What Sensory Processing Difficulties Feels Like

I jump out of the car at the supermarket - here to pick up a few things with Mummy. It's the end of a mentally tiring day, so I'm feeling pensive. On top of that, I woke up this morning with a sore throat that is irritating more than anything else.

As we go to step over the threshold at the supermarket's entrance, I suddenly feel that I don't want anything or anyone to touch me: I don't want to touch the cart because my hands will feel dirty, and I can't stand to have anyone near me. Unfortunately for me the supermarket is packed at this hour, and the first couple of aisles - fruits and veggies, pastas and tinned goods - are especially populated. Everyone who comes within two feet of me I automatically go into fight or flight mode: I have to move away or I feel like I will physically push the person away.

While looking at the tinned foods a child is there and doing everything children do: talking, and moving a lot. I am well aware that her movements mean that she is liable to touch me accidentally, which makes me extremely uncomfortable, but I want to get my tins of tuna! On top of which, the child's movements are wreaking havoc with my visual system: the speed of her hand or whatever she is doing is too much visually for me to process, and I am getting even more irritated.

By the time we get to the snack and cereal aisle the child is there again and I just want to get my things and go. Noises are now bothering me - the music on the supermarket radio, people talking. I tell Mummy there are too many people around. But I still want my food, so I trudge on. From now on though, I cross my arms in front of me (elbows can be used as weapons if necessary) and my nails are digging into my fists so tightly I'm sure they are forming dents.

The next few aisles are quick to pass through but by the time we get to the checkout I've had more than enough and I just need to go. Fortunately Mummy senses this and hands me the keys to the car. I rush out quickly, almost on the verge of tears because it is too much stimulation.

When I get to the car I relax, but realise my heart is beating faster than normal and my head feels weighted. And I still feel to cry. All this from a simple trip to the supermarket.

I work with children who have trouble processing their various senses: sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste, and the lesser-known senses of movement and balance, and knowing where the body is in relation to other objects. Some of these children are diagnosed with autism or other conditions; some are just like me - the different senses do not work as they should all the time to help the body function effectively. Sometimes one or more if the senses is working overtime, or not working enough, and this can throw someone off-kilter. Someone can be extremely sensitive to noise and may react by covering his or her ears, or a sensitivity to touch may result in a strong dislike for certain fabrics or tags on clothing. Sensory overload (too much information from one or a combination of senses) can result in a tantrum, rocking to block out some of the "noise", or finding various ways to cope that may or may not be socially appropriate.

While I was able to continue shopping and maintain some degree of functionality, children or people with more severe sensory issues would have a much harder time ignoring their feelings in order to function normally. These sensory difficulties may take precedence over anything else, making simple tasks seem monumental. Unfortunately for children or those who have difficulty communicating, it's hard to articulate the problem. What is needed is patience and a desire for those around to understand what is going on before jumping to conclusions ("that child need lix!" "That child is spoilt, look at how he/she gettin' on in public, and the parents not doin' anything!")

If you happen to see a child having a tantrum or a difficult time, or even reacting negatively or "inappropriately", try to understand all the reasons rather than be judgmental. If anything, you can always ask the parent and maybe even offer any assistance. Ignorance is never acceptable.