

Designing Ritual & Meaning in Interactive Experiences

Designing a **symbolic herb UI** that feels **meaningful and supportive** requires blending cognitive science insights on ritual, emotion, and **sense-making** with ethical UX practices. Below are **10 principles** to guide this design, each with a brief explanation and an example of **UX copy** reflecting a *mystical yet grounding* tone.

1. Infuse Ritual Intentionality & Symbolism

Rituals transform routine actions into meaningful experiences by adding symbolism and intent ¹ ². Design the interface to encourage **mindful, intentional actions** (e.g. “lighting” a virtual herb or breathing with it) that the user approaches as special moments rather than mundane tasks. Emphasize symbolism – for instance, an herb can represent calm or protection – to give the interaction deeper resonance. This helps users feel that “*something special is happening*,” elevating their mindset beyond the ordinary ².

Sample UX copy: “As you gently tap to ignite the sage, imagine clearing a space in your mind – a moment set apart from the everyday.”

2. Leverage Multi-Sensory & Priming Cues

Incorporate **sensory priming** elements to enrich the ritual atmosphere and trigger emotional responses. Even in a flat UI, visuals, sounds, or haptic feedback can evoke the senses (e.g. a softly flickering amber glow, a subtle rustling of leaves). Cognitive science shows that **multi-sensory “dramas”** and cues enhance engagement and emotional salience in rituals ³. For example, a faint chime or aromatic imagery when an herb is selected can prime the user’s mind for calm; such sensory cues tap into the limbic system to create lasting emotional markers. The goal is to **immerse** the user gently, helping them *feel* the ritual’s mood on a visceral level.

Sample UX copy: “Close your eyes and breathe in the rosemary. Hear the crackle of the hearth – let warmth and comfort spread with each breath.”

3. Encourage Personal Meaning-Making (Embrace Ambiguity)

Allow **open interpretation** so users can attach their own meaning to the experience. Rather than dictating one “correct” interpretation of each herb or ritual step, provide space for **ambiguity** – an openness that invites users to project personal symbolism and find *their* meaning ⁴. Research in design shows that ambiguity can be a “*resource for design*” that fosters closer personal engagement and reflection ⁴. For instance, describe an herb’s traditional uses or qualities in suggestive, metaphorical terms and let the user decide what it signifies for them. Tolerating multiple interpretations (and even mystery) empowers the user as a co-creator of meaning, rather than a passive recipient ⁵.

Sample UX copy: “Choose the herb that calls to you. Perhaps its story whispers something your heart understands – a meaning only you can name.”

4. Offer Non-Coercive Guidance (Invite, Don’t Impose)

Design the flow to **guide users gently** through the ritual without forcing or tricking them into any action. Adopting a “*coherence over control*” philosophy means favoring soft influence over brute force ⁶. Cues and suggestions should feel like an *invitation* or a caring nudge, not a command. This aligns with an ethical shift from coercive design to “*environmental invitation*”, where the system makes beneficial actions **feel natural and accessible** rather than mandatory ⁷. For example, instead of a hard stop until a step is completed, allow skipping or offer subtle encouragement. Users respond better when they act from comfort and interest, not pressure ⁸ ⁹. *Guidance replaces regulation* – the interface can suggest and lead by example, but the user must always feel in charge.

Sample UX copy: “When you’re ready, gently stir the blend and watch the leaves dance. If you prefer to pause or skip, that’s okay – follow the rhythm that feels right to you.”

5. Prioritize User Agency and Choice

Maintain **user agency** at every step. Empower users to customize their ritual experience – from selecting which herb or ritual to perform, to adjusting the pace or skipping parts. Self-Determination Theory identifies autonomy as a key factor for motivation and well-being ¹⁰. In practice, this means providing clear options and *never trapping the user*: avoid any design that forces an action or creates a dead-end. Use **non-coercive choices**, like offering multiple paths or a gentle “maybe later” button, so users feel respected and in control ¹¹. Validating the user’s capacity to choose will reinforce that the ritual is *for them* and that they are an active participant, not following orders ¹² ¹³.

Sample UX copy: “Select an herb that resonates with you (or none at all). You are free to explore in your own way – this ritual belongs to you.”

6. Ensure Emotional Safety and Trust

Create an atmosphere of **psychological safety** by using compassionate, non-judgmental language and interaction patterns. Users – especially “curious explorers” new to rituals – should feel safe to experiment or even “*fail*” without reproach ¹⁴. Design should tolerate imperfection and diversity of experience: there is no “wrong way” to do a supportive ritual. For instance, if a user deviates or stops early, respond with understanding (or quietly allow it), not with error messages. **Empathic communication** is key: use *warm, encouraging tones* and phrasing that normalizes different feelings and outcomes ¹⁵. By assuring the user that their experience is valid and their pace is acceptable, you build trust. This sense of “*loyalty without coercion, structure without rigidity*” lets users remain engaged without fear of judgment ¹⁶ ¹⁷.

Sample UX copy: “There is no right or wrong way to do this. If your mind wanders or you need to stop, be gentle with yourself – this space will be here for you whenever you return.”

7. Craft a Poetic, Grounded Tone

Use **mystical yet grounding language** to set the tone – a touch of the poetic that inspires wonder, balanced with clarity and sincerity. Rituals often evoke “*meanings, magic, and the unexplainable*,” tapping into spiritual emotions ¹⁸, so it’s appropriate to use metaphor and evocative imagery (nature, elements, light, etc.) to give the UI a soul. For example, describing an herb as “sunlight captured in leaves” could spark imagination. However, ensure the language remains **approachable and clear** (grounded): avoid overblown or obscure jargon that could alienate newcomers. The tone should be **serene, reverent, and positive** – *inspiring comfort* rather than sounding too clinical or, on the flip side, overly whimsical. By carefully choosing metaphors that feel nurturing and **ethical**, we guide the user’s mindset without misleading. Remember that metaphors shape how people understand their journey, quietly framing their experience ¹⁹ ²⁰, so use them to uplift and reassure.

Sample UX copy: “Feel your roots in the earth and crown in the sky – you are the bridge between, steady and luminous. In this moment, simply be, as the cedar smoke carries your wish upward.”

8. Use Ethical Metaphors & Symbolic Language

When employing symbolism or metaphors (e.g. treating the herb’s effect as a “gentle guardian” or comparing emotional states to weather), do so **ethically and truthfully**. An **ethical metaphor** connects concrete imagery to abstract ideas in a way that clarifies without deceiving ²¹. It should make the concept *accessible and relatable* to the user, and align with positive values. For instance, presenting an herb as a “companion” on the user’s journey personifies support, but be careful: do not imbue the symbol with false agency or promises. The metaphor should be uplifting and instructive (helping users understand their feelings or intentions) while **avoiding over-claiming**. Essentially, metaphors are powerful “*conceptual devices*” ²² – they provide frameworks for meaning, so choose ones that reinforce the user’s autonomy and hope, and are culturally sensitive. By speaking in symbols, we engage the user’s imagination (important for ritual), but by grounding those symbols in ethical context, we avoid manipulation.

Sample UX copy: “Imagine each lavender bud as a tiny vessel of peace. As it unfurls in warmth, it releases calm into the air – a reminder that peace lives in you too, waiting to blossom.”

9. Focus on Support, Not Cure (No Medical Claims)

It’s crucial that the UI **never makes medical or health claims** about the herbs or rituals. Frame the experience as providing *emotional and spiritual support*, not as treating or curing any condition. Over-promising crosses ethical lines and can mislead users – for example, claiming “this ritual will cure your insomnia” would be inappropriate (and possibly illegal). Users should understand the **herbs are symbolic aids**, not medicines. In line with expert guidance, “*avoid apps (or features) that promise to cure, treat, or diagnose conditions*” without scientific backing ²³. Instead of clinical claims, use words like “soothe,” “ground,” or “invite restfulness,” which suggest potential **wellness benefits** without guaranteeing outcomes. This approach maintains honesty and trust. It’s fine to mention traditional beliefs (“sage has been used for cleansing”) as long as it’s clear this is about cultural meaning, not a certified effect. By **keeping the promise modest** – offering comfort rather than cure – the design stays supportive and credible.

Sample UX copy: "Chamomile has long been cherished for its calming presence. As you sip this moment of stillness, know that it's here to comfort, not to cure – a gentle friend in the night."

10. Foster a Sense of Connection & Continuity

Tie the user's personal ritual experience to a **larger context** – whether communal, cultural, or temporal – to enhance meaning. Rituals often make people feel connected to others or to tradition ²⁴. You can gently reference that *many others before have found meaning in this practice*, which can instill a comforting sense of **community and continuity**. For example, noting that an herb is used in ceremonies around the world can make the user feel part of a wider human experience. This should be done inclusively and respectfully, without appropriation of specific cultures or implying any religious angle the user hasn't chosen. The aim is to provide an *optional layer* of belonging: if the user is a seasoned practitioner, they'll appreciate recognition of ritual lineage; if they're a curious explorer, it can pique interest and lend credibility. By **honoring the heritage** of certain rituals or symbols, the UI adds depth while reinforcing that the user is *"not alone"* in their pursuit of meaning.

Sample UX copy: "By lighting this incense, you join a quietly glowing circle that spans centuries and continents. Feel the presence of countless hearts who have lit lamps in the dark, just like you, seeking warmth and meaning."

Each of these principles interweaves **affective science** (how design can evoke emotion and comfort) with **ethical, user-centered design**. Together they ensure the symbolic herb UI is not only **immersive and poetic**, but also **respectful of the user's agency, interpretation, and well-being**. By grounding mystical elements in compassionate design, the experience can truly support users in a meaningful way – **"coherence over control,"** and **guidance over prescription**, so that every user, whether a ritual practitioner or an intrigued newcomer, feels both *mystically inspired* and *emotionally supported* throughout their journey ⁶ ⁷.

¹ ² ¹⁸ ²⁴ Introducing Ritual Design: meaning, purpose, and behavior change | by Kursat Ozenc | Ritual Design Lab | Medium

<https://medium.com/ritual-design/introducing-ritual-design-meaning-purpose-and-behavior-change-44d26d484edf>

³ Placebo and How Culture Affects Healing Outcomes - Healing Works Foundation

<https://healingworksfoundation.org/placebo-and-how-culture-affects-healing-outcomes/>

⁴ courses.ischool.berkeley.edu

https://courses.ischool.berkeley.edu/i262/s13/readings_pdf/Sengers_Gaver_Staying_Open_to_Interpretation.pdf

⁵ ⁷ ⁸ ⁹ ¹³ ¹⁴ ¹⁶ ¹⁷ Social Engineering. Principles of Non-Coercive... | by Boris (Bruce) Kriger | Sep, 2025 | Medium

<https://medium.com/@krigerbruce/social-engineering-08bf1eb9ba87>

⁶ THEORETICAL_FOUNDATIONS.md

file:///file_000000001b2871f48a4428a7a8132b0f

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<https://www.zigpoll.com/content/what-are-some-effective-ways-to-design-ui-interfaces-that-promote-user-mental-wellbeing-based-on-psychological-principles>

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<https://medium.com/@krigerbruce/part-1-metaphor-as-a-way-of-thought-131c89969c36>

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<https://www.healthline.com/health/trustworthy-health-apps>