

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

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| Episode #: | 14 |
| Guest: | Amy Street, PhD |
| Title: | #14: Military Sexual Trauma |

Pearl:j

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veteran's Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Pearl:

In today's episode, we will discuss military sexual trauma, sometimes abbreviated as MST. I Will be joined by Dr. Amy Street, who is the Deputy Director of the National Center for PTSD Women's Health Sciences Division at the Boston VA and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine. Hello, Dr. Street, and welcome to PTSD Bytes.

Amy:

Hello, Pearl. Thanks so much for having me on today.

Pearl:

I'm going to start with a basic but important question. What is military sexual trauma?

Amy:

Military sexual trauma refers to any kind of unwanted sexual experiences, including sexual harassment or sexual assault, that people experience during their military service.

Pearl:

And what would be some of the first things that you would want to say to someone who has experienced MST?

Amy:

My most important message to convey. I am sorry that this happened to you. It shouldn't have happened to you. And there are many of us out here who want to help you in your recovery from these experiences.

Pearl:

Thank you. And the way you describe MST, it covers a broad range. Who experiences MST? Can it happen to anyone?

Amy:

Military sexual trauma happens to people of all genders of all races and ethnicities, all branches of military service. Sadly military sexual trauma can happen to anyone.

Pearl:

One of the things that I hear often from survivors is self-blame.

Amy:

Sadly, many survivors of military sexual trauma do at some point in their lives, blame themselves. That's unfortunately a pretty common and really a natural reaction. But I'm here to say that MST is never your fault.

Pearl:

And in terms of recovery, what does that look like? When should somebody seek help from a professional?

Amy:

There's no one way that experiences of MST impact people. And so there are certainly people who have gone on to fully recover, but unfortunately, many survivors do continue to struggle with distress or other mental health symptoms, even many years. And so certainly mental health conditions like posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse... But also just a sense of my life is not exactly what I want my life to be, maybe I'm struggling in relationships, with my job, any kinds of challenges like that suggest it could be useful to talk to someone and figure out a path towards recovery.

Pearl:

How can someone get help for MST?

Amy:

All VA treatment for physical and mental health problems that are related to MST is free. You don't need to have reported the MST when it happened. You don't need to have evidence or documentation of the MST to get care and VA disability or service connection is not required. Every VA healthcare system has an MST coordinator who can help you access VA services. So one of the best ways to get connected with VA care for MST related concerns is just to call your local VA healthcare facility and ask to speak with the MST coordinator to learn more.

Pearl:

Thank you, that's very helpful. Do you have any recommendations for technology resources for help with military sexual trauma?

Amy:

One technology resource that we're very proud of is the Beyond MST mobile self-help app. Beyond MST is free, secure, and private. And it was created specifically to support survivors of military sexual trauma.

Pearl:

So if somebody goes and downloads Beyond MST on their iPhone, Android device or tablet, what kinds of things can they expect?

Amy:

Beyond MST is focused on a range of challenges that MST survivors might experience. And it was designed to be appropriate for survivors from all backgrounds, all gender identities, and at all stages of recovery.

Pearl:

Wonderful. And if someone is checking out this app, what would you want people to know about?

Amy:

Because every Veteran's recovery from experiences of MST looks different. We've included a lot of options. We have over 33 tools to teach, build, and practice different skills. We have a ton of learn topics, which are brief articles with information, tips, links to other topics and connections to resources. And then we have a progress section where users can take brief assessments to measure and track their symptoms and their wellbeing and their recovery goals. There's a few different topics that we really focus on within this app. You and I talked a little bit about self-blame earlier and countering self-blame is one of the big focuses of this app. There's also tools focused on strengthening relationship skills, and how to practice talking about your MST experiences to others. Building support helps you explore how treatment can help and it's also a place to read supportive messages from survivors. And one of my very favorite sections of the app, the finding hope section, where we have tools that can help you fight hopelessness, help you fight isolation, explore the important ways that you can continue healing.

Pearl:

Wow. It sounds like it's an app that's just packed with helpful resources. Is it possible for app users to use the app, to connect with other survivors or to connect with their provider?

Amy:

It's not possible within the app to directly connect with other users, or to directly connect with providers. But we have included a lot of content in here for survivors to read supportive, encouraging messages from other survivors who have walked the same path of recovery, to help survivors feel a little less isolated, a little bit less disconnected from others. And to be reminded that they are not the only one.

Pearl:

In a way, I'm glad that the app does not enable those communication options from a privacy perspective. If I download the app, does the VA or anybody else get that information that that app is now on my phone or what I'm doing within the app?

Amy:

Our team was very aware of the importance of privacy when we were building this app. And I want to just say specifically, we weren't worried about privacy because we think that experiences of MST are shameful or something that could be kept hidden. But I do believe that it is the Veteran's choice to decide when and where and how much information about their MST experiences are shared. And so, because of this, we built a lot of privacy features into the app. And to answer your specific question, no one from the VA knows specifically who you are or that you have downloaded this app onto your phone. We don't collect any kind of personal health information. Any information that a user does choose to enter into the app, can't be accessed by the VA or any other third parties. There's no connection in the app to the VA medical record.

Pearl:

Does somebody have to be a Veteran to use the app?

Amy:

The app is available for anyone regardless of Veteran status. Certainly there is some information in there that's directly relevant for currently active duty service members. We've also found that providers who are working with those who've experienced MST, find it a really useful source of information, suggestions for tools that might be good fits for the Veterans that they're working with. We've also found that family members, friends, loved ones find the app really helpful to learn a little bit more information about MST.

Pearl:

So if somebody takes that step of seeking professional help, what might that professional support look like?

Amy:

It can look so different from person to person because no two survivors of military sexual trauma look exactly the same and no two have the exact same experiences. So mental health treatment options will really depend on what the specific issues are that that survivor is reporting. I think posttraumatic stress disorder is most closely associated with experiences of military sexual trauma. And there's a lot of great research evidence that shows that there are really effective ways of treating post-traumatic stress disorder among military sexual trauma survivors. And we really recommend if that feels like the right choice for you, that you have those conversations with helping professionals.

Within the app, we've got a lot of information about what different treatment options are and also some tools that might help you think through is formal treatment the right choice for me. And if so, what am I looking for? What kind of therapist would I match best with. Another question that we get a lot is do I need to be in treatment to be using this app and no, not at all. This app can be great for folks who are in formal treatment, who want a little bit more support. But it's also available and helpful for folks who aren't in treatment - either because they don't feel like formal treatment is the right choice for them, or they've gone through a course of formal treatment and found it effective, but just want a little additional support now.

Pearl:

I appreciate you acknowledging that people's experiences are so diverse and their needs can be very different. And that this app can help them to explore the different options. I want to offer you a huge thank you Dr. Street for sharing your expertise on this very important topic. For those interested in checking out the Beyond MST app, you can find it in the App store or the Google Play store. You can also find additional MST support information at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology. Catch new episodes every other week by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.