

# RECOVERING FROM MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA FROM COPING TO HEALING

Military sexual trauma (MST) is a serious issue experienced by many current and former Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members. MST describes the psychological, physical, and social impacts or “injuries” that people who experience or witness military sexual misconduct may feel. To learn more about military sexual misconduct and MST, please refer to [our Fact sheet on MST](#).

This resource was developed in collaboration with people impacted by MST as well as service providers who work with those who have experienced or witnessed incidents of military sexual misconduct. Designed for military service personnel and Veterans who are impacted by MST, this resource offers information that can help inform your understanding of your personal coping and healing. It also provides an overview of how trauma may affect you along with tips and strategies to help lessen these impacts throughout your healing journey.

## HEALING JOURNEYS ARE UNIQUE

Healing and recovery from traumatic experiences differs from person to person. We are unique individuals with our own experiences, backgrounds, and identities. Our coping and healing journey will be as unique and individual as we are. All of your life circumstances, experiences and identities can come together to shape your preferences, needs, experiences and reactions. It may take some time trying things out to find what works well for you. Ultimately, you are the best person to determine

what **you** need to heal and recover — whether it be therapy, peer support, self-care, advocacy or a combination of tools.

Healing can demand a lot from you at a time when you do not feel you have much more to give. It is important to know that you are worth it. There are supports available to you on your journey, whatever it may look like.

## WHAT IS TRAUMA AND HOW CAN IT AFFECT YOU?

Trauma refers to a reaction that takes place within an individual following a distressing event or experience.

Trauma can be isolating. Experiencing trauma might make you feel like there is something wrong with you, and that no one else can understand. You might even blame yourself for the events or your own reaction. Reactions from others, such as members of leadership or your Family, might make you feel responsible for what happened. We can take on blame, shame, and guilt that does *not* belong to us. **It is always important to remember that you are not responsible for your experience(s) of sexual misconduct. The fault is always on the perpetrator.**

You may also find yourself struggling to function at times. Try to remember that your reaction is a normal response to an abnormal event. You have experienced or witnessed something terrible. This is your body and mind responding to what happened.

“In the military, we are trained and instilled with the concept that every soldier takes care of another to the expectation of highest personal sacrifice to ensure the safety of one another.

When this trust is betrayed, you instinctively question your trust in every other military member. This is normal.”

**MST SURVIVOR**

### There are other important things to know about trauma.

- 1 You can experience trauma following a single event or multiple events.**

There is no specific point or criteria for what counts as trauma – if you feel an experience or set of experiences is traumatic, then it is trauma.
- 2 You can experience the effects of trauma very differently from others.**

Two people can experience or witness the same traumatic event and be affected in different ways. There is no “right” way to react or respond.
- 3 Your trauma does not necessarily have a specific start or end date.**

Your response to traumatic event(s) can emerge days, months, or even years after and can last for a short or a long period of time. You may also experience ebbs and flows in your trauma symptoms – one moment you may feel fine and another you may feel more distressed.
- 4 Trauma can impact you in many ways.**

You may experience a range of impacts, from physical reactions such as fatigue and difficulty sleeping to emotional and psychological reactions like anger, numbness or anxiety. These impacts can change over time. You can read about the various ways that trauma can affect you in the visual diagram below.
- 5 Healing from trauma is possible.**

With support, people can and do recover from the impacts of trauma over time.

# IMPACTS OF TRAUMA

## PHYSICAL

Trauma can trigger physical coping reactions, such as fight/flight/freeze responses. The stress of trauma can trigger physical changes in your body.



You may notice physical signs and symptoms, such as:

- Headaches
- Fatigue and/or difficulty sleeping
- Chronic pain
- Stomach issues
- Reproductive health problems and/or difficulty with sexual pleasure, arousal and performance

Sometimes, you may experience physical symptoms that persist despite your medical practitioner being unable to identify the source of your body pain.

## COGNITIVE

Trauma can cause physical changes in the brain that impact the way you think. This may include how we process information, how we understand the world or how we make decisions. You may find it difficult to concentrate, remember things or problem solve.

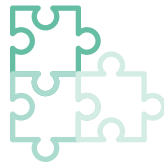


Some other cognitive changes you might experience include:

- **Perceptions** – you may start to view things differently, including the way you view the world, yourself or the future
- **Idealization** – rationalizing or justifying the perpetrator's behaviour
- **Intrusive thoughts or memories** – these can trigger strong emotional or physical responses, including flashbacks or even hallucinations

## BEHAVIOURS

Trauma can lead you to behave differently, either engaging in new behaviours or reverting to old ones. You may notice that you avoid certain activities or situations or change your eating or exercise habits. You may be less motivated, less productive, lose your passion for work or hobbies, or find yourself unable to put on your uniform and go to work. You may also find yourself self-medicating with drugs or alcohol, self-harming, or engaging in other high-risk behaviours.



## SPIRITUAL

The spiritual impacts of trauma refer to those impacts that are on your "soul" or "spirit." You may struggle with a loss of purpose or meaning, both as an individual and in relation to your service. This may result from the trauma itself as well as institutional reactions to the trauma.



You may also experience a loss of faith, whether that be in religion, in the justice system, in society or in others, to name a few. There may also be changes to your sense of self – you may not feel like the same person you were before your trauma. This is known as disintegration.

## EMOTIONAL

Trauma can have varying impacts on your mental health. You may experience:



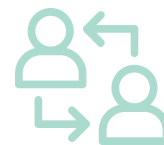
- Irritability, anger or frustration
- Anxiety
- Shame or guilt
- Sadness or depression
- Dissociation
- Over- or under-eating
- Substance-use issues
- Post-traumatic stress
- Self-harm
- Suicidal thoughts

The opposite may also be true. You may turn inward and feel numb toward the experience(s), or be unable to connect with your emotions. For example, those impacted by trauma often say they “know” they love their family, but cannot say they “feel” their love for their family.

These symptoms may occur together or individually. Depending on severity and other factors, you may be diagnosed with one or more specific mental health disorders related to trauma.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Trauma can make it hard to connect or stay connected with others. You may notice that you have difficulty trusting or connecting with people, which can prevent you from maintaining or developing healthy work, personal and intimate relationships. These challenges may manifest as avoidance or anxiety.



**Avoidance:** You may lose touch with colleagues, friends and family. This can lead to isolation and loneliness. You may also notice other changes in how you relate to others. For example, you may find it is easier to interact or have intimacy with a stranger than with a loved one.

**Anxiety:** You may find yourself needing more attention or validation from others than you did before. You may feel “clingy” or have difficulty being alone or away from loved ones. You may feel the need to check in frequently or for others to help soothe you when you are feeling distressed.

## STRATEGIES FOR COPING AND HEALING

Trauma can be impactful and can damage the way you live your life. However, like other injuries, trauma can heal. Similar to a wound, you may have some scarring or reminders of what you have lived through, but over time, these may lessen in their intensity or frequency.

As you heal, you will find that you can reconnect to your body, emotions, feelings, actions and relationships. You may grow as a part of your journey; you may improve your knowledge about yourself as well as what you need to improve your well-being, find new possibilities or feel greater appreciation for life. This is called post-traumatic growth.

You are worth the effort it takes to heal. It takes strength to survive and recover. Recognizing your strengths and building on them is an ongoing process.

There are different coping strategies and creative tools and resources that can help you meet your needs and begin your healing journey. You may find that one or a combination is helpful.

If you are unsure about your needs or options, the Sexual Misconduct Response Centre operates a 24-7 confidential line that connects you directly with a trained counsellor. These counsellors can help explore your needs and connect you to different options, in addition to offering guidance and advice on reporting. You can reach them at 1-844-750-1648 (toll-free, North America).

## PROFESSIONAL CLINICAL SUPPORT

Seeking professional clinical support from someone who specializes in trauma can be helpful, and is especially important if you think you may be depressed or are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm. Your therapist may be able to offer a variety of options for therapy or other helpful strategies and tools.

Current guidelines recommend therapy as the first-line, or initial, treatment for trauma-related symptoms. There are different types of therapy that can help you identify and change thought processes that may have emerged as part of your trauma. Some of these therapies include:

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy for trauma (CBT-T)**  
CBT-T gets you to look at and challenge the unhelpful thoughts and ideas you have developed since the trauma. It slowly helps you to face the painful thoughts, feelings and situations you may have been avoiding.
- **Cognitive processing therapy (CPT)**  
CPT helps you to look at and challenge the thoughts you've been having that keep you from healing.
- **Cognitive therapy for PTSD (CT-PTSD)**  
CT-PTSD focuses on changing how you think about and cope with your trauma. CT-PTSD shines a light on actions you take that result in tough emotions, how you might be overestimating the level of danger in a situation, and other symptoms of PTSD.

- **Prolonged exposure therapy (PE)**

PE will teach you to face the painful thoughts, feelings and situations that you have been avoiding. Confronting what you are afraid of in a safe and supportive environment removes your triggers. In time, you may feel more capable and confident.

- **Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR)**

EMDR helps your brain reprocess trauma and turn it into a more manageable memory, by focusing on specific movements or sounds as you recall the trauma.

- There are numerous other therapy options that you may find helpful on your journey. Other therapies you may want to explore include emotionally focused therapy, family systems therapy and acceptance, and commitment therapy.

It may take some time to find out which therapy, if any, works best for you. Do not give up hope as there are many options available. It is important to find a qualified therapist who you can connect with and trust, in addition to an approach that works for you.

## ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

Alternatives to more standard or “traditional” options (such as clinical therapy) may be helpful for learning to manage or treat your trauma-related symptoms. Alternative or complementary supports may include yoga, acupuncture, animal-assisted therapy, art therapy or the use of service animals.

## MEDICATION

There are different types of medications that may be helpful for managing your trauma symptoms. Speak to your health care provider to discuss whether medication may be beneficial for you.

## MINDFULNESS AND SELF-CARE

There are various mindfulness exercises and self-care activities that you can use to bring your thoughts and feelings out of the past and into the present, and to take good care of yourself. Here are some examples:

- **Noticing triggers and patterns:**  
When do these emotions show up for you? Where were you? What was happening? Identifying triggers can help you create a plan to manage situations that may bring up difficult emotions for you.
- **Grounding:**  
Paying attention to the moment can help reconnect you to the present and distract you from your anxiety or worry.

**Try this Countdown Grounding exercise:**

### 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 COUNTDOWN

This exercise will help you to bring some or all of your senses into the present moment. Take a calming breath between each item you see, touch, hear, smell or taste. Feel free to create your own list or use some of the items below as a guide.



5

things you can see:  
clouds in the sky,  
trees, birds,  
a specific colour  
around you,  
your hands



4

things you can touch  
or feel: a table,  
the ground,  
the sun on your skin,  
a pet's soft fur



3

things you can hear:  
laughter,  
cars going by,  
your own breathing



2

things you can smell:  
fresh cut grass,  
a candle



1

thing you can taste:  
a cup of tea

- **Deep breathing:**

Trauma affects your fight/flight/freeze responses, known as the sympathetic nervous system. Deep breathing can be a very useful strategy to calm this response. Deep breathing activates the “rest” response, or the parasympathetic nervous system, which can signal to your body that you are safe. This is particularly true if you focus on a nice long out breath.

**Try this Square Breathing technique:**



- **Sleep habits:**

Many people who experience trauma have disrupted sleep. As much as you can, try to establish a sleep routine that will support good quality sleep. For example, try going to bed earlier, avoid screens before bed, and spend time doing something that calms you before sleep, such as having a hot shower, reading a book or lighting a candle. Keep your bedroom as a space reserved for sleeping so that your mind and body receive the message that it is time to wind down when you enter that space. A therapist or other medical professional can help you manage your sleep difficulties.

- **Expressing your feelings:**

When you are ready, talking to someone you trust or writing your feelings in a journal can be helpful ways to process your emotions. We make meaning through stories so think about ways that you can work through your experiences by expressing them. When reaching out to someone you trust, consider asking them to listen without comment or let them know that you do not expect them to solve your problem or to lessen your distress. This can help avoid difficult conversations if your trusted person responds in a way that you may not find helpful.

## ACTIVITIES AND HOBBIES

Engaging in certain activities or hobbies that bring you pleasure or soothe you can help with your coping and healing journey. In addition to distracting you from any challenging thoughts and feelings, your activities and hobbies can also offer a sense of meaning and purpose. Depending on the nature of the activity or hobby, it can also offer an opportunity for you to connect with others or help process your trauma in creative ways. Examples include:

- Exercise or group sports
- Creative activities such as painting or woodworking
- Recreation or leisure activities such as walking, writing or reading

## CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

Trusting yourself and others may take time. Start slow and find ways to reconnect. Engage in self-care for your mind and body, and find moments to connect with trusted friends. Going for a walk with a loved one, meeting a friend for coffee, talking with a therapist or chatting on the phone with a Family member are all ways to connect with others.

“Connections provide hope that life can be enjoyed again someday.”

**MST SURVIVOR**

Peer support can offer an opportunity for community, connection and healing through interacting with and learning from others who have experienced something similar. The Sexual Misconduct Response Centre is currently expanding its services to offer an online and face-to-face peer support program. For more information about peer support, [check out our Peer Support resource](#).

## Advocacy and volunteering

What are your core values or guiding principles? What are the ways in which you can lean more deeply into these, to make them a priority in your life?

Getting involved in causes and with organizations that have meaning and value for you can help you cope with your traumatic experience(s) and heal. Like other activities and hobbies, volunteering, helping others and advocacy can help direct your energy away from anxiety and worry, as well as offer or reinforce meaning and purpose. Advocacy can also create a sense of community and reduce feelings of isolation through the opportunity to connect with like-minded people.

## Spiritual support

You may also find spiritual or religious guidance helpful for coping and healing. CAF chaplains offer spiritual, religious and pastoral care for CAF members and their Families, regardless of religious affiliation, practice and/or belief. As a Veteran, you can seek guidance from chaplains within your own community.

## CAF Chaplain Services

(for currently serving members)

Padres can assist in several different ways. They can provide an active, personal and supportive presence if you have no one else to contact or aren't ready to involve your family or friends. They are trained in crisis intervention and can assist with alleviating feelings of loneliness, isolation and distress. Padres can also give referrals to other helping professionals such as social workers, psychologists or medical personnel, as needed.



## RESOURCES

### Sexual Misconduct Response Centre

The SMRC operates a 24-7 confidential line that connects you directly with a counsellor.

This can be a helpful resource as a first step in exploring your needs and options, including options for reporting and connecting to other professionals or supports.

Call toll-free (North America):  
1-844-750-1648

### Sexual misconduct support resources search tool

Browse a list of resources that can support you based on your location.

### Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (Family Information Line)

Call 1-800-866-4546 (available 24-7)

### CAF Chaplain Services (for currently serving members)

Toll-free (North America): 1-866-502-2203

By email:

[ChaplainMain-AumoneriePrincipale@forces.gc.ca](mailto:ChaplainMain-AumoneriePrincipale@forces.gc.ca)

### Talk Suicide Canada

(available to all living in Canada)

Call 1-833-456-4566 (available 24-7), text 45645  
(available 4 p.m. to midnight, Eastern time)

Residents of Quebec:

Call 1-866-APPELLE (1-866-277-3553)

### Hope for Wellness Helpline for all Indigenous peoples

Call 1-855-242-3310 (available 24-7) or  
[connect to the online chat](#)

### VAC and Canadian Armed Forces (Member Assistance Program and Assistance Services for Families)

Call 1-800-268-7708 | TDD/TTY 1-800-567-5803  
(available 24-7)

A list of additional supports can be found at  
[atlasveterans.ca/directory-of-services](https://atlasveterans.ca/directory-of-services)

The Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families is not a service provider. Dial 911 if it is an emergency.

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