

Case study three: Betty Johnson

Betty Johnson is 67 years old and lives with her husband David. David is 75 years old. Betty has always done the cooking but since Betty has been unwell David is now doing this as best he can. Betty has cancer of the liver, she has had chemotherapy for this but she has just been told that the treatment hasn't worked and the cancer has now spread to other areas. Betty tells Linda, her social worker, that the consultant has informed her that she can have further treatment but, at best, this will only prolong her life. She has also been told it will be quite intensive treatment and she needs to try and build herself up and put some weight on.

Betty is finding it hard to come to terms with the diagnosis and feels she cannot go out or face any of her close friends in case they ask her how she is and it is all too upsetting. She was quite friendly with her neighbour Lisa. Lisa popped in now and again for a chat 'mainly about food as we both love cooking and baking' but Betty sent her a message asking her not to come round as she can't face anyone at the moment. Lisa has said she quite understands and that she will pop round when Betty is ready, but to give her a shout any time if she needs a friendly face or someone to talk to.

Linda is concerned that Betty may become very isolated and that cutting herself off from her friends will impact on her emotionally and physically, affecting how well she can cope with her treatment. She asks what it is that worries her most about talking to people. Betty says she just can't cope with people being emotional or the look on their faces and knowing they are thinking 'you're going to die, I feel so sad and sorry for you'. Linda asks Betty how she would want a conversation to go. Betty replies that she would want to tell people the situation and then just to talk about the things she would normally talk about but is worried people won't do this. Linda asks Betty if there is anyone she can think of who might do just that – Betty says she thinks Lisa might be able to talk to her as 'she isn't too close a friend and is very down to earth and practical'. Linda asks Betty how she would feel if she asked Lisa to do some baking or make a casserole or some soup for her and David. That way they could talk about recipes again and have a reason for Lisa to pop round and something not related to cancer to talk about. It would also mean that David got a break from cooking and Betty could build herself up on some yummy cakes. Betty feels she might be able to face talking to Lisa if she has something else other than her cancer to talk about; she misses some company other than David.

Betty asks Lisa if she would mind doing some baking or cooking once or twice a week and offers to pay for the ingredients. Lisa says she would be delighted as she has missed her chats with Betty and would be glad to be able to help. Together they decide what recipe to try first and jam tarts are served.