

Tala Thrive, the AI-enabled mental health platform offering culturally competent care

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Sonia Kaurah, Founder & CEO of Tala Thrive about culturally competent mental healthcare, a flexible culture and getting VCs to understand the need.

Temps de lecture : minute

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I'm Australian born and raised with South Asian heritage and have experienced a lot of different challenges such as cultural identity issues, racism, colourism and more. I have a degree in Psychology, and still time and time again I've had to spend my paid consultations educating my therapist or coach about my cultural background and the specific challenges that I face.

After lots of research, I heard so many similar stories from fellow ethnic minorities. Many of them had tried over seven therapists, and spent lots of time and money to find the right fit. This shouldn't be the case! There is also no platform in Europe purely focusing on culturally competent mental healthcare, so I realised that I needed to create this product.

Tell us about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

One trillion dollars is the annual cost to the global economy due to

depression and anxiety, and 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem every year. Yet 50% of people drop off from their therapist within the first three sessions. This number is worse for those from diverse cultural backgrounds as we face different challenges such as racism and cultural identity issues.

Tala Thrive is an AI-enabled mental health platform offering culturally competent care from therapists and coaches who understand your culture, language or religion, with video calls and self-led programs. We're launching in just a few weeks in the UK and have already participated in Freshers Weeks across the country, held chai & chat sessions, collaborated with influencers from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and provided content that has resonated with our target market.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Since starting the business last year, we've built our first product, grown to a team of eight and raised our first round of funding. We've now onboarded 40+ therapists and coaches who speak 20 different languages between them, and we're launching in just a few weeks in the UK.

Tell us about the working culture at Tala Thrive?

We have an open, transparent, and flexible culture that allows each of us to also thrive while working. We do a mental health check first thing during every team meeting and of course offer free therapy or coaching to all our team members. Our goal is to help us collectively thrive - mentally, physically, and emotionally - so we can live the lives we truly deserve.

How are you funded?

First by bootstrapping, then we did a crowdfunding campaign which was heavily oversubscribed, and we have now taken in additional angel investors in our pre-seed round. We have nearly 200 investors with amazing profiles, including six VCs personally investing, current and former execs at Amazon, AirBnB and JP Morgan, and the chief of staff at Monzo.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

The biggest challenge was getting VCs to understand the need - many of them weren't our target market and therefore didn't understand the extent of demand for this type of product. Quite frankly many weren't open to understanding the need despite everyone in our target market telling us how much they loved the idea and what we were trying to build. Considering less than 2% of VC funding goes to women and about 0.3% to women of colour founders, it was clear that we needed to go a different route for our first funds. We beat those statistics and will continue to grow from strength to strength, and are looking forward to our next raise.

How does Tala Thrive answer an unmet need?

We cannot underestimate the importance of cultural sensitivity and competence when it comes to mental healthcare and professional coaching. At Tala Thrive, culturally competent care is our priority. There are 17 million people from diverse cultural backgrounds in the UK and currently they are underserved. *Our platform* matches and connects you to therapists and coaches who understand your culture, language and/or religion, and we are the first platform of its kind in Europe.

What's in store for the future?

Version 2.0 of Tala Thrive will include a daily voice check-in with AI-based language processing to assess emotions and mental state. We will implement a dashboard to track mood over time and provide recommendations to improve emotional well-being. We will also be expanding our library of self-led programs in the areas of racism, cultural identity issues, colourism and more, and looking to scale to other markets.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

One big thing that I've learnt is that if you don't have a track record as a founder (for example haven't sold a company before and are not extremely rich or well connected) then you need to build credibility.

So what I've done is set targets for myself, then announce them to investors and in social posts - for example, that I was going to start the company. Then I did it. I said I would do a crowdfunding campaign and that the target we would hit would be £150,000, then we hit it. I said we would set a new target for £200,000, then we reached £220,000.

My point here is that when you keep saying you will do something and you keep doing it, people are going to start believing that when you say you will do something - you'll do it. It's one of the main ways you can build credibility as a first-time founder, especially as a minority founder.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living

by at the moment?

I do a 3-2-1 rule so: 3 hours before bed no eating, 2 hours before no drinking anything, and 1 hour before no screens, to try and put my body in a state of rest. Of course I go to therapy once a week to make sure I'm mentally healthy and at the top of my game. And when things get really busy I go to acupuncture for stress relief when I really need to calm my nervous system.

Sonia Kaurah is the Founder & CEO of Tala Thrive.



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