

MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA:

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR TALKING TO YOUR AFFECTED LOVED ONE

Use this resource to learn how to talk about military sexual trauma with your loved one who's impacted.





IN THIS RESOURCE, YOU WILL FIND...

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ARE YOU READY TO HAVE A CONVERSATION?

Before starting a conversation about military sexual trauma (MST), it is important that you feel prepared and that the timing and conditions are right.

Here is a checklist you can use to gauge your readiness:

- Am I feeling okay today?**
There are times when you aren't feeling okay yourself and don't have the ability to be there for others. That's okay – maybe today is a day you need to reach out for support.
- Do I have the ability to manage my own emotions and reactions today?**
Sometimes, hearing about MST can affect your own emotions. However, it is important that you are in a place where you can manage your own feelings. If you're not ready, try saying: *"Talking to you about this is important to me. I'm not feeling at my best right now and want to be sure I can support you. Can we talk about this (later/tomorrow)?"*
- Do I have the time I need for this discussion?**
A conversation about MST isn't something you want to rush through – you want to have the space to really listen. If you don't have time and the conversation can be safely postponed, that's okay. Suggest a time sooner than later. Try your best to ensure you don't have to postpone it multiple times, unless absolutely unavoidable.
- Do we have privacy?**
Conversations about MST should be held in confidence. If a conversation starts up unexpectedly, ask your loved one if they'd like to move to a different location or go for a walk. If not, try saying: *"I want us to have a private space to talk. How about we move somewhere quieter where we can talk just between ourselves?"*
- Can I avoid interruptions or distractions?**
You want your loved one to feel that what they have to share is top priority. Give them space to share and let them know they have your full attention. If there is a chance you may be interrupted, have a plan. Remove potential distractions (e.g. turn to focus on them, leave aside what you were doing, put your phone away). If you are interrupted, follow up soon after to let them know this conversation is important and set a time to get back to it. Try saying: *"I want to give this conversation my full attention because it's important. I can't do that right now. Can we talk (later/tomorrow)?"*

“ It's okay to feel uneasy or uncomfortable talking about MST – just remember that your role is to **show you care, not to have answers or solutions.** ”



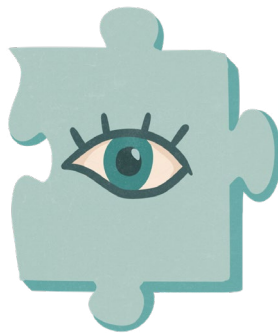
BEST-PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS FOR HAVING A CONVERSATION

If your loved one has disclosed that they experienced MST, they have shown they trust you. Knowing how to respond can feel challenging. You may feel uncomfortable or awkward at first. Being yourself, staying present, showing patience and helping identify next steps with your loved one can give them hope.

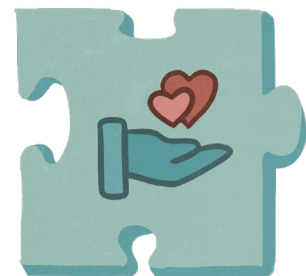
These suggestions can help them feel safe and maintain trust:¹⁻⁵



LISTEN



BELIEVE THEM



SHOW SUPPORT



LISTEN



START WITH EMPATHY, NOT SYMPATHY

When you listen from an empathetic and compassionate lens, you can see things from the other person's perspective, imagine what they are experiencing and express your support.



*"I'm here for you."
"I can tell this is really hard for you."
"Is there anything I can do?"*



Avoid saying *"I understand."*

MAKE SILENCE YOUR FRIEND

Even though it can feel uncomfortable at first, giving people space to reflect and process can help them to feel less pressured. It can also lead to new and important insights.



Pause for three breaths before responding, to see if there is something more they need to say.

LISTEN WITH YOUR EARS, BODY LANGUAGE AND EYES

Your loved one may feel judged when sharing about their experience. A lot of communication is non-verbal, so try to manage your body language and eye movements. This can create an environment that feels safe to share.



Keep your body language neutral and relaxed. Soften your eyes, talk low and slow.



Manage your body language by quieting your mental chatter, breathing into tension in your body, unfolding your arms and relaxing your eye muscles. Try to remain calm.

RESPECT THEIR BOUNDARIES

If there is something they don't want to talk about, respect that. Do not force a conversation. Reassure them that your love and respect is unconditional.



"You only need to share what you're comfortable with right now."



"I would like you to feel safe and comfortable."



BELIEVE THEM

TELL THEM YOU BELIEVE THEM

Veterans impacted by MST often feel people will not believe them. They might not be able to remember all the details now or may remember new details later. This does not mean it did not happen.



*"I believe you."
"I'm glad you trusted me."*

REMOVE JUDGMENT AND STAY CURIOUS

When someone you care about is struggling, it can feel tempting to want to jump to solutions. Your job is only to listen, believe and support — healing is their journey. Staying curious can help you avoid jumping to conclusions or judgment. Ask them what helps or hurts them.



"What can I do that helps you feel safe, supported, respected or loved?"

PLACE RESPONSIBILITY WHERE IT BELONGS

Trying to make sense of what happened by looking for reasons or "causes" can have the effect of victim blaming. The reality is that there is no "reason" bad things happen.



Avoid "why" questions.

DO NOT SYMPATHIZE WITH THE PERPETRATOR, RATIONALIZE OR FORCE FORGIVENESS

It does not matter where the perpetrator is coming from or what the circumstances were — your loved one needs your full support.



"This was not your fault."





SHOW SUPPORT

BE THERE FOR THEM

When people share their experiences, it is often because they need some kind of assistance — even if it is just having someone to listen. Reassure them that they are not a burden and they are loved.



"What can I do to help?"
"We can work through this together."
"I'm here for you."

SUPPORT THEIR CHOICES

Sexual and gender-based discrimination, harassment or violence is often about asserting power and control. It may be helpful for Veterans impacted by MST to feel like they have power and control over their choices.



"What's best for you right now?"
"I'm here if you need me."

SHOW CONFIDENCE IN THEIR DECISIONS

Whether they report is up to them.



"I trust you to know what you need to do for you right now."

CHECK IN

Asking permission to check in, including how and when, can create a sense of trust and safety.



"Can I check in with you?"
"Let me know if and when you need something."

SUPPORT YOURSELF

Many emotions may come up for you when a loved one has experienced MST. Reach out for support and set boundaries about how you can or cannot help.



"What you are experiencing is important to me. I'm having a hard time today. Can we talk about this later?"



WORDS FROM VETERANS IMPACTED BY MST:

"I want to share what happened – and to know it wasn't my fault. I need gentleness and to know you believe me."

"I don't need to be fixed and you can't sort this out for me – I just want you to listen."

"It's okay to not make every conversation with your loved one about their trauma. A good way to show your support is by continuing to do all of the fun activities you did with them before they disclosed."

USE THE RIGHT LANGUAGE

Language can have unintended consequences.

Here are some things to try and others to avoid when talking about sexual violence:^{1,5,6}

TRY

- ✓ **Using person-first language or the same words they do**
"Survivor" or "person impacted by military sexual trauma."
- ✓ **Mirroring how they refer to the "perpetrator"**
Your loved one may not be ready to talk about or hear their colleague, peer or friend referred to as the perpetrator.
- ✓ **Using language that puts the accountability on the perpetrator**
"They raped her/him."
- ✓ **Using language that makes it clear MST is serious and has an impact**
- ✓ **Acknowledging that they're doing the best they can**
- ✓ **Using language that puts the onus on the perpetrator**
"The perpetrator forced them to..."
- ✓ **Focusing on impacts and what they're experiencing in the present**
- ✓ **Using language that is gender neutral when you are unsure about the gender of the perpetrator**
"The perpetrator"

AVOID

- ✗ **Playing into stereotypes that take power away from the person impacted by MST**
"Victim" (however, it's okay to use this term if that's how the Veteran impacted by MST identifies).
- ✗ **Implying that the event belongs to the person impacted**
"She was raped" or "his assault..."
- ✗ **Downplaying harms**
"At least..."
- ✗ **Judging or criticizing their actions**
"I don't get why you didn't report."
- ✗ **Implying that sexual violence was sex**
"They had sex."
- ✗ **Suggesting actions they "could have" taken to prevent (or worse, invite) what they experienced**
"They could have..."
- ✗ **Pointing out perceived weaknesses that could have made them a target or point to factors or "causes"**
"This happened because..."
- ✗ **Assuming the gender of the person who hurt your loved one**

FURTHER READING

Holding what your loved one says in confidence is important for maintaining trust. If you agree together that you should share what they are experiencing with other friends, Family members or even your children, check out our brief guide to talking to friends and Family members about MST: atlasveterans.ca/mst-family-guide-others.

Conversations about MST can be challenging and can take a toll on your well-being.⁷ It is important to look after yourself. Check out our resource on self-care for Family members for more information: atlasveterans.ca/mst-family-self-care.

CONTRIBUTOR LIST AND SUGGESTED CITATION



Scan the QR code or visit
atlasveterans.ca/mst-family-contributorship.

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