

DROWNING IN QUICKSAND

By Debbie Lamedman

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SYNOPSIS: An in-depth and heartbreaking portrayal of a group of high school teenagers reckoning with the everyday struggles of mental health, depression, self-harm, and suicide.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 female, 13-39 either)

MIA (f).....	(29 lines)
THE CUTTER (f/m)	(8 lines)
COUNSELOR (f/m)	(5 lines)
MIA'S MOM (f)	Offstage voice. (4 lines)
VOICE 1 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 2 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 3 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 4 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 5 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 6 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 7 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 8 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 9 (f/m)	(2 lines)
VOICE 10 (f/m)	(2 lines)
STUDENT 1 (f/m)	(8 lines)
STUDENT 2 (f/m)	(14 lines)
STUDENT 3 (f/m)	(19 lines)
STUDENT 4 (f/m)	(23 lines)
STUDENT 5 (f/m)	(10 lines)
STUDENT 6 (f/m)	(16 lines)
STUDENT 7 (f/m)	(14 lines)
STUDENT 8 (f/m)	(16 lines)
STUDENT 9 (f/m)	(6 lines)
STUDENT 10 (f/m)	(13 lines)
STUDENT A (f/m)	(17 lines)
STUDENT B (f/m).....	(10 lines)
STUDENT C (f/m).....	(14 lines)

STUDENT D (f/m) (18 lines)
 STUDENT E (f/m)..... (23 lines)
 STUDENT F (f/m)..... (15 lines)
 STUDENT G (f/m) (21 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 1 (f/m)..... (1 line)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 2 (f/m)..... (6 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 3 (f/m)..... (2 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 4 (f/m)..... (2 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 5 (f/m)..... (2 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 6 (f/m)..... (2 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 7 (f/m)..... (2 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 8 (f/m)..... (2 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 9 (f/m)..... (2 lines)
 STUDENT IN THERAPY 10 (f/m)..... (2 lines)

DURATION: 35 minutes

SETTING: Any place.

TIME: Present.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

PROLOGUE: MIA, VOICES 1-10

SCENE 1: MIA, STUDENTS 1-10

SCENE 2: THE CUTTER, STUDENTS A-G, MIA

SCENE 3: STUDENT A, STUDENT E, STUDENT D, STUDENT F, MIA,
 MIA'S MOM

SCENE 4: COUNSELOR, STUDENTS IN THERAPY 1-10

SCENE 5: STUDENT 3, THE CUTTER, STUDENT A, STUDENT E, MIA

SCENE 6: STUDENT B, STUDENT C, STUDENT G, STUDENT 1,
 STUDENT 4, STUDENT 5, STUDENT 7, STUDENT 8, STUDENT 9,
 STUDENT 10

SCENE 7: MIA, STUDENT 2, STUDENT 6, STUDENT D, STUDENT E,
 STUDENT F

SCENE 8: STUDENTS A-G, STUDENTS 1-10

EPILOGUE: THE CUTTER, VOICES 1-10

OPTIONAL DOUBLING

For a minimum cast of 15 (2 females and 13 either), please see the optional doubling listed below.

THE CUTTER can double as STUDENT IN THERAPY 2

STUDENT A can double as STUDENT IN THERAPY 3

STUDENT B can double as STUDENT 9, VOICE 9, and STUDENT IN THERAPY 8

STUDENT C can double as STUDENT 2, VOICE 2

STUDENT D can double as STUDENT 5, VOICE 5

STUDENT E can double as STUDENT 1, VOICE 1

STUDENT F can double as STUDENT IN THERAPY 4

STUDENT G can double as COUNSELOR

STUDENT 3 can double as VOICE 3, STUDENT IN THERAPY 10

STUDENT 4 can double as VOICE 4, STUDENT IN THERAPY 5

STUDENT 6 can double as VOICE 6, STUDENT IN THERAPY 1

STUDENT 7 can double as VOICE 7, STUDENT IN THERAPY 9

STUDENT 8 can double as VOICE 8, STUDENT IN THERAPY 6

STUDENT 10 can double as VOICE 10, STUDENT IN THERAPY 7

MIA'S MOM (f) can double as any female character that is not already playing in Scene 3.

PREMIERE PRODUCTION

DROWNING IN QUICKSAND premiered at Pittsburg High School (KS) under the direction of Greg Shaw with following cast and crew:

Mia	Grace Terry
Cutter, Student in Therapy 2	Amanda Bourbina
Student A, Student in Therapy 3	McKenna Shaw
Student B, Student 9, Voice 9, Student in Therapy 8	Sammy Jamison
Student C, Student 2, Voice 2	Matt Buck
Student D, Student 5, Voice 5	Cassie Hurt-McLarty
Student E, Student 1, Voice 1	Julian Archuleta
Student F, Student in Therapy 4	Journey Jaramillo
Student G, Counselor	Griffin Cooper
Student 3, Voice 3, Student in Therapy 10	Molly Jamison
Student 4, Voice 4, Student in Therapy 5, Mia's Mom ..	Miranda Madden
Student 6, Voice 6, Student in Therapy 1	Jamie Van Wyck
Student 7, Voice 7, Student in Therapy 9	Jack Winzer
Student 8, Voice 8, Student in Therapy 6	Jackson Bedgood
Student 10, Voice 10, Student in Therapy 7	Natalie Harris
Director	Greg Shaw
Technical Director	Chuck Boyles

DEDICATION

I would like to thank all the members of the original cast for their open and honest portrayals of the characters in this play. Your performances impacted the many young people who filled those auditorium seats and are searching for ways to cope with mental illness. Thank you for your courageous undertaking of these roles. And many thanks to Greg Shaw, who continues to push the envelope by presenting social issue plays for teens in his community. —Debbie Lamedman

PROLOGUE

AT START: *Darkness. MIA enters. A spot of light appears and she sits, cross-legged, hugging her knees, in the middle of this light. Silence. One by one, VOICES 1-10, surround MIA and the circle of light as they say their lines. The light gets wider, but not brighter, as the VOICES 1-10 surround her.*

VOICE 1: I'm falling...

VOICE 2: I'm sinking...

VOICE 3: I'm suffocating...

VOICE 4: Disconnecting....

VOICE 5: I am angry... angry... angry...

VOICE 6: I don't want to exist...

VOICE 7: With a black hole in my heart...

VOICE 8: Constant pain... Constant ache...

VOICE 9: Fatigue. Exhaustion. Sleep... sleep... sleep to escape...

VOICE 10: Broken... I am broken...

MIA covers her ears, screams, sobs, collapses on the floor. The VOICES 1-10 break the circle and scatter to other places on the stage. The light shifts. MIA gathers herself. She stands. Smooths her hair and clothing. Stares blank-faced out at the audience. Someone brings her a backpack. She takes it without acknowledgment. Puts it on. Smiles a big, fake smile. Blackout.

SCENE 1

AT START: *School. MIA gathers with STUDENTS 1-10 as they chat about a class assignment.*

STUDENT 1: Yeah, I finished the paper. I know it sucks. But at least I did it.

STUDENT 2: I didn't do it. I couldn't concentrate.

STUDENT 3: You couldn't concentrate for a month? She gave us a month to do it.

STUDENT 2: I couldn't concentrate.

STUDENT 3: You're gonna flunk.

STUDENT 2: Who cares?

STUDENT 4: I finished it. All I found out was girls are more prone to depression than guys.

STUDENT 2: Duh!

STUDENT 5: That makes sense.

STUDENT 6: No it doesn't.

STUDENT 7: Both guys *and* girls are at risk, but girls are more likely to become depressed after puberty.

STUDENT 6: *After* puberty?

STUDENT 7: Yeah. You'll know what it is once you go through it!

ALL laugh.

STUDENT 6: Very funny. Why are girls more prone?

STUDENT 4: I don't know. They just are.

STUDENT 6: I thought you said you finished the paper?

STUDENT 4: I did. But I don't know why. I just wrote what I found online.

STUDENT 7: Seriously? That's almost as bad as not writing it at all!

STUDENT 8: Mia, did you finish?

MIA: (*Laughs self-consciously.*) Yeah. I finished it a while ago. I always have so much homework and I always have practice for track, so I just worked on it right after she assigned it.

STUDENT 9: Dude, you're so smart. *And* an amazing athlete. Everything you do is perfect.

MIA: (*Uncomfortable.*) Uh... I don't think so. But thanks.

STUDENT 10: Do you think she wanted us to write the paper because that kid committed suicide last year?

STUDENT 3: That "kid" had a name. Trevor. He was a person. I knew him.

STUDENT 10: Sorry. I didn't know him...

STUDENT 5: (*To STUDENT 4.*) Trevor was a guy, so that disproves your theory that girls are more prone than guys.

STUDENT 4: I didn't say guys *couldn't* get depressed. I just said girls were more likely to get depressed. That's what it said online, anyway.

STUDENT 5: Oh! So it must be true if it's on the interwebs!

STUDENT 2: All teenagers are crazy. Don't you guys know that by now?

STUDENT 10: They always seem to be telling us that, so it must be true.

STUDENT 7: Our brains aren't fully developed, that's why.

STUDENT 2: So that's why we're all insane?

STUDENT 4: We're not all insane.

STUDENT 1: We are troubled. We are troubled youth.

STUDENT 3: Don't be so glib about it. It's a real thing. It affects a lot of people.

STUDENT 2: What's glib?

STUDENT 8: Why do you even go to school? You don't know anything!

STUDENT 2: That's why I go to school.

STUDENT 8: But you never *learn* anything!

STUDENT 4: (*Looking up "glib" on smartphone.*) Google says glib means "insincere and shallow."

STUDENT 1: I'm not being insincere. We *are* troubled!

STUDENT 3: You're condescending to people who really have a problem. Depression is a real problem.

STUDENT 8: Are you depressed?

Pause. They all wait for STUDENT 3 to answer.

STUDENT 3: Yeah. Yeah, I am.

MIA: You are?

STUDENT 3: Trevor and me used to talk about it. I didn't realize how bad his depression was. I wish I could have helped him more.

STUDENT 6: He hid his depression pretty well. I never knew he was that far gone.

MIA: (*To STUDENT 3.*) If you were his friend, and you talked about it, and you didn't know how bad it was, it doesn't seem like there was anything you could have done.

STUDENT 3: I know. I never even asked him if he had a plan. I should have done that.

MIA: A plan?

STUDENT 3: Like if he thought about how he would do it.

MIA: Oh.

STUDENT 7: *(To STUDENT 3.)* Do you have a plan?

Pause.

STUDENT 3: No.

STUDENT 8: Really?

STUDENT 3: No. Not today, I don't.

Silence.

STUDENT 2: Wow.

STUDENT 1: Told you. We are troubled youth.

Bell rings.

SCENE 2

AT START: *STUDENTS scatter but do not exit. They remain onstage. Their backs are to THE CUTTER, who should be alone and isolated in their space onstage.*

THE CUTTER: I tell my stepmom the scabs on my legs are bug bites. Note to self: Don't wear shorts in front of her anymore. She's cool, but I don't think she believed me about the bites and I don't need her to interfere or talk to my Dad about it. I wouldn't know how to explain it anyway. *(Pause.)* I cut myself. Deliberately. It's not that big a deal. I don't know why I do it. I guess... I don't know... It sort of feels good. Makes me in control of things. It hurts of course, but I control that pain. I never go too deep. The stinging, the blood, the rush of pain... I like it. I mean, I don't *like* it, but in some weird way, it makes me feel the slightest bit better. It makes me feel like I'm here. Like I'm real. Does that even make sense? I don't even feel real sometimes. Call me a freak if you want to, but it helps me deal with things. With life. With boredom. With loneliness. I'm not crazy if that's what you're thinking. I know what I'm doing. It's all under my control. I only cut when things get really out of hand. But lately, it's been more often than usual. Yesterday, I started cutting on the

inside of my arm. I'm just gonna wear long-sleeved shirts for the rest of my life. What do I care?

Lights shift. The other students turn to face each other and interact.

STUDENT A: So you heard Kelly is pregnant, right?

STUDENT B: Yup. And I heard she's gonna have it, too.

STUDENT A: She's crazy. Who would want to bring a child into this world?

STUDENT B: I don't think she's keeping it. She's probably gonna give it up for adoption.

STUDENT A: Even if she does give it up, it's still one more person who has to live in this messed-up world.

STUDENT B: It's not *that* bad.

STUDENT A: Are you kidding? I have no hope for the future and she's having a kid! I feel sorry for that baby.

STUDENT B: Why? Why would you feel sorry for a baby?

Pause.

STUDENT A: *(Softly.)* Because I wish I had never been born. That kid is just one more poor soul who will grow up and have to deal with... with...

STUDENT B: With what?

STUDENT A: With life. Life sucks.

STUDENT B: I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were so down. Can I do anything?

STUDENT A: No. What can anyone do? There's nothing to do. This is the normal state of things for me. I live like this every day.

Lights shift to another group of students. STUDENT G is pushing the others into a line as they count off. During this entire sequence, MIA is subtly snapping the hair tie she wears on her wrist. It should not be overtly noticeable, but as the scene continues, it may get increasingly more frenetic.

STUDENT G: OK everyone. Social experiment. Everyone work with me here. *(Moving students into a line.)* Count off.

STUDENT C: One.

STUDENT D: Two.

STUDENT E: Three.

STUDENT F: Four.

MIA: Five.

STUDENT G: OK. Good. Now, which one of you suffers from a mental illness?

Silence.

STUDENT G: Come on, you guys! You heard what they said in the assembly. One in five of us are depressed. One in five of us are anxious. Or have an eating disorder. Or we're bi-polar. We have OCD. Or ADD. Or both. We are anti-social. We have substance abuse problems. One in five. So... which one of you losers is it?

Silence.

STUDENT C: Maybe it's you.

STUDENT G: It's not.

STUDENT D: How do you know?

STUDENT G: I'd know if I had a mental problem.

STUDENT E: You never feel bad? You never have difficult days?

STUDENT G: Sure I do. That's life. That's human. But there's a big difference between a "bad day" and having a mental disorder.

STUDENT F: First of all, I think it's more than one in five. I can't prove that scientifically, but it just seems like most of us deal with some sort of anxiety on some level.

STUDENT E: I agree!

STUDENT F: And the other thing... you can't just randomly pull five kids walking down the hall and expect one of us to be depressed. It doesn't work like that. We're probably all depressed at some point or another.

STUDENT G: I'm not.

STUDENT C: Everyone I know has issues. Everyone I know tries to hide it. From teachers, parents, friends. Even from themselves.

STUDENT G: I'm not hiding anything.

STUDENT D: It must be nice to never be worried about anything.

STUDENT G: I didn't say I don't get worried. I said I don't have a mental disorder. I just wanted to test out what they said in assembly. One in five teens. Here we are. Six of us. And no one is admitting anything.

Pause.

STUDENT F: I'll admit it.

STUDENT C: Admit what?

STUDENT F: I have a lot of anxiety.

STUDENT G: What are you anxious about?

STUDENT F: Grades mostly. But other stuff too. A lot of other stuff.

STUDENT D: Family. Friends. All the expectations I'm supposed to live up to. Money.

STUDENT F: *Lack* of money, actually.

STUDENT D: Right?

STUDENT C: I feel pretty good most of the time. I stress about grades, but... I don't think I'm anxious or depressed.

STUDENT G: That's exactly how I feel. Actually, life is good!

Pause.

STUDENT D: OK. I'll admit something.

STUDENT G: Go ahead.

STUDENT D: I struggle with depression. I've never been... ya know... I don't want to off myself or anything... but sometimes... I don't know... some days it's really hard to get out of bed.

STUDENT E: Yes, it is!

STUDENT G: You too?

STUDENT E: I guess. I don't know. I'd rather not talk about it.

STUDENT D: It helps to talk about it.

STUDENT E: I just don't want to right now.

STUDENT G: OK. That's cool. But you think you might be one of the one-in-fives?

STUDENT E: Um... I don't know. Maybe... yeah... I think so.

STUDENT G: Really? Hmm. So... what about the rest of you? (*To MIA.*) Are you a one in five?

MIA looks around at the others. She's playing with/snapping the band on her wrist.

MIA: *(Laughs uncomfortably.)* I'm OK. I have friends. I have great parents. I get good grades. I love track. I've been doing really well with track. I'm fine.

STUDENT G: That's not what I asked you.

MIA: No. I'm not a one in five. I'm fine.

STUDENT G: Are you sure about that?

STUDENT D: We're not here to judge you.

MIA: Yes, I'm fine! Really. *(Laughs self-consciously.)* Ya know, this is all very enlightening, but I really have to go. I've got practice and then I have to study.

STUDENT G: You're always studying, Mia. You should take a break some time. Have a little fun.

MIA: Yeah. Right. I have plenty of fun, thank you very much.

STUDENT C: Like what? What do you do for fun?

MIA: Plenty. C'mon you guys! Stop picking on me! *(Laughs.)* I gotta go. Good luck with your experiment. Thanks... for letting me be part of it, I guess. I don't know. I'll see you all later. *(Laughs and exits.)*

STUDENT F: She's always so happy!

STUDENT C: She is totally wired.

STUDENT F: She could be hiding something. Who knows? Everyone deals with stuff in their own way.

STUDENT E: She probably drinks too much caffeine. She's one of the smartest kids in school.

STUDENT D: And prettiest!

STUDENT E: *And* an amazing athlete. She's perfect!

STUDENT G: Could be exactly why she's hiding something. She probably thinks she *needs* to be perfect.

STUDENT C: Maybe. That's a lot of pressure to put on yourself.

STUDENT D: Definitely!

Lights fade as students move to their own space onstage.

SCENE 3

AT START: *STUDENTS A, D, E and F are in individual spaces across the stage isolated from one another. STUDENT A is on a laptop. STUDENT F has a textbook. THE CUTTER scrolls through a smartphone. Some students are texting on their phones. Some are writing in journals. Some are curled up under blankets. Some are simply staring out at the nothingness. MIA is situated in her “bedroom” surrounded by textbooks, free weights and a laptop. The stage is dim. Lights up as each teen talks.*

STUDENT E: I can't stop crying. All I want to do is sleep. I don't care about anything; not even eating. I just want to lie here. Nothing in my life is good. And no one can help me feel better. Sometimes I think I've run out of tears and it's impossible to cry any more than I have. But then my thoughts become uncontrollable and I start sobbing again... I'm trying to dehydrate myself just so the tears will stop.

Lights shift.

STUDENT A: *(Scrolling through news reports on laptop or smartphone.)* Another bombing in Europe. Another school shooting in the States. One more kid, who was bullied by so-called *friends*, has hung himself. *(Mockingly.)* I must post happy pics on Instagram. I must pass all my classes and get into a good college to please my parents. I must be strong and independent and not worry if the kid who has the locker across from mine, is sending me sexually explicit text messages. I shouldn't be concerned that it's 80 degrees in November and snowing in June. I shouldn't worry about all the debt I will accumulate after I get out of college. Assuming I will get *into* college. Assuming I can pay for college. I had a fight with my best friend and someone posted it online. It was private. Very private. I guess whoever filmed the fight and then posted it on YouTube, hopes it will go viral and they will become millionaires for having done *nothing*. We all want to be rich and famous for doing nothing. Achieving nothing. I'm embarrassed by my generation. I'm embarrassed by my family. I hate everyone. I hate it here. All I

want to do is escape, but the world follows me wherever I go. I cannot get away from it! I can't get away from myself!

Lights shift.

STUDENT D: I said it out loud today. I told people. I used the word. Depression. No one laughed at me or stared at me like I was a freak. One kid even agreed with me that's it hard to get out of bed sometimes. It felt good to admit it. It felt good to have a conversation about it. It's so weird, because on the inside I feel one way, and on the outside people see me and think I'm funny and happy and that nothing could possibly be wrong. I never want anyone to know what's really going on inside my head. I hold a certain standard for myself. I don't ever want people to know... like... know that something is wrong. Because it's too hard to explain and it's just easier to isolate. I said the word out loud today. And now I feel like I have to go back to pretending that it's not me who said it.

Lights shift.

STUDENT F: *(Reading a textbook. Opens and closes the textbook several times. Begins to hyperventilate. Opens the book again. Then throws the book down hard.)* I can't do this! I can't concentrate! I don't give a damn about this. Why am I supposed to learn stuff I don't even care about? *(Wipes forehead.)* I can't stop sweating. Over a stupid test. But I'm gonna fail it. I know I will. I can't learn this stuff! I hate it! *(Pause.)* I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. *(Pause.)* Oh, God. What if I fail this test? *(Picks up the book again and starts turning the pages rapidly.)* I don't know this. I should have started studying sooner. I should have kept up with the reading. Now it's too late. I'm failing. I'm never gonna be able to do anything with my life. I'm gonna flunk out of school and I won't be able to get a job and I'll be homeless and living on the street. I'm a loser. And I know it and my parents and teachers know it. And no one gives a damn. And no one knows how to help me and I can't do this anymore. I can't! I don't want to! Oh my God. I'm freaking out. I need to calm down. I can't calm

down. I'm shaking. My hands won't stop shaking... it's all too much!
It's too much!!

Lights shift.

THE CUTTER: *(Scrolling through smartphone.)* Last week. One tweet. "#Cutter." That was it. And then the other day... "#Cutter. What a loser." And then right after that, an Instagram post with a picture of an arm with deep slashes. I don't know whose arm it was, but it wasn't mine. No one ever sees me do what I do. No one could have ever gotten a photo of my arms. I'm too careful. I *always* wear long sleeves. Today, even more posts. More tweets. A picture of my face from the yearbook with #Cutter next to it. Why are they doing this? What business is it of theirs if I cut or not. I'm not bothering them. Why would anyone mock me for feeling so much pain that I need to cut? I don't understand people. I don't understand why they are so cruel. *(Pause.)* I don't ever talk about it. I don't want to talk about it with anyone. So why are people hassling me? Bullying me online for the choices I make? It's none of their business! Keep me off your social media!

MIA in her "room." She is busy on her laptop. She has textbooks stacked next to her; most of them are open. She highlights things in the books. Goes back to writing on the laptop. Her cell phone beeps; she ignores it. If the laptop image can be projected, it should show MIA looking at different college websites. She also does some crunches or lifts free-weights occasionally.

MIA: If I want to get into the *best* of the best college, I need to raise my GPA. If I can do that, I'll be eligible for even more academic scholarships. I *have* to get a scholarship. I have to get more than one. I do not want debt hanging over my head when I'm still in my twenties. Mom is still paying off her loan. *Still!* After all these years! It's unbelievable to me. I couldn't live like that. *(Clicks through different college websites, then returns to her essay.)* OK. I will finish this paper; then work on some other stuff and try to squeeze in some extra projects by this weekend. I'm so tired, but there is no time to sleep. No time at all. I need to work, work, work!

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