

Activity Programmes For Men

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Introduction

Any activity coordinator will tell you that you cannot count on men and women in a residential care community or day centre to enjoy the same activity sessions. There is certainly overlap here and there, but general satisfaction requires recognising that men appreciate doing some things separately from the women. This course provides ideas in the following categories:

- Job, career and work
- Military service
- Sports and exercise
- Cars
- Money, finance and investing
- Social clubs, service clubs, and hobbies
- Household chores and everyday routines
- Things to do jointly with women



These categories will sometimes cross over, for example, household chores like raking leaves involves exercise, but multiple ideas for all sections are provided below.

Job, Career, and Work

*Far and away the best prize that life has to offer
is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.*

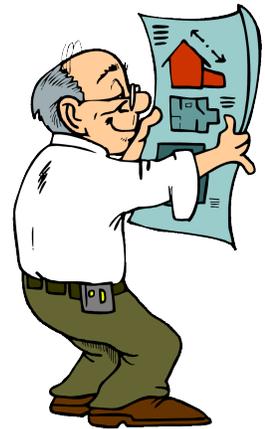
~ Theodore Roosevelt

Men have defined themselves by their work for hundreds of years. When their work has been a source of satisfaction and pride, they often wish to keep working beyond retirement – or at least continue to be recognised for their work once they have retired. That’s why a physician may be referred to as ‘Doc’, for example, or a military man as ‘Colonel’. Men whose careers were more physically demanding, such as those in construction work or farming, might be happy to retire, but they are still likely to have a sense of pride in what they created over a lifetime.

There are two lessons here for activity professionals.

The first is to look for ways you can use the specific knowledge that men have acquired through their jobs and careers in your activity programming or one-to-one sessions.

- If a man had a teaching career, can he still lead a basic class or perhaps a short weekly course on science, geography or English literature?
- If a man has specialised knowledge of, let’s say, astronomy or forestry, can he hold a session looking for constellations or recognising trees by their leaves?
- If you have a group of farmers or physicians, perhaps they’d like to learn more about advances in their field from a guest speaker or free university course on DVD.
- Can a man who worked as a plumber evaluate the state of your building’s taps, or an electrician look at your lighting levels?
- Would an architect enjoy seeing the blueprints for your building?
Would an engineer enjoy outings to see the progress being made on a local construction project?



Remember, too, that some men simply like to reminisce. Many have wonderful stories to tell about their work experiences.

The second lesson is to recognise that men like to be given jobs to do. Assuming they can do so safely, ask if they would be willing to help with moving tables and chairs to the side of a room to create a dance floor, or hang decorations for a party. Perhaps they can help sand outdoor furniture before it is stained or painted, sweep the patio of leaves, or help with a recycling project. Most of us never outgrow the desire to be useful, and men are often used to having been given ‘to do’ lists by their wives.



Even when a person is no longer able to physically carry out career-related tasks, they can offer their advice and opinions related to their specialist knowledge. Ask them:

- How can I tell if a table or chair is well made?
- What should I look for in quality house paint?
- How do I know if a melon at the farmer's market is ripe?

Express your admiration for their knowledge and skills or the obstacles they had to overcome in their careers. And always thank the men for their help or advice; we all want to be appreciated.

Military Service

Sadly, the older gentlemen who served in World War Two (1939-1945) are rapidly dying out, but due to National Service in the UK (a legal requirement for able-bodied men between the ages of 18-30 to serve with the British Armed Forces for a set period of time – it came into force in 1949 and the last serviceman was demobbed in 1963), many of the men in your care will have some military experience.

Reminiscing about military experiences can be a minefield (pun intended). As we are learning from current soldiers' experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can trigger horrific memories for many men. (This is also true for women; in earlier wars they didn't serve in combat, but many served as nurses.) Faced with today's reality TV programmes and video games, many young people seem unmoved by violence, but for people who witnessed it first-hand, the memories are often extremely stressful. Get to know each individual well, and be aware of whether military service is a topic to be avoided altogether or whether certain aspects can be discussed with them, such as the following:

- First and foremost, be sure to thank men for their service. We can all be patriotic, but relatively few of us have ever had to risk our lives to protect our country or our freedoms. We owe gratitude to those who have done so. That means that for those who have served in the military, celebrations like Remembrance Day and Armed Forces Day should not be ignored, and might be turned into week-long events. You could display photos of the men in uniform, hold a special flag-raising ceremony (let the men plan it), provide history talks, do book reviews on war literature, and so on.
- For many men, the friendships that grew out of their military experience have endured for a lifetime, and the positive memories related to that make for happy reminiscing.



- There is also a strange truth in the fact that sharing hardship stories creates laughter. Men will describe with perverse glee how they peeled endless potatoes, ate revolting army rations or played a trick on a grumpy sergeant.
- Many men will also describe with pride the skills and values they learned: discipline, loyalty, endurance, and how to make a bed so smooth and taut that a coin will bounce off the top sheet.
- For some men, specific patriotic songs or official marches will bring a flood of memories. See if you can find some to singalong to on YouTube.
- Old war films and television series, especially comedies, can be a pleasant source of entertainment for some. There are plenty available online, while others can be purchased. Men can appreciate the craziness of military life in retrospect, and many also like to critique the depiction of it in the media. (“That would NEVER have happened” or “That’s exactly what it was like!”) You may want to avoid dramas that depict the more horrific or hellish sides of war. Here are a few suggestions for happier shows that may also bring back pleasant feelings of nostalgia for TV and films of the 1940s, 50s and 60s:
 - TV programmes: ‘The Army Game’, ‘Dad’s Army’ and ‘Sergeant Bilko’
 - Films: ‘The Square Peg’, ‘Johnny Frenchman’, ‘Hail The Conquering Hero’, ‘What Next Corporal Hargrove?’, ‘Cottage To Let’ and ‘Operation Petticoat’

(Note that while a half-hour TV programme provides a reasonable activity timeframe, a two-hour film can be a lot to sit through. You might want to show it in parts or just look up the famous scenes on YouTube.)

- Love letters and wartime romances can be another great topic for reminiscence sessions. Today’s soldiers can send daily emails and are able to see their families in real time by using Skype, but during World War Two and the conflicts that followed, soldiers and their lovers relied on handwritten notes that could take weeks to reach their destination. These notes and accompanying pictures were precious treasures kept for a lifetime by the women, and tucked into a uniform and carried into battle by the men.
- If a man’s military career was of special importance to him, you can acknowledge it daily by asking him to teach you how to give a proper salute and then saluting him whenever you see him. When we show that we value what a person values about themselves, we build a stronger relationship with that person.



Think about it . . .

What do you know about the working lives of the men in your group? Who had the most unusual career? Who has skills to share?

What activities do you currently offer that highlight the men's careers? What else might you do to recognise their accomplishments and abilities?

How do you honour the military service of the men and women in your group? What else could you do?

Are you aware of who likes to reminisce about their military life and who prefers not to?

Summary . . .

For most men, their work life and military career represent two of the most significant aspects of their lives, but once they retire, their accomplishments or the skills and knowledge they might be able share are not always recognised. By highlighting both past contributions and what they can still contribute, we build stronger relationships with them because we all like to be recognised for what we value about ourselves.

Sports and Exercise

If winning isn't everything, why do they keep score?

~ Vince Lombardi

Sports have long been seen as a male thing more so than a female thing. That is probably changing. Certainly plenty of women have a favourite football or rugby team, and many continue to play tennis or golf into their old age. Nevertheless, sports offer unique opportunities for male bonding.



Sports, in relation to activity planning, can be either active or spectator-based. Many men enjoy watching football, cricket, tennis or golf on television, and many will support a specific team or athlete. This passive participation is easy to create sessions around and usually requires little more than comfortable chairs, a big-screen TV, and perhaps pizza and beer or other snacks.

If you have a local professional sports team, you might like to create these sessions around the local game schedule, assuming it's televised. In other cases, you may find there is a good-natured, built-in rivalry among residents favouring certain teams, such as between football's Everton and Liverpool or Celtic and Rangers. Then you can schedule your sessions to coincide with those games. If it's possible to arrange an outing to a local sports bar or to an actual game, so much the better.

Also consider the reminiscing activities you can do related to spectator sports.

- People may support a small local team from the area they grew up in or where they went to college or university. Talk about those memories and what it was like to go to the games.
- Many men might have played in local teams when they were younger. Let them talk about their experiences. Did they win any trophies? Create lasting friendships? Attract girls through their athletic prowess?
- People's loyalty to professional teams can come from multiple sources: family tradition, living in the team's hometown, favouring a particular athlete. Ask people how they choose which team or athlete to support.

Whenever you can, it's also good to encourage active participation in sports.

- As people age, it can become unsafe for them to continue playing an active game like tennis, but consider what might be substituted, such as a Wii version, table tennis or a seated version of badminton. Also consider a somewhat gentler sport like croquet.
- It may be possible to go to a local bowling green or you could play a simpler indoor version or, again, play it on Wii.
- Also look for *parts* of sports that older adults can still participate in, such as practicing their golf putt.
- And if one of the men has a passion for a particular sport, ask them to teach you their body stance and positioning for putting, swinging a bat, or serving a tennis ball, for example, so that you can improve your own game. Give them a chance to show off their skills.

Exercise is the number one thing you can do to maintain both your body and your brain, and yet some men rebel against formal exercise classes that seem geared towards women. Others simply prefer – as some women do – to have gender segregated exercise classes. Some men who won't do aerobics in a 'women's class' will still happily do a workout on machinery such as a treadmill, exercise bike, or stepper device. Go with what works for each individual.

Exercises that seem especially beneficial to both men and women include:

- Tai chi
- Yoga
- Swimming (if a heated pool is available)
- Walking

All of these have side benefits of increasing flexibility, and, except for swimming, improving weight-bearing stamina, and balance. They also tend to improve breathing, digestion, and sleep quality.

Creating a walking club is especially easy to do and can be fun. Let each person set their own goals based on real mileage.

- For example, a person living in Newcastle might say their goal is to walk to Durham, a distance of about 20 miles. If they walk a mile a day, five days a week, on a treadmill or a marked walking trail, they will walk the distance in about four weeks. You can create a map-like chart and fill in each mile walked with a coloured pencil. When they reach their goal, you might celebrate with a virtual tour of the destination. Have a look online for images and interesting tourist locations.
- Next set a new goal. The distance between Newcastle and Carlisle is closer to 60 miles. When they reach that goal, celebrate again.
- Another way to move further more quickly is to use a ratio. For example, the distance from Newcastle to Penzance is 480 miles. If you say each mile walked is worth 10 miles, and they continue their pace of a mile a day, they will walk the distance over 48 days. Celebrate with another virtual tour and perhaps something tasty which is relevant to the destination – in this case, a Cornish pasty or cream tea.



Finally, don't ignore activities like gardening that give inadvertent exercise – and have the added benefit of getting people outdoors. A large percentage of residents in long-term care are deficient in vitamin D, which can be rectified to a large degree by spending even as little as 15 or 20 minutes outdoors on a regular basis. Being outdoors in natural light also helps our sleep cycles and is a wonderful mood lifter. As noted below in the section on household chores, men were often in charge of outdoor work, which may have consisted of just tending to the trees, lawn, and bushes in their garden (which is enough), but may also have involved growing prize-winning flowers or vegetables. Continue to keep them involved in gardening if you can.

Think about it . . .

What do you know about the sports the men in your group have participated in or enjoy viewing as a spectator?

What sports-related activities do you offer at the moment? What else could you offer?

Do you use Wii or other gaming equipment regularly? Has it been effective?

Have you tried exercises like yoga or tai chi? If so, how have they worked?

Getting people outdoors regularly is important. What outdoor activities do you offer?

Summary . . .

Sports can be enjoyed by many men either passively as a spectator or actively as a participant. Passive participation tends to be a favourite social activity for many men; they may not get much exercise by watching a game on TV, but they have a great deal of fun cheering on their team and build bonds with other spectators as they do so.

Active exercise can be sports-related, although modifications to active games like tennis may be needed to protect creaky hips or arthritic hands. Other active exercise may be found in fitness centres, classes such as yoga and tai chi, and through walking clubs. Active exercise may also be a side benefit of other activities, such as gardening, which offers the bonus of getting participants outdoors – important for their health and well-being.

Cars

The only requirements women tend to have from a car are reliability and reasonable attractiveness. Many men, however, find endless satisfaction in viewing, discussing, and driving cars. Few things are more tied to their feeling of independence than being able to drive. Many men with dementia who are barred from continuing to drive for safety reasons will say they feel 'less of a man' when they can no longer drive.

Chances are, most of the men in your activity sessions are among those who can no longer safely drive, but you can still provide various car-themed activities. Here are a few ideas:

- Take Sunday drives. A few decades back, a Sunday afternoon drive to see the countryside or visit relatives on a farm was a popular pastime. Could you do twice-monthly Sunday afternoon outings, perhaps stopping somewhere for a mini picnic or a walk in a park?
- Can you connect with a local vintage car club and find volunteers who might be willing to take a few passengers out for a drive once a month? Can you arrange for a few of your men to get to the car club meetings once a month?
- Have an outing to a classic car show, or if that's not possible, try to get a few of the show's participants to display their cars in your car park for an afternoon. That could bring positive publicity both for your home or centre and the car club.
- Consider arranging an outing to the showroom of a local car dealership to see the new models. The dealer can explain all the new features. Alternatively, the dealer could come to your home and give a presentation on their new models.
- Discuss car-washing techniques and then have a car-wash day at your home. The men could wash the cars of staff members for a fee (and with supervision), and the money raised could go to a charity of the men's choice.
- Show videos featuring car chases from film's earliest days. For example: 'The Blues Brothers' (there are several car chases in this film – in a shopping centre, chased by the police, chased by Nazis, etc), 'The French Connection' and 'Bullitt'. There are literally millions of car chase videos on YouTube which will come up on a simple search.



Reminiscing about cars is also a great activity for men, as it almost always brings back fond memories. Here are a few sample questions to ask:

- When did you learn to drive? Who taught you?
- Tell me about your first car. What make was it? How much did it cost? What colour was it? Where did you drive it?
- Tell me about a car you owned that has special memories for you.
- Did you ever go on a long-distance road trip? Tell me about it.



Then ask for opinions and advice:

- What should a person look for in a car?
- What do you think is the best car brand and why?
- How do I know if I am getting a good deal at a car dealership?
- What are the most important things for everyone to know about their cars (eg how to change a tyre or check the oil and water)?

These reminiscence sessions can be applied to other forms of transport too. For example, many men may have stories to tell about:

- Commuting to their jobs by train, bus, or tram
- Working as a bus driver or a long-distance lorry driver
- Working as a pilot or in some other capacity for an airline
- Working for a transport company in any number of roles

Flying was a relatively new phenomenon when today's long-term care residents were young. They are most likely to have travelled long distances by train or ocean liner and have delightful memories related to family holidays or business trips. They may also have special memories of their first time on an aeroplane or of seeing a stunt pilot.

If someone in your group has a special interest in some form of transport, there are undoubtedly books, magazines, or videos that would delight them.

Money, Finance and Investing

*There is a gigantic difference
between earning a great deal of money
and being rich.*
~ Marlene Dietrich

Today's older men grew up at a time when men were typically the sole breadwinner. (Indeed, many women were fired from their jobs when they married – or when men came home from World War Two – because it was assumed their husbands would take care of them, and someone else needed their job more.) Many also have memories of the Great Depression of the 1930s when money was scarce for nearly everyone. Therefore, money and financial matters are often of deep concern to men.

Men are likely to enjoy discussing:

- **How prices have changed** – A comfortable house used to cost half of what a decent car costs today.
- **How banking has changed** – ATMs did not become part of mainstream banking until the mid-1980s, for example. Before that you had to walk into a bank and talk to a cashier to withdraw money from your account. Banks were not open in the evenings or at weekends.
- **How best to invest their money** – Stocks, bonds, gold, real estate, diamonds, art?
- **The stock market** – Some men may be interested to look at the stock prices in the daily newspaper.

There are many proverbs about money, which men may enjoy discussing. What do they mean? Which do the men believe? Here are a few examples:

- A fool and his money are soon parted.
- Money doesn't grow on trees.
- A penny saved is a penny earned.
- Money can't buy happiness.
- The best things in life are free.
- Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
- Health is better than wealth.
- A good name is better than riches.
- If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys.
- The love of money is the root of all evil.
- Give your children enough money to do something, but never enough to do nothing.
- Neither a borrower nor a lender be.
- The rich knows not who is his friend.



The word 'rich' has multiple meanings, and it's also interesting to talk about *ways* in which a person can be rich. Are you rich in friends, in love, in happiness? Anything else?

Think about it . . .

What car-related activities have you tried doing with the men in your group? What ideas do you have that aren't listed here?

What interests do the men in your group have in relation to other forms of transport?

What money-related activities have you done with the men in your group?

What do you know about how money is related to the sense of security these men feel? Have they discussed experiences of the Great Depression, for example?

Summary . . .

Two topics of widespread interest among men are cars (and other forms of transport) and money or financial matters. There are many ways these topics can be integrated into activity programmes for men, from hosting a car-wash day or going on an outing to a classic car show, to discussing how to manage money well in an uncertain world.

Social, Service, and Hobby Clubs

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.
~ Winston Churchill

Although they are much less common today, social and service clubs played an important role in many men's lives. (Most did not allow women to be members.) Some met weekly; others met monthly. Some were purely social; some involved volunteering and serving the community; and some were intended to help businessmen network with one another or improve their skills.

Here are a few examples:

- Gentlemen's or Working Men's Clubs
- Rotary
- Freemasons
- Alumni groups from a person's college or university
- Veterans' groups

If clubs played an active role in the lives of the men in your group, first consider whether you might have a branch of that club meet in your day centre or care home. Another option is to see if there is a local Men's Sheds group (<https://menssheds.org.uk>). If that isn't possible, consider forming your own club. The men can name it or simply call it the Men's Club. Encourage them to come up with a motto, membership cards, rituals (for example, how meetings open and close), and activities. Always include refreshments.



Alternatively, go out to a pub or have a special meal for them once a week. After retirement, many men form their own clubs, meeting at a local café or pub. Can you do something similar, even if you meet in-house?

When planning activities, you may want to invite outside speakers on topics of interest to your group, or perhaps the men themselves have expertise to share with the rest of the group. Many men gained satisfaction from the good they did in their communities through clubs and groups and would still enjoy volunteering in whatever ways they are able.

- Maybe your men's club could make birdhouses to put out in the garden and everyone can watch out for the different birds they attract.
- Maybe they could read with local primary school children.
- Is there a local food bank that might welcome extra volunteers?

Brainstorm the possibilities with the men, choose what most agree on, and go for it!

Some men enjoy meeting to play a game such as chess or poker. There is something satisfying to many men in the tactile aspects of moving chess pieces, dealing cards, and stacking poker chips. Others like the intellectual stimulation of chess or card games such as bridge. For others, there are satisfying memories associated with games like rummy or whist that they have played since childhood.

Other groups meet because of a shared interest or hobby such as stamp collecting or fishing. If men are interested in a topic, it is usually an ongoing fascination. Even if only one individual among your group of men is interested in the topic, look for ways to encourage that interest. For stamp collecting, for example, that could be through books and Internet searches, a visit to the post office, or even films. 'Charade' is a 1963 film starring Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant in which stamp collecting ultimately plays a key role.

Household Chores and Everyday Routines

Everyone tends to have a preferred morning and evening routine. Some people like to get up and dressed before breakfast. Others like to move gently in the morning, padding to the kitchen table for a cup of tea while still in their pyjamas, taking time to read the morning newspaper before heading to the bathroom for a shower or a wash. When we have our routines interrupted, we begin our days feeling unsettled. The same is true in the evenings. Learn the men's everyday routines and as much as possible, honour them.

Also learn what gives them a sense of security and honour that. Some men feel undressed if they don't have coins, keys, and a handkerchief in their pockets, or a newspaper under their arm. Other men have a favourite pair of shoes or a favourite jumper or a cap (which can help keep a balding head warm) that aids their daily comfort.



As noted earlier, men whose daily routines involved going to work for 40 years or more, tend to like having things to do each day. Household chores were once much more gender-specific than they are now. Men's chores tended to be outdoor things, such as taking out the rubbish, mowing the grass, raking the leaves, shovelling the snow, and tidying the garage. Women generally handled indoor chores like cleaning, laundry, and cooking – though there were always exceptions:

- Men were often the shoe polishers.
- They were usually called upon to fix broken toys and appliances.
- They climbed the ladders (to change a lightbulb in a ceiling fixture) and did the heavy lifting (of boxes to the attic or basement, for example).
- Some men saw hoovering as an indoor version of mowing the lawn or sweeping the patio or driveway and therefore a 'manly' job.
- Some men, of course, loved to cook and are still justifiably proud of their skills.

Men were also often the errand runners – to the post office, the DIY store, and the dry cleaners. (An outing to the DIY store is still a joy for many men.)

Most of these things are no longer required of men living in residential care settings, but make a list of things that need to be done, and consider what *parts* of them the men in your community might be able to do.

- If you have broken items that perhaps require just a bit of glue and a little sanding, could the men help with the repairs?
- Can they deliver the post or special notices to residents?
- Can they sort wastepaper for recycling?
- At the very least, they can offer their opinions and advice about what needs to be done and how it could be done efficiently and wisely.

- If you are planning a community event to make yourselves known, people will get a better impression of your community if the residents are active in its planning and execution.

Keeping in mind their safety, the possibilities are endless.

It's worth mentioning pets. Many men will have had a close relationship to a pet over the years, most often a dog, but also maybe a cat, fish, bird, or other creature. If your community has one or more pets, consider what role men can play in, for example, walking or washing the dog, feeding the fish or bird, cleaning the fish tank or bird cage, and nurturing and training the animal.

Things To Do Jointly With Women

Women far outnumber men in most senior groups, and while some actively court the few available men, many just enjoy men's voices – they miss the everyday sounds of hearing their husbands and sons speak. Therefore, the more activities men can be naturally and comfortably involved in with women, the better.

*An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have.
The older she gets, the more interested he is in her.*
~ Agatha Christie



While it's a broad generalisation, women tend to be planners and men tend to be doers. Women receive pleasure from planning a lunch menu and decorations. Men would often rather do the cooking, arrange the tables and chairs, pour and serve the drinks, and assist with cleaning up. Keep that in mind as you plan special events, but always ask the men, "Would you be willing to ...?" rather than assuming their input.

Asking about interests is *always* important. Consider dancing, for example: some men (and women) feel as awkward on the dance floor as they did in school when they were first learning the basic steps. Other men love to dance and love being a popular partner.

Women who love to dance often especially love being held in their partner's arms, but other women just love the music and movement and are content to dance with another woman. In other words, don't dismiss the idea of holding a dance because of a shortage of men, but don't expect all men to love dancing. Also consider inviting other staff to your dance, including maintenance and kitchen staff. Sometimes any man is welcome! (While some people have hip or other joint problems that prevent them from dancing safely, some people who walk awkwardly are surprisingly fluid on the dance floor, aided perhaps by the rhythm of the music.)

Some groups include a ladies' man who sees himself as Don Juan, and who can ultimately pose a problem in a community, but other men are overwhelmed by the attention of women, some of whom never give up looking for a partner. These men can easily feel out of place in settings where they are vastly outnumbered by women.

Nevertheless, men can and often do enjoy many of the same activities that women do, such as:

- Chair exercises
- Singalongs (although a barbershop quartet might work, too)
- Music and art classes
- Hobbies like gardening
- Outings
- Entertainers and lecturers



It is vitally important to know the individual preferences, skills, and interests of the men in your group, but don't limit them unnecessarily. The brain craves novelty. Men will come when they are invited with enthusiasm and made to feel welcome, know they will have fun and possibly learn something new, and/or are made to feel useful.

Think about it . . .

Is there a men's social or service club in your local area that you could connect with? Do you have a men's club in your home or centre? If so, what are the meetings about? Does it support any special causes?

What household chores do the men in your group perform?

What activities have you found work well with both men and women?

Has this course given you any new ideas for engaging men and supporting their interests?

Summary . . .

Many men were once active in various social and service clubs; if a branch of a local club can meet in your care setting, that can be an automatic activity for men. Alternatively, consider starting your own men's club with both social and service activities.

Learn as much as you can about the men in your group and their interests so that you can plan individual or group activities accordingly. Some men have specific hobbies or like to play cards or other games, while others simply enjoy getting together over a cup of tea or a beer.

Men (and women) almost always want to remain useful throughout life and are happy to help with community volunteer activities and various household chores. Ask what they are willing to do, make a reasonable judgement about how safely they can do it, and then give them opportunities.

This course is geared towards male-specific activity opportunities, but both men and women usually enjoy each other's company, so also consider what they can do together.

The bottom line is that men, like women, will come to activities where they are made to feel welcome and valued and where they have fun, feel useful, or learn something new.