

# Mentally manipulated: holden caulfield and ptsd

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



One Johns Hopkins Study determined that 81% of young adults have been exposed to a traumatic event, while 8% of those exposed have developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (“ Blog”). The symptoms of PTSD can be divided into three groups: intrusive, avoidance, and hyperarousal (“ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”). Psychological trauma of exactly this sort often appears after the death of a loved one. Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is drastically affected after the deaths of his younger brother and of a school friend. Within J. D. Salinger’s narrative, it is clearly shown that the terrible events Holden Caulfield has been exposed to throughout his life have lead him to be affected by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Holden displays intrusive symptoms of PTSD, especially flashbacks.

At the beginning of the novel, Holden introduces the reader to his younger brother, Allie: “ My brother Allie had this left-handed fielder’s mitt. He was left handed. [...] He’s dead now. He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946” (Salinger 43). Holden’s story about Allie is a flashback to when Allie was alive and well. This shows that Holden does not want to believe that Allie has passed away and chooses to focus on the positive memories instead. Holden is in denial. Another flashback Holden has during the novel occurs when he becomes depressed. “ I felt so depressed, you can’t imagine. What I did, I started talking, sort of out loud, to Allie. I do that sometimes when I get very depressed” (Salinger 110). Holden is still speaking to Allie as if he is alive, remembering a better time. Later in the novel, when Phoebe tells Holden to think of something he truly enjoys, Holden can only think about an old memory of his, flashing back to the time his friend committed suicide while wearing his sweater. He remembers this

vividly, thinking, “ There was this boy I knew at Elkton Hills, named James Castle, that wouldn’t take back something he said about this very conceited boy, Phil Stable. [...] Finally what he did, instead of taking back what he said, he jumped out the window” (Salinger 188). This event has a significant effect on Holden; James Castle, someone whom Holden considers a friend, appears dead on the sidewalk wearing one of Holden’s sweaters, which is now covered in blood. This traumatic moment is forever ingrained in Holden’s head, and it creeps up on him when he is trying to recall pleasant memories. These events show how flashbacks, a symptom of PTSD, affect Holden on a regular basis.

Holden also displays the avoidance symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Feeling strong guilt, depression, and worry and having trouble remembering events are symptoms of avoidance that Holden Caulfield experiences as an effect of PTSD. A prime example of Holden having trouble remembering events as well as worrying excessively happens when Stradlater arrives home from his date. “ Some things are hard to remember. I’m thinking now of when Stradlater got back from his date with Jane. [...] I probably was still looking out the window, but I swear I can’t remember. I was so damn worried, that’s why” (Salinger 45). Holden’s anxiety is far above normal levels for a healthy person because it is affecting his daily habits, such as using the restroom. An instance where Holden feels strong guilt is when he starts talking to Allie as if he is there with him. Holden does this when he feels extra depressed, and it is always about the day where he did not let Allie come along with him and his friend, Bobby. An example is when Holden says, “ So once in a while now, when I get very depressed, I

keep saying to him, ' Okay. Go home and get your bike and meet me in front of Bobby's house. Hurry up'" (Salinger 110). The fact that Holden often recalls this moment displays his feelings of guilt pertaining to Allie. Holden also has strong feelings of depression along with suicidal thoughts. When Holden is trying to fall asleep in his hotel room, he writes, " What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window" (Salinger 116-117). The one factor holding Holden back from jumping is that people will have to see his dead body on the pavement, and he does not want to make other people go through the same situation he experiences when James Castle commits suicide, which still has a traumatic effect on him.

Even more intense than Holden's symptoms of avoidance are his symptoms of hyperarousal pertaining to PTSD. Prevalent especially during the end of the novel, Holden Caulfield experiences all of the symptoms of hyperarousal that are present with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which are angry outbursts, trouble sleeping, and being on edge. Most alarming is what happens immediately after Allie dies. Holden goes into a fit of rage, remembering, " I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don't blame them. I really don't" (Salinger 44). Holden's reaction to his brother's death is far beyond what is normal during times of grief, especially for a thirteen year old boy. When Holden says that he does not blame his parents for having him psychoanalyzed, it shows that Holden acknowledges that something is wrong with him and that he knows his reaction is abnormal. An example of a time where Holden has trouble sleeping occurs

when Holden is in the hotel in New York. “ It was still pretty early. I’m not sure what time it was, but it wasn’t too late. The one thing I hate to do is go to bed when I’m not even tired” (Salinger 74). Before arriving at his hotel in New York, Holden has been awake all day and been active, causing a normal person to become exhausted. In addition, once Holden has been in his hotel room for a while, he decides to go out and visit multiple clubs, as well as go dancing, before he returns to his hotel room and attempts to sleep. A situation where Holden is on edge occurs when he visits Mr. Antolini’s apartment. Holden is finally able to fall asleep, only to be awakened by something strange: “ I woke up all of a sudden. I don’t know what time it was or anything, but I woke up. I felt something on my head, some guy’s hand. [...] Boy, I’ll bet I jumped about a thousand feet” (Salinger 211). Holden is distressed and leaves Mr. Antolini’s apartment immediately after this incident occurs. He doesn’t give Mr. Antolini a chance to explain himself, and is paranoid, assuming the absolute worst about the situation.

Although many critics believe that Holden Caulfield is suffering from a mental illness such as PTSD, some commentators have argued the opposite. One of the most common objections to the claim that Holden has a mental illness is that the emotions he is feeling are normal for a teenager. While some of Holden’s actions are normal, his emotions are far beyond the realm of anyone who is sane. Another argument against Holden’s abnormal mental state is that Holden is just trying to make the transition from boy to man and does not approve of the phoniness and cruelty he sees in the world he is trying to embrace. The novel begins and ends with Holden in a mental institution, which is obviously not a place for someone who is emotionally

stable. Holden also displays problematic symptoms such as depression, suicidal thoughts and the inability to concentrate. The most common objection to the presence of a mental illness affecting Holden is that Holden is just whiny and insecure. Yet Holden's angry and pessimistic views towards the world connect with PTSD symptoms, such as feeling on edge. Depression also triggers negative thoughts, which is another symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. While critics try to argue that nothing is wrong with Holden Caulfield, evidence from the novel clearly proves that he is struggling with serious mental instability.

Holden Caulfield consistently shows symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the horrific events he has been exposed to throughout his life. He experiences intrusive, avoidance and hyperarousal symptoms which negatively affect his outlook on life. It is also important to point out that J. D. Salinger was diagnosed with PTSD, since authors often reflect their personal lives within their work ("J. D. Salinger had PTSD"). No matter how far Holden attempts to run from his problems, he can not escape them because they are inside of him. While some critics argue that Holden is a normal teenager, facts and evidence directly from Salinger's novel prove the theory that Holden Caulfield is, in fact, suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.