**Sleep Architecture**

So, I was catching up on the television show, ‘This is Us’ over the weekend. If you haven’t discovered this show; start from season 1, which you can find in multiple streaming locations and enjoy.

I was watching the episode where ‘Deja,’ the foster child, gets reunited with the Pearson family and discovers they still have a bed for her to sleep. In the touching scene she tells Randall (foster dad); “Isn’t it weird, that everyone goes to sleep at night; everyone on the whole planet, all these people, people I’ll never know. Some are poor, some are rich, some sleep in beds, some sleep on the floor, at the end of the day everyone sleeps.” Then she tells him how tired she is.

Deja’s thoughts on sleep caught my attention as I was settling into yet another day light savings time change. Granted this one seems easier than the time change in the fall, but it still screws up all kinds of things temporarily and I’m thinking, “not true, Deja, not everyone is sleeping on the whole planet, all night long!”

What’s that all about? Waking up for absolutely no reason at all in the middle of the night without hope of falling back to sleep anytime soon. Restlessness, tossing, turning, sweating, freezing, hearing every sound on the block and then sleeping through your alarm. I swear I had more stress in my life when the kids were all home and I was working four jobs, so why now are these sleep issues so disruptive?

According to the National Sleep Foundation (Sleep.org); “along with the physical changes that occur as we get older, changes to our sleep patterns are a part of the normal aging process. As people age they tend to have a harder time falling asleep and more trouble staying asleep than when they were younger.”

When we were babies we needed anywhere between 12-17 hours of sleep a day, then it dropped to around 10 hours a day during our childhood and teen years only to land between 7-8 hours for the rest of our adult life.

According to the website, sleep needs don’t decline with age and they need to remain constant throughout adulthood. What changes is the pattern of our sleep. The article calls it our “sleep architecture.”

Sleep occurs in multiple stages including dreamless periods of light and deep sleep and occasional periods of active dreaming (REM sleep). This sleep cycle occurs multiple times throughout our nights. The older we get the more time we spend in the lighter stages of our sleep architecture. So even if we are still sleeping the same number of hours, we are not sleeping as soundly.

The research indicates that “the sleep habits of older Americans show an increase in the time it takes to fall asleep (sleep latency), an overall decline in REM sleep, and an increase in sleep fragmentation (waking up during the night) with age. The prevalence of sleep disorders also tends to increase with age. Much of the sleep disturbance among the elderly can be attributed to physical and psychiatric illnesses and the medications used to treat them.”

Other factors also affect sleep are the circadian rhythms that coordinate the timing of bodily functions; including sleep. For example, “older people tend to become sleepier in the early evening and wake earlier in the morning compared to younger adults. This is called sleep phase syndrome. The sleep rhythm is shifted forward so that 7-8 hours of sleep are still obtained but the individuals will wake up extremely early because they went to sleep early. The reason for these changes in sleep and circadian rhythms as we age is not clearly understood. Researchers believe it has to do with light exposure.”

Other disorders that affect sleep: insomnia, snoring, untreated sleep apnea, restless leg syndrome, gastroesophageal reflux disease, diabetes, renal failure, respiratory disease and immune disorders are also all associated with sleep deprivation.

Untreated sleep disorders and problems can put a person at risk for cardiovascular disease, headaches, memory loss, depression and accidents (potentially life threatening).

Research also supports that participating in a regular, consistent exercise programs positively affects sleep and many of the sleep disorders listed above.

Sweet dreams!