

# Holden caulfield and depression in the catcher in the rye

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## Introduction

The Catcher in the Rye is a literature classic that follows the story of Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year-old student. He is kicked out of a boarding school and told not to return after Christmas break. He decides to head back to New York City, where he is from, but he doesn't go home. He decides it's best if he stays away from home. This leads to a number of bad decisions that occur over three days. These events are being told by Holden from a hospital bed in California. Though it is not clearly stated, it can be inferred from the story that he is in a mental institution. Throughout the story, Holden expresses signs of having a mental health disorder. He mainly shows signs attributed to depression. The experiences and thoughts of Holden Caulfield accurately represent those of real-world depression patients.

## Cynicism

Throughout the novel, Holden acts cynical and negative towards many things. He views many things as “phony” and he doesn’t trust many people. In New York City, he calls Sally Hayes, a friend of his, and schedules a date with her. When he asks, she responds with, “That’d be grand” (Salinger 57). Holden hates this, “Grand. There’s a word I really hate. It’s a phony. I could puke every time I hear it” (Salinger 57). Holden later refers to Sally as “the queen of all phonies” (Salinger 63) and calls her snotty, “She was still being snotty on account of her ankles when she was skating” (Salinger 70). After the play Sally and Holden see, Holden sees all the people and views them all as “phony”, “At the end of the first act we went out with all the other jerks for a cigarette. What a deal that was. You never saw so many phonies in all your life, everybody smoking their ears off and talking about the play so that everybody could hear and know how sharp they were” (Salinger 68). Sally meets a guy she knew and Holden sees him as phony. He states, “The worst part was, the jerk had one of those very phony, Ivy League voices, one of those very tired, snobby voices. He sounded just like a girl” (Salinger 69). He is very untrustworthy of people. When speaking about schools, he says, “The more expensive a school is, the more crooks it has—I’m not kidding” (Salinger 2). When Sally compliments him and calls his hair lovely, he doesn’t believe what she is saying and thinks, “Lovely my ass” (Salinger 67). He often insults others and makes fun of them, criticizing their problems without recognizing his own. When talking about a student in his school, Ackley, he says, “He hardly ever went anywhere. He was a very peculiar guy” (Salinger 10). Real world depression patients often have a cynical

outlook on life and are untrustworthy to cope with their depression, “Cynicism is part of a defensive technique taken as protection” (“Depression and Cynicism”). Holden acts this way to hide his own insecurities.

## **Loss of Interest**

Another symptom attributed to depression is a loss of interest in many things, “People typically exhibit multiple of the following behaviors and symptoms Loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities, such as sex, hobbies or sports,” (“Depression (Major Depressive Disorder)”). Holden also exhibits this behavior. Very few things keep his interest and it affects multiple aspects of his life. In school, he expresses this to his professor saying, “That is all I know about the Egyptians. I can’t seem to get very interested in them although your lectures are very interesting” (Salinger 7). Because of Holden’s extreme lack of interest, he fails four out of five classes. Depression affects all aspects of life, “Depression is technically a mental disorder, but it also affects your physical health and well-being” (“The Effects of Depression”) and can lead to serious problems for a person.

## **Traumatic Experience**

The exact causes of depression are unknown. However, it can stem from trauma and other bad experiences from the past, “Early childhood trauma can cause depression. This is because some events impact the way the body reacts to fear and stressful situations” (“Depression”). Holden had a traumatic experience as a child, the loss of his brother, Allie. After this, a noticeable change in his behavior occurs. The night he died is when the change first occurs, “I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all

the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was already broken and everything by that time, and I couldn't do it" (Salinger 21). From here on out, Holden was never the same. He viewed Allie as innocent and didn't believe he should've died, " I know it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn't stand it anyway. I just wish he wasn't there" (Salinger 82 – 83). He begins to see the world as unfair, after Allie's death. Allie's death took away Holden's innocence. He wants this innocence back. He doesn't want anyone to experience his loss of innocence. He bought a red hat at the beginning of the novel. The significance of this is that his brother, Allie, had red hair. He often wears the hat when feeling awkward, embarrassed or uneasy. The hat reminds him of Allie and he feels safe in the hat.

## **Suicidal Thoughts**

Depression is a serious issue and if it goes untreated for long enough, it can lead to one taking their life, " Depression is a key risk factor for suicide" (" Suicide"). Suicide rates have spiked in recent years and suicide is a huge problem, " Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the US" (" Suicide Statistics"). Holden has suicidal thoughts multiple times throughout the novel. After being beaten up by Maurice, Holden lies on the floor and thinks, " What it did feel like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window" (Salinger 57). At one point, Holden begins picturing his funeral, " I kept picturing her not knowing what to do with all my suits and athletic equipment and all. The only good thing, I knew she wouldn't let old Phoebe

come to my goddam funeral because she was only a little kid. That was the only good part” (Salinger 83). Suicide and suicidal thoughts often are only a part of a bigger issue, “ Roughly 50% of people who died by suicide had a known mental disorder” (“ Risk of Suicide”). Holden’s depression has led him to contemplate suicide.

## **Alcohol Abuse**

Many people with depression, don’t get professional help. So in order to cope with their emotions, they turn to alcohol and other forms of substance abuse, “ Among individuals with recurring major depression, roughly 16. 5 percent have an alcohol use disorder and 18 percent have a drug use disorder” (“ Substance Abuse and Depression”). Holden does the same. In chapter twenty, Holden is feeling very lonesome so he calls a friend to have a few drinks with. The friend doesn’t like the immature conversation they are having, so he decides to leave. Holden begs him to stay, ““ Have just one more drink,’ I told him. ‘ Please. I’m lonesome as hell. No kidding”” (Salinger 80). After his friend leaves he stays at the bar, getting very drunk, “ Boy, I sat at that goddam bar till around one o’clock or so, getting drunk as a bastard. I could hardly see straight” (Salinger 80). Holden is “ self-medicating” with alcohol because he doesn’t know what else to do, or who else to turn to.

## **Bad Decisions**

Depression has a huge impact on one’s mental state. It affects the ability to make decisions as it clouds judgment, “ Another symptom attributed to depression is a diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness,

nearly every day” (“ Depression Symptoms”). During this three day period, Holden makes many bad decisions. After a night of drinking, Holden decides to sit out in the freezing cold with no jacket on and he almost dies, “ Anyway, I kept worrying that I was getting pneumonia, with all those hunks of ice in my hair, and that I was going to die” (Salinger 83). Another mistake is not owning up to his being expelled to his parents and instead, running away. Those suffering from depression tend to avoid admitting that they have a problem, “ Many people who have depression do not get help” (Suicide and Depression”). Those suffering from depression often, blame others, push others away, and refuse to help themselves. A major theme in *The Catcher in the Rye* is running away. Holden is constantly running away from his problems, like being expelled, and avoids them. One thing Holden constantly brings up is the ducks in Central Park. The ducks are migrating and he wants to know where they are going. Holden is acting like a duck in the way he avoids having to deal with his issues. A fantasy Holden has is to run away and live in the forest with Sally, ‘ I know this guy down in Greenwich Village that we can borrow his car for a couple of weeks... What we could do is, tomorrow morning we could drive up to Massachusetts and Vermont, and all around there, see... We’ll stay in these cabin camps and stuff like that till the dough runs out. Then, when the dough runs out, I could get a job somewhere and we could live somewhere with a brook and all and, later on, we could get married or something” (Salinger 71). Holden wants to keep running away from his problems and never face them.

## Conclusion

Holden Caulfield is a troubled character who shows clear signs of clinical depression. From his outlook on the world to his actions, and even his past, it is very easy to see that he has a mental health issue and needed to seek help. He shows that he is suffering, even though, to everyone else he may seem fine. Depression is usually masked and Holden is shown to do this. The ending of the novel has no real resolution, but Holden seems to be taking steps in the right direction. He seems to be getting the help he needed. Throughout the story, Holden perfectly mirrored what it is like to actually be diagnosed with depression in the real world.