



NOV 2 • WRITTEN BY SHRUTI RAJKUMAR

I Am Not The Standard & That's Okay



Graphic by Christine Park

Within Indian culture, there is a strong value placed on studies and a successful future, resulting in a high expectation for Indian kids to do well in school and join as many extracurricular activities as possible. Due to this, my parents pushed me to take piano lessons and join the school band, adaptive tennis, and adaptive skiing. It's a universal experience for Indian kids to feel immense pressure to achieve these Indian standards. However, as a disabled person, this pressure seemed amplified.

All of the extracurricular activities I participated in posed an accessibility challenge for me. Years of piano lessons and playing the

flute in my school band would cause me joint pain from my limited dexterity and hand-eye coordination. A year of adaptive tennis left callouses on the soles of my feet. During the two years of adaptive skiing, my energy was drained in minutes, and I became close to severely injuring myself on multiple occasions.

I continued with these activities for years because I was told that they would make me a well-rounded individual. If inaccessibility presented itself, my parents often found alternative solutions so that I could still be involved. If challenges persisted, I was told “practice makes perfect” or “keep trying, you’ll get it eventually,” even if it caused me pain to do so.

Having grown up in a predominantly white town with very few disabled people my age, I was never told that pushing myself past my physical boundaries in order to achieve the Indian standard was ableist. In 2014, I became connected with the disabled community through Twitter and started to reflect how abled-bodied and Indian standards were harmfully being projected onto me.

One of the first activists I found online was Imani Barbarin. Looking back, I’ve realized that I was drawn to her and her activism because she was the first disabled woman of color I had ever seen other than myself. As I scrolled through her account, I came across a hashtag she created called [#AbleDsAreWeird](#), a space where disabled people tweeted about their ableist experiences. I sat in my bed with tears in my eyes as I read the tweets under the hashtag and thought: “That has happened to me too!” and “I hear that *all* the time.” This was a moment of clarity, because I also experienced hearing comments and encountering situations that made me feel uncomfortable, but I was never able to identify these experiences as ableist.

In an interview with [National Public Radio](#), Barbarin said:

“The most impactful result of this hashtag is that disabled people get to talk to one another and feel not alone. A lot of times in the moment, you really don’t know what to say, and you kinda feel like you’re letting yourself down in a way because you’re not sticking up for yourself. But this gives people a chance to revisit those moments and maybe, hopefully, put some of them to peace.”

Just as Barbarin had hoped, I started to look back on my past experiences and upon reflection, I remembered the ableist conversations I had in doctor’s appointments as a child. These conversations typically started off with small talk by asking me what I like to do for fun. My mom would always urge me to list the many extracurricular activities I was involved in, even though I never classified them as “fun.” She would then proceed to explain my disability to the doctor and end the conversation by saying, “Our goal is to get her to walk independently without using crutches.”

Those appointments reminded me of the path I was put on and the goals I was expected to achieve. I realized that I was forced into inaccessible extracurriculars, so I could assimilate into the Indian and able-bodied standards.

My parents projected the Indian and able-bodied standards onto me, so that they could fit me in a box. But, I’ve realized that box was far too small for me, and my body was never meant to fit into it.

Today, I am an openly proud disabled woman of color who knows who she is.

It took me a while to break free from the cultural standards I was forced to live up to and to figure out who I actually am. Rejecting the Indian and able-bodied standards took small yet significant actions. I first started by dropping piano lessons, which instantly relieved my physical pain in my hands. Then, I stopped taking band class, tennis, and skiing. At the time, I wasn’t consciously rejecting those standards, but rather listening to what my body was begging me to do for so long.

It felt odd and almost wrong to drop all of the activities I had dedicated years of my life to, but in those moments of uncertainty, I reminded myself that this feeling was a product of ableism in our society. Saying no doesn’t mean you’re weak or unwilling, it just means that you know and respect your body’s limits.

For most of my life, I felt like I didn't really know who I was. I dedicated years of my life to activities I never liked doing. After quitting, I slowly began exploring my interests that were accessible to me. I began writing poetry in my free time and playing around with different makeup styles. If my hands ever got tired from typing for too long or were shaky after holding a makeup brush, I allowed myself to rest, which was my way of rejecting the ableist concept that disabled people need to continuously be resilient by pushing through pain and inaccessibility in order to succeed.

Initially, I struggled to identify moments of ableism because of its normalization in society. However, I am now able to recognize personal experiences with ableism by acknowledging how my body reacts in the moment. Before I knew what ableism was, I always had this gut feeling that something was wrong. This was my body's way of warning me about ableism. At the end of the day, I know my body and its limits better than anyone else, and I deserve to be afforded agency.

Over the past few years, I've become vocal within the disabled community online. This community helped me find my love for activism and writing. I wanted to correct the ways in which the media reports on the disabled community and give a voice to disabled people. I wanted to change the perception of my community, so I decided to attend Emerson College and major in journalism. Through the articles I've written and the organizations I've joined, I finally found my voice.

I don't fit the Indian standard or the able-bodied standard, and I'm learning to be okay with that. It's taken a while, but I'm realizing that I don't need to live up to standards that are unattainable for the body I live in. I do not exist to be perceived by the abled-bodied gaze. I exist solely for me—by my own standards.

Shruti Rajkumar

< L'shana Tova from the Duck Pond

The Intersectionalist

Editorially independent publication dedicated to
uplifting the voices of marginalized communities.

Made with [Squarespace](#)

Emerson
College

120 Boylston St.
Boston,
Massachusetts

Find us on Instagram!

