



# The Feel Factor<sup>®</sup>

**Last Updated:** 15 June 2026, 09:56

Prepared for Drift  
Project Drift App

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## Introduction

What follows is a map of the emotional experience Drift creates, or will create, when the design decisions ahead are made with intention. The Feel Factor Framework is how we structure that mapping. It works across three layers of a user's experience: what they feel in the first sixty seconds, how that feeling evolves as they move through the product, and who they feel they are when they leave. Those three layers are not sequential stages to be completed. They are interdependent. What happens in the first moments shapes what is possible in the middle, and what happens in the middle determines whether the end of a session lands as evidence or evaporates as a pleasant experience that didn't stick.

The framework was built from what surfaced across the workshops and conversations between the Drift team and We Are Affective over the course of this engagement. The exercises gave us precise language for something the Drift team already knew intuitively: that this product is not trying to make people more productive. It is trying to change the story people tell about their own brains. That is a different design problem, and it requires a different kind of emotional rigour. The Aspiration Gap exercise made clear that Drift's users arrive already carrying a long history of tools that didn't fit them. The Emotional Journey Mapping showed us exactly where the current experience holds that history well, and exactly where it lets it flood back in. The Identity Shift work gave us the sentence that anchors everything that follows: from feeling like your brain is something you have to apologise for, to knowing it's something you can work with.

What this document does is translate those insights into the specific design decisions that will move a user from one to the other. Each layer names the current emotional reality, the desired state, the evidence from the workshops that supports the analysis, and the concrete choices required to close the gap. The ambition is not a frictionless experience. It is an honest one, an experience that meets users where they actually are, responds to what they actually bring, and returns something true about themselves when they leave.

## What It Currently Feels Like

Drift has something that most productivity tools never develop: a genuine point of view about the people it is trying to serve. The workshops made that clear early. The team understands, at a level that feels lived rather than researched, that their users arrive already tired, already sceptical, already carrying the weight of every system that didn't work for them. That understanding is real and it shows in the product's intentions. What has not yet been built, fully, is the emotional architecture that makes those intentions felt by the person on the other side of the screen.

The distinction matters. A product can be philosophically right and emotionally incomplete at the same time. Drift sits in that position today. The values are in place. The restraint is admirable, no streaks, no gamification, no shame mechanics dressed as features. But values that live in design

decisions are not yet the same as values that land in the body. There is a gap between what Drift means to do and what a first-time user, arriving reactive and unsteady on a bad brain day, actually feels moving through it.

Layer	Current Experience	Emotional Quality
First Impression	A calm visual entry with no immediate demands, followed by a mood check-in that asks for vulnerability before trust has been established	Cautiously neutral, with an undercurrent of low-level threat detection
The Journey	A session structure that functions well but introduces body doubling without context, leaving its most powerful feature as its most confusing one	Partial relief interrupted by uncertainty at the exact moment connection should deepen
Identity Transformation	A session summary that lists output without yet speaking to effort, followed by a dead end that releases the user before the emotional moment has somewhere to land	Quietly positive but structurally incomplete, the peak feeling dissipates before it can become a new belief

What users currently experience is something close to a warm room they were not quite invited into. The Aspiration Gap exercise captured the internal dialogue precisely: "is this going to be like every other app that makes me feel worse for not using it?" That question is not answered by the first screen. It is suspended. The visual tone is right, the absence of pressure is right, but the mood check-in arrives before Drift has done anything to earn the honesty it is asking for. For a user whose threat detection is already running, being asked how they feel by a product they have never trusted is exposing in a way the design has not yet accounted for.

The Emotional Journey Mapping placed the emotional peak at the session summary, the moment Drift reflects back what the user completed in plain language. That moment is genuinely good. But the mapping also identified what happens immediately after it: the experience simply stops. The user is returned to a home screen carrying something good that the product does not know what to do with. That post-summary silence is not neutral. For an ADHD brain whose inner critic has been waiting, it is an opening. The feeling of having done something, which Drift worked the entire session to create, is fragile enough that losing it in the thirty seconds after the summary screen is a real risk. The emotional architecture currently builds to a peak and then steps aside, and that is the gap this framework is designed to close.

## The Three Layers

The three layers of the Feel Factor Framework are not a funnel. They do not describe a user moving from awareness to conversion to retention. They describe something more fundamental: the

emotional logic of whether a person comes to trust a product, and whether that trust becomes something they carry beyond the screen.

The first layer is about safety. What a user feels in their first sixty seconds determines whether they stay present or begin the quiet process of disengaging. For Drift's users specifically, this moment carries more weight than it might for almost any other product. They arrive reactive, mid-spiral, carrying a long history of things that didn't work for their brain. The first screen is not neutral ground. It is either a room that feels like it was arranged for them, or it is another threshold they decide not to cross. Getting this layer right does not guarantee anything. But getting it wrong closes the door on everything that follows.

The second layer is where the relationship either deepens or stalls. Once a user has felt safe enough to continue, the question becomes whether the experience meets them honestly as it unfolds, whether the mood check-in actually shapes what comes next, whether body doubling feels like company or surveillance, whether the distraction parking feature feels like a hand on the shoulder or a filing cabinet. This is the layer where Drift's most distinctive qualities have to stop being intentions and start being felt. And it is the layer that creates the conditions for the third. A user who moves through a session feeling accompanied, met, and unshamed arrives at the end of it carrying something that can become a new belief. A user who moved through the same session feeling confused or quietly on edge arrives at the end carrying more evidence for the old one.

The third layer is where the product either earns its place in someone's life or remains a useful app. Identity Transformation is not about what Drift claims for itself. It is about what the user can say about themselves that they could not say before. That shift does not happen in one session. It accumulates across returns, across small completions reflected back without judgment, across the slow erosion of a story someone has been telling about their brain for years. Each layer makes the next one possible. The emotional safety of the first sixty seconds allows honesty in the journey. The honesty in the journey allows the session summary to land as evidence rather than data. The evidence, returned enough times, becomes the new story. That sequence is the design problem this framework is built to solve.

## Layer 1: First Impression

The user who opens Drift for the first time is not arriving curious. They are arriving reactive. Something happened, a task that sat untouched for three days, a deadline missed, an hour lost staring at a blank document, and they are here now because whatever they were using before has stopped working. The Aspiration Gap exercise gave us the internal monologue almost word for word: "is this going to be like every other app that makes me feel worse for not using it?" That sentence is not a UX problem. It is the emotional context inside which every design decision on the first screen either lands or fails.

The First 60 Seconds exercise identified the specific quality of that arrival state: a nervous system in mild threat-detection mode, scanning the screen fast, not reading, looking for the first signal that this

is going to demand something before it has earned the right to. Not panic. Just the low hum of someone who has been here before and knows how it usually ends.

## Current state

**People are feeling** cautiously on edge, quietly sceptical, tired in a way that predates this moment.

The visual tone of the first screen is calm, which is right. There are no streaks, no badges, no performance metrics visible, which is also right. But the mood check-in arrives before Drift has done anything to establish the trust that question requires. Asking someone how they are feeling, when they have just walked through the door of a product they have never used, is an act of vulnerability being requested before a single reason to trust has been given. The Aspiration Gap exercise described the emotional texture of that moment precisely: tired hope sitting directly alongside scepticism, and the design is not yet resolving that tension. It is presenting itself alongside it.

The First 60 Seconds exercise named what the comparison experience feels like. The major task managers, the blank input field, the blinking cursor, the implicit pressure of an empty list waiting to be filled. "Exposure without support" was the phrase that surfaced. The risk for Drift is not that the first screen looks like those apps. It does not. The risk is that the first screen feels like it is about to become them, because the mood check-in, arriving unanchored, asks for honesty the user has not yet been invited to give.

## Desired feeling

The specific sensation we are designing toward is quiet recognition. Not excitement, not motivation, not even relief yet. Just the feeling of walking into a room that was arranged for you before you arrived. The First 60 Seconds exercise named it directly: the sense that this was made for someone like me, arrived at before a single interaction has taken place, carried entirely by the visual tone, the copy register, the absence of things that usually appear on screens like this, and the sense that the product already understands something true about the person using it without having been told.

That feeling is not manufactured through warmth of copy alone. It is created through restraint. The Notion reference in the First 60 Seconds exercise captures the principle: it did not tell the user how to use it, it simply opened and waited, with enough structure to feel safe and enough blankness to feel like theirs. The user felt trusted. That quality, being given room rather than being managed, is the emotional target for Drift's first sixty seconds.

## What the workshops told us

The Aspiration Gap exercise identified the single most important design constraint for this moment: users arrive having already spent activation energy just by downloading the app. The cost of being here is already real. Any demand placed on screen before value has been demonstrated is borrowed time that has not been given.

The First 60 Seconds exercise traced exactly where the emotional tone breaks down. The mood check-in itself is not the problem. The problem is its placement without context. "Why do I have to say how I'm feeling before I can just start?" was named as one of the primary confusion points in the Heartbreak Scale exercise, and it surfaces here too. The question feels like a barrier rather than a feature to a user who has not yet understood why it matters. The design has to answer that why before the question appears, or the question will register as one more hoop to clear before the product decides to be useful.

The Heartbreak Scale work gave us a clear picture of what the first screen must not contain. Anything that implies consequence, a streak to protect, data being established, a record beginning, will trigger the same threat response as a blank input field. The absence of those signals is not aesthetic restraint for its own sake. It is the first act of trust the product extends toward the user.

The Aspiration Gap exercise identified the critical moment that makes the first session different from everything that came before it: when Drift asks how the user is feeling and then visibly adjusts what it suggests based on the answer. That is the moment the thought arrives, this is different. But it requires the mood check-in to land well. If the check-in feels exposing or arbitrary, the user disengages before that moment of visible responsiveness can occur. The whole sequence depends on the first screen creating enough safety to carry someone through the question honestly.

The Voice Sort exercise added a layer that is easy to underestimate. The copy register of the first screen carries as much emotional weight as the visual design. Words that belong to a different world, optimise, consistency, track, improve, will be detected instantly by users who are already scanning for signs that this is the wrong room. The right register, which surfaced clearly across the Voice Sort responses, is closer to a considered person who speaks plainly and does not perform warmth. The sentence that exemplified it best was simple: "You don't have to be ready. You just have to open it." The reason it works is the removal of a precondition. Every other tool implicitly requires the user to arrive motivated. That sentence says none of that is required. The design of the first screen has to carry that same quality without necessarily saying it in those words.

## **Design decisions required**

The first screen should contain no input field. Nothing on the opening view asks the user to produce anything. They land somewhere that simply exists, calm and unhurried, before any demand is made. The room has to be entered before anything is asked of the person inside it.

A single orienting line should appear before the mood check-in rather than after it. Something in the register of "Drift works differently depending on how you're feeling, so we start here every time." One sentence. It reframes the check-in from exposure to utility. The user is not being asked to be vulnerable for no reason. They are being shown why the question matters before they have to answer it. That sequence, explanation then ask, is the difference between a question that earns honesty and a question that creates wariness.

The mood check-in must visibly change what Drift suggests in response. Not internally in the algorithm, but on screen, so the user can see that their answer shaped what came next. The Aspiration Gap exercise named this as the critical first-session moment: "most apps ignore your state and just show you your list, Drift responds to it." That visible responsiveness is the proof of concept. If the answer to the check-in appears to change nothing on screen, the question reads as decorative. The trust that should have been established at that moment evaporates instead.

The copy throughout the first screen should pass a single test: does it sound like a person wrote it on a considered day, for this user specifically, rather than a product team writing for everyone? The Read It Aloud exercise gave us practical tools for catching when copy fails that test. Sentences that feel effortful to say out loud, words that belong to a clinical or corporate register, vagueness at the moment where the copy should be most concrete. All of these break the feeling the visual design is working to create. The rhythm that emerged from that exercise applies here directly: short sentences that land cleanly, longer ones that build to something worth saying, nothing that stacks complexity without relief.

The visual weight of the first screen should be genuinely low. Nothing competing for attention, no tooltips pointing at features, no notification badges, no element that implies the user needs to make a decision before they understand what they are deciding. The Opposite Ends exercise placed Drift at the sparse end of the visual density spectrum deliberately. That sparseness is not minimalism as aesthetic preference. It is a practical response to the cognitive state of a user whose nervous system is already working hard. A calm screen is literally easier to be on than a busy one, and for this user, at this moment, that difference is felt before it is processed.

The first screen after a gap, however long, should look identical to the first screen after a single day. Nothing on the interface should allow the user to tell that time has passed. The mood check-in, today's date, a simple question about right now. The Design Principles Builder exercise was precise about this: the home screen after a long gap must look the same as the home screen after one day. Any visual signal of elapsed time is a signal of absence, and absence, for this user group, reads as failure before the design has even said a word.

## Layer 2: The Journey

The user who opens Drift for the first time is not arriving curious. They are arriving reactive. Something happened, a task that sat untouched for three days, a deadline missed, an hour lost staring at a blank document, and they are here now because whatever they were using before has stopped working. The Aspiration Gap exercise gave us the internal monologue almost word for word: "is this going to be like every other app that makes me feel worse for not using it?" That sentence is not a UX problem. It is the emotional context inside which every design decision on the first screen either lands or fails.

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## Layer 3: Identity Transformation

By the time a user finishes their first session with Drift, something small has shifted. They moved something forward. They stayed with a task longer than their brain said they could. The session summary showed them what they did, plainly, without scoring it. And then the app returned them to their home screen and the feeling, which was real and fragile and unfamiliar, had nowhere to go.

That is the current state of the identity layer. Not broken. Not harmful. Just structurally incomplete at the moment that matters most. The experience builds toward something genuine and then steps aside before it can land anywhere permanent.

The users arriving at Drift are not simply people who struggle with productivity. The Identity Shift exercise was precise about this. They are people who have developed a story about their own capability, often over years, built from the accumulated evidence of systems that did not fit them. "I'm lazy." "I can't follow through." "Everyone else finds this easy." Each app that didn't stick became more material for that story. By the time they open Drift they are not just looking for a focus tool. They are, whether they would name it this way or not, looking for something that contradicts the narrative they have been living inside.

The current product gets closer to doing that than almost anything else in the space. The restraint is genuine. The absence of streaks, scores, and absence-shaming is not just philosophically correct, it is an act of care toward a user group that has been harmed by those mechanics before. But caring about users and designing an experience that changes how they feel about themselves are two different things, and right now the gap between them is largest here, at the identity layer, where the stakes are highest and the design is thinnest.

## **Desired feeling**

The sentence that emerged from the Identity Shift exercise is the clearest articulation of what this layer is trying to do: Drift turns someone who feels like their brain is working against them into someone who feels like their brain has always known what it needed, and now they do too.

That is not a marketing line. It is a description of a real psychological shift, and it requires the product to earn it rather than claim it.

What we are designing toward is not pride in the conventional sense. The First 60 Seconds exercise named it more accurately: quietly surprised by themselves. The specific feeling of having done a thing you have been avoiding and finding it survivable. Relief with a small amount of self-respect folded into it. That feeling is the beginning. The identity shift itself, from "my brain is broken" to "my brain just needs a different on-ramp," does not happen in one session. It accumulates across returns, across small completions reflected back without judgment, across the slow erosion of a story someone has been telling themselves for years.

The Identity Shift exercise gave us the before and after with unusual clarity. Before Drift, the user has a complicated relationship with their own capability. They know they are intelligent, often creative, sometimes brilliant in bursts, but inconsistency has become a story they tell about themselves. After, with enough sessions and enough small evidence, what they can say that they could not say before is: "I know how my brain works and I know what it needs." That sentence is the identity shift. Not "I am more productive." Not "I get more done." Just a quiet, settled sense of self-knowledge that was not there before.

## What the workshops told us

The Identity Shift exercise was the most direct source of evidence for this layer, and it surfaced three structural reasons why the shift is not yet happening reliably.

The first is that the experience does not accumulate visibly enough. Each session feels somewhat standalone. There is no gentle thread connecting what a user did last Tuesday to what they are doing today, no sense that Drift is building a picture of them over time that it can reflect back. Without that thread, the evidence never becomes a pattern, and without a pattern, the old story has nothing to argue with.

The second is the body doubling confusion. The Identity Shift exercise named this directly: some users never experience the feature that most powerfully communicates "you are not alone in this." The Heartbreak Scale exercise gave us the specific moment where that failure occurs, the pairing screen on first use, and described watching real users close the app quietly at exactly that point. A user who skips body doubling because it felt unclear misses the feeling of being accompanied, which is one of the things that most powerfully contradicts the "I have to do this alone because I keep letting people down" story. That is not a feature miss. It is an identity miss.

The third is the post-summary dead end. The Identity Shift exercise returned to this moment repeatedly, and the Emotional Journey Mapping named it as the place the experience simply stops. The session summary is the emotional peak, the moment the new belief is closest to landing, the moment when a user whose inner critic has been telling them they achieve nothing sees their own output listed back in plain language and thinks: I did do something. That moment is genuinely moving. And then the design releases them. The inner critic, which has been waiting, fills the silence within seconds. The Identity Shift exercise was unambiguous: "the post-summary dead end is the moment the evidence is freshest, the moment the shift is closest, and the moment the experience stops." The design has to be present in that gap before the old story is.

The Aspiration Gap exercise contributed something equally important: the new belief Drift is trying to create. Before Drift, the story is "I am lazy" or "I cannot follow through." After a session that actually works, even one, that story starts to crack. The critical moment is the session summary, when Drift shows what was actually completed. The exercise described it as "genuinely surprising" for someone whose brain constantly tells them they achieve nothing. That surprise is the raw material of identity change. The design's job is to hold it long enough for it to stick.

The Heartbreak Scale exercise added the longitudinal dimension. The aspiration is not "you completed 47 tasks this month" but something closer to "you tend to do your clearest thinking on slow mornings." That kind of insight, drawn from a user's own data and returned as self-knowledge rather than performance data, reframes their experience of themselves in a way that no single feature can replicate. From "I finally managed to do a thing" to "I used a technique that works for my brain and it worked." The shift in narrative is the whole point.

## Design decisions required

The session summary must speak to effort, not output. Language that names what the user did in a way that acknowledges what it cost them, not just what was produced, is the mechanism by which the identity shift lands or does not. "You completed three tasks" is data. "You came back on a hard day and moved something forward" is a mirror. For a user whose inner critic has been running all day, being seen is what changes the story. Being counted does not.

The post-summary moment needs a single soft question and nothing more. One optional text field, no consequence for leaving it blank, no sense of a next demand arriving. Something in the register of "want to leave a note for tomorrow?" The user's own words, sitting in Drift, make returning feel like keeping a promise to themselves. That is a different emotional proposition from being nudged by a product. The Emotional Journey Mapping named the design challenge here with unusual honesty: the feeling of having done something is fragile and brief, and if the design does not catch it and give it somewhere to land, the inner critic fills the silence within seconds.

The product must never register absence as failure. When a user returns after three days, or five days, or two weeks, the first thing they encounter is the mood check-in, a present-tense question about now, not a list of what did not happen. The door back into Drift has to stay warm regardless of how long it has been. The Identity Shift exercise was clear about why: avoidance is already the thing these users struggle with most. If returning feels like walking into a room where everyone noticed you were gone, they will not come back. The past stays outside the door they walk back through.

A quiet longitudinal layer should accumulate across sessions and return insight to the user as self-knowledge, not metrics. Not a dashboard, not a streak counter, just an occasional unhurried reflection that appears when it has genuinely been earned. "You tend to do your clearest thinking on slow mornings" is the kind of sentence that changes how someone understands themselves. It gives them language for a pattern they may have sensed but never named. The Identity Shift exercise described this as the difference between data, which tells you what happened, and insight, which tells you who you are. The identity shift requires the second one.

The language throughout the product must never frame the user as someone who needs fixing. Not "get back on track," not "stay consistent," not "build better habits." The framing is always one of understanding rather than correction. Every time Drift uses the register of self-improvement it joins every other system that has implicitly told this user group they are not quite right yet. The Aspiration Gap exercise described the belief Drift is trying to replace: "the problem was never willpower, it was the tool not fitting the brain." The language of the product has to hold that belief in every screen, not just the ones the team thinks of as identity-bearing.

Letting users become body doubles for others should be an available and considered choice within the product. The Identity Shift exercise named this as the deepest identity move Drift can offer. A user who is someone else's anchor has a fundamentally different relationship with their own reliability than a user who only receives. The shift from "I need support to function" to "my presence is

someone else's support" is not a feature benefit. It is a change in how a person narrates their own worth. Reciprocity of that kind cannot be designed around. It has to be built in.

## The Emotional Arc

The arc begins before the app is opened. It begins in the moment someone decides, usually on a bad day, that they are willing to try one more thing. That decision costs something. It is made against a background of previous attempts, previous systems, previous apps that diagnosed the problem and failed to help with it. By the time a user downloads Drift they are not arriving hopeful in any simple sense. They are arriving with hope and scepticism running alongside each other, each one waiting to see which gets confirmed first.

What the workshops gave us, across every exercise, was a precise account of that arrival state and of what it would take to move someone from it to something genuinely different. The Aspiration Gap exercise produced the internal monologue almost verbatim: "is this going to be like every other app that makes me feel worse for not using it?" The Identity Shift exercise described the person behind that question, someone intelligent, often creative, carrying years of accumulated evidence that something is fundamentally wrong with the way they work. The First 60 Seconds exercise named the physiological quality of the moment: a nervous system in mild threat-detection mode, scanning fast, looking for the first signal that this is going to demand something before it has earned the right to. That is who Drift is designing for. Not an abstraction, not a user persona, but a specific kind of tired, specific kind of hopeful, specific kind of ready to be disappointed.

The arc the workshops described moves through three distinct emotional states. It begins in exhausted scepticism, the defended hope of someone who has been here before. It moves, through a series of small design decisions that either hold or break the feeling at each juncture, into quiet activation, the specific sensation of having done a thing your brain said you couldn't and finding it survivable. And it arrives, across sessions rather than within a single one, at settled self-knowledge: not "I am more productive" but "I know how my brain works and I know what it needs." That sentence, which emerged from the Identity Shift exercise, is the destination. Every design decision in this document should be measured against whether it moves a user toward it or away from it.

That is not a metaphor. It is a practical tool. When a design choice is being considered, the question is not whether it is useful, or whether it adds information, or whether it might increase engagement. The question is whether it contributes to that arc. A streak counter might drive return visits in aggregate, but it breaks the arc for the specific users Drift exists to serve, because it converts the experience of coming back into the experience of being measured against an expectation they did not set. A session summary that lists output without acknowledging effort touches the right moment but misses the emotional register entirely, because the arc requires being seen, not being counted. The post-summary dead end, which the Emotional Journey Mapping named as the place the experience simply stops, is not a minor UX gap. It is the place where the arc, having built toward its

peak, releases the user back into the silence that their inner critic has been waiting to fill. Protecting that moment is not a nice-to-have. It is the hinge on which the whole arc turns.

The arc only completes if Drift is still present when the user returns. The Emotional Journey Mapping was honest about the gap between sessions being the most vulnerable moment in the entire journey, the place where doubt and avoidance fill the silence the app leaves behind. The solution is not to fill that silence with notifications. It is to leave the user with something of their own inside the product, their own words, written in the soft moment after the session summary, waiting for them when they come back. A thread they created, a promise to themselves rather than a prompt from an app. That small design decision is what allows the second visit to feel like continuation rather than re-entry. And the second visit, as the Aspiration Gap exercise made clear, is where habit starts. Open Drift twice in the first week and something real has been won.

The arc is the brief. It is also the test.

## What This Means In Practice

The three layers and the arc produce a specific, concrete design brief. Every decision made during design and build should be tested against it. Not as a checklist, but as a genuine question about whether the choice in hand moves a user toward the arc's destination or quietly away from it.

Layer	The Test
First Impression	Does this screen make a user who has already been let down feel safe enough to answer honestly?
The Journey	Does this moment hold the user in the feeling of being met, or does it ask something of them before it has earned the right to?
Identity Transformation	Does this design decision contribute to the user's evidence that their brain works, or does it risk becoming more material for the old story?
The Arc	Does this choice move someone from feeling like their brain is something to apologise for, toward knowing it is something they can work with?

A product that passes all four tests at every moment is not one that is free of friction or difficulty. It is one that never mistakes the user for someone who needs to be managed, optimised, or fixed. It is one where every screen, every prompt, every piece of copy, every silence between interactions has been considered from the inside out, from the emotional reality of the person holding the phone at 11pm after a day their brain made hard.

For Drift, passing these tests is the work. Not as aspiration, but as the practical daily standard against which every decision earns its place in the product, or is quietly set aside.