

# Inspiring Holden

**I**N J.D. Salinger's book *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) Holden Caulfield struggles through the beginnings of a mental breakdown over several traumatic days in New York. Finally he begins to recount his tale from a psychiatric institution. For several generations of readers Holden has been a symbol of adolescent angst and insight. Holden Caulfield inspired many in psychology to try and catch those running through the rye before they fell.

For many, growing up is just such a clash as Holden experiences, between the hypocritical values that society puts forward and the ideals to which all the earnest young people aspire. What does it mean to grow up? The simple principles by which children live are replaced by the murkiness of adult problems. Holden is struggling with a personal set of values that he himself doesn't understand, let alone society. The things that have meaning for him are the antithesis of what he meets in the world around him. The world demands a perfect appearance and the ability to achieve; he cares little about what people think of him and has a great sense of empathy.

In the language of cognitive therapy, psychopathology results from maladaptive meanings concerning self, environmental context and the future, and the therapist



**KEITH GAYNOR** with the first in an occasional series giving a psychological perspective on fictional characters.

helps the client to realise the cognitive biases of content or process that are feeding this cognitive triad (Alford & Beck, 1997). But in the case of Holden it is slightly different. His meanings are maladaptive, but only because the world itself is too short-sighted to see their benefit. In a world of posh schools and get-ahead ideals, Holden's sense of justice and human kindness isolates and punishes him.

*That depressed me. I hate it if I'm eating bacon and eggs or something and someone else is only eating coffee and toast.*

In terms of cognitive therapy, Holden's statement could not be more true. He is getting depressed because he feels for everyone around him. Holden feels the weight of the world on his shoulders. Every tiny human tragedy he encounters, he personalises; every piece of hurt he sees, he feels. He recognises that any slight on human dignity is a slight on himself.

The novel raises several questions highly relevant to psychology. How much can you feel before you put yourself at risk? What amount of empathy is reasonable, what amount is noble and what amount can only lead to personal breakdown?

Holden is so alienated because he can't tolerate hypocrisy; others see it as a necessary social lubricant, he sees it as fear and selfishness. When he consistently pushes the bounds of the social contract, he is punished. Any break from the norm is prohibited.

*I was almost in a movie short, but I changed my mind at the last minute. I figured that anybody that hates the movies as much as I do, I'd be a phony if I let them stick me in a movie short.*

Ultimately, what galls Holden the most is the injustice that he sees. The horror and the hurt of minor indignities are observed by Holden. His difficulty is that he is unable to ignore those things that the rest of us Janus-faced wring our hands about and then wash our hands of. He feels that in order to survive, we kill ourselves inside.

This leads me to the question, if we were treating Holden how would we encourage him to go out and try to become a 'catcher in the rye'? We would probably try to replace the maladaptive meanings by which Holden interprets the world with something like this (adapted from Powell, 2001):

- Nobody is stronger or weaker than everybody else. We are all made up

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of a collection of strengths and weaknesses.

- All life's important battles and conflicts are fought within ourselves.
- You are responsible for everything that you do. All excuses are unacceptable.
- We all make mistakes; we are all selfish, cheating, vain, greedy and tell lies. We are all human. Nobody is perfect. Learn to forgive yourself and accept your humanity.
- We are all free to do whatever we like; all we have to do is face the consequences.
- The world is not always just or fair. Being good offers no guarantee of a happy outcome.

Good advice for Holden Caulfield. In fact, probably advice that his teachers and parents gave him, in slightly different language: do some work, stop dreaming, life is as it is, get on with it.

While on the face of it these are proper and noble things to aspire to, they also reject any tilting of the status quo. They

encapsulate an ethos that is essentially individualist, pragmatic and hypocritical. A 1950s conservative ethos. It is probably the philosophy we need to survive in our society; but if so, what happens to those with another point of view?

There's a strong argument to say that those who seek mental health care may be the burnouts necessary for society to keep its equilibrium. The rise of homelessness, suicide and mental illness in Ireland during the last 10 years, a time of unprecedented prosperity, would certainly point in this direction. The price of economic success appears to be the paid in human alienation and suffering.

Many within psychology would argue that they do not promote conservative values. The conditions of worth society as a whole places on the individuals in it are many of the same values psychology proposes. How would you treat Holden Caulfield? The words of Powell (and many others) push us to accept hypocrisy and injustice as some sort of natural order.

And we stand on the other side to

Holden – adults, using our therapeutic position to impart wisdom. How often do we as psychologists advertise the virtues of the same society that has damaged our clients? The irony is that Holden, who is so concerned with social justice and fairness, is just the one society treats most unfairly. Many psychologists may have been inspired when they read *The Catcher in the Rye* as teenagers. Maybe we need Holden's empathy and anger at hypocrisy and injustice to inspire us again.

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