Kitchens … bedrooms … basements … backyards. These are some of the spaces that health and physical educators have been working in since schools across the country closed in March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

For most teachers, the switch to distance learning happened suddenly, with just a few days’ — or hours’ — notice. And in the weeks that followed, there was a scramble to gather and adapt resources for teaching HPE at home.

Now, many are adapting to their “new normal.” The eight teachers featured in this article all agreed to keep a daily diary during the third week of April, sharing their challenges, routines and teaching tools. As we peek into their homes and lives, it becomes clear that there are many different ways to navigate distance learning.

School district obstacles and requirements, department goals, and even family responsibilities determine when and how teachers are interacting with their classes and teaching lessons from home.

But the one commonality is this: Teachers everywhere miss their students.

“1 let them know about the activities of the day, the weather, birthday shout-outs, and something I’ve been calling ‘Feats & Fails,’” says Metcalf. “‘Feats’ are positive happenings and ‘Fails’ are unexpected challenges that have happened in the past day.”

After returning home, Metcalf edits and posts video messages, as well as daily activities for each of his classes which include a warm-up, choice of two or three physical activities, and a mindfulness/cooldown activity. His greatest challenge has been posting to different technology platforms — some classes use Seesaw, while others use Google Classroom or PowerSchool — in a way that minimizes screen time and stress.

Allisha Blanchette, health educator at DC Everest Senior High in Schofield, Wisconsin, and 2020 Midwest District Health Education Teacher of the Year, is also up by 6 a.m. to run on the treadmill before her kids get up. Then at 7 a.m. her husband gets them breakfast so she can work by herself.

“Normally I am in my car heading to work by 6:30 a.m.,” says Allison Relyea, PE teacher at Guilderland High School in New York and 2020 Eastern District High School Physical Education Teacher of the Year. With her new routine, she is able to enjoy a morning coffee and the news with her husband while her 9-year-old daughter sleeps in.

“On a regular school day, I would be setting up the gym by 7 a.m.”
Kyle Bragg, physical education teacher at Anasazi Elementary School in Scottsdale, Arizona, begins his work-from-home day at 8 a.m., responding to emails and helping families with technical issues. “The schedule is quite different now,” he says. “I have more meetings now with staff, usually via Zoom.”

From 10 to 11 a.m., Bragg records his lessons, typically using Screencastify. He then moves on to grading assignments, responding with individual feedback to each student.

In the Bronx, Jim Hambel, elementary physical education teacher at P.S. 457, also begins at 8 a.m., posting messages on Google Classroom. He works straight through until 2 p.m. — grading, checking assignments, creating video lessons, and going “live” on Google Meet.

To Hambel, teaching virtually is less clear and consistent. “I post assignments and messages and I’m unsure if they are reaching the students,” he says. “I go live on Google Meet with limited success. However, students are watching the videos I make and are doing assignments.”

Hambel must create “apartment-friendly” activities because most of his students do not have the option to go outside now. The technology disparity in New York City is another concern. “As teachers we’re trying to adjust,” he says. “My heart goes out to my students.”

Ruby Dajani, physical education teacher at Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School in Oak Park, Illinois, has found that more students are likely to participate in the morning, so that is when she goes online. But not all students log in. “Another challenge would be how grading and documenting participation is always changing so we can’t get too comfortable with one thing,” she says. “We really have to be flexible during these times.”

With six classes for grades 6-8, Dajani has found it best to divide her grading time over three days by grade level, with Fridays set aside for planning. “I set up the following week’s outline and begin creating videos and assignments,” she says.

With a kindergartener (Jacob) and third grader (Brendan) at home, Allisha Blanchette must balance her own work with her children’s school requirements. “While Jacob is working, I answer emails and work on assessing previous assignments,” she says. “I have found that it’s too difficult to think and build content and progression for my classes while he needs me.”

A little later in the morning when both boys are occupied, Blanchette walks on her treadmill while building content in Canvas or giving feedback on assignments in Google Classroom.

Jason Leach, physical education teacher at Independence Elementary School in Keller, Texas, is an empty nester so his house is fairly quiet. He has Zoom meetings three mornings per week: K-1 on Fridays, grades 2-4 on Tuesdays, and the Game Changers Club (for fourth graders) on Wednesdays.

During the Zoom meetings, students participate in a variety of activities: scavenger hunts, fitness game boards, “Would You Rather Fitness,” and more. “Members of my Game Changers Club sometimes lead activities,” says Leach.

Leach also does live games on his school’s Facebook page. “I go live and tell the students what they need and how to play,” he says. “I give them 30 minutes and they can play along with me.”

Oak Park, Illinois, physical educator Ruby Dajani takes a break from the computer and stays active with a boxing workout at home. She also looks forward to walking her dogs twice a day.
11:30 a.m.  
LUNCH BREAK  
After spending the morning grading, responding to emails, working on Google Classroom, or having video conferences on Google Meet, Allison Relyea is ready for a quick break to “refuel mentally” and grab a bite to eat. “If the weather is nice, I go outside and sit at my table or walk around the property,” she says.  
After checking in on her daughter Cadence and helping her with anything she needs, Relyea is ready to get back to work.

Noon is lunchtime for Allisha Blanchette and her family. “I love that I don’t have to pack a lunch but feeding four for lunch is a big change during the week … it can be time consuming to prepare and clean up,” she says.

1 p.m.  
BACK TO THE COMPUTER  
After lunch, it’s quiet time at Adam Metcalf’s house. While his kids nap, he holds office hours, which might include Zoom meetings, responding to emails, planning, prep, and reviewing feedback submissions from his students.

Early afternoon is also prep time for Kyle Bragg. After answering more emails, he settles in and plans his next lesson. “I look at the standards and how I will achieve them,” he says. “Because I’ve had to adjust my yearly plan, I use resources like #HPEatHome on Twitter to help with ideas.”

After 1:30 meetings (either faculty or union), Megaera Regan pops into other teachers’ live Google Meet lessons at 2:30. “All my own lessons are prerecorded or created in other ways,” says Regan. “But I ‘visit’ other classrooms to provide movement breaks.”

Once Allisha Blanchette’s sons have settled in with more daily school activities at 1:30, her office hours begin, which for her means having to respond immediately to emails until 3 p.m. She also works on projects that don’t require as much concentration.

“I am back to interval work so I can help the boys and not get too frustrated. For me it’s harder to see scope and sequence through scrolling on a computer,” she says. “I like to write with a pencil and paper to sketch out my thoughts and timelines.”

3 p.m.  
AFTERNOON BREAK  
Many teachers miss the physical activity that was naturally part of their day while teaching in school — and by 3 p.m. they are ready for some exercise.

For Kyle Bragg that might be going for a jog or hitting some golf balls. For Jason Leach it might be going on a 15- to 20-mile bike ride or working out with weights. And for Adam Metcalf it’s working out in the basement, followed by some outdoor play with his family.

In New York City, Jim Hambel is finally ready to take a break, having...
worked through the lunch hour. He’ll have something to eat and then spend some time with his family, occasionally checking work emails.

In Illinois, Ruby Dajani is also ready for break. She’ll have a snack and relax outside before logging back online at 4 p.m. to respond to emails, read articles, and do some grading.

Near Albany, Allison Relyea evaluates how much work she has left for the day. “If I need to work longer, I will continue up until about 5 p.m.,” she says. “Sometimes I find it amazing how fast the time goes from this point on until dinner. I get wrapped up in what I am doing and lose track of the time.”

As 5 p.m. rolls around, it’s time to prepare dinner or support a local business by getting takeout. With no need to drive to sporting events or other activities after dinner, most teachers enjoy a quiet evening either playing games with their children, video chatting with family and friends, or watching movies to relax after a long day at work.

There are exceptions, however. “My schedule is vastly different now,” says Megaera Regan. Before distance learning, Regan would begin winding down from her day around 5:30. Now, she’s still working in the early evening, planning lessons with co-workers before creating her video lessons and scheduling them in Google Classroom.

Many teachers have an evening routine that includes stretching, yoga or meditation, and some are finding it important to set boundaries by staying off their computer at certain times.

When teaching from home makes it harder to maintain a healthy work-life balance, self-care is critical. “I need to get my mind off of schoolwork and take care of myself, which in turn will help my students,” says Kyle Bragg. “What I’ve learned is that I’m doing enough.”

What Does the Future Hold?

We asked the teachers featured in this cover story to share any concerns they had about the future. Here are some of their responses.

► Kyle Bragg
I’m a bit concerned that the “powers that be” might start to think that physical education can be done with videos on a computer, since it is “working” now. It can’t. It’s not working. We are doing our best, but quality physical education requires building the teacher/student relationship, standards-based instruction, being a role model for students, and more! None of this can be fully done online alone.

► Ruby Dajani
I’m concerned about how our students will do next year, especially those who were already struggling. What will the upcoming school year look like for us and our students?

► Megaera Regan
I am worried about going back to school — and about not going back to school. I am fearful about the loss of real, face-to-face human contact with our students and what that loss will do to them (and us). I miss my students and I miss my colleagues.

► Allison Relyea
My main concern is what the recovery of our country will look like on a larger scale. The impacts of this pandemic are far reaching on many levels — medically, financially, physically, and emotionally.

During this challenging time, SHAPE America has never been prouder to serve our nation’s health and physical education professionals. The work you are doing is vital, and we are committed to supporting you and fighting for you.