Here are some tips to help you make the most out of these easy to use but powerfully effective relaxation exercises. Two of the written exercises are also available as MP3 recordings at HTTP://www.solanoseniorspei.org

First study the diagram, Relaxation training; how does it work? to get a sense of how these methods work; they have a real physical basis as well as an effect on your sense of well being. In fact, the sense of feeling good that comes from regular practice of these techniques is the result of the physiological changes you learn to make in your body at the direction of your mind.

As you will learn by studying the diagram, when you perceive any kind of threat, your body reacts with a fight or flight engagement of your body’s automatic protective system of which prepares you to run away or fight what is threatening. You may have heard the notion that this automatic mechanism is great and appropriate if you are directly faced with a physical threat (like a tiger considering you for lunch), but that it is not the best way to respond to a mental threat like a worry or idea that you may perceive as a threat, say a threat to your 401k, for instance, or maybe a threat to your reputation. It is important to note that this fight-flight system, (technically the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system; see diagram) gets activated by merely reviewing your “to-do” list in your mind. The take away message here is that most mental activity arouses the sympathetic nervous system to some degree or another until you learn how to pay attention differently from what we are used to. That is the role of relaxation training. By doing the exercises you learn much about how your attention effects how tense or relaxed you feel, how your thoughts affect your quickness to anger and many other experiences.

The Basic Relaxation Exercise (basic relaxation MP3) and the Autogenic Training exercise (autogenic relaxation MP3) are both similar in that they help to calm the fight/flight system and activate the relaxation response (parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system) system]. The basic exercise is good if you have a very restless mind (who doesn’t now a days?) or if you want to reduce muscle tension anywhere in you body but particularly the head, neck, shoulders and lower back. The autogenic training exercise actually shifts blood volume from the upper part of your body to your lower
body, particularly the abdomen and legs. Therefore it is especially effective if you have migraine headaches, irritable bowel syndrome and many kinds of chronic pain. As I mentioned, both exercises are available for download on the website and you might try both of them at alternate times and see what you think is more effective for you. Many people use them both because they have those different effects.

I suggest you practice on a regular basis to get the most benefit you. After many years of teaching these methods my experience shows that if you practice every day for a week you will notice a difference in how you feel and function. If you practice every day for a month, it is likely that people around you on a regular basis will also notice you are different. What is different? Most likely you will be feeling more relaxed more often, sleeping better, thinking more clearly and more effectively. Why? Because you have begun to “de-clutter” your mind of inessentials and to focus more on what is important to you.

Believe it or not, you do better in the long run not to practice before bed. The idea is to do it when you are fully alert so that you gradually learn to notice the effect of your attention (where your mind is focused) on your body including your emotions. So if you wait until bed time to do the exercise you will most likely just fall asleep sooner and not get the practice benefit. If sleep is the main problem you might try one exercise as your wakeful training exercise and the other before sleep. Even if you only practice in the morning when you wake up (do it sitting up!!) you will probably notice you are sleeping better because you are not carrying so much tension to bed with you. You learn to relieve it during the day as you learn to notice how tension builds up without your noticing it and yet can be released with conscious attention. This is a side effect of practicing the exercises while fully alert.

For “real time” stress relief you can use the Three Minute Breathing Space included in this package of written materials. You can do this in the middle of a meeting or conversation or while waiting for a traffic jam to clear. (Have you noticed how your hands tighten on the steering wheel if you are worrying about being late?).

Practicing these methods regularly helps you discover for yourself that your quality of life depends on where you focus your attention.
Relaxation Training:
How does it work?

The aim of relaxation training is to learn how to direct attention to what happens in the body when your attention is away from threat and instead on body sensations associated with relaxation. A target mental state for this practice is the **quiet mind**; a state that might best be described as passive awareness. Practice extends our comfort with this
state and the ability to spend time in it, and enhances healing and deep rest.

**Basic Relaxation Exercise**

**Description:** This simple practice can have important and far reaching benefits if engaged in regularly. With regular practice you gradually become calmer and less irritable. A sense of comfort and well being becomes more familiar. Naturally, stress related ailments can be helped as a consequence. This is an outline of the exercise recorded on the MP3 entitled *Basic Relaxation.*

**Settling Down**
Begin by sitting in a straight-backed chair if possible (kitchen chair, side chair) or sit on the floor in lotus or half lotus meditation posture if you are familiar with them. The idea is to try to maintain a comfortably alert posture. We are not attempting to get so relaxed as to get drowsy and sleepy. The target state we are aiming for in this practice could be described as "passive awareness." The mind is not actively thinking, though there may be thoughts. You are not actively listening, though you will probably hear sounds around you. The idea is to move your attention through the following stages while other events inside you and outside you compete for your attention. You need make no effort to blank your mind, quiet your mind or empty your mind. It is likely that as you practice, your mind will quiet and you will feel more relaxed with out "trying."

**Three Deep Breaths**
Now close your eyes, take a deep breath and slowly release it. Next just breathe naturally for a few breaths--not trying to change the speed or depth--just let it be as it is. Then take another deep breath, release slowly and let the body take a few normal breaths. Finally a third deep breath and then forget about the breathing for a bit as you shift your attention to the muscles at the top of the head.

**Allow muscles to relax.**
If you notice any tension, just allow it to let go. There is no need to wait for the muscles to relax, just move on to all the other muscle groups (face, neck area, shoulders, upper arms, wrists, hands fingers, then back, chest, pelvis, thighs, knees, shins, feet, and toes ) with the same permission to relax. When you reach your toes, briefly note any remaining tense areas and let them continue to relax without your attention as the exercise continues.
Count back from 10 to zero.
When you are ready to proceed, begin counting back from 10 to zero, timing the numbers with your exhaling. Again, don’t worry about breathing slower or deeper, just accept how the breathing is and count at that pace.

I am relaxed
When you reach zero then just let your mind come to rest on the words (in your mind) "I am" (on the inhale) then "Relaxed" on the (exhale). Make no attempt to regulate your breathing. When the body inhales, just say "I am." When the body exhales say "relaxed."

When you are ready to return to your normal state of attention or social awareness, gradually count back the numbers from zero to ten. Stretch and open your eyes around "nine" or "ten."

In the beginning you might find it easier to learn this by using the Basic relaxation MP3 recording. I suggest you avoid becoming dependent on it, however. You can make your relaxation exercise portable by practicing with out the audio and adjusting the practice to your needs. For example, if you are already fairly relaxed, you might spend less time on the muscle relaxation section and more time in the "I am,..." Relaxed" portion. Practice regularly whether tense or not. Practicing when relaxed allows you to get to very deep levels of relaxation that your body will remember. There is a gradual cumulative effect of practice, the benefits of which are directly in proportion to the amount of practice you give yourself.

Bonus Hint!

Once you have practiced for a while, you can "fool your body" by doing a quick version: Simply take a few deep breaths with normal breaths in between. On the deep breaths say, in your mind, “I AM” (inhale) “Relaxed” (exhale). This is like a miniature version of the whole exercise but it only works if you practice and develop a body memory of deep relaxation. Then the mini version is more likely to trigger a strong relaxation response.
Autogenic Relaxation

This is a very simple yet powerful relaxation exercise that has a profound effect. By activating the parasympathetic nervous system it increases circulation to body surface, the muscles and gut. If special attention is given to warming the feet, it can have a measurable effect on the blood pressure by reducing stress related factors. It works by shifting blood volume from the head and upper body to the abdomen and limbs.

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position with hands on the lap with fingers open. Then repeat these phrases slowly from three to six times each. Keep your attention away from other thoughts—just return attention to the words and the accompanying sensations—imagining them to be true and noticing how they change as your

My right hand is heavy and warm
My left hand is heavy and warm
My right foot is heavy and warm
My left foot is warm
My abdomen is warm
My forehead is cool
My breathing is comfortable and easy
My arms and my legs are heavy and warm
I am quite quiet
I am at peace

When you have finished all the phrases, take a few moments to just be aware of the many sensations registering from your entire body—just let yourself perceive them all at once—“multi channel.”
Three Minute Breathing Space
(From, Germer, Christopher; Siegal, Ronald and Fulton, Paul, Mindfulness and Psychotherapy, Guilford Press, 2005)

Use this any time you want to employ instant stress relief. It is simple three stage process that you can do privately, on the interior, even in public situations like difficult conversations, meetings, getting sales pitches on the phone, etc,

1. Awareness
   Bring yourself into the present moment by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then ask: (just do an interior scan--- can be a wordless questioning) “What is my experience right now...in thoughts...in feeling...and body sensation?”
   Acknowledge and register your experience, even if it is unwanted.

2. Gathering
   Then, gently redirect full attention to breathing, to each in-breath and to each out-breath as they follow, one after the other:

   Your breath can function as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness.

3. Expanding
   Expand the field of your awareness around your breathing, so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression. Noticing muscle tension and allowing it to go.

   Can combine this with Quick version of Basic Relaxation Exercise track one on CD

   After using this simple method, it is often easier to see with a “clear head” what action to take next.