Tired of persevering

"Have you always wanted to be a scientist?” I have been asked this question many times before. This time, it’s from a photographer who is taking my picture to advertise a new diversity initiative at the institution where I’m a postdoc. He seems nice and sincere, and I answer “yes” and tell him about cell division of adherent cancer cells. Still, his question stirs an ever-present uneasiness. Are other people asked this so frequently? I suspect I wouldn’t hear the question as often if I were white or Asian. But I am Black. And I am forever being reminded, in ways big and small, that many think I don’t belong in science or academia.

When I was a child growing up in a lower income African American family in the South, my parents told my brother and me we could be anything we wanted. On TV, I watched The Cosby Show featuring a Black family with a successful doctor dad and lawyer mom and saw young Black people in college on A Different World. I was completely in love with the natural world and won awards at grade school science fairs. I participated in state and national math and science competitions. In high school I took every advanced science class my school offered and was recruited into a research laboratory as part of early efforts to bring minorities into science. Surely science was where I belonged.

It was only when I started college at a predominantly white institution that I began to question whether I was a fool for thinking someone like me could be a scientist. I was usually the only Black student in my classes, and I had no Black professors. Fellow students excluded me from study groups. A professor even tried to kick me out of an exam, assuming I couldn’t possibly be in his class. Thankfully, my family had faith in me and helped me remember that I am smart and capable. Even when I developed a mental health disability, their support made my aspirations seem viable.

After completing my bachelor’s degree I went on to earn two professional medical certifications, and I finally found some much-needed encouragement from within the academic world when several wonderful white women professors readily accepted and nurtured me. Their mentorship made me want to become a professor myself—which meant pursuing a Ph.D.

Unfortunately, graduate school brought a return to the challenges and exclusion of my undergrad experience. I constantly heard about everything I was doing wrong and nothing about what I did well. If I had not already had therapy for my chronic depression and anxiety, I might have quit—or worse, followed the same path as two bright colleagues who died of suicide as a result of working in toxic environments, abused and mistreated.

The scientific challenges I encounter are nowhere near as discouraging as the systemic racism I’ve encountered in academia. I’ve had supposed colleagues critique my efforts within the first 30 seconds of meeting me, talk around and over me, push my name down the author list for no justifiable reason, and tell me I only earned awards because I’m Black. I’ve been misnamed Henderson, High-tower, Hardaway, and other “Black-sounding” names, including once in a departmental newsletter, prompting an uncomfortable email to the chair: “The newsletter looks great ... I wanted to point out my name is misspelled. ... Actually, that’s just not my name.” I’ve experienced treatment so harsh I’ve filed a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Despite the barriers I’ve encountered on my path—and in part because of them—I still dream of becoming a professor. But I’m tired of having to build resiliency, work on self-care strategies, and mentally process microaggressions that don’t feel “micro” at all. I—and other Black scientists—want to bloom where we are planted, just like everyone else.

In my training and career across seven institutions in three states and abroad, I have only been taught by three Black professors. It would have made such a difference to have seen more faculty who looked like me. I hope I can make that difference for future students. ■

Keisha Hardeman is a postdoc at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.