

Read the whole story of the butterfly woman

The good life

Once upon a time, a Butterfly Woman lived in a small village surrounded by green hills. She loved to sit by the river that ran nearby. She lived in a solid house with her children and her man. They had good and not so good neighbours and slept in peace at night and woke the next morning with a thankful heart. The country was calm, and people had enough to eat and drink.

The Woman had a **good heart** and a **strong body**. Her feet walked her long distances, and she had clever hands. She often sang, and you could see her washing clothes in the river, walking with a swing to her hips, or jiggling her children. Her man was a good person. She felt satisfied and proud. She trusted her life and the people around her, most of the time. When she was sorry for something she would cry a little and tell herself that it would get better. She wanted to become a wise woman, to whom other people could turn for advice in difficult times.



*The days went on. In her right wing were all the **good memories of her life** like the green hillside, the sound of the river she loved, and the fragrance of her favourite flowers. Thinking of the trees and animals made her feel calm. Looking at the house made her feel safe. Memories of her children, growing up year by year, made her proud. She remembered the smile of her mother and the collared dress that a friend had given her. She had sad memories too, of saying goodbye to her friend when she moved to another part of the country, of her mother's sickness and death. All these memories were stored in her wing. They made her feel strong enough to think and feel and live her life.*

In the left wing, she kept her dreams about the future and some worries too, though they weren't too big to handle. Sometimes she dreamed of a new dress, and some good shoes to keep the rain out. But her strongest dream was for her children's education. Every month she tried to save some money for their education. She kept all her dreams, worries, plans and longings in this wing. They made her feel alive and that she had enough control over her life. Every morning, she took a deep breath when she woke up, ready to start a new day. Every night, before going to sleep, she rested her face for a moment in the palms of her hands, praying and giving thanks for her good life.

Life is turned upside down

*Then something happened that turned life upside down. It was not an earthquake, wind or fire. War came to the country and threw the villagers and their communities into **fear** and chaos. People were killed, many fled. She heard that old and young women, even children, had been raped. Life became **unpredictable** and difficult to handle. She tried **not to think** so much. She **did not smile** so often or giggle as before. Her man became angry more often. She **did not sleep** so well and prayed for peace.*

One morning she went down to the river. Some soldiers found her there. She was filling containers with water. After that day, everything changed.



At first, she **tried to flee**, but she could not escape. The soldiers laughed when they caught her and threw her down in the dust of the riverbank. Then she **tried to fight** them. Her **heart pumped** in her chest, the **face became warm**, her arms were **stronger** than ever before. But they were four big men, and they were even more brutal when she **tried to fight back** hitting, biting, kicking, scratching and screaming for help. Their laughter rang in her ears. The **smell** of their bodies **scared her heart to silence**.

Her legs became as if **dead, her hands and arms too**. Her face became **pale**, and it was as though she had lost all her spirit. She heard the sound of the river and the breath of the soldiers. She **lost her sight for a moment**. It was as if **she had left her body** or was **hiding in her heart**, looking at the soldiers from a distance, watching them do bad things to her. She saw it like a scene in a film, she **did not feel anything**. It was as if the men were hurting a stranger, though she knew she was the person being hurt.

Some hours must have passed before two men from the village found the Butterfly Woman, wounded on the river bank. The sand was red with her blood and the

Woman stared at them with glassy eyes, unable to utter a word. Instead of helping her home, the men were so frightened by the sight that they ran off into the bush.

The Woman **felt extremely weak**. She asked herself: Am I already dead? She noticed that blood covered her yellow dress, and that the dress was torn into pieces. She noticed the sound of the river and wondered whether she was in an unknown place. The river **sounded** hostile. Her **heart beat rapidly** in her chest. Would the soldiers come back? Her **body felt numb**. She had **no strength to** move. Her arms and legs were like dead meat. Her body ached and yet there were **no feelings left**.

That night the Woman was left alone. Her husband asked her to leave! The elders said she should not come back! The children were crying. She had to depart.

She wandered off into the forest, away from the river. Around her, the trees became dark and hostile. **She felt fragile, weak**, like the living dead. Her feet could barely carry her. They felt numb. Her hands were like the hands of a stranger. No smile in her heart, only darkness. Her body felt cold and silent, as if she was not living there anymore, or as if her soul was hiding far away in a corner of her shivering heart.

She could not rest. She **saw** the soldiers' eyes, **heard** their laughter, their breathing and their words. Their **smell** filled her lungs. She was **sweating**, crying in rage and despair. She could not find shelter and scanned the green hillsides all the time for soldiers. All her dreams and wishes evaporated. Her mind became invaded by **worry** and she had difficult, strange thoughts about herself. Was she going **mad**? She felt **shame** and **rage** and **deep sorrow** at the same time.

Before, she carried her most important memories and longings in her wings. Now, they frightened her deeply. She **tried to distance herself** from them. She used all her energy **not to think** and **not to feel**. Her husband's words poured into her right ear. You cannot stay. You are a sick, crazy person dirty, and dangerous for me. I do not want you here. Go away! She wandered far from the river, stumbling and falling. She walked **as if she was asleep**, leaving her children behind. She had no tears left. The ache in her womb was intense, but she scarcely felt it.

The Butterfly Woman was hiding behind some bushes. Having walked for days she realised she had nowhere to go and was completely alone. She **felt her loneliness spreading** like ice to all her limbs. She lay completely still, looking dead. Her yellow dress was torn to pieces.

When staff at the health centre was informed that a woman had been raped, they decided to search for her. After looking for some time, a helper saw something move behind a bush and a woman screamed Go away! She moved slowly and paused so that the woman could see her from a distance. Not wishing to scare her, she sat down in silence, waited for a while, and then told the Butterfly Woman that she helped women in her situation. At first the Butterfly Woman just shouted Go away again. Her voice was filled with **despair, anger and fear**. The helper continued to sit, and repeated that she was there to help.

After a while the Butterfly Woman started to listen to the helper. She could **feel some of her inner ice starting to melt** and was able to move her arms and legs. She was **not able to speak** but felt gradually that the lady wanted to help her. This first feeling of confidence weakened her **feelings of fear and shame**.

She managed to sit up. Then she dared to raise her gaze and meet the helper's eyes. She could see that the helper's expression was free of contempt and that her eyes were warm. At last, the Butterfly Woman said: Come. The helper went slowly across and sat down beside her. They sat in silence for a while. The day turned towards night. At that moment the Butterfly Woman felt how tired she was, and she leaned towards the helper who put her head on her shoulder.

The helper started to tell the Butterfly Woman about the health centre. She described what kind of place it was and told her that many raped women had come there.

Inviting the Woman to stay at the health centre, the helper took some clean clothes and gave them to her. The Woman cleaned herself and put on the clean clothes.

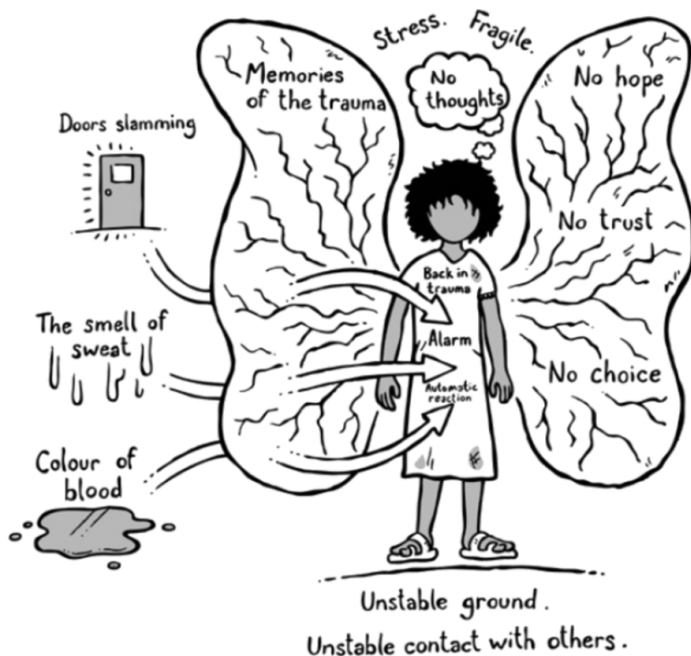
The Butterfly Woman was greeted by the other women and the helpers. She felt welcome. She was given a clean bed in a dormitory she shared with other women. For the first time since the horrible events, she managed to rest. At the health centre the Butterfly Woman isolated herself, and it was obvious that she was suffering. The helper offered her a consultation and asked her about her suffering.

The Butterfly Woman said that she was doomed and destroyed. The helper asked how long she had felt that way, and she replied that it all happened after the terrible incident. She also said she had lost her family because of this. The helper asked her to say **how her suffering affected her thoughts, feelings, breathing, heart and**

body. The Butterfly Woman replied that bad thoughts came to her mind. She thought she was a bad woman who had lost her dignity and that soon she would go mad. She even admitted that she already felt quite crazy and described chaotic feelings of shame, anger and fear. She said that her body was tense and weak at the same time. She said that she had lost all her power, and she felt doomed to have this illness forever. She also believed that she was visited by evil spirits.

The helper explained that this was a very **natural reaction to the very abnormal experience she had suffered.** She told the Woman that all the other women at the centre could confirm this. She also invited the Woman to a group where other women discussed their reactions and tried to find ways to cope with the pain they felt.

After this talk the Butterfly Woman immediately felt a little better, less crazy and less alone. It comforted her to know that other women felt the same way that she did.



Experiencing triggers and flashbacks

Soon after she arrived at the health centre, the Butterfly Woman had to go to the hospital because she had suffered injuries during the rape. She knew that the nurses

and doctors wanted to heal her but, as soon as she had to lie on the bed and spread her legs to be examined, **horrible memories from the rape returned**. Suddenly she thought the doctor was the soldier who had raped her. She tried to flee. **The memories flooded her thoughts and body, and she could not separate them from what was happening to her now at the hospital**. A wise nurse repeated the Butterfly Woman's name over and over again in a calm and strong voice.

She said: You are in the hospital now, you are safe now, It is [Wednesday, March 12 2014], We are here to help you. The tone of her voice and what she said helped the Butterfly Woman to return to the present. She realised that she was at the hospital receiving help, and she managed to calm down.

The wise nurse understood that the Butterfly Woman's memories of the rape were very close to the surface and could be triggered during the care she would receive and the examinations she would have to undertake. She decided to prepare her for what would happen and explained to her how easily old rape memories can be triggered by reminders. They talked about the Woman's reaction during her medical examination the day before. The nurse suggested exercises the Woman could do **to prevent old memories from flooding** her mind. She taught the Butterfly Woman to use her **eyes** to look at things around her, and to say aloud to herself what she was seeing. When she did this, the Woman noticed that she **felt more present**, more in the here and now. The wise nurse said: **When you focus on the present the past stays in the past**. The Butterfly Woman also learned to ground herself by using her sense of touch. She held a stone that just fitted in her hand and felt its weight, its coolness, its shape. The two women practised these exercises together and the nurse told the Butterfly Woman to do them whenever she felt her memories coming back. The nurse also said that she would remain during her operation, to reassure the Butterfly Woman and remind her that the hospital was safe.

At her medical examinations and treatment, the Butterfly Woman felt more prepared. When memories about the rape came into her mind, she looked about her and named what she saw. She held tightly the stone that fitted her hand. And the nurse spoke gently to her, saying: You are safe in the hospital. You are getting help. You are a strong woman. You are doing very well. You are really doing what we practised together. I am proud of you. You can be proud of yourself too. The Woman felt that she could be a little proud.

After this she returned to the rehabilitation centre. She felt calm after spending some time there. Her arms, legs and back felt stronger, and her heart felt lighter. She smiled and could think more clearly. This filled her with relief.

*One day, when she felt light at heart, she went to the market. But there she saw some soldiers and, as if lightning had struck her, she panicked and **fled** to the centre. She felt **it was all happening again**, as if a film were playing in her head. Every time she saw a soldier, she felt the same, the memories flooded back, and she lost control. **After a while she became afraid of almost all men.** Her reaction was to flee. (Hyper-arousal symptoms and anxiety). Some days later she hit a man who had walked up behind her. She felt trapped because the path was narrow and, before she knew it, she had hit him hard. The sound of his steps reminded her of the rapists. **She could not think, only react.***

*When she returned to the centre, she was afraid and panicky and suddenly **lost all her energy.** She felt like a zombie and went to bed. The strength in her arms and legs left her and she could not think clearly. She could not smile. She **felt sadness and confusion.** **She was afraid of going mad.** It took some days before she became well enough to participate again in any activity.*

*Many objects and situations could **evoke memories** of the rape. Some states in her body would bring the memories back. When she menstruated, for example, the pain in her stomach and the sight of her blood reminded her of the rape. A yellow cloth (she wore a yellow dress when she was raped) instantly recalled the memory of herself bloody in her yellow dress.*

A certain light in the evening** before the sun went down, or the **sound of the river** reminded her of the rape too, because it took place by the river just before sunset. Other strong trauma reminders were **angry voices** and **heavy breathing.

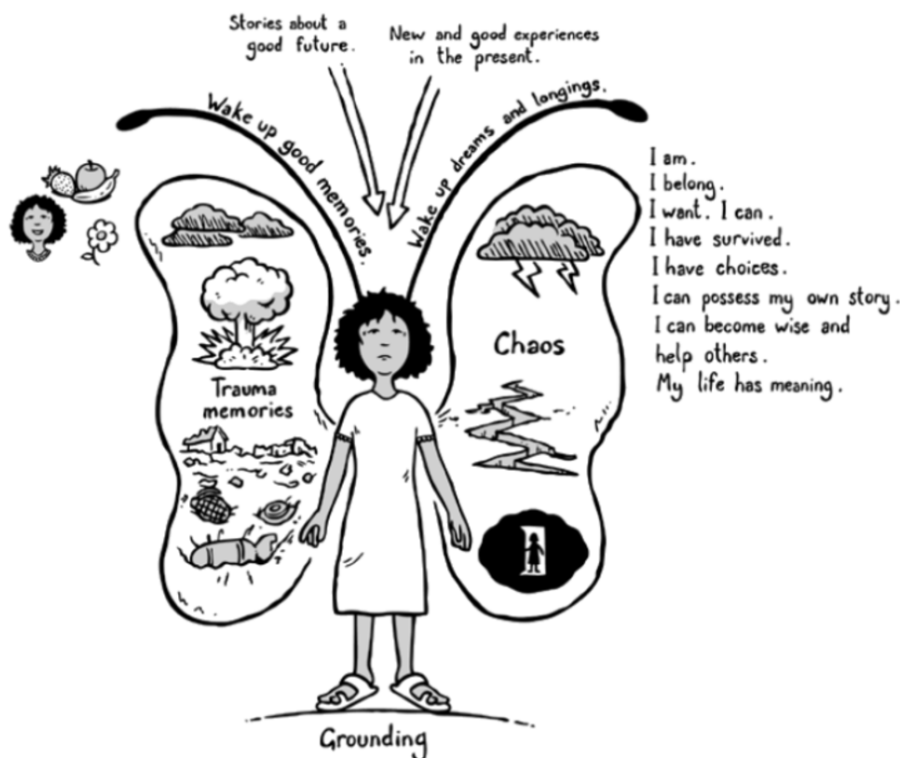
At the health centre, the Butterfly Woman felt calm most of the time. After staying at the centre for two months, she felt much better. She joined the choir where the women sang and danced. The choir revived some joy and vitality in her. Being together with women who had been through what she had been through made her feel less estranged. They could support each other. The Butterfly Woman was good with her hands and was able to join a sewing class where she learned to make clothes. Some of the women said they could make a living from what they sold,

though they had been rejected by their families and community because they had been raped.

Gradually healing

The Butterfly Woman was relieved that she had met good helpers among the nurses and workers and among the women who had also experienced trauma. She realised that her reactions were natural, and understood how her trauma memories were triggered, so that she lost touch with where she was and forgot she was safe.

The helper explained to the Butterfly Woman that she needed to find ways to reconnect herself and relocate herself in the here and now. The helper said: **If you focus on the present moment, memories of the past will remain in the past.**



The Butterfly Woman found it hard to understand what this meant. The helper said: Memory of the rape can invade the present, taking away your sense of time and place. She explained that trauma memories belong to time past. **The secret is to experience the present through our senses: this anchors us to the here and now.**

The helper put hot tea and two cups on the table in front of them. She said: **Listen**, what do you hear? Then she poured tea into the cups. The Butterfly Woman listened, paused, and said that she heard the sound of the water pouring, a bird singing, and the voices of some of the women outside. The helper replied: You have now focused your hearing. These sounds tell you what is happening right now. This is how you connect yourself to the present moment by using your ears. Now hold the cup and use your sense of touch. **Feel** the cup.

The Butterfly Woman could feel its warmth. Then they used their sense of **taste** to savour the tea. The Butterfly Woman could taste and **smell** the tea. The helper asked: What happened to your memories when we concentrated on hearing sounds, touching the cup, and tasting the tea? The Butterfly Woman replied that they were absent.

The helper praised the Butterfly Woman's good work. She said that our senses are gateways that connect us to the present. When we focus our senses on what we are seeing, hearing, tasting and touching, what we feel becomes our reality. So, it is important to open our senses and focus our attention on things that remind us that we are safe that now and here we are safe. We call this a grounding exercise because it gives us ways to ground ourselves in the present moment.

The helper continued to teach the Butterfly Woman new tools. She said: People are not all the same, so we need different exercises to make sure they are helpful. And we need to give our senses good new experiences that will remind us that we are here, now, and safe.

The helper also explained that it is vital to practise these exercises every day when you are feeling calm. Because then you learn to use them even when you feel distressed. In this way, when traumatic memories are triggered, exercises can help reduce their impact and power.

However, when they met the next time, the Butterfly Woman said that she was overwhelmed by painful feelings. She tried to do the Naming exercise, and it helped, but she needed something more to contain her feelings. The helper replied: When our emotions are very strong, we are afraid of collapsing or being completely fragmented. Some exercises help to ground us and contain such emotions. It's almost like making the body into a strong container by activating our muscles. Are

you willing to try an exercise that might help you contain and bear your feelings? The Woman said was ready to do that.

The helper demonstrated the exercise to the Butterfly Woman.

The Helper asked the Butterfly Woman: Do you feel any difference? Yes, I do, the Woman replied. Do you feel more or less overwhelmed? Less, the Woman answered, but still not completely here. Then we continue, said the helper.

The helper paused and asked: Do you feel more present or less present? Now I feel present, the Butterfly Woman replied. The helper said: Now you have practised and experienced some recovery skills that you can use when feeling overwhelmed and not present. Your homework now is to practise these skills every day when you feel calm and safe. Then they will become automatic, and you can use them when you feel overwhelmed.

*The Butterfly Woman said that she **felt less overwhelmed** but still weak, and the helper could see that her chest and upper body had collapsed inwards. The Helper invited the Butterfly Woman to lengthen her spine. First, she demonstrated, then she asked if the Butterfly Woman was willing to try the exercise with her. She was and started very carefully to straighten her spine. Immediately **she felt a little lighter and stronger.***

The Butterfly Woman asked the helper for advice. She said: What will become of me? Am I going insane? Is my life destroyed forever? She described her state of mind. I feel so alone. It is dark inside. My heart and spirit are asleep. I have bad thoughts, nightmares, and I am afraid of everything. I get angry and yell at people. I do not recognise myself.

Others turn away from me. I am bad, dirty. Some days I do not want to live. I see no hope! Can I escape from this?

The helper realised that the Butterfly Woman might be ready to tell her full story. The helper had asked before whether she would like to talk, but the Butterfly Woman had never been willing. The helper readied herself to listen but needed to take certain precautions beforehand.

Then the Butterfly Woman began to think about what she should do with the terrible story she was living with. She had heard it was possible to report such things, but

wanted first to talk with a helper, who could listen to her without criticism and would not say she had done anything wrong. She wanted to go in more detail into what had happened to her, hoping this might get it a bit off her mind. She did not know exactly how to do it, but decided that, when a helper next asked her if she wanted to talk, she would say that she did. In the past, she had always refused, and the helper had always mildly and gently accepted her response.

Now she felt more determined to say what happened. How they threw her around, insulted her, touched her, were violent, even that she was penetrated, by one and then many, and that they had laughed at her. She knows it will not be easy to talk about this, but she understands that it may have to be done, especially if she wants to report what happened.

The helpers did ask, and she started to talk hesitantly, not coherently, sometimes in tears, sometimes shivering. The helper underlined that she was with her, would not tell anybody, would sit as close to her as she wanted, and that the Butterfly Woman could stop at any point. The helper let her talk, but confirmed she was listening, reminded her that she was safe, that she had been attacked and was not to blame, and that no one could take her dignity and pride from her.

One day the Butterfly Woman needed to talk about the rape. She wanted to report it and get help from a lawyer. She wanted the men who had raped her to be convicted for what they had done.

The helper told her that it could be **very triggering** to talk about the rape. She wished to **prepare** the Butterfly Woman, so that she could do what she wanted without dissociating or becoming overwhelmed. She said: It is most important to tell the story **in headlines**. Avoid details, because **details are a strong trigger and will awaken the trauma** memories again.

The helper taught the Butterfly Woman a stop signal. She said: **You are the one in charge**. You can say stop or no or I need a break if you find it too difficult to continue or to answer questions. Do what feels natural for you. You can also say No by lifting your hand. The helper lifted her arm with her palm forward to demonstrate. Do you think you can do that? Let's try it together.

The Butterfly Woman found her way to signal stop. She said Stop and lifted her arm and put her palm forward. She discussed with the helper what kind of **tools and**

resources she wanted to use when she talked to the lawyer. Now that she had learned to ground herself, she decided to hold a little stone in her hand that reminded her of the present. She **practised lengthening her spine and grounding her feet**. She also asked the helper to be there when she talked to the lawyer, **to help her to regulate herself** during the meeting.

The helper and the Butterfly Woman also talked for a long while about what she expected to happen after she had filed the report. She knew that often perpetrators were not punished but she was willing to try anyhow. Perhaps this could prevent others from experiencing what she had&.

The Helper promised that she would be there when the Butterfly Woman talked to the lawyer and made her report.

She also made plans with the Butterfly Woman to arrange closure afterwards.

The Butterfly Woman was getting better as the days passed. Nevertheless, she had problems with nightmares, and she asked for help. The helper said: **The function of dreaming is to process what happens in our lives when we are awake**. Nightmares are our most difficult dreams. When you have nightmares about your rape, you are reliving the trauma. Often one wakes up when the nightmare is at its worst. When this happens your body and mind cannot finish making sense of what happened, so the nightmare tends to repeat itself. When we dream, we cannot move. This paralysis can continue even after waking up from a nightmare and can be very scary and triggering. The darkness of night can itself be triggering. Sometimes the trauma happened at night. In the dark it's also difficult to orient oneself and ascertain whether the situation is dangerous or not.

Because of her dreams, the Butterfly Woman was afraid to go to bed. The helper told her that she could do things to improve her sleep. She said it was important to develop good routines. They talked about what could be done and the helper made a list of important things that the Butterfly Woman could do at home to help herself sleep and to cope with nightmares.

Slowly the Butterfly Woman regained her strength. She acquired confidence in the skills she had learned and was not so worried about being triggered. She managed to ground herself quite quickly when it happened.

*Still, **one area in her life overwhelmed her with sadness and despair.** She tried not to think about it because it gave her so much pain. One day the helper brought it up without her asking. The helper said that it was time to try to talk to her husband and family, to see if it might be possible to reconnect with them.*

When the Butterfly Woman heard the helper, she immediately saw an image of her husband with angry and frightened eyes, his mouth open, yelling that she should leave. She saw her crying children, and it tore her heart. She started to tremble and cry but managed to ground herself and come back to the present.

She and the helper continued to talk about a possible reunion. The helper calmed her by saying that they would proceed step by step. Some of the helpers visited the village to talk to her family and other villagers. The Butterfly Woman derived great support from another woman from her village, who had also been raped and rejected by her family. They supported each other and reminded each other to use the coping skills they had learned. They were encouraged to talk about good memories of the village, so the bad memories would lose some of their strong grip on their bodies and minds.

*When they visited the village, the helpers found out first whether resource people in the community could support a survivor. They were referred to the village chief and the priest. The helpers **explained trauma and trauma-reactions and said that a raped woman is not to blame** for what happened to her. The chief and the priest understood the women were suffering and that they were not to blame. They agreed to protect the raped women in their community and wanted to assist the helpers to talk to the women's families.*

When they talked to the Butterfly Woman's family, the helpers explained that she had been traumatised and had suffered and had recovered. They told the family that she had learned new skills, like sewing, that could help the family survive. The chief said that raped women were wounded in a way that could be compared with the wounds of soldiers in the war. He said that the community would support the Butterfly Woman and help her not to feel ashamed.

While the Butterfly Woman was staying at the Centre, the helpers had made several visits to her family and community. It had been difficult. The children had frequently asked for their mother, but her husband had not allowed the children to mention her name, let alone see her. After some time, however, he changed his mind and

said that he wanted to see his wife again. In this, he was supported by the rest of the family.

The Butterfly Woman too had reached a point where she was ready to meet her husband. And she had longed to see her children for many weeks.

At last, the time came for the Butterfly Woman to visit her family. She was **very nervous and had a hard time concentrating**. Together with the other woman from her village, she had worked hard to recall good memories from the village, so the bad ones were not so strong.

The helper warned her that the village and its surroundings would be very triggering. She said: Use everything you have learned about grounding. Once you are grounded, there is one more strategy that can be of great benefit. That is: **actively see how the present moment differs from when the trauma occurred**. You know that trauma-reminders trigger trauma-reactions. If the river starts to trigger a trauma-reaction, actively try to see how the river now is different from the river then, by examining it closely, and by telling yourself that it is now peaceful, the soldiers have gone, and so on. When you **actively orient yourself** and see that it is safe, this will help you to see what has changed in the village, and you will be able to separate past from present. You will give yourself a new experience that will soon become a **good new memory, strengthening** you and your connection with the present and **sending past memories back to the past**. This will also tell you that the danger is over. When you detect differences, you can say them out loud to yourself.

The Butterfly Woman felt prepared to go back to the village to meet her husband and children.

With a helper, she decided to go.