

Dear HR,

I know that improvement can look kinda simple when you're looking at them from the outside. You might sound a little calmer on the phone or manage to answer an email. It's the small signs—and all of a sudden it seems like things are getting better. But on the inside that's not always the reality.

When you're away for a longer time, things move slowly and weeks pass by. Any occasional, normal movement is mistaken for progress. But recovery doesn't always present itself in ways others can easily recognize. The exhaustion can stay—heavy, difficult to describe. You might feel unsteady, unsure, strangely disconnected from the person you used to be. This is often when doubt begins to surface, at least for me. You wonder if you're doing things the wrong way or if you should be further along by now. If you're somehow “behind” in a recovery process that no one actually clearly outlined.

Eventually you start setting quiet bargains with yourself.
“Today I should feel okay.” or “Next week has to be better.”

And I get it. It makes sense. But it just doesn't work that way.

Before all of this, I actually saw myself in my role. It gave my days structure and purpose. It helped me feel like I belonged somewhere. Being present mattered so stepping away didn't become just a health decision—it felt personal. And what made the greatest difference during my time away wasn't a flawless plan or daily check-ins. It was something a whole lot simpler: I was taken seriously. I wasn't rushed. I wasn't doubted. I never felt that I had to prove how bad things were in order to deserve patience.

Being believed changed everything. It lifted pressure at a time when pressure only makes things harder. It gave me room to focus on getting better rather than explaining myself. And it reminded me that I still belonged—even when I wasn't there each day. For me, this became a genuinely positive experience. I felt supported and respected, even when I couldn't clearly explain how I was doing or when things might feel normal again. That stayed with me. Because sometimes getting better doesn't look like progress from the outside.

And believing someone when they tell you how they're really doing can matter more than you may realize.

Hugs,
Vivienne

Dear HR,

Before my absence, work really wasn't just work for me. It was identity and stability. It was a lifestyle and it was my financial safety. In many ways, it was also how I stayed grounded and how I knew who I was. Then, a close family member received a terminal diagnosis and later passed away. That heartbreaking news and eventual loss is the reason why I was away from work for a long time.

Let me tell you: Deep grief like this doesn't arrive in an organized way. It does not follow plans or timelines. Some days you're able to function. On other days, you just can't. And even when nobody is actively pushing you, there is still pressure. It's quiet. It's in the background. What does work expect from me now?

When work has been such a big part of your identity and your stability, being away from it is not just "time off." It changes how you feel about yourself. The routine disappears. The version of you that usually shows up disappears too. All of a sudden, there's a lot of empty space where structure used to be, and your thoughts fill that space whether you want them to or not.

I was around 40 at the time. At an age where you'd think you should be able to just cope. Where you think you've learned how to hold things together. And still, this took everything out of me. Everything. That's why the way that HR shows up matters more than people realize. Personally, I felt supported. And I'm grateful for that. It made a real difference during a period that was already heavy.

When you're in the middle of something like this, you don't need a flawless process. You need something that feels human. You need clarity without coldness, and you need space without feeling forgotten. It's probably so, so hard to create this balance for your employee but—at this moment—I really needed to feel like I was still a person to the company, not a situation that needed to be handled and closed.

If I could say just one thing to HR, it would be this: Thank you for all the support, I will never forget it. I mean that sincerely. Whatever you do to make the process feel human, keep doing it. People remember how they were treated when they were not at their best. Sometimes more than they remember promotions or titles. And sometimes, that moment becomes the reason they trust their employer long after they return.

Sincerely,

A colleague who needed time and was allowed to take it

Dear HR,

So, I had a proper burnout. Back then, work wasn't just work to me. I'd basically drawn an equal sign between my job and my mood. I joined the company really early, when it was still small and chaotic (in a good way). We were building something together. Watching it grow into a global player. It was amazing.

And these weren't just colleagues. They were my friends. I went to work every day to create things with people I genuinely cared for. Some of them are still among my closest friends today. Work felt fun. It felt shared. It felt like it mattered, you know?

Then the company got bigger, and bigger. Slowly, the atmosphere changed. What used to feel like pulling in the same direction turned into more politics and quiet elbows. I stopped identifying with the culture. The problem was that I didn't adjust how much of myself I gave, accordingly. I was still operating at 150%—only now, that effort had nowhere good to land.

At some point, that caught up with me. Small meetings drained me. I started having panic attacks. Once, I blacked out during a meeting and thought, "Uhm, okay, this is probably not great."

The scary part is that, until then, I'd thought it was. Nobody had ever explained what burnout looks like. So I assumed I was just kind of weak. That I should push through. Telling my manager I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and couldn't work properly felt embarrassing—not because of how they reacted, but because I didn't have words for what was happening.

When I finally went on sick leave, someone said, "Take your time." I said, "Oh, I'll be back soon."

Six weeks later, I was back part time. SIX WEEKS. Way too early. I wish someone had pushed back, but they didn't—and back then I didn't want them to. The company was changing fast and I was afraid of being left behind. So, when I came back—and here's the fun part—someone else had actually taken over my role and, yes, left me behind.

That broke something in me. I wasn't just burned out anymore. I was angry. This wasn't a clear HR decision, but nobody had stepped in either. I spent months slowly increasing my hours, knowing I wasn't really needed there anymore. My team was incredibly supportive, always. Leadership wasn't. At some point, I was asked to pitch what I should do next. What role I should take. Not long after I was officially back at 100%, I was let go.

I jumped into another startup too early after that. I thought taking a break would ruin my chances (that's the lesson I'd learned). It didn't help. The burnout came back and I quit just a few months in. Years later, I still feel it. But I'm stronger now. I know my limits. I speak up sooner. And if I could say one thing to HR, it would be this: Protect your people. Especially when leadership changes. Especially when everything looks fine from the outside. Put rules in place—and stand by them.

I know you mean well. I really do. But sometimes, for the person affected; that's not enough.

With love,
A former employee

Dear HR,

There is a strange moment when you realize your calendar is no longer yours. Mine disappeared with a diagnosis: acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Twelve months out (at least).

As a marketer, I'm used to momentum. The different campaigns moving, projects being built, the pipeline growing. And suddenly, everything just paused—except for the actual work, of course; that part of my life kept moving on without me. Actually, the medical treatment itself wasn't the most difficult aspect here, it was watching ideas I had helped shape at work go live, knowing I should have been the one driving them.

It might sound extreme to some, but work has always been more than income for me. So in the first few weeks, I still wanted to stay involved. My team gave me updates and continued to ask for my input on things I had helped shape. They looped me into projects. Not in a “can you work?” way—in a “you still matter” way. Even though I was physically absent, they made me feel like I was still part of what we were building.

I realize that this kind of involvement would not work for every situation, and at some point I had to accept that my fight against cancer was the real KPI for the year. But being kept in the loop meant a lot to me.

And you handled things well, dear HR. Very by the book, sure—but in a really reassuring way. I knew exactly what documents I needed to submit. I knew what my options were. My disability was recognized immediately. I could call at any time and get clarity on whatever situation popped up. There was never any guessing, no mixed messages. Just structure. And let me tell you something: structure is underrated when your life feels chaotic.

As you can probably imagine, during a treatment like this, a ton of energy goes into simply getting through the day. It's easy to feel erased. Those small inclusions at work reminded me I still had value beyond my diagnosis. That my brain was still part of the company, even if my body was somewhere else.

Once I returned to work, I was given time to land without rush or pressure. And eventually, I was even promoted. That says more than words.

If there's one thing I would highlight through my experience, it's probably this: looping someone in is not a small gesture. It is a signal. It tells them they are still part of the story.

And when you are fighting for your life, that matters more than you think.

With appreciation,
David

Dear HR,

I had a psychotic episode on vacation. That was the moment I knew I couldn't keep going the way I had been. When I got back I reached out to a former mentor of mine who now runs a rehab clinic. I told myself that "This can't go on. I need help. I have big problems."

There were definitely signs before all of that. I hated going into the office. I tried to work from home as much as I could. At one point, I even started drinking while working from home. Not all day. But from like 3:30 or 4:00 PM. An early "after work" beer. That's how I coped. And guess what? It didn't help.

When I finally had a chat with my manager I said that "I need to go to rehab and sort my life out." What I needed most then was emotional support, stability, and security. Not "we're here for you" as something you just say, but as something real. And to be honest, I did feel that from my boss. A WhatsApp message saying, "We got your back." Another reminder: "Remember it's just a job." That stuff mattered. It made me feel more safe about my role and less alone in my struggles.

The hardest part during my time away wasn't being removed from the work, but from the people. I was always thinking about what they must think. Whether I'd be out of the picture. What the future would look like. I read too much into messages. My fears got louder. In my head, it all looked bad. What grounded me were my kids, my brother, and my mother. They're everything to me.

Where things became difficult was on the formal side. The generic conversations and the cultural gaps. You see, I was employed in Switzerland. My boss was in the Netherlands. Headquarters were in the USA. And HR was in South Africa. Yeah. The good intentions were there, definitely, but sometimes they got lost between systems and formalities. The moment I felt most like a person (not a process) was simple when I was meeting my boss in person as I returned part-time. That did more than any HR template ever could.

At the end of the day, it could have been much worse. I know that now. But if there's one thing that would have made a difference, it's this: ask, and actually mean it, "What else can we do for you?" And be ready to hear the answer.

Thank you.

Dear HR,

This might sound brutal but in pro football your body is your job and when it works nobody cares and when it breaks it's suddenly everything. I was off the pitch for a long time because of an injury. On paper that sounds simple but it really wasn't. It felt like losing control over the one thing I rely on. In this sport you're taught to push through pain, tape it up, ice it, say you'll be fine, so that's what I did, I kept going like always, until I just couldn't.

There comes a point where pain stops being something you handle and starts running your life. Training was impossible, matches gone, even walking around was a reminder that my body had made a decision I didn't agree with. People think an injury like this is just physical but it's not, it messes with who you are.

Suddenly I'm not on the pitch, not in the starting line-up, not part of the team's flow, I'm just watching and that hits hard. The worst part wasn't rehab, it was sitting on the sidelines watching the boys train and feeling time move on without me. Football moves so so fast, contracts change, positions change, chances come and go, but when you're injured your world slows down and the club's doesn't and that gap gets in your head. You start thinking am I still needed, am I still valued, what if I don't come back the same.

Rehab matters and the medical stuff matters but what mattered most to me was not feeling like some broken "asset", I needed to feel like I still belonged to the team even when I couldn't give anything on the pitch. The talks that helped most were the honest ones, no fake hype, no pressure to rush back, just being told recovery takes time and that time was okay. An injury like this doesn't just test muscles and ligaments, it hits your confidence and your purpose.

What made the difference was not being rushed and being trusted to recover the right way, because even in pro football you're still human.

Best,
Footballer at heart

Dear HR,

During my break, I called the internal sick hotline. When the person asked how I was doing, I started crying, which I had for sure not planned. I still tried to play it down, blamed the lack of sleep, said I just could not concentrate. Even then, I was trying to make it smaller than it really was. They reorganized the shift so I could get home safely, and I apologized over and over and over to the colleague who took over because I felt like I did not deserve that understanding. Sleep did not fix it, and the thoughts kept circling. My family doctor told me this was not something you solve with a pill. A few nights later, I called a crisis service because I did not know what else to do, and that next morning I was sitting in a psychiatric crisis unit, overwhelmed and ashamed.

After two nights, I wrote to my supervisor and told him the truth. Writing it felt embarrassing, but his response mattered a lot. He thanked me for being open, told me to take the time I needed, and most importantly for me at the time he made it clear that my job was not at risk.

The hardest part was not the work itself but the fear of coming back. I kept thinking, “What will they think?” and “Will I be labeled?” I imagined judgment everywhere but in reality I found more understanding than I expected. What helped was being included in ongoing decisions, and an early intervention manager explained my rights and return options, which gave me a sense of safety. My supervisor stayed fair and never blamed me. What made things harder were the generic HR conversations and the change of contact person after three months, because when you are already struggling, repeating your story costs energy you do not have.

Now I am back in a different role, and I feel valued and more connected to my employer than before. Time to heal is not a luxury—it is the difference between breaking and returning.

With gratitude,

Someone who found their way back

Dear HR,

I announced my pregnancy in a meeting room and the first reaction was that they wanted to terminate me immediately. I remember how the mood shifted in that moment, how something I had been so happy to share suddenly became a problem to solve. Just seconds earlier I had been excited, proud even, to share the news about my little girl. Then suddenly it felt like a wave of difficulties rolling toward me.

Before that, work had been everything to me. I had helped build the company. I worked long hours, mornings into evenings, and trained at lunch just to keep up—and I believed it would be possible to combine that with a private life. But when I tried to make that work, it felt like I ran straight into a concrete wall. Looking back, the warning signs were already there. My performance dropped because I was doing too much overtime. I was running on output, not on anything sustainable.

The real damage did not come from exhaustion, believe it or not. It came from feeling suddenly replaceable. I had not hidden my pregnancy. Definitely not. I was open and I even suggested a part-time solution after maternity leave because I wanted to stay and keep contributing just in a different way.

But instead, the situation escalated. The emotional stress even led to complications in my pregnancy and I was signed off sick. Ironically that was the first moment I could protect myself. I could step back and set a boundary. What hurt most was not the legal process itself but the message behind it—that motherhood and ambition could not exist together, that my private life had made me less valuable overnight.

I went from feeling important to feeling inconvenient. What would have helped? Hmm. Maybe just a simple (and true) question like “How are you really doing?” Not as a formality but as an invitation. The legal dispute that followed made everything even heavier. Being dismissed during maternity felt like being reduced to paperwork. A case. A risk to manage. It probably would have taken very little to make things different—just some understanding and a willingness to find good solutions.

One thing I will acknowledge is that the insurer was steady. Payments were consistent. There was understanding. That stability mattered more than you might think when everything else feels uncertain. Pregnancy is not a disruption—I mean come on—it is part of life. Flexible structures are not a weakness, they are leadership. And a well-designed part-time role can be worth MUCH more than a full-time replacement.

Long-term absence does not mean someone is lazy.
Sometimes it means they are carrying more than anyone can see.

With love,
A mother making a career

Dear HR,

Okay, I don't even know where to start, so I'll start where it actually started. In the night. I'd keep waking up anxious with a stupid list in my head. Things I hadn't done, things I might forget, things that could go wrong. Instead of just sleeping, I thought about opening my laptop.

I was Customer Success at a software company, which basically means there is no real off switch. Early calls, late calls, customers in different time zones, meetings I was leading, and an inbox that never really closed. I was constantly reacting, constantly trying to prove I deserved to be there. I've always had impostor syndrome, so even when things were going well, it never felt safe if that makes sense.

When I first got diagnosed with burnout, I didn't tell anyone. Reviews were coming up, projects were running, and I thought I could fix it. Therapy, better planning, healthier habits—like it was a productivity issue. But it wasn't.

The anxiety became CONSTANT. I couldn't sleep. My memory started failing me (which is absolutely terrifying when your job depends on details). And my coping mechanisms became increasingly unhealthy. I tried to numb myself while still smiling on Zoom, and eventually it all turned into depression and I had to go on sick leave. I told my team and handed over my customers. I tried to be transparent because I actually do believe mental health needs more visibility.

The hardest part was not knowing when I'd feel like myself again. And the well-meant advice—go for a walk, just relax—felt brutal when I couldn't even get out of bed. I'm an immigrant in Switzerland, and some people close to me didn't really understand what was happening, which made it lonelier. Work was supportive in many ways. Colleagues checked in. When I returned, my team lead let me build up slowly from 20% to 100% with side projects first. That helped.

What didn't help was the bureaucracy. Insurance calls, paperwork, misalignment between doctor, insurance, and work—and somehow I had to coordinate parts of it while barely functioning (and if you're also an expat in Switzerland, you know that the paperwork is off the charts here).

One moment still sits with me: When I was back at 60%, someone from HR said they wouldn't adapt the role—even though I hadn't asked—and that if I didn't want it, I could consider another company. I needed structure, not an exit suggestion.

So please, reduce the noise around someone who is already overwhelmed. Coordinate behind the scenes instead. Make it safe to speak up early. This isn't time off. It's time spent trying to find yourself again.

Xoxo,

Someone who's found themselves

Dear HR,

There is one moment from my absence that I still feel physically when I think about it. I was already months into burnout, moving through my days with very little energy, and then I received a letter telling me that my salary payments would be stopped.

When I first read that letter I felt nothing but panic. I was like “I can barely manage my own recovery right now, how am I supposed to manage an empty bank account on top of it?” In the end, luckily, it was a misunderstanding and we were able to figure it all out so the payments continued. I am thankful for that.

What made it harder was not only the message itself but the tone. It felt distant and administrative. And when you are in burnout even neutral communication can feel like pressure. There is very little reserve left. Anything unexpected lands harder than it normally would. I am convinced that this “little” thing prolonged my recovery.

Just to paint a picture: before this burnout arrived at my door, a normal week for me meant working through the day and then spending evenings trying to catch up. I kept thinking that if I just organized myself better, if I just pushed a bit more, things would stabilize. The first clear warning sign was my sleep rhythm. I stopped switching off properly (the usual suspects: worked late and then laid awake). My heart was racing more often than it should and eventually there was a nervous breakdown and the anxiety attacks followed.

At the beginning I did not even explain what was happening, I just reported sick. Only later when it became clear that this would not be over in a few weeks did I share that it was burnout. What helped me personally was stability and openness. The first conversation with the case manager reduced a lot of fear because I finally understood what options existed and what I needed to pay attention to. The weekly meetings with my direct manager were equally important because I was able to speak honestly about my health without feeling judged or rushed. Hearing that my recovery mattered more than speed made a real difference.

Therapy, my partner, and eventually a burnout clinic supported me in rebuilding. I only wish I had known earlier that such a clinic was available. If there is one thing I would ask HR to keep in mind it is that burnout does not only take strength, it also takes capacity for administration. Calm communication and solution-oriented conversations protect recovery in ways that policies alone cannot.

Best,

An engineer who is glad to be back

Dear HR,

I am writing this as a painter and foreman and as someone who has been away from work for a long time now—almost two years—because of a work accident. During a job there was an explosion caused by nitro thinner fumes, and I was seriously injured.

Before the accident work meant something simple and something big at the same time. It gave me a regular daily routine and I had real joy in what I did. I liked working independently but also with the team. A normal week was Monday to Friday and sometimes a Saturday too. I did not need much excitement—I just needed that rhythm, that feeling of being useful, and the pride of doing good work with my hands.

After the accident everything changed. Suddenly you are not needed the way you were before and that is a strange feeling when you have been reliable your whole life. What was difficult for me was not the rehab itself. It was the uncertainty and the emotions that came with it—you start asking yourself where the future is going and how you will ever find your way back into normal everyday life again. I can say honestly that I was open with my employer about everything. I did not keep anything to myself. Still, even when you speak openly, you cannot make the fear disappear.

What I needed most from the beginning was patience. Because healing is slow and sometimes you feel heavy and a little stubborn. For me the slowest and the second most difficult part has been the way back into everyday life. Rehab is one thing. Daily life is another. There were moments that helped me more than people might think though. The progress in rehab (even when it was small) gave me hope. The visits in rehab themselves mattered too. I still remember that my supervisor came to see me there. That visit said more than any email could say. It made me feel that the company really stands behind me and that I am not just a case on paper.

I also want to mention the people around the insurance companies because they have been very helpful. They always had an open ear for me and that kind of stable support is important when you are emotionally not strong every day.

This letter is to simply thank you. Thank you for the support, thank you for the understanding, and thank you for the full backing. I know that not everything can be fixed quickly and I know my situation is still not over because I am not back at work yet. But it makes a difference when you feel like you are not left alone in it.

With appreciation and with the hope of finding my way back,
A painter and foreman