



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Helping your kids build a thick skin

Some of the best advice I ever received came after my first big job promotion.

I was 23 and the newly tapped executive speech writer for a large company. My primary responsibility was to prepare notes for the CEO's speaking engagements.

Because he was a terrific speaker, he often spoke off-the-cuff. What this meant for me was that I might spend three weeks working diligently on a speech only to have him use a sentence or two.

As my boss prepared me for what would come, he mentioned this: "You need a thick skin if you don't have one already because he might use all of your speech or none of it, and you can't take it personally."

He was talking about the job, of course, but what I've realized in the years since is how relevant this advice is to life. You see, I'm sensitive by nature, and while I've come to appreciate this about myself, I've also come to see how important it is to have a thick skin when living in a broken, unpredictable world.

When you're sensitive, life affects you deeply. While your highs can be really high, your lows can be really low. Since you empathize well, you tend to be a good friend. You can recognize when someone's hurting and know when to offer encouragement.

In terms of handling life's hard or unexpected knocks, however, being sensitive can be a liability. It can amplify your disappointments and make rejection more painful. You might want to retreat (or worse yet, quit) over minor setbacks. Even constructive criticism can be hard to take. Instead of seeing a growth opportunity, you might take it as a personal attack. You might turn small slights into big deals because you're so emotionally invested.

Truth be told, our world isn't made for sensitive people. It's made for survivors. It's made for people who can adapt, roll with the punches and handle challenges without falling to pieces. The tricky part is learning to build a thick skin *while keeping a tender heart*. That's my hope for me and my family, that we can be resilient on the outside yet soft inside, able to handle any hard realities without letting them seep under our skin to harden us.

Among my daughters, I have one who's especially sensitive like me. And one thing we work on is letting things roll off her shoulders. There was a time when she'd get upset over someone

calling her Barbie too pink. She'd cry and run to her room if her sister critiqued her cartwheel.

As I consoled her in her meltdowns, I'd share stories about how easily I got my feelings hurt while growing up. I'd reassure her that it's good to be sensitive because it means she has extra love and compassion to share, but building a thick skin would keep things from going straight to her heart. Without some protection, the world might crush her.

"When you get your feelings hurt, see if you can let it *roll off your shoulders*," I'd say, illustrating by placing my hands on her shoulders and sliding them down her arms. "Don't let the words stick. Let them *roll off your shoulders*."

We'd repeat this several times with my hands over hers. By the fourth or fifth try, her demeanor would change. She'd quit crying, sit up straight and say with confidence as she did the hand motions alone, "I'm letting it *roll off my shoulders*, I'm letting it *roll off my shoulders*!"

Her voice grew loud and bold as the words came out. She smiled and looked relieved instead of sad. These little sessions helped toughened her up a bit, and while I know there will be bigger breakdowns ahead, at least we have groundwork in place. She's starting to understand how to cope with frustration.

We can't always control how people treat us. We can't predict what cards we'll be dealt or make our boss use the speech that we labored over for weeks. But we can control our response. We can keep our moods independent of others so that no matter what *they* say, do, or decide, *we* are okay.

Certainly, we all should be more kind and gentle. At the same time, we need a thick skin to handle potentially hurtful situations. Being tender yet tough isn't easy, but it's important to find the right balance. By keeping our heart in the right place and right condition, we ensure that regardless of what the world gives us, we continue to give our best: our best love, our best performance and our best foot forward.

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