Julie Sowany

Ms. Smith

EN40SL

6 May 2020

Holden’s Struggle With Depression

How does one know if they have depression or are just going through a tough time? This question can be pondered as one considers Holden, the main character of J.D. Salinger’s novel The Catcher in the Rye. Holden is a sixteen-year-old boy who is attempting to transition from childhood to adulthood and problems arise, causing a decline in his mental health. Based on evidence in the story, Holden could be diagnosed with depression as he exhibits symptoms of depression such as being involved with alcohol and having compulsive sexual behaviour, losing interest in food, being sad, and having a preoccupation with death.

Common signs of teenage depression include the use of alcohol (Shroff) and having compulsive sexual behaviour (Mayo Clinic Staff). Holden is involved with both. Holden drinks alcohol a lot, especially for a sixteen-year-old. Whenever he is at a bar or club, he tries to order alcohol. He sometimes succeeds because of his tall height and grey hair on the right side of his head (Salinger 65). Holden once gets so drunk that he is not functioning well: “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 166). Additionally, Holden has compulsive sexual behaviour; the obsession with sex, through urges, behaviours or fantasies, to the point that it negatively affects one’s life (Mayo Clinic Staff). Holden often fixates on the topic of sex and brings it up in conversations in an attempt to fit in with the adults around him. An example of this is when Luce, a man that Holden knows, sits next to him at a bar and one of the first things Holden does is ask Luce how his sex life is (Salinger 159). When Luce makes it clear that he is annoyed and does not want to talk about it, Holden continues to press him because he is curious (Salinger 160-163). Holden also takes a man’s offer to hire a prostitute for Holden, although it is against his morals; “It was against my principles and all, but I was feeling so depressed I didn’t even *think*”(Salinger 102). He ends up making a poor decision because he is too obsessed with sex and not mentally well. Holden is also fixated on having sex for the first time, as he is a virgin (Salinger 103). Holden’s unhealthy habits involving alcohol and sex, as well as not eating enough, can be indicators that he has depression.

Another indicator that a teenager has depression is that they lose interest in food (Shroff). Holden is already skinny and claims he is a light eater (Salinger 120), and as the novel progresses Holden eats less and less. He goes a long time without eating food: “The last time I’d eaten was those two hamburgers I had with Brossard and Ackley when we went in to Agerstown to the movies. That was a long time ago. It seemed like fifty years ago” (Salinger 117). After saying this, Holden thinks of ordering breakfast from his hotel room, but he is anxious that the man bringing him the food would be Maurice, a man he has trouble with, so Holden decides not to eat (Salinger 117). Holden struggles to maintain a healthy weight (Salinger 120). When he does get food, Holden has difficulty eating. For example, after almost vomiting, perhaps due to his irregular intake of food, Holden orders doughnuts, but he is not able to physically swallow them: “The thing is, if you get very depressed about something, it’s hard as hell to swallow” (Salinger 216). Holden guesses the reason he is having this trouble with eating is because he is depressed. Some people do not have an appetite or desire to eat if they are sad.

An additional sign of teenage depression is sadness (Shroff). Holden becomes sadder as the novel progresses while he attempts to transition into adulthood, which is a difficult time for many young people. Holden often talks about how his surroundings make him depressed and how this depression affects his decision-making. When Holden is agreeing to hire the prostitute, he says, “I was feeling so depressed I didn’t even think” (Salinger 102). Holden’s emotions are causing him to make decisions he would not make if he were feeling happy. Holden’s mental state is also very unstable, which may be causing this sadness. Near the end of the novel, Holden suddenly breaks down in tears multiple times. One episode occurs when he is leaving his sister, Phoebe, after visiting her: “Then, all of a sudden, I started to cry. I couldn’t help it. I did it so nobody could hear me, but I did it. It scared hell out of old Phoebe when I started doing it, and she came over and tried to make me stop, but once you get started, you can’t just stop on a goddam *dime*” (Salinger 198). Holden is upset that he must leave Phoebe, but also moved by Phoebe’s gesture of lending him money (Salinger 198). This, along with his unstable metal state, is what causes his breakdown. Another occurrence of Holden’s lack of emotional control is at the very end of the novel when he and Phoebe are at the carousel. It begins to rain (Salinger 233), which foreshadows Holden crying. While watching Phoebe ride the carousel, the rain comes down harder, and Holden bursts into uncontrollable tears: “I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth” (Salinger 233). At this moment, Holden is realizing that he is leaving his childhood behind, but Phoebe keeps going around the carousel as she is still very much in childhood. This feeling is overwhelming for Holden. Because he does not quite understand his emotions, he decides he is feeling happiness, although it is much more complex since he appears to still be troubled and confused (SparkNotes Editors). Holden is also very emotional and sad when he thinks about death, especially his brother’s death.

Another sign of depression in teenagers is the preoccupation with death (Shroff). Death is often on Holden’s mind. He is still affected by his brother Allie’s passing. Holden loves Allie and speaks very highly of him: “But it wasn’t just that he was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways” (Salinger 43). The night when Allie died, Holden slept in the garage and broke all the windows (Salinger 44). This outburst shows how distraught Holden was and still is about Allie’s death. Near the end of the novel, when Holden’s mental health is quickly deteriorating, he becomes extremely anxious about crossing the street, so Holden pretends to talk to Allie to calm down: “I’d say to him, ‘Allie, don’t let me disappear. Allie, don’t let me disappear. Allie, don’t let me disappear. Please, Allie.’ And then when I’d reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I’d *thank* him” (Salinger 218). Allie and death are often on Holden’s mind. In addition, Holden ponders the idea of his own death. While sitting on a bench thinking about how he could die from pneumonia, Holden imagines, with much detail, his own funeral and who would attend it (Salinger 171). Furthermore, after a nerve-wracking argument with Maurice, Holden says he feels like jumping out a window and committing suicide, and probably would have done it if nobody saw his gory body on the ground (Salinger 117). It is not healthy for a teenager to think so much about death, and this thinking should be taken seriously as it can be a sign of depression.

Holden’s preoccupation with sex and alcohol, poor eating, sadness, and thoughts about death are not just because of a few bad days. It is likely that Holden is experiencing depression, which would explain why he ends up in a sanitorium. However, this is not a negative turn of events as Holden can get help and support there. Depression is a mental illness that affects many people, but it can be treated. Holden, and others in society with symptoms such as those experienced by Holden, can get assistance and support to improve their mental health and help them live fulfilling lives.

Works Cited

Mayo Clinic Staff. *Compulsive Sexual Behavior – Symptoms and Causes*. Mayo Clinic, 7 February 2020. www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/compulsive-sexual-behavior/symptoms-causes/syc-20360434. Accessed 3 May 2020.

Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye.* Little, Brown and Company, 1951.

Shroff, Amita. *Teen Depression: Causes, Symptoms, Heredity, and Treatments.* WebMD, 23 April 2018. www.webmd.com/depression/guide/teen-depression#1. Accessed 24 April 2020.

SparkNotes Editors. *The Catcher in the Rye: What Does the Ending Mean?* SparkNotes, 2005. www.sparknotes.com/lit/catcher/what-does-the-ending-mean/. Accessed 1 May 2020.