

# The Future is Well

With its theme, Connecting Minds, Creating the Future, Expo 2020 Dubai gathers us here over the next six months to help shape a better world, a world where we look beyond our differences and are united in our diversity, a world more compassionate, more resilient.

**NOON SALIH:** Connecting Minds, Creating the Future. That's Expo 2020's theme and a summary of its grand vision. And this theme is incorporated in every facet of the event, from the design of the space to all the programs being offered.

One of these programs is Expo Live, a grant program created to foster the next generation of global innovators.

**YOUSUF CAIRES:** I think there's something about Expo Live as a program, and these type of programs, being relevant to nowadays.

**NOON SALIH:** That's Yousuf Caires, the Senior Vice President of Expo Live. Part of Yousuf's job for the past five years has been to harness inspiration in social entrepreneurs and empower them with the resources to keep looking ahead.

**YOUSUF CAIRES:** You could be part of creating the future, not a bystander or watching it from the bleachers. I think that is what I think we need as a society.

**NOON SALIH:** In 2018, Expo Live opened its doors for applicants from around the world to apply for an opportunity to win 100,000 dollars and the chance to be in company with leaders who have the same ambition to change the world.

**YOUSUF CAIRES:** We invited entrepreneurs, startups, you know, innovators from wherever they were, and said, “Hey, we’re from expo.” Expo is all about innovations and we want to hear yours, but here’s the thing, we’re really interested in those innovations that are making a positive impact in society, as well as our environment, not by accident, but by design.

**NOON SALIH:** 11,000 entrepreneurs from all over the world applied. And in the end, 140 Global Innovators, or GIs as they’re called by Expo, from 76 countries received the grant. Of those recipients, a few have tried to answer one specific question: What does it mean to innovate in the mental wellbeing space?

On today’s episode, we talk to Yousuf about Expo Live’s role in supporting social entrepreneurship in the mental health industry. And to explore the question of mental health innovation, we talk to the founders of two mental wellness startups that have received the Expo Live grant.

I’m Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

### [INTRO STING]

**NOON SALIH:** Here’s Yousuf again.

**YOUSUF CAIRES:** We didn’t create a particular segment for mental health or in fact, we didn’t create segments at all. We really wanted to make the requests or the ask to remain quite generic and not say, hey, we are looking for solutions in this particular space.

**NOON SALIH:** But despite Expo Live being open to innovators in every sector, there was an apparent effort from global innovators to create solutions for one of

the most challenging issues facing the world today: accessibility to mental health services.

In 2017, it was estimated that 792 million people live with a mental health disorder. That's around 1 in ten people. And for global innovators around the world, it became obvious that there was an opportunity to offer solutions that address mental wellness.

**YOUSUF CAIRES:** What we've been able to, to notice from the innovators that we have in our portfolio is a clear use of technology, that enables great connections, right? Or easier, more personal, more private connections between those who need to speak to somebody and those who are qualified to have those conversations.

**NOON SALIH:** For all the innovators presenting solutions in the mental health space, the end product was similar: to build a platform, in the form of an app, that provides therapy services for an end user who seeks it. But Yousuf says the unique perspective and experiences that each entrepreneur brings to the problem is what makes it so innovative.

**YOUSUF CAIRES:** Each of them come with their story of how this is relevant and what's really important for people in their countries and in their communities. I think there has to be a very a very contextual based knowledge, right? And hence the solutions have to be quite contextual. To the extent in which the services already existed and there was a demand for them, the demand for the services exceeds supply in a way that it creates that gap for technology and for innovation to come in. I think these innovators are quite self-aware and connected to their communities.

**NOON SALIH:** And so Yousuf and the Expo Live team, their goal was to, sort of, get out of the way. Essentially, they wanted to create a program with no strings

attached, one that allows the entrepreneur the space and time and money to do what they do best, innovate.

**YOUSUF CAIRES:** You see, we provided a grant. That's not an investment. We didn't take a stake in them. It wasn't a loan. It did not create conditions that they'd have to abide. And though that sounds very altruistic, it actually has a huge impact in their ability to find themselves and to find the mechanism that works. It allows them to spend money, to test stuff and make sure that they arrive at that level, where they have a plan, they have a service and it works. And they've, you know, they've spent money that, you know, wasn't tied to anything to develop that innovation. I think that that's very important because when you bring in investors money, right, they come with expectations.

## MUSIC

**SUZI GODSON:** When we got the Expo grant, it was significant for us. It was so meaningful.

**NOON SALIH:** That's Suzi Godson. Suzi is the co-founder of MeeToo, a mental help app for young people. The app is based on a peer support model with the goal of supporting young people early on with their mental health struggles.

Along with her co-founder Kerstyn Comley, Suzi believed that in order to avoid more damaging mental health issues later on in life, children and teens had to have a place where they felt heard throughout the different phases of growing up. And so the pair teamed up to create MeeToo. Here's Kerstyn.

**KERSTYN COMLEY:** We met in 2014, we have daughters of the same age and the daughters were at, at a trampolining class and we were sort of on the sidelines a bit bored and Suzi got chatting and she shared this idea for a digital tool with a

button that was called me too, that would allow people, young people to ask these awkward questions.

And then also say me too, you know, I've got that problem too. And the whole concept is that if you can normalize a problem or an issue and feel that you're not the only one, then it really helps you to overcome that problem.

**SUZI GODSON:** The trouble is the current system is based on crisis support. Basically a kid has to fall off a cliff before they get any care at all. We know that if you pulled it all back into the early intervention space and started giving support to kids before they needed help you divert so much of the crisis care that's required. But because you can't fund early intervention and prevention because you can't measure something that hasn't happened and therefore nobody is willing to fund it. It's a kind of a catch-22.

**NOON SALIH:** Many mental health apps offer the platform and resources for paying clients to find professional therapy. But MeeToo caters to young people, and what Suzi and Kerstyn were able to understand about their chosen demographic is that many of them wouldn't feel comfortable opening up to adults.

**KERSTYN COMLEY:** I think a lot of parents are so desperate for their children to get help. They're really worried about their kids. And so they want them to see a therapist because they want to fix it. And they think that therapy will fix it. The thing about being a teenager is that the stuff that's bothering you at 14 is going to be completely different to the stuff that bothers you at 16. And if you don't give kids the tools to help themselves, they are just not going to become resilient.

**NOON SALIH:** After the app launched in 2017, MeeToo was able to gain traction fairly quickly. But from early on, Kerstyn and Suzi understood that one of their biggest challenges was going to be funding.

**KERSTYN COMLEY:** It's free for anybody who stumbles across it. And, um, it's important that it stays like that because of course, which 15 year old who's struggling with their parents, who's being bullied at school. They're not going to go to their parents and say can you give me the money to download an app.

**SUZI GODSON:** When we started, we were all about altruism and we were all about solving a big social problem. And suddenly we were supporting thousands of kids and we realized that we didn't have a revenue model.

We explored becoming a charity, but we realized that that wasn't for us because the tail wags the dog funding drives what you're doing to such an extent, and we really wanted to innovate, but actually it's very difficult in the tech space, if you're working in social impact, basically you can't measure prevention. And so it's very difficult to fund.

**NOON SALIH:** Being able to access grant funding has been crucial for MeeToo, especially in its early stages. And the Expo Live grant, when Suzi and Kerstyn learned about it in 2018, it was just a year into the launch of their app and it felt like the money came at a do or die moment.

**SUZI GODSON:** We knew what we were doing was working. We knew we were acquiring users, but we didn't have the evidence. We probably didn't even have the structures or the people to grow it to the next level. And so the money that we got with the expo grant allowed us to, to really make a much more robust business model, to hire people and, and to take it to the next level. And without that, I'm not sure we would have made it.

**KERSTYN COMLEY:** Expo Live is something quite exceptional. They took a gamble. If you like on entrepreneurs and innovations at very early stages and committed to support them through their journey and really recognize that social impact takes

time to mature. And there are very few people out there in the world who offer that support and funding and investment.

**NOON SALIH:** The Expo Live team strived not only to grant participants the finances they needed to secure their ideas, but also to provide a sense of community and camaraderie between the applicants.

**KERSTYN COMLEY:** What was really wonderful and very different to any other pitching event I've been to before or, or sense was that they made it very clear that this wasn't a competition among us. You know, normally when you're going to an event, you, you sort of get this sense that, okay, they're only going to pick five of the total or whatever. They were very clear that we had all made it to that point. With that we'd submitted our applications. We'd all been selected and we were being judged on our individual merits, but not compared to each other. And that meant we were all able to relax and get to know each other and build that sort of sense of community.

**SUZI GODSON:** Being part of this incredibly innovative group of, of GIs, and being able to go out to Dubai and feeling part of a community of people who were really trying to make positive changes in the world made us feel connected, made us feel that what we were doing mattered at a global level.

**NOON SALIH:** Today, MeeToo is focused on scaling and discovering new revenue streams that will allow it to grow and still remain free for the users who need it most. The app supports around 43,000 users from the age of 11, up until people in their 30s. Many of them, Kerstyn and Suzi believe, would not have been inclined to seek traditional therapy.

**SUZI GODSON:** But of course it makes sense that if you are an autistic child, And you want to connect to other children that have your condition. It's very, very difficult. Whereas we provide a national platform. So kids who are autistic can

identify with each other, have discussions about what it's like to be 14 and autistic. And because you can filter your feed by topics, so they could just click autism and then all the conversations are about autism. So we're making it really easy for these diverse communities to connect to each other and to support each other.

Um, so that's really quite fascinating and something that we are keen to sort of build on, and create much bigger community. For these kids, so that it's easier for them to talk about the issues that affect them specifically.

### **MUSIC**

**NOON SALIH:** And a group where perhaps MeeToo has made the most impact is young boys.

**SUZI GODSON:** Well, the first population that we were absolutely clear we needed to engage were boys. And that's because boys are three times more likely to die by suicide. But they just don't ask for help or they find it much more difficult to admit that there's anything wrong. So we essentially designed an app, which took out all the kind of visual hierarchies that relate to gender that made it so anonymous.

When, kids go into the phone, they shake their phone and they generate a three word random usernames. Which has, has no connotations of gender. So they really are completely anonymous. And as a result of some very targeted strategies, 40% of our users are boys. And that is really phenomenal.

### **MUSIC**

**AHMED ABUL ELHAZ:** Mainly in Egypt and in the MENA region, we have a big stigma about psychotherapy and about going to psychiatrists' clinic.



**NOON SALIH:** This is Ahmed Abul Elhaz, another Expo Live global innovator reshaping the mental wellness space. He's the founder of Shezlong, an online therapy platform for Arabic speakers.

**AHMED ABUL ELHAZ:** In the MENA region, mental health is viewed by some as a crisis of our religious faith. Also we have a big, extra social stigma for women. In some Arab countries, women can not allow to go to a therapist clinic alone.

**NOON SALIH:** Ahmed is not a mental health professional. He's a software engineer. You can hear his story in more detail on episode 10 of another one of Expo 2020 Dubai's official podcasts: Innovate with Purpose.

This taboo culture he's talking about actually stems from his own experience. Back in 2013 he fell into deep depression after an accident and just couldn't find the psychosocial support he needed.

**AHMED ABUL ELHAZ:** We created some awareness campaigns about what does 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.

**NOON SALIH:** In order for his product to make sense for its eventual users, Ahmed needed to communicate the problem first. So he reached out to universities and clubs, and set up TV interviews to talk about mental health and dismantle the stigma against seeking help.

**AHMED ABUL ELHAZ:** We created a massive awareness campaigns before delivering them the solution.

**NOON SALIH:** And then, gradually, Shezlong came to life.

**AHMED ABUL ELHAZ:** I developed a platform to connect therapists with anybody, need the therapy. We mainly provide private and anonymous, uh, connections

between a psychiatrist or psychologist. Simply, you can talk to the therapist in your private room, without going to the, the clinic. Online therapy is more convenient and more efficient to break the stigma.

**NOON SALIH:** Meaning, you don't have to wait awkwardly in waiting rooms where you can be recognized, and so long as you can get online, there seems to be fewer obstacles.

In a region where almost 85 million people suffer from some kind of mental disorder, Shezlong seemed to fill a crucial gap.

**AHMED ABUL ELHAZ:** Now we have customers in 80 countries and therapists from 20 countries.

Also, we change the mindset of the therapy practice for doctors. Now, all, all of doctors in the MENA region using online therapy as a main source of therapy practice, especially after COVID-19 or 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.

**NOON SALIH:** The mental health landscape wasn't only changing for therapists and those seeking therapy. The Expo Live grant helped Ahmed collaborate on projects with UN Women and the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity to offer support to victims of violence and women in shelters.

Ahmed told us that the taboo of mental health still exists, but that it's definitely changed in the last five years, and he's not done yet.

**AHMED ABUL ELHAZ:** About Shezlong, definitely expanding horizontally and vertically, expanding in other countries. When I started Shezlong I didn't expect that number of people can use the service. A lot of people directly, uh, help them and change their lives. It touched me personally.

**NOON SALIH:** Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://VirtualExpoDubai.com).

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