



## Gray Area Thinking®: How to Welcome and Accept Diverse Humans

Everyone habitually categorizes and groups others who appear “different” from “us,” which often lends to black and white thinking, as in “we” versus “them” or “good” versus “bad” or “American” versus “immigrant” and a host of other isolating labels. With this presentation, Human Inspiration Works, LLC founder and president Ellie Krug offers a toolset—Gray Area Thinking®—for interacting with diverse humans in a mindful and compassionate way.

Because Ellie has experienced what it means to move from one of “us” (as an ostensibly heterosexual Christian white male) to one of “them” (as a bisexual Buddhist transgender female—we know, holy cow!), she has a far better idea of what discrimination and “otherness” feels like compared to when she lived as a high-earning white male trial lawyer. She also better understands what it’s like to be part of a community that society often marginalizes or even shuns.

Finally, Ellie believes that 99 percent of all humans want to do the right thing; it’s just that many of us don’t know what the right thing is or we’re afraid to take risks that involve interacting with people who are “different” from “us.” With this talk, Ellie offers a way—a toolset—for getting past our fears to do the right thing.

### 1. First, how the Deck is Stacked toward Grouping and Labeling

- The absence of a Human Owner's Manual.
- Our default to grouping and labeling.
- The concept of tribalism—insider vs. outsider.
- Neurobiology at work: Fight or Flight?
- Awareness that explicit bias and implicit bias exist despite our best wishes.
- The “Bystander Effect”—operating on cues from others.
- Saving Grace No. 1; humans want to do the right thing—hardwiring for empathy and compassion (or, how rats can teach us a thing or two!).
- Saving Grace No. 2: buttressing empathy by remembering the **Four Commonalities**: (1) a desire for our children (or nieces or nephews) to succeed; (2) the need to be free of physical or emotional violence; (3) wanting 20 minutes of personal peace; and (4) the need to love and be loved.
- How the Four Commonalities form a basis for radically changing our fear-driven society to one that’s more inclusive and accepting of all.
- Remembering the person who pours the water at the restaurant tonight.
- The power of normalization; good and bad.
- The Identity Game—how self-labeling/categorizing drives humans.

## 2. Engaging in Gray Area Thinking®

- Societal/cultural biases for black-and-white thinking: good vs. bad; gay vs. straight; success vs. failure; rich vs. poor.
- Gender translated: there's only male or female, assigned at birth; the core belief that birth gender should be "forever."
- In reality, many persons "live in the gray" relative to gender, sexuality, race, religion, careers, relationships, etc.
- Awareness that explicit bias, implicit bias, micro-inequities, micro-aggressions, and cultural incompetency/arrogance all exist.
- The difference between arrogance and curiosity.
- **Hallmarks of Gray Area Thinking®:**
  - (a) Awareness of human vulnerability (or suffering);
  - (b) A willingness to take risks to soften or lessen another's vulnerability (or suffering);
  - (c) Compassion/kindness.
- Darnell Barton: The epitome of "Living in the Gray."
- Day-to-day awareness, risk-taking, and the payoffs from compassion.
- Strangers, Weirdos, and "Those People"—the value of openness.
- A pitch for self-help and other groovy stuff: Gray Area Thinking® works inward as well as outward!
- Remember **ARC** (Awareness, Risk-taking, Compassion/Kindness).

## 3. Inclusivity and Allyship

Diversity is about *numbers* whereas Inclusivity is about *action*.

The 3 Levels of Inclusivity: Tolerance, Acceptance and "Party Host."

"Ally" is an *identity*; "Allyship" is a form of *action*.

Some suggested inclusivity and allyship actions and understandings:

- Get to know people's stories: "Tell me your story." In the process, understand commonalities (and remember the Four Commonalities); this is how we learn to accept others.
- Create space for persons who live in the margins; don't allow for a thin margin for failure.
- No apples-to-apples treatment—SAT or ACT test scores don't tell the complete story; persons with privilege haven't learned poverty or marginalized life skillsets.
- Persons of color or from marginalized communities can't be on every committee; be an ally/engage in allyship in their place.
- Don't be afraid to speak up for a person: "Don't touch her hair" "Remember, he uses male pronouns now."
- Understand that society easily utilizes double standards and ask why that has to be.
- The difference between "opinion" and "experience."
- Don't assume that you know what everyone's experience is; it's true that society treats "different" persons "differently"; you can't get blisters unless you walk in another person's shoes (or vice versa).
- Allyship enriches those for whom you're speaking up and yourself. It's all about respectful empowerment in multiple ways.

- Sharing about commonalities not ground in race—children, survivorship (a parent's alcoholism or divorce) or a sibling's disability.
- Share about the 3 Levels of Inclusivity (Tolerance, Acceptance and "Party Host").
- A truly inclusive community is filled with Party Hosts!
- Inclusivity must be a constant value; it requires a positive, on-going culture in the workplace and the community.
- Inclusivity will not occur without culture leader buy-in, leadership, and modeling; otherwise, the organization will waste time, money and people.
- Writing a check to a cause is just not enough.
- Don't laugh at someone's jokes or marginalizing— "Not cool."
- The dark side of familiarity—humans can tolerate almost anything if they hear it/experience it enough.
- What's happening at your "front counter" relative to customer service and colleague interactions? Are they treating the white woman wearing pearls differently than how they treat the Black woman wearing a hijab?

### **Personal Contact/Consulting Information/Standing Offer**

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Sign up for my newsletter, *The Ripple*, by clicking on "Newsletters/Media" at [www.elliekrug.com](http://www.elliekrug.com)

Listen to podcasts from my AM950 radio show, "Ellie 2.0" (Mondays 7:30-8 a.m. CST) at <http://www.am950radio.com/events/ellie-2-0/>

Many of my talks/presentations inspire others to live authentically no matter what the challenges or hurdles (e.g. cisgender people find meaning from my words, too!).

*My standing offer:* any human can contact me relative to gender or sexual identity issues or anything else related to surviving the Human Condition. I'm a good listener and willing to meet with anyone in a public place or speak on the telephone for up to an hour. This is a real offer. Email: [elliekrug@gmail.com](mailto:elliekrug@gmail.com)

*Please have compassion for yourself and for others and remember the need for Gray Area Thinking®!*

*ellie*

*Encouraging open hearts and thriving human spirits*



## Now What? Using GAT Going Forward

Okay, you and your team members have gone through Ellie's incredible, wonderful, fantastic (sure, just keep tossing the accolades El...) Gray Area Thinking® (GAT) human inclusivity training.

So now what? How do you put that training to practical use? How do you keep GAT from being yet another one of "those" trainings that you soon forget?

Here are some quick and easy ideas.

1. First, make sure to master the three GAT elements: Awareness of human vulnerability or suffering; Risk-taking to lessen or alleviate that vulnerability/suffering; and acting with Compassion and Kindness. Remember "ARC." Then, pause (remember, we're all so busy and often don't pay attention) to think of a recent instance where, had you known about GAT, you would have exercised ARC toward another human or group of humans. Learn from that and vow to do better next time.

2. Do a Deep Dive: Engage in prompt-based discussions (contact me for the prompts) with team members/colleagues about their reactions/experience in participating in the GAT training. Use what you hear to consider the ways in which your organization can break through tribalism and become more inclusive; the goal is to be Party Host-focused! In fact, some organizations infuse Gray Area Thinking® principles into their values and visioning documents. Also:

- Consider Ways of Making Compassion an Institutional Value. The Identity Game teaches that we collectively hold compassion as a core personal identity and value. Is the word "compassion" found in any organizational documents, such as a visioning statement? Do you talk about the need for compassion for others and self at meetings? Is compassion discussed in company newsletters? Spotlight team members who've exhibited compassion for others or for themselves—share names and examples.
- Develop a "Living" Inclusivity, Diversity and Equity plan. I recommend that all organizations (business, academic, nonprofit, or governmental) have a written IDE plan that includes GAT principles and a provision for accountability. Make that plan "living" by regularly revisiting it to ensure that you are fulfilling its vision, values and goals; adjust as necessary.
- Institute a Mentoring and Sponsorship Program (or evaluate existing programs). Not everyone is cut out to be a mentor and even fewer are good sponsors. Do the hard work of teaching folks how to mentor and sponsor; identify those who will make good mentors or sponsors and pair them to diverse team members. Figure out who are the poor mentors and if they don't respond to coaching, don't make them mentors.

- Develop Employee Resource Groups. Affinity groups are great ways to make people feel as if they matter (remember, “mattering” is the most basic test for an inclusive organization). Empower those groups to act in a variety of ways, including organizing book clubs where team members discuss books or articles themed around compassion and societal challenges to diversity and inclusion.

2. Do a Moderate Dive: Post the GAT toolset elements within your organization (in conference rooms or at the water cooler or via an intranet or all) and include any photographs from the GAT training day. Consider adding a GAT section to your organization’s newsletter and invite readers/team members to submit examples of how they’ve exercised Gray Area Thinking® either within the organization or in their personal lives. Praise those folks for their compassion and action!

3. Do a Shallow Dive: Be aware of your inherent tendency to group and label others and identify the various “tribes” to which you belong—where we tend to think of “us” and “them.” Consider how your daily tribal behavior or that of other tribe members works to exclude humans. Break through tribalism by reaching out to non-tribe humans; it can be as simple as deciding to sit at the table of strangers or instructing your team members to do the same.

4. Engage in Self-Compassion. The Identity Game often reveals that we are not alone in feeling as if we’re not up to the task of successfully living life or succeeding at work/in our career/personal life. I always recommend that humans (1) regularly journal with ink on paper—journaling is a safe place to work out things in your head; (2) engage with a therapist—it’s critical to have independent perspective; and (3) ask yourself one question a day: *Am I doing my best under the circumstances as they presently exist?* If the honest answer to that question is “Yes,” then that’s all anyone can expect of one’s self. If the honest answer is “No,” then do what you need to get to “Yes.”

5. Invite Me Back to Conduct More Training. I know this sounds self-serving, but it’s important to not make Gray Area Thinking® a one-off. Workplace Inclusivity and Allyship 101 training is a natural extension of GAT. So too is conducting Talking Circles (directed team member conversations around diversity and inclusion) where we can go in depth; often, we hear about things that are below the surface which significantly impact inclusivity and cohesiveness.

Thanks for the opportunity to present to your organization. Go forward with compassion for others and for one’s self!

*ellie*

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