

At 41, I found out I was the child of a sperm donor, not my dad

My whole world crumbled – and the truth undermined my sense of self, until I found help

Anonymous author

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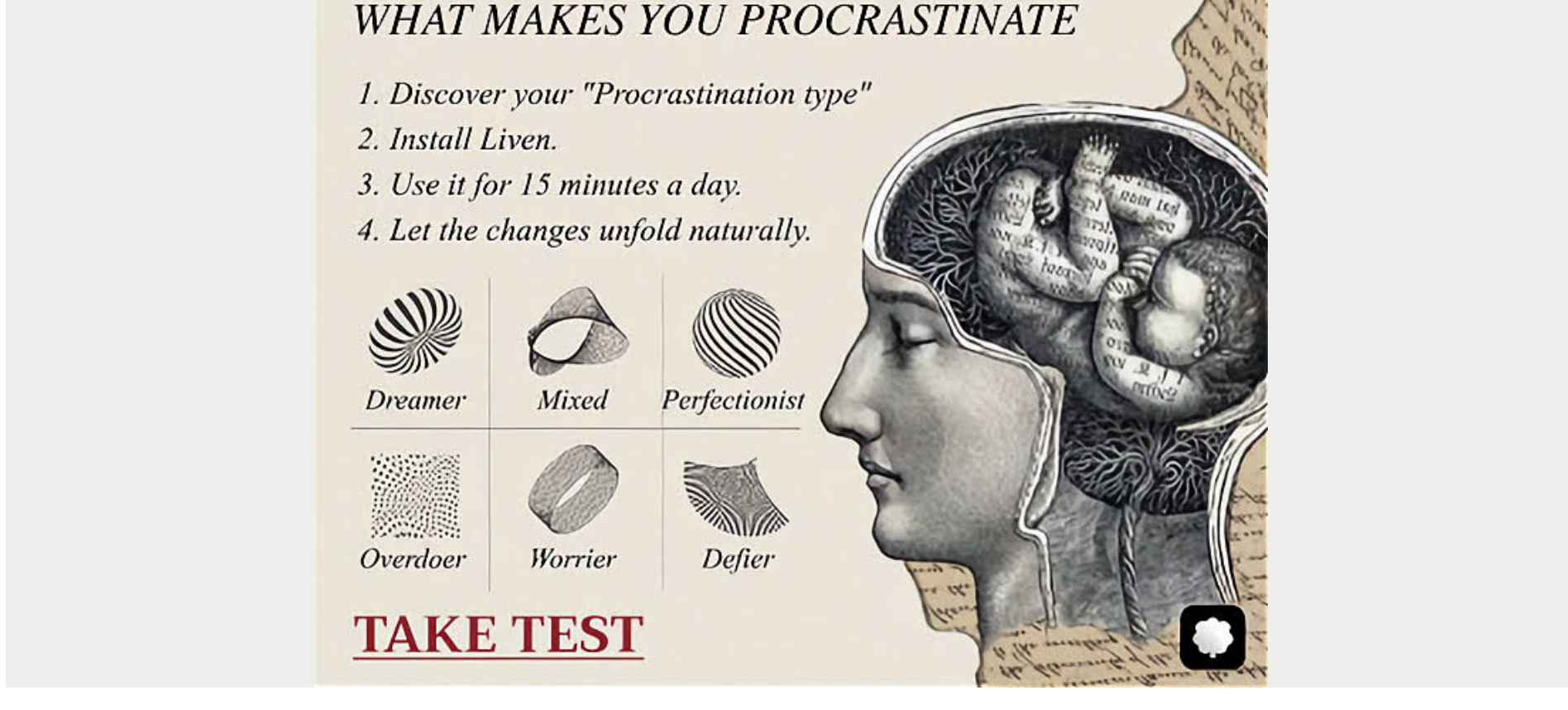


All names have been changed

I have a vivid memory of myself at eight, sitting on the riverbank and fishing with my dad. It's a moment that always made me feel safe – the security that comes from being with a parent who loved you and made you who you are.

But last year I stared at an email from a stranger, read the words “[sperm donor](#)”, and that memory, along with so many others, shattered. If what she had written was true, then he wasn't my biological father at all. At 41, the foundation of my world seemed to crumble away.

I had always idolised my dad, an engineer who taught me how to canoe and camp. I knew [he spoilt me more](#) than my younger brother, Adam, and sister, Sophie, but I ignored their teasing that I was a “daddy's girl”. I wore the label with pride.



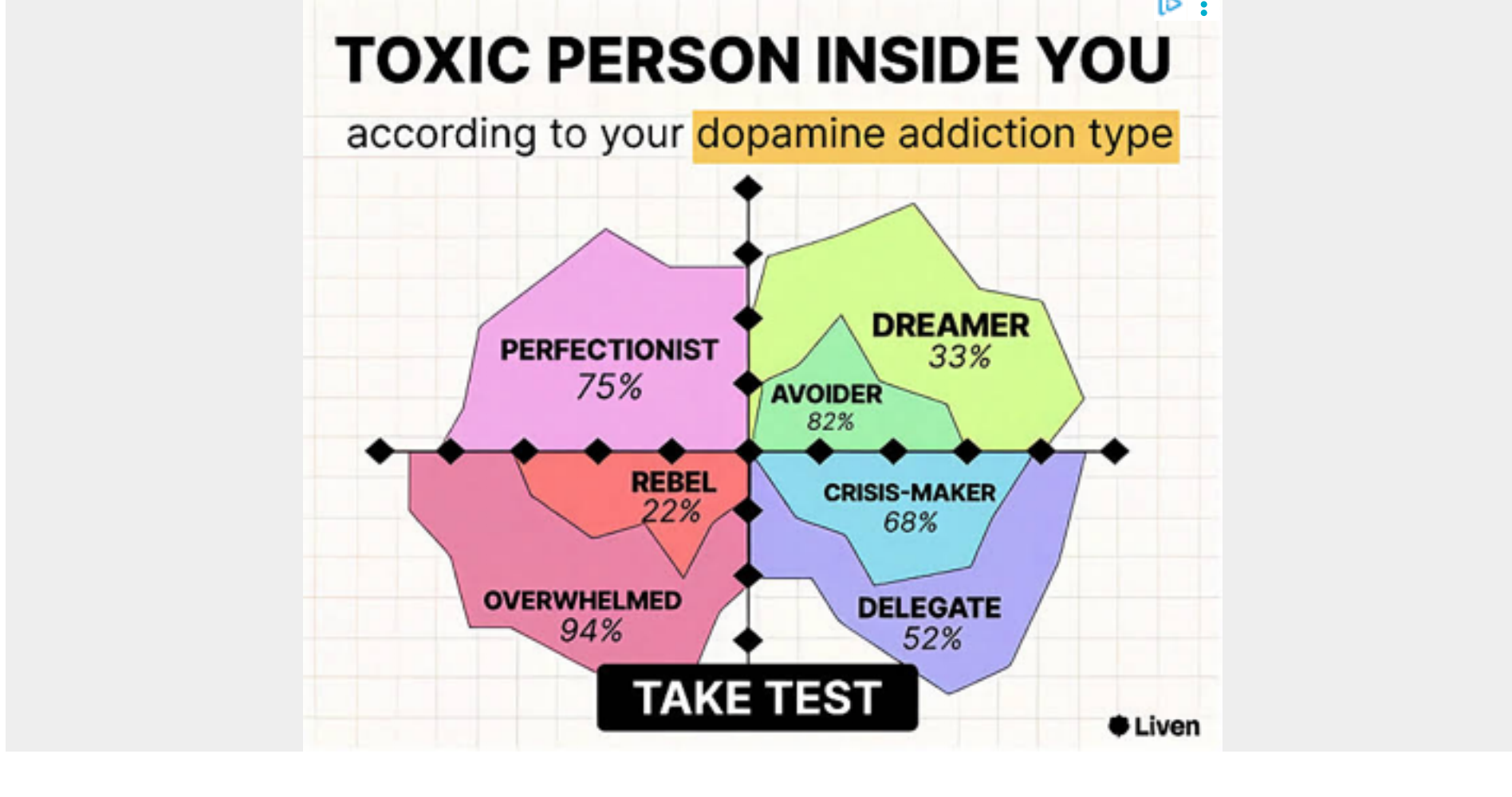
[My relationship with Mum](#) was more complicated. I never felt her unconditional love, and after their acrimonious divorce when I was 17, her attempt to forbid me to see Dad hurt.

I ignored her and she was furious, a pattern that played out for years. Unlike my siblings, who could see Mum without incident, every conversation we had ended in an argument. Still, I couldn't bear to cut ties completely.

Even at 26, married and a mother myself, we were never far from a row. One day, as she criticised Dad and I defended him, she snapped, “He's not your dad anyway!” I knew it wasn't true but was appalled at the lengths she'd go to hurt me. He was my dad, and I'd never abandon him. When I lost him to cancer five years later, I was devastated.

A revelation over dinner

So, it was strange to be sitting with Mum at dinner in 2024, after years of sporadic contact. Stranger yet, we were smiling and laughing rather than fighting. Then she said, “Do you remember our argument years ago, when I said that Dad wasn't your dad? Well, we used a sperm donor to have you.” I sat frozen, looking in shock as she continued, “I just thought that you should know.”



Struggling to breathe, it was impossible to process what I was hearing. How their GP had recommended sperm donation after they had struggled for years to conceive. That Adam and Sophie had then been conceived naturally, making them my half-siblings. Surely, it's all lies, I thought for the 100th time. I couldn't bear to contemplate what it meant if it wasn't.

I found the Donor Conceived UK (DCUK) Facebook group, and read about those who had discovered, just as I had, that they had been lied to. Many called that moment an NPE or “non-parental event”.

Desperate for more information, I turned to Mum, who seemed annoyed at my persistence. She'd told me the truth, she replied, why didn't I just leave it now? But that was impossible. I bought a [DNA test](#), desperately hoping it would lead me to someone who could tell me more.

As the weeks ticked painfully by, I spoke to my siblings, who, to my shock, didn't think Mum's claims were a big deal. I should have been happy their love for me remained unchanged. Instead, I felt even more alone.

The quiet times were the worst, when my questions came unbidden and refused to leave. Did it matter if Dad and I hadn't been connected by blood? Was my conception the reason he doted on me more than Sophie and Adam, his attempt to compensate somehow?

I kept running through my memories, looking for clues. It was exhausting and got me no closer to answers. I started to feel like I was losing my mind.

Unravelling the mystery with a DNA test

Five endless weeks later, I was staring at my test results, the page linking me to any other users who shared my DNA. Right at the top, with the highest percentage match, was the name Joanne. Without even thinking I clicked the message button and began typing. “Hi, I've just done this DNA test and see we have a high match. I'm just wondering how we're connected?”

Before I could even think, the reply came. “You probably want to speak to your parents about this. But the reason we're connected is because they would have used a sperm donor.”

Two thoughts hit me at once. Mum had been telling the truth, and this was my sister.

Joanne was farther advanced in her search to find out the truth about her parentage – and so it fell to her to explain the situation whenever a new half-sibling found their way to the same DNA site and got tested.

Our messages flew back and forth, each one revealing a new shocking piece of information.

There were four more siblings who knew they had been conceived through the same donor. We all had an aunt called Hannah, who Joanne had also found through the same DNA testing site. She had been given permission to share medical information and some personal details about her brother Robert, our donor.

Joanne even sent me Hannah's email and a link to some info about Robert, although at this stage Hannah is not allowed to share his personal contact details.

One click, and there was my biological father's face. Overwhelmed with everything I'd discovered, I closed the page. For my own sanity I needed to catch my breath.

At risk of accidental incest

I should have been pleased. The DCUK support group was [full of stories](#) of people searching for years without any answers, or whose newly discovered relatives refused to see them. On paper this was the best possible outcome.

But without the distraction of waiting for my DNA results, the shred of hope that it hadn't been true, it all hit me. Dad wasn't my biological father – and with that certainty some part of my identity fell away.

When I tried to talk to Mum about what I had discovered, she simply ended the call. In frustration I sent her a picture of the donor, despite knowing that to see the face of the stranger who fathered her own child would be hard. I was furious at her denial at what was happening to me.

I struggled to sleep or eat and couldn't concentrate at work. I would walk down the street, scanning stranger's faces; wondering if they were my biological relatives. By keeping my conception a secret, I had been at risk of [accidental incest](#). The thought made me shudder.

My grief for Dad returned in waves, followed by a question of whether I should even be grieving when he wasn't my biological father. Then I felt guilty that I had even thought that, and realised how much emotional turmoil I was in.

The DCUK community saved me with both their online forums and their help in accessing counselling. In those sessions I realised I was allowed to be angry at both my parents for keeping my conception a secret. If I had been told as a child, if it had been normalised as part of my developing identity, maybe I wouldn't be struggling so badly now.

Meeting my relations

Counselling also helped me see that I wanted to meet my new relatives, despite my fear of rejection. Which is how I found myself sitting in a coffee shop with Hannah.

Her genuine joy calmed my nerves, and for two hours we talked. She spoke about Robert, how he had donated as a medical student to help couples. Now happily married, he had chosen not to have children of his own.

Hearing her sisterly pride, clearly wanting me to feel the same, I guiltily thought of Dad. Would he have minded me looking through Hannah's family photos, seeing a nose or brow she thought I shared?

When Hannah spoke about how clever Robert was, I thought of my own childhood nickname, “the clever one”. Did Dad know it was a doctor who had fathered me? I felt a rush of confusion and sadness to think I had never know the answers.

A month later I was hugging Joanne, who had received my text asking if we could meet and immediately invited me to stay. That made me smile, as it was exactly how I would have responded.

I didn't see a physical resemblance, but when I told her I was starting an [assessment for ADHD](#) she said that her daughter was neurodiverse. With each new meet-up, text or chat, our bond grew, and I felt my shattered identity piecing back together.

Moving forward

I would love to say that a year on from our dinner, my relationship with Mum has healed. Sadly, that hasn't happened. I suspect that it was fear that made her keep my donor conception a secret in my childhood, and fear that prevents her speaking openly about it now. And as long as she continues to do that, it's impossible for us to move forward.

My feelings for Robert remain complicated. He isn't my father, and I don't want or expect anything from him. But when Hannah told me that he's visiting the UK later this year, it did make me wonder. Would I want to meet him? I'm trying not to put too much pressure on myself to decide anything right now, while he is considering whether or not he wants to meet us.

As for Dad, I no longer scour my memories for clues to a mystery that will never be solved. I will never know how he felt about my conception, or how he would react to my knowing about it now.

But I can finally think of that little girl fishing with her dad and smile. I've found peace in the knowledge that love can be based on something stronger than biology. Whatever my DNA results page says, he will always be my dad.

See [Donor Conceived UK](#) for more details

As told to Kate Graham

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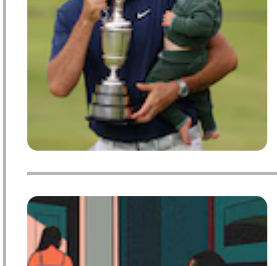
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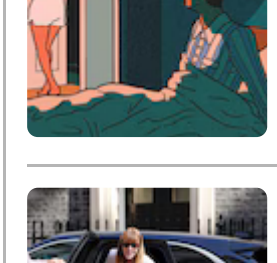
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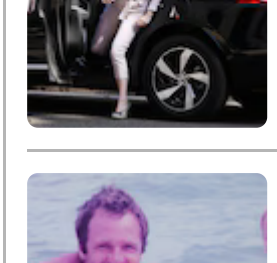
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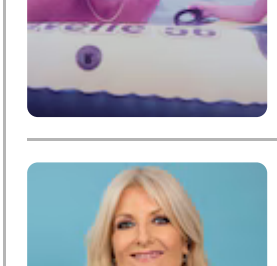


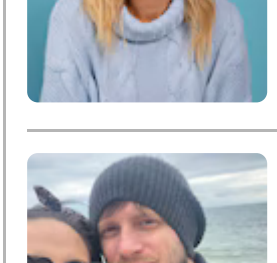
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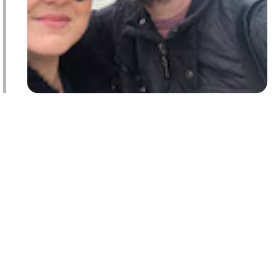
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