low-self-esteem participants. In other words, self-esteem did not influence how happy or sad participants felt when they succeeded or failed. The situation is different when we look at how participants felt about themselves after learning they had succeeded or failed. On the right-hand panel of Figure 5.16 we do find an effect of self-esteem. Low-self-esteem participants felt proud of themselves when they succeeded, but humiliated and ashamed of themselves when they failed. This was much less true of the high-self-esteem participants. How they felt about themselves didn’t depend so much on whether they had just succeeded or failed.

The findings from this investigation make several points. It seems that low-self-esteem people take failure very personally. It humiliates them and makes them feel ashamed of themselves. High-self-esteem people do not show this effect; failure makes them sad, but it does not make them feel bad about themselves.

There’s another way to look at the findings. Low-self-esteem people’s feelings toward themselves are conditional. If they succeed, they feel good about themselves; if they fail, they feel bad about themselves (see also Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). This is a precarious approach to emotional life. Low-self-esteem people feel that they’re only as good as their latest outcome. The comedian David Letterman aptly describes the experience:

Every night you’re trying to prove your self-worth. It’s like meeting your girlfriend’s family for the first time. You want to be the absolute best, wittiest, smartest, most charming, best-smelling version of yourself you can possibly be. That’s how I feel every night I go down there to the Ed Sullivan theater. If I can make these 500 people enjoy the experience, and have a higher regard for me when I’m finished, it makes me feel like