CASE STUDY / 2026

Panic Defense

A crisis-first mobile UX for panic moments.

Panic Defense is built around one hard constraint: during a panic episode, most product conventions become friction. The interface asks for less than the panic already demands.

The goal is not engagement. The goal is the fastest calm path back to baseline, then a clean exit.

Executive Summary

Panic Defense is a concept app for acute panic moments, not reflective wellness use. It treats cognitive overload, motor imprecision, and reduced reading tolerance as primary design constraints. The product begins from a widget, moves through breath and sensory grounding, asks one branch question, then either lets the user leave or offers focused support.

CHALLENGE	ROLE	OUTCOME
Design for crisis-state cognition.	**UX model, interaction logic, screen system.**	**An 11-screen editable Penpot PoC.**
Menus, setup, dense copy, and exploratory navigation become friction when the user is already flooded.	The work defines the flow, content rules, voice constraint, visual language, and Penpot hi-res screens.	Entry Widget, Breath Pacer, Safety Statement, five Anchors, Check-In, Exit Success, and Support Options.

- One primary task per screen.
- Large targets and stable placement for low-motor-control moments.
- Soft contrast, low density, and calm language.
- Exit is a success state, not a retention failure.

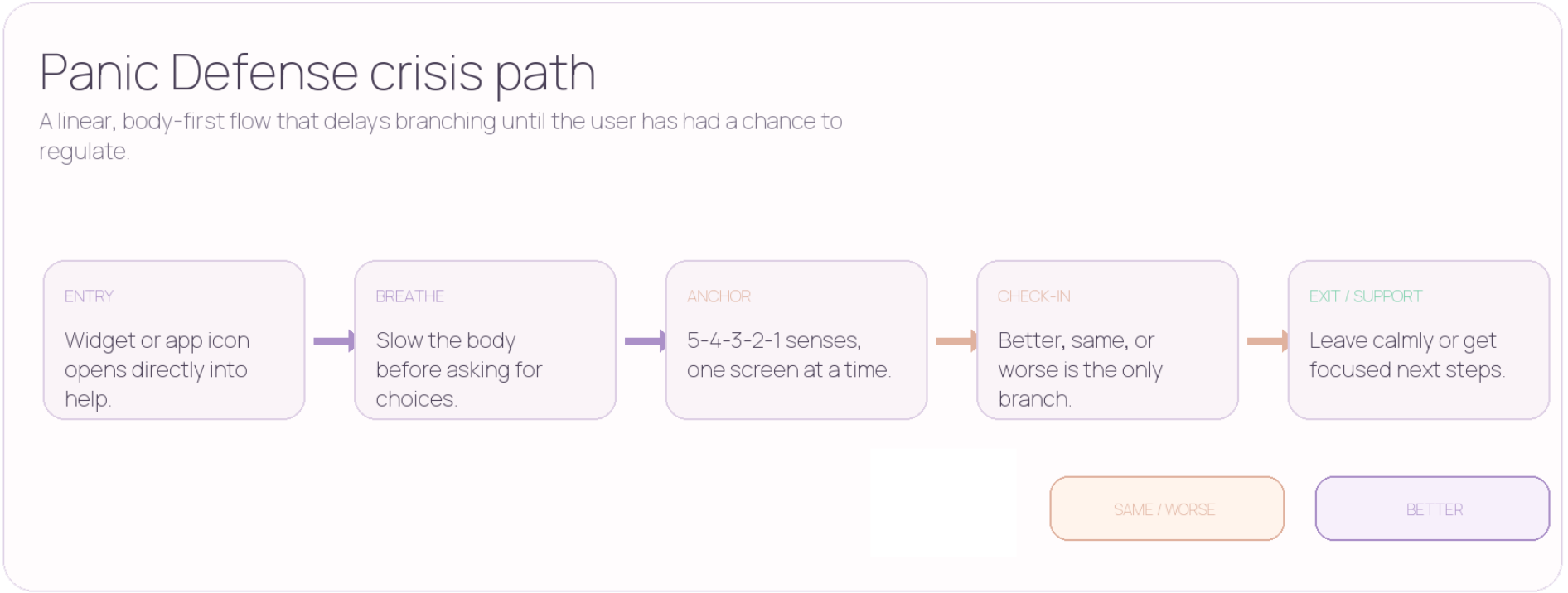
Problem Framing

Most mental-health products are designed for calm, reflective users. Panic episodes are different: attention narrows, reading tolerance drops, and even simple choices can feel expensive. That makes ordinary app patterns risky.

RISK 01	RISK 02	RISK 03
Choice overload	**Body before logic**	**Support without alarm**
The user should not need to browse, compare, configure, or remember where help is.	Physiological regulation needs to come before explanation, journaling, or self-assessment.	Escalation paths must be clear without making ordinary panic feel catastrophic.

Flow Contract

The product model is deliberately narrow: get in fast, regulate physiology, anchor attention, ask one branch question, then exit or offer focused support. The interface is not a wellness dashboard. It is a short crisis path.



User Model

PERSONA A	PERSONA B	PERSONA C
Recurring panic	**First-time panic**	**Public setting**
Knows the sensation but may still lose access to memory, language, and fine motor control during an episode.	May not know whether the body symptoms are dangerous, so reassurance must be direct without over-explaining.	Needs a discreet flow that can be used on public transport, at work, or around other people.

The shared need is not a richer app. It is a small amount of structure that is still usable when the user has very little attention available.

Design Principles

PRINCIPLE 01 **One thing at a time** Each screen presents one action or one short sentence.	PRINCIPLE 02 **Large motor tolerance** Controls are large, full-width where possible, and forgiving for trembling hands.	PRINCIPLE 03 **Ground before deciding** Breathing and sensory anchors happen before the check-in branch.
PRINCIPLE 04 **Voice as enhancement** In-app voice can help after launch, but every command must have a tap alternative.	PRINCIPLE 05 **No engagement loop** The product succeeds when the user leaves calmer.	PRINCIPLE 06 **Soft but legible** The visual system is calm without reducing critical text readability.

Flow Model

The flow is intentionally linear until the check-in branch. The app starts from the fastest available entry point, regulates the body, anchors attention through the senses, and only then asks how the user feels.

PHASE 01 **Entry** Widget, app icon, or native shortcut route directly into the exercise.	PHASE 02 **Regulation** Breath pacing and safety language reduce immediate physiological load.	PHASE 03 **Anchoring** 5-4-3-2-1 grounding gives one concrete task per screen.
PHASE 04 **Check-in** Better, same, or worse is the only explicit decision point.	PHASE 05 **Exit or support** Better exits; same or worse gets focused support options.	CONSTRAINT **No menu** History, settings, or broader product surfaces stay out of the crisis path.

Voice Capability Constraint

The web app should not promise OS-level launch from Siri or Google Assistant. In-app voice commands are viable only after the app is open, microphone permission is granted, and the browser supports speech recognition.

- Acceptable product language: voice shortcuts are available while the exercise is open on supported devices.
- Native wrappers can add Siri or Assistant launch shortcuts later.
- Every voice action needs a visible tap alternative.

State Machine

A production build should start from the crisis-path state model, not from screen styling. The visual system exists to keep each state low-cognition, predictable, and easy to exit.

State	Primary user question	Allowed actions
Entry Widget	How do I start fast?	Start, app icon fallback
Breath Pacer	Can I slow my body down?	Continue, help now
Safety Statement	Can I hold one reassurance?	Continue, back
Anchors	What can I name in the room?	Back, done, next voice shortcut
Check-In	Am I better, same, or worse?	Worse, Same, Better
Exit Success	Can I leave now?	Close, optional note, help
Support Options	What helps next?	Try again, call my person, sit with me, crisis line

Implementation Notes

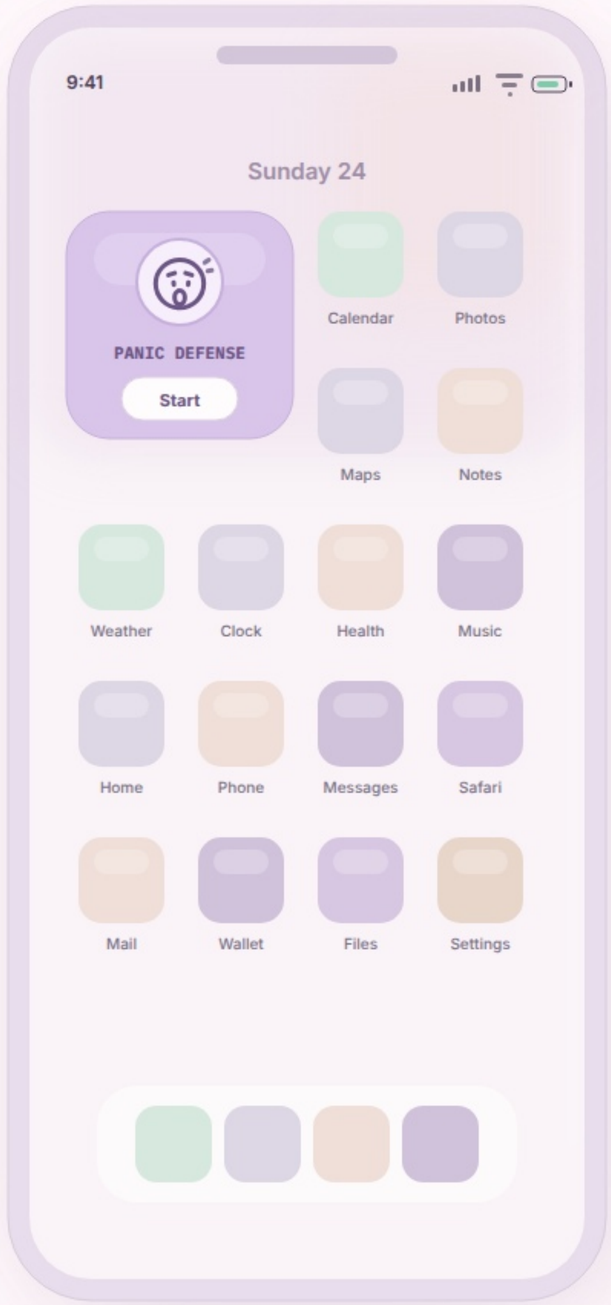
- Build the crisis path as a state machine rather than a general app shell.
- Keep Back and Close available but visually quiet.
- Persist optional notes only after explicit user action.
- Treat support options as focused next steps, not as a menu.
- Use reduced-motion and no-audio alternatives for the breath pacer.

The product is successful when it gives the user enough structure to get through the moment and enough restraint to let them leave.

PANIC DEFENSE / 01

Entry Widget

Fastest possible entry. No menu. No search.



CRISIS UX DECISION

The experience begins outside the app because opening a full product can already be too much during panic. A widget, voice command, or app icon fallback all lead directly into regulation.

UI DECISION

The home-screen mockup gives the widget more weight than the app icons. The visual hierarchy says: this is not a place to browse, it is an emergency shortcut.

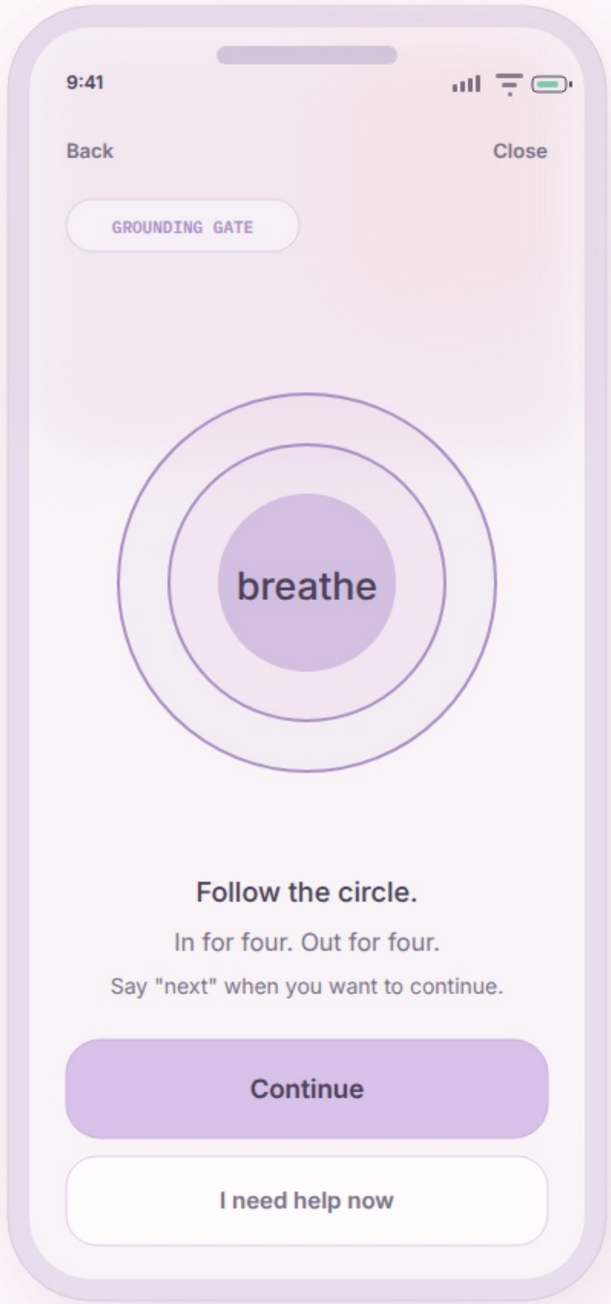
PANIC DEFENSE / 02

Breath Pacer

Ground the body before asking for choices.

CRISIS UX DECISION

The first full screen has one job: regulate physiology. It avoids choices until the user has had a chance to slow down and orient.



UI DECISION

The breathing circle is large, central, and low contrast. The button remains visible for accessibility, while the focal animation carries the experience without requiring reading.

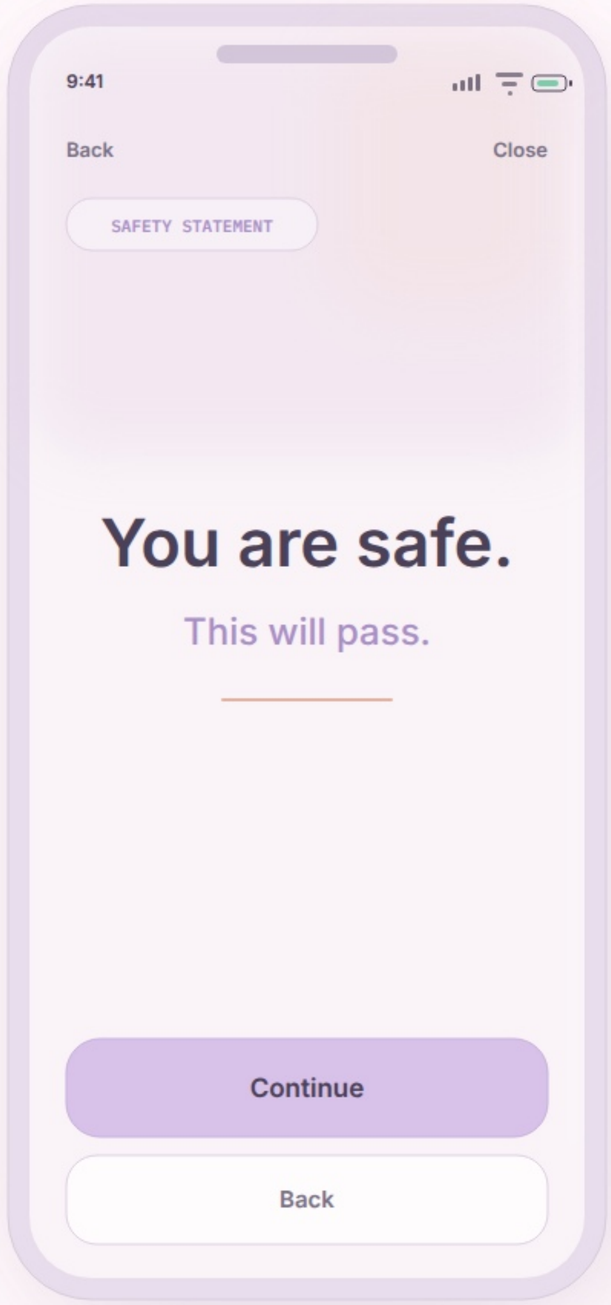
PANIC DEFENSE / 03

Safety Statement

Short reassurance, then continue.

CRISIS UX DECISION

The safety statement uses very little language because comprehension can drop during panic. The product does not explain panic; it gives the user a sentence they can hold onto.



UI DECISION

Large centered type, a short line, and generous empty space make this screen readable in one glance. The content is calm without becoming childish or decorative.

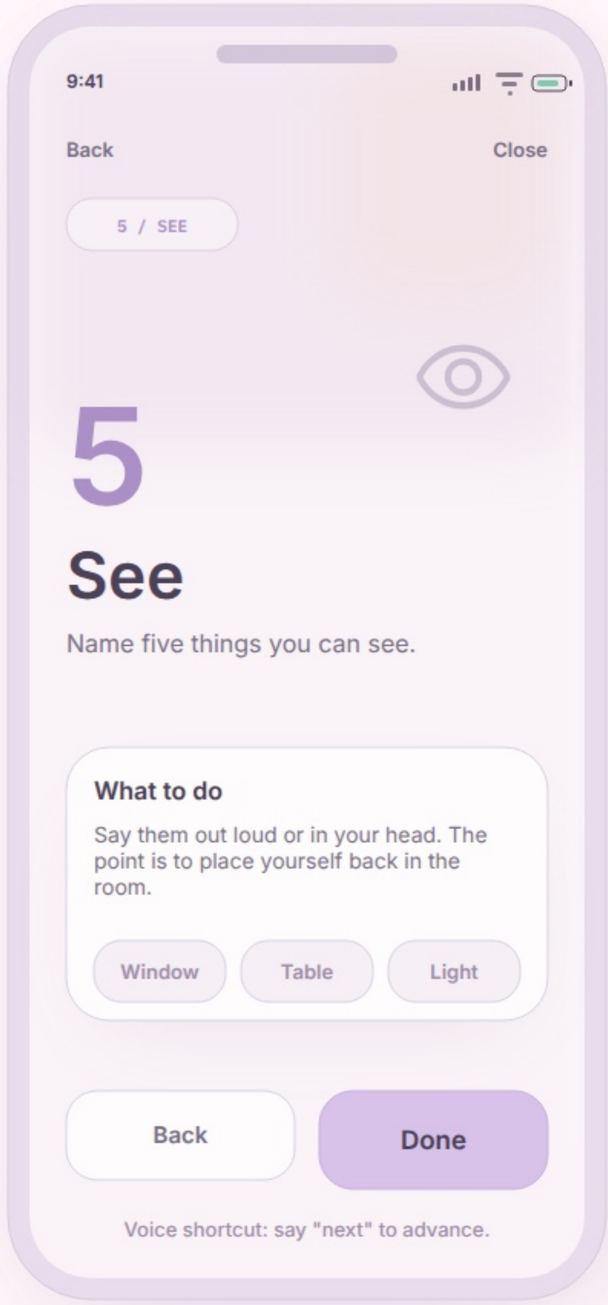
PANIC DEFENSE / 04

Anchor: See

5 things you can see.

CRISIS UX DECISION

The grounding sequence starts with the most immediate sense. The user gets one concrete task and a repeatable interaction pattern.



UI DECISION

The large numeral replaces a progress bar. It gives orientation without making the exercise feel like productivity or performance.

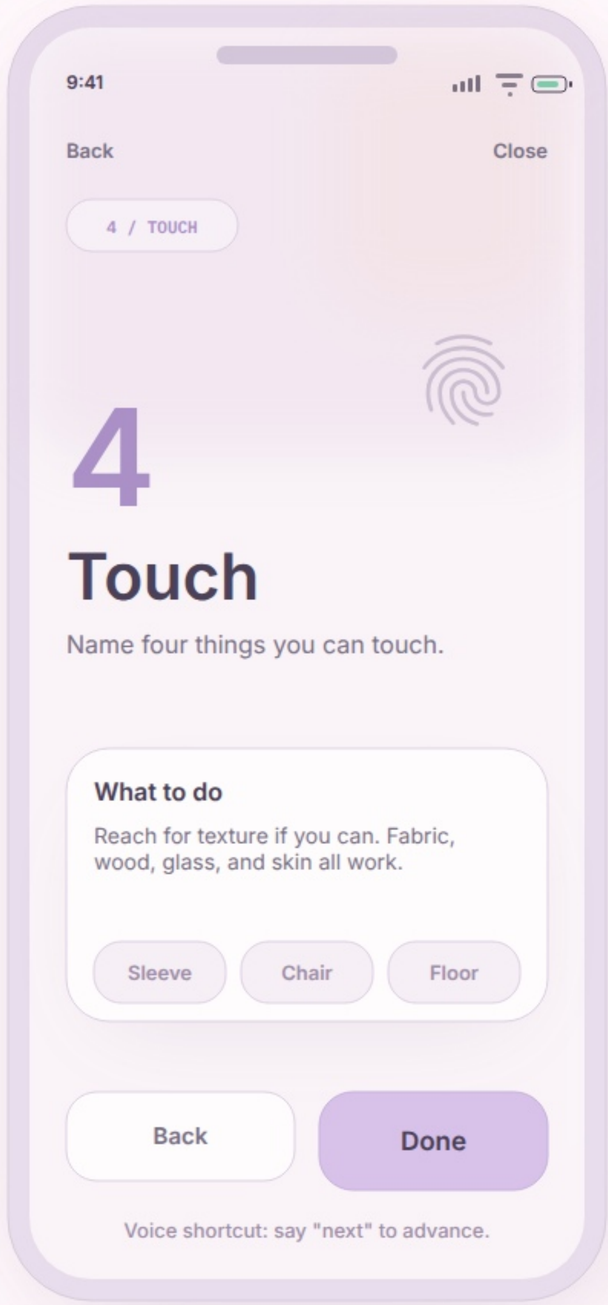
PANIC DEFENSE / 05

Anchor: Touch

4 things you can touch.

CRISIS UX DECISION

Touch brings attention from abstract fear back to physical contact. The interaction stays identical to the previous screen so the user does not have to relearn anything.



UI DECISION

The layout repeats deliberately: count, sense, prompt, concrete examples, Back and Done. Consistency becomes the navigation system.

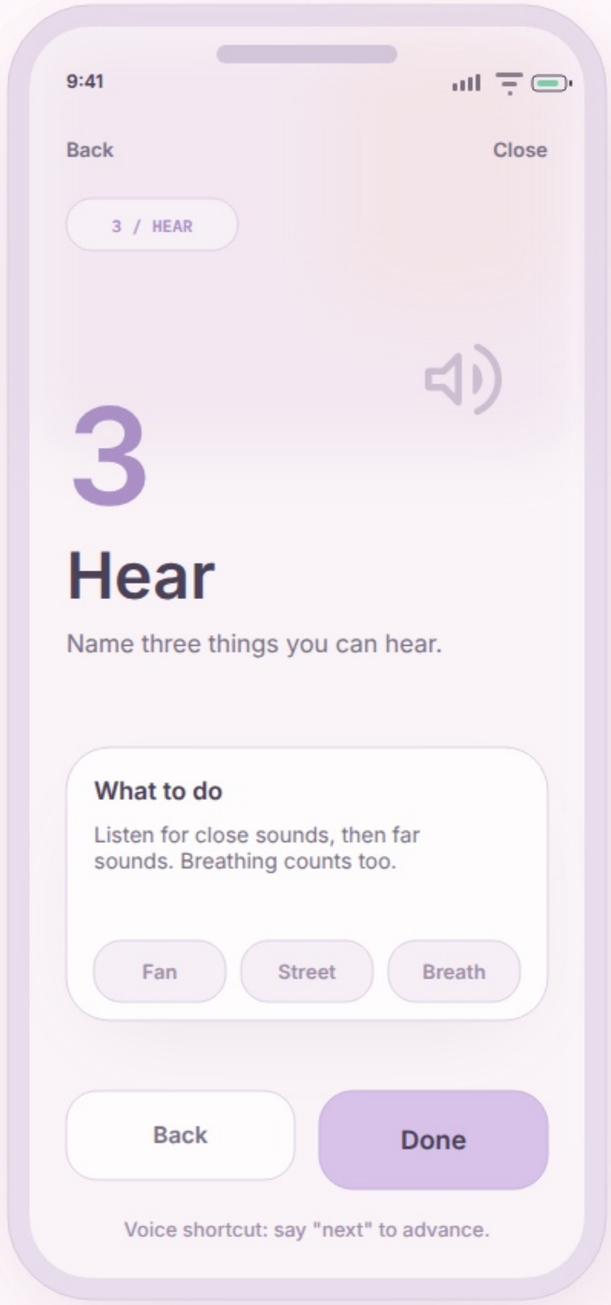
PANIC DEFENSE / 06

Anchor: Hear

3 things you can hear.

CRISIS UX DECISION

The user is now further into the repeated sequence. The design preserves momentum and avoids a visible timer that could create pressure.



UI DECISION

The smaller count naturally communicates progress through the same composition. The UI changes content, not controls.

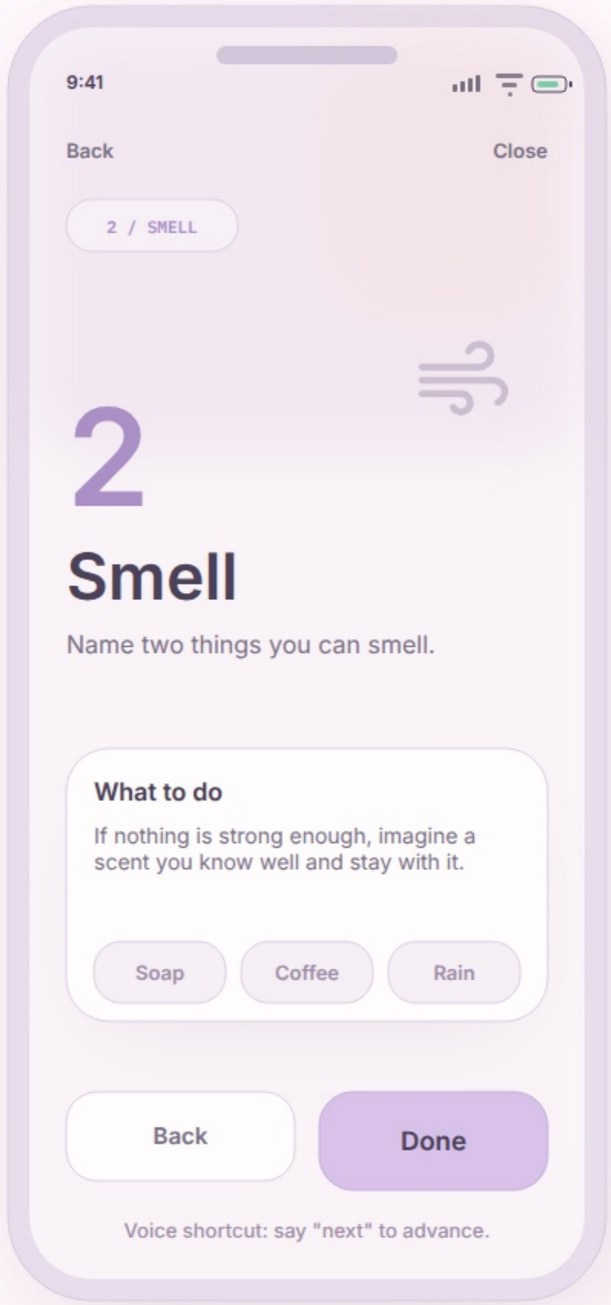
PANIC DEFENSE / 07

Anchor: Smell

2 things you can smell.

CRISIS UX DECISION

The prompt allows real or remembered scent because not every environment provides a clear smell cue. The exercise still stays concrete.



UI DECISION

Example chips give fallback answers without becoming a list of choices. The user can use them as anchors or ignore them.

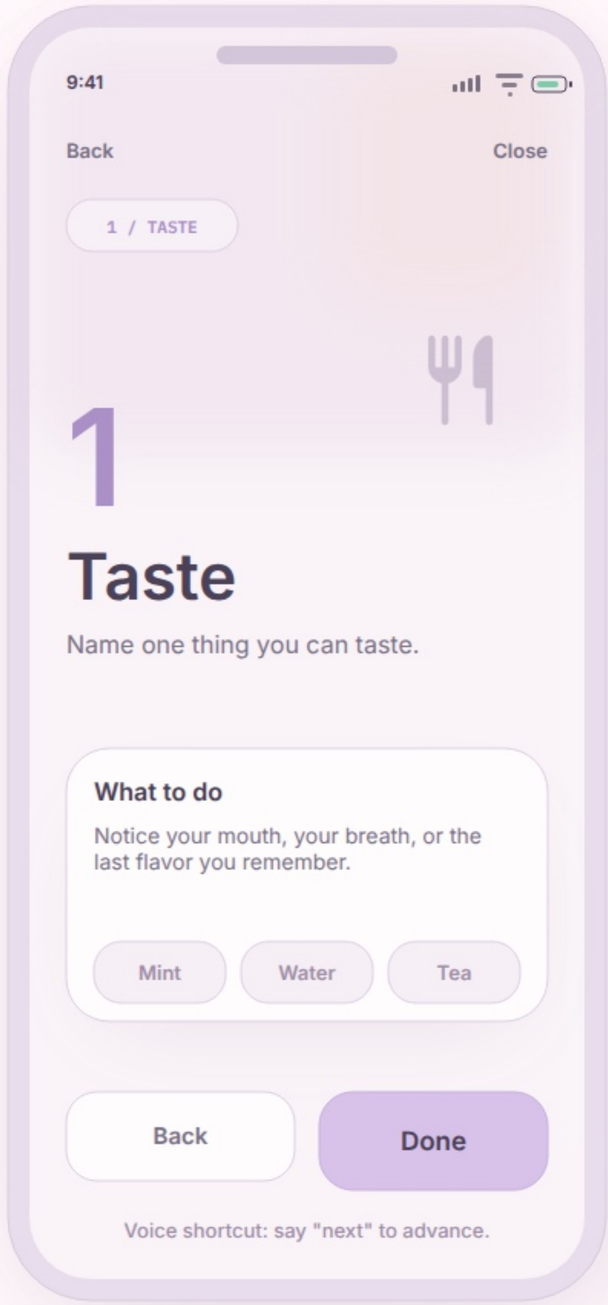
PANIC DEFENSE / 08

Anchor: Taste

1 thing you can taste.

CRISIS UX DECISION

The last sense prompt makes the grounding sequence feel finite. The next step is a check-in, not another endless exercise.



UI DECISION

The single count creates closure. The screen remains quiet and familiar so the user can finish without needing a new interaction.

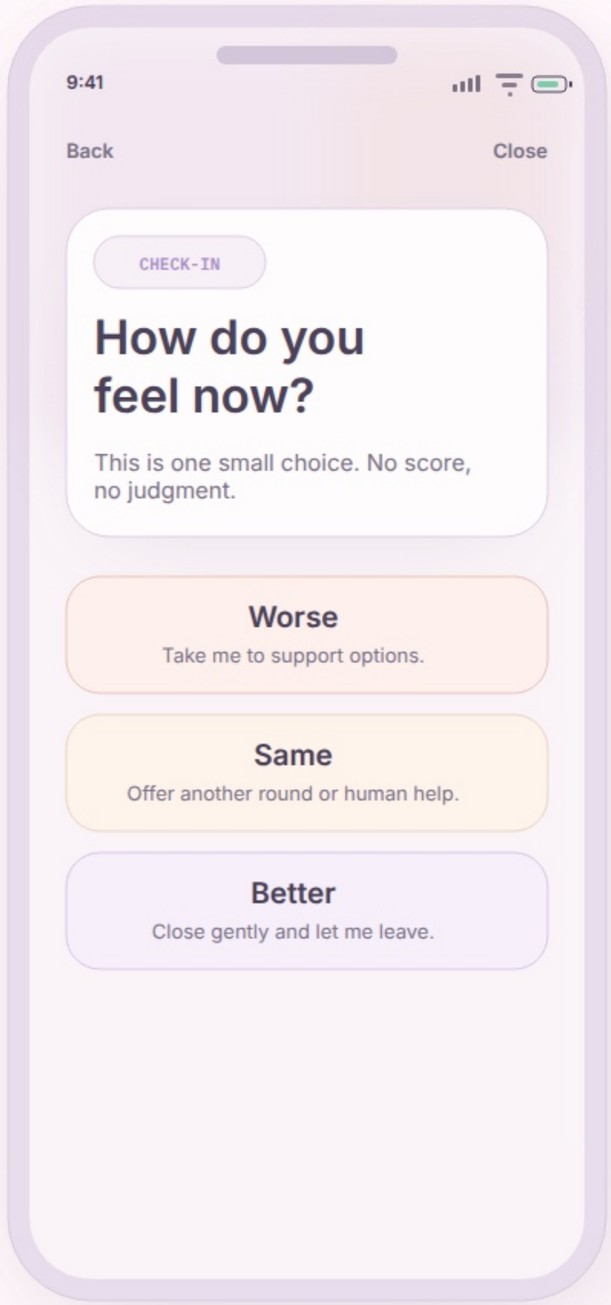
PANIC DEFENSE / 09

Check-In

First and only explicit branch.

CRISIS UX DECISION

This is the first true decision point. The user is asked only what matters now: better, same, or worse.



UI DECISION

The three choices are full-width and sentence-backed. They avoid ambiguity while keeping tone judgment-free.

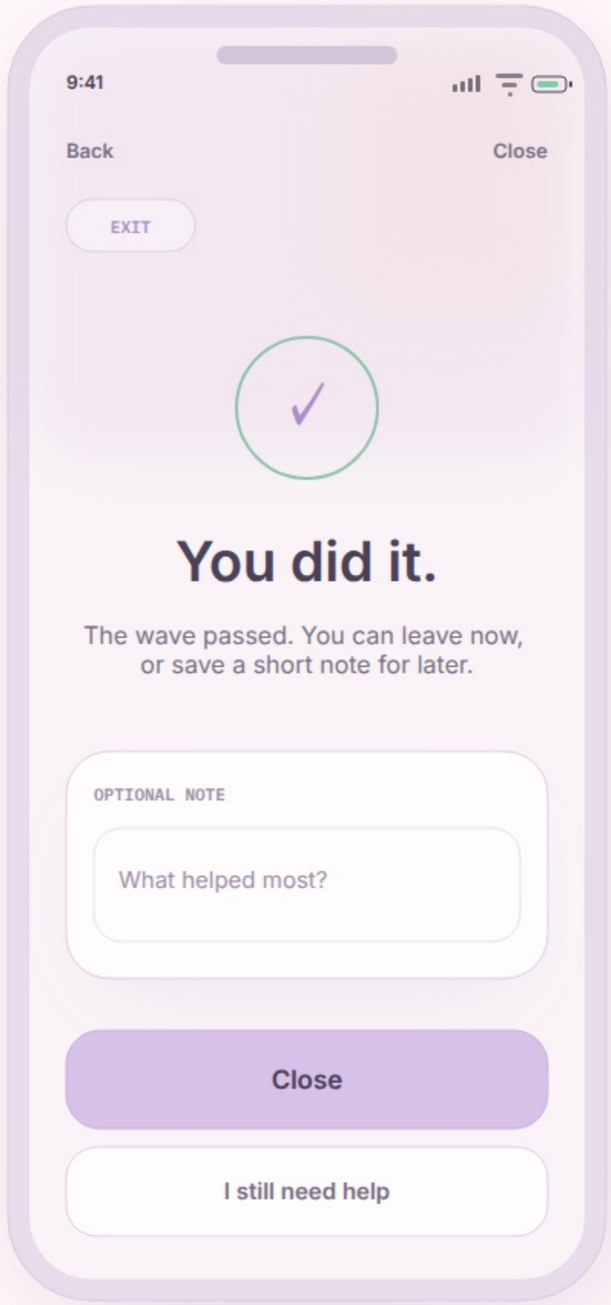
PANIC DEFENSE / 10

Exit Success

Minimal closure. Optional reflection.

CRISIS UX DECISION

Success means the user can leave. The app offers an optional note, but it does not demand tracking, reflection, or continued engagement.



UI DECISION

The check mark and Close action make the exit state feel complete. The support link remains available without competing with leaving.

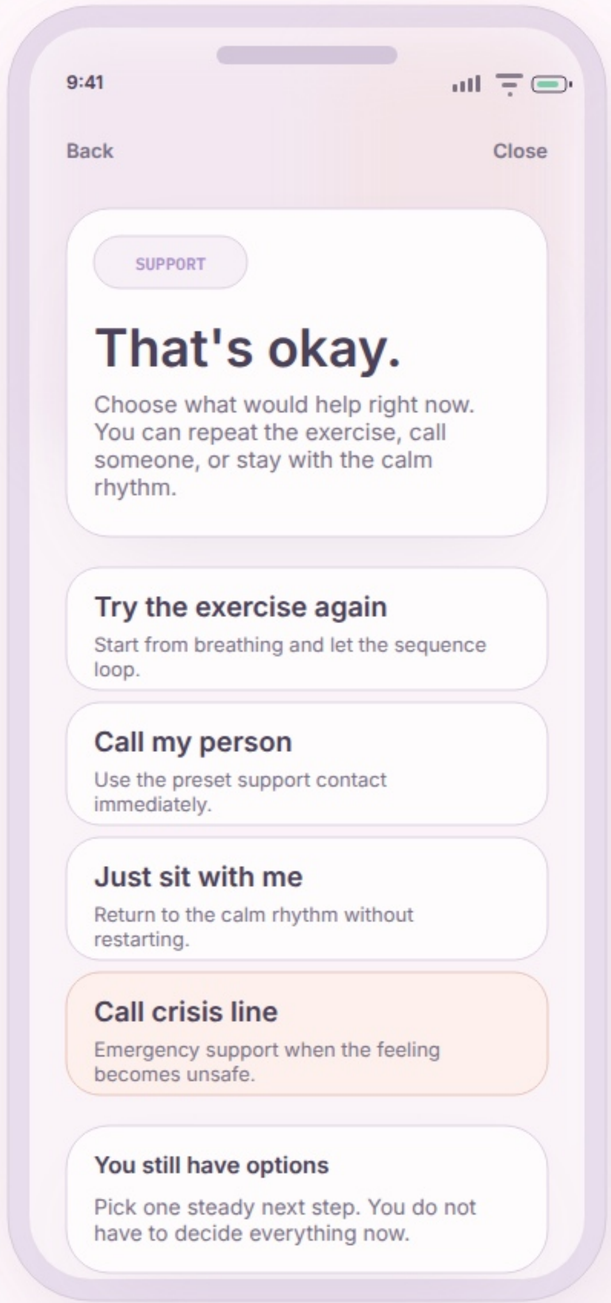
PANIC DEFENSE / 11

Support Options

Retry, contact, or stay present.

CRISIS UX DECISION

Support is still not a menu. It offers a few focused next steps when the user is not better yet.



UI DECISION

The options are stacked, plain-language, and easy to scan. Crisis support is visually distinct but not visually alarming.