

## Holden Caulfield and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

After reading [Dr. Leymann's web pages about his research on mobbing](#), I was struck by these questions regarding J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: **was Holden Caulfield suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? Why?** and **Are his fans suffering from PTSD?**

First, a brief overview of Dr. Leymann's observations: In his research about mobbing (it seems safe to say that mobbing is a term for group bullying), he found nothing that showed that victim personalities *caused* mobbing, but rather that mobbing causes Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which, practically speaking, changes the victim's personality. Sometimes their orientation toward life is so drastically changed that they become very ineffective people, losing their careers. Leymann outlined the stages of mobbing as starting with a conflict of some sort that is not effectively dealt with (sometimes no fault of the victim, for example, incommunicative workplace managers). The next stage involves people using a negative approach to the victim where any one exchange or incident does not seem very concerning (example: gossip), but, over time, the pattern forms a hostile environment that has the flavor of retribution toward the victim. There are one to several people involved in this and any number of bystanders who are aware of what is going on but who do nothing. When and if authorities come in, they take the side of the majority: the consensus seems to be that the victim is at fault and the authorities would rather not get involved and would rather not take responsibility for effectively managing things, regardless. If the victim seeks psychiatric help, they are usually seen as paranoid and suchlike because most psychotherapists are not very familiar with PTSD. The victim falls ill more often than before and is eventually ejected from the job after an average of 15 months. They are stigmatized by the entire sequence, for instance, feeling obsessed with wariness.



### Does Holden show the signs of PTSD?

I do not have a degree in psychology or anything like that, but I can read the diagnoses well enough, I think, and so can anyone. Looking over the [standard PTSD diagnosis](#) (American Psychiatric Association), I think he fits group C with avoiding stimuli that can be associated with the trauma via methods 4, 5, and 7 (specifically, he's uninterested in school and in what the teachers think of him, which I think it's safe to say are important, he's been expelled by schools for not applying himself; there is a mismatch between him and most other people; and he tends to see his future as having no career or even of dying young — of cancer, pneumonia, or suicide). I think he also fits group D (arguably even better than he fits group C) as he has difficulty falling asleep and repeatedly finds it hard to concentrate, gets irritable, and is vigilant of phonies. **Yes,**

**he shows the signs of PTSD.**

A related question is whether, if Holden does have PTSD, was it from a single traumatic event or from a chronic trauma lasting at least a month (in effect, the group E permutation)? Basically, **why does he have PTSD?**

Although he could have repressed memories not mentioned in the book, I'll assume he mentions every relevant thing. We know about his brother's death and his other brother's going to war and coming back shell shocked and changing the way he writes.



**I don't think his brother dying is outside of ordinary experience.** Since everyone dies, everyone has to deal with death (in fact, Dr. Leymann died). Also, Holden was 13, so he was no small child. Further, Allie died of cancer, which I assume his family was aware of before he died, which means his death was neither violent nor a surprise. Also note that,

although Holden is preoccupied with Allie's death, he is much more preoccupied with the prevalence of phonies.

Holden remembered being a kid seeing his brother, D.B., on leave from the war, doing almost nothing but lie on his bed. Holden said he didn't think he could handle being called up to war. He'd rather be executed than to go to war (p. 140). Holden also saw D.B. moving to Hollywood to write movies as a major change in D.B.'s approach to writing (p. 1, 164). Maybe D.B. came back from the war acting like a phony sometimes (note that other times he earnestly argued about war poetry, p. 140). Yet, at both the start and end of the book, Holden mentioned contacts with his brother, but shows no venom for him (at least nothing remotely like his disdain toward the phonies). He seems puzzled and angry by D.B.'s change, but D.B. does not seem to be the center of Holden's apparent PTSD. And even if it were, **I think that seeing D.B. inactive during leave is not enough outside the ordinary experience to be a single trauma, and seeing D.B. change and go to Hollywood would seem like a chronic question more than a chronic trauma.**



Now, here's something: at Elkton Hills, Holden heard James Castle fall out the window to his death and **he saw James Castle's dead body, bloody and broken, wearing his borrowed sweater.** He saw people hanging back, inactive, until one teacher carried James' body away. He saw the killers get off with a mere expulsion. That's the most traumatic event Holden mentions, **which I envision as tied in with some additional, chronic trauma.**

**I'm picturing that Holden was mobbed** (bullied) in the first school he was expelled from (which I'm assuming was Elkton Hills — see [notes](#)). I picture Holden as a sensitive kid in boarding school — perhaps he was new to boarding schools — being pushed around by classmates. I imagine it becoming an anxious, hostile situation as time went on. Meanwhile, a classmate, James Castle, was being mobbed even more than Holden, to the point where James was so subdued that the teacher rarely called on him and he hardly talked to anyone (p. 171).

Then the mobbers *killed* James, and, even then, no one but one teacher even wanted to get near his body and the killers remained free in society (p. 170).

James' body was lying in blood, wearing Holden's sweater. The impression Holden could have been struck with: "**that could have been me**, if things were just a little different, or when things got bad enough for me here." **His sense of security in the "nice" school society could have evaporated.**

Indeed, what we know about Holden is that he basically quit Elkton Hills (p. 13). Mr. Antolini kept in touch with Holden and his parents and was concerned about his progress (p. 180). I envision Holden as traumatized by this classmate's death. The one teacher who crossed the line and picked up James' body also got involved with Holden's progress (p. 170, 180), but the rest of the school did not. Holden changed schools two more times but didn't keep up with his studies (p. 4, 13, Holden had no objection to Mr. Spencer's characterizing his problems at the Whooton school as similar to his problems at Pencey).

### Sequence: Holden's Schools

The last school we know about Holden going to was, Pencey. Several times, he mentions Elkton Hills and the Whooton School as previous boarding schools he'd attended. It's not made absolutely clear which school was the first of those.

**Elkton Hills seems to be farther back in time.** In the time since Holden left Elkton Hills, Mr. Antolini also left there, moved to New York [p. 173], frequently visited the Caulfields to follow Holden's progress [p. 180], got married [p. 180], and is well settled in marriage. Mr. Antolini also seems wry about the news that Holden got kicked out of Pencey, not like it was a new thing for Holden to get kicked out of a school [p. 174]. Meanwhile, the Whooton school seemed more recent and Holden seems older in the Whooton period: boys dated there [p. 136], there were sex talks [p. 143], he drank there at least once [p. 90], and he was studying some of the same material as at Pencey [Beowulf, Lord Randal My Son, p. 10]. Finally, when Mr. Spencer mentions Holden's failing at other schools, he mentions the Whooton school first and then Elkton Hills, possibly as a way to underline his sarcastic point [p. 13]. The way I see that is Spencer first mentioned the most recent school and then the previous school — that's the most natural way to speak, referring back, then farther back into the past.

Imagine learning that a group of classmate bullies could drive someone to their *death* yet still almost no one would want to get *near* the victim. Imagine that the bullies would only get expelled like poor performers, instead of going to jail like *killers* (p. 170). **I picture Holden coming to view the characters of the killers as a bunch of self-impressed, alienating phonies pushing people around to get *performances* out of them while everyone else stands by doing little or nothing.** James Castle was *killed* because he referred to a very conceited guy as a very conceited guy and wouldn't take it back (p. 170).

Since the authorities in charge didn't come down on the bullies as killers, **Holden also came to doubt their authority.** The Elkton Hills headmaster, was a huge phony (p. 13-14).

**Holden came to question almost everyone's integrity and trustworthiness.** When he comes to the Whooton school, he observes how Luce controls conversations to maximize the impression he makes: Luce, a student advisor, does sex talks to impress the younger boys and then tries to separate everyone so no one can follow up with any smarter



remarks (p. 143, 147). When Holden goes to Pencey, he observes what a clean cut guy Stradlater looks like to the public eye but what a self-obsessed slob he is in private (p. 27). Holden observes how everyone cuts Ackley out (basically mobbing him, p. 167) as if they're clearly superior when in fact they're mean guys and arguably inferior. Holden sees how a mean guy's mother cares more about how her voice

sounds than about seriously asking herself what sort of son she has (p. 54-8). I could go on, but **there is all too much insincerity and Holden is honestly uninterested in engaging in such a superficial, alienating society.** (He finds children a proven exception to that.) He dreams of living a more rustic, sure way of life (p. 132-3, 198-9, 204-5).

Getting back to the first question a bit, **does Holden have a form of PTSD specifically noted in victims of mobbing/bullying?** I think Holden fits the last one ("additional symptoms that indicate that the patient has resigned himself or herself to the situation") because Holden arguably has all three traits: wishes to get away from people (p. 198, 166), generally feels alienated from society, and a generally cynical attitude toward the world.

(A compelling note is a trait from the *first* category.

"Hypersensitivity with respect to injustices and *a constant identification with the suffering of others in an almost compulsory manner*" [emphasis added]. It certainly describes his **feeling charitable toward and sorry for so many people** [the nuns, Mr. Spencer, Thurmer's daughter, girls in general, Ernie; p. 111-113, 15, 3, 123, 84], **even being generous to people he didn't even like** [inviting Ackley along on an outing and buying tons of drinks for the witches at the bar; 36, 75].)

Looking at the stages of mobbing, Holden's ongoing lack of interest in school and society, and indeed, his acceptance at the end of letting things go the way they go, seems to point to his being entrenched in PTSD. In fact, Leymann's repeatedly referring to the practical personality change as "permanent" is a disturbing prognosis for Holden's future. Indeed, the last stage (in the worse cases, at least) is the person losing their career, never able to really engage again. At the end of *Catcher*, Holden's almost *Que Sera Sera* attitude seems somewhat reassuring and even amusing, but many readers are left with a lingering [question of what will become of him](#).

### Are Holden's fans suffering from PTSD?

**I don't know how many people have PTSD, but I suspect the percentage is high.** Not only are there concentration



camp and battle survivors and earthquake survivors in the population, but up to half of the people in our culture were stressed by possibly not being securely attached to their caregiver in infancy and childhood (*The Highly Sensitive Person*, by Elaine N. Aron, p. 43, 33-35). This is arguably a chronic trauma. Further, consider how many people have been mobbed or bullied for at least one month in junior high school and high school, possibly getting PTSD from that experience. (A conundrum: if more than half of a population has trauma, does trauma become *not* outside the ordinary experience? I think it makes little difference. I think an overwhelming majority of people in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule had such trauma, but I imagine that PTSD is very widespread there.)



***The Catcher in the Rye* is an unusual first person narrative, of someone who arguably has PTSD, told very vividly and with humor. It would be a very popular book in a world with a large number of people with PTSD** — a world with a prevalence of traumas. Of course we know that Salinger's book *is* very popular indeed. It can be seen as resonating with a lot of people who relate to Holden either through having PTSD themselves or through understanding their PTSD neighbors through his eyes. And, of course, there's the wicked sense of humor and the easy read that captivates almost all other readers. The time period, culture, and class don't seem to matter much: the book has fans in many countries and all classes.

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