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VA SERVICE-CONNECTION CLAIMS: MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA (MST)

**This guide will help you step-by-step on how to argue your case for
MST-related service-connected disability compensation.**

WHAT IS MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA?

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is sexual assault or sexual harassment that a service member experienced during military service. MST does not have to occur with another service member or veteran, and it does not have to occur on base or military property.

MST refers to the experience of sexual assault or sexual harassment; it is not a diagnosis or disability. When applying for disability compensation, you will apply for a condition – such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety – that you have as a result of experiencing MST.

SEEKING SUPPORT

If you are a survivor of military sexual trauma (MST) know that you are not alone. You could be eligible for support and benefits including VA service-connected disability compensation and VA healthcare for conditions which are related to the MST regardless of how long ago it occurred, whether or not it was reported, or documented.

While you are working on a service-connection claim that relates to MST, it's understandable that your emotions may be heightened. We encourage you to reach out to your support system if you find yourself overwhelmed by troubling memories and emotions.

Therapy and other MST-related healthcare is available at any VA health care facility for MST survivors, including those otherwise not eligible for VA healthcare or who have a less than honorable discharge. Every VA health care facility has **an MST Coordinator** who can assist you with accessing VA care.

Local **Vet Centers** are another resource that provides free mental health care for MST survivors. A list of Vet Centers is available online, and there may be one in your area.

THREE ELEMENTS OF A VA SERVICE CONNECTION CLAIM BASED ON MST

For service-connection claims based on MST, the VA requires proof of the following three elements:

1. **Current diagnosis** of your claimed condition, such as PTSD, anxiety, or depression.
2. Information about and corroboration of the **MST incident(s)**
3. **Nexus evidence** showing that your current condition (#1) was likely caused by the in-service MST event(s) (#2)

This guide will help you identify potentially helpful information & evidence of these three elements to provide the VA to support your claim.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is a supplemental to our self-help guide on **VA Service-Connected Disability Compensation** which provides more general information about service-connection claims including how to submit your claim and what to expect after your claim is filed. A lot of the information on the rules that are specific to MST-related claims expands on the general claims information provided in **that guide**. We encourage you to review both as you prepare your service-connection claim.

As part of your VA Service Connection claim, the VA will ask you to submit **VA Form 21-0781** – Statement in Support of Claimed Mental Health Disorder(s) due to an In-Service Traumatic Event(s). This form gives the VA information needed to process your claim based on MST. Given the limited space on the form, we recommend you write a separate personal statement and attach it to this form when you submit your claim.

Throughout this guide, we'll suggest information that you may want to include in your statement. We have another self-help guide specifically on writing personal statements – **Writing Your VA Mental Health Stressor Statement** – which will also be helpful to review.

ELEMENT #1: CURRENT DIAGNOSIS

First, you'll want to provide the VA with information about the condition you are claiming is service-connected due to MST. Many different types of mental health conditions can be caused by MST, such as PTSD, depression, bipolar, psychosis, or anxiety. If you don't know your exact diagnosis, that's no problem – you can claim “acquired mental health condition” and the VA will help you pinpoint your exact diagnosis as your claim is developed. The important thing is to give the VA information about your mental health symptoms today that stem from the MST event(s).

Mental Health Treatment Records:

If you are in treatment or therapy, include copies of those medical records with your claim. If your treatment is at a VA facility, you can list the name of that facility and the date on treatment on the VA Service-Connection Claim Form and the VA will take care of requesting those records on your behalf.

Personal Statement:

In your personal statement to the VA, you should describe your current symptoms – such as nightmares, panic attacks, inability to get out of bed, trouble regulating your mood, etc. Include how those symptoms impact your ability to work, take care of yourself, and maintain relationships with others. For more on this, see Swords' other guide on [Writing Your VA Mental Health Stressor Statement](#).

Compensation & Pension Exam

It's important to know that **you don't need a formal diagnosis** for your condition before applying for Service Connection. So long as you describe in your statement that you are currently experiencing mental health symptoms because of the MST experience(s), the VA is required to schedule you with a Compensation & Pension (C&P) exam. In that exam, the doctor will formally diagnose you and document your current symptoms for the VA. More on the C&P exams at the end of this guide.

ELEMENT #2: MST INCIDENT

Next, the VA will need information about your experience of MST. The VA understands that it can be very hard to show proof of the MST event. Given the culture of the military, MST incidents are rarely reported and those who experience MST often don't feel able to seek help or treatment afterward. If this is your situation, please know that this is normal, and the VA regularly approves claims based on MST without any direct proof of the MST incident.

Personal Statement

When writing your personal statement, include any information you feel comfortable about your experience of MST. Given the traumatic nature of these experiences, you may not be able to recall a lot of details – that's completely normal. Share whatever you can remember about what you went through, in whatever level of detail possible.

"Markers" of MST for PTSD Claims

For Veterans who are applying for compensation based on PTSD, VA has expanded the evidence it uses to corroborate incidents of MST to include "markers" in the veteran's file, such as in their personal statement, military records, and buddy statements. A full list of these "markers" are included on the next page for your review. On **VA Form 21-0781**, there's a section to note all the "markers" that apply to you. And, in your personal statement, describe any markers, including any changes in behavior or mood that you experienced from before and after the MST event(s).

ELEMENT #2: MST INCIDENT

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Military Records

You can request your military records to review them for possible markers as well. For more information on requesting your records, see Swords' self-help guides on [Requesting Your Military Records](#).

SARC Office & Police Reports

If you reported the MST to the on-base Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) office or to local law enforcement, you'll want to provide the VA with that information. You can request copies of these records from those offices and provide that documentation to the VA.

“MARKERS” OF AN MST INCIDENT

For PTSD claims VA considers a wide array of circumstantial evidence, called “markers”, when it tries to corroborate an MST event. Essentially, the VA will treat any of the following that occurred after the MST incident as proof that the MST incident occurred. If any of these apply to your situation, be sure to include information about them in your personal statement and submit any corroboration of them with your claim:

Documented Events

- Requests to change duty assignment or MOS
- Treatment for physical injuries around the time of the MST, even if you did not tell the doctor that the injury was a result of the MST.

EXAMPLE

Your wrists were injured during the assault and you sought treatment for wrist strain afterward.

- Pregnancy, diagnosis of an STI/STD, and/or medical notes or records that you sought a pregnancy or STD/STI test
- Visits to a medical or counseling clinic without a specific diagnosis or injury

EXAMPLE

You spoke with a therapist afterward to be able to talk to someone even though you didn't share what happened with them.

“MARKERS” OF AN MST INCIDENT:

(continued)

- Civilian records relating to the MST

EXAMPLE

Records from civilian health centers, rape crisis center, or other off-base care center

Observed Changes

Changes in behavior following the MST incident, for example:

- Decline in your work performance
- Unauthorized absences
- Increases in misconduct
- Changes in mood or behavior
- Mental health challenges, such as episodes of depression, panic attacks, or anxiety
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Problems with relationships with family, friends, colleagues, or romantic partners
- The breakup of a romantic relationship
- Unexplained changes in spending or financial decision-making

STATEMENTS FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Letters from friends, family, and those you served with can also be helpful at corroborating the MST incident.

Those who knew about the MST:

If you told a friend, family member, or fellow service member about the MST event(s), you can reach out to see if they can write a letter in support of your claim. In their letter, they can talk about anything you might have told them about the MST, as well as their own observations about your mental health symptoms both at the time of the MST and today. If possible, they should also describe any “markers” they witnessed such as changes in your mood and behavior after the MST event(s).

Those who don’t know about the MST:

Those in your life who are unaware of what you went through can still be helpful in supporting your claim. Remember, the VA will treat evidence of changes in the veteran from before and after the MST as proof that the MST incident happened. Even if they don’t know what you experienced, friends and family can still write letters describing those changes in you – such as in your mood, behaviors, relationships, interests and hobbies, work performance, and drug and alcohol use. If you’re in touch with people who knew you before and after the incident, see if they’d be willing to write a letter in support of your claim.

Their letters should end with:

“I certify under penalty of perjury that the foregoing statement is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.”

and then sign & date.

ELEMENT #3: NEXUS BETWEEN CURRENT DIAGNOSIS & MST INCIDENT

Lastly, the VA will need to see how your current symptoms are connected to the MST incident. In other words, the VA will need to find that your mental health condition is not from before service or after service, but stems from your experience of MST.

Personal Statement

In your personal statement, you can include information connecting your symptoms today with the experience(s) of MST. For example, that you didn't have these mental health struggles prior to the MST incident, and you have had them consistently ever since. This will help show the continuity of your symptoms since the MST event in service.

If your symptoms tie back to the incident – such as nightmares about what happened, or avoiding certain triggers that remind you about the MST – include those examples in your statement. Lastly, you may also be able to say that you haven't had other traumatic events before or since the MST that could be the cause of these symptoms.

ELEMENT #3: NEXUS BETWEEN CURRENT DIAGNOSIS & MST INCIDENT

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Compensation & Pension Exams

As part of the development of your claim, the VA will order a Compensation and Pension (C&P) exam. The doctor performing the C&P exam will offer their opinion about whether your current symptoms are related to the MST incident from service.

If you want the C&P examiner to be a particular gender, you can request that. This can be a good way to make it easier for you to tell the examiner about what you experienced and how it has impacted you.

The results of this exam will provide the VA with the information necessary to approve your claim, so be sure to attend this exam once it's scheduled. For more information, see Swords' Self-Help Guide on [C&P Exams](#).

NOTES

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Disclaimer

This memorandum provides general information only. It does not constitute legal advice, nor does it substitute for the advice of an expert representative or attorney who knows the particulars of your case. Any use you make of the information in this memorandum is at your own risk. We have made every effort to provide reliable, up-to-date information, but we do not guarantee its accuracy. The information in this memorandum is current as of January 2025.

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