

Radio Silence

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I have had three episodes of burnout in my professional life, in three consecutive years. Not the best moments, for sure. This story is about the first episode, less than a decade ago.

I had been working at the company I was at the time for already almost a year, when I started having strong episodes of depression and anxiety.

At that moment I was working in a both complex and complicated project that was (as I would learn later) literally defying some laws of physics, and thus could not be done, at least not in this universe. But nobody knew at that moment, or dared to tell me. And, even worse, nobody was telling this to the customer, either, even though we were “agile” and all of that. I actually thought somebody was communicating our project issues to them, as I was not in direct contact with them. More on that later.

I started having panic attacks fairly often, particularly at night, and I could not sleep well. The previous year I had gone through a deep personal crisis.

When I realized I was having a big problem, I chose to do the professional thing: I sent an e-mail to my boss and to the owner of the company where I was working, explaining the situation and that I needed to talk to them in person.

To this day, **I still haven't received a reply to that e-mail**. Not even an out-of-office message. Nothing. Radio silence.

What's worse, is that I know they received it, and read it. They chose not to reply. I don't know why, and probably never will.

A few days later I had to meet the customer of this project by myself (they were in another city). I told them what I thought they knew, which was that defying laws of physics is generally a bad idea. They were dumbfounded, as they thought that the project was almost ready to ship.

Or, at least, that's what our product owner was telling them.

Ready. To. Ship. We hadn't even been able to run a single prototype.

I fell in a strong depression that night. I was alone in my hotel room, somewhere else than home, and I could not believe that this was happening.

And I sank.

Of course I blamed myself. Because that's what happens in my head when I have depression. I thought this was all my failure. I have failed this project. I was failing at work, hence I was failing to perform my duty in life. I was failing as a person. It all dawned on me, as a dark black night in the woods without a flashlight.

Long story short, to this day, I have never received any reply from my "boss" or anyone else. A few days later I went into medical leave, and a few months later I left the company. Nobody came to say goodbye from the team. I just closed the door and left.

I had two more episodes of burnout in the following years. In the second one I ended up taking medication, and in the meantime, went to therapy for two years. It took me four years to finally feel like I could go back to a normal life.

My wife supported me like nobody else, with infinite patience and love. I don't have words to express my love for her. I owe her everything.

Regarding this issue, or other issues in various shitty workplaces I have had the misfortune of working at, I do not blame myself for anything else now, other than for having chosen to work in those.

Because I deserved support in that moment. I deserved having my boss taking me to the side to have a coffee and asking me how I was doing. I deserved having somebody more in my team to help me figure out a new technical solution for that project, instead of leaving me alone. I deserved having a product owner communicating issues to that customer. I deserved having someone giving a fucking shit about my mental health.

I deserved a reply to that e-mail I sent; I did not deserve to have that radio silence instead.