



## **A Breast Cancer Alphabet**

*Madhulika Sikka*

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**A definitive and approachable guide to life during, and after, breast cancer**

The biggest risk factor for breast cancer is simply being a woman. Madhulika Sikka's *A Breast Cancer Alphabet* offers a new way to live with and plan past the hardest diagnosis that most women will ever receive: a personal, practical, and deeply informative look at the road from diagnosis to treatment and beyond.

What Madhulika Sikka didn't foresee when initially diagnosed, and what this book brings to life so vividly, are the unexpected and minute challenges that make navigating the world of breast cancer all the trickier. *A Breast Cancer Alphabet* is an inspired reaction to what started as a personal predicament.

This A-Z guide to living with breast cancer goes where so many fear to tread: sex (S is for Sex - really?), sentimentality (J is for Journey - it's a cliché we need to dispense with), hair (H is for Hair - yes, you can make a federal case of it) and work (Q is for Quitting - there'll be days when you feel like it). She draws an easy-to-follow, and quite memorable, map of her travels from breast cancer neophyte to seasoned veteran.

As a prominent news executive, Madhulika had access to the most cutting edge data on the disease's reach and impact. At the same time, she craved the community of frank talk and personal insight that we rely on in life's toughest moments. This wonderfully inventive book navigates the world of science and story, bringing readers into Madhulika's mind and experience in a way that demystifies breast cancer and offers new hope for those living with it.

## A Breast Cancer Alphabet Details

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Author : Madhulika Sikka

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# From Reader Review A Breast Cancer Alphabet for online ebook

## Darlene says

Originally posted at: <http://www.peekingbetweenthepages.com...>

Not many of us can say that cancer hasn't touched our lives in some way whether it be in our own life or in the lives of our loved ones. October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month and I always like to try and spotlight a few books that deal with breast cancer and those dealing with it. A Breast Cancer Alphabet by Madhulika Sikka is a little book that packs a big punch and should be one of the first things you gift a newly diagnosed breast cancer patient. This book will give them some insight into what will happen to them in terms of the medical side of things and also the personal side as well. The best way I can describe this book is to say it is very real and straightforward. Madhulika talks about sex, drugs, your feelings on your hair and breasts for that matter – she addresses so many things that really matter when you're diagnosed with this devastating disease. As a note I used my own photo because I think it shows just how pretty this little book is and as frivolous as it may sound I think it's important to have pretty things when you're not well along with your favorite pillows (the author speaks about that), blankets, and of course your furry pet if you have one.

Yet this book isn't just for those diagnosed with breast cancer. It is important for an individual's family and friends to read it as well so they can gain a much better understanding of what their loved one is dealing with. Breast cancer has touched my family many times unfortunately as many carry the breast cancer gene and I lost a best friend to breast cancer as well. So many things that Madhulika describes I can still clearly remember one of my aunts and my friend dealing with. I wish that they would have had this book to help them understand what was happening to them or to even justify some of the feelings they were having in what Madhulika calls 'cancerland'. The book is quite literally an A-Z guide and Madhulika presents everything in a very clear, very personal, and very practical manner. She makes it ok for the cancer patient to feel as crappy as they do most days. She addresses things like the anxiety, fear, and guilt that comes with diagnoses. She talks about what to expect during and even after breast cancer. It really is an indispensable guide for those dealing with breast cancer. From firsthand experience of being the family member helping a loved one deal with their diagnosis I have to say that I wish we had this book to help deal with many of the issues that came up.

I love the personal and conversational tone of this book as well as how it looks. It even has pages in the back of it for those all important notes you need to make yourself or for your loved one because the wealth of information you are receiving is overwhelming. I was lucky to have both the beautiful hard cover edition of this book as well as being able to listen to the audiobook. The audiobook is wonderful. It is narrated by Madhulika herself and she has a beautiful and soothing voice which made it very easy to listen to. What I loved about the audio is that I felt more connected to Madhulika and what she went through as she is personally relating it to her listeners in her own words and emotions which is very powerful.

Whether it be the book or the audio I highly recommend this beautiful little book to anyone dealing with breast cancer and to their loved ones. It's both comforting and empowering to understand what is happening to you and around you. To Madhulika I wish you all the best and a continued cancer free check up in the years to come! Highly recommended!

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## Maisarah Mohd azam says

I thought i might hv to give this a read, as a person i dearly most diagnosed with breast cancer (Thankfully she is now cancer free). This book have given me knowledge and a bit understanding on how cancer patients might feel throughout their journey.

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## Jen says

This was a great book to give a little practical window into the breast cancer experience. It was short and very well-written.

My only criticism is that the author seems to assume all women automatically choose reconstruction after mastectomy. Many women opt out of further surgery, and I would have loved a mention of this.

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## ?Karen says

If you're ever diagnosed with breast cancer, this is a great perspective on what to expect, how to fight the anxieties, fears, pain, guilt -- how to cope with it all. This is the book I wanted to write.

ARC from LibraryThing.com.

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## Michael says

Breast cancer has become something of a *cause celebre* these days. There are marathons, t-shirts, Facebook pages, high-profile double mastectomies. And well there should be: cancer, we don't need to be reminded, is an insidious, wasting disease, and the 'war on (breast) cancer' publicity machine has helped many women and families deal with its effects. But in *A Breast Cancer Alphabet*, Madhulika Sikka, with honesty and precision, offers a refreshing and straightforward view of her journey through what she calls "Cancerland".

Sikka's aim with her *Alphabet* was to dispense with the notion that breast cancer is a (paradoxically) sexy condition; that it's a journey of self-discovery and inner strength; and that the women who defeat it are Amazonian warriors who take the bit by the teeth and champion the cause. The first entry in her book is "A is for Anxiety", and that sets the tone for the next 25 chapters: cancer is not a *Lifetime* movie.

The systematic deconstruction of the breast cancer machine - from its diagnosis to its platitudes, from the big losses (like one of the defining characteristics of your body being amputated) to the little victories (like taking a walk around the block without collapsing) is what makes Sikka's book memorable. She describes the realities of her cancer treatment - the toxic therapies, the unfathomable fatigue, the crippling paralysis of not knowing if she would make it, the shame of losing her hair, a breast, her sex drive - with such clinical effectiveness that the blood runs cold.

But she plows through, and it's in the little indulgences that the miracle of recovery shines through. Whether binge watching *Downton Abbey*, buying new scarves to cover her now bald head, or giving into sleep whenever she could, Sikka reminds her fellow sufferers that even though the journey through Cancerland is

fraught with pain, resentment and frustration, there are ways to get through it. They are small ways, but, like Sikka's book itself, they are tangible and believable. Sikka's gift to the cancer conversation is not just that she survived it, but that she documented it with such honesty, grace and heart.

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### **Sylvia Smith says**

I just found out I have breast cancer and this is my third cancer. The book was so helpful because breast cancer is so much different than others. It got me prepared for what's going to happen next.

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### **Stacie says**

During this month of October, I felt it was especially appropriate to share this book. A BREAST CANCER ALPHABET isn't just for the person with cancer, but for those who love and care for the person with cancer. I would even offer that even though this book focuses specifically, in certain chapters, about breast cancer, this book could be helpful to anyone with any form of cancer.

While working as a producer with NPR, Sikka found out she had breast cancer. As she traveled through chemo and hair loss, surgeries and sickness, she found there wasn't a book to tell you exactly what you wanted and needed to hear while going through the days of cancer. Sikka wrote this book to remind those with cancer and their families and friends that you can still smile, life still goes on and most importantly, you have every right to feel the way you do.

The book is laid out exactly as you would expect. Each chapter begins with a letter of the alphabet that explains a part of living with cancer. In the "A is for Anxiety" chapter, you will find that anxiety isn't a feeling experienced just during the waiting game after a lump is found, but a part of life that continues years after you are "cancer free". The anxiety during your treatments is just as real as the anxiety you feel in the back of your mind, always wondering if your cancer will come back. In the "E is for Epiphany" chapter, Sikka explains that all those dreams and wishes you had in your "pre-cancer" life are nothing compared to the dreams you have in your "after-cancer" life. Realizing that your life was pretty great just as it was may be the epiphany you needed. There are also practical chapters like "P is for Pillows" in which the author shares the practicality and necessity of a three-by-six-inch pillow.

I found A BREAST CANCER ALPHABET to be a practical, yet emotional book. Just because I am a woman makes me a large target for the wretched breast cancer beast. Reading this book made me fearful, yet encouraged. I get my annual mammograms. I perform monthly self-checks. But, I also have a family history of breast cancer. I know the risk for me is high and I found comfort in the pages of this book. Sikka was honest, thorough, and creative in her informative book. I am more aware of how cancer patients feel, physically and emotionally, because of her honesty. This is a book that should be shared with every woman you know. We can become better patients, caregivers, and friends with the knowledge in this book.

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### **Nancy says**

When Elizabeth Edwards died of breast cancer in 2010, the author of this book was in the White House with an NPR crew to interview the President. Pretty Christmas tree? New Rug? Sikka couldn't tell you because, in

the forefront of her mind, she was awaiting a phone call that could (and did) change her life.

Breast Cancer! Scary news! I know this because this past September I received the same phone call. Plans to be planned, decisions to be decided, life goes on but on a totally different course. If only I'd had this book. Seriously. Ms. Sikka writes in woman-speak, tells it as it is and offers some great ideas along the way.

I loved the format of this book: A-Z with each chapter getting a page or so. I loved her references to Cancerland (I live there, too!) and to let yourself be YOU. Most important. No one can do that for you, although they can (and, if they offer, should) do darn near anything else.

Coming out in February, 2014, I hope this shows up in Dr. offices and hospital libraries because it can help – a lot.

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### **Jennifer says**

Going into this, I wasn't cognizant that it was geared towards those who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. I do not qualify, which is certainly not the fault of the text. Re-reading the copy, I can see a few qualifiers that signal the book's intended audience, though they are a bit vague. I would perhaps have wished that the publisher had made these sentences a bit more explicit, though I'm also liable for not reading as closely as I should have.

Nonetheless, this book wasn't a sunk cost. I, as most others, have loved ones who have been touched by this particular form of cancer, so viewing it from that perspective was helpful even though the text wasn't directed to me. I would recommend this as a thoughtful gift to the newly diagnosed (or perhaps anyone diagnosed with any form of cancer, as much of its content is likely universally applicable). I imagine it would be a reassuring alternative to some of the other dominant cultural discourses around cancer.

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### **Melinda says**

There is so much to cancer, more than the medical involvement, it's the emotional, mental and physical toll it takes on the afflicted. Each person's experience varies, however a few aspects might be shared and easily relatable of those suffering, Sikka herself states it is an immensely personal 'journey.' A Breast Cancer Alphabet addresses a myriad of challenges breast cancer imposes from a woman whose experience is shared.

Sikka gives a candid insight into breast cancer from the diagnosis continuing through survival, peppered with morsels of wit. No doubt this book will be helpful for a person recently diagnosed with breast cancer anxious to learn more than what the medical pamphlets describe. Looking for the answers to questions popping up in your mind, this book serves to anchor those hanging concerns from someone who's been there sharing her knowledge first hand.

The book is cleverly formatted in the style of an alphabet book. Beginning with "A for Anxiety" continuing forward ending in "Z for Zzzzs" you gain a clear picture of the trials breast cancer presents, tips to reassure and assist as you try to navigate your way through the unknown waters.

**“My breast cancer was not mystical, or enchanting or exotic. My breast cancer was not and is not a journey. Getting through cancer is no different from getting through some other terrible disease because that is what it is, a disease. It’s okay to treat it like one.”**

“I for Indignities” a great section, she speaks loud and clear for ALL to hear about the bright side of breast cancer – “a land of sparkling brightness personified by women who are happy and smiling while they are ‘battling’ this disease”. Ending the chapter with “My point is breast cancer is many, many things. What it is not is a fun ride. It is a painful and debilitating and public, and it is okay to feel indignant about that.” Her courage and honesty shines in her comment, thank goodness she voices what others silence.

A book serving as a lifesaver for some, certainly can’t hurt to peruse the pages arming yourself with knowledge. If you know anyone diagnosed I highly suggest this book, I urge you to read it if only to educate yourself on what they might be experiencing in hopes of serving as a vehicle of support.

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### **Kats says**

The first day after my last day of chemotherapy I read (or rather: listened to) this book. Why? Shouldn't I move on now that it's finally over?

As the author, Madhulika Sikka says in chapter 1 ("A is for Anxiety"), the life with breast cancer never really stops being that, as after treatment you will always live with the anxiety that it comes back. So, in one way it was good timing at the end of my treatment cycles, as I need to face the future that lies ahead (plus more surgery to stay ahead of the cancer), on the other hand all I could think was "I wish I'd been given this book on the day of my breast cancer diagnosis seven months ago". This is the most truthful account of dealing with breast cancer and the treatments' side effects I've read, I would highly recommend it to anyone being confronted with the same diagnosis or any close friends & family of a breast cancer patient.

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### **Enka-Candler Library says**

Sikka's concise and approachable A Breast Cancer Alphabet is an empathetic and relevant addition to breast cancer literature. In passages like this:

"The day you are diagnosed with breast cancer is a day you will never forget. It is the moment that your world is turned upside down forever. Nothing about you or your life will be the same after that,"

Sikka captures the emotion and understanding of someone who's been given a first-class ticket to Cancerland-- one-way, mind you.

This book would make great reading for someone newly diagnosed, as it: is able to be read in one sitting, divided into short chapters for each letter of the alphabet so it would be good reading for waiting room visits, and is light in overviewing information without overwhelming its reader. It would also be great reading for friends and caregivers to help them sort of understand what their loved one is going through from diagnosis to treatment.

As someone with cancer baggage, Sikka does address the martial language surrounding breast cancer, criticizing such seemingly beloved war references as being a "warrior," and "fighting" the disease. I couldn't agree with her more, as I too think such language is hurtful to those already suffering, who may "lose" their

cancer "battle," and think it's time for patients to re- address the terminology currently in use. But, if you or your loved one need this language to cope with cancer, skip the "W" chapter.

Also, information about radiation therapy is missing from this book; I'm assuming because Sikka did not have to undergo radiation as part of her treatment protocol.

In short, pair this lightweight memoir with a more comprehensive cancer tome, like Susan Love's Breast Book.

I'll close with a passage that I completely identified with during my own breast cancer treatment, which Sikka so accurately expresses:

"Quitting comes up a lot. I don't mean in a melodramatic way of leave me here alone to die. I just mean getting up every day and putting one foot in front of the other as you deal with the enormity of your news and the incredible busyness of managing your disease and treatment and then actually going through the treatment. Oh, yeah, and the rest of your life continues without interruption . . . "  
Amen.

--Melisa

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### **Trish Bachman says**

For anyone who wants to know what someone with breast cancer faces. I found this book to be informative and touching as the author shares her own experience with the disease.

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### **Laura says**

Since my Mom's breast cancer diagnosis just before Christmas this past year, I've been immersing myself in all sorts of breast cancer books. This lovely little tome appeared on my doorstep as a gift (we still don't know who it's from, though!), and I added it to my stack. Granted, most of the books I've come across I can skim and skip around without missing much new information/insight/statistics since so many seem to overlap. But this one was a little gem of a cancer book. Madhulika is honest, wry, sensitive, straightforward, and practical. While yes, it is about her traveling through Cancerland, it's also about the experience at large. What it feels like to lose your hair. Dealing with exhaustion. Handling all of the various ways you feel guilt. How to get comfortable with the new landscape of your body. It was truly wonderful to read a book that wasn't a variation of "Yes! We Are Warriors" or "How To Kick This Disease In The Butt!" or "Beware My Experiences!". It's beautiful to look at (my Mom said she really appreciates the fact that Breast and Cancer aren't the two most obvious words on the cover), and it's told in easily digestible chapters of a few pages each. You can jump around to each letter of the alphabet or read it straight through - it doesn't matter, but I read it straight through and really enjoyed it that way.

Bottom line is, if you, or someone you love, or someone you know, is diagnosed with this disease, please buy a copy of this book. It's been one of the most comforting and informative books that I've ran into.

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## **Andrea says**

Interesting read. I enjoy her work on NPR (of course). I feel selfish for being a self absorbed teenager who had no clue while my mom had a prophylactic double mastectomy and reconstruction after the second occurrence of early cancer in her 40s. And I can relate differently to the treatment part now that my mom has leukemia, but I mourn the experiences she didn't have, like preparing for treatment and getting a wig consultation--basically anything other than instant admission to the hospital and zero time to process. I was looking for a book about cancer I might learn from and relate to, and in ways here I did, both to experience past and present.

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