Fear fact cards saved my life. It’s simple — grabbing an index card, writing a fear on the front, and a fact on the back — but to me, it gave me the courage to hug my mother again.

My fear fact cards are small pieces of paper that help me manage my thoughts. I consider them products of my “touched” soul. Some may call it being highly emotional or empathetic, but I refer to it as my sensitivity. As a child, I became scared easily, reacted differently to my surroundings, and felt highly vulnerable. I hated it.

When I was eight years old, I developed emetophobia, the extreme fear of vomiting. I washed my hands every few minutes. I refused to go to “dirty” places like cities or crowded places. I avoided things that sick people touched. And the list goes on.

At the time, my parents and I viewed my behavior as a silly childhood fear that would eventually perish. But it began to consume me. The weight of my terror buried my rational thoughts. I refused to leave my house. My hands turned purple from overwashing and peeled like a snake. I became numb to reality.

The nine months following the progression of my emetophobia were both the worst and best parts of my life. I began exposure therapy for treatment. It started with small tasks like touching the surface of a table for thirty seconds. Each week, I was given another task to do, and each time, they became severely more uncomfortable.

Dreadful was an understatement. I was forced to listen to the sounds of people vomiting. I had to watch people throw up and to step in vomit. My worst nightmares were physically presented to me. But after months of learning how to cope and using fear fact cards, I used my resilience to overcome this panic.

Fears never go away completely. I continue to deal with slight emetophobia. But my fear fact cards have given me the strength to deflect the little voice in my head that tries to hold me back. In middle school, they supported me in conquering stage fright. In the beginning of high school, they helped me be at ease with others. Now, they continue to assist me with improving my self-esteem. While my sensitivity may have caused my emetophobia, it has shown me that I am capable of persevering.

It has also shown me the ways I can utilize it to deeply connect with people. My mom always told me, “Your ability to feel so much only proves how big your heart is.” I now embrace my hyper-sensitivity as a tool to express and explore the world around me.

One day, when a girl on my volleyball team came to practice, I immediately noticed her fiddling hands and tired eyes. Her energy slightly shifted and I decided to check on her after a few minutes of giving her space. She was surprised I noticed since no one else had. I supported her by listening and giving advice. I later learned that she was at a low point in that moment and that my small gesture made a much bigger impact than I realized.

Now, as a rising filmmaker, I want to show the world the beauty of vulnerability by fully immersing an audience in raw emotion. I recently directed a piece that captured how my best friends and I met and how our connection has supported us through our lowest times. We cried in each others’ arms after I showed them the way I remember our story. These moments are the ones I want to preserve and share. I hope to empower others to accept themselves and their values. Through my art, I will give people the space to embrace their sensitivity as I freely unveil the essence of my heart.