

Effects of Ableism in the Fitness Industry: Sports For everyBODY

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NSG 230 - Women's Health: The Physical Self

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Whether you'd like to admit it or not, ableism is all around us. We live in a world made for able-bodied people. You don't have to have a physical disability to know that our world is an inaccessible place. Sadly, because the majority of the world are able-bodied individuals, we don't think about this kind of stuff. If something comes easily to us, we don't even give a thought about how it might be hard for others. The things we take for granted, others are grateful they can find a way to make that same thing work for them. Living with a physical disability for 22 years, ableism is second nature.

First, let's dive into the start of the topic: ableism. What is it? Who experiences it? Ableism is the act of having a prejudice and/or discriminating against people who have either physical or mental disabilities. In the United States, 25% of individuals are diagnosed with a disability. This leads to 61 million people living with some type of disability. Worldwide, we have one billion people, or 15%, living with a disability. All disabilities are important, and they all matter, but some of them are right there when you first meet us. 1 in 7 people in the United States have a physical disability. With that in mind, 10-15% of those participate in sports. People who are diagnosed with physical disabilities not only have to worry about the mental aspect of how draining everything can be, but also, not having the right resources and tools to get around safely.

This leads to the central research question: How can we combat ableism and minimize it as much as we can in sports and the overall fitness industry?

Health and fitness is important for anybody, as it can improve your quality of life. Physical activity can greatly improve your health, and it can reduce the risk of an individual developing severe diseases such as cardiovascular disease or cancer. It has immediate and long

term benefits. It's a great serotonin boost and is good for one's mental health, too. Exercise is especially important for people with physical disabilities.

There is a huge stigma in regard to people with physical limitations and health/fitness. With our physical limitations, there are able bodied people who think we can't do anything that involves physical exercise. That is further from the case. People with disabilities need physical exercise more than anything because of their weaker muscles, and they need to move them regularly so they don't deteriorate even more. Yes, there are certain activities and exercises that we physically can't do, but we adapt and find ones that work for us, and we *get the job done*. No matter your ability level, fitness looks different on everyone. As long as you're showing up and doing the work, and you're getting stronger for your body and mind: that's all that matters.

Continuing on from that, sadly, there's ableism in fitness centers. Not surprising, but it's still sad to hear. A study by Richardson, E., Papathomas, A., and Smith, B. says, "Changing perspectives of disability [will lead to an] accessible physical environment, embodying an alternate way of being, and provision of a relatable narrative." (Pg. 10)

When I was younger, I genuinely thought I was the only person like me. We aren't talked about in schools, no representation in television or movies, no one looked like me on social media, and no one in my life who had a disability. I would do physical and occupational therapy as a young child, and I had no role models. My goal is to be a physical therapist and be the representation for disabled kids that I never got growing up. Given my history and how important physical health is for me: I know it would be fantastic if someone who's disabled saw that their trainer is also disabled and killing it out there. It would really help not only them, but it would also break the stereotype around such a thing.

Furthermore, there's ableism in the Paralympic Games. The paralympics are multi-sport international events that specialize in disabled athletes. *Yes, there's ableism in something, specifically, known to represent disabled bodies. WHAT THE HECK!?* It's absolutely mind boggling.

Rebecca Meyers is a prime example of this. She competed in the paralympics, as a swimmer, and she had to step out due to the lack of accessibility. Rebecca was born with usher syndrome, a rare genetic disorder, and she was born deaf and is slowly losing her vision by the day. She definitely had success earlier on, competing. Rebecca won three gold and one silver medal competing in Rio during the 2016 paralympics. Also, she won a silver and bronze medal in London.

Fast forward a few years later to 2021: it didn't go as planned. Obviously, she needed accommodations to help her succeed. According to an article by Syracuse, the aids that she had weren't qualified to help with her specific needs and disabilities. Thus, she dropped out. It's not surprising that the world is an ableist place, but the paralympics? *Do better.*

First answer to the research question: letting disabled people lead. Just because we may have a physical limitation, it doesn't mean we can't have fun, fulfilling lives. We can accomplish anything and everything we set our minds to, just like the able bodied community. Stephannie Hammermond, the first ever adaptive crossfit coach, is doing just that. Stephanie is physically disabled, and health and fitness has always been a big passion of hers. She was diagnosed with spastic cerebral palsy depligia. This means it affects both of her legs.

Just a little background about cerebral palsy: it's actually the most common motor disability. In general, it affects the way one moves and their balance. There are four types of spastic cerebral palsy, and whichever one you're diagnosed with, it will affect a different limb on

your body. Having cerebral palsy is like a spectrum: it affects everyone differently with different severities of it.

Anyway, back to Stephanie and her story. According to an article by Crossfit, the whole business started thanks to her grandmother. She was worried that Stephanie wasn't getting the proper health care options she deserved. The goal was to help women with disabilities find accessible wellness and healthcare options. Thus, Initaribe for Women with Disabilities came about. With that, and the whole pandemic hitting, Stephanie started teaching free fitness online classes. After a while, IWD asked if they could pay for her services. Staying Driven was born and so was Stephanie's nickname: Steph "the hammer" Hammermon.

I also have leadership experience. I, too, have the same physical disability as Stephanie. It does affect the parts of our bodies differently, though. I have what's called spastic right side hemiplegia meaning it affects the right side of my body. Senior year of high school, I found this organization for women that was at over 100+ universities. It's called CHAARG. Here's a little background about CHAARG before getting into the meat of the topic. CHAARG stands for "Changing Health, Attitudes, and Actions to Recreate Girls. It's a health and wellness movement aiming to show college women of all shapes, sizes, races, genders, abilities, etc. that fitness can be fun. It's all about lifting each other up and *empowering* each other to be the best, strongest, and most authentic versions of ourselves.

It wouldn't even be a thing at DePaul anymore if it wasn't for me. My sophomore year of college, I, actually, had to relaunch the entire organization from the ground up; I saved it from closing all together. Not only did I do this because I knew it would look great on my resume, but it was the only thing that I found in my first year where everyone was so welcoming and accepted me for who I am. Not only that, at the end of my first quarter, I ran into an exec leader

who said something along the lines of this: “Oh my god, Olivia, we love you! Thank you so much for joining, and we can’t wait to have you the rest of the school year. *Without a doubt, that made my entire year.* People will remember all the good and bad things that you say about them. Choose your words wisely, as you never know the impact it can hold on them.

Relaunching the chapter was a struggle, but it was rewarding, nonetheless. Starting off, I had to relaunch the chapter in the middle of COVID during the fall of 2020. Not only that, it was already at DePaul, so I had to deal with a bunch of old documents and organize everything to get back up and running. Long story short, the first year being an online chapter wasn’t ideal, but it set us up for where we’re at now. Now being an event coordinator, with a full executive team and over twice the members as last year, it’s been a success. Who wouldn’t want a fun group of ladies who are as supportive as we are and inspire others to be the best version of themselves? No wonder it’s been a hit!

Having disabled people lead is important beyond belief. Having a physical limitation is not an obstacle to having the successes that we want and will have. People with disabilities are smart. We know that we live in an ableist world, and if we just sit here and do nothing, nothing’s going to change. Our goal is to educate those who are willing to listen and understand. The more we do that, the more accepting everyone will be. Additionally, we want to prove that we are capable and worthy to lead a business or anything. It offers a different perspective, whom we haven’t seen before.

It’s obvious that people with disabilities can live independent lives with the adaptations we need in order to succeed. A big thing that needs serious changes is public transportation systems. I’ve lived in Chicago my whole life, and the CTA is not as accessible as it can be. For above ground trains: they need to have stairs, escalators, and elevators to be able to get to the

train platform with ease. Some do, like the Fullerton train stop. *DePaul represents!* It's not at every train stop, and it needs to be. Even the underground ones, it may not be able to do an elevator, but it can easily include an escalator.

According to a study by Terri-Lynne Langdon, "Lack of access, and the various forms of anti-value that it produces, also produces a specific and intense-energy-sucking kind of time-debt to which the disabled communities are exposed. In the case of public transit, I have to find an accessible route or *literally* seek out special transportation on a regular basis. The accessible route is often the long, hidden route in dark passages and corners. This is a waste of time, an anti-time, a time-debt invented by able-bodied people." (Pg. 1)

People with disabilities aren't stupid. Everyone thinks that way because of the way that we walk or what our physical bodies look like. That's further from the case. We are smart! We've figured out how to live in a world that, clearly, doesn't accommodate us or listen to us. It's adamant that we are background noise. With all of this in mind, transportation should be the least of our worries. Getting from point a to point b is normal. Right?! How do we get to work? How do we get to special work events or parties? Public transportation is a common thing in big cities. What is extremely irritating is that because public transportation is in big cities, you would think people would be more accommodating with a more diverse population. It's not at ground zero, but a long way to go to get to where it needs to be.

Next up, we have Sensei Jeff Kohn leading "Karate Can-Do" in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. He's been teaching the sport of Shotokan Karate since 1979. He's been training thousands of students awarding them with numerous black belts. Additionally, he created a program called "Karate Can-Do" specifically made for those who have physical disabilities. The Sensei's philosophy is that just because someone has a physical limitation, it doesn't mean

they're *unable* to do physical activities or sports. According to an article by Patch, he was awarded the Paralympic coach of the year around 10 years ago. His athletes have traveled across the world to compete and won multiple silver and gold medals.

According to a video by Nude TV, Sensei quotes a couple of things that can be used not just for disabled athletes, but for all aspects of life. It doesn't matter what your ability level is... "if given the opportunity, could not be great. [...] You have to focus and you got to believe you can do it, and you just got to do it." More people need to have the mindset of this. Anyone can do anything they put their minds to, and this dojo community proves just that. Being selfish and unwilling to learn is one thing, but allowing others to show their abilities and skills with the willingness to let them is a whole other story.

Sharing the three stories above, it's obvious that there was a support system with us. Having a physical disability, you have to be extra careful with who you let in as you never know someone's true intentions. Having a support system behind us was a huge gamechanger. We don't experience that level of support on a daily basis, and we have to advocate for ourselves. If you have any sort of a disability: find your people. Find the people who make you feel like that because they're out there. You just have to look. If you can, try and be that person for someone because it means the world.

Moving on to the next topic. The next answer to the research question is the use of social media and representing disabled bodies. Social media is huge, and it can be an excellent way to boost awareness on a certain topic. Obviously, there are both negatives and positive aspects to posting on social media. No matter what you do, being vulnerable and sharing a story for the whole world to see is scary and not everyone will like it or agree with you. But the bottom line is

to talk about it and get the word out. The more we talk about it, the more we get loud about the topic: the more people will know about it and make change to happen.

Adding on to that, there are so many disabled creators on social media sharing their stories and educating others. The disabled community doesn't expect able-bodied people to get exactly what we go through on a daily basis. We know they won't fully understand as they're not physically disabled. The more you are willing to listen and understand, educate yourself on the topic, and be a good ally in whatever way you can? That's all we are asking for. A study by Waseem Akrom, "One can adopt its benefits to gain positive results in education. [...] It provides an easy and an effective way in which students can share knowledge." (Pg. 350)

There was this TikTok, the username being @casshuff, who is a physically disabled creator. She is blind in one ear and partially deaf as well as having a form of dwarfism. She is studying to go into musical theatre, and she doesn't see herself represented in the media *at all*. She was talking about how she saw this video of a disabled dancer who looked like her. If she saw that sooner and knew it was okay to have a different body and wanted to pursue a career in the performing arts, she would have started at an earlier age.

A study by Lopresti, E. Bodine, C. , and Lewis, C. discusses how there are multiple different disabilities (both physical and cognitive) and the adaptive equipment needed to be successful. Let's get one thing straight: people with disabilities are successful. Just because we need certain aids to help us with tasks, it does not make us any less capable to get it done. We are now *able* to do what, and however much, we want to do because of those aids. It helps us be the independent people that we are.

After talking about all of this, it's safe to say ableism affects the disabled community. There's a lack of or cost of adaptive equipment and inaccessible transportation talked about

earlier that needs to change. Also, there's inappropriate communication. The disabled community has been told countless times how inspirational and brave we are. For what? Living our lives with things we can't control? A study by Leah Cameron, "The term "inspiration porn" gained prominence after disability advocate, Stella Young (2014), gave a TED Talk in 2014 entitled, *I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much*. In her nine-minute speech, she declares that society has been told a lie – disabled people are exceptional and that having a disability is a "bad thing." disabled people are often celebrated for being exceptional and awe-inspiring when they are just using their bodies to the best of their abilities. She wants disability to be viewed as the norm and not an exception to the norm, and for disabled people to be celebrated for genuine achievement. She concludes her speech by saying, "Disability doesn't make you exceptional, but questioning what you think you know about it does." (Pg. 6)

Here's a question: would you go up to a janitor and tell them how inspiring it is that they stick around after school hours and clean? Let's hope the answer is no. Disabled people are the same way. It's not inspiring when you see us doing daily chores and activities like going to the grocery store. We are doing what everyone else is doing. It's disrespectful, ableist, and beyond frustrating. Let's face it: you're basically telling us that you would rather die than live a life with a disability. That statement is definitely out there, but so are people's perceptions of us. It represents society's views of what it's like to live with a disability. My life isn't poor or sad by any means. So, why are people conditioned to believe this or think this way?

I AM A PROUD DISABLED WOMAN.

Yes, you read that correctly. Go ahead and read that statement a few times. It's powerful; it's true. Throughout history, women have played a very particular role. They have essentially served as caregivers and have only been allowed to exist and operate within the male gaze of our

patriarchal society. Disabled women, however, have always been and continue to be cast off as undesirable, worthless beings. In a world that only values a woman for her ability to take care of a man, disabled women don't stand a chance.

In a world that is in the beginning stages of accepting women as the worthy human beings that they are, it is our responsibility as the women collective to ensure that these emerging rules apply to all women of all backgrounds. Disability included. We are gifted in ways society doesn't value enough.

Feminism alone is not enough. Intersectional feminism is what needs to happen. Start seeing us for what we are: athletes, lawyers, students, models, wives, business owners, Doctors, and Mothers. Most importantly, we are *badass women*.

Don't send us pity. We don't need it. Feeling "sad" does nothing for us. If seeing anyone with a physical disability out and about, living their lives, invokes an emotion for you that you can't handle, ask yourself *WHY*. It may have less to do with me, a disabled woman, and more to do with a world that doesn't try hard enough to adapt for those that need adaptations. Change your perceptions. Celebrate people who are different from you. Do something to make a positive impact in the world. The only "bad" disabilities are those that have bad attitudes.

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CASSIDY'S TIK TOK VIDEO: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdy26edU/?k=1>

CHAARG WEBSITE: <https://chaarg.com/>

NORTH SHORE DOJO VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dLu3R84zDg&t=218s>

