Purple Orange Podcast, Season 2, Episode 3: Let’s talk about dating

**SPEAKERS**

Belle Owen (host), Carey Scheer (narrator), Daniella Biagi (guest)

**Belle Owen** 00:00

Welcome to the Purple Orange podcast, where we dive into the untold stories that challenge perspectives and broaden understanding. I'm Belle Owen, and today we're taking you into the world of dating, a world that's full of excitement, uncertainty and self-discovery. But what happens when the typical dating experience intersects with the realities of living with a disability. Even without disability, dating is not just about finding love, it's about putting your best self out there, preserving your dignity, avoiding heartbreak, and confronting the ever-present beauty standards that we're all measured against. Dating can be about examining your relationship to yourself, but it also makes you so hyper aware of the ways in which you're perceived by others. Before I met my partner, I navigated the chaos of dating apps. It was a delicate balance. Should I not reveal my disability up front so that I could connect with people without their biases tainting our conversation? Or should I put my disability out there and let it be a filter to weed out the narrow-minded? There's also the paradox of dating while disabled, being desexualised and simultaneously fetishised, which are both problematic and dangerous in different ways. In today's story, we meet a young woman who shares a confronting experience that profoundly shaped her approach to dating and motivated her to challenge these stereotypes. Carey Scheer brings us the story.

**Carey Scheer** 01:45

Daniella Biagi was in her early 20s when dating apps burst onto the scene. Like most of her friends, she set up a profile, but unlike her friends, Daniella felt the need to be extremely cautious about the photos she chose to share.

**Daniella Biagi** 02:04

Yeah, because then it could be basically low hanging fruit for somebody going, ooh, you know, somebody of that mindset, that might be, you know, fetishy, or might be, whatever it may be.

**Carey Scheer** 02:13

She arrived at that conclusion after an incident which might be better described as a trauma. It occurred when she was just 18 years old.

**Daniella Biagi** 02:24

There was this famous rapper at the time, my friends and I had tickets to go and see him. And, yeah, absolutely, we were excited. I hadn't ever been to a rap concert that size. We get there, and it was quite packed. I like to get to the front, I like to be able to see things. And given my height, I think it was in my mind that I'd get to the front and see properly.

**Carey Scheer** 02:48

The rapper began selecting women from the audience to join him on stage. He picked Daniella’s group. Her friends scrambled onto the stage, but Daniella stayed back.

**Daniella** 03:00

I didn't want to get up, so I kind of just looked and stood there trying to avoid this situation.

**Carey Scheer** 03:07

Daniella was hoisted onto the stage by a security guard before she had time to process anything. This famous rapper is dancing on stage, holding Daniela in his arms, her feet off the ground.

**Daniella Biagi** 03:22

It was just really, you know, you're there in front of thousands of people. Half of you is like, this is really cool, this guy's massively famous, and he's picking me up, and then the other half of me is going, this, this, there's something intuitively that feels very wrong about this. I just had this sinking feeling, I just knew something bad was gonna come from it.

**Carey Scheer** 03:43

A few days later, that something bad comes in the form of a viral video.

**Daniella Biagi** 03:49

And I look at this video and it has the most derogatory way around the way my body’s described and this particular rapper lifting me up. And I was horrified and I started Googling this title, and it was on so many different websites at the time. It was on, this is before Tiktok era and Instagram era, so it's Facebook, MySpace, and a lot of very prominent news websites as well, in America. And I just, a part of me honestly died inside. I freaked out. I was in tears, I literally was hysterical. I think I pretty much stayed in my room for a week.

**Carey Scheer** 04:48

And in that week, she scanned the internet, reading every single video comment she could find.

**Daniella Biagi** 04:58

And the comments were so objectifying, and they're objectifying in a very sexual way as well. It was, it was horrific. I remember walking to university and thinking, I wonder whether any of you guys were the ones. And from a dating aspect, you know, obviously you still, you want to meet people and you want to do things, but in my head, I had this psychological barrier, because I was so paranoid that people that were going to be interested in me were going to be these people.

**Carey Scheer** 05:46

Remember, Daniella was only 18 when this happened. She was just entering the world of dating, and that's a confusing time for everybody. But now, she had to worry about the hordes of people who seemed eager to objectify and fetishize her based on her physical attributes. She's four feet tall with short legs and very short arms. How would she differentiate between those types of guys and people who would genuinely be interested in her for all the other things that make her who she is? And so fast forward a couple years to when dating apps are a thing, she made the decision to post selfies from the shoulder up only.

**Daniella Biagi** 06:38

It's a bit of a cognitive dissonance, though, because there's a degree of you going okay, I need to look after myself, but also I've got nothing to hide. You know, it's not like I was trying to hide my body, I'm proud of who I am, and I haven't really had body confidence issues.

**Carey Scheer** 06:51

Daniella more often dated people she met organically, like at a bar with friends. But when she met someone online, she'd have to consider whether she felt the need to explain anything ahead of time, and sometimes she didn't feel the need to.

**Daniella Biagi** 07:09

Overall, a lot of the experiences are pretty positive, but on balance, people are good. It's unfortunately though, some of those significantly bad experiences that stick out.

**Carey Scheer** 07:20

Like this one time where she matched with a guy. They messaged back and forth a couple times, and then she made a plan to meet for a first date at a restaurant.

**Daniella Biagi** 07:30

And I'm sitting there, I got there a little bit earlier, so I thought, yeah, I’ll just get a mojito, it’s all cool. So I'm sitting there just having a drink, and then this guy rocks up, and I could see he was a bit awkward. And I mean, I get that, I get that, you know, okay cool, I wasn't expecting that your arms are different. That's fine. And then the lady came around, so the lady’s come over and asked whether he wants a drink and he, he just said, no, I'm not staying for a drink. And he's like, yeah, look, I'm just not comfortable with, and signaled my arms and said, you know, you should be more transparent. And I said, what did you want me to do? Zoom in on my arms and send you zoomed in photos, just so you had a bit of a heads up. You're not walking into a situation where I'm, this isn't an arranged marriage. I don't, I'm not getting this. What am I asking of you? Anyway, he gets up, he leaves after five minutes, and that was it. It was embarrassing, because the lady, I think, had walked back, and it was just one of those, she knows clearly, it's clearly a date gone wrong. Yeah, I drank my drink, paid for my drink, and left. And I was walking back home, and it just kind of hit me, and I was like, this is really, like, that's pretty confronting. Like, this guy has just gotten up and walked out because of the way that I was born. He hasn't even asked questions. He's just told me what I should have done when he's had zero experience in his life living in my shoes.

**Carey Scheer** 09:06

When they had been messaging before the date, the guy had already told her what he did for work. He had a professional job where he saw clients.

**Daniella Biagi** 09:15

If that same situation happened with a client, and you go into a client meeting and this client rocks up and they've got short arms and legs, are you gonna treat them any differently? No. So you do when somebody has some professional backing as well, you probably do expect a little bit more because of those reasons.

**Carey Scheer** 09:32

Daniella decided she wasn't gonna let him just get away with that without trying to expand his mind a bit. So, she sent an email to his work account.

**Daniella Biagi** 09:41

Which is pretty savage behaviour, but I just wanted to get my point across. And I said it was unfortunate that you were uncomfortable with the way in which I was born. I didn't get the chance to formally introduce myself, and I gave my resume. I particularly honed in on a lot of the diversity, equity, and inclusion stuff I did. And then I said that I'm happy to offer him access to a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Toolkit at no cost to him or his organisation, and sent it on, and I felt like an absolute queen about it.

**Carey Scheer** 10:18

Daniella wants to make it clear the issue isn't that the date didn't go well. It's not even that this guy brought his biases into the date. It was the way he treated her subhuman.

**Daniella Biagi** 10:31

Even in talking about these experiences, you know, one of the key things in looking back on this is it's not like I'm sitting here free from bias.

**Carey Scheer** 10:40

Daniella told me she went through a phase where she only dated stereotypical attractive, sporty men. She said it was definitely to boost her own ego. She needed to prove that it wasn't just those quote, “weirdos”, who'd made comments on that video all those years ago that would be in to her. She's moved past this now, but that's beside the point. It's okay to have a type.

**Daniella Biagi** 11:07

There is no wrong or right with this stuff, but there's just a basic level of human decency that is important in any interaction. That is, whether it's dating or career or whatever it may be, and everyone's deserving of that.

**Carey Scheer** 11:20

We're going to share one more of her negative dating experiences, because it led her to some important reflections. She matched with a guy who lived in another state, and they messaged for a while, and they even talked on the phone a few times. Daniella explained to him that she did look different than the average person.

**Daniella Biagi** 11:41

Yeah, so like, I explained to him, like, I'm really short, and he kind of just brushed over it and didn't really knowledge it, like there was nothing to it. So I went, okay, this guy's pretty chill, like he doesn't really seem to care.

**Carey Scheer** 11:50

This guy happened to be coming to Adelaide, and so she made a plan to meet.

**Daniella Biagi** 11:54

Because he was interstate, we'd arranged to initially meet at mine, have a drink and then head somewhere for dinner. And we were speaking for a little bit as well, so I felt relatively comfortable with that.

**Carey Scheer** 12:07

He arrived at her house, and everything seemed okay. They had a drink. They seemed to be clicking. But then he said, he's not hungry, and he didn't feel like going to the restaurant.

**Daniella Biagi** 12:19

That's odd, weird. So, my brain's really ticking over, being like, hmm, okay, are you not comfortable going out in public? Like, there's something a bit odd now. How do you just flip your mind from that? Because that's what the plan was going to be.

**Carey Scheer** 12:31

But she pushed that voice down, because, well, his actions were saying, he's attracted to her.

**Daniella Biagi** 12:38

He seemed very super keen. Yeah. So he was, he was, he was definitely trying to make a move. And then fast forward, he ended up just getting a little bit, he was just a bit weird. And I was like, okay, I'm like, what's up? He's like, oh, just, you know, there's, there's a lot to process. And I said, what's there to process? And he was like, what people are gonna think? And I was like, what do you mean? What people are gonna think? Who's people? And he was like, the world. And I was like, what? And just the gravity of that in my mind hit me. I was like, okay, this, this guy clearly ain't it. That was the end of that. I might be okay and I can process the comments the world, but there are some people that that would affect them for the rest of their life. That's heavy. People can make these off-the-cuff comments, but they're not the ones that have to actually live every single day in these realities. I can't just magically go grow arms tomorrow. I can't change my life like that. This is me. We don't know why somebody acts a certain way, because we're not them. We don't know them well enough. But worrying about what the world thinks of who you're going to date, or worrying about what people are going to think about who you're sitting next to in a restaurant, they're all abnormal behaviors. They're all things that indicate that you need to do some work on yourself. What you do know is that usually when somebody is insecure, they'll project that insecurity back on you, so you can't absorb it. And we can very easily get caught up in thinking that these kind of experiences, like, that's what you have to deal with. You don't need to deal with it. It's actually abnormal. These are outliers.

**Carey Scheer** 14:37

So after one of these rare, but painful experiences, Daniella vented to her brother, and he suggested, why don't you just put a photo of yourself on the app that shows your difference?

**Daniella Biagi** 14:50

Yeah. He was like, why don't you actually just see, like, why don't you actually put it on there? Like, why don't you just do that? And suss it. And if you don't like it, just delete it and go back to what you were doing before. I still, I think I was mature enough to kind of get past some of the trauma that I'd experienced in my teens and early twenties around, you know, relating to that objectification piece. And I think having that point of maturity and having evolved and gone through some of the traps, I was at a better headspace to be able to do that than what I was when I was less mature.

**Carey Scheer** 15:25

And so she did.

**Daniella Biagi** 15:27

It wasn’t really too different, to be honest. It really, I didn't, there wasn't, the only real difference is that I didn't have to navigate and determine whether I felt the need to explain it to somebody or not. That was, it was actually way easier for me.

**Carey Scheer** 15:50

Daniella says there's no wrong or right here. People should just do what makes them comfortable. But for her now, putting yourself out there fully is what feels right, and she gets a lot of interest. Her 18-year-old self would have worried these guys were attracted to her for the wrong reasons. But now, in her early thirties, she simply decided to ask.

**Daniella Biagi** 16:18

I feel like, again, like the mad scientist. I was like, I want to know this stuff. I'm the curious person now. So, I just ask point blank, you know, what is it? So, if you're attracted to me, like, what is it? Obviously, knowing there's a point of difference there as well. Um, and, a lot of it was confidence.

**Carey Scheer** 16:38

They were attracted to your confidence?

**Daniella Biagi** 16:39

Yes, yeah. So that was a common theme in the responses. It was also intrigue. And at first, when I first heard that, I didn't know how to take it at first. I was like intrigue, because I've heard it before, and I think probably a bit of it was maybe deep down, a tiny bit of a trauma response going, ooh, I don't know whether I actually like that. But when I delved into that, so intrigue, so what do you mean? It was more around you've had a different life experience, I would actually like to understand more or where people have, where it's been somebody that I've dated over a period of time, it's been okay, well, you know, yeah, that was initially one of the things that attracted me to you. And it's not from an objectification point. It was from a genuinely, you've had a different life, like, that's interesting, I want to get to know that more. You know, when you look at that, like, there's actually nothing, you're not a weirdo for being attracted to somebody that has a different life than you.

**Carey Scheer** 17:38

But it wasn't just about the curiosity and intrigue. These guys also told her they found her physically attractive.

**Daniella Biagi** 17:45

It’s also, you still want to hear that, you don't just want to be some unique character and like, look, I don't actually physically find you attractive, but you're unique. Nobody wants to hear that. Like this consistent theme that all these people are super attracted to you, but coupled with that element too, like it was just interesting, because you got both worlds.

**Carey Scheer** 18:05

So reflecting back on everything she's learned in her dating journey, I wondered what advice she might give to her younger self.

**Daniella Biagi** 18:14

Yeah, so, if I was giving myself advice, it's don't be afraid. It's actually really cool to learn different things and to meet different people and understand how people's minds work at different levels, because you learn a lot from that. And you learn a lot from experiences that are not so great, because you learn about people with insecurities and how blessed you are to be quite secure in who you are. Like, that's actually a nice learning. So even when you go into things, it's not absorbing other people's insecurities. If you can put that block in your own mind to know that you are who you are, you're going to put your foot forward in whatever it is in life that it may be, whether it's dating or career or any aspect, you're not less than, you've got things to add to the table, just like anybody else. And like anybody else, there's strengths with people and there's weaknesses with people and that’s it. So, going in, I would be telling myself to explore and have fun and just know that people's reactions to certain situations aren't a reflection of you, it's a reflection of them.

**Belle Owen** 19:29

What I love about Daniella's story is that she is confident in who she is, and she embraces her difference. She doesn't take on the insecurity of others. She's having fun and enjoying her dating journey and its many lessons, and it's a great place to be. So as Daniella says, you aren't lesser than, don't settle. Life is better alone than with the wrong person. Who is the wrong person? For starters, anyone who doesn't make you feel respected. We want to hear much more about navigating interpersonal relationships, including dating, friendships and love in all of its forms. Do you have something to say on this? Please get in touch. Email stories@purpleorange.org.au or visit our website, [www.purpleorange.org.au](http://www.purpleorange.org.au). This story was made by Carey Scheer for the Purple Orange Podcast. We thank Daniella Biagi for sharing her story.