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## **'Secret illness' brings misery to a million**

Almost a million people in the UK suffer some of the symptoms which dogged the life of billionaire recluse Howard Hughes, a charity has revealed.

Hughes, who is played by Leonardo DiCaprio in Hollywood blockbuster *The Aviator*, due to be released on Boxing Day, had a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder which involves a fear of germs and contamination.

Now an organisation which helps sufferers is hoping that the film will raise awareness of the condition and prompt people to seek help. "OCD is often referred to as the secret illness," said Ashley Fulwood, chief executive of OCD-UK. "Howard Hughes suffered in silence from his obsessions and soon they started spiralling out of control.

"At the time, it wasn't recognised as OCD. But now we know what it is, and that it affects at least two to three per cent of the population. About half have repetitive, intrusive and unwanted thoughts about contamination, and this may lead them to carry out behaviour to try to neutralise their fears."

Among other things, Howard Hughes gave his staff complex instructions for handling objects – for example, a spoon could only be handed to him with its handle covered in tissue paper and sealed with cellophane. Other sufferers may feel the need to wash their hands repeatedly or perform complex rituals related to cleaning, going to the toilet or handling food.

"Few people end up living locked away in hotel rooms, but it can be a seriously debilitating condition," said Mr Fulwood. "OCD sufferers aren't mad, and many of them, like Howard Hughes, have outstanding talents. They can be helped to lead full, rewarding lives."

OCD-UK adviser Dr Jeffrey Schwartz, who is a world authority on the condition, helped Leonardo DiCaprio to accurately portray the mental anguish and internal conflict OCD sufferers battle with on a daily basis.

As well as fears of contamination, OCD can involve symptoms including worries about inflicting harm on other people, inordinate concern with order, arrangement or symmetry, and upsetting thoughts or mental images of a blasphemous, sexual or immoral nature.

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