

The Impact of Sexual Trauma During Military Service

Military Sexual Misconduct (MSM) is defined as: “conduct of a sexual nature that causes or could cause harm to others, and that the person knew or ought reasonably to have known could cause harm” ¹. The US Department of Veterans Affairs defines MST as, “sexual assault or threatening sexual harassment experienced during military service. **MST includes any sexual activity during military service in which you are involved against your will or when unable to say no.” ²**

Our Approach:

- This was the qualitative arm of a 2-arm study
- Constructivist perspective
- 60-minute virtual interviews
- Semi-structured interview guide
- Focus on impacts on participants’ mental and physical health, social functioning, relationships, activities of daily lives, as well as their experiences of reporting and/or seeking support
- Recruitment through existing network partners and social media (Facebook, Twitter)



84%
of participants screened positive for PTSD

47%
reported suicidal thoughts

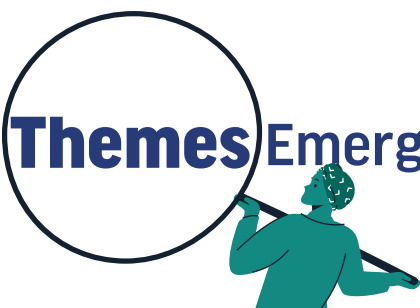
68%
of participants screened positive for anxiety disorders

68%
reported sexual trauma

53%
reported stress

68%
of participants screened positive for depression

Multiple Themes Emerged from the Research:



1 Impacts on Mental & Emotional Health
Reluctance to seek help, avoidance, lack of safety and security



I knew I had to keep it a secret, so it just ate away and ate away until I was in a dark depression. I didn’t dare tell anybody because I thought that people would think less of me, that I was disgusting and dirty or nobody’d want to be near me and plus I thought it would ruin my career. I thought they’d kick me out.



2 Impacts on Occupational Performance
Career impacts, retaliation, assignment of undesirable tasks



3 Impacts on Physical Health
Exhaustion, nausea and vomiting, disordered eating, substance misuse



4 Impacts on Social Functioning
Loss of trust, social anxiety, hypervigilance, increased isolation



5 Impacts on Relationships

Partners

- Withdrawal and isolation
- Lack of trust
- Discomfort with physical touch
- Avoidance of intimacy

Children

- Hypervigilance and fear for safety of children
- Teach children about safety and respect for women

Military Coworkers

- Supportive relationships important to recovery

Various coping strategies

- Changes in gender expression
- Seeking protective relationships with others
- Blending/masking
- Asserting oneself

Barriers to and use of resources, services, and support

- Participants sought help from a variety of mental health professionals
- Participants indicated the value of peer-based programs
- Participants acknowledged a gap in knowledge around military sexual trauma and misconduct for mental health care providers



Taking strides forward, together

Thanks to the willingness and courage of people with lived experience to come forward and share their stories and experiences, more work is being done to address the root causes of sexual misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces. While it is a slow process, we acknowledge the efforts of Canadian Armed Forces leadership to make concerted, meaningful moves toward positive culture change.

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1. Department of National Defence. (2021a, March 24). Glossary on Sexual Misconduct. <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/services/benefits-military/conflict-misconduct/sexual-misconduct/training-educational-materials/glossary-on-sexual-misconduct.html>

2. US Department of Veterans Affairs. (2010, April 14). Va.gov: Veterans Affairs. Effects of Military Sexual Trauma | VA Mental Health. <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/index.asp#:~:text=MST%20includes%20any%20sexual%20activity,with%20promises%20of%20better%20treatment>