

Charlotte suggested that I write a page of information to help the team, colleagues, and friends know how best to support me with my surgery. Both of my sisters have breast cancer, one of them for a second time. I have decided to have a double mastectomy as this is the best way to prevent breast cancer. It was not a difficult decision – my greatest desire is to be around to see my children grow up, and I want to do what I can to make that more likely. I am having surgery on 8th December. I will be off work and away from emails from 4th December until 6th January. I will then be working from the office (ie not going to meetings, facilitating etc) for the rest of January, and fully back to work at the beginning of February.

Helen



Supporting me – what helps

- **Staying in touch.** It helps to know that you are thinking about me. The best way to do this is texts. Cards are lovely too, but please don't send me flowers or gifts. Please don't phone me. It does not mean that I don't want to talk to people, but I know that to keep sharing the same information by phone will be difficult for me. I will text you with how I am doing, and I will write on my facebook page as well.
- **Supporting me to talk as much or as little as I want.** Sometimes I want to talk about it, sometimes I want to focus on my work, or just talk about other things. What works for me is just to say "How are you?" I will tell you I am fine (if I don't want to talk), or talk to you about how I am feeling. Please don't be offended if I don't want to talk about it, it is not personal.
- **Taking this in our stride, not seeing it as 'life defining' and still telling me about good things happening in your life.** I joke about going from 'Susannah to Trinny'. It helps not to be serious about it all the time – you can take the lead from me on when to laugh with me about it.
- **Being direct with people who ask you about it or who need to know.** I am happy for people to know. I need you to be direct and tell people I am having a double mastectomy, and why. I am going to look different afterwards, and I don't want people to think that I have just had breast reduction surgery! If we don't tell people who need to know, they will fill in the gaps themselves.

Supporting me – what does not help

I know how hard it is to know what to say sometimes, and it is fine just to say that! Here are some things that do not help:

- When people tell me that it will be OK, for me and my sisters, and that we will be fine. I know it is meant well, but it does not make me feel any better. We honestly don't know that everything will be OK, and it does not help me to pretend otherwise.
- When people tell me a story about someone they know who had breast cancer and they are fine now. I know that the intention is to encourage, but it ends up feeling like another way to say "It will be OK".
- Talking about cancer every time we communicate.
- When we talk, insisting that I tell you how I am 'really' feeling, as I may not want to talk about that right then.
- Ignoring it completely, and pretending that nothing is happening.

Thank you for reading this, and for your support.