

## MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA:

# BRIEF GUIDE FOR TALKING TO YOUR FRIENDS OR FAMILY MEMBERS

Use this resource to learn about tips, strategies and considerations for disclosing or talking about military sexual trauma to friends or Family members, including children.





## IN THIS RESOURCE, YOU WILL FIND...

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As a Veteran or a Family member, it can sometimes feel challenging to disclose or talk about military sexual trauma (MST) to others – even trusted loved ones. You may be worried about how they will react or respond. You may also feel embarrassed or a sense of shame (known as self-stigma).<sup>1</sup>

## DISCLOSURE IS **NOT** A REQUIREMENT.

Keep in mind that there should not be pressure to disclose or talk about trauma – what you and your loved one choose to share is entirely up to you or them. You don't need to tell people everything or answer all their questions. There is nothing wrong with deciding *not* to disclose or discuss trauma with others.<sup>1</sup>

You may wish to consider the following questions as you think about disclosure:



### For Veterans

- What is the purpose of disclosing to this person?
- Are there potential harms or benefits of disclosing to them?
- What information are you comfortable disclosing to this person?



### For Family members

- Do you have your loved one's consent to share information with this person?
- What is the purpose of disclosing your loved one's MST to this person?
- Will disclosing to this person help or harm your loved one?
- What type of information would your loved one be comfortable sharing?



If you are a Family member sharing on behalf of a Veteran (e.g. talking to your children or another loved one), ensure you have their consent and that they are comfortable with what you will share.

# ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT DISCLOSURE?

HERE ARE SOME PRACTICAL TIPS AND STRATEGIES:<sup>1-5</sup>



## Be prepared

- Read about MST and related topics to help prepare for the conversation. Check out the Atlas Institute's suite of MST resources to get started: [atlasveterans.ca/mst](https://atlasveterans.ca/mst).
- Practise what you want to say ahead of time. If you have a counsellor, therapist or other trusted health professional, they could help you practise how you might disclose.
- Turn off your cellphone (or set it to silent).
- Think about the different ways your loved one might respond (anger, guilt, shock, questions, disbelief)<sup>6</sup> and create a mental plan for how to respond to each.
- You may want to consider starting the conversation slowly to gauge reactions (e.g. sharing a story about a "friend").
- Consider providing some resources or materials to share before or after the conversation.



## Set ground rules or boundaries

- The person may be curious or ask for details. There should not be pressure to share specific details about the experience. If you aren't comfortable sharing more information, let them know: "I'm not ready to talk about that yet" or "I've told you everything that I'm comfortable sharing."



## Take a pulse check

- Consider how you are feeling today and whether you are in the right headspace. A conversation like this can be emotional.



## Pick the right moment

- Try to choose a time when you and the person are able to give your full attention to the conversation.
- Consider how much time you need and how the conversation may affect everyone involved – for example, try to avoid starting the conversation when someone is tired, intoxicated or busy.
- Pick a time that will allow you the opportunity for self-care after the conversation. For example, try to avoid starting the conversation right before an important event.



## Choose a space where everyone feels safe and comfortable

- Choose a spot where you feel safe and can have some privacy. It's also important for the other person to feel comfortable. This could be while on a walk, on the phone or in a written message, or in a comfortable spot in your own home.



### Focus on the impact

- Focus on the impact of the event(s), rather than the details of the traumatic event itself.



### Pay attention

- This conversation can be challenging for everyone involved. Keep an eye out for any changes in facial expression or body language.
- It's okay to ask for a break or to pause the conversation. Let the other person know that they can do this too.



### Look after yourself

- Your well-being is a priority. Acknowledge that whatever range of emotions you may be feeling during or after the conversation is completely normal. Do something you enjoy or that recharges your batteries after your conversation.

## TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT MST

Having a parent with an injury like MST can be challenging for children.<sup>7,8</sup> Children are very perceptive – they may notice that their parent is not acting or behaving the same as before. As a result, the child may feel confused or hurt and may even experience grief or sadness over the changes. Without clarity, they may feel like they have done something wrong.

#### Further reading



For more information on how trauma-related injuries in parents can affect children, check out [mindkit.ca](https://www.mindkit.ca) (intended for children aged 13 or older) or other child- and youth-specific resources ([atlasveterans.ca/children-youth](https://atlasveterans.ca/children-youth)).

You can help children better understand what is going on by explaining MST in an age-appropriate and easy-to-understand way. You may be wondering where to even begin with a conversation like this. Check out the following sections for general and specific considerations to keep in mind. You may also want to consult a professional, like a child counsellor, who specializes in sexual trauma.

# HERE ARE SOME **GENERAL** CONSIDERATIONS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN:<sup>9-12</sup>

## Recruit support (if possible)

- Consider recruiting another trusted adult (e.g. partner, grandparent, close friend, counsellor or service provider) to help with the conversation, especially if it gets overwhelming for you or your child.

## Pick the right space and time

- Choose a place that is safe, comfortable and familiar to your child. Ensure they are not distracted, sick, hungry, tired or grumpy.

## Use familiar words and examples

- Consider your child's developmental stage. Use words and language they can understand.
- Use examples they have seen or experienced.
- Check out the age-specific guidance in the next section for more information.

## Find the right balance

- Avoid too much silence. Children can fill in gaps with their own imagination and this can be scary for them.
- Avoid going into too much detail. Your child does not need to know everything. Focus on the impact.

## Pay attention

- Conversations like this may be difficult for your child to hear. Keep an eye out for changes in their facial expressions or body language. Ask how they feel.
- Take a break if necessary.

## Gather resources

- Consider sharing the contact information for Kids Help Phone (call **1-800-668-6868** or text CAFKIDS to **686868**) or providing an age-appropriate book or leaflet.



# KEY MESSAGES TO SHARE WITH CHILDREN:



It is not your fault.



Your parent still loves you.



It's not your responsibility to fix the situation.



Things will get better. Sometimes, these things take time.



# HERE ARE SOME **AGE-SPECIFIC** CONSIDERATIONS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN:<sup>9-12</sup>

## CHILDREN AND PRE-TEENS



### **Stick to the basics.**

Your children don't need to know the details. Avoid sharing details of the traumatic event and focus on the impact.



### **Explain impacts using words and examples they will understand.**



### **Acknowledge their feelings.**



### **Reassure them.**

Younger kids tend to depend on others when they're upset or distressed. It's important that you are there to support and reassure them.

*"When I was at work, something bad happened to me. This gave me an injury to my brain. You might not be able to see this injury, but I can feel it – kind of like when your head hurts or you have a tummy ache. It's super tough for me to talk about. I have bad dreams about it and I know I get grumpy sometimes, even when you haven't done anything wrong. I still love you. It's not your fault. I am doing my best to get better."*





## TEENAGERS



### **Prepare them for the conversation.**

Teens might want a heads-up about the conversation so they can have time to prepare.



### **Focus on the impact.**

Your children don't need to know all the details. Avoid focusing on the traumatic event itself.



### **Use words and examples they will understand.**

You can use more advanced and direct language when talking to teens, but you should still make it appropriate to their developmental stage. They may be more familiar with concepts like consent and sexual trauma through learning about it in school, talking to their peers, reading books or browsing the Internet.



### **Acknowledge their feelings.**



### **Reassure them.**

They may already have established tools or strategies they can use when they feel upset, but it's still important to show that you are there for them.



### **Have resources available.**

They may want to reach out to Kids Help Phone (call **1-800-668-6868** or text CAFKIDS to **686868**), Veterans Affairs Canada Assistance Service (call **1-800-268-7708**) or Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre (call **1-844-750-1648**).

*"When dad was in the Forces, something bad happened. He experienced military sexual trauma. This happens after someone experiences, sees or hears about sexual harassment or assault during service. Since it happened, your dad's been struggling to deal with it. It affects him in a lot of ways. You may have noticed that he has a lot of nightmares or that he isn't around as much. Some days are harder. But this doesn't mean he doesn't love you. You haven't done anything wrong. Healing from these types of injuries can take time. What's important is that he's trying his best to get better. There are lots of resources out there to support him."*



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Disclosing MST to loved ones is not required. Nevertheless, if you choose to disclose or discuss it, there are ways you can feel more prepared for the conversation.
- If you are sharing on behalf of a Veteran impacted by MST, ensure you have their consent.
- Try to focus on the impact, not the details.
- There are specific considerations to keep in mind when talking to children, such as using age-appropriate language and content and focusing on hope and recovery.

## CONTRIBUTOR LIST AND SUGGESTED CITATION



Scan the QR code or visit  
[atlasveterans.ca/mst-family-contributorship](https://atlasveterans.ca/mst-family-contributorship).

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