

LETS Erase the Stigma

by Mark Katz, PhD

WHILE A NUMBER OF PROGRAMS have been shown to improve the lives of people who struggle with ADHD, many simply refuse to accept the help. Accepting help only draws more attention to their challenges, and more attention equates with greater shame and embarrassment. Youth with ADHD often seem to feel such emotions more intensely. Psychologist Stephen Hinshaw, PhD, calls stigma the most important issue facing the entire mental health field. And whether it's a function of their age or particular stage of development, school-age youth seem to be suffering the most.

But not all youth; some, in fact, are fighting back. They're part of a program known as LETS, an acronym for Let's

Erase the Stigma. Hinshaw, an expert in the field of stigma prevention, serves as the program's co-director of research.

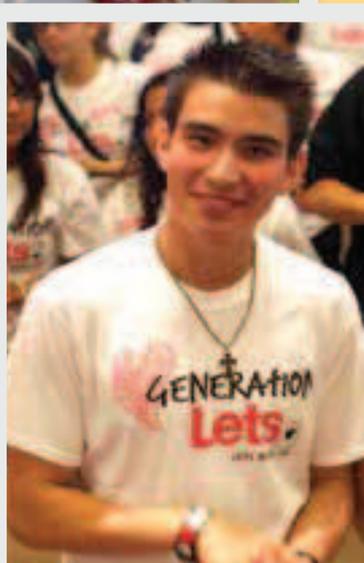
LETS youth are young people from all walks of life choosing to speak up about mental health challenges, and doing so in a way that presents these challenges in an entirely new and more hopeful light. Some experience mental health challenges themselves. Yet, they feel empowered and unafraid.

LETS on campus

LETS youth belong to campus-based LETS clubs, each of which receives ongoing support from the LETS Educational Foundation. Headquartered in Los Angeles, the foundation is dedicated to erasing the

stigma of mental illness. Among its other functions, the organization provides training and guidance to LETS youth leaders, focusing on topics youth confront every day, yet may have difficulty talking openly about to the adults in their lives. Topics include feeling excluded as a result of feeling different, bullying, discrimination, social exclusion, stereotyping, teen suicide, eating disorders, depression, cutting and self-harm, and substance abuse, among others.

LETS was founded by Philippe Fontilela, who has worked in the mental health field for many years and who has long been interested in stigma prevention. The program began as a pilot project on the campus of Ulysses S. Grant High School in Los Angeles. Under Fontilela's leadership,



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LETS.ORG

the LETS Educational Foundation has grown to include younger and older age groups, as well as an ongoing research component. Today, there are over four hundred LETS youth in fifteen LETS clubs located on middle school, high school, college and university campuses in six different states. College chapters are encouraged to reach out to local high school LETS clubs.

LETS youth are working to change the conversation about mental health challenges on campus. They work to legitimize differences, and to provide an opportunity to talk about them openly. They also provide a sense of acceptance, belonging, and solidarity to those who experience these challenges personally. To quote a LETS club member, “Everyone has a story. If you knew my story... you might change your mind about me.”

LETS clubs, along with their youth leaders, can flexibly decide how best to carry out their mission. Some focus on peer-to-peer education, others sponsor events, others arrange community discussions. The LETS Educational Foundation provides each club the resources and funding required to successfully carry out their activities.

LETS hosted its second Annual Youth Summit in Los Angeles on May 23, 2012. The theme of the conference was “Generation LETS Heroes.” Young people attending the event were invited to become community heroes by taking on meaningful mental health leadership roles. The summit also included presentations by LETS youth and others on ideas for creating lasting change in the perception of mental illness. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors proclaimed the day of the summit “Let’s Erase the Stigma Youth Day.”

Reducing social distance

Results of initial studies are promising. Following six months of participation in a LETS club, findings showed a reduction in social distance, a measure of how close a person wants to be to people with general or specific forms of mental illness. At one San Francisco Bay Area high school, a LETS club is actually the biggest club on campus.

The LETS website (lets.org) offers information about clubs for middle and high school students (LETS 101 for Middle and High Schools) and clubs designed for college and university students (LETS 101 for Colleges and Universities). Starting a LETS club requires a simple three-step process:

- follow school rules for starting a new club
- complete the LETS club constitution (provided online)
- begin regular LETS club meetings and activities.

LETS Foundation staff will contact those wishing to form new clubs to go over the LETS club constitution, and to explain how to apply for a \$1,000 LETS club Grant. Newly formed clubs will also receive club materials, including the LETS Start-up Guidebook.

In his opening keynote address at CHADD’s November 2012 international conference in San Francisco, Steve Hinshaw spoke both personally and professionally on the topic of stigma. He highlighted the important work LETS youth are doing on behalf of those impacted by the effects of stigma. Readers interested in hearing this inspiring presentation are referred to chadd.org for purchasing instructions. Hinshaw is also the author of a book on the topic: *The Mark of Shame: Stigma of Mental Illness and an Agenda for Change* (Oxford University Press, 2007). To learn more about the work of the LETS Foundation, visit their website at lets.org, or call 888-594-LETS (5387). 



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