

# Smear Campaigns and How to Overcome Them

## What is a Smear Campaign?

- A smear campaign is a targeted, intentional planned effort to discredit a person or group and tarnish their reputation.
- Smear campaigns are a form of emotional abuse and they take a tremendous psychological toll on the victim.
- There are ways that a victim can cope, so they can heal and move forward with their lives.

A smear campaign is a planned effort to discredit a person or group, to undermine their credibility, and tarnish their reputation. Those who launch smear campaigns go to great lengths to spread stories, lies, rumors, and gossip about their victims. Smear campaigns are often associated with politics, although they aren't just a feature of political propaganda. They are also a tactic used by family members, colleagues, and romantic partners to poison the well. Smear campaigns may take place within a family unit, among friends or acquaintances, in the workplace, or within a group or online community.

A smear campaign is basically a vendetta or act of retaliation. They are a tool of those who can be characterized as vengeful and vindictive, controlling and obsessive. Such individuals are also insecure and emotionally immature. Smear campaigns involve manipulation, and they are often a behavior of malignant narcissists and those with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and antisocial personality disorder (ASPD, or those informally known as sociopaths and psychopaths.) (Dow, 2023)

## What does a smear campaign look like?

Individuals who run smear campaigns feel wronged and seek to punish those they see as being at fault. They are abusers who paint the victim as the abuser, because they see themselves as the victim. These people are incapable of taking responsibility or accountability for their actions. They mount smear campaigns to control the narrative, and often, to rewrite history. Smear campaigns amount to character assassination. The abuser has the intention of damaging a target's reputation, and if they are successful, they feel like they have "won." They want to protect their own public perception, and to make the victim appear to be the "crazy" one.

To execute the smear campaign, the individual “grooms” other people over time, to function as allies or followers. (Webb and Kohi, 2019) They do this by spreading false or exaggerated information about the target, while they often share private true information, too, aiming to turn others against the person. Those recruited by the abuser to actively participate in their manipulation become an entourage known as “flying monkeys.” (This term comes from The Wizard of Oz, in which the Wicked Witch of the West puts a troop of winged monkeys under her spell to do her bidding.) These smear tactics won’t work on all who are approached, often they only influence people who are easily manipulated. Those who side with the abuser are ultimately being abused themselves, and also enabling more abuse.

## **How to overcome a smear campaign**

Smear campaigns are a form of emotional abuse and they take a tremendous psychological toll on the victim. These harmful attacks can cause considerable confusion, isolation, anxiety, helplessness, and anger. Smear campaigns spread false or misleading information, gaslighting a person about their experiences. By affecting a person’s reputation they can also cause untold professional damage and loss.

Here is some advice for those who become the target of a smear campaign. For starters, don’t retaliate, because this can escalate the behavior. Stick to the facts, but overcome the urge to defend yourself and clear your name, which can result in more attacks. As noted, many of these perpetrators are narcissists, so tools that are designed to deal with narcissists apply to dealing with their smear campaigns, too. It helps to disengage from the person. Refusing to engage with them will take away their power. Try not to worry about what others think. Over time, people often come to see the facts for themselves. Rise above the drama. Focus on healing yourself, and moving forward to rebuild your life. Also, know that you are not alone. Smear campaigns are more common than people realize. Despite the challenges, know that things will eventually get better.

The most important thing is to protect your physical and mental health during a smear campaign. It can be useful to seek out a network of people who understand the situation and can offer emotional support. Finally, reach out to a mental health expert who can help you find ways to cope during this time.