

Ahmed Abu Elhaz: Breaking the Stigma around Therapy

RAMA CHAKAKI: I'm Rama Chakaki, and this is Innovating with Purpose. Today we're speaking to Ahmed Abu Elhaz, founder of the mental health support platform Shezlong. The app was built to help connect Arabic speaking people all over the world with mental health support practitioners like therapists.

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: In the concept of online psychotherapy simply you can talk to the therapist without going to the, the clinic and wait and sitting in the waiting area, maybe other people can see you and catch you. So the online therapy is more convenient and more efficient for a to break the stigma.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And breaking that stigma, has been one of the biggest challenges of building a mental health support platform in the Middle East. Today, his company has helped people in 80 countries access support. But for Ahmed, Shezlong started with a very personal experience.

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: The story began in 2013. I had severe depression after a big accident and I wanted to go to a therapist to recover, but in Egypt it's very difficult to find a good and trusted one. So I searched it online, about any therapists, but in the MENA region at the time we didn't have any online platform to talk with a therapy.

RAMA CHAKAKI: So, as a software engineer -maybe you thought, sure... I can try to solve that. And then started building the company that became Shezlong. But what about tackling the social stigma around mental health support in the MENA region? How did you go about breaking down that barrier?

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: Mainly in Egypt and in the MENA region, we have a big stigma about psychotherapy and about going to psychiatrists clinic. And also we have a big extra social stigma for women. In some Arab countries, women are not allowed to go to a therapist's clinic alone. Another thing is the big number of mental health disorders in the MENA region - in WHO statistics, we have 65 million people who have a mental disorders. All these reasons are a big motive to create this platform.

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AHMED ABU ELHAZ: So, we created some awareness campaigns about what is mental health, what is the difference between depression and anxiety? What is the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists and the life coach and so on. So we created massive awareness campaigns before delivering them the solution. We went to universities, we went to clubs to grab this awareness. We made TV interviews with with doctors. We made live videos and podcasting and mental health - all these channels move the rock about the stigma.

RAMA CHAKAKI: So you identified the problem, and found a way forward to solve it. But to really make Shezlong a success, what sort of marketing and campaign building skills did you find you needed?

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: Definitely the engineers build the world, I'm believing that - yeah. So the mindset is actually the entrepreneurial - the entrepreneurial mindset. The entrepreneurial mindset is mainly searching about the problem and giving for it a solution, an efficient solution. So when I started Shezlong we tested the model and the market in a small phase we created an MVP and we gradually spread our our service and took an investment from investors in the MENA region and Silicon valley. All these actions empowered us to expand. Now we have customers in 80 countries and and therapists from 20 countries. And we made collaborations with UN Women and Marcel Foundation and other and other corporations inside Egypt and outside Egypt.

RAMA CHAKAKI: But, it hasn't always been a smooth ride. Like any startup, Shezlong has ran into its challenges over the years.

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: Lots of mistakes - many mistakes in hiring the wrong people, mainly mistakes and managing financials, re-manage the process designs, the

operations and actually Shezlong is my first company. So I didn't have the experience of managing people and managing company before. So definitely we, we failed a lot and we succeeded a lot. This is the startup game, actually.

RAMA CHAKAKI: But clearly - Shezlong has hit its stride now - what sort of feedback are you getting from your customers to reflect this?

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: We have on the platform reviews and rating section. After each session, the customer can rate the doctor, rate the session, rate the platform, and we collect that and the analyze the comments and ratings and like that to

improve our service. This is number one, number two is the retention rate - how customers come again and again for the same doctors. This is very important metrics to validate us. this is a service that can help people.

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AHMED ABU ELHAZ: Definitely all people, all our customers after rating the session and having a good feedback, it touched me personally. When I started Shezlong, I didn't expect that number of people can use the service and a lot of people directly help them and change their lives.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And while Shezlong's main goal is to help people in need of mental health support, Ahmed told us that he's also noticed a shift in the way doctors are working with patients - especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: Definitely. Also, we change the mindset of the therapy practice for doctors. Before Shezlong all doctors doing therapy in a common way or a traditional way in the clinic. Now, all doctors in the MENA region are using online therapy as the main source of therapy practice, especially after COVID-19 and during COVID-19.

And on the other side, you help a lot of doctors to increase their revenues, increase their practice, diversify their clients from a lot of countries. Now each doctor in Shezlong have a lot of customers from 40 or 50 countries. This is very important for them about empowering their experience.

RAMA CHAKAKI: With the Expo Live grant, in what way were you able to push Shezlong's vision further? Were you able to build partnerships or expand the platform's reach?

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: Actually, after taking the grant, we went to the UN Women and we made a collaboration to help women who suffer in violence to access them a therapy and we made a collaboration with the ministry of social solidarity to - especially in the shelters of woman to give them a mental support. So definitely Expo grant helped us to support our vision, to spread the therapy culture to all people.

RAMA CHAKAKI: The social stigma surrounding mental health support is still there and is an ongoing challenge - but things have come a long way since Shezlong started.

AHMED ABU ELHAZ: Yeah, still we have a stigma actually, but definitely not like the five years ago I think the whole, the whole community - social media, movies, series I think that's changing the mindset of the mental health. About Shezlong, definitely expanding horizontally and vertically building another product in mental health and expanding in in other countries. This is one of our objectives in the next time.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Thank you Ahmed for sharing your journey with us. "Innovate with Purpose" is the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai. Innovation can come from anywhere, to everyone.

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