

The Aviator: A real-life portrayal of OCD in the media

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The Aviator tells the story of the early adult life of Howard Hughes, the notoriously eccentric and talented billionaire. Hughes was a driven and often successful aeronautics engineer, filmmaker, and lady's man in Hollywood of the 1920s-1940s. Among other issues, Hughes appears to have been affected by OCD symptoms that at times were severe and incapacitating, although for much of the period of his life depicted in the film he functions relatively well. The director, Martin Scorsese, was at pains to depict Hughes' life realistically, so that even when his behavior in the film seems odd or atypical, it was based on Hughes' real-life symptoms.

Many of Hughes' OCD symptoms were apparently quite classic, particularly his contamination-related fears. We are shown a possible source of these fears: when Hughes is a child, his mother warns him about an epidemic and tells him he's not safe. Leonardo DiCaprio portrays Hughes as having relatively mild symptoms early in the film, such as requesting unopened bottles of milk, ordering the same meal in restaurants, and wrapping the wheel of an airplane to form a barrier against germs. He carries his own bar of soap to use in public restroom, and washes his hands in a stereotyped way. In times of stress his compulsions appear to get worse. As the movie progresses, the severity and complexity of his symptoms increase. He repeats words and phrases compulsively and develops complicated and elaborate routines that must be followed exactly. Any deviation from the strict routine compels him to start over from the beginning. At times Hughes will "get stuck" in a repetitive and uncontrollable bout of compulsions. We see him begin to avoid appearing in public, washing his hands until they bleed, and temporarily holing up in a screening room taken over with piles of refuse, with no one allowed to come in, in his obsessive effort to establish a "germ free zone" in which to live.

In addition to his OCD symptoms, the film reveals other aspects of Hughes' personality. He was quite driven and perfectionistic, often going over time and over budget to complete a film or design an airplane to his exacting specifications. Seemingly at odds with his OCD-related safety obsessions, he also took risks with his physical safety, such as challenging world air flight records and choosing to pilot planes that had never been tested. He was shown dating a number of different high-profile women, particularly actresses, and getting lots of publicity about his womanizing. Hughes' perfectionism is typical of some people with OCD, whereas the more risk-taking and sensationalistic aspects of his behavior are much less typical.

An important part of the film involves Hughes preparing for and attending a senate hearing to defend himself against accusations of war profiteering. The subpoena for the

hearing came during the time he was severely impaired by his OCD and virtually homebound in his screening room. To get to the senate hearing, Hughes had to leave his “safe” space and ignore all his typical OCD routines and rituals to function in a relatively normal and non-OCD way in a highly stressful situation. This real-life event is portrayed accurately in the film, but such a rapid positive change in functioning is not frequently observed. No matter what the level of motivation, in most cases a rapid, substantial remission in severe OCD symptoms is highly unusual in the absence of treatment.

In summary, Hughes appeared to have had a classic case of contamination-related OCD, characterized by rigid and extensive rules and rituals, the underlying fears, the particularity and irrationality of the symptoms, the need to start over if a ritual isn't observed perfectly, and increases in symptoms in times of stress or trauma. The depiction of his symptoms at their most severe is quite accurate, including the appearance of his “safe” room. His perfectionism and need for control are common in others with OCD. There were also aspects of Hughes' personality that tend not to be associated with OCD, such as his risk-taking and promiscuity, and elements from his biography that are not typical of many, such as his role in life and society. Unlike most people with OCD, Hughes was very much buffered by his wealth and position, and could apparently function well despite extreme symptoms (at least at times). Overall, however, *The Aviator* provides a realistic and sensitive portrayal of one man's decades-long struggle with OCD.