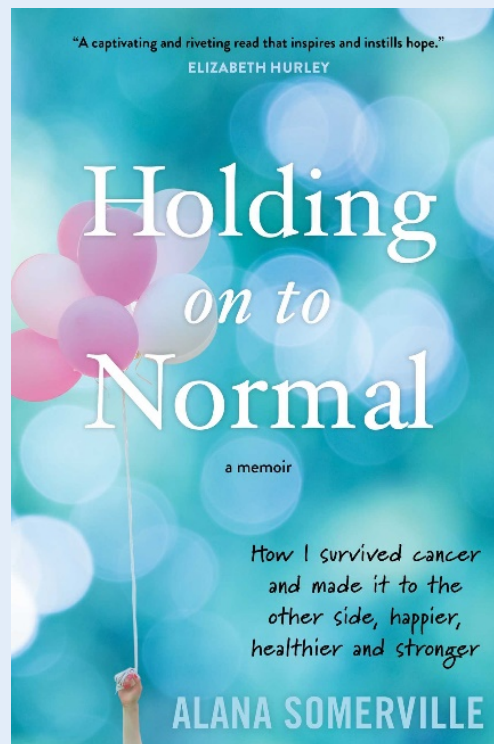


Holding on to Normal

Alana Somerville



This reading group guide includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

A compelling memoir about trying to live meaningfully with illness and triumph beyond it, by breast cancer survivor Alana Somerville, a teacher and mother of two young children.

I looked at all the sick people around me. Was I going to be like them? Was that already me? Did I suddenly have a time stamp on my life? Would I make it out of this alive?



Alana Somerville—wife, teacher and mother of two small children—was thirty-three years old when she was diagnosed with stage-two, triple-negative breast cancer. The diagnosis changed her world and the relationships she had with everyone around her. Suddenly she was faced with endless medical appointments, multiple surgeries and procedures, the challenges of chemotherapy, and all the decisions involved in her treatment. She also had to deal with the trauma of realizing that her support network—sometimes even her closest friends—could struggle with how to help or even how to react to her anymore.

Throughout the course of her illness, Alana learned to maneuver through the medical system, to advocate for herself, and to build a truly supportive network. She

also discovered how to keep her positive spirit intact while undergoing a double mastectomy and ongoing treatment. She is now living cancer-free—a survivor and an advocate.

Alana’s story is not unique. It’s a story that will resonate with anyone who has suffered illness and found themselves navigating a whole new world upon diagnosis. This is an “everywoman’s” journey through the experience of cancer, tracing the emotional, physical and psychological steps that are common to all. In the end, this memoir will offer hope that one can live a healthy, fulfilling and happy life beyond diagnosis.

Holding on to Normal is for anyone who is suffering—or knows someone who is suffering from—a setback in life, and who is looking for inspiration on how to navigate their own journey.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the way in which the book is structured. Do you find that the short chapters make it easier to read about Alana's experience of living meaningfully with her cancer diagnosis?
2. Near the beginning of the book, Alana wonders, "What is the right way to respond to the news that someone has a lump that may or may not be cancerous?" People respond in two ways: by saying things are going to be okay or changing the subject. Both come across as superficial or uncaring. How would you respond to Alana's news?
3. Alana writes, "I divide my life into two parts: before I was diagnosed with breast cancer and after." How has her life changed, and what remains the same after the diagnosis? How have you responded to difficult situations in your life?
4. Throughout the book, Alana advocates for the power of positive thinking. How does she use positive thinking to get through difficult experiences?
5. After Alana is diagnosed with cancer, she decides to read and educate herself about her disease and breast cancer in general. How does this help Alana understand her condition? In what ways does this process allow Alana to prepare for the diagnosis?
6. Alana writes about her first chemotherapy treatment in detail, and gives insight into an aspect of cancer that is often ignored. How does Alana's transparency affect your perception of cancer and its treatment?
7. Alana is so strong throughout her treatment but admits, "what ... I couldn't handle was having my hair fall out." How does Alana cope with the loss of her hair, and why is it so difficult for her to lose it? What have you found surprising about difficult situations you've been in?

8. Describe the effect that going shopping for a wig has on Alana. What prompts her to seek out the experience, and why do you think she takes Charley with her?

9. When Alana attends the Relay for Life event, she finds it difficult to join the “survivors group”. Why doesn’t she feel like she belongs? How does she feel different from the other survivors?

10. Discuss the significance of the title. In what ways does Alana hold on to normalcy in her life, and why does she find it so important to maintain that normalcy?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. All the new cancer patients at the Juravinski Cancer Centre get a quilt and knit squares, which become quilts. Gather your friends and make a small quilt to donate to a breast cancer awareness organization such as JCC.

2. Alana describes the pre-chemo waiting room as being “like a party, with music playing.” Create a playlist of upbeat and inspirational songs to play in the background of your book club that would cheer up someone battling an illness.

3. Alana takes strength and courage from reading a memoir written by an athlete who survived cancer. What are some of your favourite books that have inspired and motivated you?