

The Secret Power of Stress

Leo woke up feeling uneasy. Today was the big math test, and he couldn't stop worrying about it. As he stared at his cereal, his mom asked, "Are you okay, Leo?" "Yeah, I'm fine," he muttered, even though he didn't feel fine at all. He just couldn't bring himself to explain the heavy feeling in his chest.

At school, things didn't get any better. Leo felt his nerves creeping up as he handed in his homework, worried it wasn't good enough. During recess, he couldn't even enjoy playing with his friends. His mind was stuck on the test, and the buzzing in his head wouldn't go away.

When the time for the test finally came, Leo noticed that everyone else looked nervous too. Their teacher paused before handing out the test papers and smiled at the class. "I can see you're all feeling stressed, and that's okay. Let's take a moment to breathe together."

Leo followed along as the teacher guided them in a breathing exercise: in through the nose, hold, and slowly out through the mouth. After a few breaths, Leo felt his heart slow down a little, and the knot in his stomach started to loosen.

"You've all worked hard, and you're ready," the teacher reassured them.

Leo took one more deep breath. Maybe, he could do this after all!

Leo took his test paper and tried to focus. The breathing exercise had helped a bit, but his hands were still shaky as he picked up his pencil. He took another deep breath, just like the teacher had shown them, and started answering the questions one by one. As he worked through the problems, he realized that he knew more than he thought. The stress hadn't disappeared, but it felt different now—like a small push to keep going. When the test was over, Leo felt a rush of relief. He didn't know if he'd gotten everything right, but he was proud of himself for trying his best. The rest of the afternoon went smoother. Leo even enjoyed his favourite subject, science, without the constant buzz of worry.

After school, Leo's parents picked him up, and they immediately noticed that he seemed better. His mom asked, "You look happier than this morning. Do you want to tell us what was going on?"

Leo hesitated, then decided to open up. “I was worried about the math test. I thought I’d mess up and that my homework was wrong too. I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t think you could help.”

His mom smiled and nodded. “I used to feel like that all the time when I was your age. I was probably the most stressed kid in my class! But you know what? I learned that stress isn’t all bad. It’s like a signal that something important is happening. It’s your body getting ready to face a challenge—like when people have to react quickly to real dangerous situations. Imagine facing a lion—you’d need that boost of energy to run away fast or to fight back.”

Leo’s eyes widened. “So, it’s like a superpower?”

“Exactly!” his mom laughed. “Stress can be your superpower if you learn to manage it. For example, when athletes compete, they use stress to stay sharp and focused. And did you know that a little stress can actually help you do better on tests?’ It makes you more alert and ready to tackle problems.”

Leo thought about his test. “I did feel kind of alert after the breathing exercise. But how do I control it so it doesn’t feel so bad?”

His mom explained, “Well, you’ve already started by using the breathing exercise. Here are a few more tricks: Try looking at things in a new way—like turning ‘I’m scared of this test’ into ‘This is my chance to show what I know.’ Taking small breaks when you’re working on something tough can help too. You can try squeezing a stress ball when you’re nervous, or imagine a calm place, like lying on the beach.”

She paused, then added, “And don’t forget, you can always talk about how you’re feeling. Even just sharing your worries can make a big difference. Like today, if you’d told me what was on your mind, we could have talked it through, and you might have felt a little better sooner.”

Leo nodded slowly. It was like a door had opened in his mind. Stress wasn’t just this terrible thing—it was something he could understand, manage, and even use to his advantage.

In the days that followed, Leo started paying more attention to how he felt when stress popped up. He noticed that his stress wasn’t completely gone—it still showed up when he had a tough assignment or had to speak in front of the class. But now, instead of feeling overwhelmed, Leo remembered what his mom had told him and tried to put the new strategies into practice.

One day, Leo faced a tough new drill at swim practice. Frustrated, he took a break to stretch and clear his head. When he returned to the pool, he felt focused and ready to try again. Even after a small argument with his best friend, Sam, later that week Leo felt stress build up. He took a few deep breaths to calm down and then talked things over with Sam, sorting out the misunderstanding without any hard feelings.

That evening, Leo sat down with his parents at dinner. “You know,” he said, smiling, “I think stress really can be a superpower.” His mom and dad exchanged proud glances. He had learned something truly valuable—stress was part of life, but it didn’t have to control him. In fact, he could use it to make himself stronger, smarter, and ready to face any challenge.

As he got ready for bed that night, he knew that tomorrow might bring new difficulties, but he also knew he was ready for them. After all, he had a secret power now—the power to turn stress into something positive.

And with that comforting thought, Leo drifted off to sleep.

Note for Teachers

This story, “The Secret Power of Stress,” introduces pupils to the concept of stress as a natural and sometimes beneficial response rather than something purely negative. The psychological foundation of the story is based on the “stress mindset,” a concept that emphasizes the idea that stress, when managed well, can be a source of growth, motivation, and resilience.

The story encourages children to see stress as an opportunity to showcase their abilities or to recognize the importance of a situation, which can shift their perspective from feeling overwhelmed to feeling motivated.

By teaching pupils simple techniques like deep breathing, taking mini breaks, positive self-talk, and talking about their feelings, the story equips them with practical tools to manage their stress effectively.

You can reinforce these lessons by practicing the coping strategies with your class. For instance, you can try starting or ending the lesson with a breathing exercise. By normalizing stress and framing it positively, you help create a supportive environment where pupils feel empowered to handle challenges both in school and beyond.



Co-funded by
the European Union



The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.