

**Why Bo Burnham's *Inside* is the Best Representation of Determination**

Leah DeMauro

Keuka College

English 112-01

Catherine Reed

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### **Why Bo Burnham's *Inside* is the Best Representation of Determination**

A problem today that is not talked about enough is the mental health adversities related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many people around the world developed depression and other mental health illnesses due to the loneliness caused by quarantining. The struggle of no longer having the freedom to go out and see other humans was a hard adjustment. After being stuck inside for so long, people took to social media to express their adversities of being alone. People also began to watch more television. Bo Burnham is one person who shared his experiences with the world about his quarantine, yet he did it in a different way than others. He wrote, performed, and produced his own special for Netflix to create a project to keep himself occupied. His authenticity of the hardships he faced during this period is the first thing I think of when I look for an example of determination. Bo Burnham's *Inside* is the best contemporary representation of determination, as it demonstrates the strength it takes to overcome mental illnesses such as depression due to the quarantine period all over the world caused by Covid- 19.

### **Background of Depression**

Depression is a mental health disorder that “causes severe symptoms that affect how you feel, think, and handle daily activities, such as sleeping, eating, or working” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018, n.p.). Many people around the world deal with this disorder, and it can be hard to diagnose. Symptoms can include loss of normal interests, decreased energy, persistent sadness, difficulty eating, sleeping, concentrating, etc. Anyone can develop depression at any age, and it can have many factors. It can be developed due to psychological, biological, genetic, or environmental factors, including a mix of them (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018, n.p.). Since there are so many symptoms as well as so many factors related to depression, it can be hard to get diagnosed or even get help. It also makes it extremely

hard for a person to know whether or not they need to seek help. This is exactly why depression and the signs need to be shown in mainstream media so that people can become educated on the available help.

Depression is not only feeling sad and having difficulty doing activities. It can also “affect how you feel, think and behave and can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems” (Mayo Clinic, 2018, n.p.). Many people think that depression does not actually affect anything besides how one feels, when in reality that is not true. It is classified as a mood disorder as it affects the day-to-day life of the person who has it. The effect on emotional health leads to changes in behavior and even the physical ability of the person who is affected. The symptoms can also present differently between adults and adolescents. In adults it can present as tiredness, drowsiness, memory loss (which can lead to shifts in personality), or physically, in the form of pains and aches, as well as many others. In adolescents, depression can present as excessive worrying, wanting to skip school, reactions that can be seen as “over-the-top,” and irritability, as well as many others. It is important to remember that there are many symptoms, and every person is different. Some people may show certain symptoms that others do not (Mayo Clinic, 2018, n.p.).

A study in 2019 was done to see how many adolescents, aged ten through nineteen, have depression and other mental health disorders. Adolescence is a critical time when the brain is developing, and it could help in the long run if depression was found and treated early on. Depression is one of the biggest health burdens on teens in recent years, which is why this study was conducted. It was found that 42.9% of adolescents have depression (UNICEF, 2021, n.p.). This is an extremely high number of teens who have this disorder, and this is only counting the ones who are diagnosed within this small study pool. Unfortunately, it is extremely hard to get

help, even when diagnosed. A lot of health professionals, as well as insurance companies, do not recognize mental health disorders as illnesses with needed treatment. Not only is therapy a treatment, but there is even medicine out there that can help, which is extremely hard to access.

### **My Experience with Depression**

When I was in high school, I began having a lot of trouble mentally. I was having a really hard time in school, and it was hard to process all of my emotions. It felt like everything was closing in on me, and I had no idea where to turn. I only knew about depression from the very minimal information shown on social media, so I did not know that I needed help. I only realized the enormity of my problem after talking to one of my most trusted teachers at my high school. Once I finally talked to a doctor in order to try and start the healing process, my family realized that the insurance company would be no help. Insurance said that counseling was not needed and that it would not be covered at all, which meant that I could not afford to get help. This is precisely why depression needs to be taken more seriously and treated as an actual illness.

This incident occurred around five years ago, and insurance companies have changed a lot since then. It did not help that I was an adolescent at that time, which made it even harder for the insurance company to take the situation seriously. Today, there are a lot of better options that allow people to seek help, as well as get assistance paying for the treatment with their insurance. The issue has now switched to whether the therapist takes certain insurance companies. Many people still pay for therapy, but instead have a “co-pay” that has to be paid. This is a certain amount of the total fee that the appointments cost (Cost and Insurance, n.d., para. 3).

The thing I struggled with the most was finding the difference between in-network and out-of-network therapists. In-network providers is the network of doctors that are provided within an individual's own healthcare plan. These therapists have to meet specific criteria that

allow them to be certified with the specific company. It is also usually the more cost-effective option, since most insurance companies will pay for at least part of the cost. Out-of-network therapists are ones who do not work for any specific company, which is the reason it can be a lot more expensive. Insurance companies also have a harder time paying for even a part of the original bill, as these therapists do not necessarily work with doctors offices (Cigna, n.d., para. 2-4). I currently work with an out-of-network provider, and my insurance will now reimburse me. I pay in full the day of my appointment and at the end of the month I will get a superbill that has all of the charges for the month. I submit this to my insurance company and get reimbursed to the point where I only pay ten dollars per session. It was extremely difficult to find all this information on my own, especially while coping with my mental health issues. This is why there needs to be more education on the topic, so that people like me do not have to jump through all the hoops while trying to cope with their diagnosis.

### **The Problems with Treatment**

The use of therapy and counseling is one fairly common way to treat depression, yet it is very hard to access. Many people, like myself, have trouble finding a therapist with not only an open schedule, but also one that takes insurance. One possible reason for that is that there is a declining number of practicing psychiatrists. A study was done between 2003 and 2013 which found that “During this period the number of practicing psychiatrists declined from 37,968 to 37,889, which represented a 10.2 percent reduction in the median number of psychiatrists per 100,000 residents in hospital referral regions” (Bishop et al., 2016, para. 1). This shows how much of a shortage of specialists there is. Not only do people need to be educated on the help that is out there, but more people need to be entering this field. The same study also found that 40% of adults who are diagnosed with mental health disorders do not actively seek treatment,

which can create further problems (Bishop et al., 2016, para 2). Not seeking help can be serious, as it may result in the situation getting worse. The Mayo Clinic (2018) states, “depression often gets worse if it isn’t treated, resulting in emotional, behavioral and health problems that affect every area of your life” (n.p.). This shows precisely why treatment is needed.

While therapy is a good option for the majority of people, there are others who need more treatment. Some people need medications to help with their symptoms, and antidepressants are the most common ones prescribed. They work by changing how the brain processes the input chemicals. By changing these chemical reactions, symptoms such as mood swings and excess of stress can be controlled. Many times people have to try multiple different medications in order to see which works best for them, as everyone is affected differently and can experience different side effects. It can also take anywhere from a few weeks to a month before the medications start to work. Due to the different side effects, it is advised not to change or stop taking medications without first discussing with a doctor (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018, n.p.).

Overall, depression is a treatable illness. As hard as it seems, there is therapy, medications, and many other options to help treat symptoms. One thing that can help treatment is catching the signs early. It has been proven that it is easier to treat depression when it is early on, but that does not mean that there is a point where it is untreatable (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018, n.p.). Reaching out is the best thing that one can do.

### **Depression in Relation to Quarantine**

Depression has been highly prevalent in society for a long time, but one thing that led to even more people experiencing it was the Covid pandemic. Worldwide, governments and businesses shut down in order to prevent the spread, which led to people being forced to

quarantine in their homes. Being trapped in my house for days on end made me feel claustrophobic and confined. It also made me think about the things I have taken for granted. I may have complained about aspects of school beforehand, like having to wake up early, but being forced to have Zoom classes made me realize how important the social aspect of school really was. Stores were not even open, and everything was unknown. No one knew when schools, stores, or towns would reopen, and that was scary for so many people. Being stuck at home alone led to the feeling of depression coming back, and I was not the only one in the world who felt this way.

Since the issue of depression during quarantine was such a prevalent problem, a study was conducted in Germany in 2020 to research the effects of the quarantine on adults. The results found that a “greater reduction of social contacts and perceived changes in everyday life were related to psychopathological symptoms” (Benke et al., 2020, para.1), showing the effects of this quarantine on how people felt. There were different restrictions around the world, and the severity of each quarantine differed based not only on the need, but also the country itself. While it was needed, the effects of no social interaction were astounding.

Another important finding of the study was Benke et al. (2020) discovering that, “perceived stay-at-home orders were associated with higher anxiety and depressive symptoms, fearful spells, higher psychosocial distress, higher loneliness, and lower life-satisfaction” (para. 20). This shows the combination of symptoms and events that led to people developing higher depressive symptoms. The feeling of loneliness discussed above is proven in this study. Even across the world, people had a hard time coping with the changes of the orders to quarantine. The uncertainty with the amount of time that this quarantine would take place also led to the decreased enjoyment of life.

Also as discussed above, the move to online education was something that impacted many students around the world. There were many different factors that caused both teachers and students to feel like the platform was not working, one of which was the issue with the internet. Some classes were online video calls, and some just had work that needed to be submitted, all of which required internet access. That is a problem for many students around the world. A study done in India cited how hard it is to access the internet in a lot of locations within India. This led to falling attendances for classes, which negatively impacted both the students and the teachers (Nambiar, 2020, para. 1).

Another study that was conducted on the effects of transitioning to online learning found that this shift had a negative impact on the mental health of students. The study was conducted at Lebanese University with the goal of finding out the rate of students with depression and other mental illnesses caused by the learning shift. The study concluded that this unexpected and sudden shift to E-learning caused an increase in students exhibiting symptoms of depression, as well as other mental health issues (Fawaz & Samaha, 2020, para. 4-5). This just shows one shift that a generation had to make, and just how hard it was.

Getting used to being alone was one of the hardest things for everyone around the world, young and old, to process during quarantine. Since everyone was spending so much time inside, watching television was a common pastime for many. I watched a lot of different series and documentaries during this time, and one that I stumbled upon was Bo Burnham's *Inside*. This special was a defining moment for me during quarantine, and I think it is something that changed my perspective. Finding out that someone created an entire comedy special that represented how so many people felt was an amazing feeling.

*Inside*



*Inside* is a comedy film on Netflix that was written, produced, starred in, and directed by Bo Burnham. Burnham has done many live comedy specials, but he decided to take a break after experiencing anxiety attacks on stage. This was an extremely hard decision for him, but he knew it had to be done in order to allow his mental health to get better. After five years, he decided to return to comedy, but that is exactly when Covid hit. Instead of being discouraged by this sudden change to his plans, he decided to try and make a special in his house, and for the first time without a live audience, which was something new for him. He goes on to produce a special that is all about things people do during quarantine, as well as his personal feelings (Burnham, 2021).

Burnham puts himself into different characters to represent some common things people around the world did in order to pass the time in quarantine. In one section he pretends to be a Twitch streamer playing video games for an audience. In another he sings and performs a song called “White Woman’s Instagram” (Burnham, 2021), which shows him posing in many ways and taking pictures like the ones that many people post on Instagram. Many times he breaks from these comedic scenes in order to discuss how emotionally down he is, and how at some points he really wants to quit, and at other points he wants to never stop producing it since he will have to go back to normal life after this. After over a year of working on the special, he finally is able to release it (Burnham, 2021). His determination to complete this film all by himself is what not only helped him finish the special, but the reason it resonated so much with people around the world.

All the adversities that Burnham had to deal with are exactly why he and his film represent determination. He left performing for five years to better himself, and when he was ready to come back, the world was changing. He then decided to produce a special that was in a different format than he was used to all by himself, without his usual crew. He then faced mental

health adversities while turning thirty and still being stuck in quarantine while filming this special. In the film, he stated “So um, uh, my current mental health is... rapidly approaching, um, an ATL, which is, um, that’s an ‘all-time low. Not... not Atlanta’” (Burnham, 2021, 0:55:37) which was only halfway through the special. The way in which he said this line showed how emotionally beaten down he was, yet added a comedic joke into it. He struggled a lot, and broke from his comedic acts many times to show the reality of how he was feeling. Another thing that he did to show the realness of the situation was show what his room looked like. There would be scenes that showed messy floors with cameras and equipment everywhere, which showed how much dedication was put into this. There were a few scenes that showed and implied that he played these songs he created over and over again until it felt right to him, as well as film his comedy bits that went along with the songs (Burnham, 2021). All of these examples from the film are exactly why I think he represents determination in an especially difficult time.

### ***Inside Reviews***

Many people have written their own reviews of the special, as well as how they interpreted the film. Andrew Kaump, a student at Henry Ford College, is one person who wrote about the special. He liked how it was created as almost a video documentary of Burnham’s experiences, as well as the light-hearted jokes thrown in throughout some serious topics. He writes, “Bo addresses the global situation with the COVID-19 pandemic in the song “Content”, talking about his minor inconveniences, like needing to reschedule haircuts, and more seriously, feeling depressed by being stuck indoors and isolated,” showing exactly one of the points in the film that he likes (Kaump, 2021). He also demonstrates the contrasting structure of the film that is used to represent the jump between the ups and downs of quarantine. I agree with Kaump’s

review because he accurately describes the serious and lighthearted nature that Burnham uses to document his experiences with depression.

Another person who reviewed this film is a writer for the New York *Vulture* named Kathryn VanArendonk. VanArendonk (2021) starts off by describing the film. She describes the format of the film, as well as some analysis of the songs and decisions that Bo Burnham made. She discusses all of the different personas that Burnham uses to further his point of the shift to the internet era that has taken place, especially during the Covid era. In one part VanArendonk (2021) writes:

He has only himself. So Burnham's self-portraiture casts himself as the protagonist, the guy whose ever-growing hair marks the passage of time even as he keeps changing himself into a musing James Taylor acoustic type, a window washer, a puppet. And even as he creates and shoots and edits all the performances, the interstitials show us Burnham watching them back, on tiny phones or laptops. Sometimes he literally projects them onto himself, with his white T-shirt as the blank screen. It's all endless loops of performance and consumption, worrying about performativity and authenticity and productivity, staring at himself in the mirror. (n.p.)

This section resonated with me because she perfectly describes the performative aspect of the film, leading to the increased sense of depression that he faces.

### **The Other Side**

One counterargument that could be made is that *Inside* is not the best representation of determination in regards to mental health, especially since it is a comedy. This is a correct statement in the aspect that mental health should not be treated as a joke, but some people use comedy as a coping mechanism, and Burnham is one of those people. He was not writing this

film with the intention of making fun of mental health adversities, but was actually using his platform of comedy to bring attention to mental health. He demonstrates the good and bad of quarantine, while accurately describing his own personal feelings of depression, which other's can relate to.

A study was done in 2014 on the effectiveness of stand-up comedy on mental health. This was conducted within the United Kingdom, and specifically members of the United Kingdom Armed Forces (UK AF). The soldiers in this study were shown regular stand-up comedy shows that contained information on mental health. It was shown that there was a positive, short-term effect on mental health (Jones et al., 2014, para. 1-3). This study further proves that comedy can help with mental health, especially when there is information on how to get help involved.

Comedy is also used by a lot of comedians to cope with their illness. The humor is not meant to put themselves down, but it is "self-deprecating" in a way to explore the topic while framing it in a positive way. Not only is stand-up and other forms of comedy used to help the performer, but it can also help the audience. A lot of the time people who are watching can relate to how the comedian feels, and can actually laugh with them. An author for Helpline.net wrote, "... comedy about mental illness can create a space for us to laugh and let down our guard in a safe environment. When we do this, we just might find that barriers and stigma also relent, maybe just a bit or just for a moment, while we laugh" (Matta, n.d., para. 11). This represents how helpful it is to joke about this topic sometimes. It is never okay to make fun of someone for having mental illnesses such as depression, but being able to laugh with someone every now and then can help to bring some relief.

## **Conclusion**

Bo Burnham's *Inside* is the best representation of determination in the media today. Depression has been a struggle for many people for many years, but the quarantine period caused by Covid only exacerbated the problem. Getting access to proper treatments and even diagnosis can be difficult for people, especially with insurance. Struggling with this adversity alone is extremely hard, so it took a lot of determination for Burnham to produce this special over a one-year time span. By using his platform to share the reality of quarantine with others, as well as using comedy to lighten the mood of the movie, he was able to successfully produce a great piece of work. This film can help others in a similar position realize they are not alone and that things can get better.

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