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# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

## Be Like Jerry Seinfeld: Create a Chain

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

“My next guest is a young comedian who’s making his first appearance on *The Tonight Show*,” said Johnny Carson in 1981.<sup>1</sup> Out bounced a gawky guy named Jerry Seinfeld. He was wearing a beige sports coat and dark slacks, along with light gray shoes that stuck out since they didn’t match his pants.

“Hey. Wow. Good evening,” Jerry gushed, rubbing his palms together. “This is so exciting. I’m so excited to be here.” Then he started moving his hands and arms as if he were ground crew at a busy airport, the only thing missing the orange batons to direct a plane to its gate.

An observer would later note, “He looked like he could have just come from his bar mitzvah.”<sup>2</sup>

Jerry went on to co-create and star in what became the most popular and successful sitcom on American television, despite having been fired from his first TV gig. By the ninth and final season of *Seinfeld*, his earnings were estimated to be \$1 million per episode. Syndication rights continue to increase Jerry’s haul. In 2014, experts estimated his income from local affiliates replaying *Seinfeld* as \$400 million.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, *Forbes* identified him as the highest-paid comedian in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Jerry’s sweet spot is portraying everyday human interactions as humorous. He’s continued that approach in an Emmy-nominated web series called *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*. Installments revolve around Jerry giving a well-known comic a ride in a vintage car and then chatting over coffee. The banter between Jerry and his guest is what makes every 10–20 minute segment soar.

On the surface, the conversation seems unscripted. However, when one pays closer attention, one begins to wonder. “This chick has some horsepower; she belongs in a Ferrari,” said Jerry, as he unveiled the car he was going to use to pick up comedian Amy Schumer.<sup>5</sup> It was luminescent yellow. “You’ve got horsepower, honey,” he repeated when he and Amy greeted each other. And when the car allegedly broke down during the segment, Jerry commiserated, “Oh, Ferrari, so sorry.”

By May 2015, the series had been streamed nearly 100 million times. Netflix contacted Jerry in 2018 about offering *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* on their platform. “I am really quite charged to be moving there,” he said.<sup>6</sup> Pundits believe the entertainment service paid him upward of \$100 million to make the change.<sup>7</sup>

### TO WHAT DOES JERRY SEINFELD ATTRIBUTE HIS SUCCESS?

Software developer Brad Isaac was an aspiring comedian when Jerry was still touring at the start of his *Seinfeld* fame. One night they happened to be at the same club. “Do you have any tips for a new comic?” Brad asked Jerry.<sup>8</sup>

“The way to be a better comic is to create better jokes,” Jerry replied. “And the way to create better jokes is to write every day.” Then Jerry shared his secret for sticking to such a schedule:

- He hung a large wall calendar in a conspicuous spot so he’d see it all the time.
- Next to it, he placed a colorful marker.
- Each day, after he completed his writing task, he put a large X in the box on the calendar associated with that day of the week.

“After a few days you’ll have a chain,” Jerry explained. “Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You’ll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your job is not to break the chain.”

He paused.

“Don’t break the chain,” he repeated.

Jerry’s friends describe how successful this practice has been for him. “He’d sit down and write for an hour every day, no matter what,” recalled comedian George Wallace, a long-time friend. “We’d do a lot of our writing onstage, but he’d go onstage and have it all figured out, written down on his yellow pad.”<sup>9</sup>

### HOW HAVE I IMPLEMENTED JERRY SEINFELD’S APPROACH?

“Doreen, Doreen,” my friend Gaia said on the phone. She had just read a blog post about Jerry’s calendar strategy.

“Interesting,” I said. “What are you keeping track of?”

“I’m doing the plank every day,” Gaia replied.

I shook my head. Doing the plank wasn’t something I was willing to devote mental energy to. But there were plenty of things I longed to address in my life.



Everything I know about completing big projects suggests that breaking them down into small steps produces the best results.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, that's how I finished a 493-page doctoral dissertation.

"What do you think about doing a tiny task every day?" I asked Gaia. "Ideally one we've been procrastinating about doing—and each of us taking a picture of what we've done? And then sending the photo to the other? Both so we'll be accountable and so our brains will register our success."

Gaia was interested, and, because she's an actuary, she labeled it an initiative. She and I committed to doing one tiny task each day. What task doesn't matter; what matters is that we do *something*. Today, I realize that each task represents a pathway

toward accomplishing the goal of feeling more in charge of our lives.

Gaia and I are approaching the 19-month anniversary of our Tiny Task Initiative. Every day since June 25, 2017, I've done one task I'd been dragging my feet about completing. Who knew there could be so many things?

Do I feel stronger? Absolutely. "YES, I CAN!" I tell myself. "YES, I WILL!" I add. "YES, I AM!" I exult.

#### AN ADDITIONAL BENEFIT

A positive unintended consequence is that I've become closer to Gaia. After all, we're in touch most days, texting our pictures to one another and offering congratulations for a job well done.

I'm quick to admit that I would never have stayed the course during the past year had I not been accountable to *someone*.

Who, I ask you, would have wanted to return a book a full year after promising to get it back within a week? Or clean out my bulging desk drawer? (The one that made me shudder when I opened it.) And empty reams of paper from dated file folders to make room for new material in my file cabinet? Plus contact people whose emails I had never replied to? The list goes on and on.

Additionally, last year I submitted my income tax returns March 1, while the prior year I'd been madly trying to figure out how to use TurboTax on April 14.

### YOUR TURN

What goal have you been longing to achieve? What are tasks so small you can complete them every day? To whom will you be accountable? Please let me know, so I can cheer for you. ■



Dr. Doreen Stern is a writer, motivational speaker and success coach in Hartford, Connecticut. Her dream is to become a best-selling author. She's currently writing a book about creating the courage to tell the truth. She can be reached at [Docktor@DoreenStern.com](mailto:Docktor@DoreenStern.com).

### ENDNOTES

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