

RECOVERING FROM MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

THE ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT

Military sexual trauma (MST) can be particularly damaging because it can create feelings of disconnectedness, mistrust and lack of safety within your military community. Opportunities for a safe connection with others can be helpful for healing. Peer support offers such an opportunity, allowing you to connect with a person or group of people who get you, believe you and, most importantly, know what may help to support you.

This resource aims to guide your exploration of the role peer support can play in your healing journey through an overview of what peer support involves, including a definition, its key benefits and some considerations to keep in mind.

WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Peer support is a type of service or support involving two or more people who use their shared experiences and expertise to help one another. Peer support can offer an opportunity for community, connection and healing by interacting with and learning from others who have had common experiences.

In the context of MST, peer support generally involves a supportive relationship between people who have experienced MST, though peer backgrounds can vary. For example, peers may have experienced sexual trauma in a civilian setting or other forms of trauma in a military setting. In some peer support settings, peers may be civilians who have experienced sexual trauma.

You may have access to different types of peer support depending on your location and other factors. Supports can vary from informal to formal. Some are drop-in self-help groups and volunteer peer-run services whereas others are more structured peer partnerships or staff peer supporters (i.e. those specifically hired to offer peer support within an organization). Similarly, you may find some groups offer peer support that is more talk-based whereas other groups are more activity-based. Some may offer a combination of approaches.

You may find peer support is helpful for your healing and coping related to MST, either on its own or as a complement to other supports. While peer support is not a form of treatment, it can complement other therapeutic approaches. To learn about other approaches or creative tools, both therapeutic and non-therapeutic, check out our [Coping and Healing](#) resource.

BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT

Research shows that peer support can be helpful in various ways. You can review these benefits in the diagram below. Participating in peer support may:

- Help you feel that you are on the road to recovery
- Improve your sense of well-being
- Remind you that you are not alone and that you have support
- Provide you with coping skills that work for you
- Build strong social networks
- Empower you and highlight your own personal growth
- Give you a sense of control over your healing process and life
- Offer a sense of hope
- Act as a bridge to other supports and services
- Reduce the chances that you might need to spend time in a hospital or residential facility
- Reduce the intensity of your symptoms, such as distressing feelings
- Help you understand that your body and mind's responses to trauma are normal and valid

How to choose and access peer support groups

There are various things to keep in mind to help you find the right peer support group for you. You can find some of these considerations outlined here.

1 Identifying safe and high-quality peer support



Here are some questions you can ask to determine whether a group offers high-quality and safe peer support:

- **Does the organization or group have rules or guidelines for the provision of peer support?**
These can be general (e.g. practice guidelines around language) or situation-specific (e.g. protocols if someone is in crisis). Guardrails keep us safe.
- **Are the leaders and peer supporters in a healthy place?**
People may have good intentions but may not yet be in a place to offer support. It is important that you understand and feel comfortable with where your supporters are in their own journey of healing.
- **Have the peer supporters undergone any form of training?**
In order to provide safe and effective support, expertise gained through a lived and living experience is often best supplemented with training.
- **How does the organization or group build trust and what are the specific rules around confidentiality?** Both trust and confidentiality play an important role in your overall experience.
- **Does the group make you feel validated or safe?**

2 Personal preferences and comfort levels



Different peer supports groups are available to different people – some have a broader focus (i.e., all forms of sexual trauma), whereas others may be more specific (i.e. military sexual trauma, in particular). You may feel more comfortable participating in a group specifically for Veterans. Alternatively, you may feel more comfortable participating in civilian groups. Keep in mind that Veteran-specific groups may include Veterans of different ranks and military backgrounds, which can influence your comfort levels.

You may also have preferences for different forms of healing. Some peer support groups are more talk-based whereas others may be more activity-based.

Think about what you need. If you dreamed up the ideal group, who would be in it? What would they provide you? Use your reflections on these questions to guide your search.

Like other approaches, it may take a bit of trial and error to find the best group for you. Take the time to find the right peer support for you – you deserve safety and healing.

4 Being aware of barriers and restrictions



Keep in mind that you may face certain barriers or restrictions when accessing a peer support group. Here are some barriers or restrictions that you may face:

- Some may have language barriers, such as English-only or French-only groups.
- Online or virtual groups, although perhaps more convenient, may require high-speed Internet service to access and participate.
- It is important to be aware of financial barriers too, such as travel costs, the need to take time off work or to pay for family care while you attend.
- There may be also be certain restrictions, such as a zero tolerance policy for alcohol or drugs, or membership based on age or gender.

3 Location, location, location



Your geographic location may have an impact on what peer support services are available to you. There are many different peer support groups available across Canada. Some groups may offer online or virtual options, and so can be accessed from anywhere in the country. Others may be in-person and thus are limited to a specific geographic area.

ALTERNATIVES TO PEER SUPPORT

Sometimes we are not ready for connection with other people. There are alternative supports available that draw on key elements of peer support (i.e. secure interactions, connection), such as animal-based therapies. You are the best judge of what feels safe for you. To learn more about these other supports, [check out our resource on Coping and Healing](#).

PEER SUPPORT RESOURCES

Interested in peer support? Find out more:

Sexual Misconduct Response Centre Peer Support Program

[The Sexual Misconduct Response Centre](#) has a peer support program specifically for Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members and Veterans who have experienced MST. The peer support program was created through comprehensive consultation with those impacted, and will have a variety of options including 1:1 conversations, groups, and virtual sessions. At present the online discussion board is functional, with other aspects to be launched at a later date. Please visit their [webpage](#) to learn more.

Other MST resources

[Coping and Healing](#)

[Canadian Military Sexual Trauma Community of Practice](#)

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