

BATTLES INSIGHTS

# The Fight That Keeps Coming Back

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*A communication method for couples ready to  
stop restarting the same argument*

**AMBER FRAZIER-FINKELSTEIN**

CEO & Founder, Battles Insights

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*For Makeoutclub.*

*If you know, you know.*

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# Intro

Couples who lose a parent, lose a business, face a serious diagnosis in the family, and run out of money inside the same stretch of time are not statistically supposed to make it.

The Holmes-Rahe Stress Scale, which assigns point values to major life events based on how much adjustment they require, places that combination well into severe-risk territory. Death of a close family member is sixty-three points. Major change in a family member's health adds more. Major change in finances adds more. A major business setback adds more. Past three hundred points in a single year, the scale places a person in a severe-risk range for stress-related illness, and the research on couples is similarly grim. A Kansas State study of more than 4,500 couples found that arguments about money were the strongest predictor of divorce, ahead of arguments about sex, children, or in-laws. Longitudinal research has linked sustained marital conflict to depression symptoms and to functional impairment in both partners over time.

That is where this story starts.

None of which is what I saw coming.

My name is Amber. This is a short recount of what my husband Jake and I went through. Everything in that first paragraph happened within six months, and a few things on top of it. My father died. He was the single father who raised me and my little

sister, and for most of my life he was the person I called when I needed to know what was going on with people, how the hell I was going to get through something, what was survivable, and what I was supposed to do next. He died, and the number I had called my whole life stopped working.

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*He died, and the number I had called my whole life stopped working.*

Jake's company closed. Method Savvy was a data-driven marketing agency he had founded and run for more than a decade in Durham, North Carolina. By the time it ended, he had taken it past the ten-year mark, rebranded and expanded the firm, served on the board of the Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO), and built a roster of clients that included Lenovo, Toyota, US Cellular, Disney. It was the structure his identity had grown around for thirteen years. COVID hit the business in ways that did not show up immediately, but the long-term damage was the kind you cannot recover from in an industry that depends on companies feeling confident enough to spend on marketing. The agency did not close in a single phone call. It closed the way these things actually close, over months of trying to stop the bleeding before there was nothing left to keep open.

Then my mother-in-law was diagnosed with uterine cancer.

Then our air conditioner died.

Then Jake had to pivot what was left of his work into something new.

Then I started Battles Insights, which began as a way to make sense of what I was watching us go through and became, over time, what you are reading right now.

The money was real. Not the abstract version. The kind where a normal sentence arrives with a number behind it and a question about dinner is also a question about what we can spend.

We were still parents. We were still married. We still had a family that had to keep moving while neither of us had a clean place to put any of it.

Jake and I are the kind of people who, when we are told something cannot be done, our first instinct is to say watch me. We had survived things before. We had been through stretches that, looking back, probably should have ended us, and they did not. That was the steady underneath us. I knew it about him. He knew it about me.

There was a moment somewhere in the middle of all of this where Jake was sitting at the kitchen counter and the wheels had come off and he needed to know that I was still in it. I told him the odds were stacked against us in a way that, statistically, said we should have been divorced three times over by then. The point was not that we were doomed. The point was that the odds were not the thing actually running our marriage. We were. And we were still here.

*I told him the odds were stacked against us in a way that, statistically, said we should have been divorced three times over by then.*

That was true. It was also not enough.

By October 2023, I had a different running response to the news of the day, which was to look up at the sky and say give me a fucking break, man. Out loud. To no one in particular. I am a pragmatist who leans on cynicism for humor, and what I had available to me by that point was mostly the cynicism. I had a line I kept thinking about, from Janet on *The Good Place*, who is trying to explain the universe to Eleanor.

*If there were an answer I could give you to how the universe works, it wouldn't be special. It would just be machinery fulfilling its cosmic design. It would just be a big, dumb food processor. But since nothing seems to make sense, when you find something or someone that does, it's euphoria. In all this randomness and this pandemonium, you found each other, and you had a life together. Isn't that remarkable?*

That is the only frame I had for any of it that was not bitter. I had found someone who made sense to me in a way that nothing else did, and we had a life together, and the universe was a big dumb food processor that had spent the year mulching everything around us. Both things were true. The remarkable part and the food processor part were running at the same time.

What was happening between us was not a question of whether we would stay together. The question was whether we could keep having the same fight on top of everything else without it eating us from the inside. The pressure was real. The fight was real. And the fight had a route that neither of us could see while we were on it, which meant we kept walking it over and over without choosing to.

What I did not know then was that the topic was not the actual problem.

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## The fight has a shortcut

The fight rarely felt new.

The topic moved. Money. Time. The kids. Whether one of us had called someone back, whether the other had assumed we had. But underneath whatever we were ostensibly arguing about, something familiar would start happening.

One of us would say a sentence that belonged to the current moment, and within two or three turns the conversation was somewhere older. I would hear something Jake had not said. He would defend himself against something I had not accused him of. We would both end up arguing with a version of the other person that was not in the kitchen with us.

That is the shortcut.

It only needs one familiar opening — a tone, a question, the specific pause before an answer — and the rest of the route is already built. It knows who gets sharp and who gets sharper. It knows which sentence will end the conversation for the night and leave the actual issue intact for the next time.

The day I started understanding this was not a fight. It was a conversation that I should have recognized as one and did not.

Jake was telling me, sincerely, how lost he felt. Not in the abstract. About what was happening to him, to the work he had spent thirteen years building, to who he was supposed to be on the

other side of it. He was being honest in the way that he is rarely honest, which is to say without performing the answer alongside the question.

What I said was, Why are you thinking that way? You're doing great. Stop thinking that way.

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*Why are you thinking that way? You're doing great. Stop thinking that way.*

I did not hear him. I did not hear him at all. I responded to a sentence I had already written in my head about how the conversation was supposed to go, which was that he was strong and we were strong and we would be fine, and his job in that conversation was to confirm the script. He was not running my script. He was telling me what was actually happening to him, and I shut it down because the actual version was harder than the version I had prepared for.

I did not realize what I had done in the moment. I realized later. The realization was not that I had been unkind. The realization was that what I had said was an attack disguised as perspective. I had reframed his pain as a thinking problem, which made it his responsibility to fix, which meant I did not have to sit inside it with him.

The apology came later, after I had sat with it long enough to understand what the apology was actually for. The other thing that came later was the recognition that the way we were talking

to each other was not going to get us through what we were inside of. Not because we did not love each other. Because we had not yet learned to hear each other when one of us was telling the truth about something hard. I needed to figure out where to start a different kind of conversation, and I did not know yet what that conversation was.

A fight can end without resolving. People have lives to run. Dinner has to happen. The kids need shoes. Someone has to be normal in public the next morning. So one of us would land a final point, or get practical, or say we would come back to it, and the day would keep going. The shortcut stayed open.

I thought the topic was the thing we had to solve. The topics were real and they each needed real attention. But solving the topic in front of us did not change what happened the next time pressure came into the room. The next argument took the same route the previous one had. The topic changed. The turn happened in the same place.

A nicer tone does not close that route. A more thoughtful apology might help for the night.

What closes the route is being able to see it while you are standing on it. Catching the moment a sentence stops being current. Hearing yourself answer a question that was not actually asked. Noticing that you have started defending something the other person did not bring up. Or, as I had to learn the hard way, noticing that you have started managing a conversation instead of being inside it.

That requires knowing what you do when the room changes, and what your partner does. As moves, not as personalities.

## Where it gets in

The shortcut enters through ordinary things. A calendar. A purchase. A text that did not get returned. A tone in the answer to a logistical question.

The thing in front of you is real. We were not inventing the pressure. But the topic was usually the door, not the room.

Three places it kept getting in for us.

**TIME.** Time is never only the clock. It is who gets to finish a thought and who has to put theirs down. It is who leaves the house with a calendar that counts as official and who stays behind running the part of the life that does not show up in a meeting. When Jake asked me what time something was, I sometimes heard the question. Other times I heard every previous version of being the one who had to know.

**ROLES.** Nobody assigned the role of the person who knew where the pediatrician's number was, or who tracked the insurance renewal, or who noticed we were almost out of coffee filters. I did those things once because they needed doing, then again because I knew where the information was, and then it was mine. The role had no name and no end date. The fight about it always sounded like a fight about something else. *Did you call them back. I thought you had it. I didn't know that was a thing.*

That last one is the hardest. It can be completely true. It can also be evidence of a structure one person has been inside for years that the other person never had to see.

**MONEY.** Money sits on top of every other unsettled question between two people. Who gets to spend without explaining. Who gets asked about a purchase. Whose risk tolerance is treated as the one that counts. After Method Savvy closed, every money conversation went somewhere it had not gone before, because the structure underneath who-decided-what had shifted and we had not redrawn it.

These three bled into each other. A fight that started as a calendar question would turn into a fight about roles in twelve minutes. A roles conversation would become a money conversation by the end of the night. The shortcut moved between them the way water moves through a house with a slow leak. You see it where it surfaces. The path it took to get there is somewhere else entirely.

## Two of the same

This is the part of our story I could not see while we were inside it.

When the conversation starts changing — when the room gets less stable, when pressure enters, when one of us hears something that is not exactly what the other one said — both people in a couple reach for something. The reach is what we call a Conversation Core. There are eight of them. They are not personality types. They are the move you make when the conversation starts to slip. I will describe them in the next section.

The piece I have to introduce first is what happens when both people in a couple have the same one.

Jake and I are both Challengers.

A Challenger says the thing other people are managing around. Where most people soften to preserve the room, a Challenger holds to what they see as true. Where most people work around an issue, a Challenger says the issue out loud. The function is to introduce the friction a conversation needs in order to actually get somewhere. The risk is that the friction can become the conversation itself.

A Challenger is useful in a marriage where the other person trusts that the friction is in service of something. When that trust is there, a Challenger creates growth. When it is not, the same directness reads as attack.

Two Challengers in a marriage is rare. It is also a specific structural condition, and it took us years to understand what it meant. Most couples have a natural counterweight built into the wiring — one person who creates friction, one who absorbs it. We do not have that. We have two people wired to push back, two people wired to hold a position long enough to test whether it survives, neither of us wired to be the one who softens.

The same thing that made us survivable in everything else became the problem between us.

We had gotten through every previous hard thing by holding. By refusing to let the situation define us. By looking at what was supposed to be true and saying back, no, this is what is actually true, and we are going to do this our way. That wiring saved us in every external fight we had ever been in. It was what we knew. It was the reason I knew Jake would not fold under the weight of Method Savvy ending. It was the reason he knew I would not fold under the weight of my dad dying. We were each other's evidence that the wiring worked.

What we did not know was that the same wiring, pointed at each other under pressure, does not produce a stronger marriage. It produces a stalemate.

When two Challengers disagree, neither person is built to yield. The conversation does not resolve through one of us coming around. It resolves through both of us running the test long enough that the truth becomes undeniable, or through exhaustion. Twenty minutes in, no new information has entered the room, both of us are still holding, and the challenge has stopped being about the issue. The challenge has become the

pattern.

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*We are both holding. What would we need to know to move.*

The work we built around the eight Cores is anchored by an assessment we developed at Battles Insights, the Couples Communication Roles Assessment. It takes about four minutes to complete. It does not tell you what to say. It shows you how you communicate, what shifts when the conversation gets tense, and what your partner is dealing with when you stop seeing eye to eye. Each partner takes it separately and the result identifies your primary Core, your secondary Core, and the pairing the two of you make together. Jake and I both took it. The pairing it produced was the two-Challenger structure I have been describing, and the report that came out of it named the specific places that structure shows up between us.

The report identified three specific places this collision shows up between us. Reading it was uncomfortable. Reading it was also the first time the fight stopped looking random.

The first is the mutual hold. Both of us holding a position past the point where the holding is doing anything except confirming that neither of us will move first. The second is what the report calls simultaneous sharpening – under stress, a Challenger's instinct is to sharpen, to become more direct, to challenge more precisely. When both people do that at the same time, the conversation moves toward who can hold longest. The third is the validity loop.

A Challenger validates a position through testing. In a pairing of two Challengers, both of us validate our own positions by them surviving the challenge. Both positions can be reasonable. Both of us can articulate exactly why the other person is not wrong. And nothing moves.

That last one was the hardest one for me to admit. For a long time, when Jake and I could not reach an agreement, I assumed one of us must be missing something. The report was specific. We were not missing anything. We were both right, about different things, at the same time, and that is a problem the Challenger cannot solve.

Every primary Core has a backup, and the backup is where the resolution lives. Mine is Architect. When I move there, I build — a framework, an agreement, a structure that can hold the result of the conversation. Jake's is Navigator. When he moves there, he moves us forward — a path from where we are to where we can both land.

Here is what that actually looks like in our house.

Jake and I are talking about something — let's say money, because money is usually where this surfaces — and we have hit the place where neither of us is wrong but neither of us is moving. Twenty minutes of the same conversation. The challenge has become the pattern. I can feel it. He can feel it.

What I do, in the version of this where the work is working, is move to Architect. I reframe the problem. Instead of arguing the specific decision, I build a frame around the kind of decision it is, what the agreement needs to do, what we have not yet defined

that is making the specific decision impossible. I am not solving the disagreement. I am building the container that can hold a solution. That move, when it lands, gives Jake something to test that is not me.

Sometimes the move lands. Sometimes I do the same move for a less honest reason. Sometimes I go to structure because I do not like where the conversation is heading, and building a frame around the problem is a more sophisticated version of changing the subject. I do not always know in the moment which one I am doing. I usually know by the end of the next day.

What Jake does, in the version where it is working, is move to Navigator. He sees the path. He says it out loud. He sails right around the stuck point toward something that resembles forward motion. The thing that makes Jake's Navigator powerful is that, when he is honest with it, he can see a solution faster than I can build a frame around it. He can also, when he is being honest with himself about being less than honest, sail right past a solution I am building toward, toward one that ends the conversation faster or sets it aside until later. The first kind of move resolves the conversation. The second kind of move ends it. The difference between the two is something he can usually tell after the fact.

I do not always discuss any of this in method language with him in the moment. I notice it. I file it. It becomes part of what I am tracking the next time we are in the same kind of conversation. The discipline this pairing requires is not just the willingness to move to the backup first. It is the willingness to be honest with yourself about why you moved to it.

The work was not learning that we were both Challengers. We knew we both pushed back. What took years was understanding that the way out was not going to come from one of us being less of a Challenger. It was going to come from one of us being disciplined enough to move to the backup first, and honest enough to know which version of the move it was.

## What the method is

The work Jake and I had to do became a method we now teach. The full version is a six-week structure. The compressed version is two days. The shape of it is three words.

**LOCATING.** Find the place where the conversation left the current moment. Not who started it. Not who was more wrong. Where did the turn happen, what was the sentence that opened the shortcut, and what did each person hear it as. Premature problem-solving is one of the most common ways couples stay stuck. You cannot solve the conversation you are actually having until you have located it, and most of the conversations couples think they are having are not the conversation that is actually happening.

For us, locating started with me looking at a series of conversations and realizing they had a shape. Time conversations did not finish. Money conversations finished and then the solution we landed on got quietly abandoned within a few weeks. Roles conversations turned into something else by the end of the night. I was, at that point, coaching executives and building communication frameworks for leadership teams. I had a diagnostic eye for what was happening in other people's conversations that I had not yet turned on my own. When I did, I could see the pattern in our house clearly enough to start tracking it. That was locating. The first thing I named was that we had patterns. The second thing I named was what they were.

**PRACTICING.** Catch the move earlier than last time. The first time you catch yourself reaching for your default move under pressure, the catch will be clumsy. You will say it badly. Your partner will hear the correction itself as another challenge, and you will have to repair the repair. Do it anyway. Earlier is the entire point. The goal is not to never reach for the default move. The goal is to notice it sooner, so the next sentence has more information than the last one did.

For us, practicing looked like me saying things badly for several months. I would catch us in the mutual hold and try to name it and end up sounding like I was running a workshop on him. Jake would hear the correction as another challenge, which was structurally accurate because I was a Challenger trying to correct another Challenger, and so the catch itself would become the next argument. We did this enough times to get reasonably good at it. The good version did not look like grace. It looked like one of us saying we are doing the thing again and the other one saying yeah and both of us pausing long enough to figure out what the actual conversation was.

**REBUILDING.** Change what happens next. In the specific, not the abstract. What is the signal you and your partner will use to mark *we just took the shortcut*. What is the sentence one of you will say when the room has crossed into the old fight. What follow-through belongs to whom now, named out loud, not absorbed by default. What does the agreement need to do that the last agreement could not.

For us, rebuilding meant acknowledging the divide before trying to bridge it. The divide was that I had been the person who carried the operational reality of our house for ten years, and Jake

had been the person who carried the financial weight of the business, and neither of us had really seen the full shape of what the other had been carrying. The agreements that came out of that period were not large. They were specific. Who tracks what. Who has authority over which decisions without checking. What happens when one of us starts to absorb something that should be assigned. The agreements held because they addressed the actual mechanism, not the symptoms.

The rebuild has to come after locating and practicing. A plan built before the shortcut is understood becomes another version of the shortcut. If we had tried to build agreements before we understood that we were two Challengers in a mutual hold, the agreements would have looked reasonable and fallen apart the third time they got tested. They would not have addressed the actual mechanism. They would have just been more material for the challenge to operate on.

Locating first. Practicing in real conditions. Then the rebuild can hold.

## What changed for us

Jake and I still have the fight sometimes. Important things come back.

The difference is that we can see it while it is happening.

When I catch us in a mutual hold, I can say so, and Jake can say it back. We have language now for what was previously invisible. We are both holding. What would we need to know to move. That sentence does not soften the disagreement. It relocates it. We are still Challengers. We are still both wired to push. The push is just landing on the question instead of on each other.

We do not always do it well. Sometimes one of us misses the moment entirely and we are an hour into the same fight we have been having for ten years before either of us notices. Sometimes the catch itself becomes the next argument, because being told you are in your protective pattern can land like being told you are doing it wrong, especially when the person telling you is also a Challenger.

The route is not invisible anymore. We know what it looks like when one of us takes it. We know what the other is reaching for. The fight does not get to run the same way it used to, because the same way required not seeing it.

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*The fight does not get to run the same way it used to, because the same way required not seeing it.*

The other thing that changed was in me, and I want to be honest about it because it is part of how I got to the work and not just a result of it. During an Amazon Prime Day sometime in the middle of the worst of it, in a moment of maybe this will help, I bought a 365-day positive affirmation card deck. If someone had told me a year earlier that I was going to be the kind of person who drew daily inspiration from a deck of cards, I would have laughed. Hard. I am a pragmatist. My closest friends would have laughed harder.

The cards worked anyway.

Not in the way the marketing copy implied. I did not become a different person. I did not stop being cynical. I did not lose my sense of humor about how absurd the year was. What happened was smaller and more useful. The cards kept yanking me back to a working mindset on days when my default would have been a kind of bitter clarity that was technically accurate and functionally useless. They were a tiny daily interruption of the pattern I was about to walk into. I would pull a card, roll my eyes at the card, and then, against my will, sometimes find that I had moved one degree away from where I had been five minutes earlier.

That mattered more than I wanted to admit. Especially because, by the time Jake and I started doing the work that became this method, I had been practicing — without calling it that — the same basic move. See the pattern. Let something small interrupt it.

Keep going.

The work with Jake is a more rigorous version of the same skill. The fight that keeps coming back is a pattern. The catch is the interruption. The next sentence is the one degree of movement. If you are reading this and the idea of a couples communication method feels like a heavier lift than you have in you right now, I would not blame you. I would also tell you that the skill underneath it is not heavy. It is the willingness to let something small change the direction you were about to walk.

If you and your partner have a fight that keeps coming back, the work is not to stop having it. The work is to learn its route well enough to walk it differently.

## About the author

My name is Amber Frazier-Finkelstein. I am the CEO and founder of Battles Insights, where I work with founder couples, leadership partners, and high-stakes households on the conversations that keep coming back unresolved.

I came to this work through executive coaching. Before Battles Insights, I spent years inside leadership teams as a content strategist and communication consultant, designing frameworks for executives and senior partners who needed to have hard conversations under pressure. Over time, more than one of those clients asked me, quietly, whether the work I was doing in the boardroom could be done in their living room. That happened often enough that I built the version that lived in the living room, and that is what Battles Insights became. The Conversation Cores framework that anchors this book and the workshop I now run came out of that crossover — the recognition that the dynamics that make a leadership partnership work, or fail, are the same dynamics running underneath a marriage between two people doing high-stakes work in the same house.

I am married to Jake Finkelstein, who founded Method Savvy and now runs 10cubed, a technology-enabled marketing firm. He is the person across the kitchen counter in most of this book. He is also the reason I started writing any of it down. We are both Challengers, which means we will probably argue about something before dinner tonight, and we will most likely figure

out what we were actually arguing about by tomorrow morning, and one of us will move to our backup first.

My father was a single father who raised me and my sister with almost no money and a deep, plainly stated belief that we were not less than anyone else. He died during the stretch of years this book is about. Most of what I know about how to be in a hard conversation, I learned from him.

I live in North Carolina with Jake and our kids. I write and run workshops out of Battles Insights. If something in this book sounded like the conversation that has been running in your house for years, I would like to hear about it.

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