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LIVE WELL: Sleep better, lose weight with a digital sabbatical

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Electronic exhaustion

Posted: Wednesday, June 15, 2011 2:53 pm | Updated: 6:49 am, Mon Jun 20, 2011.

LAURIE BUDGAR For the Sentinel |
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Earlier this month, researchers at the World Health Organization confirmed what many people have long suspected: that cellphones are a potential cause of brain cancer. If that's not enough of a reason to convince you to turn off the mobile once in a while, here's another: Taking digital sabbaticals helps us dial down our stress, keeping our hormone levels — and, ultimately, our health — in balance.

"Because we're always so plugged in, always on the computer late into the night, on our iPhones, our iPads, our BlackBerrys, we never relax," says Marcelle Pick, an OB/GYN nurse practitioner, and author of "Are You Tired and Wired?" (Hay House, 2011). "When you don't have time to quiet the nervous system down, you're always in sympathetic drive, and not parasympathetic," Pick says. A physiology refresher: The parasympathetic system tells your body to chill out when all is well. But when you're "on," the sympathetic nervous system accelerates your heart rate, elevates blood pressure and tells your adrenal glands to produce cortisol, the fight-or-flight stress hormone.

"High levels of cortisol cause huge hormonal dysregulation," Pick says. It throws production of estrogen, progesterone and testosterone out of whack, but also ramps up insulin (yep, that's a hormone, too.) Cortisol releases sugar into the bloodstream to provide fuel during times of stress. Then, the brain tells the pancreas to release insulin to mop up the excess sugar. When there's too much sugar to process, the body becomes resistant to insulin, and converts the excess to belly fat. So, stress — including the type caused by constant communication — helps make you fat.

If you have ongoing stress, the body can't produce enough cortisol to keep up with demand, and you can develop such symptoms as insomnia, headaches, fatigue, anxiety, inability to concentrate and depression. Women may have more pronounced symptoms of PMS or perimenopause.

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One way to reduce cortisol demand, Pick says, is to unplug. "Take an electronic sabbath two times a week," she suggests. Ideally, that means no cellphone, no email, no Facebook, no Twitter, no Angry Birds, no MP3 player, no World of Warcraft and no TV — no, not even Netflix. But if the mere idea strikes panic in your heart, start small. "Shut them off at 5 p.m. Find ways you can do without them. Just be present with yourself and your

family, instead of being so reliant on electronics," she says. It's the perfect opportunity to learn that new stitch or dig in the garden with your spouse — whatever is relaxing to you. "People are spent. They're burned out, doing so many different things and having a hard time keeping up. They never have that down time, and the adrenals really need that."

But it's not just the adrenals, Pick says. Research shows stress affects the heart, the digestive system and the immune system, for starters. Taking a digital holiday "is not about feeling better [just in the short term]. It's about doing something for yourself that has overall health benefits," she says. We're so focused on kids, careers, families. "We get sick later and wonder what happened. A lot happened — along the way."

Laurie Budgar is a Longmont-based journalist. She was formerly editor in chief of the Colorado Springs Business Journal, managing editor of the Natural Foods Merchandiser, and Denver editor of Disney's Ideal Bite site. Her articles have appeared in Parenting, Edible Front Range and Psychology Today. Send wellness and fitness questions and comments to wellness@aurorasentinel.com.

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