# David Harbour and others on the evolving meaning of ego death



In a recent interview with GQ, actor David Harbour, known for his role in Stranger Things, shared insights into his personal journey through what many in contemporary discourse refer to as an "ego death." Harbour, now 50, spoke candidly about the transient nature of the self and the challenges of navigating fame in a way that transcends ego.

“It’s all just ego,” Harbour told GQ, reflecting on his art and fame. “The art that I’m creating is about you. It’s not about me. It’s about your experience of life. We get hung up on [the person themselves], and I think we get lost in the idea of, like, what it’s really about. And I think, for me, it’s dangerous, too, to get lost in the personality in any way.” He further elaborated on the impermanence of identity, saying, “I’m not the same person I was this morning. It’s all impermanent. It’s all gonna change. It’s all gonna die. And that’s very, very much deeply in my heart now. At 20, [life] was gonna go on forever.”

The concept of “ego death” has gained popularity in recent years, especially across social media platforms like TikTok, where users often reference the term in discussions about personal growth and spiritual awakening. It also features prominently in cultural works such as Apple TV’s satirical series, The Studio, which mocks Hollywood’s obsession with such psychological terminology. The term, however, is broad in meaning, encompassing experiences ranging from existential crises to transformative conversations, shifts in self-awareness, or intense psychedelic experiences.

Dr Greg Madison, an existential psychologist and chartered member of the British Psychological Society, provided perspective on the term’s evolving usage. He traced the psychological underpinnings of ego death back to Sigmund Freud, for whom the “ego” represented a person’s sense of self, mediating between instinct, conscience, and social norms. “The ego tries to keep us rational and functioning according to convention," Dr Madison explained, noting that in everyday language “ego” often implies grandiosity and a need for superiority.

Dr Madison observed that “ego death” can signify liberation from a narrowly defined sense of identity, allowing for qualities like empathy, tolerance, and compassion to emerge. The term was also linked to Carl Jung’s notion of “psychic death,” describing a profound transformation within the psyche. Today, it is commonly associated with spirituality and practices such as meditation and psychedelic experiences. While it can be experienced as positive and liberating, it may also feel unsettling if the expansion of self-awareness is unintentional.

Several public figures have spoken about undergoing an ego death, particularly amid personal controversies. Harbour himself hinted at a spiritual journey following his separation from musician Lily Allen, choosing not to engage with tabloid narratives about their breakup. “It’s not that things ending aren’t hard, but it’s just that I’m choosing to make it a period of growth,” Harbour told GQ. “And I feel like having the opportunity to be busy and work is really good, and also to delve into this deeper spiritual quest.”

Similarly, actor Shia LaBeouf, who faced allegations of sexual battery and emotional distress from FKA twigs, described his own ego death during an interview on Jon Bernthal’s podcast Real Ones. He characterised his prior behaviour as “pleasure-seeking, selfish, self-centred,” and credited the experience with a significant personal reckoning. “Had she not intervened in my life and not created the avenue for me to experience ego death, I’d either have a really mediocre existence or I’d be dead in full,” LaBeouf said.

Armie Hammer, the Call Me By Your Name star, also spoke about an ego death in the wake of abuse allegations, which he has denied and for which the Los Angeles County District Attorney decided not to prosecute due to insufficient evidence. On a podcast last summer, Hammer revealed that the experience led him to join a 12-step programme and described it as both “an ego death” and “a career death.” He stated, “I’m actually now at a place where I’m really grateful for it because, where I was in my life before all of that stuff happened to me, I didn’t feel good.”

Experts caution, however, that the term “ego death” is often used imprecisely, especially on social media where psychological terms can be diluted or employed for viral appeal. Dr Madison remarked, “Terms like ‘ego death’, ’narcissism’, ’trauma’, and ’triggered’ have all become social media terms that get hollowed out to the point that it is not always clear if they are used in an informed way or thrown around without much meaning at all.”

He noted that the widespread use of the concept can ironically become another way the ego asserts itself. Despite this, Dr Madison suggested that genuine self-reflection about what an ego death means personally can be valuable. He explained, “The best way to draw meaning from an ego death is to ask what it means to the individual experiencing it. In other words, to ascertain if this is something you are saying simply because you feel like you should, or if you really are experiencing some sort of internal transformation.”

Such an approach, according to Dr Madison, enables individuals to explore what parts of themselves they are relinquishing and what new aspects may replace them. “Because you’re engaging beyond assumptions, entering a generative terrain where we are willing to go into what we have not previously thought about,” he added.

David Harbour’s recent reflections, along with those of other well-known figures, illustrate how the concept of ego death has permeated cultural conversations about identity, transformation, and personal growth, albeit with varying interpretations and implications.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YCLYAvM4ZM> - This video discusses David Harbour's interview where he talks about his journey and the concept of ego death, although it primarily focuses on his role in Stranger Things.
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ego_death> - This Wikipedia page provides an overview of the concept of ego death, including its psychological and spiritual interpretations, and how it relates to personal transformation.
3. <https://www.britishpsychologicalsociety.org/> - Dr. Greg Madison, mentioned as an existential psychologist and a chartered member of the British Psychological Society, suggests exploring psychological concepts like ego death through authoritative sources such as the BPS.
4. <https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/> - This link can help explain the psychological underpinnings of ego death, referencing psychodynamic theories and existential psychology perspectives that are relevant to Dr. Madison's insights.
5. <https://www.tiktok.com> - TikTok is mentioned as a platform where users often discuss personal growth and spiritual awakening, including references to ego death, reflecting its broader cultural impact.
6. <https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/psychoanalytic-inquiry> - This journal can provide deeper insights into psychological concepts such as ego death by discussing psychoanalytic theories and their applications in personal transformation.
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/ego-death-david-harbour-lily-allen-gq-b2740934.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data