

An office desk with a computer monitor, keyboard, mouse, and telephone. The desk is white with a dark top. A black office chair is positioned in front of the desk. The background is a plain white wall.

THE
Signature

TOUGHNESS

OF ADMINISTRATIVE PROFESSIONALS

By Courtney Clark

Any given day in the life of a NALS member is a gauntlet of competing priorities. There are the last-minute requests; the never-ending focus shifts; being the “go-to” person for any question, activity, or problem. And on top of it all, being expected to keep up a positive demeanor as the face of the leadership you represent.

How do NALS members do it all?

The secret is resilience. Resilience is what allows us to bounce back quickly in the face of a setback. Resilience is how we keep our perspective during a bad day. And resilience is what keeps us from burning out when the stress gets too high. When an organization brings me in to help their teams cope with change and challenge, I often find that a few focus shifts help a great deal to build resilience.

There are several highly regarded techniques for building greater resilience that are perfectly suited for administrative professionals. The first technique involves taking a closer look at our habit of “venting.” Often we find ourselves in situations we cannot immediately change or impact, so we default to venting. We vent our frustrations to our spouse, our friends, pretty much anyone who will listen because it makes us feel better. Or, at least, we think it does . . .

The truth? Research shows that complaining is actually counterproductive to feeling better. Researchers asked people to spend a week bottling up their feelings instead of venting, and they found that one of two things happened: about half of the research subjects got incredibly frustrated because they did not have the little release of venting. However, after that initial frustration, half of the research subjects found creative ways to make changes to their situation. Once they stopped venting, they hit rock bottom with their situation, but at rock bottom a new solution emerged.

The second group stopped venting and found that without rehashing the situation over and over and over, their frustration seemed to dissipate. It did not go away completely, but somehow venting was making the situation worse. The research suggests that frequent complaining about a situation allows us to blow off just enough steam that we do not really feel the need to make any changes to our situation. Venting also keeps a problem front and center in our minds, which keeps our stress level high. To build greater resilience, be careful about too much venting. Productive conversation to solve a problem is good, but simple venting is a known resilience killer.

Another resilience-enhancing tool is perspective. Human beings have always had an instinct for comparison and maybe it used to serve us. Our ancestors could look at their neighbors in the cave next door and think, “hmmm . . . I wish I could make a fire that big.” But then the keeping up with the Jones’s culture came around and turned us all into super-consumers. On the flip side, playing the comparison game can also damage your resilience by making you feel like you have it so good that you should not be complaining about your lot in life. Have you ever heard anyone say, “Well, you should not be complaining about work. At least YOU still have a job! Steve got fired!”? Or how about, “I know your kid is not sleeping right now, but you really should not complain when you know Anna cannot even get pregnant. She would kill to have your problems!”

There are two things you can do to refocus your perspective—quit playing the comparison game and start giving back to others. First, taking yourself out of the comparison game requires that you see the world through the lens of reality. And I do not mean reality TV! Reality television is actually one of the worst comparison traps in existence with the glamorous jewelry and fast cars of the so-called stars. Even closer to home, social media can be a real resilience-killer these days as well. When you log on to your computer and see other people’s fancy vacations, gourmet cooking skills, and loving family photos, it is easy to think that everyone else has it better or easier

than you. A friend's grandmother once told me "Never compare your insides to somebody else's outsides." If you compare the glossy exterior you see from other people to the doubts, fears, and stress living in your own mind, your life seemingly does not stack up. It is hard to be emotionally tough when your brain is telling you that you have it worse than everyone else, so stop playing the comparison game. It is not the truth anyway.

The other perspective-getting tool I use is volunteering. Research shows, in fact, that giving back to other people helps us cope with our own issues, even the most traumatic situations. In my book *The Giving Prescription*, I studied all the research on what happens when people give back to others following a trauma and found lots of proof that being charitable to other people is one of the best, most complete ways to heal.

The interesting thing about using volunteering to get perspective is *why* it works. You might think that helping someone else gives you perspective

because you notice how much better you have it than others. But the research shows that is not why. It is actually because you discover that no matter how bad you do have it, there is still something within you that you can give to someone else, something you have that can help someone. That realization helps you regain your personal power and, therefore, your resilience.

Resilience is as necessary a tool for NALS members as a working computer. Yet so often it is a skill that we neglect in the hustle and bustle of life. By building your resilience in a few simple ways, you can prepare yourself to handle any struggle with grace.

Courtney Clark works with organizations to build resilience in their team members so they can handle challenge and struggle smart. She is the author of *The Giving Prescription*, a three-time cancer survivor, brain aneurysm survivor, keynote speaker, and founder of a nonprofit. www.CourtneyLClark.com

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