMENT



VETERANS EXPERIENCING SEXUAL ASSAULT



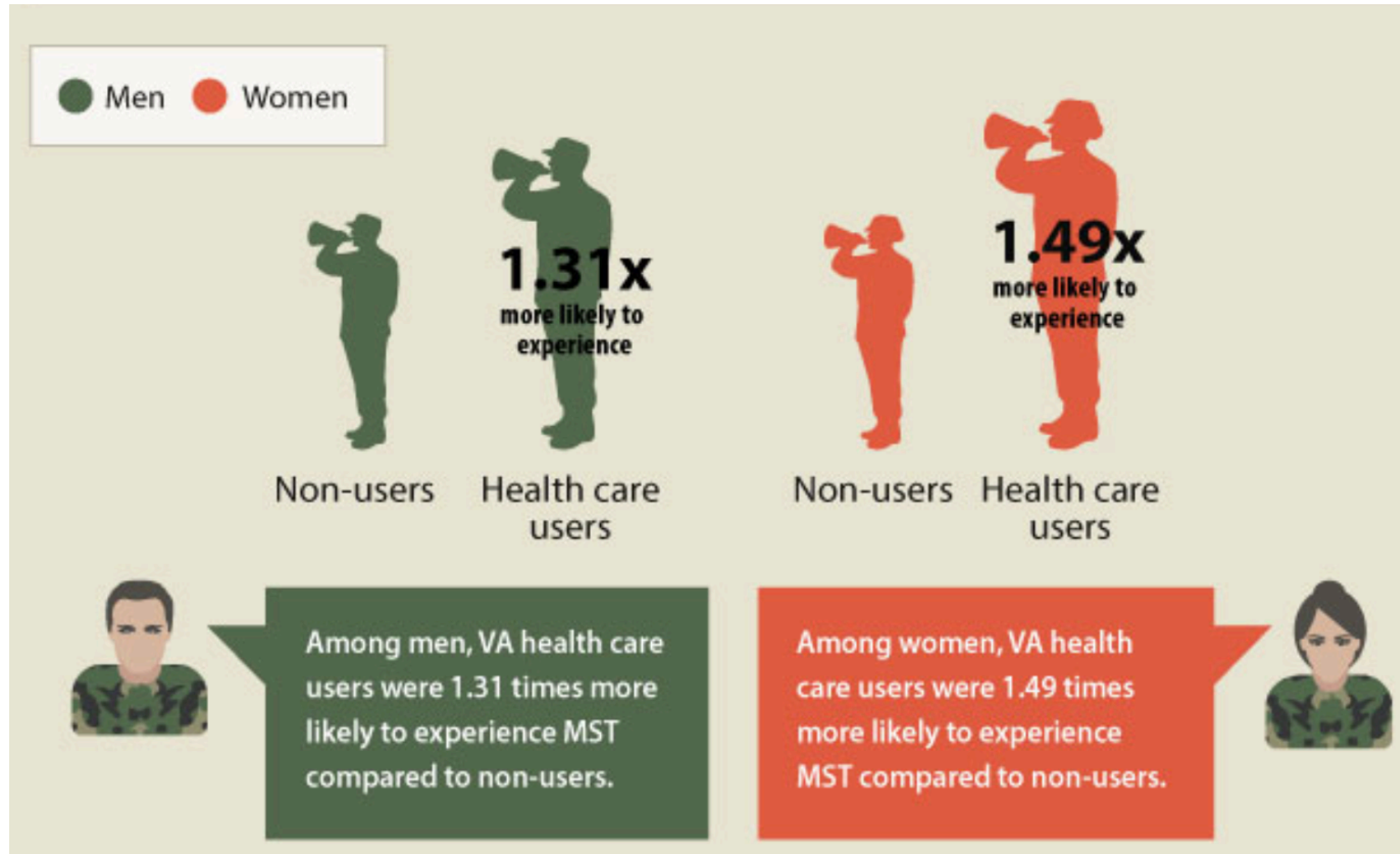
Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom Deployed vs Non-Deployed



Combat Exposed vs Non-Exposed



VA Healthcare Users vs Non-Users



Describe Common Reactions to MST

MST Quick Facts

Military Reports a Surge of Sexual Assaults in the Ranks

- Sexual assault in the American military surged in the last two years, driven almost entirely by a 50 percent increase in assaults on women
- DoD annual [Report on Sexual Assault in the Military](#) estimated:
 - 20,500 instances of “unwanted sexual contact” in the 2018 fiscal year
 - An increase of 38 percent from the previous survey in 2016
 - DoD survey of men and women across the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines revealed assaults on men in the military remained flat while assaults on women recorded their biggest increase in years
- Women now make up only about 20 percent of the military
 - targets of 63 percent of assaults
 - youngest and lowest-ranking women are most at risk

MST Quick Facts

Claims of sexual assault increased at military academies

- according to a survey unwanted sexual contact increased by nearly 50 percent since 2016
- for women it was 15.8 percent, an increase from 12.2 percent
- for men it was 2.4 percent, up from 1.7 percent
- the rate of cadets and midshipmen reporting the incidents has stayed the same
 - 50 percent of women and 16 percent of men experienced sexual harassment
 - yet during that same period of time, only seven complaints were made

MST Quick Facts

- An estimated 1 in 4 female veterans in the VA healthcare system report experiencing MST
- Trend data show reports of military sexual assault are on the rise
- Service members often do not report assaults until:
 - long after the assault has occurred
 - after they leave the military
 - **they go to providers in the community**
- Sexual assault has a larger impact on PTSD symptomatology than any other trauma, including combat exposure

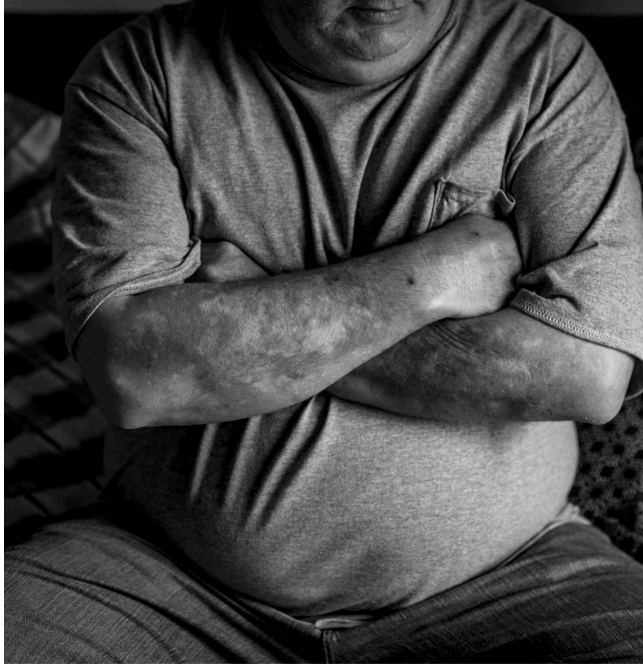
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MST Quick Facts

What Makes MST Difficult for Men:

- “This can’t happen to me. This doesn’t happen to men.”
- “I felt like less of a man after, sometimes like not even a man at all.”
- “I tried to move on and forget it. It’s probably too late now.”
- “I should have been able to stop it. It was my fault.”

More Than 100,000 Men Have Been Sexually Assaulted in the Military in Recent Decades



Mr. Capshaw has scars from the daily beatings and sexual assaults that he said Mr. Dahmer inflicted on him.

Photographs by MARY F. CALVERT
Text by DAVE PHILIPPS

SEPT. 10, 2019



ntist regularly since the attack. "It is difficult to have someone in my personal space hovering over me," he said.

Reporting The Experience



MST Quick Facts

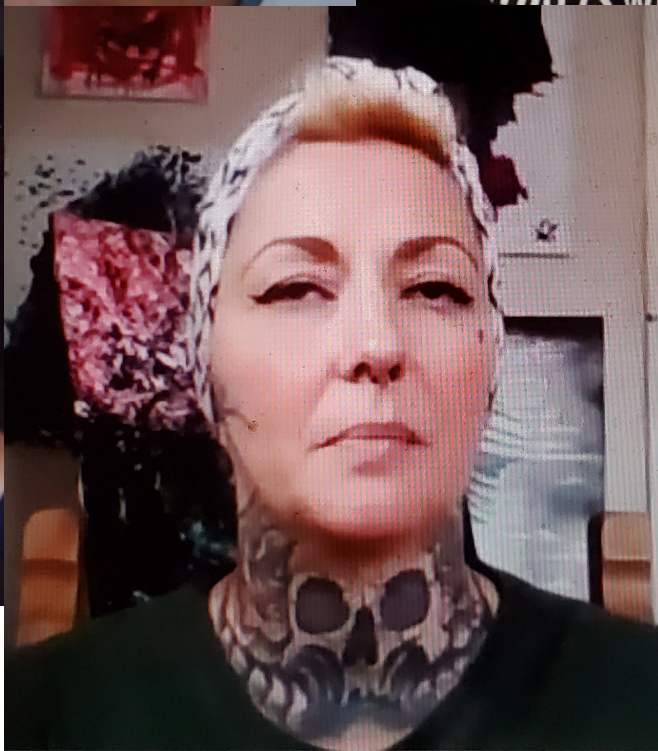
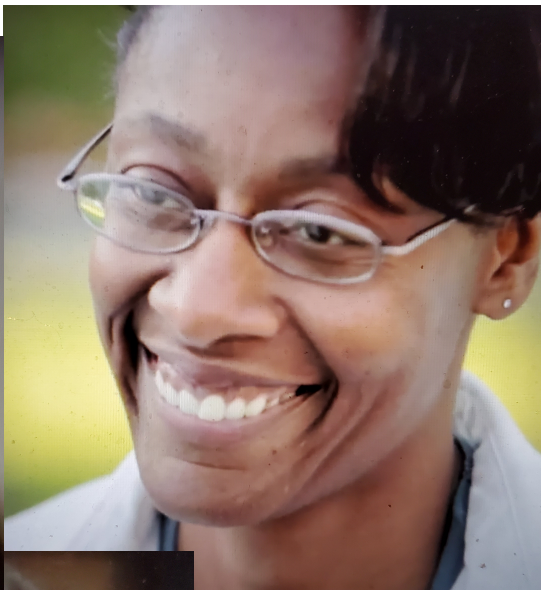
What Makes MST Difficult for Men

- Men may have had uncontrollable biological reactions like an erection or ejaculation during MST. This does **not** mean that they wanted or enjoyed it. It also does not mean anything about their sexual orientation
- Men's background and identity, like their age, race, religion, and abuse or trauma prior to military service, can also affect their reactions to MST

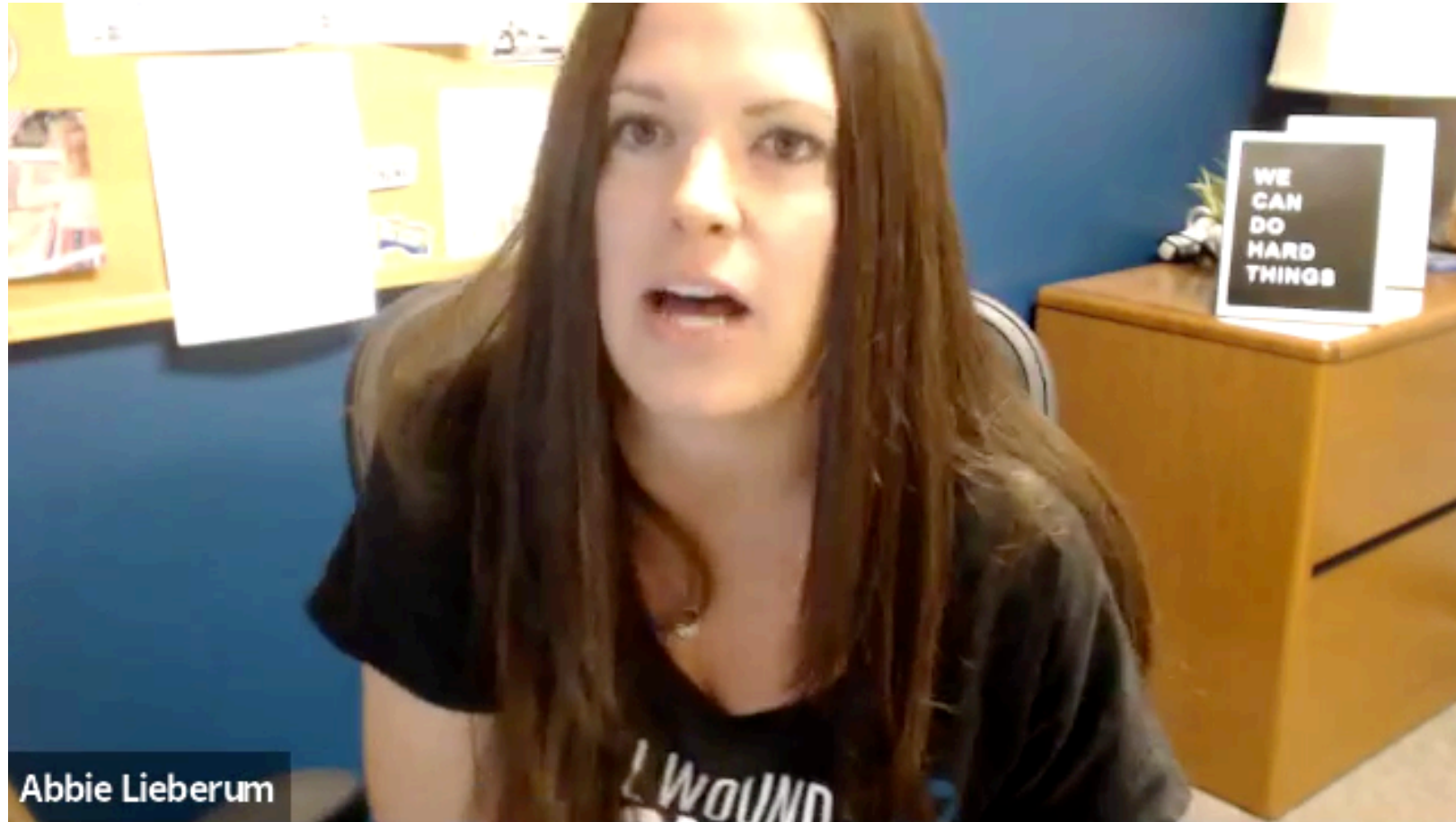
Female Veterans

- Female veterans:
 - Comprise 2.2 million members of the US Armed Forces
 - Make up approximately 10 percent of the total veteran population
 - Experience unique struggles while serving their country
- Females make up about 16% of the entire active duty force
- The majority of today's female veterans (53%) served between the Vietnam era and September 11, 2001

The Stories Behind the Faces



The Journey to Recovery



Abbie Lieberum

MST Quick Facts

- Female veterans have:
 - much higher rates of **interpersonal** trauma than male veterans
 - much higher rates of **military sexual trauma** (MST)
 - much higher rates of **intimate partner violence** (IPV) one in five
- One study places the **prevalence** of trauma histories among female veterans at 81% to 93%
 - Childhood **sexual** abuse experienced by 27–49%
 - Childhood **physical** abuse experienced by 35%
 - **Sexual assault** experienced by 29–40%
 - **Physical assault** experienced by 50% have experienced
 - Domestic **violence** experienced by 18–19%

MST Quick Facts

- Sexual trauma in the military does not occur only during training or peacetime
 - stress of war may be associated with increases in rates of sexual harassment and assault
- Research by Jessica Wolf and colleagues with Persian Gulf War military personnel found higher rates of the following than typically found in peacetime:
 - sexual assault (7%)
 - physical sexual harassment (33%)
 - verbal sexual harassment (66%)

Reactions / Symptoms associated with MST

- Difficulty with relationships and social functioning
 - the abuse triggers trust issues
 - problems engaging in social activities
 - possible difficulties with sexual dysfunction
 - emotional challenges with guilt, shame and anger
 - difficulties finding or maintaining work after their military service

Reactions / Symptoms associated with MST

- Physical health problems
 - sexual difficulties
 - chronic pain
 - weight or eating problems
 - gastrointestinal problems
 - difficulty with attention, concentration and memory
 - trouble staying focused or frequently finding their mind wandering

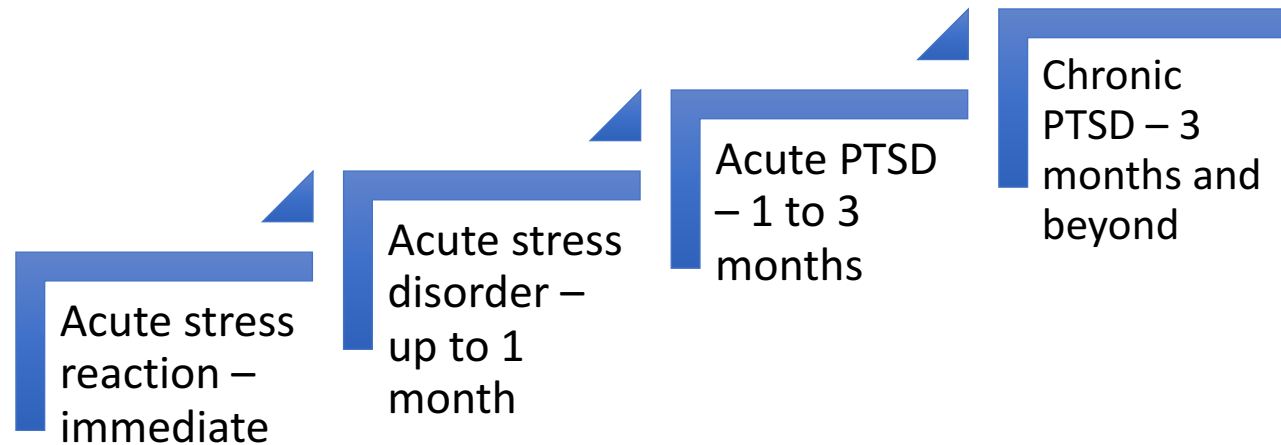
Reaction / Symptoms associated with MST

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological health issues
 - higher lifetime rate of PTSD - 49.5 percent
 - depression and other mood disorders
 - substance misuse disorders
- Substance misuse disorder
 - Higher correlation of drug and/or alcohol misuse
 - marijuana, cocaine and other illicit substances
 - 10 times as high for victims of sexual assault

Reactions / Symptoms associated with MST

- Additional medical and mental health conditions
 - Strong association with the development of:
 - obesity or weight loss
 - chronic pulmonary disease
 - liver disease and hypothyroidism
 - mental health conditions (i.e., bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder).

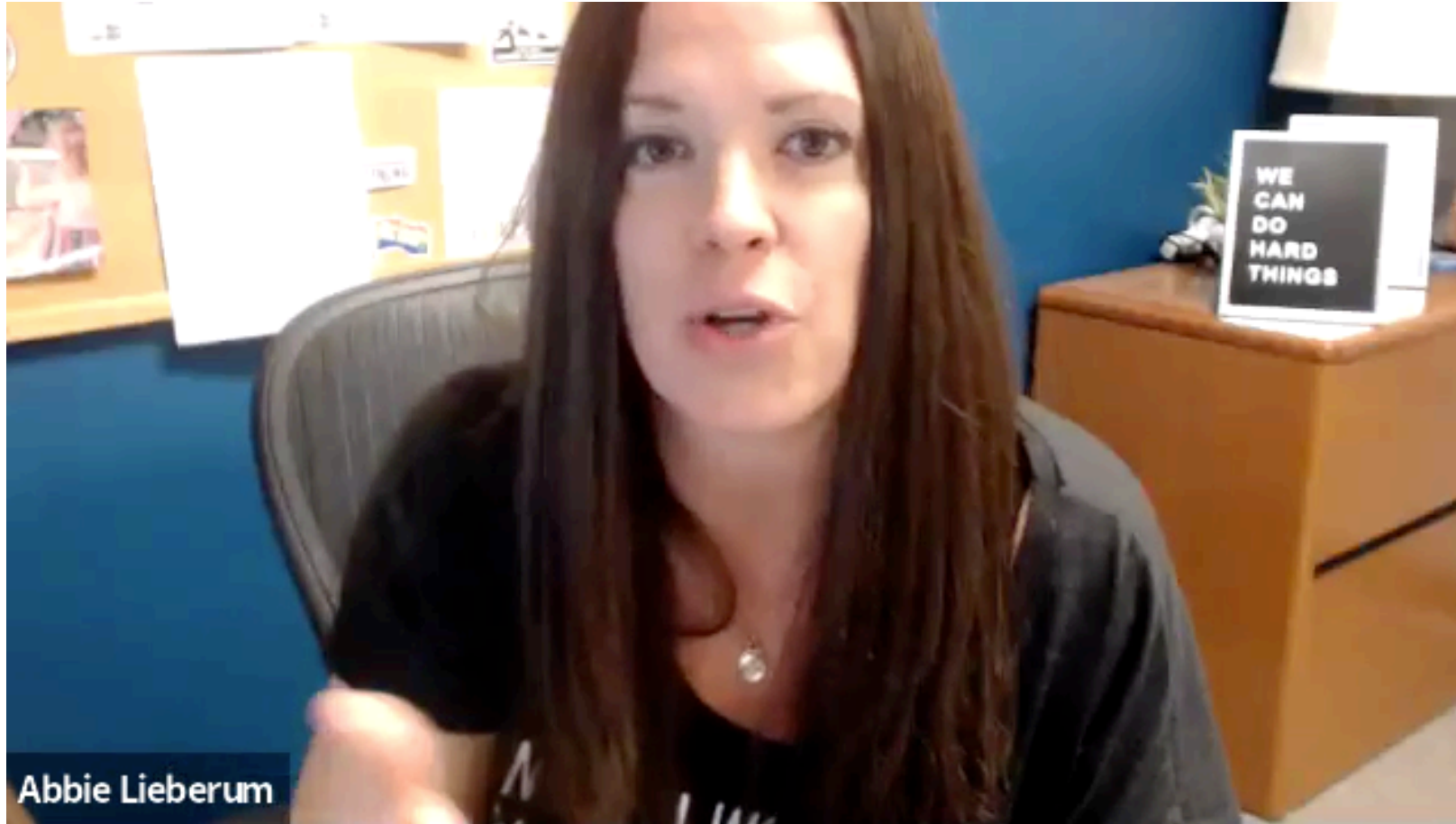
Reactions / Symptom Response to Trauma



Consequences of Military Sexual Trauma

- Rates of PTSD for sexual assault are higher than those for combat
 - 46% of females who have been sexually assaulted report PTSD symptoms, compared to 39% of males following combat
- Sexual assault survivors are more likely to use drugs:
 - 3.4 times more likely to use marijuana
 - 6 times more likely to use cocaine
 - 10 times more likely to use hard drugs
- Increased domestic violence and sexual victimization

Discuss the impact of MST on service members and their families



Abbie Lieberum

Impact of MST on Veterans

MST is an experience, not a diagnosis or a mental health condition, and as with other forms of trauma, there are a variety of reactions that Veterans can have in response to MST.

- The type, severity, and duration of a Veteran's difficulties will all vary based on factors like:
 - Whether he/she has a prior history of trauma
 - The types of responses from others he/she received at the time of the MST
 - Whether the MST happened once or was repeated over time
- Although posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is commonly associated with MST, other diagnosis that can result from MST. The diagnoses most frequently associated with MST among users of VA health care are:
 - substance use disorders
 - impaired health status
 - depression and other mood disorders
 - more chronic health problems in veterans
 - increased number of current physical symptoms

https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/mst_general_factsheet.pdf

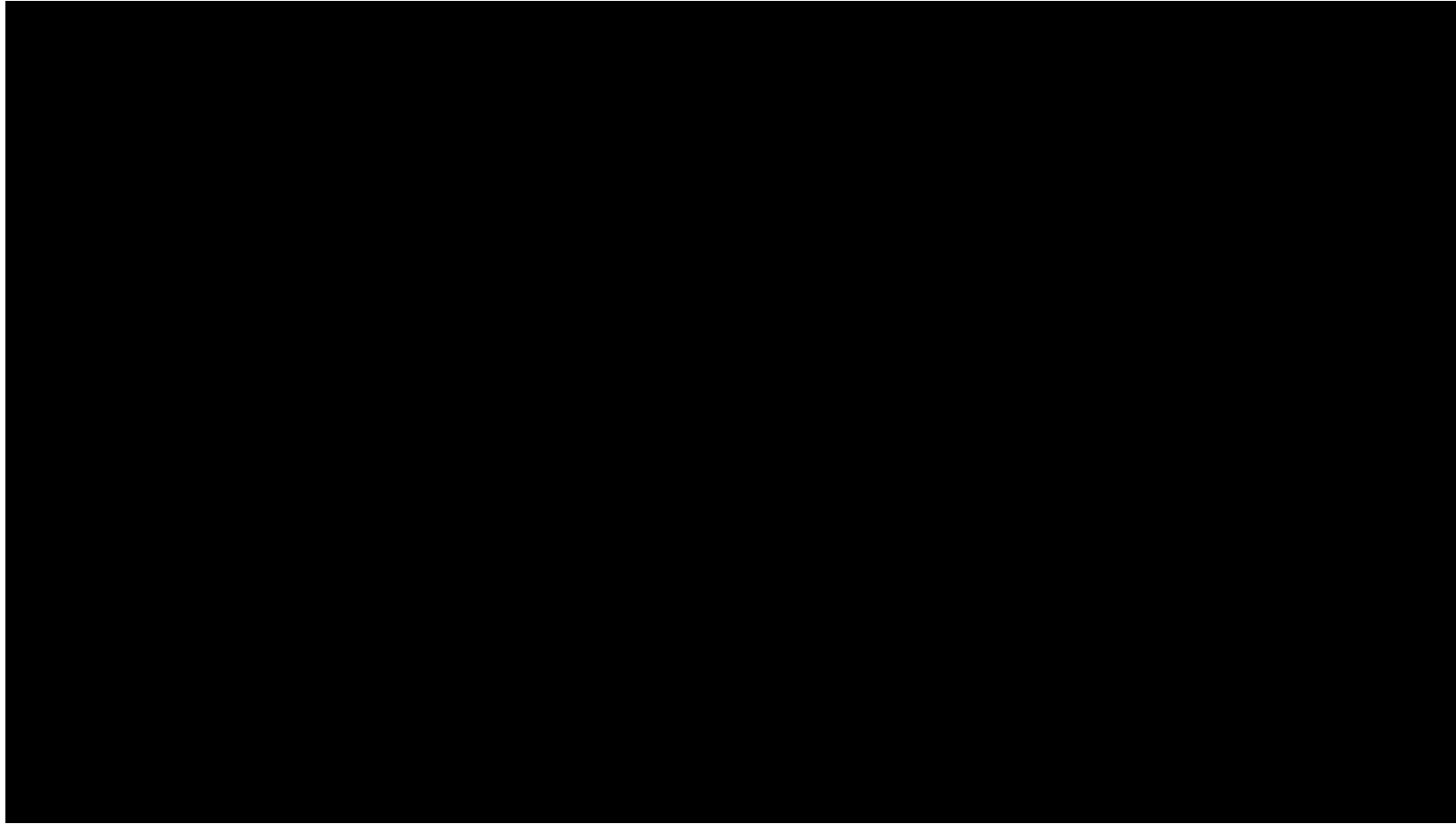
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Unique aspects of sexual trauma associated with military service

- Factors that may be unique to MST include:
 - You may have had to continue to live and work with your perpetrator, and even rely on him or her for essential things like food, health care, or watching your back on patrol
 - You may have been worried about damaging the team spirit of your unit if your perpetrator was in the same unit
 - You may have been worried about appearing weak or vulnerable, and thoughts that others would not respect you
 - You may have thought that if others found out, it would end your career or your chances for promotion
- The experience of MST can put Service members in some no-win situations and be emotionally difficult for them to resolve as Veterans

Standing at the Intersection of MST, The Veteran and The Family



Responding to the problem of MST

VA is strongly committed to ensuring that Veterans have access to the help they need in order to recover from MST.

- Every VA health care system has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues.
- VA health care providers ask every Veteran whether he or she experienced MST.
- All treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to experiences of MST is provided free of charge.
- To receive free treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST, Veterans do not need to be service connected (or have a VA disability rating). Veterans do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred.

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/types/sexual_trauma_military.asp
https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/mst_general_factsheet.pdf

Responding to the problem of MST

- MST-related services are available at every VA medical center and every facility has providers knowledgeable about treatment for the aftereffects of MST
- MST-related counseling is also available through community-based Vet Centers. Services are designed to meet Veterans where they are at in their recovery
- Nationwide, there are programs that offer specialized sexual trauma treatment in residential or inpatient settings. These are programs for Veterans who need more intense treatment and support
- To accommodate Veterans who do not feel comfortable in mixed-gender treatment settings, some facilities have separate programs for men and women

Recommendations for the Non VA Provider Caring for Veterans

- Ensure that intake personnel, clinicians, administrative support personnel, and others are aware of and understand the unique culture and experiences of female veterans.
- Create a trauma-informed organization that is welcoming to female veterans.
- Offer or provide referrals to trauma-specific/trauma-informed interventions and services. **They are entitled to this care from the VA**
- Engage female veterans in peer to peer-support activities to support treatment and recovery.

Recommendations for the Non VA Provider Serving Female Veterans

- Screen for interpersonal violence, including military sexual trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder
 - particularly important for women in the military and women Veterans
 - routine screening of all patients for a history of sexual assault and paying particular attention to those who report pelvic pain, dysmenorrhea, or sexual dysfunction
- Two questions that use descriptive, nonjudgmental language and can be used in any office setting: While in the military,
 - 1. Did you receive uninvited and unwanted sexual attention, such as touching, cornering, pressure for sexual favors, or verbal remarks?
 - 2. Did someone ever use force or threat of force to have sexual contact with you against your will?

Recommendations for the Non VA Provider Serving Female Veterans

- The female Veteran and their engagement with the health system
 - Providers who bring military/veteran cultural competence to their interactions with Veterans
 - Lack of cultural competence may indicate that healthcare providers are unaware of what questions to ask and what information to gather
 - Providers outside of the VA often don't think about a client having military experience or how that service might affect the veteran's presenting condition; how to treat them; or how they'll respond to treatment
 - important to have a basic knowledge of military culture and what that could mean for how veterans approach their health care
 - it takes a lot for a veteran to seek help and so a medical complaint should never be viewed as trivial

<https://youtu.be/akoTU7Kjl-A>

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By [Jennifer Steinhauer](#)

NY Times Sept. 26, 2019

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<https://maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma> **Video source**

<https://www.metoomst.com> **Video source**

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