Black people can be disabled: Breaking the cycle of disability stereotypes

Speakers: Belle Owen (Host), Carey Scheer (Narrator), Khadija Gbla (Guest)

00:03 **Belle Owen**

I’m Belle Owen, and you’re listening to the Purple Orange Podcast. In this episode, you're going to hear the story of Khadija Gbla.

Khadija is a writer, a speaker and a fierce advocate for many causes. We've linked to their TED talk in the show notes, and I really encourage you to check it out. The story you're about to hear is something different. It's Kadija reflection on growing up in Australia as a refugee and how over and over the world misread them. The consequences of that misreading are painful, but what comes through is also strength, clarity and deep love, especially for their son. Stories like this are why we make this podcast. They remind us to listen deeply, especially when the experience is different from our own.

This story was produced and narrated by Carey Scheer. The first voice you'll hear, and the one at the heart of it all, is Khadija’s.

01:04 **Khadija Gbla**

He said the test was conclusive, you're autistic, and it comes out at level three, and he goes, I am shocked. I said I am not. I said I'm not. I'm not because I know what it feels like to live in this body and this mind. It was never me. That's how I felt: It wasn't me.

It was not anything I didn't do more of or less of. I wasn't lazy. I didn't- that was it. I had a different brain, and it was existing in a world that did not understand it, and that had been why it was so hard.

01:44 **Carey Scheer**

That conversation with Khadija’s therapist happened when she was 34 years old, living in Australia. But her story starts long before that—across an ocean.

01:57 **Khadija Gbla**

I was born in Sierra Leone, West of Africa, but due to the civil war in Sierra Leone, my family fled.

Smells, there's sounds, there's bombs, there's all these things happening, and there's not even the time to be going, ‘Okay, these are my needs, and these are my needs.’ There are no needs, but just this constant awareness you're not doing the things that everyone expects you to do which will keep you safe. And the fact I couldn't do it to keep myself safe, was the problem. And that, I think, is when I realised, okay, I'm in trouble here because I feel different from everyone around me right now, I am in trouble. And that sense continued throughout my life.

02:46 **Carey Scheer**

Khadija was resettled in Australia at 13. Finally safe from a war outside, but inside, the chaos and pain came with her.

02:57 **Khadija Gbla**

The moment my body calmed down from the wars of Sierra Leone, it felt everything in Australia.

03:10 **Carey Scheer**

Khadija says her mother couldn’t hold space for her pain because she had too much of her own.

03:17 **Khadija Gbla**

I wake up in the morning and I would say to her “I am tired. I feel like somebody beat this shit out of me.” And she would say “I wish you would die”.

Because, for her, she had come all the way to Australia and brought us here for second chance at life. She had escaped the war and did her job, and I'm alive. This was a luxury, to wake up and say, I am in pain because I have a roof. I have food. To her in her context, that was a privilege.

All my preferences, neurodivergency, what is now mostly known as my autistic traits, “no, no, no, no, a refugee child. We don't have time for this shit. You get what you have. Who has time for your sensitivity? Sounds like you’re trying to be a white girl.”

That’s how she chalked my autism, that’s how most of them, they would call me white girl. It was the CALD word for you’re not black enough.

“There goes Khadija with her white interests that she has. She just can’t have a black interest like the rest of us, like basketball maybe, or a Nigerian movie, it has to be anime with another language with cartoons. Strange child.”

In fact, those things were liability, So I was taught them to mask. The more I mask, the harder my body then captured all that pain, chronic pain, chronic nausea, chronic fatigue. Can't sleep. This will be diagnosed as fibromyalgia. The body - it remembers.

05:15 **Carey Scheer**

Today, Khadija and her mother are no longer in contact.

05:21 **Khadija Gbla**

it's not even my mum's fault. I don't blame her. She’s just a person who's gone to war, was a single mum, was in a different cultural context, had no support network. She said, you're black, you're a girl, you can’t- we can't add disability. For her, the label would have been the threat to me, rather than the fact that not getting the care I deserve was actually what was posing the threat.

05:52 **Carey Scheer**

While Khadija’s African Australian community saw these artistic traits as somehow indulgent- a black girl simulating whiteness, ironically, the broader Australian community mistook these traits for cultural difference.

06:07 **Khadija Gbla**

That's what everything was labelled. She's just being black. She's just been Khadija. And I was being autistic, but I couldn't be that because the presentation of autism people knew wasn't black.

06:17 **Carey Scheer**

So Khadija spent most of her life feeling like an outsider. Like the only one. Until she had her son, Sammy. It was like they were tuned to the same frequency.

06:36 **Khadija Gbla**

It's like looking at a twin version, but different, like he looks at me like in wonder, wow, you're like me. I'm like, wow, you're like me. And it's a beautiful thing.

06:48 **Carey Scheer**

Then came the phone call. Sammy’s school had been observing him and they wanted to talk.

06:54 **Khadija Gbla**

Kindy contacted me just before he was going to school and told me something is different about Sammy. Like, what do you mean? Something's different about Sammy compared to the other kids. Then they express all the adjustments and accommodations they extend at kindy. And I shared this stuff I also did at home, and as I just thought he was just like me, but different, and my job was just to adapt. They like that sounds right, but maybe it's more than that.

07:23 **Carey Scheer**

It was. Samee was diagnosed as being autistic.

07:28 **Khadija Gbla**

When I found that he was autistic, I wasn't sad that he was I was sad at the world I have to raise him in.

There's so much negativity. There's so much chaos, and there's so much ableism. But then I was reminded I have always been making the world a better place, so why should I even be scared now? I just have to up the stakes.

07:56 **Carey Scheer**

Sammy’s diagnoses made other things fall into place.

08:00 **Khadija Gbla**

It would take me a year to go: If Sammy is like me, am I like Sammy? And I remember the first time I walked into my therapist office and said, I think I need an assessment.

08:16 **Carey Scheer**

The therapist looked at her and said, “You don’t have autism. You have PTSD. You’re a refugee. You’ve been through so much. And look at you now. You’ve got two degrees. This isn’t autism.”

08:32 **Khadija Gbla**

I go, oh, well, that is actually not only negatively stereotypical, but it's very biased. That is not how it works. But I also don't remember asking for your opinion. I asked for a test.

It took a lot for us to get to the end. And I went, Wow, if I, who is somebody so assertive could speak for themselves, felt that way. What chance does anyone else who is not English speaking?

Imagine my auntie, five kids, African from Sudan. What the hell are they meant to do with that process? Let alone getting the referral to get to a psychologist for them to say that nonsense, and you have to knock it down and go, please administer the test. That's all I'm here for, and let the test determine what I am.

09:23 **Carey Scheer**

When the test finally confirmed what Khadija had known deep down all along, it was a mix of emotions. Relief. She finally had a name for the way she’d felt her whole life. But alongside that, there was grief.

09:41 **Khadija Gbla**

For everything I wasn't given, for every accommodation I didn't get so life could have been easy. For every rest. For every time I was called lazy. For every time it was “I didn't just try hard”. I was told I was anti-social, I hated people. I wasn't black enough, because somehow, I wanted things in a way that was white. It was for all the times I was made to feel like I was a waste of space.

10:10 **Carey Scheer**

It was time to let go of those old stories. Owning her identity as autistic gave Khadija power. Self-acceptance- and that also extended to her physical body and the chronic pain it carries.

10:26 **Khadija Gbla**

I am not ashamed to have a different body. I'm not ashamed that my body does different things. Is it painful? Is it exhausting? Yes, but I don't think there's a reason for me to have to feel ashamed because other people felt ashamed. I had to separate my mum's shame. It's not mine to carry.

10:47 **Carey Scheer**

When she looks at her son Sammy, all this becomes even clearer.

10:53 **Khadija Gbla**

How many years later we come full circle, generational change, I will be in the same junction with my child, and all I see is, what can I do to make sure you have it better, but not just that. How can I heal so that I also give little Khadija what she never got.

11:20 **Carey Scheer**

While Khadija’s proud of her identity as autistic, when you’re black, in a minority, and in a new country, it comes with added complexity.

11:30 **Khadija Gbla**

My autism has made me more vulnerable as a black person.

Stay calm. Stay calm. Stay calm. Don't have a meltdown. Don't have a meltdown. Don't have a meltdown. It’s okay, because you can’t have a meltdown. It's not safe for you to have a meltdown. You are not going to be viewed as a victim. You're an aggressor.

11:54 **Carey Scheer**

It’s one thing for Khadija to have to worry that she is misinterpreted as defiant or dangerous – but what keeps her up at night is how the world might perceive her son.

12:06 **Khadija Gbla**

Quirky, autistic, white boy, Sammy doesn't get the quirk. That is not what anyone is saying. Because he's black, violence and aggression is projected to everything he does, even though he's just a 10 year boy.

12:24 **Carey Scheer**

So now, Khadija speaks out—on social media, in interviews, articles, she’s even writing a book. Because her goal is clear: Bring awareness, and to make space for voices like hers.

12:37 **Khadija Gbla**

So people will say, I think they say I'm the face of black autism, not that I wanted to be. But I think for my community, and it's not even including the indigenous community, that's separate and they have their story and their voice, but for the new and emerging community, refugee migrant community, yeah, we don't have a face. We have not had. We have been an asterisk as people discuss autism.

I wish I had had somebody like me to realize that black girls can also be disabled, and they can be neurodivergent. And what does that look like? What example does that look like? I hope somehow now, as the world has changed, I'm like, yeah, this is what I would have wanted little Khadija to have.

13:26 **Carey Scheer**

Little Khadija didn’t have that someone, but her son sammy does.

13:33 **Khadija Gbla**

He knows he's disabled. His understanding of that is so different. To him, he knows, he understands and experiences the world differently, and the world experiences him differently, but he knows how he feels about himself is the most important thing in the actual world. No shame, no stigma, can just be you and I can just be me.

14:07 **Belle Owen**

That was Khadija Gbla. I want to thank them for their honesty, their strength and for trusting us with their story. When I first listened to this piece, they said things that stopped me in my tracks.

Khadija’s story is a powerful reminder that our systems still don't know how to recognize or support people whose experiences don't fit the dominant narrative.

I learned a lot from listening to this about what it means to grow up feeling out of place, about how easily people can be misjudged, and about the deep strength that it takes to finally understand yourself and claim that understanding even when the world resists it.

Stories like this matter, they ask us to think more deeply, to listen more carefully, and to do the work of inclusion, not just in theory, but in practice.

This story was recorded on Kaurna land. We pay our respects to the Kaurna people and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people past and present, whose stories have always held truth, knowledge and resistance.

Thanks for listening, and if this episode resonated with you, we'd love for you to share it. The more these stories are heard, the more space we make for creating real change. Hit us up on our Facebook or Instagram or reach out to us at stories@purpleorange.org.au