



Brian Conaghan

The M Word

**TEACHING
RESOURCE**

ABOUT THE BOOK

*Moya. The M Word. Whisper it. Conceal it.
But, please, never mention it...*

Maggie Yates tells her best mate Moya everything.

She tells her about Mum losing her job – how Mum's taken to crying in secret. She even tells her about her foolproof plan to cheer Mum up: find her a fella with cash to splash.

Moya's with her every step of the way. I'll help, she smiles. Though you're surfing a rainbow if you think someone like that exists round here.

But at the back of her mind Maggie knows that Mum's crying is more than sadness. That there are no easy fixes. And that she shouldn't be speaking to Moya any more. Because Moya died months ago.

An unforgettable novel about grief and healing from Costa Children's and Irish Book Award-winner Brian Conaghan. Please be aware that some of the themes and content in the book are adult in nature.





MENTAL HEALTH (taken from *Hugland*)

Objectives: Analyse how the writer uses language to explore the topic of mental health; consider the impact of mental health problems and what we can do to overcome them.

Subjects: English, PSHE, Art, Design and Technology

'Tell me, Mum. Tell me what's going on.' Her head falls to her chest.

'I feel really unhappy, really low.' 'Like bottomless-pit low?'

'Just feel a bit hemmed in, like everything's dark.' Well, open the bloody blinds, woman!

'Are you able to see any light at all?' The lines in her forehead sink deeper.

She looks at me as if I've had a brain transplant. Like, is this my daughter speaking? It's a decent question.

Truth: these are questions that Anna has put to me in the past. I banked them. Now, nicking them.

'I'm only trying to explain my behaviour, Maggie. I'm aware of what you're going through, so I don't want you worrying about me, that's all.'

Going through? Funny how we rarely mention the M word these days.

I take a quick gander at the living room. Place is a complete dive.

'I'm tired all the time,' she goes. 'But can't sleep during the night.'

'So, what do you do?' 'I sit.'

'In darkness?' 'Sometimes.'

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is Maggie's mum trying to express in this extract? Do you empathise with her situation?
- Why might this be a difficult conversation for a parent to have with their child?
- How do you think both characters are feeling at this point in the text? Give reasons for your ideas.
- Why is it important not to bottle up our emotions? What can happen if we keep things to ourselves?
- What advice would you give both characters if you were part of their conversation? Explain your ideas.



ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

Subjects: English, PSHE

- In groups, students should come up with definitions for the following things: mental health, depression, anxiety, stress. Feedback ideas as a class so that everyone has a clear understanding and written definition of each word.
- Attribute a different colour to the following terms: depression, anxiety, stress. Then go back over the extract, this time highlighting words and phrases (with the corresponding colour!) that students associate with the terms. It is fine if some words and phrases are linked to more than one colour/term – as long as students can explain their ideas.
- As a class, discuss which words you have linked with which term(s). In doing so, consider questions such as: What does this tell us about mental health? What does it reveal about how the characters are feeling? Can you relate to any of these discussion points?

ACTIVITY 2: MY MENTAL HEALTH

Subjects: English, PSHE, Art, Design and Technology

- Using the same colour code as in Activity 1, students should annotate an image of the human head/brain and human body (see worksheet overleaf) with how depression, anxiety and stress affect us. Questions for them to consider include: What causes you or people in general to be anxious? What feelings and behaviours do you associate with being stressed? What events or circumstances can trigger depression? Try to give examples and relate it to your own life when possible.
- Then, in a different colour, next to the comments that they have made, students should write down words or an action that they can use on themselves to combat the problems associated with mental health. They should think about things such as sleep, exercise or talking to someone. What solutions do they find most useful?



