

▲ Empowered Learning

"...Women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with anxiety and depression, conditions that exacerbate stress..."

- **Prioritize Gut Health:** The gut microbiome plays a key role in immune function. Eating a balanced diet rich in fiber, probiotics, and anti-inflammatory foods can help regulate the immune system.
- **Seek Support:** Autoimmune diseases can be isolating. Support groups, therapy, and advocacy communities can help women feel heard and empowered.
- **Advocate for Research & Awareness:** Increased funding and gender-specific medical research are critical for early diagnosis and better treatments.

A CALL TO ACTION

Anna's story is just one of many. Too many women suffer in silence, dismissed or overlooked in the healthcare system. It's time to change that. By raising awareness, pushing for better research, and taking control of our own health, we can create a future where autoimmune diseases are

diagnosed faster, treated more effectively, and—perhaps one day—prevented entirely.

Because no woman should have to wait **seven years** to be taken seriously.



Prof. Dr. Anabel Ternès von Hattburg

is a globally recognised futurist, sustainability leader, and author of over 50 books. She is the CEO of Sustain Plus and Managing Director of the SRH Institute for Sustainability Management & Innovation in Berlin. With a background in leadership at companies like Samsonite and Triumph, she now serves on several international boards promoting human rights and environmental responsibility.

She is also the host of the live radio show "**We Empower**" on **UK Health Radio**, where she explores innovation, empowerment, and sustainable futures.





The Silent Struggle:

Women, Autoimmune Diseases, and the Hidden Burden of Stress

by Prof. Dr. Anabel Ternès von Hattburg

A STORY OF MISUNDERSTANDING AND RESILIENCE

For years, Anna felt exhausted. Not the kind of tiredness that disappears after a good night's sleep, but a deep, unshakable fatigue. Her body ached, her vision blurred, and sometimes, she struggled to even hold a pen. Doctor after doctor told her it was stress, anxiety, or simply "in her head." One even suggested she take a vacation. Yet, Anna knew something was wrong. It took **seven years** before she finally received a diagnosis: Multiple sclerosis (MS). By then, irreversible damage had already begun. Anna's story is not unique. Millions of women around the world face similar battles—often dismissed, misdiagnosed, or told their symptoms are exaggerated. Autoimmune diseases, in which the body's immune system mistakenly attacks its own cells, disproportionately affect women. Yet, they remain one of the most misunderstood areas of medicine.

THE NUMBERS:

WHY WOMEN ARE MORE AFFECTED

Autoimmune diseases affect **nearly 80% of women** (NIH, 2023). Conditions like lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and Hashimoto's thyroiditis are far more common in women than in men. But why?

- Hormonal Influence:** Estrogen plays a complex role in the immune system, often making women's immune responses stronger—but also more prone to overreacting and attacking healthy tissues.
- Genetic Factors:** The X chromosome carries many immune-related genes. Since women have two X chromosomes, they are more susceptible to genetic mutations that can trigger autoimmune disorders.
- Environmental Triggers:** Exposure to toxins, infections, and lifestyle factors like diet and stress can exacerbate immune dysfunction. Studies show that women's immune systems react more aggressively to infections, potentially leading to chronic inflammation.

MISDIAGNOSIS AND MEDICAL BIAS: THE HIDDEN CRISIS

Research indicates that **more than 50% of women with autoimmune diseases are either misdiagnosed or have to wait years for an accurate diagnosis** (Autoimmune Association, 2022). Why?

- **Symptoms Are Often Atypical:** Many autoimmune conditions manifest in non-specific ways—fatigue, joint pain, brain fog—making them easy to dismiss.
- **Gender Bias in Medicine:** Women's symptoms are more likely to be attributed to stress or psychological factors rather than physical illness.
- **Lack of Research:** Despite their prevalence, autoimmune diseases receive far less funding than other chronic conditions like cancer or heart disease. In fact, for every \$1 spent on cancer research, **only 5 cents** go toward autoimmune diseases (American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association).

"... Exposure to toxins, infections, and lifestyle factors like diet and stress can exacerbate immune dysfunction..."

STRESS: THE UNSEEN TRIGGER

Stress doesn't just affect mental well-being—it is one of the leading triggers of autoimmune diseases. Chronic stress increases inflammation, disrupts hormone balance, and weakens the immune system's ability to regulate itself. Why is stress more prevalent among women?

- Women are **twice as likely** as men to be diagnosed with anxiety and depression (WHO, 2023), conditions that exacerbate stress.
- They often bear a **disproportionate mental load**, balancing careers, family responsibilities, and societal expectations.
- Workplace inequality, caregiving roles, and cultural pressures contribute to **higher chronic stress levels**.

PROTECTING YOURSELF:

PREVENTION AND EARLY ACTION

While we can't eliminate stress completely, we can take steps to minimize its impact and reduce autoimmune risks:

- **Listen to Your Body:** If something feels wrong, don't ignore it. Keep a symptom journal and push for medical answers.
- **Manage Stress Effectively:** Practices like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness can lower cortisol levels and reduce inflammation.